

A Sum Of Our Histories

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Additional Tags:	Magical Stiles Stilinski , probably overpowered Stiles Stilinski , Not that it does him much good , Time Loop , Apocalypse , this is NOT a post-apocalyptic survival story , quite literally the opposite in fact , Good Stiles Stilinski , too good for his own good , Angst , Bleakness , Blood and Gore , Heavy Injuries , Temporary Character Death , looping in time may erase wounds but trauma is forever , Underage Kissing , Frottage , other sexual acts discussed and referenced , Dirty Talk , not a very healthy relationship , no one cares about that overly much , Swearing , BAMF Peter Hale , BAMF Stiles Stilinski , Depression , Self-Esteem Issues , Suicidal Thoughts , Suicidal Ideation , Suicide Attempt , non-consensual memory removal , Parental Abuse , parental neglect , Stiles Stilinski is a Nerd , I did tons of research but I do still apologize to any physicists who might happen to be here , mostly Stiles' POV , Peter's POV in the epilogue , the narrators are not overly reliable
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A Sum Of Our Histories

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Summary

Madonna had four minutes to save the world. Stiles has noticeably more but it doesn't feel like nearly enough, especially when his only ally is as likely to be a smug hindrance as he is to be an insufferable help at any given moment.

Thankfully, whenever Stiles fails, he can try again. And again. And again. And again.

Notes

Hi there, hello, just wanna say a few things before we dive in.

- 1) Please make sure to mind the tags. Remember, no one's going to take care of your mental health better than you. I think I mentioned everything relevant but if I forgot something, let me know and I'll add it up there.
- 2) This fic is finished and will be posted chapter by chapter as I finish proofreading them.
- 3) All French and Italian is translated either right away within the fic or in the chapter end notes.
- 4) I put together a playlist for this fic that I listened to throughout writing. You can find it [here](#).

Chapter 1: Apocalyptic Glory

Just a little further... just a little more...

Stiles stretched upwards, his whole body a taut line, balancing on his tiptoes on the rickety chair. The chair wobbles but holds as Stiles' grasping fingers try and fail to find purchase on the smooth sides of the box. Snarling in frustration, he switches tactics and starts carefully pushing the sides of the box; after an interminably long exercise in patience, the very tip of a corner slides off the shelf. Score! Stiles lifts it ever so gently with one finger, fits his free hand underneath the box and tugs, holding his breath.

Bit by bit, the box moves off the shelf. Stiles doesn't dare rush it in case he fumbles the whole thing somehow; slow and steady wins the race, he reminds himself. When finally a little over half the box is off the shelf, he lowers himself on the balls of his feet, ready to plant himself more securely on the chair and let the box simply tip into his hands, gently and delicately.

This is the moment the chair chooses to give in under his weight.

With a sharp, gunshot-like crack the seat of the chair breaks, and Stiles goes down in a mess of windmilling arms and with an alarmed cry which gets cut off when Stiles hits the floor and gets all the air knocked out of him. Every bony part of Stiles—of which he has a lot, including the back of his head—radiates pain at the impact, but Stiles couldn't care less. The box! Where is it? Where did it go?

Before he can even try to sit up, the box comes from above, flipping end over end as it careens through the air, and hits him squarely in the forehead.

Were it more sturdy, it would have simply left a bump and fall to the side, intact. But it's old and brittle, and it cracks with the blow.

The contents of the box spill out, and time stops.

A blindingly white haze with an otherworldly rainbow sheen to it, like gasoline in a puddle, fills the universe. For a suspended, unhurried eternity which fits into the space of single heartbeat, Stiles cannot see anything but the iridescent white, cannot hear anything but the chime of an unseen bell, cannot feel anything but utter nothingness.

And then time starts again.

Stiles is lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling, heart going a mile a minute. A big fat drop of water from the ceiling comes down and lands directly on his nose. Stiles sneezes and hits his already sore head against the floorboards. Ow.

What the fuck just happened?

He stirs, sitting up. Now that he's no longer ruled by a single-minded desire to get to the box, he can feel every bruise and scrape he has acquired. The back of his head stings like crazy,

and when Stiles touches it gingerly, his fingers come off bloody.

Why did he want that box so badly? He twists around, trying not to jostle his leg where it's stuck inside the chair seat, and picks the box up.

It's pretty small, made of some really dark wood. Stiles can't say much about the workmanship but it might have been shoddy because when he looks closer, he notices the tiniest hairline fractures that must have formed from the box getting wet in the leaky attic and then dry again year after year. Stiles squints at it, wishing he had thought to bring some light source with him, and suddenly notices that the wood is not, in fact, dark. What he decided was the natural color of the box is, in fact, thousands of somewhat faded tiny symbols written in black ink.

Stiles turns it around, stomach churning, as he recognizes Egyptian hieroglyphics, Norse runes, Chinese characters and Arabic ligatures. There's more stuff but he doesn't know what all the other things are; his knowledge isn't even enough to understand what the more familiar things say. What he does understand is that this is some magic shit and that Stiles has just been... compelled, he supposes, to get at it.

That's... no bueno.

Stiles sets the box aside and rubs his temples. He feels like he's just woken up from a nightmare in the middle of the night, both exhausted and wired, but it's not an altogether rare way for him to feel. He still has all his limbs and, from the feel of it, his human face, so whatever the magic thing was, it doesn't seem to have harmed him.

Maybe it just wanted out and used him in desperation, and now it's gone. Off to frolic in the fields with fluffy bunnies and meet every sunrise with a song, and decidedly not to murder anyone in a gruesome fashion.

Right, sure, that's exactly what's gonna happen. And also pigs will start their own air show any minute now.

Stiles leans forward, grabs the edge of the chair seat where he's got his leg trapped, and starts hitting the side of with his free foot. The edges are reinforced with a separate ring of wood which seems sturdier than the half-rotted middle of the seat, so it's gonna take him a while to break it apart. A werewolf would only need one kick to reduce the whole thing to wood chips, but Stiles is human. It means he has time to think as he hits the frame of the seat again and again, wincing at the jolt it sends into his hand and the way it makes the sharp broken pieces surrounding his shin shift against his skin.

He doesn't remember much of this morning. He's reasonably sure he got up, brushed his teeth and had breakfast, but after that he might have lost a big chunk of time. He doesn't remember doing anything except standing by the window and staring at the rain outside, but he can't have spent hours on that... can he?

And he remembers a burst of activity that puzzles him now but seemed like a perfectly logical thing to do at the time, the only possible course of action: running upstairs, climbing

up the ladder into the attic, trying to reach the box. Stiles is pretty certain he has never seen the box before, much less known exactly where it was—on the very top shelf, out of sight.

He will need to investigate this. It can't take priority to the other current problem Stiles should be investigating since he seems to be only one who has suffered here so far and all of his injuries have been caused by the old chair rather than the magic thing, but Stiles will put this in the queue of shit he needs to learn more about. He should take pictures of the box at every angle, get every symbol translated and go from there. The symbols must have a clue about what it used to contain; they can't be just a design choice.

The side of the seat cracks, startling Stiles with the noise. The broken-off piece clutters away, and Stiles finally frees his leg, a little worse for wear but still serviceable and not even bloodied.

He gets to his feet, leaving the box lying where it is, and looks around the attic. Nothing else here seems to be calling to him. It's just a dusty, messy attic. Whatever answers he's looking for, they probably don't lie here.

* * *

The shower is blissfully hot and relaxing. Stiles washes the dust off, making sure to use soap on each scratch, and turns the water off long after it stops running pink around his feet. He wraps a towel around his waist and spends a few more minutes dabbing at the breaks in his skin with rubbing alcohol, swearing under his breath. It burns, but it has to be done. The one on the back of his head doesn't seem to be big enough to need stitches; Stiles will track the way it heals all the same. If it starts getting infected, he'll have to get to the hospital pronto.

He pads out of the bathroom and into his bedroom, feeling somewhat refreshed, and it takes him a full second to actually register the sight that greets him: Peter fucking Hale, stretched out on the bed in all his smirking, smug, creepy glory.

Stiles yelps like a little girl, flails and flinches backwards. Peter laughs, gleeful like a toddler who got away with a prank.

"What the fuck are you doing here?!" Stiles demands. The blush of embarrassment crawls over his face, neck and chest, and he belatedly kicks himself for not taking fresh clothes with him to the bathroom. But how was he supposed to know there would be a zombiewolf in his bed when he was done showering?

"You were quite atrociously late to the research session," Peter says. His teeth are gleaming as he keeps smirking; it's not a leer but with the way he eyes Stiles it might as well be. "And you weren't answering your phone. I was wondering if the thing we're looking for had gotten to you, and in this case there would have been fresh clues around here."

He sniffs the air demonstrably loudly.

"You smell like blood. Did you get into a scuffle with it after all?"

"Yeah, haha, you're the comedian of the year." Stiles crosses his arms. "All the victims went to primary school, so this is you, very subtly digging at my age. A-plus, well done. Now get the fuck out of my bedroom, creeper."

"Who knows, maybe it decided to diversify its diet," Peter shrugs. "And Stiles, Stiles, my sweet fragolina, why would I want to get out? In your bedroom, there's you, clad only in a damp towel, and your delightful murder board. So much interesting stuff all around."

Stiles keeps the murder board lowered and tucked behind his desk when he's not using it. Of course Peter snooped. He was probably at it while listening to Stiles putter around in the bathroom so he could jump on the bed in time.

"Out," Stiles says.

Peter arches an eyebrow.

"What's in it for me?"

Stiles rolls his eyes. Peter likes to play a myriad of weird mind games, and this is one of his favorites. He will demand something for complying with the most innocent of requests; he doesn't even seem to want anything specific, just that kick of having power over another person, so Stiles normally gives him whatever junk he can find on or around his person. So far Peter's what's-in-it-for-me collection consists of a small Batman pin, half a BLT, a yellow sock with a duck face pattern that fell into Stiles' hoodie pocket during laundry one time, an old Biro with one end mauled by Stiles' teeth worrying at it, a Pusheen keychain, a pack of tissues, a random Android cable, a flier advertising the local pizzeria, a BHHS baseball cap, and some other garbage Stiles can't quite remember anymore. Stiles has no idea what possible use all of that is to Peter—well, he saw Peter eat the BLT so there was that, at least—but far be it from Stiles to question how the mind of an (allegedly) ex-insane, ex-serial killer works. Just as long as it actually works at all, Stiles is quite satisfied.

He crosses the bedroom, giving the bed a wide berth, and plucks a book off the shelves. He's tempted to throw his wet towel in Peter's stupid face instead, but then he'd be 100% naked, and even though Peter, despite his incessant creepy flirting, is not actually out to steal Stiles' virtue, such as it is (isn't it depressing to realize that even a deranged zombie werewolf is way out of Stiles' league?), Stiles still doesn't want to give a free show.

"Here," he tosses the book to Peter. "There's your payment. Now get your ass off my bed and go downstairs."

Peter looks at the book.

"Good Housekeeping's Guide for Young Homemakers," he reads the title incredulously and flips the cover open. "And it's a library book, to boot. What, are you hoping I'll return it for you?"

"I doubt the library's expecting it back." Stiles moves to his closet and starts pulling out fresh clothes. "I nicked it from them years ago, so even if they actually noticed it's gone, they've probably moved on from the loss by now."

"You stole a library book on housekeeping from the sixties?" Peter snorts. "You must have been one strange child, Stiles."

"That's me, the weirdo of the year. Now out!"

Stiles points at the door for extra emphasis, and Peter finally hops off the bed and goes away. He takes the book with him.

Stiles pulls on jeans, a t-shirt and a long-sleeved checkered shirt. It's a bit hot for a summer afternoon, even a rainy one, but he feels better with layers hiding his scrawniness, especially next to Peter's obnoxious supernatural muscles. His phone is on the nightstand; he checks it quickly and finds two missed calls from "Zombiewolf" and several texts.

Zombiewolf

Tardiness is unlike you. Have you lost interest in the do-gooding and moved to Hawaii without telling anyone?

Zombiewolf

A teenager who doesn't even read texts. You must be dead, I see no other explanation.

Zombiewolf

Earth to Stiles?

Zombiewolf

I do hope you're indecent, mon chou, because I'm going to come over and see if you're actually dead and I'm counting on a reward for my efforts.

No one else has messaged or called Stiles all day. He Googles "fragolina" and "mon chou" and finds out that they are Italian and French endearments, respectively, meaning literally "little strawberry" and "my cabbage". Perhaps Peter's hungry. Usually his mocking fake-flirting is not all on one theme.

As Stiles comes down the stairs, dragging the murder board with him, he quietly seethes with resentment. He's tired of ignoring and deflecting the constant barrage of digs; can't Peter find some other entertainment besides reminding Stiles with every other sentence just how unattractive and unlovable Stiles is? And if it's not pretending to flirt, then it's everything else. Stiles' youth, ignorance, clumsiness, humanity—it's all fair game for Peter to comment on solely for the pleasure of watching Stiles squirm. Some days Stiles would almost prefer to deal with Derek who tends to express his low opinion of Stiles with sudden slams into hard surfaces; for all that Peter has never physically hurt Stiles, a little bit of Stiles withers and dies every time Peter trots forward a new endearment or innuendo.

Stiles knows he should grow a thicker skin. He thought he wasn't all that sensitive anymore after years of being a nerd in a world where people care more about how hard someone can throw a ball than about whether or not someone understands quantum theory, but there's something about the way Peter does it that rattles Stiles for some reason.

He finds Peter in the kitchen, busy with making coffee and tea and flipping through the book.

"You left a lot of comments in the margins," Peter says without turning around. "In a rather childish hand, too, compared to your handwriting now. I have to wonder, why were you so interested in this?"

"Weird child, as you said." Stiles isn't about to pour out the whole story of how Mom got sick and then went to live at the hospital, and Dad got busy with caring for her and work, and little Stiles had to pick up the slack at home if he didn't want to walk around in stinky clothes and crunch on raw pasta from the box. Not only is it none of Peter's damned business, it's also not what they were supposed to meet for. "Did you bring your books with you, or did you leave them at Derek's?"

"They're in the car." Stiles is sure Peter sees the change of the subject for what it is but chooses to say nothing, and Stiles is marginally grateful for that small mercy.

"Then we might as well have the research session here," Stiles decides. Dad won't be home until late, and in any case, Stiles originally demanded that they only research at Derek's with the idea that Derek himself would be there in case Peter boards the crazy train again and tries to murder Stiles, and Derek often gets so bored that he just leaves the loft in search of something more interesting to do. Oddly enough, Stiles has not been murdered yet. "You go get the books, and I'll prepare the murder board."

He half-expects Peter to ask for something else in return for getting the books, but Peter goes without making a fuss. Stiles takes everything off the murder board and pins on with magnets a huge map of Beacon Hills, bigger than his arm span.

He is sorting out through the rest of the things, photos, and reports, and string of different colors, when Peter returns with his habitual duffel bag of books on the supernatural and goes back to coffee and tea.

"There's something different about you today, my enigmatic huckleberry," Peter says as he sets a mug of coffee before Stiles—two sugars, almond milk, exactly the way Stiles likes it. "I can't quite put my finger on it, though."

"Well, keep your fingers to yourself," Stiles says. "We need to focus."

"Are you going to tell me why you didn't show up at Derek's or answer your phone? Or what happened that left you covered in bruises and scratches?"

"Nope," Stiles says. Theoretically, Peter could be of help in studying the box but Stiles has a feeling that sort of ask will require a more substantial payment than a novelty Batman pin; besides, now is not the time to get into it.

He takes a long, fortifying sip of coffee and turns to the board.

"The police reports indicate that all victims lived not far from each other," he says.

"Did you pilfer those reports from under your father's nose, my thieving cutie pie?" Peter asks with interest.

"Don't be ridiculous," Stiles says. "I didn't steal the confidential police files, I just copied them. The first victim, Millicent Goddard-Garcia, age 8, lived at number 5, Greenhill Drive. She was reported missing by her moms a week ago. At night on the same day one of them found her clean bones in a pile in the basement of their house."

He puts a red magnetic pin over the address and puts Millicent's picture from the file next to it. The late Millicent was photographed laughing, showing off a gap between her front teeth; her long dark hair is in neat pigtails. In his mind, Stiles tries to detach that picture from the one he pins next: a close-up of a femur with markings highlighted.

"The forensic analysis of the bones showed two types of markings: deeper ones that the police is preliminarily ruling to be from a blade and smaller, more numerous ones that are theorized to be from sandpaper. Despite the lack of DNA traces, I'm inclined to consider these to be teeth and tongue marks of a supernatural assailant. The floor of the basement was also found to be scratched as if with sandpaper, presumably for the purposes of cleaning up blood spatter."

He picks up another red pin.

"Christina Daley, age 9, lived in the apartment complex at 29, Lincoln Road. Five days ago she went downstairs to get mail from the mailbox while her mother was making dinner. Christina's bones were found in a similar pile in the alcove next to the stairs half an hour later when her mother realized it had been too long and went looking. Despite the extremely short timeframe, the assailant had managed to clean and mark Christina's bones in the same way. The pattern is not identical but possesses natural variations that can be consistent with someone biting and licking meat off the bones."

Stiles picks up one more red pin.

"Thomas Queensley, age 7, lived at number 47, Linden Avenue. Three days ago he was playing tennis in the garden with his older brother and went out of sight to find a lost tennis ball. When he didn't return, his family decided that he must have gone out into the street and organized a neighborhood search party. The search lasted long into the night, and they only found his bones stacked inside the hallway when they got back around 2 A.M."

Stiles chooses an orange pin this time and puts it on the Springwater Park.

"Those three are the only confirmed victims. However, there was a peculiar report made at the station yesterday: Enrique Velasquez, age 8, and his mother complained about their family dog, a German shepherd, having been killed by what Mrs. Velasquez considered another dog, a rabid one, and Enrique, the one who had actually seen it, insisted was a scary monster and not a dog of any kind. According to the report, Enrique only escaped from the monster slash rabid dog due to the intervention of his own dog. The sight of the monster terrified him so much that he ran straight out of the park and into a crowded street. He was not pursued. Later on, when he returned to look for his dog in the company of his parents, the dog's throat was torn out but otherwise its body was untouched."

Stiles has no pictures of Enrique or the German shepherd to put up. Instead, he winds the red string around the pins in the four addresses and connects them. The result is a tight, lopsided

diamond.

"The Velasquez family was recommended to address their grievances to Animal Control, seeing as it's not a police duty to deal with rabid animals, especially not when every available deputy is out there looking for a serial killer targeting children. I suspect Enrique's monster is the same one that attacked the other children, and this seems to be the general area where, for whatever reason, it prefers to operate."

He turns to Peter who seems to be listening avidly, one hand on a book page to mark at which line he stopped.

"The way I see it, we're looking for the following. One, a creature with a taste for human flesh and specifically for children. It was not interested in dog meat. Two, an urban creature or at least not a city-avoiding one. Even though Enrique was attacked in the park, it'd be a stretch to say that all the benches and paved paths represent nature or wildness. Three, a sapient enough creature to play malicious tricks on humans. Even though Thomas was, to the best of our knowledge, taken from the garden, the creature put his bones inside the house for his family to find. Four, a creature possessing either some kind of magic or incredible speed. No one has heard the children scream or seen anything, and the speed with which Christina's bones were cleaned nullifies the idea of the attacker using some mundane external means to help separate the flesh from the skeleton. You know your own books pretty well by now, I imagine, so you can use these criteria to narrow down our options fast. This is an urgent case, considering that the monster was interrupted with Enrique and must be looking if not for Enrique again, then for another victim. Most children in town are currently under constant supervision by their panicked parents, but our assailant doesn't need that big a window of time, and the longer they go without a meal, the more of a risk it is that they will change the area. So I will go to the Velasquez' place and try to get more details out of Enrique regarding what the monster looked like. Please don't steal anything for shits and giggles while I'm gone. Any questions? Comments? Suggestions?"

Peter blinks at Stiles innocently.

"One, I didn't expect you to go all strikingly attractive genius Criminal Minds profiler on me today, but I'm not complaining, quite on the contrary," he says, smiling. Stiles wants to kick him in the balls for picking a really bad moment to continue his needling. "Two, you are going to go where the thing is, alone, and talk to the one victim who got away? If it's as sapient as all that, it will likely be stalking little Enrique, looking for another chance to get its teeth into him. What do you think it will do if it understands that you are actually, seriously looking for it and not some human lunatic? It might just decide that eating a seventeen-year-old may well be worth the trouble, even if you turn out to taste a bit gamey. Three, how are you planning to engage the child in a conversation about this undoubtedly traumatic experience while his parents are looking on? Don't you think they'll tell you to shove your questions where the sun doesn't shine and beat it?"

"Careful, someone might get the wrong idea and decide you actually give a fuck," Stiles snaps. "I'll take my chances with the creature. And it shouldn't be that hard to talk to Enrique. I don't look dangerous. And I can pretend to be from Animal Control, there for a follow-up."

"You don't know if they actually did go to Animal Control or not," Peter points out. "And I hate to burst your bubble, but your chances against a creature like this are not that high. It's probably fast enough to tear your throat out before you can say "where's my baseball bat"."

Stiles throws his hands up in the air.

"And what are you suggesting, then? That I take a werewolf with me for protection? I don't even know where Scott is today, and besides, he's not one for subterfuge. Derek could just stand there and scowl, so he won't say the wrong thing, I suppose, but that's not helpful either. And he'll probably just scare Enrique all the more with his manly brooding face."

Peter raises his eyebrows, an expectant look on his face.

"Oh no," Stiles says. "No, no, no."

"No what, Stiles?" Peter prompts.

"No, I'm not asking you to go with me. You'll just refuse and laugh in my face, thank you very much. You're only here because Derek told you to do research and he's technically, kinda, sorta your alpha, it's not as if you care whether or not someone's killing children. I'm not so stupid as to waste time amusing you."

He drains the remainder of his coffee in one gulp and puts the mug on the table with a thud.

"I'll see you when I get back," he says.

"Wait," Peter says.

"What?"

Peter studies Stiles with that intense, scrutinizing look which always makes Stiles want to fidget.

"Regardless of whether or not I care, you certainly do," he says. "Let us cut a deal. I will help you with the subterfuge and keep you safe, and in return you'll tell me what happened to you today that banged you up."

It's a deal vastly in Stiles' favor. After all, "I fell from a broken chair" is probably not the riveting tale Peter is hoping for, but Peter is not going to find out about that until after Stiles has made use of his sneakiness and werewolf strength.

"Alright," Stiles says, trying not to second-guess himself. "Deal."

* * *

"It's a terrible idea," Stiles hisses as they stand before the door of the Velasquez' house, sheltered from the rain by a large oak. "I changed my mind, the deal is off. Just go back to my place, and I'll figure it out on my own."

"Too late, honeybunch," Peter sing-songs and presses the doorbell. "Remember, smile and talk to the kid, I'll handle the parents."

Stiles marvels at Peter's ability to combine truly venomous mockery with helpful schemes as the door opens. A tired-looking slender woman with her dark hair in a messy bun stares at them with some bewilderment.

"Sorry, can I help you?" She asks.

Peter wraps an arm around Stiles' waist, palm resting on his hip, and beams. Stiles remembers the instruction to smile and hastily puts on a smile-adjacent grimace. It's the best he can do with Peter's hand pressed hot like a brand against his body, the layers of clothing notwithstanding. Stiles doesn't think he's ever been so aware of anything in his life as he is aware of the precise placement of that hand.

"Hello! Let me introduce us: I'm Benjamin and this is Mieczysław, otherwise known as the love of my life." Peter drops a kiss on Stiles' temple. The brief touch is like a shock of electricity, and Stiles barely manages to keep from shuddering.

It's been a while since anyone touched him at all, at least affectionately. He feels like a live wire as he stands there, keeping his rictus of a smile firmly plastered onto his face.

"We're recently married," Peter raises his hand, and the ring he just made in the car on the way over, having crushed the thin silver chain he'd been wearing, with his bare hands, no less, sparkles in the light, "and just moved in down the street, so we thought we'd go and meet a few neighbors. May we come in? I do apologize we haven't brought anything, terribly apologize, but we just wanted to say hello, you know how it goes."

Peter is a hurricane of smarmy charm. Stiles doesn't quite understand how they actually get inside—Mrs. Velasquez certainly hasn't had a chance to get a word in, either to invite them in or to tell them to go away—but here they are, with Peter leading the way to the sitting room and keeping up a smooth stream of chatter.

"Oh, isn't that park nearby just *darling*?" Peter enthuses. Both Mr. Velasquez and Mrs. Velasquez are listening to him with confused expressions on their faces, as if they are trying to understand how they found themselves in this situation and failing. Stiles can relate. "You absolutely have to tell us all about the other hidden gems of this neighborhood! Tell me, where do you go for groceries?"

A kid who must be Enrique is sitting on the floor of the living room, drawing a picture on the coffee table. He looks very small and even more tired than his mother.

"Hey," Stiles says quietly.

Enrique doesn't reply but gives him a shy nod.

Stiles checks surreptitiously that Peter is still doing his hypnotizing con-man act—somehow, in the few seconds while Stiles wasn't listening, Peter has gone from groceries to a step-by-step description of their imaginary wedding—and crouches next to Enrique.

"I'm Stiles," he says. "What's your name?"

Enrique looks at him again, as if weighing the pros and cons of talking to him. Stiles waits patiently and gives Enrique an actual sincere smile.

"Enrique," the boy finally whispers. Stiles has to strain to make out his voice under the loud sounds of Peter's one-man show.

"It's nice to meet you, Enrique," Stiles nods. "Whatcha drawing?"

"The monster who killed Rufus. Rufus was my dog." Enrique's tiny hand tightens around the red crayon. "He died 'cause he was protecting me."

"I—I'm really sorry for your loss, Enrique," Stiles says awkwardly.

"It's not your fault." Enrique looks down on the coffee table. "'s mine."

"Why do you think that?"

"Rufus would still be alive if I wasn't there. The monster wanted me. It said it would eat me."

"So it's the monster's fault." Stiles squeezes Enrique's shoulder gently. "Rufus was your friend and you were his, right? That means he wanted you to be safe."

"But I... I ran away... I should've protected him too... I left him there..." Enrique's breath catches, and a tear drips on his drawing as he hunches onto himself.

"You're still very small, Enrique," Stiles says, feeling very helpless. He has no idea how to navigate this conversation. "It's the duty of those who are bigger and stronger to protect you right now. And when you grow up, you'll be able to protect others yourself."

"Is that what you did?" Enrique asks. He lifts his head to look at Stiles again. His huge brown eyes are still brimming with tears. "Is that how this works?"

"No one died to protect me when I was small," Stiles admits. "But I still lost my mom. I couldn't save her. Now I'm trying..." He swallows. "I'm just trying to help."

He looks down at Enrique's drawing. It's childishly crude but Stiles can see that Enrique has put a lot of effort in it. The monster has weird proportions, not quite human; it's crouching, and its head and shoulders are colored in red while the rest of him is pencil outlines of bones.

"May I have your drawing?" He asks.

Enrique shrugs.

"Okay. Mom doesn't like these anyway," he says.

Stiles folds the drawing up and slips it into his pocket. He wants to say something to Enrique, something profound, something that will give the boy hope and won't lead to him causing

himself harm chasing monsters in the shadows. But in the end Stiles knows jackshit about anything and he can't come up with a single thing to say.

"It's been nice talking to you, Enrique," he says and straightens up.

He catches Peter's eye and gives him a small nod.

"Oh. Em. Gee." Peter presses his hands to his cheeks. "I've been talking this whole time, haven't I? I'm so, so terribly sorry, I get that way sometimes, haha! Please, let me shut up and listen instead."

He stops talking. The silence is so jarring, it makes Stiles' ears ring. Mr. Velasquez clears his throat.

"Well, we're happy to welcome you to the neighborhood, as it were," he says, sounding a little dazed. "And I'm sure we'll be happy to share whatever tips we can. However, I'm afraid... I'm afraid right now may not be the best time for us to, well, to have guests."

"Oh! Of course, we'll get out of your hair, then! We would never want to impose. Mieczysław, my precious sugarplum, shall we leave these nice people to themselves? We'll make sure to pop in later, when you're not as busy!"

Peter leads Stiles out with a hand on the small of his back, a gesture that would have probably make Stiles' stupid teenage hormones go all a-flutter if he thought for one second it was in any way genuine. The hand slides away the moment the door closes behind them.

"So, what did you find out?" Peter asks as they head down the road back to Roscoe.

"First of all, *Benjamin*," Stiles says with as much acidity as he can master, "I'd like a divorce."

He stops, tugs his own fake ring off and slaps it into Peter's hand. Peter closes his fingers over Stiles' with lightning speed, not letting him move away.

"What on Earth is wrong?" Peter frowns. "It worked, didn't it? And for the record, I am, in fact, Benjamin. That's my middle name."

"I..." Stiles has no idea why he's so angry. He wouldn't be angry at Scott if they had to pretend to be boyfriends for some scheme or other, would he? And he'd probably find it hilarious to fake being married to Derek.

Maybe it's because Peter is the only one who keeps showering Stiles with mocking compliments, pretending constantly as if he finds Stiles attractive, smart, fascinating. All the time, not just now, and this is just an escalation of their normal dynamics, and Stiles is just so fucking tired of pretending that it doesn't get under his skin.

Stiles' frustration and anger reach their peak and boil right over. Maybe it's time to fucking pay Peter back. Let's see how he likes being called out on being a complete and utter fucknugget.

Stiles closes his free hand in a fist over the fabric of Peter's incredibly douchey V-neck, jerks him forward and kisses him.

It's less of a kiss and more of an angry slam. It's Stiles' first ever kiss, and he doesn't know what the hell he's even doing. Peter, though, is quick to respond and take the initiative; he tilts his head a little bit, winds a hand into Stiles' hair and kisses back, hungry, dominant, strong.

Stiles wants him so much, it hurts.

They kiss, and kiss, and kiss in the middle of the road. Stiles is drunk on the sensation, on the warmth of Peter's lips, the wet heat of his tongue, the back and forth of fighting for control, the smell of Peter's skin, the indescribable, tantalizing taste of him; his every sense is drowning in Peter, every nerve ending blazing, the synapses in his brain firing haphazardly.

Stiles doesn't know how long it takes, but eventually he comes down from the initial weird high (is this what kisses are supposed to be like?), and the reality crashes back in like a speeding train.

He tears himself away and takes a few steps back. His breath is coming in gasps, his dick is throbbing, his lips are tingling, and he can still taste Peter on his tongue. Peter, the liar, the manipulator, the insane killer, the probably-former villain. Peter, the ex-dead werewolf who is about twice Stiles' age, as dangerous and crooked as they come.

The kicker is the fact that not only can Stiles still taste him, but he also wants more; wants so desperately that he has to jam his hands into his pockets to make sure they don't try to reach for Peter again. What the fuck is even wrong with him?

Peter, for his part, looks delighted with this turn of events, smiling wide.

"I have to say, my dearest sugarmuffin," he starts.

However, Stiles doesn't find out what is it that Peter has to say. The strangest sensation comes over him right then: he feels shaky, unstable, as if he's in an earthquake, and then it's like a wave of ticklishness rolls over his entire body. He shakes his head, confused, and forgets all about it when he sees Peter stumble and fall over in a heap. Peter's hair is suddenly white, and his skin is dry and tight, as if painted over the bones of his face, neck and hands. In the blink of an eye, Peter has become... mummified?

All around Stiles, stone, and metal, and wood rumble, groan, crack and snap. He whirls this way and that, panicked, disoriented, and everywhere houses are falling down, their previously clean walls now overgrown with ivy and pouring in every direction in waves of uneven bricks and blocks of concrete. The trees and bushes are spilling out of gardens and lawns, breaking away rotted fences with only a few specks of paint here and there. Huge cracks appear out of nowhere and run along the weathered road that was smooth and new a moment ago.

Eventually, everything stops, and Stiles can hear nothing anymore. It's quiet. Not a single voice, not a birdsong, not a distant roar of an engine.

Stiles takes in the devastation, numb with shock. As far as he can see, the whole street is like this. Nothing has been left unaltered; everything is either wild or crumbling into pieces, as if... as if a hundred years have passed while Stiles wasn't looking.

He kneels next to Peter. The look of him now is impossible to reconcile with what Stiles remembers of him. This can't be. Peter was so full of life, healthy, brimming with his trademark obnoxiousness; Stiles' lips still know what it was like to kiss him. How can he be aged a century and... and dead?

Stiles lowers his head closer to the road to listen for Peter's breathing but there's no sound. The silence around him is absolute, and suddenly it's too much. Stiles can't be here. He can't take this. It's a nightmare, and he needs to wake up. Or he has gone crazy, which means he needs some meds to make this go away.

He scrambles to his feet in a manic burst of energy. There are no discernible landmarks anymore, so he fishes his phone out of his pocket and tries to use a map app.

There's no signal and no internet connection. He tries 911 but doesn't get anywhere. It's like there are no cell phone towers around Beacon Hills, no anything; somehow, without having left town, Stiles is in uncharted wilderness where he cannot contact the civilization.

"Fuck," Stiles whispers. He slaps and pinches himself, hoping to wake up, but to no avail. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

What can he trust? What won't die, or break, or disappear? Is the position of the sun in the sky real? What can he use to understand which way to go?

He looks around again, frantic, avoiding looking down at Peter's body.

(it's not real not real not real Peter must be alive well perfectly fine confused by Stiles' behavior everything is fine it's not real)

There's a huge oak in one of the yards, standing taller than any other tree. There was an oak by the Velasquez' door, wasn't there? It was smaller than this one but... but if everything aged, that means the oak did too. And there are no others. This is the only one. Okay. Okay. They left the house, went out the gate. Stiles was on Peter's left... and they went left, Stiles hurried on ahead in his anger, leaving Peter a little behind. In the direction of Roscoe, down the road where he'd parked.

The center of town must be that way. The Sheriff's station is there. Stiles has to check on Dad. Even though this is absolutely and undoubtedly not real, Stiles still needs to see if Dad is okay. He can't help Peter, and he can't call for qualified professionals to dig people up from the remains of their homes, but he can get over there and find out if anything happened to his only family in this world.

Bits of asphalt, twigs and concrete crunch under his high-tops as he runs. What remains of Roscoe stands by the side of the road, a rusted metal carcass. Stiles only pays it a glance, long enough to understand he won't be driving anywhere in this car, and keeps running.

* * *

He loses all sense of time as he runs. The only sign that it's still there is how much more ragged his breathing gets with every stride; he'd stop and rest, but the sights around him spur him on.

The town unfolds around him in surreal apocalyptic glory. He sees buildings that crumbled from age, and buildings that have become piles of new, neat bricks and oozing puddles of fresh concrete. He sees a tree with a gnarled, thick trunk and a tiny, delicate, just-grown crown. He sees that around a fountain full of mud the ground is splashed with broken eggs, and has a mad, mad idea that the eggs are birds that got aged backwards mid-flight. He sees mangled remains of cars thrown around as if by a hurricane and slips and flails through a patch of damp marbled path—the only wet spot he has seen even though it had been raining on and off all day.

He runs past a Wild West saloon door that has replaced the swanky huge doors of a restaurant, past an open area where an invisible nightingale is singing its heart out, past a pigeon that looks to have been bludgeoned to death by an extremely localized hailstorm, past more dead mummified people lying on the roads, sitting inside cars, and crushed by the rubble of destroyed buildings, past suspicious piles of rags, past half a plane wing that's been embedded into the ground and is already covered in moss. The acrid smell of smoke comes from the direction of the mall, and from time to time power poles fall down in front of him, making him swerve.

Stiles runs.

He runs until he can't run anymore. His knees buckle when he's still, by his estimation, a few blocks away from the Sheriff's station, and he just barely manages to put his hands in front of him to avoid faceplanting.

As he gulps down air, willing his side stitches to go away, he sees the road change under his hands. From underneath his palms, a pool of normal road, the one he remembers, not soft and fresh but not cracked either, spreads outwards. He follows the edge of it with his eyes, too full of emotion already to feel any more shock. It stops going about twenty, maybe twenty-five feet away from him.

Squashing an urge to laugh (because he has a hunch that if he starts, he might never stop), he takes his hands away from the road.

The fixed patch stays in place.

Is that the way to fight the hallucination? Does he need to touch anything that looks batshit crazy, and then his brain will undo this horrible, torturous illusion? Stiles drags himself back to his feet again, buoyed by the new hope.

He stumbles over to the nearest mummy. It's terrifying and revolting to look at by itself, and it also reminds Stiles of Peter—Stiles should've tried touching Peter, should've stayed, tried to help, shouldn't have run—so he has to look at it from the corner of his eye as he reaches out to touch a finger to its dry, yellowed cheek.

He shudders in disgust at the sensation, but it's very brief: in no time at all, the skin under his fingertip grows supple and warm, the mummy's white, sparse hair thicken and darken, the facial features fill out and become familiar. Coach Finstock gasps and sits up with a jolt as he comes back to life.

Stiles sits back on the ground as a fit of exhaustion envelopes him. His stomach aches all of a sudden, reminding him he hasn't eaten anything after the half-remembered bowl of cereal during his hazy morning. He's so happy to see Finstock's wild eyes roving, taking in whatever it is Finstock sees around them. There's someone back to normal, someone who is as Stiles remembers him.

He needs to check on everyone he knows and touch them if they are dead. Hell, he needs to touch everyone and everything, and then it will be alright. The town will be normal again. One laying on of hands, and the apocalypse is averted.

The thought is so funny for some reason, and Stiles can't hold back his laughter this time. He hugs his knees, tucks his face into them and laughs, shaking and sobbing.

"Bilinski? Hey, Bilinski, snap out of it!" Finstock takes Stiles by the shoulders and shakes him. Stiles' teeth clack against each other as he goes with the shaking, limp and still laughing. "What's going on? Where are we? Come on, Bilinski, don't go crazy on me now."

Stiles throws himself at Finstock, hugging him; Finstock grunts and wobbles but manages not to fall. Stiles presses his face into Finstock's shoulder, hot tears soaking the fabric that is rapidly restoring itself from dirty rags into a slightly dusty ordinary t-shirt.

"C-Coach Finstock..." Stiles manages to get out. "Something's wrong, something... I don't know what happened... Everything... Everybody..."

He hiccups and gives up on speaking in favor of crying and clutching at Finstock.

"There, there, Bilinski." Finstock pats him on the back, and his awkwardness is so blessedly normal, human and familiar that it makes Stiles cry harder. It's almost more difficult to take in after all the craziness than the craziness itself. "It'll be alright."

"You... You don't know if it will, coach," Stiles argues through his sobs. "I, I don't know what happened, but so many people died, and the houses, trees and stuff all went, like, forward or backward in time, and I was running but I haven't met anyone else... fuck, coach, you see it all too, right? I'm not actually crazy, am I? It's not a hallucination?"

He lets Finstock go and points at the nearest building whose wall seems to be made of two different walls, blending seamlessly where they meet: one a modern concrete one, and the other a wooden one, with half a hand-drawn poster of a can-can dancer.

"Yeah, I—I can see there's some shit going on with time," Finstock says, staring at it. "That, or I fell off the wagon and this is me having the shakes. Although I'll be damned if I know why you would show up in my hallucinations, Bilinski. You're not scary or anything."

"Well, I'm definitely not drunk, and I can see it," Stiles argues, desperate for proof that he shouldn't be committed to Eichen House. He jumps to his feet and runs over to the double-walled building. "Here, I see half a poster, and this is wood, and here it's concrete—you see the same, don't you? Don't you?"

"Yep, same." Finstock joins him by the wall and squints at the border between the old and the new. "Fucking weird, pardon my French. It kind of hurts to look at where they join up."

"It does?" Stiles frowns. "It doesn't hurt me to look at them at all. I mean, besides the, uhm, emotional trauma, I suppose."

"It doesn't, huh?" Finstock squints again, this time at Stiles. "Say, Bilinski, how come you and I are the only ones still alive and kicking around here?"

Stiles wraps his arms around himself. It's not cold but he wants a bit of comfort.

"I don't know, coach. I was in the street with, uhm, with a friend of mine, and things just went to shit, just like that." He snaps his fingers to illustrate his point. "He fell down dead like those... those people." Stiles nods towards the nearest cluster of three mummies and then looks firmly and directly at Finstock and nothing else. "I ran and ran, and I accidentally noticed that when I touched the road, it went back to normal? I don't know why? So, well, I went over to the nearest dead person and touched their face, and, uhm, the dead person was you, coach."

"So nothing happened to you?"

"I wouldn't say nothing—"

"Yeah, yeah, Bilinski, emotional trauma, I heard you the first time, welcome to the club. I mean, no freaky stuff happened to you? No..." Finstock waves his arms around, seemingly helpless to find the words for this. "You didn't die or anything? Like I apparently did? Jesus triple fuck, this town, I swear."

"No, I—I didn't." Stiles frowns. Now that he has the conversation with Finstock to focus on and the immeasurable, desperate joy of not being the only surviving person in a town gone wonky in time, he can think clearer; the shock and horror are masked by the immediate need to be present and available. And Finstock is raising a very good point. "Nothing happened to me. Physically and—shit, I don't know, temporally?—I've been fine."

"And you fixed me and a bit of the road, too." Finstock puts his thumbs in his pockets and rocks on his heels. His jeans, that are currently little more than mottled rags, immediately rip, and he hurriedly slaps his hands at them to press them against his body before they fall down. "Listen, Bilinski, there's no appropriate way to say this, so I'll just come out and say it: touch my pants, please?"

"Oh! Oh, sure thing, coach."

Stiles leans down and touches Finstock's knee. They watch in silence as the fabric fixes itself, sturdy blue spreading out from Stiles' touch like a ripple in a pond.

"These too, I guess?" Stiles offers as he crouches down and taps each of Finstock's sneakers.

"Thanks, Bilinski." Finstock chews his lower lip as he tugs at his jeans pockets, reliable once again. "Listen, we might meet someone else who's alive. We don't know what kind of assbattery this is, so maybe we're just in a spot that got hit and there are some spots that weren't. So just in case we see others, maybe you should keep your mouth shut about what you can do. And don't go around touching stuff right and left where people can see."

"What? But I can help—"

"Can you help fix the entire town? You look like you haven't eaten in a month. Which is about how long it's been since school let out, so maybe you've been on a new diet this whole time to make sure you fit into your Star Trek ensign costume that arrived two sizes smaller than it should have been, but I kinda doubt that. My guess is that whatever it is that makes you an extra special snowflake also makes you vulnerable. And people who have lost everything to this won't much care if they're exploiting you or not."

Stiles stares.

"Coach, that's super paranoid. And the Star Trek thing was really specific."

"Paranoia is how you stay ahead in this game called life, Bilinski. If I were more paranoid, maybe I wouldn't have lost a testicle to exposure, you know."

Stiles makes a face.

"I really don't wanna know anything about your testicle, coach. Even if it's the end of the world."

Saying the words out loud somehow makes it more real. They are both silent, struck by the realization that this might very well be what this is.

"You're such a downer, Bilinski," Finstock says after a prolonged pause. His carefree tone is painfully fake. "Come on, let's get going. There's gonna be other people out there. They'll have blankets and hot cocoa, and then I'll tell you that I told you so."

"That'd be really nice, coach," Stiles says wistfully. "Can we, uhm, can we go to the Sheriff's station first? That's where I was going, actually. I want to see if my dad's alright."

"Lead on, then," Finstock says. "I'm not sure where anything is anymore."

As they walk, not even the normally talkative Finstock seems inclined to have a conversation. Stiles, a rambler extraordinaire himself, doesn't feel like it either.

Peter would probably still be talking, Stiles thinks out of nowhere. Making fun of Stiles, creating theories, quoting obscure literature, coming up with new apocalypse-related endearments.

But Peter is dead.

Stiles shoves the pang of pain down, down, far out of sight, and keeps walking.

Chapter 2: Cilantro Illusions And Whatnot

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They reach the Sheriff's station in a few minutes, and this is the first building Stiles has seen that actually looks almost like it should. It's mostly the same; only the back of it, where the dumpster was, seems sheared off and replaced by a pasture with a lopsided wooden fence. Stiles can even smell some fresh literal bullshit from over there.

"Dad?" He calls, speeding up. "Dad, are you here?"

He hesitates, hand hovering over the doorknob, torn between wanting to hurry and see Dad and not wanting to see him as a grotesque mummy. Finstock catches up to him and moves his hand away.

"Careful with the touchy-touchy, Bilinski," he reminds and pushes the door open himself.

Inside, the station is pandemonium. Dozens of people are milling about, sitting on the floor and rocking back and forth, talking and yelling; a few deputies in uniform are talking in soothing voices and making calming gestures; a plethora of babies and toddlers swathed in adult shirts are crying. Stiles recognizes Melissa who is kneeling by someone and cleaning a nasty deep gash in their arm. But where's Dad? Is he here?

Stiles is rooted to his spot on the threshold, feverishly looking this way and that, but even for all this effort he doesn't spot Dad. Dad is the one who spots him first.

"Stiles!"

Before Stiles can properly process Dad's voice, Dad sweeps him up in a bear hug that lifts Stiles off the ground. Stiles clings to Dad in return, trembling, unable to speak; at some point he must have started crying again because his eyes are burning and wet tracks are making their way down his cheeks.

"Stiles, kiddo, you're alright," Dad exhales into Stiles' hair. He's squeezing so tight that Stiles can't breathe. Stiles doesn't mind in the least. "God, you're alright. I couldn't reach you by the phone, I didn't know where you were, if you were okay, oh, thank God, you're alright."

"Dad," Stiles says in thick, choked voice. He can't say anything else; he just tucks his face into the crook between Dad's neck and shoulder and hugs back for all he's worth.

"Shh, kiddo," Dad strokes his head. "It's okay, it's all fine. Well, it's not, but you and I are fine, I—I haven't lost you, kiddo, and that's the most important thing. Don't cry, it's okay. Come on, I'll get you some water. You look like hell, kiddo."

"I feel like I've been through hell," Stiles mumbles as he reluctantly lets go.

Dad leads him over to a bench, sits him down and gives him a paper cup with water from the cooler.

"You might want to ration that," he says, taking a seat next to Stiles. "There's no water coming from the pipes anymore, so we're a bit tight on resources. Clark's trying to do some scientific voodoo with the radio but so far we can't contact anyone."

"Someone's got to have noticed," Stiles suggests and takes a sip of the water. Tepid and stale, it tastes heavenly to his parched mouth and throat. "They're probably sending rescue teams as we speak, right?"

"I hope so, kiddo." Dad sighs. "We've been canvassing the area southwest of here: crazy as it might sound, lots of people over that way seems to have turned into little kids. There are some survivors here and there, but not many, and we've been rounding them up, too. Were you at home when... all this happened? I asked everyone to keep an eye out for you, just in case, but no one has seen you."

"Oh, I was... hang on... to the northeast. I didn't see any little kids there, though. Just... mummified people." Stiles shudders. "And, uhm, coach Finstock. He came in with me."

He looks around, seized by a sudden anxiety at the thought of losing track of Finstock, but the latter is perfectly fine. He's helping Melissa tend to injuries and, from the familiar expression on his face, being very rude to people in the process.

"Northeast..." Dad rubs his face with both hands. "That way is dead land, Stiles. I have no idea how you survived it, but I'm so thankful that you did."

"Well, it seems to be over," Stiles offers. "I means, whatever happened, has happened and it's gone now. Right?"

"I don't know, Stiles. This is not like anything I've ever seen. I can't predict what's going to happen just as I wouldn't have been able to predict the things that already happened."

Stiles slumps on the bench. Dad looks at him and smiles a big fake smile, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Don't fret too much, kiddo, alright? I know you're a worrier, just like your mom was, but we're gonna figure it out. Okay?"

He gets up.

"We need to go out again, widen the search area. Stay here, will you? It'll give me peace of mind to know you're safe while I'm out there."

"But I could help—" Stiles pushes himself off the bench as well.

"Stiles," Dad interrupts. "Please. Stay here. I'm begging you, please."

Stiles sighs and nods.

"Okay. Okay. I'll stay. Maybe I can help Valerie figure out the radio."

"That would actually be tremendously helpful, kiddo." Dad hugs Stiles again, briefly this time.

It only took the end of the world for people to start touching Stiles all the time, didn't it? Between Peter, coach Finstock and Dad, Stiles feels like he's gained an embarrassment of riches today.

"Stay safe," Dad says.

Stiles watches Dad walk away, calling out to Tara. As he stands there, that strange sensation comes again: an earthquake that's not actually there and a million gently tickling fingers rolling all over him.

He shudders involuntarily, and when he's done with that, everything is gone.

There's no station anymore. No survivors, no deputies. No Finstock or Dad. Stiles is in the middle of an enormous lush field that disappears into the horizon; the tall grass, some of it yellowed and dry, is rustling in the wind and brushing its tips against Stiles' knees. The sun is shining directly overhead, warm and bright in the cloudless sky.

"Dad?" Stiles calls out.

There's no reply.

Now, Stiles thinks, is a really good moment to break down. He probably would have if he still had any energy for it. He's so, so tired, and hungry, and well past his capacity of reacting to bizarre horrible shit. With everything else he's seen today, sure, this might as well happen.

He walks forward, feeling oddly calm. His body is a little numb, as if it doesn't quite belong to him now. With curious detachment, he listens to insects buzzing around and birds chirping. From time to time, he stops for a little while to look at an especially huge, lush and bright flower. The air is honey-sweet with the fragrance of blooming flowers and sun-warmed grass.

He doesn't know how long he spends walking, but it doesn't matter. The town is not there anymore, is it? There's no Dad, no Finstock, no Scott, no Peter. There's only this field. Nowhere to rush, no one to see.

Eventually, he comes to a wide, rushing river. The sight of it reminds Stiles how thirsty he is—he's only gotten one sip from that paper cup—and he kneels on the shore, cupping his hands to get some water.

As he drinks, he notices movement under the surface of the river. Before he can even begin to wonder what that is, a huge open maw lined with teeth bursts up in a brilliant splash of water droplets.

Stiles reacts on instinct, flinching away and raising his arms to protect his face. The enormous jaws close around his arm and yank, almost wrenching it out of the socket. Stiles

screams, his unnatural calm shattered by the searing pain, and brings his free hand around to fend off his attacker.

It's a crocodile of all things, and its snout is actually longer than Stiles' arm, so he can't even punch it in the eye.

"There aren't... any crocodiles... in California," he gasps, as if that fact should shame the crocodile into leaving. He tries to pull his arm away but he might as well try to stop a hydraulic press with his bare hands. "Not... for... millions... of years...!"

The crocodile jerks its head in a movement powerful enough to throw Stiles into the water like he weighs nothing; it still doesn't let go as it sinks back into the river and pulls Stiles down with it.

Stiles is on his back in the water, watching the shining, sun-dappled surface grow further and further away from him as the crocodile that shouldn't exist is dragging him to the bottom. With a crystal, perfect clarity he knows he's going to die.

No. No. It can't end like this.

It won't.

A long-forgotten memory stirs at the back of his mind; Stiles can't really discern it, but it makes his thoughts flow along weird paths. He can't fight the crocodile off. He is already gravely injured. His only recourse is to go back to when he was safe.

Back. Back. Back.

The word seems to synchronize itself with Stiles' heartbeat. A wave of serene nothingness is born inside Stiles, and it rushes out through every pore in his skin. The world around him shines like a slick, otherworldly rainbow; Stiles forgets about the pain, about being underwater, about losing everyone and everything as he watches the colors dance and flicker, spellbound.

A big fat drop of water comes down and lands directly on Stiles' nose. He sneezes and hits his already sore head against the floorboards. Ow.

Wait, what?

He grabs at his arm. It's decidedly not mauled in any way, and his clothes aren't wet. Above him, he can see only the attic ceiling—which is damp with rainwater, yes, but it's a far cry from being in a river.

Was none of it real? Stiles lets his arm drop back along his side and cries out when it jostles his banged-up elbow. Right. He fell from a chair. Just how hard did he hit his head?

Slowly, carefully, he sits up. His stomach rumbles with hunger, and he ignores it for the time being. He doesn't feel like he's been running, and there are no grass stains on his pants. In fact, the pants are not the jeans that he put on after kicking Peter out of his bedroom; they are his pajama pants he remembers chucking off before going into the shower.

The box is lying on the floor, looking the same as he recalls. The symbols seem the same too when he reluctantly picks it up and inspects it closer. So that part was true, then. But what about the rest of it?

With desperate vigor, he breaks off the side of the chair seat the same way he did before (or did he?); he cares less about holding it steady this time, and his shin is bleeding slowly but steadily when he's done. He scrambles over to the trapdoor and down the ladder and bursts into the closest room with a window, Dad's bedroom.

Outside, Beacon Hills looks exactly like it always does. A sleepy street stretches to the left and right, a bit dreary in the pissing rain but completely normal. Mrs. Henderson walks past with her poodle on a leash and a few cars pass by as Stiles takes in the view with a mix of relief and disappointment.

Nothing happened. It's all fine. It was just a vivid hallucination made up by Stiles' brain in response to blunt force trauma, nothing more. Granted, it was a really, really vivid one, but now that Stiles thinks about it, he can find no other explanation. A bizarre temporal apocalypse? Kissing Peter? Bringing coach back to life? Any one of those things is very much impossible, let alone all of them rolled together into one package of a dizzying emotional merry-go-round. Stiles' subconscious is definitely trying to tell him some truly disturbing things, but that's all it is. In this light, it even makes sense that Stiles was special in the dream, the only one surviving the changes in time again and again, the only one capable of restoring anything and everything, including bringing people back from the dead. Who isn't the main character of the story in their own head, after all? And Stiles has never once in his life been special, so his subconscious must be trying to make up for the lack of that.

He retreats from Dad's bedroom. The floor there is now covered with dusty footprints, and Stiles makes a mental note to clean it up later. Dad won't be home for many hours yet, so Stiles has time enough to do everything without hurrying.

He detours to the bathroom to disinfect the scratches he's earned fighting the stupid chair but doesn't take a shower this time. Being clean sounds nice, but Stiles is so hungry that he really can't wait, so he picks up his phone and checks it as he makes his way to the kitchen.

There are two missed calls from "Zombiewolf" and four text messages.

Zombiewolf

Tardiness is unlike you. Have you lost interest in the do-gooding and moved to Hawaii without telling anyone?

Zombiewolf

A teenager who doesn't even read texts. You must be dead, I see no other explanation.

Zombiewolf

Earth to Stiles?

Zombiewolf

I do hope you're indecent, mon chou, because I'm going to come over and see if you're actually dead and I'm counting on a reward for my efforts.

Huh. Guess Stiles' subconscious knows Peter really well. Like, well enough to predict how many times he'd call and what he'd write in text messages, accurate to a word, including even a French endearment that Stiles must have heard somewhere before. This is kind of creepy and Stiles doesn't approve of his subconscious being an obsessive stalker, but it's consistent with the hallucination, really. He kissed Peter there, which must be a rather unsubtle hint that Stiles wants Peter.

That is, frankly, the stupidest idea Stiles' brain has had in a long, long while which is saying something, considering how many spectacularly stupid ideas it comes up with on a daily basis. But he's never been one to shy away from facts if he doesn't like them, and this is no different. So Stiles might not be as straight as he likes to think. Sexuality is fluid, yadda-yadda. And while Peter is a horrendous choice, what with the age gap and, oh, the freaking *insane killer* thing, Stiles and Peter have been researching shit together ever since Peter came back from the dead. That has meant a lot of hours spent in close proximity and an opportunity to see that, whatever else Peter is, he's smart and quick on the uptake, and Stiles has always been a sucker for a person capable of using their brain. Look at Lydia, for example. She wouldn't have been half as perfect as she is if she wasn't pure genius.

It would have been so much easier to accept seeing her in the hallucination, but Stiles' subconscious doesn't have anything but reality to draw on, does it? And the reality is that Stiles hasn't seen Lydia since school let out. She hasn't been there (be honest, Stiles tells himself, she has never actually been there; just... nearby), and Peter has, with his undeniable intellect, and the ability to work in sync with Stiles, and the sarcasm that would've been very attractive if it weren't aimed at Stiles all the time, and those icy blue eyes, and the smell of his cologne, fresh and sharp, and... just all of his Peter-ness. Is it such a wonder that Stiles' reproductive system got interested and expressed said interest when it had the chance?

Stiles hopes he can control himself well enough not to let on that his reckless, irresponsible, irrational dick has decided to base its big gay (bi? Stiles will need to figure that out later) revelation on Peter of all people. He shudders to think what kind of cruel jokes Peter might employ if he knew Stiles was (resentfully) attracted to him.

As he fixes up a sandwich almost as big as his head, piling on everything he can find in the fridge, he makes himself put all of those thoughts away. He can have all the sexuality-related freakouts he wants once they have found the creature attacking children; and also after he's been to the hospital to have his head checked out. Head injuries can be tricky, and even though he feels mostly fine now, he doesn't like it that he's had a hallucination as detailed and bizarre as that.

He's halfway through the sandwich when Peter lets himself into the house and appears in the kitchen doorway, soundless like a ghost.

"Hello, Stiles," Peter says, studying him with blatant curiosity. "I see you decided to have some fun for once, huh? Clearly, you were on a bender last night, and you have just returned home after sleeping in a ditch and are having a strong case of the munchies."

He frowns.

"You smell like blood. Have you been in a scuffle?"

Stiles swallows what he's been chewing.

"Nope," he says. "Since you're here, we might as well do the research right here too, no point in going to Derek's. Bring the books from the car and start the coffee, will you?"

"Someone's feeling bossy today," Peter purrs, and Stiles hides his sudden blush by lowering his head and biting off another piece of the sandwich. He wishes he could un-realize all of the things his hallucinated kiss pointed out to him. What kind of a cliché is Stiles, anyway, getting all hot and bothered for a bad boy? "If I do as you say, what's in it for me?"

Stiles rolls his eyes, feeling for a moment firmly back on a familiar ground.

"I'll get you your so-called payment," he says. "I need to bring my murder board downstairs anyway."

"You have a murder board?"

"Of course I have a murder board," Stiles says. "What am I, a schmuck on wheels?"

A sincere, delighted laugh tumbles off Peter's lips; he briefly looks surprised by it but quickly covers it with a smirk.

"You're in a rare mood today, my sweet fragolina," he says, and if Stiles didn't know better, he'd think Peter sounds almost fond. "I think I'm going to enjoy this research session very much."

With this cryptic parting shot he leaves to get the books. Stiles stares after him, forgetting his sandwich for a moment. "Fragolina" too? Maybe when Stiles goes to the hospital, he should also book a session with a therapist. It can't be healthy to know Peter *that* well.

Not that he can afford therapy on a regular basis. Dad's not paid all that much, and Stiles is already pretty expensive, what with food, clothes, school supplies, Roscoe's upkeep, Adderall and college fund. Maybe he should look into some ways to earn more serious money than pocket change. Writing essays online, tutoring, mowing lawns, delivering stuff, whatever job a minor can do. Pull his weight around the house and whatnot. God knows Stiles owes Dad for the years of putting up with his spastic self.

He finishes his sandwich off in a few giant bites, speedily chewing each one until his jaw aches, and brings the murder board downstairs, along with *Good Housekeeping's Guide for Young Homemakers*. That one worked in the hallucination, and Stiles sees no reason why it shouldn't work in real life.

"Here," he says, tossing the book at Peter. Peter plucks it out of the air with annoying grace. "Yours to keep. And no, the library's not expecting it back."

"Why not?" Peter wonders, flipping through the book. "What, did you steal it?"

"Yep." Stiles flips the kettle on to heat up water for Peter's tea.

"Mm, I love your criminal tendencies, Stiles." Peter starts the coffee machine with one hand, most of his attention on the book. Stiles can't imagine what could be so interesting in there. Maybe Peter finds little Stiles' fumbling notes mildly amusing. "Just waiting for the day when you pull a truly big heist. Library books won't put you on the list of Interpol's most wanted, I'm afraid. Although, I suppose, that depends on the library and the book..."

"Oh no," Stiles says dryly, "my lifelong ambition has been crushed. Here I was, waiting by the phone, hoping that this would finally be the day Interpol notices me and comes after my ass in order to restore the legendary housekeeping manual to the grateful public, and now you're saying all this effort was in vain?"

"So sorry to disappoint you, my darling jellybean," Peter smiles. "Do not lose heart, though, you will have many more chances to make your dream come true. Those Interpol people will surely jump at an opportunity to go after your ass. After all, it's an exquisite one."

Stiles doesn't reply, busying himself with the tea bags instead. The remark about his ass has served as a reality check; the moment Stiles dropped his guard and made a silly joke Peter reminded him again how completely undesirable he is. His cheeks are burning with an unhappy, humiliated flush as he sets the tea mug before Peter with a little more force than necessary and starts pinning the map to the board. He can sense Peter watching him intently but, thankfully, Peter says nothing else.

He runs his mini-briefing much the same as he did in the hallucination. It's concise, correct and to the point, what's not to like? At least his subconscious got this right too, not just the Peter parts.

Peter responds the exact same way he did in the hallucination, which gives Stiles the creeps again. But now he zones out a bit instead of snapping and arguing like his subconscious showed him; absently twirling a marker between his fingers, he wonders if the rest of it was true as well. So many things have been eerily accurate so far. Maybe the creature they're looking for is actually the one he saw in Enrique's drawing in the hallucination?

No. No. That'd be too crazy. Stiles hit his head, not suddenly became some sort of a prophet. All the things that have been the same in real life are easily explained by his own knowledge of the people and circumstances involved. He doesn't have the background to somehow have already figured out what the creature looks like with the information he has. He has to go and talk to Enrique again. Wait, no, not again. For the first time, of course.

And he could actually use Peter's help there. Granted, Stiles doesn't know if the Velasquez family and their home will be similar to the hallucination or not, but Peter is the type to land on his feet in every situation, and he's not that bad a back-up option when he wants to be.

"Stiles?" Peter raises an eyebrow. "Are you sleeping while standing up? And with your eyes open?"

"Listen," Stiles says. "It'd make the most sense if you came with me. You and your wolfie biceps can keep me safe if the creature shows up, and yeah, it'd be nice if you took up distracting Enrique's parents so I can talk to him in peace. How about you do all that, and in

exchange I'll tell you what happened that made me smell like blood? I bet you're curious, aren't you?"

"No," Peter says.

"No, you're not?"

"I am, but I want something different in exchange." Peter's eyes are distractingly bright blue. "I do all that, and you tell me why you smelled like that when we joked about Interpol earlier."

"Like what?" Stiles sniffs reflexively but can't smell anything much besides his own coffee.

"Like hurt, and unhappiness, and resignation. You often smell that way around me. I want to know why."

That... wasn't in the hallucination. Stiles doesn't like this variation one bit.

"What's this question even supposed to mean?" He demands, crossing his arms. "What do you mean, why?"

"It means I want to know."

"You want to... what, talk about my feelings? It wasn't enough for you to mock them this whole time, was it? Now you want me to pour them out to you for more mocking, is that it?" His face and ears feel hot enough to fry an egg. "What the actual fuck, Peter? I don't know if you, insane zombie serial killers, are capable of being aware of that fact, but for your information, I'm a real person, alright?! And I prefer not to get hurt more than I have to, thank you very much!"

By the end of it Stiles is screaming. In contrast, Peter regards him with a strangely blank face.

"You think I have been mocking you? In what way?"

Stiles wants to hide behind the murder board. Standing here where Peter can see him makes him feel more exposed than in the hallucination where he was only wearing a towel.

"Seriously? You're asking me that with a straight face? Alright. Sure. Why the fuck not? Every fucking time you see me, in every damn text you keep heaping on those—those innuendos, and the endearments, and the compliments, and all of that, and I know that you know that I know," Stiles stumbles a bit, lost in the sentence structure for a moment, and plows on, "that you're lying! I'm not attractive, or all that smart, or sweet, or any of whatever it is you say, and I don't need you pointing it out all the time! If you really need someone to laugh at so desperately, try cat videos on the Internet! They work fucking wonders!"

Peter takes a sip of his tea, calm as you please, and sets the mug on the table very carefully.

"Let me sum it up," he says. "The answer to my question is that you are suffering from massive insecurities that don't allow you to perceive anything I say as genuine or at least joking in a non-malicious manner. Thus you have been under the impression that I am

bullying you pretty much the whole time we have known each other. Engaging in psychological torture, so to speak, due to my inherent insane zombie serial killer perversions. Thank you, Stiles. This has been very enlightening."

He gets up.

"I suppose you really aren't that clever after all," he says.

Suddenly, he leaps over the table and lands right in Stiles' personal space. His eyes are burning with werewolf blue, and his fangs are poking out. Is this where Peter snaps and murders Stiles? Stiles' heart is going a mile a minute, and, to his horror, he feels some blood pooling down south. Last time Peter and he were so close to each other, Stiles kissed him.

No, wait, no. It wasn't. They never kissed. It was all a hallucination. It wasn't real.

Stiles licks his lips and feels strangely disappointed when he can't taste Peter on them. Peter's gaze, hungry, intent, tracks the movement. Stiles stifles a whimper.

"I don't know if you, nerdy high school boys, are capable of being aware of that fact," Peter half-whispers, half-snarls, "but for your information, I'm a real person as well, alright?"

He steps back.

"I do appreciate your hospitality, Stiles," he says, smooth and calm, all werewolf traits put away once more. "I'm afraid I have to rush, though. My weekly Villains Anonymous meeting simply cannot wait."

He tips an invisible hat to Stiles, picks up his duffel with books and strolls away. Stiles... Stiles stands there stock still as his world undergoes a paradigm shift.

Of course he knew Peter was a real person. Everyone is a person, and Peter is part of everyone; that's kindergarten logic. But Stiles doesn't think he was ever viscerally, fully aware of the fact that Peter is not a nebulous concentration of malice and smugness, a taunting, magnetic, infuriating bane of Stiles' existence, a Schrödinger's threat that may or may not strike at any given time for its own unfathomable reasons.

He is not anything "of Stiles' existence". He is his own whole person, one with feelings, and thoughts, and weird habits, and quirks, and preferences; separate from Stiles or anyone else. And the entire time they have known each other Stiles has been viewing him as less than that.

Stiles bursts out of the kitchen into the hall, then into the front yard, almost braining himself on all the doorjambs that seem to appear in his way as if by magic.

"Peter!"

Peter is not gone yet. He's almost to the gate, but he stops when he hears Stiles.

"Now what?" He asks.

Stiles manages to stop himself just before barreling straight into Peter and grabs his wrist, partly to steady himself, partly to make sure Peter doesn't leave before he hears what Stiles has to say. Not that Peter couldn't shake Stiles off with less effort than it'd take Stiles to brush a mosquito away.

"I'm sorry," he exhales, somewhat winded. "Peter, I'm sorry."

"Whatever for?" Peter sounds bored.

"I—I've been a selfish, self-centered dickhead." Stiles makes himself look Peter in the eyes. "And I hurt you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be absurd," Peter says in the frostiest tone Stiles has ever heard from him. "You don't have any power over me, Stiles. You can't hurt me."

"Uhm, no," Stiles says. "I get it now. I do. You're right, you're a person too, and I have been such an asshole to you, oh my God, and, and I do have some power to hurt you, maybe not much, but I do, same as you have some power to hurt me, because we're both people. Real people. You have feelings, and I hurt them. You don't want to show it, fine, I can relate. But I understand now. And I'm sorry."

Peter snorts.

"You understand, do you? I left a trail of bodies across this town—a trail, mind you, that started long before my pack burned alive—I killed my own niece, I threatened all your little friends, I bit your feeble-minded best friend without his consent, I possessed a clueless girl from beyond the grave, I stole, and I lied, and I have definitely jacked off once or twice imagining what it would be like to fuck you while perfectly aware that you're underage. And here you are, fresh-faced and earnest in your cartoon shirt that says "Avocadon't Mess With Me", insisting that you understand me and you're sorry. Well, aren't you just a little saint, Stiles?"

Peter steps close again. Invading personal space must be a favored intimidation technique or something; if so, then it backfires spectacularly because Stiles is not afraid. Well, he is, but not so much of Peter as of popping a very ill-timed boner.

"What are you going to do if I decide I've had enough of these inane games where we pretend I'm a benevolent citizen, Stiles?" Peter says quietly. His breath brushes Stiles' lips that tingle with the memory of the kiss that wasn't real. "What if I show you exactly how I feel about death, destruction and pain?"

"Why haven't you?" Stiles whispers. "Why have you been playing nice ever since you got yourself resurrected? What's stopping you from finding another alpha to kill and moving on from me and my avocado shirt? Which, for the record, is an awesome shirt, and I don't want to hear you dissing it."

Peter gives a harsh laugh.

"Move on from you? You don't matter much to me either way, Stiles. Don't flatter yourself. Perhaps I'm just sentimental and like to hang around my remaining family. Or I like this town because it has belonged to the Hales and, by extension, to me since before humans decided to settle here."

"Okay," Stiles agrees. It stings to hear that he doesn't matter but he's got practice with ignoring that. "I obviously don't know shit about your motivations and stuff. But I'm still sorry. I'm not saying it so you'd forgive me and sing "Kumbaya" or something. I just think you should know that I am. Sorry, that is."

Peter lifts his free hand and settles it on Stiles' cheek. His thumb brushes along Stiles' cheekbone, light as a feather, and a fresh pulse of lust goes from that spot directly to Stiles' dick.

"Mm, so you don't want my forgiveness?" Peter murmurs. "Are you quite sure you wouldn't like to earn it, my delicious sugarplum? Because," Peter lowers his head, touching the tip of his nose to Stiles' neck, and inhales deeply, "you smell like you would."

Stiles' head is spinning. He's confused, and aroused, and outraged, and thrilled, and the jumble of emotions is taking up so much of his attention that he almost misses the familiar double sensation.

Earthquake. Tickling.

"Oh shit, oh fuck," Stiles says. "Triple-layered fuckity fuck with a drunk Jesus on top."

Oppressive heat engulfs him, sudden and strong like a blow. The gray rainy afternoon is no more, replaced by blindingly bright sun. Instead of buildings, and fences, and cars, and road, and people, there's only sand as far as Stiles can see, only livened up by an occasional cactus.

"What the hell...?" Peter steps away from Stiles and looks around, tense and alert for any danger.

He is also not wearing any pants.

Stiles yelps and turns on his heels with enough force to half-bury his feet in the sand; he cannot tell if his skin feels like it's burning from the desert sun or from a glimpse at Peter's nether regions.

"Stiles? What is it, did you see something?"

"Will you please cover yourself up?" Stiles asks in a very high-pitched voice without turning around.

"What? Oh, for goodness' sake, don't tell me you've never seen a penis before."

"Not yours!" Stiles argues. "Just... just cover up, okay?"

Peter sighs.

"Fine. But for the record, I'm not doing it for the sake of your sensibilities. We appear to have been dumped in a desert, and the skin of the genitalia is more susceptible to sunburn than the rest of the body."

Stiles waits, looking very intently at a cactus.

"You can turn around now," Peter says, sounding annoyed.

Stiles turns. Peter has fashioned his V-neck into a makeshift loincloth that does cover up his cock, but now there's a great deal of smooth skin and impeccable muscle on display which is only marginally better. Or worse, if one were to ask Stiles' libido—which Stiles is not going to do.

Not that any of it matters anyway, he realizes with a frown. It looks like he's still hallucinating. Is he actually dying up there in the attic, and this is what his brain is showing him instead of the proverbial life slideshow? And what is that sensation that comes on just before everything changes? Is that maybe medics trying to revive him?

Stiles has to give his brain credit, though. The illusion of standing in a desert is complete and flawless. Every sense is telling him that's where he is, and not a single detail is out of place. Talk about immersion, huh?

"You seem oddly calm for finding yourself in a desert without warning," Peter notes. "What gives, Stiles? I would've thought you'd be climbing walls by now. Metaphorically, that is, seeing as there's a glaring lack of walls out here."

"Well, this is a hallucination," Stiles shrugs. "It's even nicer than the last one. At least there aren't any mummified dead people, and you're alive!"

He gives Peter's chest a glance.

"My subconscious is one horny bastard, though."

Peter sighs.

"Do we need to have another conversation about how I am, in fact, a real person? Emphasis on "real" this time?"

"A contrary bastard, too," Stiles notes. "Alright, sure, it's not like I can just wake up from this. I couldn't from the last one. Let's have an intellectually stimulating conversation with myself."

"Let's walk and talk. Especially about your cryptic mentions of "the last one"." Peter glances up at the sun. "Looks like it's morning here right now, and it's going to get hotter at noon. If we can find water and shelter before then, that would raise our chances for survival greatly."

Stiles snorts.

"Wow, I'm really committing to the realism, aren't I? If you want water and shelter, I think we can just go back in the house."

"And how, pray tell, will we manage that?" Peter asks, looking fed up with Stiles' shenanigans.

"Easy peasy lemon squeezy," Stiles says. "Let's see, you haven't moved much from where you were standing, right? So the house is behind me, that way."

He turns, noticing and dismissing what looks like a small pile of garbage a little further away (imagining broken furniture and a pile of cotton pads in the middle of untouched wilderness? Stiles' brain must have some opinions on littering and ecology), crouches down and presses both hands to the sand next to his socked feet. The paved path between the porch and the gate spreads out in a circle from his touch; Peter behind him makes a choked-off sound.

When the wave of restoration stops, Stiles walks over past its border and crouches down. Rinse, repeat. The path is not that long, it's not like the Stilinski house is a grand estate, and on this second pass the steps of the porch form out of thin air. Peter walks up to it cautiously, looking like nothing so much as a cat inspecting a new home. He touches the porch and the path, sniffs them carefully, then does the same with the sand. Stiles can't hold back a small smile as he watches him. This one is definitely nicer than the last one. Thank you, brain.

"Come on," he says. "Water's in the kitchen. Mind you, I don't think the pipes will be working because last time hallucination-Dad said they weren't, but there should still be some in the kettle. You only drank one cup of tea."

"I hope you realize that you're not speaking any sense," Peter tells him as Stiles restores the hallway. "None of this makes any sense. I can swear the desert is real, but then again, your house is equally real, and it's not even a whole house. It's just... a patch."

"Hallucinations are in the field of medicine, and I don't know anything about that," Stiles says as he grows the kitchen door back. "No use trying to figure this out."

"I assure you, I, at least, am very much real," Peter says.

He sits down gingerly on a newly restored chair. It's a nice sturdy chair, unlike the traitorous one up in the attic. Stiles finishes restoring the counter and pours some water from the kettle into a glass.

"Here." He sets the glass before Peter and takes a seat across from him. He's a bit tired and somewhat hungry again, despite the sandwich he remembers having not that long ago; he'll restore the fridge in a little while and get something to eat. "No roof yet, sorry, I think I'll need to climb up onto something to figure out ceilings. What a peculiar arbitrary rule for a fantasy my brain made up."

Peter stares at the water for a few seconds, then takes a tiny sip, as if expecting it to turn into sand in his mouth.

"Stiles, can you at least consider for a moment that this is real? Surely you can feel, taste, see, hear and smell things. No hallucination is ever that complete and clear, is it?"

"Ah, but this is where it gets tricky," Stiles says. "Our very reality, or at least what we perceive to be such when we're in our sound minds, is all a very big illusion anyway. There's no color blue, just the illusion our brain creates as it processes the signals from the optic nerves after the retina converts light into the aforementioned electrical signals. There's no pain when we stub our toes, just, once again, the signals brain receives from nerves that have detected tissue damage. I could go on, but you're a figment of my imagination, Peter, you know all that already. The world as we experience it doesn't exist. It's all a mental construct already, we, meaning humanity, just agreed to call it reality between ourselves because, due to our belonging to the same species, we experience the world in more or less the same ways. And we don't even agree on all of it! I mean, look at the people who love cilantro and the ones who say it tastes like soap. The cilantro is the same, it's us whose illusions of its taste differ."

Stiles plucks a dish towel from the rack and winds it around his head in a makeshift turban.

"Getting real hot with that sun beating down on me," he explains to Peter's questioning look. "I don't want to have a heat stroke, even a hallucinated one. So, yeah, as I was saying, the brain basically does nothing but create illusions all day, every day. It's hardly a stretch that a head trauma would prompt a hallucination with such a high level of realism, dude."

"Don't call me dude," Peter says absentmindedly as he thinks Stiles' words over.

"Okay, hot stuff," Stiles agrees easily.

"Hot stuff?" Peter snorts. "Really?"

"Hey, I can call you whatever I like. You're not real," Stiles reminds him. "I'm just imagining you here with me."

"Right, and when you think it will have no consequences, your first impulse is to tell me I'm hot and ogle my chest." Peter grins impishly. "I have to say, if we weren't in a kitchen magically restored from desert air, I would absolutely exploit that and see just how far you want to go."

"I don't know how far I'd like to go, to be honest." Stiles slumps on the table, pillowing his head on his arms. "I've been trying not to think about the fact that imagined you told me you weren't, in fact, bullying me this whole time. Is it true? Is it something my subconscious picked up on in reality while I was busy wallowing in self-pity and insecurity? Or is it just wishful thinking? Because yeah, you killed, and threatened, and lied, blah-blah, but you're also so... you." He waves in the air to encompass all of Peter. "Smart, and funny, and yeah, hot like plasma. The sensible part of me is telling me I'm an idiot for having my great gay awakening based on you of all people, but the rest of me is, apparently, very gang-ho about idiotic decisions. I even kissed you the first time around."

"Oh, you kissed me, sweetheart?" Peter wonders with unmitigated glee. "Setting aside the disturbing fact of me not remembering that, how did you find it?"

Stiles looks at him, unimpressed.

"Scorching hot," he says. "Way hotter than first kisses have any right to be. Some modern popular media does its best to deromanticize those, like, they ought to be awkward, and wet, and quick, but my brain, I guess, wants to star in a bodice-ripper or something. Hallucination- you kisses like he wants me to come into my pants just from that. Which you already know because you're a figment of my imagination, therefore you know everything that I do."

Peter shifts on his chair and leans forward, looking Stiles in the face. The angle is weird, but even looking up at him like this, Peter is handsome. Stiles hates that as much as he likes it.

"No, in fact, I do not," he says. "We will definitely revisit the possibility of you coming, into your pants or without those in the equation, but for now I need you to understand that this is real. Come on, Stiles. You're too smart for your own good, with all your knowledge of cilantro illusions and whatnot, and you're getting into your own way more than anyone else ever could, but you have to use that brain of yours to reason out the truth now. Yes, this is a weird situation. That doesn't make it any less real, and I suspect you and your magic hands are the key to fixing it. You're our ticket back to actual safety, Stiles, yours and mine both. But you clearly don't want to do anything about that because you have convinced yourself that this is a hallucination and there's no point in trying, so think, Stiles. Find a way to prove to yourself, logically and irrefutably, that this is indeed the reality."

"No," Stiles says, snickering. "Nope. No, siree. What would even be the point, indeed?"

Peter gives Stiles a stink-eye which causes Stiles to snicker even harder. This is fun, in an absurdist kind of way.

"Alright, I'll take a stab at getting through to you myself," he says. "What if I quote some laws at you? You didn't study them, so you can't have that knowledge in your head."

"My Dad's the Sheriff," Stiles reminds him. "I know enough about law to make up very convincing quotes."

"God, you're stubborn, aren't you?" Peter makes a disgruntled face. Stiles wants to kiss him again. "Alright then. How about... Hmm... Tell me, do you speak any foreign languages?"

"I'm taking Spanish at school, although I kind of suck at it so I wouldn't say I'm that much further than "Me llamo Stiles", " Stiles shrugs. "And I picked up a couple of Japanese words from anime. I know some bits of Polish, I suppose, Mom taught me a few words when I was a kid. Oh, and I recently started on Latin because I begged and pestered Allison until she gave me the full Argent bestiary, and some pages in there are in Latin, but that's slow-going."

"This is it? No French or Italian?"

"No." Stiles frowns. "Where are you going with this?"

"Today, I called you "mon chou" in a text, and later on, in this very kitchen, I called you "fragolina". Those are endearments from French and Italian. How could your brain have possibly conjured these up if you didn't know them to begin with?"

Stiles squirms. He doesn't like where this conversation is heading.

"I hallucinated Googling them the first time around to find out what they meant," he says reluctantly. "That doesn't mean anything. Maybe they are just gibberish words. Or maybe I heard them somewhere before."

"Where would you have heard them?" Peter challenges. "You don't watch foreign romance movies with subtitles, do you? And you live in a tiny provincial town. There are no Italian or French quarters in Beacon Hills, it's not New Orleans. And as for gibberish—well, I took French in high school and spent a year in Italy when I was in college as an exchange student. I still remember enough of both those languages to teach you some. How about that? How much French grammar should I demonstrate before you can't pretend it's not real anymore? Or are you going to tell yourself that your brain, despite not being all that linguistically inclined, is making up a whole new consistent language on the spot?"

"No," Stiles shakes his head. He can't stop. He just keeps shaking it. "No, no, no, Peter, you don't understand. Please don't demonstrate any grammar. This can't be real. It just can't."

"And why the fuck not?" Peter asks, angry and exasperated.

"Because if it's real," Stiles whispers, "then they are all gone."

"They?"

"Dad," Stiles clarifies. Despite sitting in the desert sun, he feels weirdly cold inside. "Scott. Coach Finstock. Lydia. Derek. Everyone. All of the people. If this is real, then they are gone. I can't, Peter, I can't let this be real."

Peter reaches across the table and takes Stiles' trembling hands in his own, warm and steady.

"You can and you will, Stiles," he says, and Stiles has never seen him so determinedly ruthless. "You're all about science, aren't you? Research. Investigation. Proof. If a fact is unpleasant, or inconvenient, or plain insane, you don't hide from it anyway. Don't start now, my naive, brave, bright fragolina. You faced my alpha form and still threw a Molotov cocktail at me instead of running away. So face the truth."

"Peter," Stiles whispers.

He feels hot and cold all over, one after the other and both at the same time, as the comfortable certainty of having a hallucination that lets him pad all of the sharp corners of his circumstances is tearing away from him. Tears brim in his eyes and dry almost immediately in the desert heat. Peter watches him intently, his thumbs brushing over Stiles' knuckles.

"Do you believe it's real now?" He asks.

"No," Stiles corrects, trying to focus on Peter's touch and not on all the people who disappeared from the face of the Earth in the blink of an eye. "I don't just believe in things. I need cold, hard, reproducible proof, so that I can *know*. But yeah. I know it's real."

Peter smiles.

"There you are," he says.

He gets up from his chair and leans all the way over the table to kiss Stiles on the cheek.

"Since you are, from the looks of it, not as unreceptive to my advances as you have always seemed," he says, "perhaps you'd like some extra motivation to figure it out? Once this is all over, I'll see if I can reproduce that fabled kiss you were waxing poetic about and perhaps expand upon it. How about that?"

Stiles snorts through his tears.

"Is that motivation or just you wanting into my pants?" He asks. "You know I'll do all I can to save everyone anyway."

"You caught me," Peter grins, shameless. "Think of it as you getting the guy in the end then, just like a triumphant hero should."

"I'll hold you to that," Stiles says, smiling like a moron and not minding it one bit. "See if I don't."

"Looking forward to it, my delightful sugarmuffin."

Stiles takes a deep breath and sits up straighter. Peter has come up with an argument Stiles couldn't refute, no matter how much shelter he found in the idea of having brain damage; so, since this is, against all common sense, real, they better not lose any time.

"Alright," he says. "Where do we start?"

"You should probably finally fill me in on that 'last time' you keep mentioning," Peter offers. "Besides my history-making skill in kissing, that is."

"Oh, shut up," Stiles says, retroactively embarrassed for all the stupid shit he said while he thought Peter wasn't real. "So it all started when I went up to the attic to get an old box and fell off a chair..."

* * *

Stiles takes a full handful of pins and stares at the map, now clear of everything else.

"It's kind of hard to remember," he says. "I was freaking out like there was no tomorrow... which, I suspect, is the case? But I'm certain we were next to the Velasquez' home, by the Springwater park. And I ran through the entire Springwater Drive, according to the mental map I tried to follow. It all seemed to have aged forward. Houses crumbling, trees shooting up, like I described. And people... well, people were all dead of extremely advanced age."

He places a row of neatly spaced red pins on either side of the Springwater Drive.

"Then I'm pretty sure I ran down this bit of Linden and turned onto the Fourth. That's about when things started getting more complicated. This fountain here definitely aged forward but

there were eggs splashed on the ground around it. Those had to have been birds aged backward, right? While they were in flight, so when the eggs fell down, they just went splat."

Stiles marks the fountain with a red pin and surrounds it with a few blue ones.

"I don't remember it well enough to estimate the height they were at when that happened, so either there were opposite, uhm, temporal forces acting in parallel, one located lower and the other higher, or they could have been working intertwined. Don't even ask me how, this crap is so insane, Einstein or Planck would've gone bananas if they could see any of it."

"I'll take your word for it, ma cerise," Peter says. His knife is a steady tap-tap-tap on the cutting board.

Stiles has no idea how to react to endearments now that he's been given to understand Peter means them... on some level. What do well-adjusted people who have self-esteem and self-respect do when they are flirted with? Stiles is paralyzed with the fear of showing Peter that he's not, in fact, worth the effort, so he just barrels past it. It's a reaction not unlike how he dealt with this in the past, and it used to work well enough to let them get on with the research, so, well, if it ain't broke, maybe Stiles shouldn't try to fix it.

"Down here is where I found coach Finstock." Stiles adds a red pin. "And here is the station which was mostly untouched but the back of it had become pasture. There wasn't any particular indication of whether it was the past or the future but it's more likely that people would have kept cattle in the middle of town in the past, so let's consider it a backward area." He snaps a blue pin in place. "I didn't get any details from Dad before, uhm, before he disappeared along with everyone else, but he did mention that they found a lot of little children that seemed to be de-aged adults and even untouched survivors over to the southwest and that what they had seen to the northeast where I'd come from was a dead zone. So we can envision a typical canvassing route Dad and his deputies would take and designate the southwest as a backward zone with some possible safety pockets." Stiles adds a bunch of blue pins and connects the pins of each color with correspondent string. "This is as much as we know about the pattern of that... uhm... wave of temporal changes. The next wave was similar to the one we're currently living, in that it covered a large area indiscriminately and consistently, and it was also a massive shift along the timeline of the world. I don't know when we're supposed to be now, but that field was definitely a backward area, and it was really motherfucking old."

"How so?" Peter finishes mixing the dressing into the minced vegetables and spoons them onto one of the two pieces of bread that are already laid out.

"Well, I told you about that crocodile, didn't I? It was kinda eating me at the time so I didn't get a good enough look to try and figure out its exact taxonomy—not that I'd even know enough to be sure about that, to be honest, I'm no Darwin—but I know it's been about sixteen million years since there last were crocodiles in California." Peter's hands freeze where he's about to place the second piece of bread over the vegetables and slices of smoked Polish sausage. "And I was still in California, provided we agree that this desert has the same spacial properties the field did, and, considering my house is where I expected to find it, moving in time hasn't displaced us in space. Fuck that curvature of space-time, am I right? Although,

maybe not..." Stiles trails off, trying to make this whole situation fit into the tidbits of theoretical physics he has managed to learn over the last six years.

"Sixteen million years?" Peter asks.

"Uh-huh." Stiles devours the sandwich from afar with hungry eyes. "Is that ready?"

"Ah, yes, of course. Bon appetit." Peter passes the sandwich over.

Stiles bites into it and moans. Maybe it's the hunger talking, but it tastes bloody amazing.

"Zhish ish sho gud," he tells Peter.

"Your manners are deplorable, and thank you for the compliment," Peter tells him. "You know, it's not much of a pattern but it does remind me of something."

He traces the marked streets with one finger while Stiles is eating his sandwich.

"You know, there's something that bothers me about what happened before," Stiles says after dutifully swallowing his food. "I mean, there's a ton that bothers me, duh, but this is a logical inconsistency."

"What is that?"

"Everything I touch, like, returns to the state of normal time, right? That is, normal defined as being in temporal sync with me, Stiles Stilinski circa 2011. It's got about half a second of delay before it starts but it has worked on pretty much everything. I can understand why it's not working with air and even possibly, maybe why it didn't work with the water in the river, but what was up with the crocodile? It got its teeth into me, no one can say it wasn't touching me. Why didn't it disappear? It doesn't exist in normal time, and at least a few seconds have passed, time enough for it to start getting erased from existence like Marty McFly, maw-first."

"That is a good question," Peter says thoughtfully. "Admittedly, I'm not much of a scientist, but from a lawyer's perspective, when a fact appears in a case and contradicts previous findings, it may be simply because we don't see the connection yet."

"True," Stiles nods. A scientist's perspective is much the same. "I hate not seeing the connection, though."

Another very bothersome thought comes to Stiles. He sidles up to Peter and takes his hand, then continues eating.

"Holding hands?" Peter comments. Stiles' ears pinken.

"Look, me touching things is the key to keeping them in normal time, do you agree? It has just occurred to me that literally the only reason you're here and not wherever the rest of the town went must be because we were touching when the change happened. I was touching the sleeve of your V-neck, too, which is why you managed to keep that. A new wave of changes can come literally any moment, so I'm not gonna risk you getting lost."

"Sound reasoning," Peter agrees and squeezes Stiles' hand with reassuring firmness.

Stiles has to wonder if Peter is being so nice and helpful only because Stiles is Peter's ticket to safety. Peter is all about survival, isn't he? Just look at how he clawed his way out of the grave. He wasn't shy about using Lydia to do it, and if now he needs to use Stiles, he'll do it without a second thought. Peter might be bored enough with hanging around the fringes of Derek's pack that he wouldn't mind fucking Stiles if an opportunity presented itself, but this goes beyond that. He even used Stiles' hormones to dangle an extra carrot in front of him, conditional on him doing what Peter wants him to do. Literally no one ever has been so patient with Stiles as Peter was when talking Stiles into accepting the reality of what's happening, and if Stiles has to choose one person on Earth to be that kind out of sheer goodness of their heart, Peter wouldn't even be anywhere close to the top ten million.

It's alright, though. Stiles can't blame Peter for wanting to survive. Every living thing is hardwired to do that. And besides, Stiles is using Peter too—as a sounding board, as a voice of reason, as a lifeline. He shudders to imagine what he would've done if Peter wasn't here with him. He would have probably sat down in the middle of the desert and die quietly, all the while feeling mildly miffed at his own cruel imagination.

Stiles is not going to look this gift horse in the mouth. And what happens after they figure this out (if they do)... well, that will sort itself out somehow. It'll be nice to have a small, petty, cosmically insignificant problem again.

"Ley lines," Peter says suddenly.

"What lines now?"

"The lines of natural magical energy that cover the Earth in a complicated network. We used to have a map of the ones in Beacon Hills, and I think they sort of coincide with what you marked on the map here."

"Do you still have it?" Stiles isn't sure what use that would be to them, exactly, but no one ever knows what kind of conclusions might come out of seeing a whole pattern.

"It burned in the fire," Peter says. His tone is perfectly nonchalant as if that fire means nothing to him. "But I think I know who might have another one you could restore to normal time."

Chapter End Notes

- "What am I, a schmuck on wheels?" — Stiles is referencing the 1990 movie *Goodfellas*. Unbeknownst to him, Peter loves that movie.
- Me llamo Stiles (sp.) — My name is Stiles.
- Ma cerise (fr.) — literally "my cherry"; also used as an endearment meaning "my darling/sweetheart".
- A 2017 study of newly found fossils revealed that crocodiles called California home as

recently as only 6 million years ago. The 2011 Stiles is not aware of that information which is why he cites the previously established 16 million.

Chapter 3: A Hefty Responsibility

The next wave of change comes just as Stiles crouches in the sand again to restore a bit of the town and check if they are going in the right direction. That wobbly earthquake part plays havoc with his balance but Stiles gets injected with so much adrenaline at the thought that Peter's going to be taken away from him that it doesn't matter. He leaps up from his crouch like a coiled spring and hurls himself at Peter who is, thankfully, only standing a foot or two away.

Not expecting the assault, Peter slips in the sand, and down they both go as the sensation of a million playful tickling fingers leaves Stiles. A burning line of pain blazes across Stiles' back as they tumble into sparse, short new grass.

"Fuck," Stiles moans. He presses his forehead against Peter's chest and takes a few measured, deep breaths, trying to get the pain under control. An illusion it might be, but it's still highly fucking annoying.

While he's busy with that, several deafening gunshots ring out around them.

"You're hurt!" Peter rolls them over to cover Stiles with his own body.

Yeah... turns out, Stiles didn't get the V-neck. The cold ground beneath him and the new flare of pain in his back do very little to distract him from the fact that a naked Peter is plastered to his front with only Stiles' thin sleeping clothes separating them. It is a fact that is extremely hard to ignore indeed. "Hard" is definitely the right word.

"I'll live," Stiles offers. "I think. We, uhm, we should move away from the gunfire?"

"Good idea," Peter says.

He lifts his head cautiously, no doubt tracking the sounds, smells and sights that Stiles' human senses can't perceive.

"Hale!" Someone bellows to the right of them. "What the blazes are you doing out there? And where's your uniform?!"

Stiles twists to look that way. To his bewilderment, there is an actual person that way, but he doesn't recognize the guy—neither his face, nor his clothes. Very old-fashioned clothes, to Stiles' knowledge, although he'd be hard-pressed to name the century.

How is there a person like that? So far anyone Stiles has seen either was dead/a baby, or managed to avoid the temporal wave altogether, or was kept safe by Stiles' touch. Whether time went forward or backward, it didn't make period-appropriate people magically appear out of thin air.

Well, it did make the crocodile appear, so there was that. Come to think of it, maybe there would've been people in that field too? Except that sixteen million years ago there weren't

any humans on Earth.

"I'll tell you all about that later!" Peter yells back. "But we need some cover first, if you please!"

"This doesn't make sense," Stiles mutters as they crawl to the right with gunfire covering them. "It's been treating people as separate entities so far, why would it start bringing them as part of the landscape? There wasn't a can-can dancer to go with the poster. Is there truly a difference between a sapient being and any other concentration of atoms? Could it have been a coincidence? A randomized distribution of, uhm, I dunno, time particles? Our incident sample size is really small so far—"

"Who's the young bookworm?" Someone asks Peter.

Stiles scowls at the speaker, his train of thought derailed. He doesn't appreciate being ridiculed for his nerdiness—what is this, high school?

The offender doesn't look impressed with Stiles' scowl; his hardened, wrinkled face, bushy beard and clunky rifle all send the message that he's used to being the big man on campus. He drags Stiles and Peter behind a small hill, takes off his coat and thrusts it towards Peter.

"Cover your shame, Hale. And explain yourself."

"Sir, yes, sir!" Peter gives the man a sloppy salute and shrugs the coat on. Great, Stiles is going to have to remember not to touch that, otherwise all sorts of shame are going to get uncovered again. "I'm escorting this civilian scientist from behind the front lines. His work will be invaluable on the road to our victory."

Bushy Beard gives Stiles a measuring look. Stiles feels very judged, especially on behalf of his poor avocado shirt.

"And why is this the first time I'm hearing of this?"

"It's all very hush-hush, sir." Peter shrugs. "You know how the higher-ups are: urgency, secrecy, broken lines of communication. What matters is that he's the only one who can deal with that."

Peter points behind Bushy Beard. Stiles looks that way too, and there is another world rising maybe a hundred yards behind them, one that Stiles recognizes: ruins of Beacon Hills, a mess of crumbling brick and thriving ivy, with dead people lying in the streets.

Bushy Beard squeaks like a rubber toy.

"Or that," Peter points to the side. Stiles looks: there's the ocean there, close enough to hear fish splashing about, although Stiles is reasonably sure it takes quite a bit of driving to get from Beacon Hills to the shoreline. And, as if that wasn't enough, what seems to be a viking ship is rapidly approaching this way.

Bushy Beard falls on his knees and starts praying loudly. Stiles tugs Peter by the hand to walk a few steps away and talk in private.

"How does this guy know you?"

"He doesn't," Peter shrugs.

"But he called you by name?"

"Obviously, he knows my great-great-something-grandfather. It's definitely some sort of military situation, and whenever there's a skirmish in California history, there's a Hale mixed up in it. I might not look exactly like my ancestor, but probably close enough, especially when my face is outshone by my everything else."

Stiles can't contain a giggle.

"You're a time con man," he says, grinning. "That's kind of awesome."

Peter preens.

"Thank you, sweetheart, I'll be taking encores all night. However, more importantly: we still need to get to where the Argents' house is supposed to be. I no longer have a clue which direction that is."

"I guess I should restore a patch of the ground to normal time and see if that offers any clues." Stiles glances around. "Under the gunfire from those bushes and with a viking invasion bearing down on us."

"That's not going to work, Stiles." Peter shakes his head. "I don't know what exactly is going on, but I suspect if you actually die, then we're all done for."

Stiles swallows.

"That is... kind of a hefty responsibility," he says. "Maybe there's a whole army of people like me out there, we just haven't met them. I can't—I can't be the only one who can do something."

"In my experience, when bad things happen, a lot of the time no one does anything, and if someone does, they are quite often all on their lonesome," Peter says. "Don't get me wrong, I'd be ecstatic to meet that army of magic touch people, but we can only act according to what we know, and so far we know that you're it."

"Alright. Alright." Stiles nods. "I have to do this, so I will do this. So what's the plan?"

* * *

They stick out like a sore thumb as they leave the relative safety behind the hill and run towards the town ruins, trying to keep to the cover of trees and bushes on the way; it's not that big of a problem, though, because with vikings and (maybe? Possibly?) Civil War forces clashing, everyone more or less sticks out around here. Peter follows behind Stiles on account of being the one who can heal a random bullet wound without much fuss. Stiles is majorly not okay with not holding on to Peter at all times but Peter is insistent, so Stiles is just trying to move faster.

"Oh crap," Peter hisses through his teeth as they cross the boundary.

"What is it? Did you get shot?" Stiles frets.

"Keep moving!" Peter pushes Stiles forward. "We're not out of the woods yet... again, metaphorically. The border between the two time periods burned my eyes a bit, that's all."

"It did?" Stiles frowns. "I didn't feel anything like that."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me at all. Come on, go, go!"

They only relax when they are far enough away not to hear the gunshots anymore. Stiles clutches Peter's hand in his, exhaling in relief.

"Do you recognize where we are at all?" He asks, studying the city remains around them. "This looks much older than before."

"No idea." Peter stares at the piles of bricks and concrete, looking a bit lost. "I guess this is a forward area? If the pattern is the same as before, we're somewhere northeast of the Sheriff's station?"

"That's a very big 'if'," Stiles notes. "Okay, Allison's house is... let me visualize the map... to the west of the station and a little to the south, I think. But which way are we facing? Where's the north? Do you have any woodsman skills that can help us, oh Big Bad Wolf?"

"You have no idea how much you saying that makes me want to bite you in the most fun of ways," Peter says, and Stiles immediately blushes bright red. It's like a freaking switch. "And yes, as a matter of fact, I do."

"Wait, really? Why?"

"That is one of the first things a Hale child ever learns." Peter breaks off a twig from the nearest tree and drives it into a break in the pavement, then marks the tip of its shadow on the ground. "We all tended to play in the Preserve a lot, and finding the way back by retracing one's own steps requires practice with the senses. Knowing alternative methods to get around just makes sense."

He straightens up and just stands there.

"Now what?" Stiles asks after ten full seconds of nothing happening.

"Now, assuming the sun is still moving east to west, we wait for ten or fifteen minutes and mark the shadow again, which is how we find out where the east and the west are."

"Oh! That's really cool!"

"Of course you'd think it's cool, city boy," Peter teases.

"Excuse me!" Stiles faux-gasps, only barely suppressing a grin. "I'm a city boy? And what are you then, Mr. hotshot lawyer with impractical V-necks?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say they don't serve any practical purposes," Peter purrs. "They did attract a very lovely, incredibly bitable young man brimming with sexual frustration, didn't they? Like a moth to the flame."

"Okay," Stiles laughs, "comparing me to a moth? Is that the best you can do in the romance department? Then I might just have to flap my wings and mosey on over to the next flame."

Peter pulls him closer; Stiles' bare wrist brushes against the old-timey coat which immediately starts disappearing, but Peter doesn't pay any attention to it. He looks into Stiles' eyes, smiling slightly.

"Here we are, at, presumably, the end of the world," he says, leaning his forehead against Stiles', "in a ghost town filled with weirdness from throughout history, and the most fascinating thing I see is you. How is this for romance?"

"That's... that's pretty good," Stiles admits. As he speaks, their lips almost touch, but not quite.

"Mm, that's what I thought," Peter says. He looks so smug that Stiles can't help himself.

He shifts forward a bit and kisses Peter.

This kiss is less intense than the one where Stiles was as angry about wanting it as he was drawn to Peter. He surrenders the control of it to Peter, letting himself be kissed with a small happy sigh, eyes sliding closed as Peter's hands find their way to Stiles' neck and the small of his back and pull him closer still. The sensation of a temporal change comes over him but Stiles doesn't bother opening his eyes—he just puts his arms around Peter and keeps kissing him.

Two more changes occur in rapid succession while they kiss. When a sharp pang of hunger twists his stomach, Stiles pulls away with a muffled curse.

"What's wrong?" Peter's pupils are dilated, and Stiles finds it a bigger mystery than time getting tangled like earbud wires. Peter is aroused because of kissing Stiles. The annoying, awkward, weird, motor-mouth Stiles has this kind of power over the self-assured, sharp-tongued, cunning, prideful Peter. It's a heady and addictive idea.

"Nothing," Stiles says. "I'm just really hungry. Also, sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I suspect your stick is gone since I wasn't touching it."

Peter looks over Stiles' shoulder.

"So it is. And we might want to find you some shoes."

"Why?" Stiles glances away from Peter and sees a thin layer of glittering, brilliant snow.

"Interesting," he says. "Generally, California winters are getting warmer year by year, so, assuming that proves true for the future, we must have gone backward. So much for the theory that this spot is only for moving forward."

"Or this might be a future where the Third World War happened, and this is nuclear winter," Peter notes.

"Ooh, so what you're saying is that while the past is set, going forward can bring us into any number of possible futures, not just direct aging of objects and people but also alternate realities as laid out by the collective choices of humanity?" Stiles perks up. "You're pro the growing block universe view, then?"

"I have no idea what that means." Peter kisses the tip of Stiles' nose which is both embarrassing and nice. "Just giving a suggestion."

"No, you could be right." Stiles eyes the snow with suspicion. Is it radioactive? It's not giving off any tell-tale glow, but then again, it doesn't have to. "I'll be the first to admit I don't know how the fuck this works. But we should probably get a move on in case we're getting poisoned as we speak."

They do the trick with a stick again, this time without kissing while they wait because Stiles is cold, and hungry, and generally miserable. Once they establish where the north is with as much certainty as they can, they pick a direction to scout and set off.

Hand in hand, they walk out of winter and onto a summer street that looks long abandoned. From there, they cross over into a section that seems perfectly normal but doesn't have any people in it, go through a long stretch of empty ground made mushy by pouring rain, and turn into an alley that is lit up with more neon than Las Vegas and filled with the sounds of laughter, club music and conversations even though there aren't any people. Peter carries Stiles over a wide rushing brook starting and ending in thin air and kicks aside a high pile of wood stacked together as if for a bonfire.

Periodically Stiles returns bits and pieces of the world to the normal time. He doesn't do it too often because every time it makes him more and more tired, and he's so hungry by this point that it makes him nauseated and light-headed.

"We're raiding the Argents' fridge," Peter decides after an especially lucky restoration that reveals a bit of a wall with the street name and number. "You look starved in the most literal sense of the word."

"I doubt they'll have much in there." Stiles shrugs. "Scott told me Allison and her dad had gone to spend the summer in France. It wouldn't make sense for them to leave stuff in the fridge to spoil."

"There has to be a pantry, then," Peter insists. "Things that don't spoil easily. Canned beans or corn, peanut butter, honey, cereal, pickles and olives, things like that."

"I feel like right now I'd sell my soul for some cereal with pickles and canned corn, never mind that it has to be disgusting," Stiles sighs wistfully. That sandwich Peter made for him in the desert only a little while ago feels like it must have happened to someone else. "I hope you're right."

After the next restoration Peter has to pick Stiles up like a child and carry him the rest of the way which would have been much more exciting, considering that Peter is still buck naked, if Stiles weren't so tired. He lets his head loll on Peter's shoulder and half-naps until Peter sets him down and presses his hand to the ground.

Stiles has no warm and fuzzy memories of the Argents' house. Last time he visited, it wasn't voluntary and he got beaten up by a crazy old sadist, may God kick his soul right out of the pearly gates. This time, though, he's pathetically happy to see those same corridors and rooms, especially considering that he ends up in the kitchen instead of a torture dungeon. Peter gives him some restored cereal and a jar of honey, and Stiles eats cereal by the handful, spilling as much as he gets into his mouth, and drinks honey out of the jar.

"Wow," he says, setting aside the empty carton and jar. The energy that has come rushing in is a sharp, almost painful contrast to the previous weakness. "I feel like a human black hole. Are there any of those pickles you were predicting?"

Peter hands him an already opened can of beans and a jar of pickles, and Stiles falls on them like a bunch of locusts. By the time he finally feels full, the floor around him is littered with empty cans, jars and cartons.

"You look like your normal self again," Peter says, brushing his fingers along Stiles' cheek. Stiles catches his hand and kisses it, somewhat drunk on his miraculous rejuvenation.

"That," he says, "is both terrifying and intriguing. I must be somehow metabolizing food directly into whatever it is that allows me to bring things into the normal time and keep you with me throughout the changes. This sort of thing, my sexy caterer, is full-on alien physiology, and I'm fairly sure it's new. I wonder, do I still have to poop? Or does it all, you know, just get converted without any waste?"

Peter laughs like he can't help it.

"I don't remember giving you any alcohol," he says, "but you certainly sound a little tipsy."

"Nah, I'm just feeling good." Stiles hops to his feet, nimble and ready to get to work once more. "It'll pass."

"It most likely will," Peter agrees. For a moment, he sounds a bit sad, although Stiles doesn't understand why. "Let's find that map now."

Stiles painstakingly restores the stairs to the second floor; finding the room which must be the study takes a couple false starts, but eventually they are standing before a large desk. Peter checks drawer after drawer while Stiles drinks sweet corn from the can like an especially chunky smoothie but only finds a normal map, one that is actually inferior to Stiles' own because it's older and smaller.

"Maybe Chris doesn't have it after all?" Stiles asks after Peter kicks the table in frustration and swears at the way his stubbed toes smart. "Or he took it with him to France?"

"What would he do with a map of Beacon Hills ley lines in France?" Peter disagrees. "And yes, there's a chance he might not have one, but I'm banking on the Argent reputation here. They've been at their family craft of murder for centuries. They have to have a map like that, it's just common sense."

"Well, okay, then maybe there's a secret drawer somewhere." Stiles swallows one last mouthful of corn and sets the can aside. "I'll help you look."

They search the drawers again, throwing all of their contents on the floor and knocking all over their inside paneling which is no small feat with one hand each (Stiles refuses to let Peter's hand go because if a temporal change can come at the exactly wrong moment, then it absolutely will).

"The junk he has here," Stiles grumbles. "I get the condoms and the stash of M&M's, but what is this black light torch for? Was he throwing mini-raves in here all by himself?"

"Wait, a black light torch?" Peter picks it up off the floor where Stiles has thrown it. "Chris Argent is not the type to party. If he kept this here..."

"...Then it was for work," Stiles finishes.

Peter clicks the black light on and shines it on the only map they have found. Interconnected lines of light come to life as Peter moves it along the streets and boulevards.

"Yes!" Stiles pumps a fist in the air. "There's a marker here, let's draw the lines so we can see them all at once."

Peter shifts the black light as Stiles marks the ley lines. A temporal change comes while they are at it but Stiles is well-prepared, touching Peter, the black light torch, the map and the desk at the same time; the air in the study grows musty and a bit of the ceiling falls off, making Peter hit it aside just before it connects with Stiles' head, but otherwise they are fine.

"Okay, there they all are." Stiles tosses the marker into a drawer without capping it, like the rebel that he is. "What do we get from all this?"

"The changes are all large-scale," Peter says, studying the map. "Admittedly, some seem to cover the whole town without regard to the ley lines, like that desert or the sixteen-million-year-old field, but the very first one you told me about was much more localized, even with some bits that were left untouched. That means knowing the ley lines might provide a slightly safer way to get through town. Anything that lessens our chances of getting caught up in a temporal change is something we should seize with both hands."

"Ah, I see what you mean." Stiles taps the Sheriff's station that lies squarely in the middle of an area free of ley lines. "So you think this, this time magic or whatever is moving along the ley lines, and if we loop back to moment I fell off the chair again, we could theoretically gain some ground by going through the areas with fewer ley lines and getting caught up in fewer changes."

"Exactly, my quick-thinking cupcake," Peter says.

"Okay, then riddle me this, hot stuff: what ground are we gaining, exactly? I mean, where are we going? Do you have an idea about where all this crap is coming from?"

"It's just that, an idea," Peter says. "But ley lines aren't supposed to go crazy like this, with time magic or any other magic, their purpose is regulation, the exact opposite of what is going on. We have to find the Nemeton and see if everything's alright there."

"Neme... tone? What's that?"

Before Peter can answer, a new temporal change has Stiles wobbling on his feet. He squeezes Peter's hand tighter, bracing himself for the house to fall down on their heads, or for a dozen rabid bears to rush them, or something along those lines.

As the tickling sensation leaves Stiles, something hits him from underneath, propelling him up like a cannonball. Peter's hand slips out of Stiles', and he hurtles through the air with zero control over where and how he's going; as he is flipped over, windmilling with all of his might, he sees a large tree below—one that, evidently, decided to grow exactly underneath Stiles.

In fairness to the tree, it's not a lone lucky saboteur. It seems to be the biggest one around but it's standing in a forest. Stiles cranes his neck, trying to see Peter, and catches a glimpse of him: tanned skin and a flash of red. A branch must have gone through him instead of catapulting him upwards. Stiles' already hysterical heart misses a few beats before he sees Peter moving. He's alive. Oh, he's alive, Peter's alive, thank God.

Stiles starts planning how best to land in order to not die at once, but all of his planning is useless. Another temporal change comes over while he's still falling. He strains towards Peter, frantic with the dread of the realization of what this means, but that's a useless gesture that does nothing. Peter and the forest wink out of view, and Stiles keep falling where the gravity tells him to, twisting and yelling in the air, utterly powerless and mad with grief.

He lands on something hard. There's a sharp pain in his neck, and he hears a bunch of other bones snap but doesn't feel it. He doesn't feel anything below his neck anymore.

He stares up into the overcast sky, uncaring of when he is, and tries to breathe. The air doesn't quite come into his lungs, and when Stiles coughs, he can feel blood bubbling up onto his lips, warm and sticky.

He's dying, Stiles realizes. He broke so many bones, a bunch of them have likely gone through internal organs, and he's paralyzed. No help is coming, too.

He can't die, though. If he dies, there will be no one to save the town and possibly the world. No army of people with magic touch has shown up, has it? Stiles is on his own... and he has to live.

His thoughts feel sluggish and unclear, as if glazed over. All he knows for sure anymore is that he needs to go back. Back. Back.

The sky shines with the delicate, ever-shifting rainbow of gasoline in a puddle.

Pretty, Stiles thinks.

A big fat drop of water from the ceiling comes down and lands directly on his nose. Stiles sneezes and hits his already sore head against the floorboards, but he pays that small hurt no mind.

He screams and hits the floor with his fists.

"No, no, no! Fuck, no!" He yells at the indifferent damp ceiling. A sudden sob steals his breath, and he chokes on his own voice. "This. Is. So. Fucking. Unfair!"

He punctuates every word with a new blow to the floor. A splinter spears his hand, sharp pain radiating from the point of contact. He stops and roughly wipes his furious tears with his sleeve—which only makes them worse, considering how much dust he has picked up from the floor. So stupid, pointless, cruel, arbitrary... Peter is dead, and there's no restoring him. Sure, technically, he's alive, driving over to Stiles' house right now, but it's not the same Peter, now is he? They have talked, and kissed, and gone through so much bizarre and scary shit together, and made plans, and, and...

Oh, God, Peter. Stiles has never wanted anything so much in his whole life as for all this to actually turn out to be a hallucination. If it's not real, then he hasn't lost Peter because he can't lose something that has never existed in the first place, right?

Although, the pedantic nerd part of him points out, if this is a time loop, then the Peter Stiles misses so fiercely never existed indeed. With time itself going back, that Peter has never happened; and yet, Stiles has still lost him.

He laughs, a manic, broken sound, incongruous in the silence of the attic.

He can still find a way to debunk Peter's linguistic arguments, to make himself believe this is all a hallucination. There's a non-zero chance that Stiles did pick up those foreign endearments somewhere, and Peter never ended up actually demonstrating any French grammar. Maybe he couldn't. Maybe it was all a bluff. Maybe if he'd called Peter out on that, the promised demonstration would have turned out to be bogus.

No, Stiles tells himself. No, this is real. There's too much discrepancy in the linguistics thing to ignore, and Stiles never ignores facts, even when said facts are completely wackadoo. He figured out that Scott was a werewolf long before Scott himself did, never mind that up until then he'd been sure lycanthropy was made up. It's real funny, though, how mind-boggling and life-changing that discovery seemed at the time, compared to what is happening now.

Stiles sits up, determination fueling him. This is real, and for the moment Beacon Hills should still be alright. Stiles needs to act fast, collect information, verify a hypothesis or two, and get to the bottom of this so that everything can go back to normal. First things first, he needs to free his leg from that damn chair.

He leans forward, ready to demolish the chair seat again, and freezes with his hand half-outstretched. His leg is already free; the chair is lying in shambles around it. Why the fuck didn't it come back the way it was?

Stiles files that together with the other million questions he has and scrambles down the ladder. In his room, he texts Peter, ignoring the messages he has already read twice:

Me

hurry up

He opens his laptop, navigates to an anime forum he frequents, and leaves a post. There. This forum keeps its servers in Japan, so next time Stiles loops—and there will probably be a next time—he can check if the post is still there despite him technically not having written anything. Stiles is inclined to take himself looping in time and the temporal apocalypse as an interlinked set of circumstances—these are hardly coincidences—and he wants to see if this is a limited bubble of time fuckery that only concerns Beacon Hills. If it is, that would mean that Stiles' actions affecting the outside world aggregate without the influence of whatever is happening within the town and occur anyway, which will show a high likelihood (although it wouldn't be unequivocal proof) that Beacon Hills is the only affected part of the planet. If the post is not there next loop, well, that would definitely mean that Stiles is in deeper shit than he hopes he is.

That done, he hurries down the stairs, slipping and almost falling in the process (a klutz like him saving the world? Prepare to die, everyone), and stumbles into the kitchen where Peter finds him some time later. Stiles doesn't notice him at first and Peter doesn't announce his presence, just standing at the threshold and watching Stiles rip chunks off a loaf of bread with his teeth and swallow them with little to no chewing as he recreates what he remembers of the ley lines on his own map.

"I feel like I should ask if you're alright," Peter says eventually, making Stiles jump and curse at a line gone all squiggly. "It seems rather evident, though, that you're not."

"Peter!" Stiles points at him with his marker. "Come here, I have to be holding your hand at all times."

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, I know, very confusing, an out-of-nowhere request, who cares," Stiles makes a lunge for Peter's hand. Peter jerks it out of the way and steps aside. "Oh, come on, I'm not a werewolf, I won't bite. I mean, I don't know what I am anymore, but I haven't grown any non-human teeth so far. Gimme your hand. Please?"

"Before I consider relinquishing any body parts," Peter says, sarcasm dripping from his words, "would you mind explaining why you want them? And also why you're looking completely deranged and wearing pajamas with blood on them?"

Stiles sighs.

"Of course I'll explain. But while I'm doing that, can I please, please be touching you in some small way?" Peter looks doubtful at that. Stiles sets his marker on the holder bar at the bottom of the murder board and goes down to his knees. Peter's eyes widen in shock. "Please, Peter, I'm begging you." Stiles puts his palms together in a praying gesture that is somewhat spoiled by the half-eaten loaf of bread he's still holding. "My sanity and literally the fate of the world

depend on that. I promise, I'm not going to do anything to you. We just need to have some skin-to-skin contact, no matter how tiny. Please."

Disgruntled and reluctant but intrigued, Peter takes a seat at the kitchen table.

"Alright," he says. The mistrust is clear on his face. "Let's hear this tale. I'm sure it will be riveting."

Stiles plops down on a chair across from Peter and intertwines the fingers of his right hand with Peter's left; Peter looks tense at that but relaxes just a bit when nothing happens.

"So here's the deal," Stiles says. "I'm caught up in a time loop which means I keep coming back to a moment a little while ago, just before I texted you. Very soon, waves of temporal changes will start coming over the town, aging and deaging people, objects and terrain, sometimes contained to affecting what is present in our current reality and sometimes bringing in whole chunks of the reality of the past or the future. It's chaotic, unpredictable and deadly. I seem to be the only one who can survive the changes intact and who can return things to the normal time, this time we're in right now, one small patch at a, uhm, time. I have to be touching something in order for it to work, and this is why I have to be touching you. Holding hands is convenient, although, judging by the fact that my clothes always come with me, contact with any part of my skin works. Without it you will be affected same as everyone and everything else."

Peter stares at him.

"You know, Stiles," he says, "the very first moment we met I found you interesting."

This is unexpected enough to bring Stiles' thought process to a screeching halt.

"You—you did?"

"Yes, I did. I remember being partially insane, just on the brink of losing functionality, and extremely focused on killing Kate, but even in that state I couldn't ignore you. The thing is, Stiles, I find most people exceedingly, soul-crushingly boring, so meeting someone I thought was interesting was kind of a big deal. I couldn't understand what made you so intriguing but I knew it was there. Something unique, perhaps, to the spark in your eyes. The curl to your smile. The lilt to your voice. But now, today, I finally understand it. What made you interesting was that you are stark raving mad, same as I was, and I could, evidently, sense this kinship."

"I'm not crazy!" Stiles argues, exasperated.

"Funnily enough, that's exactly something a crazy person would say."

"Look, we don't have time to look for proof. It'll come soon enough anyway, the temporal changes should start within an hour if the previous events are any indication. Just, just humor me, okay? Just go with it. We need to go find the Neme-tone thing, and it'll be much easier to do if we set out now."

"Nemeton?" Peter frowns. "Where did you even hear this word? The Nemeton is dead."

"Well, past you must have had some doubts about that since he—you—were the one to suggest looking for it. What or who is it, anyway?"

"The Nemeton is the great tree that grows in the Preserve," Peter says, sounding dubious. "It would probably be more accurate to say that a Nemeton to an ordinary tree is like an ordinary tree to a child's drawing of it, and there are only a few Nemeta in existence, scattered around the globe. It consists entirely of magic and might or might not be sentient. Or, well, it used to. Someone cut the one in Beacon Hills down before I was born, so now, supposedly, there's just a dead stump."

"Supposedly? You haven't seen it for yourself?"

"Of course I haven't," Peter scoffs. "I don't know where it is. No one does anymore, to the best of my knowledge. According to the lore, finding it is a more of matter of it wanting you to find it than a matter of navigation, and since it's dead, it can hardly want anything, can it?"

"Well, if it's even a little bit alive, it might have some idea of what's happening," Stiles offers. "It might want to help, if only out of self-preservation. We should go looking for it right now."

He jumps to his feet and tugs Peter's hand impatiently. Peter doesn't budge.

"Come on," Stiles urges. "We'll take a car and be at the Preserve before, hopefully, any radical temporal change sets in. We need to get a move on. I even remember some pockets of town that are mostly free from the ley lines, so we might be more or less safe on the route I plot."

"I feel disgusted with myself as I say this," Peter says, "but you're such an earnest lost little lamb, with your big pleading eyes and a need to save the world, that enabling your delusions would take a much sleazier scumbag than me. So I'm going to be a repulsively nice and sympathetic person for once in my life, Stiles. We're not going to the Preserve for you to traipse around the forest and look for a dead magic tree. We're going to the hospital where you can get some professional help."

"No, you don't understand!" Stiles stomps in frustration, aware that throwing a tantrum is probably doing nothing to prove his (tenuous) sanity. "Look, I know stuff from the previous loops, alright? Stuff I couldn't know otherwise. Here, uhm, your middle name is Benjamin. And at some point today you're probably going to call me "fragolina" which means "little strawberry" in Italian, a language I don't speak. And you know how to find where the north is by following the tip of the shadow of a stick because this is one of the first things any Hale child learns."

"All things that you could have learned via other means or extrapolated based on information already known to you," Peter argues.

"Oh my God, you're so stubborn! This must be fucking karma!" Stiles thunks his forehead on the table in frustration. "Last time you were the one trying to convince me I'm not crazy, and

now I understand how you felt!"

Peter curls a hand over Stiles' forehead and pushes his head up and off the table, surprisingly gently. Stiles looks him in the face and is taken aback at the pity he sees there.

"What is a secret I could use next time?" Stiles asks, desperate. "Something I absolutely couldn't have known any other way except for you telling me. Please, Peter, we've already wasted so much time this loop, I want to get it over with in one fell swoop later."

Peter hums thoughtfully.

"Alright, how about a deal? I'll tell you a secret like that, and in exchange you'll come willingly with me to the hospital. I'll drive. My car is very nice, you'll like it."

"Sure," Stiles says. The hospital is actually closer to the Preserve boundary than his home, and he can always do a runner from under the nurses' noses; that is, if they actually get that long a stretch of time without temporal changes, which he very much doubts. "But you have to be touching my skin in some way the whole time. Deal?"

"Deal, my sweet frago..." Peter stops, looking a bit awkward.

"A secret?" Stiles prompts him.

"I have a pet," Peter says. He seems entirely serious. "It's a gray and white kitten I found on the street a month ago. Unlike a normal cat, he's very stupid because, from how he prefers sleeping on my pillow instead of on his high-quality cat bed I got him in San Francisco, he is not afraid of werewolves in the slightest. An evolutionary mistake, I suppose. I call him Mr. Muppet."

"You," Stiles says. "A fearsome, cool, devious zombie werewolf. You have a little kitten at home that you call Mr. Muppet. Are you, by any chance, making this up?"

"Nope," Peter grins. "And maintaining my reputation is exactly why I keep Mr. Muppet a secret. No cat hair on my clothes when I go out. No cat smell on me. No letting him out on my balcony where people can accidentally see him. Soundproofed walls to make sure no one can hear him meowing in triumph as he shreds my bed covers into pieces, the little villain. You're off your rocker, sweetheart, so if you tell anyone, they won't believe you, just like you're not believing me right now."

"No, you know what? I actually do believe you," Stiles says. "It took some effort for me to get it, but you are a real person. You may prefer not to show your sweet, goofy side to people, but that doesn't mean you don't have one."

"Oh." Peter blinks, looking wrong-footed for a moment. "Well, would you look at us getting along and being in total accord? I could positively puke. And if I did, a rainbow might come out. Get up, Stiles, and put some shoes on. We're going to the hospital."

"Wait, one more thing. We need to go upstairs and get my loosest sweatpants for you to wear when your clothes disappear in a temporal change. Should've thought of that before now."

Peter rolls his eyes.

"I'm so flattered that your delusions feature me naked," he says. "Fine, get your sweatpants, you'll need something to change into at the hospital anyhow."

They go up to Stiles' bedroom where he tucks his shirt into his pajama pants and stuffs the sweatpants inside this makeshift pocket so that they are touching his skin.

"Alright, let's go."

"Finally." Peter looks like he's had it up to here with Stiles and his crazy.

They make it as far as the middle of the stairs, Stiles still holding onto Peter's hand with mulish determination, when the temporal change comes. The earthquake feeling makes Stiles lose his footing; Peter moves to pull him back but then the stairs creak, groan and give in under them. The house falls in on them as if crumpled by an invisible hand. Peter yanks Stiles' hand, hard enough for Stiles to smack into Peter with an "oof", and wraps himself around him as time-worn blocks of concrete rain down on them.

Peter's arms behind Stiles' back take the brunt of the fall, and Peter's body above Stiles absorbs the impact of the entire house falling down. Peter's harsh, pained breathing is hot on Stiles' cheek, and overall there's so much weight bearing down on Stiles that he feels like a pressed panini.

"You okay?" Stiles manages despite his lungs being squashed.

"Peachy keen," Peter says through gritted teeth. "I'll try to lift it off of us. Just... don't move or do anything."

"Wait, I can try to return these to the normal time."

Stiles gets one hand out from under Peter, steadfastly ignoring the fact that it was just tucked into the crease of Peter's thigh, and presses it to the nearest block of concrete. It immediately starts disappearing.

"See?" Stiles crows.

"I do not, as a matter of fact, see much of anything besides your ear," Peter says. "For the love of God, Stiles, stop fidgeting."

"But I can help!" Stiles insists.

He touches another block blindly. It disappears too—only, as far as Stiles can deduce, to appear above them and fall down again. Peter groans as it delivers a new blow and an extra bit of weight to hold.

"Oh," Stiles says when the house bits on them stop moving again. "I'll just be quiet and still then?"

"An excellent idea," Peter says.

It takes Peter a few mighty heaves and a shift into his beta form, but eventually he flings himself up with a roar, arms outstretched, and the pieces of the house fly away, letting Stiles see a starry night sky. Before anything can shift and come down on them again, Peter plucks Stiles off the ground like a carrot from a garden and leaps up and over the unstable mass of what used to be Stiles' home.

In the street, safe from any more stray masonry, Peter sits Stiles down on the sidewalk and looks around. The night is bright and peaceful; the stars and the waxing moon are shedding a lot of light on Peter's perfectly sculptured and fully naked body and the devastated street. Some buildings are aged forward, like Stiles' house, and some are replaced with shabby wooden structures Stiles would have expected to see in a history book. There's a skyscraper instead of old Mrs. Henderson's house down the road, and a part of it has been sheared off diagonally, exposing floors with white walls and glittering display cases like in a museum. A small five-legged deer picks its way across the cracked pavement, stepping delicately between mummified people and dead birds and pterosaurs scattered all over; when Peter shifts from foot to foot, the deer pricks its ears and gallops away, bobbing a little side to side with its uneven number of legs.

Peter looks down at Stiles.

Stiles fishes the sweatpants out and offers them to Peter.

"So, the Nemeton?" Stiles asks.

* * *

"The time is out of joint. Oh cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" Peter declares.

"What?"

"Hamlet," Peter says.

"What hamlet? I don't see a small village anywhere." Stiles squints into the night through the windshield.

"Never mind," Peter says, and Stiles, belatedly realizing which *Hamlet* was referred to, kind of wants to kick him for the condescension in his voice. "So you want me to be your bodyguard while we're thrown across time so that we can get to the Nemeton and you can... do what, exactly?"

"The working theory is that time is being thrown at us, rather than the other way around. And how the hell would I know what to do with it? You're the expert here."

"Excuse me, I'm not any sort of expert on druidism," Peter argues. "I told you, I don't even know where the thing is."

"Well, you know more than me!" This Peter is extra exasperating, Stiles decides. "And why are you being so annoying about this? Yes, I would very much like you to keep me safe. If I die, there's no guarantee there will be anyone else capable of doing what I do. Is that not

incentive enough for you to actually do it? Why are you saying "bodyguard" like I'm offering you an earthworm to eat?"

"I don't actually see a reason for me to get involved in this," Peter shrugs, almost dislodging Stiles' hand on his shoulder. "You've already restored my car. What's stopping me from pushing you out onto the road and speeding away before any temporal change catches with me?"

Stiles opens his mouth and closes it again. The second-loop Peter has been tremendously helpful and cooperative, so Stiles went into the situation assuming this one would be no different. Guess the joke's on Stiles, huh?

"Well," Stiles says lamely. "First of all, you can't exactly outrun a temporal change. A car is certainly not fast enough."

"Have you tried outrunning it?" Peter counters. "No? Thought so."

"And second of all," Stiles snaps, "there might not be a safe space out there, have you thought about that? We don't know how far this goes. It might even be over the whole planet."

"Have you seen any evidence that it's not localized to this town?"

"Oh, it's evidence that you want?" Stiles hisses, well and truly pissed by now. "Trying to lawyer your way out of dealing with an apocalypse, are you? Well, think on this, Mr. lawyer, sir: I know for sure that I have already been to a patch of reality from as far back as sixteen million years ago. What do you think will happen if a temporal change opens up a patch of what was here four billion years ago, when this planet wasn't able to support life? Or about five billion years ahead, when the Sun runs out of fuel, gets all bloated and swallows up Mercury and Venus? Oh, I forgot: you're the one with the fancy literary quotes that go over my head, you don't know any physics. Well, I'll skip all the technical details but in short, the luckiest you get in scenarios of this kind is getting vaporized as the red dwarf that used to be the Sun boils away the little remaining atmosphere at a rate that you can't even imagine. The sort of energy that is involved in that? It will not be contained in its own little patch, let me assure you. But how about something a teensy bit slower, hmm? Atmosphere getting sucked out into the vacuum of space, pieces of old continents knocking into the new ones, meteors crashing into the Earth out of nowhere, tsunamis, earthquakes, every single natural disaster you have ever heard about and a few more on top of that. We've already seen the ocean where it's not supposed to be. It's only a matter of, yes, time."

Stiles stops and inhales deeply, trying to get his anger under control. He must be the reasonable one this time around. The level-headed one. He can't let this devolve into a screaming match.

"Are you done?" Peter asks as he turns into a new street, this one razed to the ground by age and lit up with flickering purple light coming from seemingly nowhere. He has to swerve around a dead raccoon whose top half looks like an adult and bottom half like a newborn kit.

"Almost," Stiles says. "Look, I'm not asking you to turn over a new leaf and become Mother Teresa. You don't really care about saving everyone else and are looking to save yourself? No

problem, the heart wants what the heart wants. But this time there's no saving just yourself, Peter. What I'm asking you to do is in your own personal best interest. Think about that, please. And fast, if you can manage that. There, I'm done now."

Stiles breathes into the silence in the car. If Peter does decide to risk striking out on his own, it would suck. Stiles' frail human body cannot take a lot of the stuff out here; hell, even if nothing falls down on him, or eats him, or drowns him, or pierces him, or breaks his every bone (etc., etc.), he might just expire from hunger if he has to restore too much. But Stiles will try. He has to.

"What's in it for me?" Peter asks.

Stiles supposes he should have seen this coming.

"Well, what do you want?" He asks, feeling very tired in a way that has nothing to do with physical exhaustion. "I don't even have anything with me except the clothes I'm wearing."

Peter laughs.

"Now I believe the world is ending," he says.

Stiles mulls that one over.

"I don't get it."

"You see, my heroic huckleberry, the very first time I asked "What's in it for me?", I was expecting you to ask what I want. Then I would have said "How about a kiss?" and watched you blush, squirm and flail around in outrage, which, I assure you, is a delightful reward all on its own. But you never asked. You just gave me that Batman pin, looking like you were certain it was a thing I would want. And I kept saying it, and you kept reacting the same way. Now that you have actually asked me what I want, I'm not even sure what to do with myself."

"Huh."

Peter glances at Stiles briefly and returns his attention to the road.

"I can't help but notice you don't seem at all outraged or even surprised at the idea of kissing me."

"Technically, I already kissed you twice," Stiles admits. "Or, rather, I kissed alternate yous who, as of right now, have never existed."

"Oh, you did?" Peter chuckles. "Go mes."

"Look," Stiles says. "I will kiss you, suck you off, do whatever the fuck you like. Anything. I mean it, anything. Just please, come with me, protect me from the things that you can shake off but my weakling human self can't, lend your expertise on the supernatural and just, well, be there. I really don't want to be in this apocalypse alone. I..." Stiles grimaces. "Turns out, I don't deal well with that."

"Wow," Peter says flatly.

"Wow what?"

"Nothing. There's no need to prostitute yourself, Stiles. Consider this one a freebie. It is, after all, in my own best interest, isn't it?"

"Oh." Stiles blinks. "Well, good."

He has a feeling that he has said something wrong, but he has no idea what it was.

He squeezes Peter's shoulder.

"Thank you," he says quietly.

"Don't mention it," Peter says in a clearly dismissive tone. Alright, Stiles can take a hint. "To the Preserve we go, then. I hope you know the way."

"I don't," Stiles says brightly. "Don't worry, though, we'll find it."

"If I don't strangle you first," Peter mutters.

"What? Why?"

"Just... tell me where to drive, Stiles."

Stiles does. But much as he tries to focus fully and completely on the apocalypse, the niggling feeling just won't leave him alone.

Chapter 4: That's Gonna Need A Big Band-Aid

They lose the car in a lake of molten lava that opens up underneath them with a temporal change. Stiles doesn't even want to calculate from how long ago that one is because he's sure he won't be happy with the answer. Instead, he restores a patch of ground which turns out to be a lucky break: the restoration reveals a corner of a house with the number and the street name. They are basically at the edge of the Preserve already.

Peter doesn't look happy about it, though, nor about anything else. He is a thundercloud, ripping off the burnt ends of his borrowed sweatpants and turning them into sweat-kapris. His charred leg hair rains down in tiny clouds of ash from his jerky movements, and a couple of nasty-looking burns on his right ankle don't seem to be in any hurry to heal.

"We should make a pit stop here," Stiles says. "Raid the fridge. I need food to keep restoring stuff."

Peter follows him silently as he recreates the hallway and a bit of the kitchen. The fridge yields a chicken casserole which is congealed and much too bland, but Stiles eats it anyway while Peter keeps a hand on the back of his neck. It's nutrition, and the end of the world is not the time to get picky.

"Why you?" Peter asks abruptly.

Stiles looks at him questioningly, cheeks bulging with the chunks of cold chicken in a hamster-like fashion.

"Why is it you who can loop back around, survive these temporal blasts and restore things but no one else?" Peter clarifies. "What's so special about you, specifically?"

Stiles swallows the half-chewed food, grimacing at the uncomfortable sensation of it elbowing its way down his esophagus, and shrugs.

"I dunno," he says. "Must be some sort of random chance. Could be anyone."

Peter narrows his eyes.

"You're lying," he says. "I can hear it in your heartbeat, Stiles, have you forgotten it's something werewolves can do? You do know. You just don't want to share it then?"

"I don't know," Stiles insists, panicked out of nowhere. He can feel that treacherous heartbeat of his now, gaining speed at the rate of a race car. "I don't, I don't, I don't!"

He drops the casserole dish, and it shatters at his feet, showering everything in chicken and glass. The spoon he was using clinks against the tiles and keeps jumping for a bit while Stiles' hands shake and cold sweat runs down his face.

"I hear you," Peter says cautiously, watching Stiles like a ticking bomb. "But I also hear your heart, Stiles. Did you... do something to gain this ability? Some sort of unwholesome magic, maybe? I won't judge if you tell me, you know. I'm a very unwholesome person myself."

"I..." Stiles takes a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. He doesn't know why he reacted like this, and, frankly, he doesn't want to know. He just wants to distance himself from this feeling. "I didn't do anything. I don't even know any magic, Deaton refused to teach me anything."

"Well, has anything unusual happened to you recently?" Peter just can't let this go, it seems. "Maybe someone did some magic on you?"

Stiles closes his eyes, willing his churning stomach to settle. He's put a lot of effort into consuming that casserole, he doesn't want it all to come right back up.

"No," he says in a small voice. "Nothing. No one. Will you please stop picking at it? Why are you even asking? Who cares why it's me? The important thing is to fix this."

"I suppose I'm wondering what makes you qualified," Peter raises a skeptical eyebrow. "If it's scientific expertise, then surely there are others even in this town who could do better. One needn't look long for other options, even. I'm sure dear Lydia could cite everything that you can, possibly more, and she would look fabulous while doing it as opposed to your dragged-through-the-bushes-feet-first vibe."

Stiles wraps his arms around himself.

"I used to think you were being mean to me a lot," he says. "Now I know what you sound like when you are actually trying to hurt me. Peter, why are you doing this?"

"Just trying to understand how it is that out of everyone in this town I have to be stuck with you," Peter says.

Stiles bites his lower lip and says nothing.

"This!" Peter snarls. "This is the thing that fucking qualifies you, isn't it? Why aren't you standing up for yourself? Telling me to go to hell? No, of course you wouldn't. You're a martyr through and through, Stiles, aren't you?"

"What? What are you even talking about?"

"This is what you do time and time again," Peter spits. Despite how angry he sounds, his hand on Stiles' neck is still a light, gentle pressure. "Throw yourself at things you'd give a wide berth to if you'd only had the common sense God gave a tadpole. You participate in a cockamamie plan to call an insane alpha to an empty school, ram a wall and an enraged kanima with your car, take on a bizarre apocalypse, jump on my dick—"

"Wait, hold on, what the fuck does your dick have to do with anything?" Stiles tried to sort out mentally his conversations with all of the Peters. "Is this about what I said when I asked you to help me?"

"Oh, congratulations, the boy genius has figured it out!" Peter's eyes burn cold beta blue. "When you offered sexual favors in exchange, I first thought it was because you think I'm absolute scum. You know, there's killing and conning, and then there's the kind of guy who'd take you up on an idiotic promise like that. Anything, he says. As if you have any idea what "anything" even entails! You've got "virgin" stamped on your forehead in big neon letters for the world to see! But then I thought about it more, and now I understand that it wasn't about me in the slightest. You saw a chance to do yourself harm for the sake of others and you just went for it without thinking, didn't you? Why are you like this, Stiles? What, don't you think you have any worth unless other people are using you in any way they see fit?"

"I..." Stiles says. He feels lost and overwhelmed. "I didn't mean... I don't think you're scum. And I... Well, even if you did take me up on it, I don't think you would've hurt me?"

Peter stares at him incredulously.

"You know, the last loop it was actually the other way around," Stiles offers. He has no idea what else to say. "You, I mean, past you tried using a promise of sex as an incentive for me. Maybe you're right, and I'm a martyr. But that's not all it is. I just, I've been through some stuff with you already, and I... actually feel safe-ish with you?"

Peter rubs his face with his free hand.

"You do realize that those other mes you've shared all those attitude-flipping experiences with aren't *me* me, right?" He asks. "I'm a tabula rasa. I wasn't there. I will never have been there."

"You did save my life when my house fell down on us," Stiles reminds him. "You could've used me as a human shield instead. Would have saved you a bunch of bruises."

"That was an impulse decision which I'm already starting to regret," Peter says, lifting his chin in a haughty way that reminds Stiles of a cat. Maybe Peter has picked up the gesture from Mr. Muppet.

The thought makes Stiles smile. Weirdly, that seems to only make Peter angry again.

"You insufferable, self-sacrificing, self-destructive, moronic..."

He doesn't finish his sentence. Instead, his hand on Stiles' neck tightens, and he reels Stiles in for a furious, bruising, toe-curling kiss.

Stiles kisses back, with all of his anger at Peter's cruel words, all of his awe at the care in Peter's actions, all of his pent-up, frustrated, grief-stricken, mindless want. He buries his fingers in Peter's hair, and Peter's hands slide underneath Stiles' shirt, leaving trails of what feels like pure lust as they slide along his back. The heat of Peter's body is intoxicating, and Stiles presses closer, loathe to miss even a tiny bit of sensation. When Peter pulls away, Stiles makes an incoherent noise of complaint and can feel the twitch of Peter's cock in response.

"I hope you realize what a horrible match I am for you, sweetheart," Peter says. He's looking at Stiles like there's nothing else worth looking at in the whole universe, and it does things to

Stiles that are decidedly outside of all of his previous life experiences. "I'm sure your big brain has already come up with the laundry list of reasons why. I'll wreck you, you know."

"Maybe it's the reckless martyr in me talking," Stiles teases, made bold by being kissed for once instead of assaulting an unsuspecting Peter with his lips, "but I'm kind of looking forward to it."

As Peter reasonably albeit tactlessly pointed out earlier, Stiles only has a vague idea of what it is that he's looking forward to. For some reason, though, that only makes Stiles want it more.

Peter half-groans, half-laughs and lowers his head to drag his cheek and nose along the side of Stiles' neck, scent-marking him. Stiles wonders if it's something Peter generally likes to do in bed. Would Peter want to touch every single part of Stiles to make sure his scent lingers everywhere? Stiles imagines those hands going much further than just stroking his back and bites back a whimper.

"Much as I'd like to hear all of the delicious sounds you seem to be prone to producing, we should take a raincheck," Peter says, lifting his head again. "Saving the world aside, your first time deserves a little more consideration than a random kitchen that only partially exists."

"Right," Stiles agrees, his mind still giddy and hazy from the kiss. "It should at least be a kitchen that exists one hundred per cent. Accept no substitutes."

Peter chuckles, reaches around Stiles and tears off the marble top of halfway-restored counter. He sets it down in front of the fridge, on top of the casserole mess.

"Here," he says, "this way you won't cut up your feet. Get something else to eat before we set off."

Stiles steps on top of the marble board, sliding at little because of the casserole sauce that has soaked through his socks (he's going to leave béchamel footprints across space-time because of course it's a thing Stiles would wind up doing), and gives the fridge contents a critical look. In the end, he decides on a block of mozzarella and a jar of marinara sauce. They should sort of go together, at least. It'll be like eating the world's saddest deconstructed pizza.

"On a less uplifting note," Peter says, once again setting a hand on Stiles' neck, "we should really return to the reason why it's you. Your reaction was rather extreme, and I don't think it was because I was rude about it. There is a reason, my tantalizing honeyberry, and I suspect it's either because of something you did or something that was done to you. You're certainly not doing it with some sort of device," he adds, giving Stiles a blatant once-over. "Not unless you've got it keistered."

That last suggestion makes Stiles snort and relax a bit; it's a good thing, too, because he was already starting to squeeze the marinara sauce jar a little too hard and breathe a bit faster.

"Do you really think it matters?" He asks, avoiding looking Peter in the face. "It's—it's here, a done deal. Who cares why it's here? The point is that I can use it to help people."

"I've been researching all manner of happenings and creatures with you for a while, Stiles," Peter says. "I know how you operate. You leave no stone unturned, and if you have no lever with which to overturn a stone, you dig around it like a demented badger until you get it done. Everything matters, and every piece of a puzzle has a place to click into. What are you so scared of that you'd pretend to be the sort of person who is content with half-assing these things?"

Stiles stares into space without seeing, clutching the jar to his chest like a rather useless shield.

"I wasn't lying," he insists. "I don't, like, *know* know anything about it. It's just a weird thing that happened this morning... I think. That has to be it. I don't remember anything else that could possibly have anything to do with it. I really don't. I swear."

Peter tilts his head as if to hear better.

"That was a bit of a melting pot of truth and lies," he says. "I confess, I'm no longer sure who you're lying to in this scenario."

"Will you stop your walking lie detector act?" Stiles asks, annoyed. He's already doing some breathing exercises to avoid spiraling into panic again, even as he's skirting the very edges of the topic, and Peter dissecting his every word isn't helping. This is so weird. He wasn't afraid when he was trying to get to the box; he wasn't afraid when he snapped out of it and left the attic the first time.

Maybe, a little voice inside Stiles whispers, it's because he's starting to remember. Just barely seeing the outlines of some memories; silhouettes in the fog, looming and sporting long sharp claws and teeth. He doesn't really know anything; it's more that he knows that he knows *something*. And Peter can insist till he's blue in the face that Stiles throws himself at danger without a care in the world—Stiles is increasingly sure that avoiding those silhouettes is the most reasonable, self-preserving thing that can be done.

"Look," he says, going for calm and failing miserably, "right now we've got a different stone to dig under. We're looking for the Nemeton. Let's get into the question of me later?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Peter says, "but 'later' sounds suspiciously like a euphemism for, perhaps, accidentally forgetting to hold onto me when the next time wave comes and then starting over with another Peter. One who wouldn't know to ask the difficult questions."

"No!" Stiles is tempted to throw some marinara sauce into Peter's stupid face. "How the fuck... Seriously?! You think I'd murder you 'cause you're asking inconvenient questions? Open your fucking wolf ears wide, then, and listen here: I would never, ever, ever do that. Are we clear?"

Stiles dips his cheese into the marinara and bites off a big chunk in order to stop speaking and thus saying something he'll regret. Peter's thumb strokes the side of Stiles' neck with tenderness that feels weird coming from someone able to break marble counters without effort.

"Crystal," Peter says. "It might be something I would do, you know. Reason one hundred and sixty-seven why I'm not good for you."

"Who's the martyr now?" Stiles asks, annoyed. "Either shut up and let me decide if you're good for me or not, or come outright and say that you aren't giving me the authority to make that decision."

"Technically, under law, you don't have that authority," Peter points out. "You're not eighteen yet."

"Because I will magically grow my adulthood gland by next spring—that is, provided next spring ever comes—and the world will suddenly start making sense, and every decision I make will be fully informed and only bring nice predictable outcomes? The way I see it, if I'm old enough to deal with this temporal crap, I'm old enough to fuck you if I want to." Stiles pauses for a moment. "Unless this is you backing out in a roundabout way? If you don't actually want me, then just tell me."

If that turns out to be the case, well, Stiles will be disappointed but not surprised. Not being wanted is something he has ample experience in, after all.

Peter presses his face into Stiles' hair and inhales what must be a full lungful of Stiles' scent.

"Does a man dying of thirst not want an oasis when he sees one?" Peter whispers. Stiles shivers, eyes sliding half-closed at the sensation of Peter's lips just barely brushing against the shell of his ear. "You're as tempting as you're vexing. You always have been."

"That's settled, then," Stiles says in the most authoritative manner he can master which, at the moment, is not much. "We save the world, and then sexy times ensue."

"Mm, so they shall." Peter gives Stiles a feather-light kiss on the temple and leans away. "But promise me we will explore what happened to you and why, right after we're done with this particular pilgrimage to the Nemeton. Even if I die and you'll have the next me on your hands, completely ignorant of any such promise. Even if you really, really don't want to. You're the key to everything, Stiles, not some old tree stump, I feel it in my bones. Promise me."

Stiles doesn't want to promise. He wants to do whatever is the opposite of that, like running away screaming, for example.

But Peter is right, and if Stiles ignores the box and the nebulous threat that comes with it and it hurts people, Stiles will never forgive himself. Whatever those silhouettes of memories are hiding, they cannot be worse than knowing he has let people die because he was afraid.

"I promise," he says.

Peter just nods, looking satisfied.

* * *

After Stiles is done eating, they set off along the shore of the lava lake. It's really huge, cutting into what they calculate to be the Preserve territory, and the heat it radiates is crazy; were the Preserve still a forest, it would've been on fire by now. It has, however, been replaced by a construction site which, by Stiles' reckoning, comes from the future. The point of the Preserve is to be, well, preserved, so it has never been touched by human development before. Stiles finds it extra distasteful that the construction site looks abandoned, rusty and disordered. If one goes to the trouble of cutting down a bunch of protected trees to build something, one should at least have the decency to finish it.

It's an eerie walk, not just because abandoned construction sites are creepy, but also because there are pockets of sounds from elsewhere which Stiles and Peter only find out about after walking into them. There's children's laughter on repeat, with a notable lack of any children, and a couple having a fight about one of them hiding some unknown secret, and the methodical thuds of a shovel hitting soil, and an owl hooting, and a phone ringing, and someone's ragged, heavy breathing, interspersed with whispered "No, no, no"; on and on it goes, these disparate time soundtracks, one after the other, never overlapping. It has Peter on edge, and Stiles is confused as to why so many of them feature people. Statistically speaking, there's a lot more time without people to choose from, and if this thing is truly random, why did only these sounds get picked—the insignificantly short bits of human presence, compared to the amount of time this territory has spent by itself?

Maybe there's some bias in the system. Stiles wishes he had the time (ha) and opportunity to actually research this, science-wise, not just survival-wise.

"Hey, look," he says, pointing up. There are silent fireworks exploding in the sky at a distance, all the more striking in their mute splendor. "Is that the Fourth of July last year?"

"I wouldn't know. I was catatonic at the time," Peter reminds him, stopping to look up as well. His face is full of wonder as he watches the show. How long has it been since he last had a chance to see fireworks?

Stiles has a sudden urge to go through every experience he's ever taken for granted over the last seven years, like Harry Potter, and Reddit, and Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog, and Baskin-Robbins' Double Header cones, and just everything, and make sure Peter sees, hears, tastes, touches and smells all of it.

"Sorry," he says. "But at least you can see it now."

"The small perks of the end of the world, huh?" Peter smiles.

It's a bit romantic, in a deranged kind of way, to stand between future rusty scaffolding and a pile of construction bits and bobs, hold hands and watch mute fireworks from the past. Even though they should really hurry up, they keep watching it; Stiles is struck by the realization that this might be the calmest and most peaceful moment he's had since it all started.

It probably should not be surprising (although it still is) that only a few seconds after that Stiles' world drowns in white-hot, blinding pain.

Peter moves like lightning, and Stiles hears a wet thud almost before he can process seeing Peter turn and throw a punch to Stiles' right. Slow, much too slow, Stiles whirls around and flinches away, almost tripping over his own feet, but all he can see is a multicolored blur—both Peter and whoever attacked Stiles are moving at an incredible speed, too much for him to process. Stiles didn't even know werewolves could be that fast.

He looks down at his forearm which is where the pain is radiating from and feels like fainting, throwing up and screaming, all at the same time; he would have gone at least one of these routes if they weren't overshadowed by the blessed numbness of shock.

There's a chunk of Stiles missing, torn away together with a piece of his sleeve. A part of Stiles is just gone. The raw, mauled muscle is exposed to the light, and blood is streaming out, soaking the fabric of his shirt.

Stiles' ears are ringing, and it takes him a few seconds to distinguish the ringing from a high-pitched, pitiful whine. It takes him a few more to realize it's him who's making that sound.

It feels like he's been staring at the wound forever, but it can't have been long at all. Peter is still fighting, and the fireworks above are still exploding.

Peter. Stiles can't afford to faint like a Victorian maiden and hope that the strapping gentleman will save him. He has to help. Whoever or whatever this is, they sneaked up on Stiles while he was standing right next to the most paranoid werewolf this side of the Atlantic ocean; they shouldn't be underestimated.

Stiles staggers over to the pile of stuff and picks up a long piece of metal pipe. Only after his bloodied fingers close over it does he remember that it's going to disappear under his touch, he should've thought to pull the sleeve over his palm—but it doesn't.

Stiles stares at it in dumb confusion, but he doesn't have long to try and understand it because the movement in the corner of his eye stops.

Peter is standing still, shoulders slumped, chest heaving, sweat and blood rolling down his face; the sort of speed he has just shown clearly costs him a lot. His opponent also looks a bit worse for wear: its exposed bones are visibly broken and cracked in many places, and the raw flesh that covers its head, neck and some of its shoulders is bruised, distended and disfigured from what must have been hammer-like blows.

Stiles recognizes it. Young Enrique, apparently, has some serious artistic chops; the real-life version of his drawing of the monster has the same disturbing, not quite human proportions with gorilla-long arms and an elongated maw that doesn't close properly due to the many long and sharp teeth.

Those teeth are stained with blood, and Stiles understands in a flash of horror that it's his.

Don't faint. Don't faint. Don't faint.

"Hungry," the monster says in a quiet, sibilant voice. Its big bloodshot eyes are tracking Stiles, and its misshapen skinless nose makes a weird flutter as it, from the looks of it, inhales

Stiles' scent. There don't even seem to be any lungs, Stiles thinks hysterically. How does it do this? "Hungry. Days and nights, days and nights. Hungry! Hungry!"

It lunges at Stiles, and Peter throws himself in pursuit.

A temporal change comes on just as Stiles, crying out from how the pain in his forearm flares, swings his pipe. He stumbles at the earthquake sensation, overcome with both relief—surely the monster will be gone now—and panic—Peter's going to be lost in time, too. Only the loss of balance saves him when the monster flies right over him, so close that Stiles can smell its coppery, faintly rotting scent.

The landscape hasn't changed at all; the only difference is that Peter, who has managed a few steps by the time the change set in, is back where he started, between the scaffolding and the shore of the lava lake.

"Hungry!" The monster croons.

This advanced warning helps Stiles react just in time to come to the only sensible solution: he flings himself down on the ground with the beginning of a spin and rolls towards Peter who has already made those same few steps again. Why wasn't the monster back where it had been too?

Another temporal change, and once again Peter is further away than he was. Stiles holds his pipe up without even trying to time it to when the monster charges again—it's too fast for him—and its teeth clang against the metal. A few break, and the monster howls in that same strange, sibilant way.

Looks like maybe it's not all that smart, even if it is sapient enough to speak. Not that intellectual superiority is going to help Stiles much.

Yet another change comes through, and it's the same strange, tiny hiccup where Peter is back a few steps but for Stiles and the monster nothing changes.

Stiles rolls to an immediate stop, bumping into Peter's legs. Peter gawks at him. The monster is hiss-wailing behind him, too busy bemoaning the loss of several teeth to attack again right away.

"How are you... What..."

"Take this," Stiles says, thrusting the pipe up.

It's a testament to how good Peter is in a crisis that he doesn't ask any further questions. He takes the pipe and hops over Stiles, putting himself between Stiles and the monster.

If they survive this, Stiles is going to trot this occasion out every time Peter starts going on about how he's not good for Stiles. Sure, this is technically just Peter fulfilling his part of their deal, and without Stiles Peter is going to disappear in the next temporal change big enough, so it's pure self-interest, but somehow Stiles doubts it's quite that simple.

Or he wishes it weren't that simple. One of those two.

"Eat you! Eat! Hungry!" The monster lunges again.

Peter swings the pipe, too fast for Stiles to follow.

Another temporal change comes in. Peter stays between Stiles and the monster, and Stiles blinks a few times to make sure he's not imagining it. The pipe finishes its swing trajectory and smacks the monster across the jaw; the sound with which it breaks is very satisfying for Stiles to hear, much as he's not normally bloodthirsty outside of video games. More than that, Peter has put enough force into the blow that the monster is thrown to the side, landing with one foot in the lava lake.

With a sibilant yelp, it jerks up and away, blurring with speed momentarily again but refocusing almost immediately, at a respectful distance from Stiles and Peter.

"Naughty," the monster hisses darkly, staring at Stiles even though Peter was the one who hurt it the most. Its broken jaw is hanging at an angle which should make it impossible to speak but the monster doesn't seem to know that. "Naughty meat."

It turns around and runs off in a series of strange leaps that take it out of Stiles' view in seconds.

"What..." Peter begins, looking down at his hand that is now stained by Stiles' blood from the pipe.

One more temporal change starts, making Stiles feel a bit seasick with all the repeating wobbliness. Or maybe he's just nauseated by this whole situation, which would also be a fair assumption.

"...Just happened?" Peter ends.

"Wait," Stiles sits up. "You... didn't roll back just now? And a couple of times before this? I'm not going crazy and imagining it, am I?"

"Should I have?" Peter frowns.

"Yeah, I mean, the wobbly thing and then the tickling... you didn't feel anything?"

"No wobbling or tickling, if that's what you mean by 'anything'," Peter says. "But I don't understand where you came from with that pipe. Can you teleport now, too?"

"Oh, I fucking wish," Stiles mutters. "Congratulations, you're special now too. You have just been through several temporal changes and lived to tell the tale... even though you can't actually tell that you have. Really, you didn't feel that?"

"I assure you, Stiles, if anyone wobbled or tickled me, I definitely wouldn't have missed it." Peter kneels down by Stiles and inspects the wound. "That's gonna need a big band-aid."

"A band-aid?" Stiles echoes, incredulously. "Please tell me it's a joke and you actually know more than that about patching up humans."

"What's there to know? Shove the insides back inside and staple the hole, the rest they can walk off," Peter says airily as he picks Stiles up in a bridal carry and straightens up. The tips of his fingers find Stiles' bare skin above the neck hole of his shirt, and all pain ebbs like a wave receding from the shore, leaving Stiles light-headed and limp even as new pain appears immediately. "We're going back to that house, and you're restoring the bathroom. Hope they've kept their first aid kit properly stocked."

Stiles wants to protest going back (they really need to press on) and being carried like a baby (he's got legs and he's not afraid to use them), but the fight has drained him and he has already lost a ton of blood. Besides, Peter is already walking, and his smooth stride isn't even jostling Stiles' arm where he cradles it on his stomach. So he relaxes against Peter and, for what feels like the first time in ages, lets someone else take care of him.

* * *

"Did you recognize that thing?" Stiles asks while Peter is cleaning the wound with the leftover water from the kettle and some cotton from the first aid kit. Even though Peter's movements are light and deft, it still hurts, little flashes of extra pain among the more or less level sea of powerful hurt, and there's so much more grossness on display than Stiles ever wants to see. A conversation would help keep him distracted.

"Rawhead-and-Bloody-Bones," Peter says. "Quite an exotic personage. I only remembered because when I read about it, my nineteen-year-old imagination was quite unable to settle between "ew" and "cool". I've never met one before."

"Well, thank fuck for that. I really don't want to ever see a horde of these." Stiles wrinkles his nose. "What's its deal?"

"It's all in the name, sweet pea. It's a skeleton with some flesh on its head. It tends to appear somewhere, usually in a small town or village, eat about a dozen people or so and disappear into the night again. The flesh it eats serves as a source for it growing its own, and, from the account I read, this is the only thing it wants: to cover its bones with flesh. However, the flesh gets used up as it goes along, presumably for all the things that we need energy for as well, like moving or healing. So once it only has flesh on its head, it goes off in search of a new meal."

"Ew," Stiles says with feeling. "So now a piece of me is part of it. Great. I might be sick."

"Make sure to aim away from me and your arm," Peter says. "Can you imagine the infection that would set in if you threw up on this?"

"I'd prefer not to, thank you." Now Stiles might really be sick. "So how do we get rid of it? And how did it even track me down? And why wasn't it affected by those last few temporal changes?"

"I'd hazard a guess that eating a piece of you gave it an immunity," Peter offers. "And I haven't the faintest why or how it found you. This one seems to prefer small children anyway."

"Those might be short to come by around here right now. Maybe it just found the only living people in town, and of the two of us, I was simply the closest to its preferred age range."

"That could be it. Oh, and as for getting rid of it, I only know about old-fashioned methods. Kill it dead with judicious violence and burn every trace of it to make sure. We could also salt the bonfire for extra-extra security."

"Well, the violence is gonna be on you," Stiles says, secretly relieved because he doesn't want to kill anyone, even something as disgusting and irredeemable as Rawhead-and-Bloody-Bones. Does it make him a hypocrite to not want to do it himself even though he recognizes he will breathe easier knowing that monster will never hurt him again? "It's too fast for me to even keep track of. I'm amazed Enrique's dog managed to hold it off long enough for Enrique to run away."

"Who's Enrique?"

"Oh, that's right, we didn't do the whole Criminal Minds routine this time around. Enrique's a kid who survived Rawhead's attack thanks to his dog. We even went to talk to him in the first loop."

It bothers Stiles how he didn't think of Peter not knowing this before he spoke. He thought he knew all about one-sidedness, with how he adored Lydia from afar and she never gave him a first glance, let alone a second one, but this thing where he remembers interacting with Peter and Peter himself doesn't is screwing him over on a whole different level. Stiles is being warped and re-shaped by this, and for Peter nothing has changed.

"Right," Peter says.

He slathers a thick layer of some cream all over the wound, and after the first few seconds of jolting pain Stiles feels blissful numbness overtaking his arm. It's not a complete switch-off like the anesthetic at the dentist's but it's fucking amazing.

"I'll bandage this up but you really need some professional help." Peter slices a packet of gauze open with a claw. "It's big enough that you might need an insert, or a tissue transplant, or whatever it is that doctors do in such case."

"Yeah, that's gonna have to go to the bottom of my to-do list." Stiles snorts. "Hospitals are in short supply right now."

"That's assuming you won't magically regenerate it, of course."

"I can't regenerate. I'm human, have you forgotten?"

"Are you?" Peter lifts his head briefly to look Stiles in the eye, then returns his attention to the bandages. "I'm going to go out on a limb, my darling cinnamon roll, and suggest that no garden variety human can do what you do. Furthermore, your flesh gave the Rawhead-and-Bloody-Bones the same protection that I enjoy from holding your hand. And when I touched your blood on that pipe, I was afforded that protection as well."

"So what, are you saying my blood... has some inherent time-stabilizing properties?" Stiles frowns. "That's just nuts."

"Is it?" Peter counters. "Then riddle me this: how come your shirt has a bloody rip on the back but when I touched your back, I could ascertain for myself that it was wonderfully smooth and decidedly unhurt?"

He reaches behind Stiles and taps a spot on his back.

"There was a bullet that grazed me," Stiles remembers. "But that was... last loop... why the hell is my shirt still ripped, then?"

"Because it has your blood on it," Peter says with conviction. "What I remember of physics from my high school days might only be enough to fill a shot glass but I'm very much aware of the basic principles of magic. Blood has power, and your power seems to be over time."

"That's ridiculous," Stiles protests. "If my blood has some sort of power, shouldn't all of me have it? I'm constantly shedding invisible bits of skin and hair, and every time I exhale, there's a teensy part of me coming out with the moisture. If all that had an effect, I'd basically only have to hold your hand once, and you'd be fine to ride those temporal waves on your own for a while. Besides," Stiles blushes, "there was, uhm, a saliva exchange happening just a little while ago. But that didn't work, did it?"

Peter shrugs.

"If spit had the same power as blood, would there even need to be any rituals with blood sacrifices?" He asks. "Any darach with ambitions could just have a virgin girl lick the knife, which is still weird but a lot less troublesome than killing her. The best the books I've read have come up with is that blood is meant to be kept inside and saliva is meant for evaporating. So the act of violating the natural order of things is an act of drawing out the hidden power."

Stiles doesn't know what the hell a "darach" is but there are enough context clues to follow. And what Peter says makes a weird kind of sense, if one allows that magic doesn't have to work in the same way that conventional science does.

Admittedly, this idea sits ill with Stiles. But maybe magic does fit into science, he just doesn't know enough to see how. Einstein thought quantum mechanics was spooky, after all, and after decades of studies and gaining new knowledge the spookiness of the incomprehensible is slowly wearing off.

"Although," Peter adds, grinning wickedly, "the magic theory is stumped when it comes to another substance bodies produce. Semen does have power, but it's definitely meant to come out."

Stiles blushes so hard, his face must be steaming.

"You're not giving me a blowjob just for the sake of being safe from temporal changes," he tells Peter, trying to sound very firm about it.

"Who said it would only be for the sake of that?" Peter purrs. "I think you're underestimating just how thoroughly lovely it would be to have you writhe and beg under my mouth."

Peter makes a pause, visibly enjoying the way Stiles is squirming.

"I wasn't suggesting we do that, though," he amends, taking mercy on Stiles. He ties off the bandage expertly, tight enough to make sure it's secure but not so much so that it'd be hurting Stiles. "You're too injured to enjoy it properly, and just so you know, my ego doesn't bear a partner who lies there and thinks of England. You could just smear a bit of blood on me. There's certainly a lot that's already out of you."

"You do it," Stiles counteroffers. "I don't like looking at blood... mine or otherwise."

He half-expects to be mocked for being a wuss—Peter doesn't suffer from the same shortcomings, as evidenced by his history of meting out the ultimate justice to everyone involved in the Hale fire—but Peter simply bunches up Stiles' shirt in the front, where it got sopping wet during their walk back to the house, and wrings some out.

He smears it on the front of his legs, underneath the remains of the sweatpants; the fabric of those soaks a bit of the blood up but the majority of it is hidden from view. Stiles is pathetically grateful for the consideration.

"There, I'm as safe as can be."

"Yeah, and the Rawhead is, too." Stiles hunches in on himself a bit. He couldn't have prevented getting bitten but he still feels guilty knowing it was him who has inadvertently given a monster protection. "Do you think it's smart enough to understand I'm something different? Would it track me down specifically now to, well, finish the job?"

"No idea. As you could see for yourself, this monster is not one to stop and give an interview for posterity. Not quite Anne Rice material, is it? But for what it's worth, I think it can and does hold a grudge now, so we should be on our guard."

"Right, and what else is new?" Stiles sighs. "At least now that we've figured this out, I have an idea. Maybe I just need to smear my blood all over the Nemeton when we get there? I mean, if the temporal changes come along the ley lines, then it must all be connected to the Nemeton. It stands on ley lines too, doesn't it?"

"Yes, in a thick nexus of those, as a matter of fact," Peter confirms. "Some books on druidism suggest it acts as a regulation mechanism of sorts for the magic pulsing all across the Earth through the ley lines, as a relay or a filter, if you will. I didn't think it was quite correct, though, because the one in Beacon Hills was supposed to be dead but there was no magical apocalypse. Up to now, that is."

"So maybe right now it's dying all the way as opposed to only mostly dying," Stiles theorizes. "That could have thrown all the magic off. So if my blood has power, I could just give it a little boost and it'll be like restarting a glitchy computer. Poof, and no more data getting jumbled."

"That sounds wonderfully simple and like this time tomorrow I could kidnap you, take you to Hawaii and do some truly filthy, despicable and depraved things to you in between mai tais, all without worrying about the world getting torn apart by continents smashing against each other." Peter kisses Stiles lightly on the lips. "I doubt it'll be this easy, and feeding Nemeta blood is normally never a good idea, but it's the best we've got. We should give it a try."

"You know you don't have to try so hard to get me in bed, right?" Stiles asks with a snort. "I'm not expecting you to take me on a tropical vacation before I let you do all those things you've got in mind."

"Oh, I know," Peter assures him. "One of the bizarre and irritating things about you is that you're not the type to demand tropical vacations or any other material favors. It has never even occurred to you that I have money and connections which I could use to make your life nice and pleasant, has it? You just want me because you do, and the minute you don't, you'll tell me in that straightforward, word-vomit manner of yours. But for my part, I *like* tropical vacations and fruity cocktails. Unless you're allergic to pineapple, I see no reason why we can't combine Hawaii and your introduction to the wondrous world of sex."

"Well, when you put it like that, I kind of want it to happen," Stiles smiles at Peter, feeling inexplicably shy. "I have to warn you though, I get sunburned at the drop of a hat. The one time I went on a seaside holiday with my parents, I spent like three days lying in bed with a fever, red like a boiled lobster."

"I'll make sure to buy a cistern of sunscreen and hose you down with it from time to time," Peter says agreeably, and they giggle at the image like children, leaning against each other's foreheads.

"Alright," Stiles sobers up first. "The Nemeton?"

"The Nemeton," Peter agrees.

* * *

They set out into the depths of what used to be/will be the Preserve one more time. After a while a temporal change comes on, and Stiles, remembering his last meeting with a surprise tree, clings to Peter with both arms. This doesn't save him from being flung up again, but this time Peter goes with him.

This tree is a smaller than the last one, and they don't have as far down to fall. Peter twists in the air and grabs the nearest branch when it's in range; the stop is jarring but Stiles will take that over all of his bones snapping.

"I should call you Tarzan, king of the apes, from now on," Stiles teases as Peter climbs down using one hand to propel them towards a lower brunch.

"Ooh, are you into roleplay?" Peter smirks. "Would you like me to wear a ragged loincloth and take you on top of a tree?"

"Nah, I'm good," Stiles blushes a bit. Flirting is a territory as unfamiliar as magic, maybe even more so, considering his social circle lately, and he despairs to understand if he's doing it right. "Trees don't really do it for me."

"Truly? One would think a mighty, thick, firm trunk would pique your interest."

Stiles gives Peter a stink-eye.

"I'm all for taking care of Mother Nature, but there's a level of tree-hugging I'd prefer not to go to, thank you."

Peter laughs, amused and carefree, as he lands on the ground and sets Stiles down.

"You're twice as fun when you don't get angry and offended at my advances," he tells Stiles.

"Well, you're still a creep," Stiles tells him fondly, reaching out to take Peter's hand again, even though it's not technically necessary anymore. He feels a little thrill when Peter's fingers wrap firmly around his. "But maybe I kind of like it."

"What a ringing endorsement," Peter smiles.

"Give it some time," Stiles says. "Yesterday, whenever that was, I couldn't stand it."

"Couldn't stand it, huh? I have to wonder, what did my other selves do to inspire such a change of heart?"

"Nothing that you didn't," Stiles says honestly. "They were just themselves, I suppose."

"I see you're well on your way to becoming a true mage of legends. You've got the cryptic yet seemingly sage answers down pat."

They keep bickering and teasing each other just for the sake of it as they walk deeper into the forest. Stiles has no idea where exactly they are heading; he doesn't know the Preserve that well, and even if he did, there's no guarantee the one they are in now is even from the same century as Stiles. Forests mostly look the same, barring the changes in geological eras, so the most Stiles can say about this version of the Preserve is that at least it doesn't look like they're about to meet any dinosaurs roaming the underbrush since there would've been a lot more ferns around. Not that they have a particular course in mind anyway, considering that neither of them knows where exactly the Nemeton is.

"How can we make sure the Nemeton wants us to find it?" Stiles asks. "Can it sense us? Hear us? Should we, like, declare what we're here for out loud? Can you do some magic to attract its attention?"

"Werewolves can't do magic," Peter tells him. "We're got enough magic permeating our bodies already, and it's all bound up in making us what we are. If anything, maybe you should try to cast a spell."

"Sure, just let me open my Hogwarts textbook from last year and look something up," Stiles rolls his eyes. "I may or may not have some weird power, but that doesn't mean I have any

idea what to do with it."

"Then try just saying something. It's not like that'll hurt our chances. Unless you say something rude, of course."

"What does a magical tree consider rude? Would it help to say that I donated five bucks to the Arbor Day Foundation?" Stiles looks around, not sure what he's expecting to see—a yellow brick road materializing between trees, maybe—but nothing happens. "No? Okay, uhm, Mx. Nemeton, could you please, like, show yourself? Or make yourself easier to find? We're only here to try and fix the time magic problem, honest. We're not going to hurt you, or litter in your forest, or do any shady rituals with selfish nefarious purposes."

Peter's laughter intertwines with the sound of tree leaves rustling in the wind.

"You might want to work on your pitching skills, sweetheart," he says. "That was endearing in the extreme but I don't know if that's what a Nemeton would be looking for."

"I dunno, maybe it is," Stiles says, staring past Peter's shoulder at tree branches leaning in a direction that goes against the wind.

Peter turns around and see it too.

"Well, I'll be damned," he says. "Being adorably nice does save the day."

"Bite me," Stiles retorts, setting off in the indicated direction.

"Oh, I will," Peter promises.

Several temporal changes happen as Stiles and Peter walk, but none of them are life-threatening. Grass and flowers grow and wilt under their feet, snow crystallizes and vanishes, deer and hares cross their path, leaping out of thin air, rain starts and stops in fits; strangely, no unexpected trees pop out of the ground underneath Stiles or Peter or in front of them, as if the Nemeton is trying to keep the way clear for them. How much control does it have over what is happening anyway? Stiles has to consider a possibility that this is all the Nemeton's intentional doing and they are walking into a clever trap. But what possible use could the Nemeton get out of this? If it was tired of humans and wanted to kill them all off (including Stiles, powers or no powers), it could've done that with one well-picked temporal change. Surely, there's no point whatsoever to silent fireworks, pockets of sound or hiccuping minute changes?

According to Stiles' internal clock, it doesn't take them very long at all to arrive at a large clearing. In the middle of it there's a giant tree stump. In fact, "giant" doesn't do it justice: it's massive, humongous, gargantuan. It boggles Stiles' mind to imagine the size of this tree before it was cut down; although he doesn't have to try very hard to imagine because the stump is flickering in and out of existence, sometimes with a ghostly outline of an enormous trunk above it, sometimes appearing as a complete ruin that looks like someone has ravaged the stump with a few bricks of C-4.

Next to Stiles, Peter swears through his teeth, lifting one hand to his face to shield his eyes.

"It hurts to look at it," he complains. "It's just wrong, somehow."

"I can look at it just fine," Stiles notes. "Looks like a smear of my blood doesn't protect you from everything, so be careful."

"Way ahead of you, sweetheart," Peter says.

In contradiction to his words, he stays half a step behind as they walk on. Close up, Stiles can see that the disappearing and reappearing doesn't happen with the whole stump at once: little sections of it blink in and out of reality, shift around, fall, slide and soar like the world's strangest kaleidoscope. Stiles is no expert on magic trees—or anything magic, really—but he's pretty sure the correct diagnosis here is "on its last legs".

"Alright," Stiles says, throat dry with nerves. "I guess this is it. So, where do I put the blood? Like, in the center? Or anywhere? Or do I dig a little hole by the roots?"

"Beats me," Peter says. "Is it giving you any hints?"

Stiles watches the Nemeton for a good ten seconds but if there are any hints being given, they are not ones he can decipher.

"Nope," he says. "Maybe it's just as clueless as I am. I mean, has anything like this even happened before?"

"If it has, it was certainly never mentioned in any books I could get my hands on," Peter supplies readily but unhelpfully. "On the other hand, if a crisis of the sort did occur but was successfully resolved to the complete elimination of the temporal turmoil, who would even know?"

They stand there for a few more seconds, Stiles feeling more and more anxious with each heartbeat. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Maybe they should study up on the Nemeton first. Stiles hasn't the faintest what to do, how can he be sure that whatever he does won't muck things up even worse?

"Stiles, honeybunch, if you're going to do something, you should consider doing it sooner rather than later," Peter prompts him. "It's getting a bit stuffy here."

"How can it be stuffy? We're in the middle of a forest, that's, like, the definition of fresh air."

"I know, and yet, here it is. The best I can come up with is that we might be breathing in some temporal particles, and while that's basically your oxygen, they might be cancer-inducing or something along those lines for me."

"Right." The idea of temporal particles that are bad for one's health when inhaled sounds like a bunch of hooey, if Stiles is being frank, but then again, this whole afternoon, in all of its repetitions and variations, has been exactly that. "Okay, here goes nothing then."

He takes one more step that brings his toes in contact with the very base of the stump.

"I really hope I'm doing the right thing," he says.

If the Nemeton wants to back out, it's not giving Stiles any indication of that. He bunches up his shirt the same way Peter did at the partially restored house, shuddering at the wet feel of his own blood, and wrings it out with as much strength as he can master.

A viscous, heavy drop of Stiles' blood falls on top of the stump and is immediately absorbed.

Bright white light tinged with iridescence bursts out of the stump in all directions. Stiles is startled but the light goes through him without doing any harm; more than that, it feels nice, serene and, for lack of a better word, timeless, like lying on his back in the middle of a field on a sunny day and staring up at a cloudless sky without a care in the world. This must be a good thing, surely.

Behind him, there's a sizzling sound and the beginning of a scream that is immediately cut off. Stiles whips around, dread making his heart skip a beat, and the sight of Peter makes him scream.

Peter's front is completely burned off. His skin and muscle are gone, opening a grotesque tableau of charred bone and internal organs, and what is left of him only seems to be still standing because of the sheer force of the light that keeps steadily immolating him.

"P-Peter," Stiles says in a voice he doesn't recognize.

There's a cracking sound behind Stiles, and he automatically turns his head back to the Nemeton, only to see the stump explode with a new burst of that light. A sharp bit of wood comes at Stiles with the speed of a bullet, and he feels a weird pressure at his throat at first, and then pain.

He stumbles, suddenly weak, and falls to his knees. He lifts a hand to his throat and grabs at the piece of wood embedded there; he yanks at it, and it takes a few tries, each accompanied with searing, blinding pain, to pull it out completely. Blood, hot and wet, squirts down on his chest.

He can't breathe. He's going to die.

He has to go back. Back. Back.

His own thoughts feel numb and distant; in this state thinking about what just happened to Peter and to Stiles himself doesn't hurt. Those are simply things that happened, same as any other ones. Stiles swims through this gray indifference, and the only bright thing in his world is the thin film of gasoline rainbow that stretches over the universe.

It's always been so pretty, Stiles thinks.

A big fat drop of water from the ceiling comes down and lands directly on his nose. Stiles sneezes and hits his already sore head against the floorboards.

He lies there in the dust, looking up at the damp attic ceiling, a bloodied piece of wood still clenched in his hand, and quiet, desolate tears roll out of the corners of his eyes.

Chapter 5: You Did

He doesn't spend long crying. Only long enough for the fresh pain to get numbed a bit, and then Stiles is up again. He has a world to save, and the world doesn't care whether or not Stiles is reeling from yet another loss, so Stiles shouldn't either.

He takes a very brief shower, just to rinse off all of the blood he's drenched in despite no longer having a hole in his throat or a chunk of his arm missing. His bloodied clothes stay in a heap on the bathroom floor; the house is likely to fall down again, or disappear, or become a volcano, or something anyway. Stiles will deal with them later, if later ever comes.

Clad in a fresh pair of jeans, an old purple long-sleeved shirt, soft and faded from multiple washings, and dry clean socks (finally), Stiles brings everything he needs downstairs: the murder board, his laptop and the box. He checks his phone, too, but he doesn't expect anything so he isn't disappointed when there isn't a new message from Peter that would indicate Peter remembers this time. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise that he doesn't. Who would want to remember burning alive for the third time?

He gets the coffee machine and the kettle going and takes a seat at the table to contemplate the hateful box; he should probably eat something but he can't make himself to even try, too nervous and fearful to keep anything down. This is how Peter finds him, appearing in the kitchen doorway on silent feet.

"Hi," Stiles says.

It's a relief and a torture to see Peter whole and, well, hale. The view of him raising an eyebrow as he studies Stiles is, for a second, overlaid with the image of his ruined body in the Nemeton clearing; Stiles blinks, and the memory is gone, leaving only Peter as he is now. Healthy. Oblivious.

"Hi," Peter echoes and takes a seat across Stiles, looking intrigued.

Stiles reaches out and takes Peter's hands in his. Apparently, it's less suspicious if he doesn't ask first because Peter raises both eyebrows now but doesn't free his hands.

"I need you to listen to me very carefully," Stiles says. He knows he is weak and selfish; he shouldn't bring Peter into this only to get him hurt and worse, but he can't bear to do it alone. Besides, he really needs everything that Peter brings to the metaphorical table. "I have been stuck in a time loop for a while now, and I need your help to figure out how to save Beacon Hills and possibly the world from a temporal apocalypse. Last time I told you, you decided I was crazy and tried to drive me to the hospital, so I asked you for a secret I could use to prove to you that it's real. You told me that you have a pet, a gray and white kitten that you found on the street and have been secretly keeping in your apartment. No one knows about it because you get rid of his scent when you leave the house, don't let him out onto the balcony and have soundproofed the apartment so no one would hear his victorious meowing as he sharpens his claws on your bed covers. According to you," Stiles' lips twitch in a small smile, "he's quite the little villain."

Peter starts out sarcastically attentive but when Stiles mentions the kitten, Peter tenses up and his eyes grow cold and dangerous.

"How do you know about it?" He asks. "How did you get into my apartment without me finding out? How do you even know where I live?"

"I know because you told me in the last time loop," Stiles reminds him. "I did ask you to listen carefully, Peter. I know this sounds very unlikely, but what is more unlikely—that time has become unhinged or that I somehow managed not only to track down your address, but also to ninja my way inside without tipping you off in any way? Besides, I'm sure you were listening to my heartbeat while I was speaking. You know I'm not lying."

"Those are both valid points. However, I can't imagine voluntarily telling you about Mr. Muffin," Peter says in a perfectly nonchalant voice.

Stiles rolls his eyes. Peter must be really rattled because that wasn't subtle at all.

"It's Mr. Muppet, and you told me because you thought I was as nutty as a fruitcake and should I tell anyone, people would just dismiss it as a lunatic raving. I know some other little things, if the compounded effect will help you believe me faster. Your middle name is Benjamin, you spent a year as an exchange student in Italy when you were in college, you took French in high school, you know how to find north by connecting the tips of the shadow of a stick to trace the east to west direction because this is one of the first things a Hale child learns, and you like mai tais. You also, I think, like Shakespeare, because you quoted *Hamlet* at me last time after I explained things to you."

"Oh, did I now? Which line was that?"

Stiles thinks back to it.

"Time is broken, and it sucks that I have to be the one to fix it? I didn't exactly try to learn it by heart, but that was the gist, I think."

Peter nods slowly.

"Your story, unbelievable as it is, is very convincing," he says. "If this is a con you're pulling on me for some reason, then you have gone to truly extraordinary lengths in preparation, even ensuring the extra brilliant psychological flourish at the end of your pitch. I would have doubted you a lot more if you'd quoted the line word to word."

"So you believe me?"

"Let's say I'm ready to temporarily suspend my disbelief and see what else you have to say," Peter corrects. "Presumably, there's something specific you want my help with before any apocalyptic events start?"

Temporarily is a good word for it, Stiles thinks and feels like laughing and crying at the same time. He shoves all that aside and away and gets down to business.

"Before and during, yes, but you're right." He pushes the box towards Peter with one finger, feeling the same disgust that he would if he were touching a dead cockroach. "A past you brought up a valid point: why me? Why am I the one unaffected by the temporal changes when everyone else is? Why am I the one looping, and no one else? Also, my blood seems to work as a stabilizer for anyone or anything, allowing them to go through the temporal changes unscathed as well."

"So what you're saying is that whatever calamities are about to befall Beacon Hills, your blood is the key to living through them," Peter says. His gaze is sharp and calculating.

Coach Finstock's advice comes to Stiles' mind: to be careful whom he tells what he can do. Theoretically, Peter can take Stiles' blood by force and use it to get himself to presumed safety outside Beacon Hills... of course, things like sudden lakes of lava would make an attempt like this fruitless—there's no escape—but this Peter doesn't know that.

Stiles meets Peter's eyes, unafraid. This is Peter. Even if he wants to avoid stepping up, he's too smart to close his eyes to facts, and the facts dictate that saving the world alongside Stiles is what he needs to do.

A small sentimental part of Stiles tries to add that Peter would never hurt him of all people, but Stiles squashes it without mercy. This is not a Peter Stiles has kissed. Not a Peter who has made plans for after the apocalypse that included them both. Not a Peter who has had a frank conversation or two with Stiles, excising some things that have been festering between them.

"That would be futile and just waste time," he says. "Not to mention that the rest of the world might not be as safe as you hope."

He opens his laptop with one hand, figuring that more than enough time has passed since the beginning of the loop. It's a prime moment to check if his actions in the outside world get erased when he loops.

"I left a message on a forum in a previous loop," he explains. "The forum's servers are in Japan, so if my post is not there, it means the other side of the planet is screwed as well."

"Or you might just be about to show me a forum page where you didn't post anything and fake shock and horror at seeing it," Peter offers.

"Heartbeat. Werewolf ears," Stiles intones, eyes on his booting laptop. He's been meaning to save up some money for an upgrade. He wonders if he'll ever get to do that.

Peter snorts as Stiles types out his password and starts the browser. He navigates to the thread where he posted and scrolls down the page, looking for his message. There's that very opinionated post about *Evangelion* that sat just before Stiles'... but there's nothing underneath.

Stiles stares at the page as resigned disappointment sets in. He was hoping that not all of Earth was subjected to this, but that was stupid, wasn't it? The ley lines run across the planet without much care for human-imposed borders. It's only logical that the chain reaction of the temporal apocalypse has reached everywhere.

"It's really not there," Stiles whispers.

Well, no matter. It's not important as far as Stiles' decisions go. He's going to try and find a way to stop this whether it affects a handful of people or all seven billion. Besides, a particularly unlucky temporal change here can fuck up the rest of the world anyhow, so from that point of view, this experiment was useless. This is a good thing that the post isn't there, really. It's another bit of proof for Peter.

Stiles straightens his shoulders, glances at Peter and finds the latter staring at him in puzzlement.

"What?" Stiles asks.

"There's something different about you today, my time-traveling honeyberry," Peter says, narrowing his eyes and inhaling deeply. "I just can't seem to be able to put my finger on it."

Stiles is fairly sure he has heard Peter say this before but he can't remember which Peter that was. They are all the same person, and they are starting to get mixed up in his head, and realizing that is like losing them all over again.

Grief tightens around Stiles' throat, not letting him breathe for a second.

No. No, he can't think like that. He can't afford to break down. Peter is alive and well, and what Stiles remembers never happened. He needs to find another way to frame this in his mind before he goes stark raving mad.

"That is so beyond irrelevant," Stiles says, a little more irritated than he intended to be. "Back to the point. A past you asked why it was me and suggested that something must have happened to me to give me that ability. The only weird thing that I remember happening to me lately was this morning when I felt compelled to go up to the attic and get this box." He nods at the thing. "After the box broke, the compulsion went away, and shortly after that the apocalypse started and I found myself the only one that I know of capable of surviving temporal changes, restoring bits of reality to their 2011 state, and so on. Judging by the symbols on the surface, it's clearly something to do with magic, and past you and I tentatively agreed that at least sometimes the apocalypse seems to roughly follow the ley lines whose whole function is to carry magic around. You were very insistent that I have to be the key to fixing this mess and that we need to investigate what happened to me, and I promised we would even though I feel like having a panic attack just looking at the thing. So please, have at it. You're the one with the magical know-how, tell me what this box is for, what these symbols mean and what was inside before it broke."

Stiles' explanation could have been more coherent but Peter seems to have followed it because he nods and makes to reach for the box. Stiles tightens his hand still holding Peter's.

"One more thing," he says. "If you don't have my blood on you, then you have to be touching me to gain, uhm, temporal immunity, I suppose. Since you're going to need both hands, here, take some blood."

Stiles offers Peter his arm, flexing it slightly to make the sleeve ride up.

"You're just giving me free rein to have a go at your arm with my claws?" Peter asks, amused.

"Yep. I recommend you put some on your skin in different places, just in case, and also dab a bit on each item of your clothing that you'd like to keep because they will disappear too and then you will be very naked."

Stiles can't help it. He blushes, to Peter's absolute delight.

"I see that saving the world comes with some perks, my sweet fragolina?" Peter smirks. "Did you enjoy the view when that happened?"

"Yes," Stiles says, not seeing much point in lying. "You're exceedingly attractive, Peter. Now hurry up and take some blood."

He closes his eyes because he still doesn't want to look at blood more than he absolutely has to. Peter pushes Stiles' sleeve a bit higher and makes what feels like a small, precise cut. The pain is so negligible compared to everything else that Stiles remembers happening to him today that he doesn't even react. Peter scoops up some blood on his finger over and over; there's clothes rustling, and then Peter lets go of Stiles' other hand.

"Great," Stiles says, opening his eyes and tugging his sleeve back down without looking. "Now you can get started with the box."

"Aren't you going to disinfect that and put a ban-aid on it?"

Stiles shrugs.

"It's fine. Come on, Peter, the box."

Peter crosses his arms and leans back in his chair.

"I'm not even sure of all the places my claws have been but I'm certain some of those places weren't very hygienic," he says. "You're claiming to want to save the world but you refuse to even take care of yourself?"

"On my God, Peter, who cares?" Stiles glares at him. "Why do *you* care? Let's just get the fuck started."

"Not before you take care of that," Peter says. Of all the things he could be contrary about, he chooses this?

"Fine," Stiles huffs and gets up. "I'll deal with the stupid tiny insignificant cut, and in the meantime, please look at the box already."

He makes a quick trip to the bathroom to swipe a bit of rubbing alcohol over the cut and slap a band-aid on it. When he returns to the kitchen, Peter is already up, the box in one hand and a marker in the other, writing the symbols out on the murder board.

"This is one eclectic trinket you've got here," Peter says without turning to look at Stiles. "It's a mishmash of everything: Egyptian, Arabic, Aramaic, Chinese, Sanskrit, Akkadian and a

few more. Get my laptop out of the bag. I have a language recognition program installed, we'll need to run these through that and see what they mean individually, at least."

"You have a program that deals with all these ancient things?" Stiles unzips Peter's duffel bag and pulls a sleek light laptop out from between books. "Where did you even get one?"

"I know a coven in Norway," Peter says absentmindedly, concentrated on getting the curve of a symbol just right. "It's such a peaceful and nice country that they don't have much to do besides academics, and they are more than willing to sell the tools and by-products of their research to the supernatural community."

"Right," Stiles says, a little jealous. He has been dealing mostly with the horrific, murderous and cruel side of the supernatural so far. Being friends with a coven of friendly Hermione Grangers and just talking magical theory with them sounds like an unattainable yet longed-for fairy tale. If this Peter were the previous loop's Peter, Stiles would've probably asked for their email. "You've got connections, you told me."

He holds the laptop up next to Peter and dutifully looks away while Peter inputs the password.

"Here," Peter starts a program. "Click the camera icon and point it at a symbol. When it's focused on the one you want, press Enter, then just point the camera at the next one. There are hundreds of these here, so let's do a couple dozen first and see if there's anything coherent coming up. I've been writing them from up to down so you can do them in order without us getting into each other's way."

The instructions couldn't be simpler, and Stiles takes pictures of symbols as Peter writes down new ones. They work like a well-oiled machine, quick and efficient, and Stiles kind of relishes it. He has never been able to get Scott to be this seamless whenever they did their homework or a project together; even though Scott was stuffed together with the unpopular nerdy crowd by virtue of having asthma, there has always been a happy jock deep inside Stiles' best friend, just waiting for a chance to come out.

Stiles supposes that was what happened when Scott got bitten; and that was probably why Stiles hasn't seen Scott in like two weeks. It's probably more fun for Scott to hang out with Isaac now that he's not forcibly stuck with only Stiles.

Stiles banishes the hurt that thought brings and focuses on the research at hand. He's got the smartest, most resourceful and educated partner he could wish for right now, and he should take advantage of that while he can.

"This should be enough for the first go," Peter decides after a while.

Stiles takes a seat and puts the laptop on the table; Peter leans down next to him and clicks out of the camera mode. He presses the icon with a pixelated magic wand on it, and the program shows a loading circle as it starts translating.

Peter is so very close as they wait. Stiles is acutely aware of Peter's body heat and the fresh, enticing smell of his cologne tinged with just a hint of copper from the blood smeared

somewhere Stiles can't see; Stiles' idiotic hormones make his lips tingle and his dick throb as he recalls kissing Peter before.

Peter looks at him, a very intrigued expression on his face. There's really nothing Stiles can do except own up to it.

"Yes, I'm aware of what your werewolf nose is smelling on me," he says tiredly. "Yes, I very much want to have sex with you. No, this is not a topic worth wasting time on."

"Last time we saw each other, you weren't giving off even a hint of arousal." Evidently, Peter has decided to waste time on that. "Just how long have you been stuck in that time loop of yours that you're getting hard just from me standing close by now? Several years?"

"A few hours?" Stiles hazards a guess. It's hard to keep track of time when said time is fracturing and falling apart. "From what I can tell, I've been attracted to you for a while but, well, denial is not just a river in Egypt. It's not a big deal, Peter, seriously."

"It might grow bigger if we coax it just a little," Peter purrs in Stiles' ear. Stiles closes his eyes at the delicious sensation that electrifies his whole body, hating himself for being so weak about this. He shouldn't... They're busy with the symbols... "What would you say if I touched you right now, sweetheart? If I put my hand down your jeans and kissed your soft, smooth throat while teasing an orgasm out of you?"

"I'd say that the world is ending and we have more important things to do," Stiles manages, his voice husky and shaky. "Please don't, Peter."

Peter pulls away a few inches. The loss of his body heat makes Stiles feel bereft.

"So you're saying that after the world has been successfully saved you're actually up for it?" He asks curiously.

Stiles winces.

"I don't want to make plans for after the apocalypse with you just to have them go up in smoke again when you die," he says curtly. "I'm begging you, Peter, just drop this."

"You're expecting me to die?" Peter sounds a bit frosty.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't," Stiles says, entirely truthfully. "But the empirical evidence so far doesn't give me much hope."

"Alright, assuming your story is true, how did I die before? How do I avoid it now?"

"Well, you're safe from how you died the first time already. We didn't know about touching or using my blood, so the very first temporal change aged everything in a street a hundred years or two in the blink of an eye. You dropped dead in front of me, looking mummified," Stiles recounts. It's hard to believe how at the time the horror of that seemed like the absolute peak of all bad things that could possibly occur. "But there's no predicting what might happen, Peter. The temporal changes are chaotic. A lake of lava opened underneath us once, and we only survived because we were in a car and you acted quickly. Trees can grow from nothing

to towering giants right underneath our feet and launch us up like cannonballs. This very house fell on us. We appeared right in the middle of some fight from distant history with bullets whizzing around. The whole town, as far as the eye could see, became a scorching desert. I met a crocodile from millions of years ago that tried to eat me and almost succeeded. Oh, and speaking of things that want to eat me: there's a Rawhead-and-Bloody-Bones on the loose somewhere in town. It got a piece of me before you fought it off, and since it absorbs the flesh it eats as its own, it is, presumably, also still immune to the temporal changes themselves and possibly even remembers the last loop. And it's very hungry and angry at us."

Peter digests Stiles' summary for a few moments without even making a leering joke about how of course everything tries to eat Stiles since he's so very bitable.

"So this is what you're counting on once the fabled time apocalypse starts," he says, leaving everything else without comment. "My protection."

"You're strong, fast and can think quickly and clearly no matter what is going on," Stiles confirms. "Without you I won't get far."

"And what's in it for me?"

Stiles can't hold back a snort. This is like sitting through Peter and his greatest hits.

"What would you like?" He asks, not even trying not to sound fond. "And yes, I'm aware I never asked before and therefore ruined what was supposed to be a one-time joke about wanting a kiss."

"Your foreknowledge sucks all the fun out of this," Peter complains.

"Sorry," Stiles says. He's itching to lean in, closing the distance between them, and kiss Peter, but he restrains himself. At this rate a temporal change will just swallow the laptop and they will never know the results. "Look, if you really want something I can give you, I will. I promise. But it's going to have to wait unless you want something that exists right here and now."

"I have no burning desire for a piece of your silverware, or an Oreo, or whatever else you've got lying around here." Peter shrugs. "How about we settle on you owing me for now? And I'll tell you what I want when I decide."

"Deal," Stiles says without hesitation.

"That's it? You don't want to put any limits on it? Just giving me carte blanche?"

"I trust you not to ask me for anything that would hurt me or others. You're a better person than you think, Peter."

Peter looks disgusted and alarmed at that.

"Maybe you really are crazy and need to be checked out by a professional," he says. "But as I am not, in fact, a good person, I will take your unlimited IOU and hold on to it. Now, I believe we've had the translation results for a while already?"

They look at the screen where the results are compiled in a simple neat table: a symbol, the language it came from and its meaning in English and what is probably Norwegian. Stiles studies the English column and finds very little variation from a single theme: "containment", "restriction", "prison", "limit", "restraint", "bounds", "lock", "constraint"...

"Looks like someone really wanted to keep something in this box and never let it out," Peter comments. He picks up the box again and turns it over in his hands, glancing at the screen every so often. "I might be mistaken since these are so tiny and numerous but I think they are repeating."

"So it doesn't say anywhere what it was that needed containment?" Stiles asks, desperate.

"We can try to go through all the rest of it to see if there's anything new, but that will take a long time. How long is it until the apocalypse, sweetheart?"

"Any minute now," Stiles shrugs. "Being chaotic means it doesn't have a precise schedule, you know."

"Of course, silly of me to ask." Peter's voice is mocking. Stiles just sighs, knowing Peter won't get to be smug and skeptical for long.

Well, unless getting the Nemeton to explode actually ended the apocalypse. Stiles still looped, yes, but who the hell knows how his looping even works? Maybe its mechanism is independent of the temporal changes, and he'll just keep reliving the same hour or two again and again forever, even if life otherwise goes on as normal?

At this point, Stiles would prefer this option, to be honest. Which, knowing his luck, probably means it's not the case.

Peter lifts the box to his face and sniffs it.

"It only smells like you, wood rot and dust," he says. "And it seems to be completely empty. Do you have any idea who put it in your attic? Someone we can track down, perhaps?"

"As far as I know, no one's gone up there for years, not since mom died. We can go up and see if you can smell anyone?"

"I'm not actually a hunting dog, you know," Peter says, a little disgruntled.

"But you want to know where the box came from and what was in it, don't you?" Stiles needles.

"How dare you use my curiosity against me?" Peter gasps with mock outrage.

Stiles giggles, charmed by the antics.

"Secretly, I've been the villain all along," he says dramatically. "Mwa ha ha!"

Peter laughs outright; he shifts, and his eyes flick down to Stiles' lips.

"So, let's go to the attic then?" Stiles offers in a traitorously squeaky voice. "I'll show you where it is!"

He jumps up and heads out of the kitchen before he derails the whole thing by kissing Peter and possibly getting his cherry popped right there on the kitchen table.

"Maybe it's different in your house, but as far as I'm aware, attics are generally in the direction known as "up"," Peter says, amused, as he follows Stiles at a more sedate pace. "I think I can manage to find that one even without the shadow of a stick."

"You don't know where the trapdoor is, do you?" Stiles retorts.

They climb up the stairs to the second floor, and there it is, a very obvious ladder at the end of the corridor leading to a just as obvious trapdoor.

"Ah, yes, of course, I would never have spotted that without a guide," Peter says.

"Oh, shut up," Stiles says, extra embarrassed now.

"Make me," Peter challenges.

Stiles turns on his heels, sliding a bit in his socks on the smooth floor. Peter is smirking at him, looking like yes, he knows exactly what he's doing.

"Why are you doing this?" Stiles demands. "I said no."

"And I heard you." Peter raises his hands with an innocent expression on his face. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "I'm not going to touch you. What, did I say something that made you want to kiss me first? Oh dear, how callous and self-serving of me."

"Don't you understand," Stiles despairs of getting through to Peter, "the world is fucking ending! Now is not the time for—for any of that!"

"In my opinion, you're very wrong," Peter says. "The end of the world is exactly the right time to get a kiss from a pretty young thing. Who knows whether or not I'll have a chance later?"

"That's what I am to you?" Stiles shouldn't have expected anything else but it seems like some stupid part of him did anyway. "A fresh piece of meat to toy with?"

Peter frowns.

"What, did you expect a love confession first? You do realize that literally anyone you'll ever date is likely to want a kiss well before things progress to the big declaration stage?"

"Of course I do," Stiles snaps. "I just..."

He doesn't even know what he's "just".

"Look," he says. "You don't remember previous loops, but I do. I've kissed every single one of you so far. I had a freak-out over you. We talked about stuff. You saved my life on multiple occasions, and I saved yours. We've been through hell together, but only I came back. I don't know what it is that I feel about you but it's something more than just casual lust or whatever. And it's not the same for you. I get it, I do. You weren't there, you will never have been there, all you see is a stupid teenager panting after you and no reason not to get something out of it. But it's not gonna mean anything to you at all, so every time you put on the seduction face, you hurt me. Please stop. Just stop it."

Stiles' eyes burn with fresh tears. He turns away and wipes them with his sleeve.

"The attic is that way," he says unnecessarily and heads down the corridor to the ladder.

Peter says nothing as he follows Stiles. Stiles is perfectly, completely and totally fine with it.

They climb up the ladder. Stiles stands to the side, hands in his pockets, as Peter slowly walks around the attic, inhaling deeply from time to time. To Stiles' eye, the attic looks pretty undisturbed. There are Stiles' own footprints in the thick dust, the deep furrows left by the legs of the chair he dragged over to the shelves and the dust angel imprint of his body where he fell, but that's about it. If anyone else has come through here recently, they either were very adept at hiding their tracks or flew around the attic.

"I can't smell anything out of place," Peter says after a couple of minutes. "Just dust and you. Could the box have been put here a long time ago?"

"That's... possible," Stiles allows. "It looks kind of like it's been getting wet and then drying again many times, doesn't it? It has many tiny cracks on the surface where the wood would swell up and shrink again. Our attic leaks a bit so it would make sense for it to have been here a while."

Since it looks like there's nothing else to be found up here, Stiles climbs down the ladder. Peter jumps down through the trapdoor without bothering with the ladder and shakes the dust off his shoes with an appalled face like a cat that's stepped in a puddle.

"Have you been living here long?" Peter asks.

"Since I was born. Why?"

"Well, if you have no idea how or when that box came to be in your attic, then there's only one other person who might be aware."

"You mean..."

"Exactly, Stiles. We're going to visit the Sheriff's station, but, for a change, we'll be the ones asking your father questions."

* * *

When the first temporal change of the day comes, Stiles is bent down tying the laces of his high-tops, making sure they touch his skin above his socks. He's also busy fighting the

unease that is telling him not to go anywhere or ask Dad about anything. He's been feeling it the whole time but it was somehow easier to let Peter in on the whole box story this loop around than to think about involving Dad. Logically, he understands that it's their best chance to learn anything, but the anxiety in his gut is not logical; it wants to lie down on the floor and throw a tantrum about not going to the station, nah-ah, no way Jose.

With the first wobbly earthquake sensation, Stiles catches himself feeling some shameful relief—Dad might be gone now, they won't be able to talk to him—and is then horrified at himself. What kind of piece of shit even is he?

It's a really good thing that Peter has Stiles' blood smeared on him this time because Stiles completely forgets about him, wrestling with his internal turmoil. As the tickling sensation recedes, the house is completely gone, as are all the neighboring ones, and Stiles and Peter are standing in a grassy plain that is probably meant to be huge but right now is only taking about the width of two streets. The air feels fresh, dewy, morning-like, and the sun overhead is definitely not in a mid-afternoon position; a weird thunder-like vibration can be felt through the ground.

Stiles straightens up and glances at Peter. The latter is staring at their new surroundings with an open mouth, naked wonder and fear on his face. Thankfully, that is the only naked part of him. Looks like Peter did listen to Stiles' advice, even if he didn't really believe in the temporal apocalypse.

"So..." Stiles starts.

He's interrupted by a deafening trumpeting sound coming from behind.

"What the fuck is that?!" Peter whirls on the spot, fists raised to fend off any threat.

Stiles looks too, and, to be honest, he's not sure if Peter can take this threat with only his fists, strong as those are. There is a whole horde of woolly mammoths stampeding down the street directly at them; a living sea of mindless, angry, powerful rusty red and brown, and it's only several feet away.

Proving his worth in a crisis once again, Peter reacts before Stiles can even finish thinking that at least being pancaked under mammoths' feet is going to be fast; he grabs Stiles by the waist and leaps up with such force that Stiles definitely feels some Gs pressing at him.

They somersault in the air, the sky and the ground going on a dizzying merry-go-round before Stiles' eyes, and land on something warm, coarse and moving. Stiles flails in panic; Peter holds on tight, though, and Stiles doesn't get dislodged by his own idiocy.

They are riding a mammoth. Holy shit, they are riding an actual mammoth.

Their involuntary ride trumpets with all its might, which leaves Stiles dazed and with his ears ringing. Peter is saying something, but Stiles cannot hear it properly.

"...direction?!"

"What?" Stiles yells back.

"I said, are we going in the right direction? Is the station there?"

"How the fuck should I know?" Stiles looks around, hoping for some familiar landmark and trying not to bite his own tongue off as the great body underneath him moves. A mammoth is definitely the bumpiest ride he's ever had.

They are in luck. This change seems to have gone strictly through the ley lines, leaving the few ley line-free pockets more or less as they were. Above all manner of buildings old and new to their right, Stiles can see the familiar clock tower next to City Hall, and the station should be right nearby.

"We need to go that way!" Stiles points.

"Brace yourself!" Peter warns.

Stiles does as he is told but there really isn't any amount of bracing he can do that would adequately prepare him for being carried by a werewolf jumping from one running mammoth to another like the star of a highly unrealistic kung fu movie and then leaping off the last one and grabbing the side of a half-ruined mossy building with one hand.

Peter slams into the building with all the momentum he's gained so far. The impact is strong enough to rattle Stiles' teeth, too. The concrete crumbles under Peter's fingers, and they slide down a bit, then stop.

With the concrete dust floating downwards around them, they are hanging off the wall and just breathing. Stiles is dangling limply like a noodle while Peter's arm, firm as steel, is pressing him into Peter's side. He feels like he's just gone on a roller coaster ten times in a row; without waiting in line, too.

"Wow," Stiles says when the disorientation and vertigo subside a bit. "We're still alive."

"So it would seem," Peter says, sounding dubious.

"Congratulations," Stiles says, the adrenaline making him babble, "you have officially passed your probation as a bodyguard to a potential savior of the world. The pay sucks, the perks are non-existent, and whether or not you take the job, you're probably gonna die a very exotic death. Welcome to the apocalypse!"

Peter laughs, and his wide, wild smile makes Stiles' stupid little heart flutter.

"Oh, Stiles," Peter says. "I haven't had this much fun in ages."

He jumps down on the ground, sets Stiles down gently and probes at his own ribs, making a face.

"Something definitely cracked," he says. "Oh well, I've had worse in bar fights. Mind you, given a choice, I'd pick to go on a tropical vacation and leave the saving of the world to other people, but seeing as we're here already... it's not the worst way to spend an afternoon by far."

"You should hold on to that optimism," Stiles recommends, taking a few trial steps. Weirdly, Stiles' legs still obey him, even if they are a bit unstable at first. "That was only the first one."

"Right," Peter sobers up. "To the station?"

"To the station," Stiles agrees.

* * *

As they head towards the clock tower, Stiles slips his hand into Peter's out of habit. He startles, realizing what he did, and his grip goes slack, but Peter's doesn't. Stiles glances at Peter but can't discern any leering or mocking; Peter is looking straight ahead, alert and focused on their surroundings, as if holding hands with Stiles is something he does every day and not at all noteworthy.

After a few seconds, Stiles tightens his grip again and leaves his hand where it is.

Another temporal change comes in but leaves the landscape intact, only bringing with it some hail. Stiles gets knocked on the head by clumps of ice a few times, but that's peanuts compared to rampaging mammoths, so he doesn't complain. Yet another change swaps day for night, and Stiles is no astronomer, but he did spend a month when he was a kid watching the sky through a cheap telescope way past his bedtime, inspired by the story of Hubble discovering the evidence of the universe expanding, and he's reasonably sure that the way the stars are positioned is different from the one he observed. Like, several thousands years' worth of time different, at the very least.

Stiles chews his lower lip, another anxiety spiking in his gut in addition to the rest of them.

"Is something wrong?" Peter asks. "Do you see something?"

"The sky is wrong."

"Looks fine to me." Peter peers upward, frowning. "I mean, other than it being night instead of an afternoon."

A new temporal change rolls over Stiles, and his shoes are suddenly rustling through piles and piles of autumn leaves. The sky stays the same, though.

"The stars are different," Stiles explains. "I can't tell you the exact number of years we're looking at and if it's forward or backward without decent data at hand and some calculations, but it's in the thousands, at least. It's because of the tilt of the Earth's axis. It changes over time, real slow."

"So what's bad about that? I mean, they are just twinkly lights in the sky. Very, very far away. Does it matter to us, here and now, what they look like?"

"It does," Stiles bites his lip with enough force to draw a little blood and makes himself stop mangling his own mouth. No need to pre-chew the meal for the Rawhead or a random crocodile like a mama bird. "I don't understand how exactly they changed. Did the temporal change replace the light in the area with the light from another time and this is essentially an

illusion? Did it introduce some catastrophic shifts into the Earth's geological structure that caused the axis to tilt? Does the apocalypse stretch as far as the whole galaxy or maybe even the universe, and this change represents what's actually happening out there at this very moment?"

"Well," Peter says after a pause, "surely not that last one? That sounds like something that requires absolutely ridiculous amounts of magical energy to power."

"Does it?" Stiles wonders. "You know, old sci-fi was often all about enormous amounts of energy to power things. But in reality things don't necessarily work like that. I can call someone on the other side of the planet with a fraction of the charge of my phone battery. Are you sure a galaxy-sized magical event like this would need that good old-fashioned exponential growth in power? Or is it, in fact, easier than that?"

"Is that how you see every single one of these time waves?" Peter asks. "And here I thought I was stressed by our current situation."

"Oh, I'm beyond stressed," Stiles says. "I'm even past 'terrified out of my mind', 'blind and deaf with denial', and 'crushed with grief'. I'm in some new place now, I don't even know what it is."

He regrets saying that as soon as he's done speaking. Peter is not his therapist; not that Stiles has one, but if he did, said therapist would be the one who had to listen to him whine about his feelings.

"How do you even know so much about science?" Peter asks, mercifully changing the subject. "I don't even remember what exponential means from the point of view of math, and here you are, saying that you're capable of calculating the position of the stars like a full-on astrophysicist."

Stiles has no earthly idea why Peter wants to talk about Stiles' nerdiness of all the things they could be discussing right now. He's glad, though, to have a distraction from the churning, fearful unease that keeps getting stronger the closer they get to the main square.

In fact, they are almost there. If it weren't for this craggy boulder in the middle of the road, Stiles would probably already be able to see the station.

Ugh.

"I just got interested in it when I was a kid." He shrugs. "When I was about eleven, Dad took me to the dentist. We had to wait a while, and I dug through the magazines in the waiting room. There were all those ladies' magazines, you know, the ones with articles like "His 5 Hottest Desires" or advice on how to get a shapely butt, so I kept digging, and at the very bottom I found a science magazine. The real deal, with equations and things. I didn't understand much but it was still more interesting than shapely butts, so I flipped through it and found a long article about experiments with particles. It was a bit of a drag for me then but I got the gist, and, well, I'm not gonna bore you with all the details, but it was mostly about the observer effect. How particles behave differently depending on whether or not someone is measuring them, even when scientists try to be sneaky with their detectors. As if

particles know in advance how they will need to travel from point A to point B. Like they can predict the future. I mean, that's a childish thing to think, particles don't have a brain to know anything with, obviously, but at the time I was fascinated. When we left the dentist's office, Dad asked me what I wanted as a treat for behaving myself. He probably meant an ice-cream or something, but I asked him to drive me to the library where I went straight to the nearest librarian and asked for books on protons and electrons. And, well, the rest is history."

"So even then you were interested in time," Peter muses. "Those little prankster particles, knowing the future, that was what started you on this."

"I'm not sure what meaningful conclusion you can possibly draw from this story," Stiles says, a bit defensively. "I'm not the only one in the world who thinks it's interesting, and anyway, I suspect I would've grown up to be a nerd regardless... oof!"

The previous small temporal changes have lulled Stiles into a false sense of security. He's 100% not ready for this next one to plunge him into ice-cold water; it floods his mouth, and nose, and eyes, and ears, and he has no idea where the surface is. His only constant is Peter's hand in his, tugging him somewhere that Stiles assumes is that up direction that is so very easy to find for Peter.

He breaks the surface with a gasp. The difference between under and above is pretty minimal: it's raining buckets, endless streams of water falling from the sky, accompanied by the rumble of thunder. It's dark, with only pinpricks of stars to give light, but in a flash of lightning Stiles can see the clock tower toppling right towards him, a snapshot of imminent destruction.

"Fuck!" Peter says next to him. "Hold your breath and grab on to me!"

Stiles inhales as much air as he can and fights the violent waves to wrap his arms around Peter; he tries to avoid the busted ribs but in all the turbulent chaos he honestly can't tell if he succeeds or not. Peter tips them forward, plunging both their heads underwater again, and powerful strokes of his arms take them into the depths, fast and far enough that Stiles' ears pop.

When the clock tower falls, the impact is so strong that it reaches them anyway. They tumble in the currents created by it like socks in a washing machine, turning this way and that, assaulted by water from all sides. Stiles holds on with arms numb from the cold, head tucked underneath Peter's chin, all of his focus directed towards not exhaling despite how his lungs are starting to burn. His shoes feel like bricks tied to his feet, but he can't even begin to try toeing them off—his legs aren't strong enough to fight the push and pull of water.

Somehow, Peter slows them down and reorients them so that (Stiles assumes, again) their heads are pointing up. Peter's arms and legs are working in concert, moving them through the water with purpose despite the currents trying to bear them away again.

Peter is so fucking cool, Stiles thinks. Why are the other werewolves he knows never this cool? In this moment, a hair's breadth away from getting brutally murdered by the furious forces of nature, Peter is like a force of nature himself, fighting and, against all odds, winning; Scott's lacrosse successes, Derek's brooding and leather jacket, and Derek's betas'

showing off at school post-bite seem like pathetic, childish affectations. If this is what they could be, why are they wasting their time on being so much less?

Stiles thinks he might be a little in love. He also thinks that the water being so cold is a blessing in disguise because right now would be an extra inconvenient moment to pop a boner.

They reach the surface once again, bobbing on the waves like fishing floats. Nothing else seems to be falling on them, as far as Stiles can tell. Peter tows him to the side, and Stiles is so busy breathing and holding on that something hard hitting him in the shoulder is a complete surprise.

"Climb up," Peter tells him, eyes burning beta blue.

In another flash of lightning Stiles can see that this is an office desk, or at least the top of one. He grasps at it with wet numb fingers and heaves himself out of the water as best he can, but Peter still has to give him a boost. Stiles flops onto the desk, squeezing the edges with all of his moderate might to avoid slipping off. He feels exhausted to the very marrow of his bones, even though he's done nothing but be dead weight the whole time.

"Great, now stay here," Peter says. "If you drown while I'm gone, I'll fish you out and kill you myself."

"Wait, what? Where are you going?"

Peter points to the side. Stiles can see jackshit in the stormy darkness, though.

"The Sheriff's station has sunk like a stone," Peter says. "I have to go get your father, if he was even still there at the time. Talking to him is the whole point of coming here. But you can't hold your breath as long as I can, so you're staying here. Afloat. Alive. If anything tries to eat you, fucking drown it."

Peter moves to swim away. Stiles grabs him by the shoulder.

"Hold on!" He pulls his sleeve up and shoves his arm towards Peter's face, or where he remembers that face being from the last flash of lightning. "Drink my blood."

"What? Did you hit your head underwater? I'm a werewolf, not a vampire—"

"We're in the fucking water!" Stiles interrupts, speaking as fast as he can. Dad doesn't have much time, if he's trapped in the flooded station, but this has to be done. "All my blood's got to've been washed off you by now, I don't know how long that'll work, maybe only until you digest it, werewolves have extra freakyfastmetabolismbutatleastalittle—"

"Stiles! Stiles, slow the fuck down, you're not making any sense!" Peter sounds like he's about to slap Stiles to bring him out of hysteria.

And Stiles is hysterical, yes. He cannot take losing Peter to another random temporal change. He cannot. At this point in his personal looping hell, he'd rather willingly feed a limb to the Rawhead than let Peter go without the protection Stiles can give. If Peter dies or disappears,

Stiles might just lose whatever shaky hold he's still got on his sanity; not to mention he probably won't last ten minutes without Peter there to save his sorry ass.

"Just fucking drink it!" He screams, and his voice is louder than the thunder.

Wordlessly, Peter takes Stiles' hand, makes a small incision with a fang and latches on.

The sensation is highly weird. Peter's mouth is blazing hot on Stiles' chilled skin, and, the throbbing in the cut aside, the rough suction is kind of like Peter is giving him a hickey on the inside of his wrist (or, at least, this is similar to what Stiles imagines hickies feel like). It's startlingly erotic, and it makes it very easy to imagine Peter's mouth doing the same thing to all sorts of places on Stiles' body. Stiles tries not to think about it and focuses instead on willing his blood to be helpful. If he has some kind of magical power in him, it has to follow his intent, right? It'd be really incredibly stupid to have magic he couldn't control even a little. Stay with Peter, he thinks to his blood. Protect Peter. Stay with Peter. Protect Peter.

He keeps up the mental litany until Peter lets go of his hand and the icy wind hits the spot where Peter's mouth has been with vengeance.

"Don't die," Peter reminds him—and really, the nerve of him, considering which one of them has a tendency to die all the fucking time—and swims away.

Without Peter, Stiles immediately loses all understanding of where anything is. He's fairly sure he's still above water because he can breathe, and he is clinging to the desk, but he has no idea which way the waves are carrying him. Everything is moving all the time, and the flashes of lightning are too short to give him any idea of where he is in relation to anything recognizable. Will Peter even be able to find him again? What if this body of water connects to the open ocean, and that is where Stiles will end up, lost forever?

He worries, and frets, and holds onto the desk for what feels like approximately an eternity. From time to time things bump into him, and Stiles is glad not to know what they are, mindful of the possibility of them being dead bodies. He's getting colder and colder, and all of his muscles are cramping in a futile effort to warm themselves up by the time Peter finally finds him.

His blue glowing eyes appear in front of Stiles as if out of nowhere, and Stiles almost falls off the desk, both from the surprise and the relief.

"Peter! Have you found Dad? Are you both okay?"

"We're fine," Peter says. "He's unconscious but I think he'll live. Let's get him situated on the desk, and I'll bring us to the shore."

After some scrambling, they lean Dad's chest against the desk; Stiles slides into the water on the other side, stifling a whimper at the new shock of the cold, and wraps one arm around Dad's shoulder, his cheek against Dad's ear to ensure skin to skin contact. He uses the other arm to hold on to the front of the desk, where Peter takes hold of it and starts pulling them towards the shore Stiles cannot see.

Only having one hand free to actually swim doesn't seem to hinder Peter in the slightest; they move at such speed that Stiles' legs are continually dragged backwards. The whole upper part of his body is ringing with tension as he desperately keeps both Dad and the edge of the desk in his grasp, and by the time his feet find purchase on the bottom, he feels on the brink of fainting.

Peter picks Dad up, and Stiles holds on to Dad's hand as they wade towards the land. This lake, or river, or whatever it is, is so tumultuous that it has flooded the surrounding streets, but the rain, at least, has a pretty well-delineated border. The sensation of *not* being pelted by streams of water anymore is exquisite, and Stiles only wishes it lasted longer because it fades quickly and gets replaced by feeling so. Fucking. Cold.

His sopping wet clothes leech every bit of warmth out of his body as they make their way into a sunny yet windy street that got wound backward. Stiles tugs Peter to one of the houses and starts touching the floor and the walls, restoring them to their proper time.

A fancy living room grows around them, one touch at a time. Peter unloads the still unconscious Dad on the floor and starts taking his clothes off, one thing at a time, and wringing them by a hole in the wall. Unprompted, Stiles does the same, too cold and tired to feel (overly) embarrassed about his skinny, lanky body; it helps, though, that Peter doesn't make any comments about it one way or the other.

There aren't any spare clothes in this room, and Peter tears freshly restored curtains off the window for himself and Stiles to wear like togas. It's not very warm, and the embroidered fabric is scratchy, but it's dry, and Stiles is grateful almost to the point of bawling like a baby as Peter's deft hands tuck the curtain around him so it won't fall off the minute he takes a step. Where did Peter even learn to do this? It's not like Stiles has ever seen him go around in a toga for kicks.

"I'll get your father's clothing, and you start the fire." Peter nods towards the fireplace which is, thankfully, not electric.

Peter probably knows much more about making fire than Stiles does, what with his outdoorsy childhood experiences, but Stiles has enough presence of mind not to point it out. Peter must have had enough of fire for a lifetime seven years ago—and then again a few months ago, courtesy of Stiles.

He restores the kitchen and hits the jackpot in the form of the huge gas stove lighter and today's newspaper. Armed with those, he gets the fire going quickly while Peter wraps Dad in the living room's fluffy rug due to the lack of more curtains.

"There's paper towels in the kitchen," Stiles says. His voice is hoarse, and even the muscles around his throat ache as he uses them. "I'll line the clothes with them, they'll wick most of the water out."

"No, I'll do that," Peter says decisively. "Can you heat up some water for tea? And raid the fridge for whatever they've got, lemon, honey, ginger. Go nuts, we need every pick-me-up we can get before all this disappears."

It's a fair point, and Stiles gets a pot of water into the fireplace. It's heavy, and his arms are trembling so much that he splashes a bunch of it around, but he doesn't ask Peter to help. There's honey and lemon; Stiles cuts the latter into three pieces and uses the same knife to make a small cut on his arm so he can dab some on Dad and their clothes.

As he's doing that, he can't help but stare at the bruise left by Peter's lips. It looks exactly like a hickey, obscenely dark on the thin, paper-white skin of his wrist. Stiles can't hold back from tracing it with a finger, and the sensation of this light touch against the tender, sore spot makes him shudder so very sweetly.

He puts it away on the "let's not think about it right now" shelf and gets on with what he's supposed to be doing.

By the time he's done with the tea, Peter is just laying the last paper towels down on the damp clothes; the already used wet towels are lying nearby, bunched up as if in imitation of snowballs. Finished with his job, Peter sits back heavily, and Stiles wonders just how much the superhuman feats of the last half-hour or so have cost him. Werewolf or not, that sort of shit has got to be taxing.

Stiles hands Peter one mug of tea and sits down next to him. It feels natural, somehow, to lean against Peter's side and rest Stiles' exhausted head on Peter's shoulder. Peter doesn't seem to mind; on the contrary, he wraps one arm around Stiles' shoulders, sharing his body heat.

Stiles takes a sip of his own tea, which is, to be honest, more honey than tea, and thinks that as long the end of the world has moments like this, then Stiles can maybe, possibly, hopefully deal with it.

He wonders when it stopped mattering so much that Peter is a killer. Maybe around that time when a quiet, logical part of Stiles acknowledged that if Peter were a different person with a different past, he wouldn't be Peter; he wouldn't be here, or if he were, he might not be able to protect Stiles. There's no editing the lack of respect for sapient life out of Peter... and it doesn't feel like there's any editing the attraction and trust out of Stiles, not at this point.

"Out of curiosity, what did you do with your blood?" Peter asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Ever since I drank it, I've had this strange feeling," Peter says.

"Indigestion?" Stiles hazards a guess.

Peter blows a raspberry in his hair in response, and Stiles snickers, pleased with himself.

"It feels like there's this faint, barely-there echo of another heart beating," Peter says, getting serious again. "It's not synced with mine. It's pretty fast, in fact. Exactly like yours. Do you feel anything?"

Stiles gives it an honest try and comes up with inconclusive zilch.

"I don't even feel my own," he says. "I mean, unless there's something wrong with it, I never do. Humans don't hear or feel these things, you know. Maybe there's some echo, maybe there's not. But, uhm, what does it mean if you feel my heartbeat next to yours? Is it bad?"

"I have no idea, Stiles, that's why I asked you."

"You're the magical theory expert here."

"And I can expertly tell you I've never heard of anything like this. Which is why, to use the terms that will resonate with you, I was gathering data before drawing any conclusions."

"Well, I didn't cast any spells or anything, if that's what you're asking. I was just worried that drinking it wouldn't work for long enough, so I... thought at it?"

"What did you think at it?"

"Stay with Peter. Protect Peter," Stiles recites. "That's it."

Peter is silent for long enough that Stiles lifts his head and twists his neck to look Peter in the face.

"Should I not have done that?" He asks, feeling awkward. "Was that wrong?"

"I don't know," Peter says. "My best guess, your blood is doing as it's told. Staying with me. Protecting me."

They look at each other, smiling, and Stiles wonders if this is the moment he throws the last of his caution to the wind and kisses this Peter too.

The moment is ruined (which might be for the best) by Dad groaning and shifting. Stiles puts his tea aside and scuffles over.

"Dad?" He calls. "Hey, how are you doing?"

"Stiles?" Dad's eyes flutter and open. He tries to sit up but, being wrapped in a rug, just ends up wriggling like a caterpillar. "What the... where are my pants?"

"The station had gotten flooded, so we took your pants off to let them dry a little," Stiles reaches over and turns the top of the rug down to let Dad get his arms out. "Do you remember?"

"Right... The water..." Dad sits up, grimacing, and touches his head where it must feel tender. "How did I even get out?"

"Peter pulled you out," Stiles nods back at Peter.

"Hi, Sheriff," Peter says.

Dad stares.

"Hale? What the hell are you two even doing together? And what are you both wearing?"

"The curtains," Stiles snorts. "Our clothes are wet too."

"Right," Dad says. Stiles is sure Dad has noticed the lack of an answer to the "what are you doing together" question, but he has no idea how to even begin explaining the whole thing. Dad doesn't know anything about the supernatural, and without a temporal change it'd be impossible to prove that Stiles has any sort of power.

Well, if Stiles could control it in some less weird way than making his blood in Peter's body echo his heartbeat, proving things would be easier. But can Stiles even do anything else except what he's already done? He's got no clue and nowhere to find one.

"So what's the plan?" Dad asks, addressing mostly Peter. It stings a bit that Dad is assuming Stiles is not contributing anything to their staying alive, but, well, he's not completely wrong. "Do you know what happened to the city?"

"It's a long story, and I only know bits and pieces," Peter says. "We've actually come to find you because you might know more."

"Me?" Dad frowns. "What could I know?"

"Stiles?" Peter looks at him expectantly.

Despite still being damp on the outside, Stiles feels like his throat has dried out. He really, really doesn't want to ask Dad any questions, so much so that he has to start doing breathing exercises again. He ignores Peter's baffled look; this Peter wasn't there when Stiles freaked out about the very idea of investigating the box, he doesn't know. Stiles can still divert everyone's attention from that, stall until another temporal change comes in, hopefully something insane and fast-paced...

No. No. He can't do that. He promised Peter that he'd get to the bottom of this, and it doesn't matter that Peter is no longer aware of that promise. Stiles is aware, and that's enough. Besides, it's the only idea they have now that fiddling with the Nemeton backfired spectacularly. There has to be some connection. There has to be some information out there to find and put together; but they'll never do that if Stiles gives into his cowardice.

"Dad," he says and stops to lick his dry lips. "This is going to sound extremely irrelevant, but I swear this is the best lead we have regarding what's going on. I need you—literally everyone needs you—to listen and not to dismiss it immediately. Okay?"

"Of course, kiddo." Dad is visibly bewildered but willing enough to go along. "Come on, lay it on me. What is it that I might know?"

"There was a box in our attic. A pretty small one, covered in tiny black symbols," Stiles says, and by the way Dad's eyes widen it's clear that Dad knows what he's talking about. Stiles' stomach feels like icebergs are crashing into each other in there, hot tea or no hot tea. "Do you know how it got there? What was in it? Who made it?"

Dad blinks at Stiles in confusion.

"You did, kiddo," he says. "Don't you remember?"

Chapter 6: Peter Particle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Stiles shakes his head, leaning away from Dad.

"No," he says. "No, I couldn't have. I would've remembered. Come on, try harder. You must be thinking of something else. Do you need me to describe it in more detail?"

"Of course I'm thinking of the right thing," Dad says, a little annoyed. Stiles feels hot and cold at the same time, and like his body doesn't know if it wants to faint or throw up. "How many little boxes with weird symbols do you think we even have? Besides, I'm not likely to ever forget this one."

"W-why... Why is that?" Stiles pushes the words out of his suddenly disobedient mouth with great difficulty.

He promised. He has to. It's the only way to save people.

Dad sighs.

"You must have really forgotten all about it, huh? Well, you were still small. It was after I knew Claudia was sick but before I realized she needed to be in a hospital." Dad stops and glances at Peter. "Hale, no offense, but do you have to be right here? This is somewhat private."

"He stays," Stiles interjects before Peter can even open his mouth. "Don't mind him. Just tell me. Please."

Dad gives Peter one more look, this one filled with suspicion, but subsides for the moment.

"Okay then. I remember Claudia bringing some wood for the box one day. She said you needed to make a handicraft thingamabob for a school project and that was what the wood was for. I, well, I thought it might be a good opportunity for you two to bond, you know? It'd been weird for a while by then. You seemed afraid of her, and she glared at you sometimes even though you hadn't done any mischief as far as I knew. I thought making a thing together would help smooth over some of that tension. And I think it even worked for a while. You two were at it all the time. You glued and nailed it together quickly—didn't even hammer a finger once, I was so proud," Dad adds with a chuckle. Stiles can't bring himself to share in the nostalgic fun. "But it was damn weird, these symbols you were decorating it with. You had a sheet of paper with them printed out from God knows where, and there you were for hours and hours with a tiny brush and an actual inkwell, drawing one teensy-weensy hieroglyph after another. I remember wondering how you could even sit still for long enough to draw one, let alone hundreds. Claudia was always with you. She didn't do any of the drawing, just stayed by your side, watching you do it. I asked her once if she could help you out since it had to be torture for a fidgety kid like you to keep at it for so long, but she said

it'd be cheating and that you had to do your own school project. I didn't think much of it at the time, although it was unusual for her to be so strict with you. I should've paid more attention."

Dad scrubs one hand down his face, looking so sad and guilty. Stiles' heart would go out to him if it wasn't busy beating somewhere in Stiles' throat.

"It took you weeks to finish the thing. I was thoroughly tired of my wife and son being obsessed with a damn box by then, so on the day I knew you'd be finally done with it I took a couple hours off to come home earlier. Even picked up some Peese's peanut butter cups for you to surprise you with a treat for all your hard work." Dad laughs a strange, broken laugh. "But when I came home, she..."

He trails off, lost in memories.

"She was conducting some sort of ritual," Peter says quietly. "Wasn't she?"

"How the hell do you know?" Dad pins Peter with an angry look.

"I didn't. I guessed."

Dad doesn't seem like he believes Peter, but in the end his shoulders slump and he nods.

"It was so... weird." Dad looks disgusted. "She had you in a circle of some kind of black powder, kiddo. You were sitting in the middle, with that damn box in your hands. She was saying words I didn't understand—I didn't even know if they were in English or not—and you were repeating after her. You seemed scared but otherwise okay, and I was so stunned by the whole thing, I just stood there and gawked. But then she said the last words, and you repeated them, and..." Dad hesitates. "It was just... profoundly weird. I don't know what other word to call it. It felt like lights went out, only they didn't. Like something went missing, but I didn't know what it was. I didn't think much about it then, though, because as soon as that happened, you fainted right where you sat. And Claudia, she... she laughed and she took a knife out of a pocket." Dad buries his face in his hands. His next words come out muffled but clear enough to understand. "I subdued her before she could hurt you. I didn't know her illness had gone so far that she'd try to do something to you. That night I took her to the hospital. Both of you. You came home with me after you woke up and the doctor said you were fine, just maybe a little dehydrated. Claudia stayed in the long-term ward, where professionals could make sure she wouldn't hurt anyone."

Dad looks up at Stiles. His eyes are bloodshot and sad, just like they were for months after Mom died and Dad drank, and drank, and drank.

"I couldn't bear to look at that box," he says. "I put it in the attic, on the top shelf, so neither of us would ever have to see it if we came up there for anything. I should've thrown it away, but awful as it was, it was still something you made, and I... I still keep that first grade drawing of yours in my wallet, you know. *The Invasion of Dinosaurs in Our Backyard*, you wrote underneath, and without a single spelling mistake, too. It looks kind of like three demented chickens running in the grass, but I love it. I couldn't make myself get rid of the box either."

For a long time no one says anything. Inside Stiles' head there's only static.

"Stiles?" Peter asks gently. "Mon trésor, do you understand what this means?"

Stiles looks at Peter. He hears words but he doesn't understand them, not quite. He presses the heels of his palms to his forehead, trying to hold memories back. His brain hurts from the inside.

"She said I had to do this to prove I was a good boy," he says. A memory is sprawling through his mind, sharp, and bright, and painful. "Just help mommy out with this box, and I'd be her little Mischief again."

Dad flinches like Stiles has physically hit him.

"Peter," Stiles says plaintively. "Peter, make it go away. Can you save me again? Please?"

Peter kneels by him and cradles Stiles' face in his hands. Peter has strong hands. Surely, they are strong enough to beat the memories back?

"Sweetheart, I don't think anyone can make this go away," Peter says, and Stiles wants to scream at the unfairness of it. "You need to get through it. To the other side."

Mom's manic, cold eyes. Fingers cramping around a thin brush. So much confused fear, like a poisonous cloud dogging his footsteps. Where is the other side to this? It's a Möbius strip of misery.

"Alright, that's enough," Dad says harshly. "Hale, you will stop touching my son immediately, or I will break every bone in your hands. And you better pray there isn't a good reason for me to rip your balls off and feed them to you."

Stiles presses his own hands on top of Peter's. He doesn't want Peter to stop touching him; he feels like without the touch he's going to float up and off into the upper layers of the atmosphere like an untethered balloon.

"You're focusing on the wrong thing, Sheriff," Peter says, calm and reasonable. "Does your son really need to see another parent becoming violent?"

"He didn't see that!" Dad snaps. "He was unconscious! Now, get your hands off him, or I swear to God—"

"Don't hurt Peter," Stiles says. He doesn't have enough left in him to plead or demand; he just says it. "If you hurt Peter, I will never forgive you."

"Kiddo..." Dad sounds like he's about to cry. Stiles wishes he still remembered how to do that.

"Your story was truly very helpful," Peter says. One of his thumbs strokes Stiles' cheekbone, and it feels like almost enough to undo Stiles utterly. Dad makes a sound like a raging bull. "It has given us a plethora of new information, and I think I can infer enough of the missing pieces to understand why the world is ending. And if I'm right, then you only saw the tip of

the iceberg of what he'd been through before you finally woke up to the fact that people with illnesses as severe as that are not trustworthy guardians. I have to commend your love for Stiles, though. If you were only a little less sentimental, you would've thrown the box away and, I suspect, we would all be long dead by now."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Dad growls. "What does that box have to do with what's going on anyway?!"

"Everything," Peter says, and he looks at Stiles with awe and wonder. "It's everything. Or, at least, it used to be until this afternoon."

"What fuck does that even..." Dad begins.

A temporal change comes in. Stiles isn't surprised; it's been a while.

He tumbles down, Peter's hands torn away from him, and lands on hard, uneven stone; winds are buffeting him, so strong that it's hard to breathe. There's an incline, and he rolls down, dazed and apathetic. Where his bare arms and feet touch the ground, 2011 ripples back into existence, those hardwood floors bumping into him from underneath and sending him careening this way and that like a pinball; half an armchair hits him in the side before going over him and heading on down, and the pain is unwelcome because it makes his head a little clearer. Stiles doesn't want to think. He doesn't.

A few burning logs from the fireplace reach him, and he yelps as they burn his skin. He slaps them away but even after they've gone on down, the burns hurt and hurt. Was that what it was like for Peter, only so much worse?

Peter. Where's Peter?

"Peter!" He screams. Suddenly, he's awake and aware, and he's flooded with terror. Is Peter dead again? Has Stiles not even noticed, too lost in his own mind to care? "Peter?!"

He scrambles to stop rolling down. It takes him a couple of tries, but he manages to restore some floor to stay on and a bit of the wall to grab at. Thankfully, the floor is even, and soon Stiles is standing up, trying not to touch anything more to avoid growing the whole house around himself.

He is on a bare, craggy cliff. Behind him, it rises into a mountain that reminds Stiles of nothing more than Orodruin, dark and devoid of life, full of huge rifts running in zigzagging lines; in front of him, maybe fifty feet away, is a drop of unknown height, and some considerable distance away there's a tornado the size of a skyscraper. The wind is insane; it steadily crumbles the bit of the wall Stiles has gotten restored and it pushes Stiles towards the drop with enough force that Stiles' feet slide and skip on the smooth floor.

Peter is nowhere to be seen, and neither is Dad. Did Stiles' blood not work? Has Peter's metabolism worked through it, no matter what Stiles tried to tell it to do? Has Dad wiped that dab of Stiles' blood behind his ear away while Stiles wasn't looking?

"Peter!" He calls. The wind swallows his voice.

Is he stuck here alone now? Is this it? Is this how the sordid, wretched story of Stiles Stilinski ends?

Crack!

The floor further up the mountain breaks from below. A clawed hand pushes through the resulting hole and breaks off bits of wood with the same ease Stiles would feel tearing a piece of bread. Stiles stares, heart in his throat, as Peter heaves himself out of... somewhere. Is this real? It has to be.

Peter gets to his feet, completely naked now that the curtain toga's been through a temporal change. Stiles remembers the first loops where Peter's nudity was always just around the corner, clothes unable to keep up with the times, and how scandalized it made him feel, and he's struck with an urge to laugh. He probably would have if not for Peter sweeping him close; Peter's hands run lightly over his head and back, as if searching for something. When they reach the spot where the partial armchair rammed into Stiles, he can't help a pained hiss.

"So you've already gotten hurt in the minute or two while I wasn't looking, huh?" Peter pushes open Stiles' curtain to examine the damage.

"It's just a bruise," Stiles tells him. "I'm fine. I'm good. Where's Dad?"

"I don't know." Peter gives the bruise a glare as if to warn it not to turn out to be anything actually serious. "I fell into a ravine of sorts, I had to climb out by digging my claws into the stone walls. He might have fallen into another one."

"We have to find—"

A boulder the size of a car comes down the mountain at a breakneck speed and takes Peter clean off his feet. One moment he's there, and the other he's not, and it takes Stiles about two full seconds to reconcile the reality with the afterimage of Peter in his eyes.

"...him," Stiles finishes.

He whirls around to the drop—how far is it to the ground? Is it close enough for Peter to survive?—and relief floods him when he sees Peter clinging to the edge with his claws.

Wait, why does Stiles see pretty much all of Peter and not just his hands? It's a bit like Peter is... lying on air...

Stiles' eyes widen as he registers the tornado again. This time it's much closer, and Peter's body is extended towards it. He's getting sucked in; he would have already, were it not for the claws.

Stiles runs. Under his feet, the rock blooms into more rugs and floors, then a backyard, a lavish, pristine one, with matching patio furniture and manicured grass. It's easy to run through it on bare feet, and Stiles is not ready at all for his next step to land on something smooth and wet.

He windmills his arms, contorting his body like crazy, and somehow manages to fall on his belly instead of his back. The hurricane winds fling him forward along the wetness, helping his own momentum, and his collarbone rams into a freshly restored metal ladder with a searing flash of pain.

In front of him, the last couple of feet of the rocky surface turn into water and splash off into the howling wind. A swimming pool. Those stupid rich bastards with a real fireplace have a swimming pool in the backyard, too. Of course they do.

Stiles' hands shoot forward without much conscious input on his part and close around Peter's wrists just before Peter is whisked away from him.

If asked earlier, Stiles would have said, quite truthfully, that his grip strength is probably enough to bruise a peach if he squeezes it really hard, but that's about it. Right now, though, he's holding on to Peter as a fucking tornado is trying to take him away, and Stiles' joints are aching as they are getting stretched out to their limits, and the ladder pressing into his shoulder shudders as the force of the hurricane is threatening to tear it out of concrete, but Stiles' fingers are fused to Peter's wrists.

He will not let go. He can't. He won't.

Peter twists his hands and grips Stiles' wrists in return. The muscles on his arms bulge and strain as he tries to pull himself forward, but the tornado is swiftly getting closer. Stiles' clavicle caves further into his body under the pressure, and the ladder shifts, clearly about to get torn off. His curtain toga is flapping like mad, almost lifting his body off the ground every time it fills with air. Several more massive boulders rocket past, bounding off the edge and disappearing within the seething mass of the tornado; the next one can easily turn Stiles' head into paste on its way down.

Stiles looks at Peter and recognizes the expression on his face. He's seen it before, the night Derek tore Peter's throat out. A sane, peaceful, resigned, rueful expression.

Everything in Stiles rebels.

"No!" He screams. "No, no, no!"

Any second now the ladder will give, and they will both be swept off the edge. Stiles might or might not loop again, but Peter will definitely die, and Stiles' blood inside him might not be enough to bring him along.

"Stop!" Stiles pleads, and demands, and commands; his very soul recoils from the thought of losing yet another Peter. "Stop!"

He wills it all to stop with every fiber of his being.

A wave of serene nothingness unfolds in him and pours out. He feels weightless and still for a moment, and the world around him grows tinged with tiny threads the color of gasoline rainbow.

Everything stops.

Peter hits the edge with a thud, no longer pulled by the tornado, and Stiles cries out as his wrung out joints and cracked or possibly broken clavicle are jostled. Peter digs the claws and fingers of one hand into the concrete edge of the swimming pool and uses the other to unbend Stiles' fingers on his wrist; then he switches hands, patient, methodical and unflappable. Stiles doesn't cooperate because he thinks he might have forgotten how to have his fingers in any other position, but neither is he trying to stop Peter.

Having freed himself from Stiles' grip, Peter pulls up and over the edge with ease.

"Careful," he says. "There's a giant boulder hovering over your back."

"You can push it away... I think," Stiles says. His voice comes out rough, and he coughs to clear his throat. "I'm not really sure how this works."

He turns over on his back, grimacing from the pain, and watches Peter give the boulder a little push with the tip of one finger. The boulder moves but only so long as force is applied to it directly.

"Huh," Peter says and pushes the boulder completely away. "Here, let me help you sit up. What's wrong with your shoulder?"

"My collarbone might be broken," Stiles says, unconcerned. "Are you okay?"

He drinks the sight of Peter in, only blushing slightly because of all the nakedness. There are some bruises and scratches but they heal before Stiles' eyes.

"Let's get at least a little further away from the edge," Peter suggests. "I wouldn't like to be sitting here if everything suddenly... unstops."

Stiles considers this a very good idea. Peter helps him get up, and they walk away from the edge, but they don't get far; Stiles' stomach cramps, and his legs buckle. He'd faceplant if Peter wasn't there.

"What's wrong?" Peter lowers him onto the fancy grass, peering into his face anxiously. "What's happening?"

"I don't know, obviously." Stiles lifts one hand to touch Peter's face. He still can't believe he hasn't lost Peter again. "I might just be too hungry."

"Too hungry to walk? Have you forgotten to eat for a week?"

"Don't be silly," Stiles chastises. His fingers glide along Peter's cheek, and he is reveling in the visceral, unmistakable evidence that Peter is alive and well. "I fuel my weird powers with food, remember?"

"No, I do not remember," Peter frowns. "You didn't tell me. Is that why you're so gaunt? I thought my eyes might be playing tricks on me."

"Oh," Stiles says. "Well, I need to eat a bunch, or I can't keep restoring things and pulling you with me through temporal changes. Although maybe you have a permanent immunity now, with my blood. Do you still have it? You do, right? Do you feel my heart next to yours?"

"I do." Peter takes Stiles' hand off his face and kisses the knuckles in what looks like an impulse. "Did you know you could stop time?"

"Nope," Stiles pops the "p". "I had no idea. I just really wanted you not to die."

"So you upended the natural order just for little old me?" Peter raises his eyebrows.

Stiles contemplates the question.

"I think I would do anything for you," he says in the end. And, because he wants to, he replies to another Peter that no longer is: "And yes, I know what "anything" actually entails."

Peter stares at him.

"Was that creepy?" Stiles asks. He was the same with Lydia. Immediate; rash; devoted to the point of making *Creep* his personal anthem. No wonder she has never wanted anything to do with him—and it also wouldn't be a wonder if Peter turned out not to mind it that much. "It was totally creepy. Sorry."

"Stiles," Peter says. "I've been restraining myself because it seemed to genuinely hurt you when I turned the conversation in that direction. But you're making it way too hard, so you have exactly two seconds to object to me kissing you."

He leans over, slowly enough that Stiles indeed could move away or say something if he didn't want it.

Stiles wants it so fucking much, it hurts.

Peter kisses him gently at first, as if afraid to spook him. The familiar taste and feel of his lips are intoxicating, and Stiles makes a desperate, needy sound as he opens his mouth and kisses back in earnest.

The kiss grows heated in no time at all; in the still, silent world, they kiss frantically, hungry for every bit of contact, and the want makes Stiles' whole body tingle and tremble as he slides one hand into Peter's hair, then down his back and over the perfect firmness of his ass. Peter tears Stiles' curtain toga in two with a growl that reverberates through Stiles' lips, and throat, and chest, and then they are pressed together, skin to skin, kissing with abandon.

Peter gets his hands on Stiles' ass, hot as brands, deliciously possessive in the way they squeeze and press Stiles closer. Their semi-hard cocks rub against each other, and Stiles breaks the kiss to throw his head back and moan. Peter immediately lowers his head to kiss Stiles' neck; he's less than gentle, taking his pleasure exactly as he likes, and Stiles feels a hint of human teeth, then that familiar suction. His blood pulses madly under the skin of his throat, coaxed by Peter's lips, and Stiles wants nothing more than to come like this, with

Peter's lips on him, marking him, with Peter's stupidly hot body flush against him, with that cock thrusting against Stiles' own, hot, and silky, and hard.

Forgetting everything but this, Stiles tries to push his right hand between them to wrap his fingers around both of them. His clavicle flares in protest, and the pain makes him see white for a moment. He cries out, and not because he feels good.

Peter pulls away at once.

"You're still hurt," he says, looking stunned and confused, like kissing Stiles has made him forget about everything else. No one has ever looked like that for Stiles; no one has ever wanted to kiss Stiles, period. "We... we should wait for a better moment."

"I... Yeah, we should," Stiles reluctantly agrees. Now that it has reminded him of its existence, he can't not pay attention to the pain in his shoulder; in fact, every other injury he's accumulated is back with vengeance, and they are collectively making his erection flag. The burns, the bruises, the overstretched joints—the list goes on.

Not to mention that his stomach chooses this moment to do a cramp that feels like a harakiri. Stiles has never been so hungry before.

"Come on." Peter smooths Stiles' hair and kisses him on the cheek. "Let me take care of you now. We have to get away from the tornado, so you can let the time go on."

"That sounds like a great idea," Stiles agrees. "Uhm... Do you see my shoes anywhere? If I just walk around like this, I'll keep restoring every bit of the ground I step on."

His shoes are nowhere to be seen, and Peter picks Stiles up without hesitation, cradling his shoulders to move the broken collarbone as little as possible.

"I'll carry you as long as you need, my magical cupcake," he says, smirking down at Stiles. "Or want. In fact, when you feel well enough, I'd like to explore the possibilities of having sex while I'm holding you up."

Stiles blushes at that.

"Now that you're no longer restraining yourself, you'll be making up for all the lost time, huh?" He asks.

"A very astute observation," Peter says as he starts walking through the frozen world. "Prepare yourself for the onslaught of innuendos, come-ons, entirely inappropriate advances, and plans for making sure you lose every single bit of your virtue."

Stiles sighs happily.

"I kind of missed those," he confesses. "You've never restrained yourself before. In the other loops, I mean."

"I have to wonder," Peter says in that perfectly nonchalant tone that by itself betrays its falseness because Stiles knows by now that Peter is anything but indifferent to the world

around him, "what were your interactions with the other Peters like? It's hard to imagine what they did or said to encourage you to... feel the way you do about me."

"Yeah, you asked that before too." Stiles smiles. "I really don't think any of them did anything you wouldn't."

"Nonetheless, they are—or were, while they existed—their own separate beings," Peter counters. "Granted, our divergence didn't last very long but I suspect the intensity and variety of experiences shared with you makes up for that."

"What exactly are you asking?" Stiles can't see what Peter is driving at with this line of questioning. "If I thought they were doing anything besides what they thought best in the moment, I'd tell you. I think you know that."

"I'm starting to grasp that, yes." Peter takes a few seconds to think, and Stiles doesn't rush him, just enjoying the solid feel of Peter against him. "I can't discount the fact that you didn't start your afternoon with me anew the way I did with you. You remember them all. They were the ones who made you want me in the first place."

"Well, in a way, but I'm starting to think it's not a good idea to call them "them". I mean, they were you, as much as you are you." Stiles hesitates a little, looking for the right words.

"Look, I thought I might go around the bend with grief as I kept losing you one by one, especially after the last time which was extra horrible. So I've been looking for a way to frame it in my mind that would let me not do that, and I can share that with you. Maybe it'll help you, I don't know, make your peace with their previous existence."

"What's that?"

"It's, uhm... How much do you know about Feynman's sum over histories?"

"Not a single thing, my nerdy nectarine," Peter says, amused, and Stiles wonder how long Peter's been keeping that particular bit of alliterative nonsense up his sleeve. Probably for a while. "Do enlighten me."

"Okay, uhm, I did tell you a little about the experiments that led Feynman to this idea. The particles being measured, basically. Since we can't track a particle because of how it's affected by any observation, we can't know what path it takes to get from point A to point B. Quantum theory relies on some really complicated math, and it's kind of hard to do any math about a glaring blind spot. I'm simplifying a lot here, but this is the gist. So Feynman came up with the principle that a traveling particle takes not one path but all possible paths, and now, when we do calculations like this with particles, we takes the sum of all the paths into account. I mean, we don't actually know for sure if this is what is somehow happening or if this idea is only a mathematical construct that helps us wrap our macro-sized human brains around the particle behavior, but this is how we think of it." Stiles stops his runaway mouth before it launches into a full-scale lecture on physics. "What I mean here is that I'm trying to think of you as, uhm, as my Peter particle. You're taking all these possible paths from point A, before the apocalypse, to point B, after that, but you're still you. And, and all the experiences I've had with different yous, they are not disparate things. They are your paths.

All yours. And you're not one or the other path, you're... a sum of them. A sum over your histories. Does that make any sense to you?"

Stiles glances up at Peter, awkward and shy about the mid-sized lake of pure nerdiness that has just poured out of him. He learned young that it only takes about a sentence and a half for people's eyes to start glazing over whenever he starts talking about this stuff.

Peter's eyes are not glazed over, though. He's looking at Stiles and smiling, and his face is softer than Stiles has ever seen it.

"I have to say," Peter says, "this was the most long-winded and scientific pick-up line I've ever heard."

"What? That wasn't a line!" Stiles would flail if not for his broken clavicle.

"Shush, Stiles," Peter laughs. "Your line is working, so don't spoil it."

"It... what?" Stiles is so perplexed that he opens his mouth but doesn't know what to actually say.

Peter kisses his parted lips. Stiles melts into it, still confused but happy to be kissed by Peter for whatever reason.

This one is unhurried and sweet in a way their previous kiss wasn't; they take their time as if they have as much of it as they could ever want, languid and tender.

Something sparks in the depths of Stiles' mind and comes to be. Something bright and warm, and it feels like Peter, like sarcasm, and strength, and shamelessness, and sexiness. It's as if there's a part of Peter now lodged in Stiles, linking them in an intangible way.

"What...?" Stiles asks dumbly against Peter's suddenly slack lips. "What just happened?"

If he thought he'd seen Peter in the state of complete shock already, he was mistaken. Right now Peter looks like his entire world has flipped upside down.

"That..." Peter starts and stops. He's speechless, and Stiles twitches, startled when emotions that are not his start pouring out of the Peter-spot in his mind: disbelief, fierce joy, confusion, possessiveness, a huge intertwined bundle of them. "That's a packbond. Our packbond. Between you and me."

"We have a packbond?" Stiles shakes his head. "That can't be it, I'm not a werewolf. I—I don't have anything like this with Scott, and he's my best friend. Humans can't..."

"There were humans in the Hale pack," Peter says. He's staring at Stiles with such all-consuming intensity that he might not even be aware of what he's saying. "They could all feel the bond."

"Oh," Stiles says.

Well, he's always known at some level that he is more invested in Scott than the other way around. He tries to squash the hurt that the confirmation has caused but he must still have leaked it through the new bond, or else Peter smells it on him, because Peter's eyes lose that wonder-struck shine they had going on and sharpen.

"McCall is an utter, complete, pitiful moron for not recognizing the treasure that you are, sweetheart." Peter firmly kisses Stiles on the lips, as if punctuating his words. "All the more of you for me, then."

That doesn't sound exactly comforting because people don't tend to be able to take Stiles in large quantities, but he nods anyway. He doesn't want to argue about it, and besides, now that the adrenaline and the lust have largely worn off, he's starting to feel a bit woozy.

"I may black out for a bit," he says, pressing his cheek to Peter's shoulder while he's allowed. "I'm so tired. I don't know how to let time go on again but maybe it'll start up once I'm not conscious."

"It's alright." Peter kisses the top of Stiles' head, his temple, his forehead. It's nice. "I'll make sure you're safe."

"Both of us," Stiles protests, slurring the words a bit. "Not just me."

"I'll make sure we're both safe," Peter corrects himself, and Stiles feels reassurance coming through the bond.

He believes it. Peter can protect them, and he will do just that. Stiles can trust it and let go.

The hair-thin threads of rainbow woven into everything disappear with a quiet pop. Peter doesn't comment on them or the sound, so maybe it's only Stiles that can see and hear these things. They both notice, though, when the time starts up again and the wind deals them a hammering blow.

Peter leans forward slightly for a more stable position and walks like the wind is no bother to him at all. Stiles closes his eyes and makes a clumsy attempt to send some trust along the packbond.

He's out of it before he can find out if he did it right and Peter actually felt that.

* * *

He comes to with the distinct sensation of being nudged, except no one is actually touching him. He blinks fuzziness away from his eyes with some success and realizes that Peter is nudging him through the bond. A mental wake-up call. Huh.

"Tesoro mio," Peter says. "I know you're tired, but you have to drink this."

A plastic straw is pushed between his lips, and Stiles reflexively slurps up whatever drink this is. It's cold, sweet and thick. A milkshake?

As he drinks, his head becomes a bit clearer and he feels stronger, strong enough to take the cup from Peter halfway through, tear the cap off and just drink it directly. After he shakes the last drops of what is essentially flavored sugar into his mouth, Peter switches the empty cup for a new one, already opened, and Stiles drains it as well.

The calorie bomb does wonders for him. He sits up straighter, grimacing at the way all of his aches protest the movement, and makes grabby hands.

"Do you have anything else?" He asks hopefully.

Peter must have robbed a diner or something because Stiles gets a double cheeseburger next, and his body sings hallelujah at the protein, and the carbs, and the prodigious amount of fat, and even the lonely lettuce leaf.

He's packed away three days' worth of junk food by the time he's full again. Peter touches his cheek, amazement pouring through the bond.

"You filled out all of those sunken spots right before my eyes," he says. "How is that even possible?"

Stiles shrugs with one shoulder.

"It might be that my powers are acting on anything I eat to metabolize it immediately when I need that," he says. "Digestion, putting on weight, those are a matter of time, and this could be one way I manifest some control over it. I have other subconscious ways, after all, like restoring things I touch."

"That makes sense," Peter nods. "Here, I made something of a sling from a tablecloth. We should immobilize your arm, it'll help with the collarbone a bit. No painkillers in this MacDonald's that I could find, sadly."

Stiles is nearly in tears from the pain by the time they get his arm situated in the makeshift sling, and he slumps against whatever it is at his back, sweaty and out of breath. Despite having eaten, he's a fucking wreck. Why don't his idiot powers heal him ASAP? Getting rid of injuries is a matter of time too.

"Thanks," he says and tries to push some gratitude through the bond. It does help to have his arm supported.

"You're welcome." Peter plants a quick kiss on Stiles' cheek and settles down to sit next to him on his less battered side, their arms touching. "So..."

"Dad!" Stiles remembers and makes to jump up and run, only to be held back by pain. "Where's Dad?!"

Peter shrugs.

"After you passed out, there were two more time waves," he says. "I don't think there's any way to know."

"Right." Stiles stares at the tiled floor. It's fine. It's all fine. He'll figure out a way to save everyone, Dad and coach Finstock, and the town, and the world. It doesn't matter he's just lost Dad. He'll find him again.

"Stiles." Peter takes his hand, interlinking their fingers. "We need to talk about what your father told us."

"What is there to talk about?" Stiles asks dully. "My mom hated me, end of story."

"I understand that you don't want to talk about it, stella mia, but if you want to save the world, we have to. And not about your mother, but about you."

"What about me?"

"You're the key to everything," Peter says, unknowingly echoing another version of himself. "I'm reasonably sure that—"

A temporal change comes over them, in a very timely manner for once. They fall, but not too far; bright sunshine blinds Stiles, and he squeezes his eyes shut on reflex.

They land on something hard and uneven, and Stiles gasps from the new sharp pain in his tailbone. Is that broken now?

A deafening sound of air horn makes him jerk and open his eyes. As they get used to the light, an oncoming train grows into focus, white and streamlined, with electric blue lines running back from the very tip, like a sci-fi dream.

And it's right here.

Stiles can feel the beginning of Peter's movement, the very start of a tug on his hand, when the train plows into them and throws them aside like dolls. Stiles doesn't feel any pain, too numb with shock, but when he hits the ground, he can't get up.

He can't breathe, and there's some weird pressure in the area of his stomach. The train passes, and Stiles turns his head, trying to see Peter.

On the other side of the tracks, Peter's body is not moving.

No. No.

Stiles closes his eyes so he won't see that anymore. The lack of oxygen makes him lightheaded; the darkness beneath his eyelids sways and swirls.

Back. He needs to go back.

Back. Back. Back.

The darkness blooms into white haze with a gasoline rainbow sheen. It has always been the prettiest thing Stiles has ever seen.

He opens his eyes as a big fat drop of water from the ceiling comes down and lands directly on his nose. Stiles sneezes and hits his already sore head against the floorboards. Ow.

Before he can even think of how to react to anything, his packbond explodes with astonishment, anxiety and urgency. Stiles can't tell if this means that Peter is shocked by finding himself looped back into normality after getting run over by a train or that Peter is alarmed by having a completely new and unexpected bond pop into existence in his head.

He sits up slowly. Nothing hurts except the back of his head and a few bruises and scratches acquired when he fell down from the chair. The blood-soaked avocado shirt and pajama pants feel icky, but Stiles is not about to get up and go change. He is not in the let's-get-shit-done mood. He's in the let's-sit-here-listlessly mood.

He wraps his arms around his bent knees. What if he does nothing? He's been trying to do something loop after loop, and the world is still ending. Maybe what he needs to do is sit tight and wallow in the memories Dad's tale let out into the light. Yes, he can sit right here and just not move. That sounds like an awesome idea, to be honest.

Maybe the house will fall on him before he remembers the rest of the things hiding in the dark corners of his mind. That would be nice.

Time is irrelevant up here in the dusty attic. It's been untouched for so long that it feels like a pocket of space-time of its own; whether ten minutes or ten years pass outside of it, it will stay more or less the same. Stiles has never been able to appreciate that quality until now.

Eventually, there's a faint sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. The trapdoor swings open with enough force to send the dust flying and swirling like some shitty snowstorm; Stiles sneezes as Peter leaps up.

Peter—alive, whole, magnificent—is staring at him with wild eyes, breathing heavily. Stiles gets up, steps over and leans into Peter, pressing his face into the crook between Peter's shoulder and neck. The smell of his cologne, the warmth of his skin, the utter Peter-ness of him make Stiles more human than he is alone, and he both loves and hates Peter for it.

From the unhesitating way Peter's arms come up around him and squeeze him tight Stiles' doubts melt away like ice cream in the sun. He knows for sure now.

This time, Peter remembers.

* * *

They spend a long time standing there. Stiles is not in any hurry; it's nice to think of nothing but Peter because everything else he could possibly think about right now hurts too much. But in the end Peter kisses the top of his head and says:

"You need to get changed out of this, tesoro mio. We must both look like Carrie now. And we need to talk about the conclusions I have come to."

It sounds very reasonable and practical, and Stiles doesn't really want to do it, but he climbs down the ladder anyway.

"I wonder if looping somehow breaks the law of the conservation of energy," he muses out loud as he hops off the last rung of the ladder. "I lost a bunch of blood, and I ate a lot of food, and I think at least the stuff from the kitchen here is back, although I'll need to double-check that, but I'm not missing the blood and the energy I got from the food is not taken out of my body when I loop, or I'd be basically dead of starvation and blood loss now. It's like extra energy and matter are getting created out of nowhere which is, you know, impossible."

"If there's one thing I learned today, it's that there are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Peter remarks as he opens the door to Stiles' bedroom.

"Okay, either you're confusing me with some dude named Horatio or that was more Shakespeare." Stiles rolls his eyes fondly. "You know that's lost on me."

"If you get to talk physics at me, I get to quote literature at you," Peter smirks. "Seems only fair, my sweet fragolina."

"We're both so obnoxious, aren't we?" Stiles can't help the smile tugging at his lips.

"We sound like a great match." Peter pulls Stiles close again and kisses him, far too briefly, before stepping away and nodding at Stiles' closet. "Pick something out. And don't think I didn't notice you're trying to change the subject."

Stiles can absolutely keep trying to change the subject. He's fairly certain he can outstubborn Peter, given enough time and motivation, but he's not sure that this is the hill he wants to die on. If Peter has some insights regarding the apocalypse, it's kind of stupid to refuse to hear him out, even if it concerns a subject Stiles never wants to discuss, ever.

"Lay it on me," he sighs, stripping off his bloodied clothing. Peter's not turning away like a more decency-oriented person would, but Stiles is a bit past caring. They would've fucked on that cliff if not for Stiles' collarbone fracture, so it's out there that Peter, for some unfathomable reason, likes what he sees and that Stiles is more than fine with the idea of getting naked for Peter.

Honestly, Stiles longs for the days when Peter ogling him while he's starkers would have been his most pressing and dire concern.

"The symbols on the box and the ritual you underwent were clearly geared towards containing your power," Peter says absentmindedly as Stiles bends down a little to rummage through his shirt shelf. The purple shirt from the last loop is here, still damp and with a smudge of Stiles' blood on it, and he throws it down on the floor next to the pajamas. "This means you must have had it then, likely since you were born. Perhaps not all of it at once. It might have grown as you grew."

"I don't think Dad ever referenced me throwing freaky time magic around when I was small," Stiles comments, pulling on a thin hoodie. He tosses one to Peter too, to cover the huge blood

stains on his V-neck.

"If you had a happy childhood... up to a certain point... you wouldn't have needed to use it in any major way. And he might have missed whatever you did when you did it." Stiles' loose hoodie fits Peter tight like a glove with all that muscle. "He said you drew a picture of dinosaurs that looked more like chickens. It's quite possible that you summoned actual dinosaurs to your backyard, since, as it is now known, dinosaurs most likely had feathers, no matter what *Jurassic Park* shows us."

"Mom would definitely know something, at least," Stiles says quietly. "She stayed home with me, and Dad worked long hours."

"Right, hence her... knowing she required a ritual." Peter sounds a bit awkward. "I expect she had some ability herself, although perhaps not mastery over time."

Stiles snorts, even though it's not funny.

"The shit Dad misses in his own home while he's stuck at the station day and night." Stiles zips up a fresh pair of jeans. "So why is the world ending? You said you came up with an idea."

"Power taken via a ritual is best returned via a ritual." Peter sounds confident again, able to sidestep the emotional minefield somewhat. "You said you felt compelled to get the box from the attic. Your power must have started leaking out from the stress microfractures in the wood, what with how it was improperly stored, and it was calling to you. But you didn't enact a ritual when you found the box, did you?"

"Of course not," Stiles sits down on the bed. He could really use a nap, he thinks. "I know even less about magic rituals than I do about Shakespeare. I fell from the chair, then the box smacked into my head and cracked open."

Peter nods, and satisfaction leaks through the packbond as if this is exactly what he expected.

"So when the container was no longer able to keep your power imprisoned—and bear in mind, this is a conjecture, but one that makes sense to me—some of that power returned to you, where it belonged, and some of it splashed into a ley line. By itself, this didn't cause any noticeable disruption, but when your time power reached the Nemeton, which is supposed to be dead or as good as, it was—will be?—unable to deal with a sudden strong infusion of a very rare and specific magic. It goes haywire, and that is what starts the chain reaction of chaotic time waves."

"Wait." Stiles holds up both hands as if to keep Peter's words at bay. "Hold on. Are you saying it's me? Are you saying I... I'm the one who is literally ending the world?"

The enormity of a fuck-up like that is too much to even fit into Stiles' mind. All the deaths, all the losses, all the pain, all of it—it's because of Stiles? He didn't give much thought to the reasons behind the apocalypse before, not least because there wasn't a lot of time to sit and think, but in the back of his mind he treated it as some sort of natural disaster, something that

happened due to circumstances outside of human control. Like a tornado. But that was never what it was, if Peter is right; and Stiles doesn't see any fault in Peter's logic.

He presses his hands to his face and cannot really feel either. He did it. He ruined the whole world. Maybe even the universe, if the Earth's ley lines connect with the rest of it somehow. Everyone and everything Stiles has ever loved is going to be destroyed, and it's all his fault.

"No," Peter takes Stiles' hands in his. "No, tesoro mio, it's not your fault. There are many others who get their share of the blame, like your mother for taking your power away from you in the first place, and your father for not noticing things that were happening right under his nose, and the despicable piece of garbage who cut the Nemeton down ensuring it won't be in any shape to deal with an overflowing ley line, and so on. You never meant for anything bad to happen. You're frustratingly, unfailingly good and kind. This is not on you."

"But it is," Stiles says. "What does it matter if I meant for it to happen or not? The fact is, I did go up to the attic, and I did release my power—mine, not someone else's—in a way that directly led to an apocalypse. Dad should've thrown the box away. I never should've been around it. I..."

Peter looks like he's gearing up for an argument. Stiles' phone on the nightstand erupts in a call, making them both startle.

"That... that didn't happen before? I don't think?" Stiles picks it up cautiously, like a grenade whose safety pin may or may not have been pulled out. The caller ID is "Tara". Why would she be calling him? Anticipatory dread pools in his stomach as he answers the call. "Hello?"

"Stiles! God, why weren't you answering your phone earlier? I thought you might be... Never mind. Stiles, you..." She sounds like she's forcefully holding herself together. "You should come to the station."

"Why?" Stiles grips the phone tighter. "What's going on, Tara?"

"It's your dad," she says, and these three little words make Stiles' ears ring. "Something happened to him, Stiles. It's not a phone conversation. Please, come to the station, kiddo."

Stiles stares at the pile of bloodied clothes on the floor next to his closet, and pieces click together in his mind without much conscious input from him.

His blood serves as a stabilizer through changes in time. Everything that has been touched by it returns to where it was when Stiles loops but in the condition that the previous loops have put it in; everything but the piece of the Nemeton that got Stiles in the throat the time before last, but that might be a special case. Stiles dabbed a bit of blood behind Dad's ear in the last loop, and in the next temporal change Dad disappeared... He must have fallen into one of those big cracks on the mountainside, like Peter, but Dad is human. So much less durable than Peter. He died, and he stayed that way when Stiles looped back.

Stiles has just killed his own dad forever.

"He's dead," he says into the phone. It's not a question. "You found him dead at the station."

There's a sharp intake of breath from Tara's end.

"Yes," she says. "Stiles, I'm so sorry. We don't know what happened yet, but I swear, we'll find the bastard who did this. If you know anything, you might be in danger too. Can you please come to the station? Or Valerie and I can come pick you up. In fact, that's a better idea. Where are you right now?"

"I..." Stiles shakes his head. "I have to fix this. I didn't know, I didn't think... I should..."

"Stiles? So you do know something? Come on, you can't investigate on your own." Tara seems worried now. "Please don't put yourself in danger. Tell me where you are, and we'll come get you."

"I'm gonna have to call you back," Stiles says.

He ends the call despite the tinny sound of Tara's protests. She calls him back immediately, but he doesn't pick up this time.

"Stiles?" Peter asks. "It's alright. I mean, it's not, obviously, but I have an idea. It's your blood, isn't it? It kept him dead when he died in the last loop. We should make sure your blood gets wiped off, and then you can loop again, and he'll be back. Or he should be."

Stiles can't let himself hope. If Peter's wrong and Dad doesn't come back, it will kill Stiles to have this hope ruined.

Peter picks up Stiles' phone and answers Tara's insistent call.

"Hello, Tara," he says, putting her on speaker.

"Who the hell are you and why are you answering Stiles Stilinski's phone?" Tara demands.

Peter glances at Stiles, clearly expecting him to chime in. Stiles can't make his lips move.

"Tell me, Tara," Peter says after the pause has grown way too long, "do you care about Stiles?"

"What kind of question is that?" Tara sounds hostile now. "Who are you? Do you have Stiles? Are you connected to his father's death?"

"I do have Stiles right here," Peter confirms, which is the absolute pure truth. "And there's something he needs you to do. You're at the station, aren't you? You must be a deputy."

"I am," she says. "Are you trying to ransom Stiles?"

"That's such an ugly word," Peter says with a chuckle. "As I said, there's a little something Stiles really, really needs you to do. If you don't, rest assured he will suffer. And it will be your fault."

There's another pause, and then Tara's tense voice comes through the phone again:

"What are your demands?"

"Take a wet tissue," Peter says. "If you don't have one, then get a handkerchief or a paper towel and wet it with any liquid. Go on. Do it."

A rustling sound comes through the connection.

"Now what am I supposed to do with it?"

"Go to the Sheriff's body and use the tissue to wipe the skin behind his right ear. Thoroughly. Make sure you get it all."

"You want me to destroy evidence," Tara spits.

"In a way," Peter concedes. "But what do you value more, deputy Tara, some measly tidbit of evidence or saving Stiles from a lot of pain? Now, I don't care if you get all your colleagues listening in on this call, or trace its location, or keep the tissue afterwards. As long as you do this. Right now. Without dawdling or stalling. Remember, every minute you put this off is an extra minute of unimaginable suffering for Stiles."

"I need proof of life," Tara says.

"You just talked to him," Peter points out, annoyed.

"I don't care. I have to hear him, or you can take a whole pack of tissues and shove them up your ass. Is that clear?"

Peter looks at Stiles, poking at him through the bond at the same time.

"Stiles, darling, my sweet honey pie, will you please say a few words for deputy Tara?"

Stiles swallows around the lump in his throat and makes himself speak.

"Tara," he says. His voice is weak, thin. "Tara, would you please... do as he says..."

"Hold on, kiddo," Tara rushes to say, heated, fierce. "We'll get you out, alright? You'll be fine. You'll be okay."

"That is very touching," Peter interrupts, "but his and, by extension, your time is not limitless, deputy. Do it now."

"I'm doing it." Stiles can make out footsteps. It's not just Tara walking, so she must have put them on speaker as well. "What is it that I'm wiping away, exactly?"

"You'll find out when you do," Peter says. "Hurry, deputy. Stiles needs you to be prompt."

A door opens and closes. There are voices in the background. Then another door.

"I'm doing it," Tara says. "Whose blood is it? If it was the Sheriff's, you wouldn't have needed it removed, so it must belong to somebody else. Is it yours?"

"It's Stiles'," Peter says truthfully, grinning like he can't help but find this fun. "Did you get all of it?"

"Yes. There was only a little bit anyway."

"Send me a picture of the tissue. Now, without delay, or I will decide you have faked it."

Stiles' phone chimes with a new message, and Peter checks it.

"Excellent, deputy," he says. "I hope you haven't managed to swindle me somehow, because if you have, I will know. And you will not be the one who will pay for that."

"Let Stiles go," Tara demands. "You got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"No can do, deputy. Darling Stiles is all mine now," Peter drawls in the sleaziest, most stranger-danger voice imaginable. "But don't you worry. I'll take nice, good, thorough care of him."

He hangs up and tosses the phone on the bed.

"Did you have to be this creepy?" Stiles asks as his phone starts ringing again. He's been battered by so many emotions and revelations that he doesn't know what he feels anymore. Maybe everything. Maybe nothing.

"I'm afraid it's in my nature," Peter shrugs, unrepentant. "Not like it matters in the long run. When you loop, she'll forget all about this conversation with a nefarious Stilesnapper. Now, we should do just that so you can have your father back and we can return to our little time problem. How do you loop, anyway? Is there a condition for that?"

"I don't know." Thinking back, the moments before reappearing in the attic are all fuzzy and blurry. "Maybe it happens when I die? Or close to it? One time a crocodile pulled me underwater, another time I fell from up high and, I think, broke literally everything, and you remember the train."

That seems plausible. Stiles looks around the room but it's glaringly weapon-free. He could bash his head against the corner of the table or something but what if he just knocks himself out instead?

"Tear my throat out," he demands, looking at Peter. "Or break my back, or something."

"What?"

"Come on, you're so much stronger, and I'm not even gonna try to run away or anything. It's a piece of cake for you. You're a supernatural predator, so, uhm, predate?"

"I think the verb is prey," Peter says, then visibly shakes himself. "Stiles, no."

"Why not?" Stiles runs his hands through his hair, agitated. "You've killed a bunch of people, so it's not like I'm asking you to do something outside your moral code. And it'll be so easy."

I'm a fragile little human. Maybe not totally human, I don't fucking know anymore, but still as squishy as ever."

Peter moves away from the bed, as if afraid Stiles will throw himself on Peter's hands and try to get the claws to come out.

"I won't hurt you," he says. "I—I never could, even back when I was insane. I've never touched a hair on your head in violence, and I'm definitely not starting now."

"But we have to loop!" Stiles throws his hands up, baffled and angry. What the hell is the hold-up? "You said it yourself! It's how I get Dad back! If I have to die to do it, that's fine with me! What, are you afraid I'm gonna hold it against you or something? I won't. I'm the one asking you, begging you. Please kill me, Peter, or almost kill me. Do you want me to get on my knees? I will. I have before."

"You asked me to kill you before? Have I ever said yes?!" Somehow, this topic seems to really get under Peter's skin. Stiles can count on the fingers of one hand the times he heard Peter raise his voice like this, and he'd still have some fingers left.

"No, I was asking you for something else, not important now. Peter. Please. If I had claws or strength like yours, I'd just do it myself, but I don't."

"No," Peter says, and his tone is very final. "I'm not hurting you, and you don't have any right to ask it of me. Besides, you've been able to do other things without dying. You stopped time, remember? So—"

"Fine!" Stiles gives up on convincing Peter. Looks like he's gonna have to do the heavy lifting himself. What an inconvenient fucking time for Peter of all people to grow squeamish. "If you're not going to help, then stay here and don't get in my way!"

"And where exactly are you going?" Peter asks as Stiles gets up from the bed and marches to the door.

Stiles doesn't bother answering as he makes his way down the stairs, but he is not, in fact, going far.

His destination is the kitchen where a set of well-cared-for, gleaming knives are waiting in their wooden stand.

Chapter End Notes

- Mon trésor (fr.) — lit. "my treasure"; used as an endearment, such as "my precious/darling/etc."
- Tesoro mio (it.) — lit. "my treasure"; used as an endearment, such as "my precious/darling/etc."
- Stella mia (it.) — my star.

Chapter 7: Let The World Burn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Stiles? Stiles, what are you planning on doing?" Peter is dogging his steps.

Stiles doesn't explain. Peter just can't understand. Dad is everything Stiles has. For so many years, Stiles has lived with this gnawing fear that Dad's job, or drinking, or clogged arteries will take him away from Stiles one day, and now Dad really is dead. But not because of anything Dad did or was.

Stiles cannot live in the world where he has killed Dad. It's not a world that needs to ever exist. It's not a *Stiles* that needs to ever exist.

He pulls a utility knife from the middle of the stand, and Peter makes a sound as if he himself just got stabbed.

"Stiles! Don't! There's no—"

Stiles turns the knife in his hands and plunges it into his stomach.

"...need for you to get hurt," Peter finishes, his voice trailing off.

The knife is very sharp. Stiles has been on point with all the domestic chores lately since it's summer now and he doesn't have school. He doesn't even feel it at first when the blade slides in, and he looks down to check that he didn't miss somehow.

He didn't, actually. The knife's handle is sticking out of him, and fresh blood is quickly soaking the light gray front of the hoodie.

And, oh, it hurts.

He stares at the handle of the knife, whimpering in pain.

It's not the first time he has looked at something exactly like this.

The kitchen swims around him, and he sees his own much smaller hand, grasping feebly at the handle of this very knife. Mom laughs, cackles even.

"Gotcha first, monster," she says. She sounds happy; proud of herself. "Not gonna be able to kill me now, are you?"

"Mom?" Stiles says. His child-voice and teenager-voice are a chorus in his ears. "Mom..."

"Noah doesn't see it," Mom hisses. "You're a monster, a filthy little monster. But I got you now. Got the knife in you. Heal around that! Ha!"

Stiles' fingers close over the handle, twice. He pulls, and it comes out of him with a horrible squelching sound.

Back. He needs to go back to when he was safe.

Back. Back. Back.

A big fat drop of water from the ceiling comes down and lands directly on his nose. Stiles sneezes and hits his already sore head against the floorboards. Ow.

The packbond floods him with concern, anger, hurt and, of all things, grim determination. Stiles pays it no heed as he hurries down the ladder and makes a running leap for his phone, flopping on the bed with enough force for the air to be knocked out of him.

He unlocks the phone with trembling fingers and dials Dad.

One ring. Two. Three. Four.

"Hi, kiddo!" Dad says through the phone. "What's up?"

Stiles is dizzy; disoriented, struck down, rendered helpless, bowled over by violent relief.

"Nothing," he says in a choked voice. "Nothing, I... I was just checking in on you..."

"Is this about the rabbit food you packed me for lunch again?" Dad scoffs. "I ate it, Stiles. Well, half of it. But I did. Just so you know, I'll find out which of my deputies is ratting me out when I don't. This is ridiculous."

"Yeah, yeah, it is," Stiles agrees. He's ready to agree with anything. Dad is wonderfully, wondrously, gloriously alive. Stiles will make sure not to go anywhere near him again, and then Dad will be safe. "Sorry about that."

"Aw, kiddo," Dad softens. "I know you're just worried. But I'll be fine, I promise. Your old man can take care of himself."

"Of course you can," Stiles says. His eyes burn, and his throat feels tight. "Sorry. I... I won't keep you from work then. Glad you're okay."

"See you tomorrow after shift, kiddo," Dad says. "Take care."

He hangs up. Stiles presses his phone to his chest, curls up into a ball and cries. He pushes the relief, and pain, and gratitude through the bond so Peter would know his plan has worked.

When Peter comes in, Stiles is still crying. Peter takes a seat on the edge of the bed, puts a hand on Stiles' shoulder and strokes it softly, and for some reason that just makes Stiles cry harder.

He lies there sobbing for long enough that he half-expects a temporal change to come and plunge them into another ridiculous high-stakes, high-speed emergency. But it doesn't, and when the tears have all left him, so has all of his confusion.

He knows what he needs to do to save the world with perfect, impeccable clarity.

"Stiles?" Peter questions. He must smell the shift in Stiles' mood or pick it up through the packbond; maybe both.

"Hey," Stiles says.

He's suddenly overcome with a wave of tenderness towards Peter; he sits up and kisses him, and Peter responds, even if the spot where their bond is anchored in Stiles' mind pulses with bemusement.

Peter is so amazing. He's smart, and funny, and resourceful, and strong in more ways than one, not to mention so fucking hot that Stiles cannot believe someone like that would want to kiss him even as it's happening.

Peter won't be happy about the way the world has to be saved, but it's gonna be okay. Peter will get over it soon and find someone as great as he is; he doesn't need Stiles mucking around in his life. Stiles only ever ruins everything, like some kind of human-shaped, walking, talking rot. Peter deserves so much better.

"That was insane, and believe me, I know a thing or two about insanity," Peter says, leaning his forehead against Stiles'. "Please don't ever stab yourself in front of me again."

"Done," Stiles says easily. He's not planning on having Peter see it anyway.

Some things one just needs to do alone.

"Right," Peter says, voice tinged with suspicion. "You seem... cheery. You know, for someone who has just been through about half a dozen traumatic experiences, each one less fun than the other."

"Dad is alive again," Stiles shrugs. He is indeed strangely cheery. There's a bit of sadness, but it's the light, noble kind of sadness. For once in his life, Stiles is going to do the right thing, and that seems like a good reason for good cheer. "Also, I've figured out how to save the world."

"You have, huh?" Peter raises his eyebrows. "I have an idea as well. Shall we compare notes?"

"No need." Stiles smiles and gives Peter another quick kiss. It's selfish of him to steal these last few kisses, but Stiles is weak. It's fine, he tells himself. As long as he doesn't show weakness when it's time to save the world. "I've got it all under control. Just wait for me here, alright?"

"Oh, no, you don't." Peter moves too swiftly for Stiles to intercept and blocks the door. It's a rather narrow door, and Stiles has zero chance of getting past Peter. He supposes he could try diving between his legs, but Peter's capable of a whole lot more speed than a crawling Stiles. "Last time you went out this door alone, you stuck a knife in your gut. Do spare a minute to tell me of your plans in advance this time."

Stiles rolls his eyes. What is Peter's problem? It worked, didn't it? They looped.

He frowns. Maybe he could try explaining to Peter. Surely Peter will understand if Stiles lays it out for him. Peter must be fed up with Stiles already or close to it, constantly having to save him, drag him around, listen to him whine; no sane person will put up with that sort of thing for long, and Peter is actually quite sane these days.

"See, it's like this," he says. It should be easy to explain, it's very logical in his head, and yet he has trouble finding the right words and putting them in the right order. "You and I, we actually got to the Nemeton one time. I gave it a drop of my blood but that didn't work. And you said rituals are important in magic. Whoever heard of a ritual that only needs one drop? The Nemeton needs power to sort out the ley lines, doesn't it? It was cut down. It's dying. I can give it a lot of power. All of the power I've got. I don't know how to do a proper ritual but maybe I don't need to because the Nemeton is at least somewhat sapient, you see. I just need—need to sacrifice myself. And then everything will be alright. Everyone will be safe."

Stiles' hands shake when he imagines doing it. Slitting his own throat. He has seen so much blood today but he still hates it. He can close his eyes when he does this. It's not like he can miss his own throat, right?

It won't hurt much, right? Just a little bit of pain, and then Stiles can just, like, go to sleep and never wake up again.

He's scared. He's a fucking coward.

Stiles steels himself. He will do what he has to do to save the world, and that's all there is to it.

"What the fuck?" Peter asks. The packbond is blazing with Peter's horror, burning like acid.

"What do you mean?" Stiles thought he explained it clearly. Did he go on a tangent and not even notice?

"Stiles, do you even fucking hear yourself? You're planning to go off and kill yourself in a forest?"

Stiles presses a finger to Peter's lips, seeing that Peter's about to launch into a tirade. He almost expects Peter to swat his hand away like a fly but that doesn't happen. Peter is just staring at him with werewolf blue eyes, mute and unmoving.

"It's awesome that you don't like the idea, really," Stiles says, trying to push some of this incontestable clarity he feels through the bond. He isn't sure if he succeeds or not. The bond is still so new, and it will never be not new now. "You're so much better than you give yourself credit for, you know. But this is for the best. Just think about it, and you'll see it. I started the apocalypse, and I will end it. It's almost poetic. You like poetry, so you should understand that this works. I'm sorry you're upset right now, but it's going to be fine. I—I hope you'll remember me. You probably won't, not after you find someone as amazing as you to—to kiss and be with, but it's okay. You don't need to come with me or anything; you didn't

like it in the Nemeton clearing last time. I'll be fine on my own. And when I'm done, the world will be as it should be. Do you see?"

Stiles falls silent. He's run out of words for the moment, so he waits for Peter's reaction.

Peter takes Stiles' hand away from his mouth and holds it between both of his own.

"I see," Peter says. Something in his face hardens, and the bond stops leaking emotions. "And I suppose nothing I can say will dissuade you from your chosen course of action?"

This is the reaction Stiles wanted. The understanding, the acceptance of the hard truth. Why does it hurt to hear it now?

Stiles should have read more Shakespeare while he still had the chance. Maybe now he'd have some pithy quote ready about how illogical human beings are.

"Exactly," he confirms.

"In that case," Peter says, pulling Stiles closer by the hand, "may I have one last kiss before you go?"

"Oh, of course. You don't even need to ask."

Peter slides one hand up Stiles' shoulder and over onto his neck, tilting his head slightly so that the kiss would be perfectly angled. Peter's lips taste and feel as electrifying as ever, maybe even more so for it being the last kiss. Stiles can think about this when he dies. It'll be nice.

Out of nowhere, there's a flash of pain in his neck, as if several needles prick him at once, and, before Stiles can question what is going on, everything goes dark.

* * *

Stiles opens his eyes and immediately wishes he hadn't. They are dry and achy, and his head is just about killing him. Is he hungover or something?

He slowly sits up, trying not to move his head; it feels like if he disturbs it too much, it will slide right off his shoulders and shatter into a million pieces like a glass vase. Not that it would be such a bad thing right now—being without a head that hurts this much looks like a more and more appealing prospect by the second.

His clammy hands catch on the leather of the seat. Leather?

He blinks the dry fuzziness out of his eyes and recognizes his surroundings as Peter's car. There's Peter himself in the driver's seat. They are going somewhere... but where?

"Ah, you're up, stella mia," Peter catches Stiles' eye in the rearview mirror and smiles. Stiles squints at Peter's reflection through the dimness of the evening—why does Peter look exhausted, like he hasn't slept for a week straight? Has Stiles been out of it for a week? What the fuck? "Are you feeling better after your nap?"

"Not really?" Stiles doesn't remember how he felt before taking this nap. He doesn't remember getting into the car or lying down to take the nap. "What the hell happened? Did I hit my head on something? It hurts like a motherfucker."

"It does? Give me your hand."

Peter takes one hand off the wheel and reaches back. When their hands touch, black lines start creeping up Peter's palm from point of contact, and all the pain leave Stiles in a blissful, giddy rush; not just the headache but all of it, every single ache and soreness he has collected so far.

"Wow." On an impulse, Stiles pulls Peter's hand closer and kisses his knuckles. He's rewarded with pleased surprise through the bond which makes him preen. "Better than an orgasm."

Peter chuckles.

"What kind of subpar orgasms have you been having, mon bijou?"

"Self-induced ones?" Stiles offers. He can feel the tips of his ears heating up at discussing jerking off plainly like that.

On the other hand, if he and Peter are... something... then this is the sort of thing that's gonna be a big part of it, and Peter doesn't seem to know what embarrassment means. Stiles should probably get used to this, assuming they both live through the apocalypse.

"I'm going to have to see to it that you are introduced to what a devoted partner can do for you," Peter purrs. "I'm looking forward to collecting your feedback on an orgasm you've had after five others in a row, or an orgasm with no stimulation besides a cock hitting your prostate, or one that you have to beg for after being brought right to the edge many times, or, as you've succinctly put it, a self-induced orgasm while I watch and tell you how I'd like you to touch yourself."

"Oh my fucking God," Stiles squeaks in what has to be the least sexy voice possible. He's sure that his flaming face is raising the temperature in the car by a few degrees. "Are those all your plans for me?!"

"Of course not," Peter grins at him in the rearview mirror before returning his attention to the road. "Those are not all of my plans, those are just a fraction."

"When did you even have the time to think this all up?"

"What did you think I was doing whenever you caught me staring at you enigmatically during a research session? Well, back then you probably assumed I was planning to murder you, considering how much you stank of suspicion and glared. But I assure you, I was only thinking of, as the French put it, *la petite mort*."

"You're a horrible, shameless creep," Stiles says with feeling. The open, assured way Peter wants him strangely buoys him, and he wants to respond in kind, even if he has zero experience to draw upon. "Also, now I have very high expectations regarding your dirty talk"

skills. If you don't make me come in my pants at least once just from telling me what you'd like to do to me, I'll be very disappointed. Give you a one-star review and all that."

"Setting me a challenge, sweetheart?" Peter's voice is low and intent, dripping with promise. "You better be prepared for me to rise to the occasion."

Stiles presses his heated cheek to the back of Peter's hand.

"Why else do you think I'm setting it?" He asks.

The desire coming through the bond may alone soon become responsible for Stiles coming in his pants. Stiles closes his eyes and does a few breathing exercises, willing his excited dick to calm down.

"No one ever told me how much of a cock-block saving the world is," he complains. "We should table this before we just have a go at it here in the backseat."

"That is also on the list," Peter tells him, and Stiles laughs. "But I see your point."

"Right," Stiles says, regretfully letting Peter's hand go. It's a bit too distracting right now. "So, saving the world? You were going to tell me your idea? I think...?"

Trying to remember their most recent conversations is like wandering around in fog. Has Peter told him the idea or not?

"Seriously, though, what happened with my head?" Stiles asks, exceedingly worried now. "Peter, I think I might be missing some memories."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"I... I think we bonded, and... Was there a train at some point? Did I get hit by a train, is that it? No, that's not right, I wouldn't just have banged my head, trains are no joke."

He feels around his head but the spot where he hit it against the floorboards of the attic is the only injury there is.

"I... I don't think I banged it at all," he says, confused. "Peter, what happened? I'm freaking out here."

His hand slides further down, and he hisses at the sting of suddenly touching some small scratches on the back of his neck, lined up along his spine.

"What the fuck happened to my neck?"

"As a matter of fact—" Peter begins.

A temporal change hits them with a blast of light, music and voices; the car flies out of a darkened abandoned road and into a thick crowd of people.

Someone—many someones—scream as the car bowls over several bodies; the engine hiccups from the way Peter brakes but the inertia carries them forward until they plow into something sturdy enough to withstand the blow.

Stiles is thrown forward, and the edge of the driver's seat headrest splits his lip; he feels dizzy and shaken, and his headache starts up again, but otherwise he's okay. Peter in the front deflates the airbag with a claw and slices through the seat belt, evidently writing the car off altogether for this loop.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah... Yeah, I'm fine." Stiles prods at his lip with a grimace. "Got some blood on your seat here though."

"Oh, fuck me sideways," Peter says as he twists around in his seat and wipes Stiles' blood off the headrest with his sleeve. "Anywhere else?"

"I don't think so?"

"Great, let's get out then. Cars don't actually explode the minute they hit something in real life like they do in movies, but with our luck we might have just hit a napalm warehouse or something along those lines." Peter tugs his door, then, when it's clear that it's stuck, kicks it clean off the hinges. Stiles' door is more cooperative, and he stumbles outside with a minimum of trouble.

The outside hits him with a wall of noise and light; it was overwhelming while he was sheltered by the car, but now it's completely disorienting. People are yelling and shrieking, and multicolored lights are flickering in a rapid succession, and everything is a sea of movement and chaos. Pain pounds through Stiles' temples, strong enough to make him nauseated.

He powers through it enough to look around himself more closely. The people all seem to be around his age, and they are wearing strange clothes with diagonally cut sleeves and legs; everyone's hair is a glowing mess of neon colors. The other thing that stands out starkly is how impeccable they all look, with Photoshop-smooth skin and not a single wrinkly shirt in sight. Stiles is fairly certain no one in 2011 looks quite like this in real life. These must be people from the future.

He's a bit disappointed there aren't any hoverboards he can see. Maybe future hoverboardists are gathering elsewhere.

"Seems we've crashed some kind of concert," Peter says.

Stiles turns his head, and indeed, the car is lodged in what looks like a stage. Several musicians stare down at them in astonishment.

"Sorry, guys! Carry on!" Stiles calls out. It's a stupid idea all-around, though, because the crowd drowns out his voice and his headache flares up. "Fuck, my head..."

Peter takes his hand, draining the pain, and just like that, Stiles can breathe again.

"Let's get out of here before any future cops appear," Peter says.

"Pfft," Stiles says. "No future jail can hold me. I'll touch it, and it'll disappear."

Peter laughs and looks at him with fondness and awe seeping through the bond. Despite the boasting, though, Stiles is all for getting out of here. If someone does try to arrest him or something, that person will probably vanish too as soon as they brush against his skin. Stiles doesn't know where that would fall on the scale from profoundly disturbing to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and he doesn't want to find out.

The crowd is everywhere, so instead of trying to go through, Peter tugs Stiles towards the stage and just points at it with a smug and expectant look on his face; Stiles rolls his eyes and touches the stage. He should probably be wary of the glee with which Peter is relying on Stiles' weird abilities. There's a million and one bad idea that can be thought up with regards to using them, and Stiles is ready to bet his last peanut butter cup that Peter's already had at least five hundred thousand of those ideas.

At the sight of the stage disappearing into nothingness the panic of the crowd reaches fever pitch, and a few of the braver concert attendees try to grab them. Peter is quick to fend them off, swiping them away with ease, but that only seems to enrage people more.

The crowd surges forward, and Peter more or less tosses Stiles up onto an intact part of the stage before jumping up himself. Stiles lands next to a sleek-looking drum, flails, trying not to touch the stage again and therefore fall through, and his hands catch at the drum. The nothingness spreads across it from his touch, and the drummer screams, falls on his ass and tries to crawl backward, keeping his terrified eyes on Stiles.

It leaves a hollow feeling in Stiles. He doesn't like it when people are afraid of him. He's not a monster. He's not here to hurt or kill anyone.

"Come on!" Peter pulls him to his feet, and they run across what is left of the stage to jump down at the back.

The temporal change has cut off the very back of the stage; it looks like it's been sliced by something impossibly sharp and meticulously precise. Stiles notices an unidentified elongated object by the keyboard on the very edge of the cut and looks away before he can confirm whether or not it is indeed the keyboard player's arm that got brought along without the rest of them.

"Where are we going?" Stiles asks as they run through a patch of bare cold earth with puddles here and there.

"Somewhere without an angry mob after us," Peter suggests, and yeah, Stiles has no objections to this destination. "What the hell is that?"

He stops and looks at something to the side, keeping Stiles behind him. Stiles peeks around Peter's unnecessarily broad shoulders, annoyed by being treated like a fragile damsel (even if

that's, in essence, what he currently is), but sees nothing except a blur. He can't even tell the color of the blur because the only light here is the disco-on-crack kind that got brought over with the future concert.

Stiles has seen a blur just like it before, though.

"It's it," he says, a fearful note in his voice that he hates himself for.

"It's what?"

"The Rawhead-and-Bloody-Bones. I mentioned it a couple loops ago, I think. It must have been stalking me, but I bet it's afraid of you too much to try and get the jump on us."

The sound of the crowd, which was slowly calming down, is rising up again. This time, Stiles is sure, it's not just screams of shock; it's genuine mortal terror.

"Well, sounds like it's decided to bulk up before harassing us again, so we have a golden opportunity to get away while it's busy. Let's go," Peter says and takes a step, tugging Stiles along.

Stiles doesn't move.

"Peter," he pleads.

It takes Peter half a second to figure out what Stiles means.

"No. No way. I agreed to be a bodyguard for you, Stiles, not for every Tom, Dick and Harry," Peter says. "I'm only interested in your safety and mine. Besides, those are future people. Maybe when it eats them, they just return back to their time, none the worse for wear."

"It doesn't sound like that is what's happening," Stiles argues. "Besides, even if I loop, they still might not exist anymore if this Rawhead eats them. It's got some of my flesh incorporated into itself. Who knows what kind of influence over time that gives it?"

"My condolences, if so. I still fail to see how this is my problem." Peter crosses his arms, looking mulish.

"You're the only one who can even hold a candle to it! It's too fast and vicious, they're just going to get slaughtered! And then it'll be at full health when it comes after us! You don't want that, do you?"

"To be perfectly frank with you, the amount of screams tells me it's already feeling rather spry, and I'm not in the best shape right now," Peter snaps.

Stiles frowns.

"Not in the best shape? I remember you busted your ribs but we looped since then... maybe even twice? Didn't they heal right back? Oh fuck, is my blood preventing the looping from erasing your injuries?"

"No, actually, it isn't. My ribs are fine," Peter says, looking like he's sucking on a lemon for some reason. "I'm just... tired."

Stiles takes one of Peter's hands in both of his.

"I'm really sorry to ask this of you when you're tired," he says. "But please. You're their only chance. Please, Peter. I can't leave them to be eaten. *Please*."

Peter growls in frustration.

"Fine! Fine, I'll do it, just switch off the beseeching Bambi eyes. If I die, I'm expecting you to figure out how to rewind that."

With that, Peter runs back towards the crowd. Stiles follows, thoroughly bewildered. Beseeching Bambi eyes? There's nothing special whatsoever about Stiles' eyes or the rest of him. Just how does Peter even see him?

They arrive to a scene that is even more chaotic than the one they just left. The future people are running away into the darkness, screaming, and there are bones scattered all over the edge of the lit area. They are licked clean of any flesh, and there are so many. The Rawhead must not have been wasting any time while Stiles convinced Peter to fight; it's currently eating another person, a blur that is going over the body top to bottom, flipping it every time to keep the level of remaining flesh even. It kind of feels like a washing liquid commercial where one smooth movement of a sponge reveals a pristine section of the white plate underneath the grime, but the plate in this case is bone and the grime is all the rest of the body. It's beyond freaky to see clean skeleton down to about waist level and everything below intact. Stiles does his breathing exercises again because right now is not the time to be throwing up or fainting.

A temporal change comes over but seems to do nothing but set everything back a couple of seconds. What's up with that, Stiles wonders. That only happened once before... Also when the Rawhead was around Stiles.

Stiles is not sure what exactly is going on but he doesn't like it one bit. Is whatever power Stiles has somehow clashing with the bit that the Rawhead absorbed? Is it happening by itself, or is the Rawhead consciously trying to do something with it?

Weirdly, the idea of the Rawhead attempting to hog Stiles' powers makes him more outraged than the idea of it wanting to literally eat him; more than outraged, in fact, as he finds himself shaking with anger. Where the fuck does this thing even get the audacity for something like that? The power is Stiles'. It has always been Stiles'. Always and forever, and no Halloween B-movie reject gets to try and steal it.

No one will take it from him. No one. Never again.

Wait, what?

Stiles shakes his head, shooing away weird thoughts.

A sobbing guitarist is trying to whack the Rawhead with her electric guitar but keeps missing it. Evidently, people of the future are not all superhuman... they must have put more effort into getting rid of pimples rather than into gaining any sort of extra powers. Not that Stiles can blame them. When he was fourteen, he'd have picked pimple cure any day, too.

Peter takes the guitar from the guitarist's shaking hands.

"Here, this is how it's done," he says and swings at the Rawhead.

Tired or not, Peter still packs tremendous power and speed and also knows how to fight—or, at the very least, how to golf. The Rawhead flies right off the body it's eating and into the darkness with the wet sound of uncovered flesh meeting metal and plastic.

Peter looks at the guitar.

"Cracked," he says regretfully. "At least it's not acoustic. Wood would've been in chips already."

The guitarist stares at him and starts cackling madly, looking like she's well over her weirdness limit for the day or even the life. The sound of her unhinged laughter makes goosebumps run across Stiles' skin, and his headache gets stronger.

The Rawhead comes rocketing back, still a blur under flickering lights. Stiles sees Peter ready himself into a stance, moving at human speed, and worries: can Peter do the thing where he matches the Rawhead for a while if he's tired?

There's nothing Stiles can do directly that wouldn't make Peter's job more difficult, but maybe he can lend a hand another way. What is speed if not distance over time? There's Stiles' blood in Peter, beating alongside his heart, obeying Stiles and carrying his power inside it. Stiles can't do much about distance, or at least he'd better not experiment with it when lives are at stake. But he knows without a sliver of a doubt that time is his domain.

He clenches his fists and wills his blood in Peter to help. To slow the world for Peter; to make it Peter's playground where everything else is moving as if in slow motion. Help, he tells his blood, trying to hold on to the same desperate urgency he felt while feeding Peter his blood in the storm. Make him faster. Help. Do it.

Peter's body lights up with gentle, otherworldly iridescence; it's the strongest at the points where blood vessels are the closest to the skin, like his wrists, neck and lips. He looks like a psychedelic dream—and his next movement to intercept the Rawhead, who seems to be heading straight for Stiles, is blurred, leaving a momentary rainbow afterimage.

Surprise, savage glee, and possessive affection pour through the packbond. Stiles blushes and preens at the same time, and then he answers with his own glee, no less savage. The Rawhead won't get away now.

Temporal changes keep coming, and the world keeps hiccuping; the only ones still around who are affected by it are the guitarist whose laughter sounds like a broken record and the

half-eaten corpse on the ground with the same blood leaking out over and over again. Stiles does his best to ignore them and focuses on the fight instead.

It's kind of hard to follow since Stiles hasn't sped himself up. Two blurs are weaving around each other through the clearing, and the only clear images he gets are moments when Peter's blows make the Rawhead stop or slow down. It's like watching a gory slideshow with a helping of LSD on account of the riot of colors and lights: here's the Rawhead pinned to the ground by the guitar neck that has gone clean through both cheeks and Peter grinning down at it with glowing lips; here's the Rawhead stumbling mid-step as the bones of its leg scatter in pieces away from Peter's outstretched claws; here's Peter taking out one of Rawhead's eyes as it tries to bite a chunk out of his arm.

Stiles wishes he could speed himself up, too, but he doesn't dare. He doesn't know if that would rob Peter of the assistance, and also he's wary of spreading himself too thin and blacking out from hunger yet again like an idiot. He has to trust Peter to do the job; and he does, even if he's chafing at not seeing most of what's going on.

It feels endless and yet it's fairly quick, at least to Stiles' baseline human perception. The blurs resolve into one last slide where Peter's got a broken-off piece of the guitar neck deep in the Rawhead's empty eye socket and the Rawhead's bony fingers are digging into Peter's throat, drawing blood.

The Rawhead's arms go slack and slide off to dangle along its sides. The temporal hiccups stop coming. Stiles exhales, relaxing, and wills his blood to no longer speed Peter up.

"Ha!" Peter says, proud of himself, as the last of his iridescence fades. "Gotcha first, monster."

Gotcha first, monster.

Gotcha first, monster.

Gotcha first, monster.

The words echo through Stiles' skull, multiplying and overlapping; his headache reaches a crescendo, and he screams, pressing his palms into his forehead. The back of his neck burns and prickles.

The memories return in a flood, and Stiles can't breathe as he relives bits and pieces of each, dragged and thrown around across Dad's revelations, Peter's ideas, Tara's call, the knife in his gut, the vision from when he was small.

His headache dissipates but he barely notices it; there's a different kind of hurt rocking through him, one that has too many sides and facets to even name. He sobs, curled in on himself, and when Peter's hot hands touch his shoulder, he clings to Peter like a limpet, the way he did underwater.

"You don't seem to be in pain, stella mia," Peter brushes Stiles' hair away from his forehead. "What's wrong? What happened? Was it too much, helping me?"

"No, I..." Stiles pushes the words out in between short, overwhelming jags of tears. "I remember..."

His brain feels much like his joints did when the tornado tried to rip his arms out of their sockets. He remembers that he was the one to start the apocalypse, the one to kill Dad, all of it, and he remembers being two different Stileses after that. One was so crushed by everything that he was single-mindedly focused on sacrificing himself to save the world; and the other one was worried and scared about the world, sure, but... also able to have a deliciously filthy and scandalous conversation about sex with Peter, think about random funny shit like *Back to the Future* references, experiment with his powers a little, and just, generally, live, however weirdly. The dichotomy is like a vise, and he flounders, trying and failing to reconcile both sides of it.

Peter stiffens; his packbond seeps out fear and determination.

"What happened to me?" Stiles begs. Peter has to know, right? "Why did I forget?"

"I happened to you," Peter says.

"What?" Stiles pulls away to peer into Peter's face. He must have heard wrong. "You? But how...?"

Peter lifts a hand and lets his claws out.

"Alpha werewolves have the power to take memories by sliding their claws into someone's neck," he says. "It's a big part of why the supernatural is still hanging on to any sort of secrecy, in fact."

"What?" Stiles repeats, not sure what else to say. "But you're not an alpha. Are you? I saw your wolfy eyes, they were blue."

"I studied how it was done when I was younger," Peter shrugs. "Besides, I used to be an alpha for a short while, if you recall. It's exceedingly hard to do as a beta all the same... but I was very motivated."

"Is that why you said you were tired?" Stiles demands, horrified. "You went into my head and locked away my memories? What the fuck?! Who the hell gave you the right to mess with my head?"

He scrambles backward from Peter, away from those claws, more angry than scared.

"No one," Peter says. He seems calm, if grim. "I don't need anyone to grant me the right to protect my pack, even if it's from themselves."

"You're fucking unbelievable!" Stiles' head is spinning. "You don't get to tell me what to do, you hear me? If I want to sacrifice myself to save the world, that's my fucking business, not yours!"

"By all means, do what you like," Peter shrugs. "Have long walks on the beach, learn to tap-dance, become the Earth's first ambassador to an alien nation, start a make-up blog, win the

state pie-eating contest, discover new laws of physics, dye your hair green, what have you. The only thing you're not allowed to do is kill yourself."

Stiles' blood boils.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" He hisses. "You don't have any authority over me. None! You're a random fucking creep who thinks he can decide whether I live or die!"

Peter's calm erodes as the frustration and anger that Stiles feels through the bond make their way onto his face.

"That's where you're wrong," Peter snaps. "I'm your pack now, and I will not see you die."

"Is that what packs are?" Stiles is snarling by this point. "What the fuck is this, some sort of cult? I don't remember signing any of my decisions over to you! I will cut my fucking throat over the Nemeton to save the world, and you can just fucking deal with it!"

Peter's face shifts as he lets out a roar that vibrates through Stiles' very bones; up until now, Stiles thought the roar Scott managed to call Peter to the school was impressive but this is on a whole different level, a primal, enraged, mindless sound that feels like it shakes the very ground.

The guitarist behind Peter whimpers and curls into a fetal position. Stiles is not feeling the same urge, but the roar has cooled his anger some, startling him.

"Do you have any idea what it was like?" Peter asks. His voice is lined with a wolf's growl, low and wild. "To feel most of the bonds I've had since birth snap as they all died in pain. And then, later, feel the last two disappear when Laura and Derek boarded a plane the hell out of here, leaving the charred piece of meat that was me in the hospital and never looking back. Can you even imagine the utter, suffocating loneliness of losing your whole pack in one night? No, you probably can't, you're not a werewolf. Then imagine spending your life in a sunny, fragrant garden full of birdsong and then, without any warning or reason, getting dumped into the pitch black, soul-sucking, merciless void of deep space. That's what this was like."

Peter scrubs at his face, visibly trying to pull himself together. His claws are still out, and they leave bloody gauges in his cheek. Peter doesn't seem to notice.

"And now there's you. You accepted the bond. It's as strong from your side as it is from mine. So bright, so warm. The things you feel about me, around me. I don't think I've ever had a bond as bright as this. I didn't think I'd ever meet anyone like you at all. And you're determined to take this from me, Stiles, to take yourself from me. I cannot, I will not let it happen."

"But I..." Stiles says weakly. He's shaken by this confession. He knew Peter had gotten burned in the fire and lost his family, but he never wondered if there was anything else. Physical pain and plain old grief seemed like they ought to be more than enough crap for one person to deal with already. "Peter, I have to. Don't you understand? I need to save the world."

The one you live in. I don't want to leave you, I'm—I'm not Laura and Derek, but I have to save you and everyone else."

"No, I don't believe you do," Peter says. "I don't think you have to die to save the world, but you've hoarded so much guilt that wasn't yours to carry around that you can't bear it any longer. You simply want to commit suicide, Stiles, and you're covering it up with excuses that would make it look like a good deed instead of a selfish one. If you don't care what I'll feel if you die, think of your father. Do you really believe he won't drink himself to death after losing you?"

That's a low blow. Stiles is fairly certain Dad will be better off without Stiles weighing him down like a rock tied to his feet, but...

"Maybe it's you who's inventing excuses," Stiles bristles. "Maybe you just don't want to lose the one good bond you've got, and you don't care about me except as a bond attachment. Fucking think, Peter! I have to save the world! I have to! How about Mr. Muppet, huh? Can you imagine what kind of horrors are happening to him in this insane apocalypse? The same ones that are happening to everyone else! You saw dead bodies, ruined buildings, a tornado, a mammoth herd even! The world needs me to die!"

"Do I look like I give a fuck about that?" Peter asks. It's like talking to a fucking wall. "I will let the world burn to save you, Stiles. I already have. And I will do it again and again. It doesn't matter how much taking your memories weakens me or what is happening to the planet or the whole universe."

He leans forward, looking feverish and manic. His eyes are burning their werewolf blue, intense almost to the point of hypnotizing.

"Rage at me. Rant at me. Snap the bond even, if you can figure out how. I will keep taking your wish to die away from you until it kills me, and I will watch the world fracture and die around us with nothing but the satisfaction of a job well done."

Stiles... is at a loss for words.

His mind, dumbstruck as he is by Peter's words, is already churning out ways to get free to sacrifice himself, the simplest of them being using his blood inside Peter to slow him down to snail speed and literally walk away. There are other ways, too. All Stiles has to do is use at least one of them, and he can be off to the Nemeton.

He doesn't want to do it, though. He's so, so weak and selfish. No one has ever been so loyal to him; he could never imagine anyone choosing him over the world for whatever reason. Hell, Dad chooses work over Stiles on daily basis, and Scott chose the happy popular jock life the day he got recognition at lacrosse for his extra strength and speed. Stiles is forever left behind... by everyone except Peter.

He wants so desperately to have that, to keep that. To be with someone who'll go to truly astounding lengths for him and already has. He's torn between knowing his duty and trying to wriggle out of it, however futile that would be.

"But the world..." He mumbles, unable to finish a sentence.

Peter looks ready to shake Stiles until all the thoughts of the world get jiggled loose and come tumbling out of his ears. He doesn't, though. He narrows his eyes instead.

"You know, Stiles, it has just occurred to me that you still owe me. As I recall, you gave me an unlimited IOU to be called in whenever and in whatever manner I wish."

"Oh, fuck," Stiles says. It's very clear where Peter is going with this.

He could still act to prevent Peter from saying anything else. A thought is faster than words, and so far Stiles has only needed thoughts to direct his blood to do as he wished.

But he hesitates. He hems and haws, unwilling to do that to Peter and, maybe, deep down, in an egotistic, greedy little place, actually wanting to live. No matter what he did. No matter what was done to him. Live anyway.

"You'll repay that by never killing yourself," Peter says. "Not directly, via causing yourself harm, and not indirectly, via staying in a dangerous situation or not fighting back against an enemy. Not in any way, shape or form, active or passive, will you ever try to commit suicide. It's no longer an option. You gave me your word, Stiles. Are you going to break it?"

It's not a binding contract or anything. But Stiles has never once broken his word, and he's loath to start now, even with the world hanging in balance.

Or, maybe, he just wants to live, with Peter by his side, and claiming that he has to keep his word is just grasping for an excuse to do just that.

"And have I mentioned that I actually do have an idea about how to stop the apocalypse?" Peter adds, raising an eyebrow at Stiles' hesitation. "One that is backed by the magic theory and common sense, as opposed to depression and self-hatred."

Stiles grimaces. For all that Peter has created himself a reputation of being secretive and duplicitous, he can wield frankness like a lethal weapon.

"On one condition," he says.

"I don't believe any extra conditions were mentioned in our original agreement, but let's hear it," Peter says.

"You will never mess with my head through your claw powers without permission again," Stiles lifts his chin in a challenge. "No matter how warranted you think it is. Never, ever again."

"Deal," Peter says easily.

And just like that, Stiles has agreed to live.

It's a strange realization. He's only had the goal of sacrificing himself for a little while, but now that it's off the table, he finds that he doesn't know what to do with his hands and feet or

where to look.

Peter solves both of these problems for him, reaching out and gathering him into a hug. Stiles can hear Peter's shuddering inhale where Peter's nose is tucked into Stiles' neck and can feel him tremble minutely.

Stiles hates himself a little bit for making Peter feel like that.

Peter bites him lightly on the shoulder.

"Hey!" Stiles protests. It didn't hurt but it's the principle of the thing. "What was that for?"

"You might not realize it but you can't control your end of the bond yet, and everything you feel just spills right out," Peter informs him. "Stop hating yourself. I'd like to get a chance to indulge in your scent without you harshing my buzz."

"You're so fucking bossy," Stiles grumbles. What's so awesome about his scent anyway? He probably smells the same as any teenage boy. "I'll be getting on that bond thing as soon as we save the world."

Making a plan for after saving the world, however small, gives him a guilty, giddy thrill. Does he really get to do this? Can he do this? Peter wasn't lying when he said he had another idea, was he?

He opens his mouth to ask what the idea is, exactly, when a temporal change comes on, and they fall through the air, dazzling sunlight blinding Stiles.

Well, now fucking what?

They don't have very long to fall, and Peter cushions Stiles' landing, but it's still kind of rough, not so much because of the impact as because of the snow. It's powdery, and feather-soft, and burning cold; they hit the surface of it and fall down, down, down until what's underneath them is compacted enough to make them stop. More snow falls on Stiles' back, some of it melting from his body heat and all of it blisteringly, horribly cold.

"What crap is this?" Stiles mutters, fumbling to sit up. In any other situation fidgeting like that on top of Peter would've redirected his thoughts in a very predictable manner, but this is like being surrounded by the coldest shower ever.

"Is this past or future?" Peter wonders, swatting snow aside. "This doesn't feel like California weather."

"No clue. I really hope it's some time period where there's a warm hunting lodge nearby or something. I'm so not dressed for this."

Together, they dig through the snow and pat it down to create a slope they can climb. It's slow, grueling, frustrating work, made more difficult for Stiles by the fact that he has to keep his sleeves over his hands, or he'll make the lower layers disappear and the top ones will fall on them. The snow is too powdery to be good for building anything, and more of it keeps falling on them every time they move. Snow gets under Stiles' shirt, and in his pants, and in

his hair, and on his eyelashes; it vanishes quickly but not quickly enough that he doesn't feel its wet coldness before it does, and whatever melts into water stays. His socked feet are like chunks of ice glued to his ankles.

"And there's nothing to eat, too," Stiles complains as they slowly make their way closer to the surface. "I'm just about ready to see if I can rewind myself back to when I was warm but that might knock me right out. I'm already kind of peckish."

Peter pokes his head out and looks around, one hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

"Well, there's some meat," Peter points to the side.

Stiles climbs a bit further and looks. The Rawhead's body is lying there on top of a rock jutting from the snow, and there's still a bunch of flesh on its top half.

"Hardy har har," Stiles says dryly. "You expect me to fight that poor bird for sustenance? Shame on you."

A vulture lands next to the Rawhead and starts pecking at it.

"Uhm... It's technically eating me and a few other people," Stiles turns away and does breathing exercises until he's certain he's not going to throw up.

"Does this mean there will be a time-immune vulture flying around now?" Peter muses. "I mean, you're the source of immunity and you gave it to me when I drank your blood."

Stiles shakes his head.

"The key word is gave," he says. "I willed my blood to stay with you. I think the Rawhead only had it as long as it did 'cause of it how it uses the flesh it eats to construct some for itself. I washed blood off in the shower at home once or twice, and the plumbing didn't get any immunity from the diluted stuff, I don't think. Once it digests whatever it eats, it'll lose any effects."

"Time immunity, right down the toilet." Peter rubs Stiles' shoulders, sharing his werewolf warmth.

"Just so," Stiles agrees. Besides the Rawhead and a few more rocks protruding from underneath the snow, there's nothing as far as Stiles can see, only a shining expanse of white. His eyes water to look at it. "Do you see anything interesting? Like any kind of shelter from the cold?"

"Nothing." Peter frowns. "Looks like there's some sort of rain that way? But no clouds?"

"Any forest or caves, maybe?" Stiles asks, feeling a bit desperate. Coach Finstock's horror story of losing a testicle to exposure comes to mind. This temporal change probably won't last long enough for that but it definitely feels like something of the sort is already happening.

"Nothing," Peter reiterates. "Tesoro mio, I think we need to try to loop sooner rather than later. Who knows how long we'll be here and if the next one will be any warmer. And I drove long enough that there's probably no homes for you to restore anywhere near."

Stiles glances at Peter, confused.

"I thought you were all set against me killing or almost killing myself? And now you're for it? You'd have to do it yourself, you know. There aren't any knives around."

Peter looks aghast.

"Why am I not surprised that this is where you automatically go?" He asks. It sounds like a rhetorical question, and Stiles flushes, embarrassed for some reason. "Stiles, mon bijou," Peter pulls him closer and kisses the corner of his lips, apologetic through the bond, "like I was saying in your kitchen, I don't think there's any need for you to get hurt. You were born to do this. You did other things without getting hurt, it stands to reason you can loop whenever you like. I'll bet my last cent and Mr. Muppet on top of that that you've only just started to scratch the surface of your power."

"I've only ever looped when I was about to die, though," Stiles points out.

"Well, of course, because you needed to. But just because it's a necessity to perform the Y action after an X event doesn't mean that you can't perform the Y action any other time you like."

Stiles wraps his arms around Peter's neck, feeling bold and nervous at the same time, and kisses him.

"Please keep talking about time magic in terms of algebra to me," he says when they part. "That's the single hottest thing I've ever heard you say, and I'm counting that porn narration thing you did in the car."

Peter laughs and sends playful fondness through the bond.

"I'm going to have to learn some science to keep up with you, aren't I?"

"And I'm going to have to learn French and Italian to understand the things you call me," Stiles retorts. "Fair is fair."

They exchange another kiss, and Stiles has to keep it brief because it's really painfully cold.

"Right," he says, shoving his cold hands underneath Peter's V-neck, not for sexy reasons but because Peter is so very warm. "Looping. I'll try to remember how I do it. I... It's all kind of unclear. Maybe I can, you know, get into the mindset of almost dying without actually, uhm, doing that."

"That would be helpful," Peter says, and Stiles borrows from Peter's own *modus operandi* and nips at the juncture between his shoulder and neck.

It sort of backfires beautifully when Peter moans and his pupils dilate.

"Please don't do that unless we're somewhere I can fuck your brains out immediately," he says, suddenly hoarse.

Stiles blinks, flabbergasted. Yes, he was aware Peter wanted him, but this reaction, so quick and so strong, is just bizarre. He must really, really like being bitten. Maybe it's a werewolf thing.

Stiles files it with other things to think about after they've finally saved the world and closes his eyes to focus on trying to loop just because he wants to.

The memories of the moments just before looping are sketchy and hazy. The most clear ones are the ones from the last time, but they are also the most horrific. Stiles shies away from thinking about Mom sticking a knife in him and chooses the first time he looped today instead, the one with the crocodile.

Sounds like the title of a *Friends* episode. "The One With The Crocodile"!

Stiles mentally kicks himself to stop wondering what the plot of this episode could be and tries to focus on the memories.

So the crocodile jumped at him from the water, bit him and dragged him under... Why do things keep trying to eat Stiles? Even Peter bit him earlier, although that wasn't to try and actually dine on Stiles' flesh. Probably.

Stiles stifles a mental giggle. Focus, Stilinski.

He was underwater, completely helpless, looking up... at least the water wasn't cold. Right now Stiles is so unbelievably cold. Even Peter's warmth isn't helping much.

Can you, Stiles asks his brain with annoyance, just focus for once in your life? He can't remember when he last took Adderall. Yesterday, for sure, but he doesn't remember this morning clearly enough, what with how his power leaking from the box was compelling him. He feels like he needs some now that adrenaline and imminent violent death aren't giving him an extra push to loop. Not that he can find any around here. If they were still in Beacon Hills proper, maybe he could try and restore a pharmacy to raid.

He has to wrench himself away from imagining in detail how they would steal Adderall from a pharmacy. There's going to be no Adderall, no nothing, if he can't concentrate well enough to loop.

They are doomed, aren't they?

"Huh," Peter says.

"What's up?" Stiles is shamefully glad for a break from trying to focus.

"The rain has reached us, and it's frogs."

"Huh?" Stiles opens his eyes, blinking at the searing whiteness, and looks around.

A couple of feet from his face, a living, croaking frog plummets into the snow. Peter sweeps another one to the side, narrowly avoiding it landing on his shoulder.

"This feels like more of a classic apocalypse," Peter comments. "Or those plagues that the Christian god sent on the Egyptians. Not sure. To be honest, I've never been all that into religion."

"They must be from another time, one where this place was or will be higher and had or will have better climate than this travesty." Stiles eyes a few more frogs that Peter has to bat aside, using his hand much like a tennis racket. He really is hungry. If there was a way to cook them, maybe he'd try those. The French eat them, right?

"Still rather ominous. How's your progress with looping? I'm hoping to get out of here before we see a river of blood or something else along those lines."

"Minuscule," Stiles sighs. "I'm gonna get back to that. If you see any rivers of blood, please don't tell me, or I'll lose whatever crumbs of concentration I've got."

"Noted, my sweet fragolina."

Stiles closes his eyes again and puts his hands over his ears to muffle the distraction of frogs croaking and plopping into the snow. This is majorly weird in a new way—just standing here, trying to figure out how to take control of a situation rather than reacting to whatever happens and hoping for the best. In Stiles' experience, that's what life in the supernatural world is: mad scrambling, a bit of pluck and luck, and a lot of praying to whoever might be listening. This feels much too passive to be counted as doing something, but it also has the plus of being much less heart-attack-inducing than his normal tactics. Maybe Peter is on to something and this is indeed how Stiles should go about stuff. Provided that he can, that is.

Right. Underwater, helpless, looking up. What was he thinking about then?

He tries to remember the moment as best he can. The sharp pain and pressure of crocodile jaws closed on his arm, the water enveloping him, the sunlight shining through from the surface. If not for the whole being eaten alive part, it would have been very pretty.

Not that it was as pretty as his power, he thinks and feels taken aback. What does his power look like again?

Unconstrained by anything anymore, memories unfold and float up into his conscious mind. Delicate, dancing, ever-changing gasoline rainbow and fine white mist; serenity and calm, neither hot nor cold, neither here nor there, neither now nor then. The power of time. Stiles' power. The prettiest thing in the entire universe.

He wants to see it again, not just remember it. He wills it to come forth, and a wave of absolute quiet rises and unfolds.

Stiles can no longer feel the coldness of the snow or the warmth of Peter's skin; all sounds have disappeared, and when he opens his eyes, all he sees is white mist tinged with slick rainbow. He thinks he should maybe panic, but, strangely enough, he can't. The biggest

emotion he can master is a little awe, and otherwise he is serene like he has never been in his entire life.

He thinks he could spend an eternity like this, unburdened by anything, cradled in his power. There's no hunger or exhaustion, no pain or confusion, only beauty and peace. A part of him longs to do just that, but a much bigger part remembers what he set out to do in the first place.

Back, he says without words. I need to go back.

The rainbow sways and flickers.

A big fat drop of water from the ceiling comes down and lands directly on his nose. Stiles sneezes and hits his already sore head against the floorboards. Ow.

Chapter End Notes

- Mon bijou (fr.) — my jewel.
- La petite mort (fr.) — literally "little death"; the modern usage is as a euphemism for an orgasm.

Chapter 8: Following The Rainbow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

His bond with Peter pulses with triumph and smugness as he sits up. The attic looks like it always does, dusty and dim; the box is lying next to him again, and he pushes it away with one finger, disgusted. That vile thing. He should burn it when they're done with this saving the world business or something.

Another thing on the floor attracts his attention. Stiles picks it up and feels momentarily confused until he recognizes the piece of the Nemeton that got wedged in his throat one loop, after which he grows a lot more permanently confused. Seriously, why didn't it get restored to the Nemeton, where it belongs?

It's still wet with his blood, and the only conclusion Stiles can come to is that the Nemeton rejected this piece, not wanting any more of Stiles' blood. It seems reasonable, seeing as that one drop made the stump explode. Stiles should still give this back, though, that would only be the decent thing to do.

He swings by his bedroom to change out of his blood-soaked sleeping clothes (the amount of clothing he has that is not blood-stained and ripped has dwindled, he notes; he might need to find some money somewhere to buy more stuff later) and washes his blood off the piece of Nemeton, with soap and everything. Being alone makes him uneasy, makes doubts and self-loathing creep into his head, and Stiles is looking forward to Peter's arrival. There's nothing more distracting from thinking that maybe he really should kill himself after all than Peter.

With the cleaned piece of the Nemeton in his pocket, Stiles takes some Adderall, picks up the completely restored loaf of bread from the kitchen and goes out to the front gate to eat and wait for Peter. The bread is bland and dry, even with the rain wetting it, and Stiles has to work to get it down, especially as with every second passing with nothing to do but wait his stomach churns with anxiety more and more.

Old Mrs. Henderson and her poodle go by. Stiles waves at them, stunned by the normality of the street around him. All of this ordinary life, soon to be disrupted by Stiles' magic gone rogue; none of it seems real, too ordered, and nice, and mundane to be true. Thinking about it makes the bread in his stomach feel like rocks.

Peter rolls up to the gate by the time Stiles has force-fed himself about two thirds of the loaf. The passenger door swings open, and Stiles is greeted by Peter's smarmiest grin that really shouldn't be as charming as it is.

"Well, hello there, pretty young man. Would you be amenable to hopping into my car?" Peter pats the passenger seat.

"I dunno," Stiles deadpans, "is there gonna be any funny business, mister?"

"Oh, most certainly," Peter assures him. "Lots of funny business, hijinks and shenanigans all around. Devilry and naughtiness are also guaranteed."

"You had me at "most certainly"," Stiles says, slipping into the car.

The passenger seat is as sinfully comfortable as the back seat; Stiles can't help but relax into the soft leather, even if it feels a little traitorous towards Roscoe. Stiles clips the seat belt into place and gives the Starbucks cup in the cup holder an interested look. Can he mooch a sip or two off Peter, perhaps? It's not like Peter's gonna mind a trace of Stiles' spit, considering how much Peter seems to enjoy having his tongue in Stiles' mouth.

"You stopped for coffee on the way here?"

"Yes, for you."

"For me?"

"You mainline the stuff all day long." Peter starts the car. "I don't actually like the taste, and the small amount of caffeine in a normal cup does nothing for my kind. Have at it."

Somehow, getting a coffee just because Peter thought Stiles would like it weirds him out more than any graphic descriptions of kinky sex with himself in a starring role. Still, coffee shouldn't go to waste, so Stiles takes it and drains half the cup at once. It tastes like latte, with some extra vanilla and caramel syrup in it; it's strong, and sweet, and hot, and simply heavenly.

"Thanks," he says, feeling tentatively human again. "So. Saving the world. We've got some uninterrupted time, come on, spill."

"It's very simple, really," Peter says, weaving seamlessly into the traffic. "The apocalypse was triggered when some of your power got spilled into the ley lines, which is an assumption on our part but it does seem like the most logical conclusion."

"With you so far," Stiles says and takes another sip of coffee in a futile attempt to wash the sour taste of guilt from his mouth.

"So what you need to do to stop the apocalypse from happening is take the power back."

Stiles waits for Peter to continue, but that seems to be it.

"Take it back?" He repeats, confused. "But that..."

"But what?"

"That'd just make me stronger," Stiles points out.

"Why is that a problem?"

Stiles doesn't know quite how to explain it but surely, Peter's got it all wrong. Hasn't he? Stiles' mind races.

"So what you're saying is that after saving the world I will emerge with more power than I had when I started. Completely unscathed. Better off, in fact."

"Don't forget, you'll also get the guy in the end," Peter snickers. "Yes, this is what I'm saying. I can sense you're stumped, sweetheart, but I don't get why. Do you see some fault in my reasoning?"

"But... this is not how this is supposed to work," Stiles argues. "It doesn't seem right to save the world and, and—"

"And not have to sacrifice something you love, or go out in a blaze of glory, or get punished for your perceived misdeeds, or all of the above?" Peter finishes. A bit of understanding seeps through the bond, and no other emotion. Stiles wonders if this is because Peter is clamping his end of the bond shut. "I suppose you never in a million loops would have thought of doing this yourself, would you? Yes, Stiles. Saving the world requires you to take instead of give. You need to pack your martyr tendencies in and be utterly, brazenly selfish, and if you don't, you'll doom the world instead of saving it."

Stiles drinks his coffee as he goes over Peter's conclusions several times, trying to find a weak spot. There are none that he can see, though. It's all so very straightforward, at least in principle. Magic spills out, magic gets scooped back in. He is riding off to save the world in a luxury car with a fresh coffee in his hand, and when he gets there, he will proceed to make himself more powerful.

This is so... anticlimactic. So wrong. Every comic book Stiles read growing up taught him that saving the world was hard and costly. On the other hand, has any comic book writer ever been tasked with actually doing something like this? Maybe it's Stiles who's just trying to, like Peter said, find an excuse to kill himself as a punishment for all that he has done instead of actually helping people.

"Do you know how I should even go about taking it back?" He asks, opting not to share his discomfort and uncertainty about the whole thing. Peter can feel it through the packbond anyway.

"There are at least three druidic rituals for getting power out of a Nemeton in the books I have with me in the car," Peter says. "I'm not quite sure about the details, since, I imagine, you'll only want to take what's yours and your situation has definitely not been covered in any literature I've ever seen or heard of. We might need to cobble our own ritual together, which shouldn't be too onerous a task with that handy bit of software from the Olsen coven. And it might also be a matter of timing, pun unintentional. A time wave coming on is likely a sign of your power cresting inside the Nemeton and rushing out through ley lines."

That doesn't sound too hard. Research is Stiles' jam, and Peter is a research partner of his dreams; with the resources on hand and with the Nemeton, hopefully, cooperating even if their ritual won't be quite the right one, they should get this done, theoretically.

"Let's get started then," Stiles says. He still doesn't fully believe this is the way to go; however, without the initial obstinate urge to sacrifice himself, he can admit, if only in the privacy of his own mind, that spilling gallons of blood on the Nemeton after one drop has

proven to be disastrous may not actually be the smartest thing to do. They might as well try it Peter's way.

He twists and contorts to fish the duffel with books from the floor by the back seat and dabs some blood on the books Peter points out and the laptop to make sure they don't just disappear in a temporal change.

It's time to do what Stiles does best: nerd the hell out.

* * *

Stiles is in the middle of constructing a rune phrase for the ritual and bickering with Peter about whether Jera or Eihwaz is more suitable for their needs when the first temporal change of this loop comes on. He presses the books and the laptop to his chest with one arm, fearful of dropping them into water, lava or whatever other insanity is waiting for them, as his other hand goes into his pocket to hold on to the piece of the Nemeton; but all that happens is that the car disappears and they land on their bums in the middle of a grassy field.

It was a toss-up whether or not to secure the car with blood, honestly, and in the end they opted not to because there are too many scenarios where it could end up being a death trap; even though the change hasn't turned out as bad as that, Stiles can't bring himself to regret that particular decision.

"We made good time," Peter remarks, getting up. "There's not that much further to go until we enter the Preserve."

He lifts Stiles to his feet as well and takes the books so Stiles can continue working on the laptop as they walk. There isn't anything carnivorous around, or any extreme weather phenomena, or anything dangerous at all. The creepiest thing in this field is the sound: the clear, high, melodious singing of a church choir that is nowhere to be seen.

"This one's lucky," Stiles says, opening the laptop again. "Okay, let's not waste it. I'm relying on you to lead us in the right direction and keep me from tripping over my own feet."

"What's in it for me?" Peter asks. Impish mischief is coming through the bond.

Stiles rolls his eyes and kisses Peter, taking him by surprise. He recovers promptly, though, and responds with enthusiasm; Stiles makes a desperate, needy sound into the kiss as Peter gently sucks on his tongue, and most of Stiles' blood pools down south when he runs the tip of his tongue across the roof of Peter's mouth and feels Peter half-growl, half-moan rather than hears it.

"Whoa," Stiles says, pulling away. He's breathing heavily, and Peter's hands have slipped underneath the waistband of Stiles' pants to cup his ass. "That escalated quickly."

Peter laughs and kisses Stiles' cheek.

"I supposed I got the payment I've been angling for," he nips lightly at Stiles' bottom lip. His teeth feel amazing against Stiles' sensitive, slightly sore flesh.

"Good," Stiles says, trying to get his breathing under control. He doesn't deserve this, any of this, the affection and desire, but he has it.

He used to think the world was unfair sometimes, but he's always applied it to bad things in his life. It was unfair to lose Mom to illness, it was unfair to have to do every chore by himself and alone, it was unfair not to have many friends, it was unfair to be diagnosed with ADHD. It leaves him feeling wrong-footed to realize that good things can happen to him, too, and still be unfair.

Peter would probably say that fairness is a made-up thing and he shouldn't bother with it either way. Stiles doesn't know if he can do that, to be honest.

"Hold up your end of the bargain, then," he says, a little snippier than he'd like, and turns his attention to the laptop.

* * *

A few temporal changes come and go, swapping day for night and then early morning. Unseen birds chirp, a family of bears slink by, suitably intimidated by Peter growling at them, and a huge cloud of mosquitoes bug them one time; Peter takes an extra affront to the latter trying to guzzle down Stiles' blood but a bunch of them still get away with it, and Stiles itches in many places which does nothing to improve his mood.

Despite the minor distractions, the Adderall and coffee help him concentrate enough to have a rough ritual hammered out pretty soon. He's not a druid, and Peter, his knowledge notwithstanding, isn't either; Stiles is not sure he can do anything else for the moment.

"I suppose we'll just have to test this now," he says, closing the laptop. "Where are we, geographically speaking?"

"In the Preserve or thereabouts?" Peter offers, shrugging. "Hard to tell."

"Alright, let me restore a bit and we'll check."

He hands the laptop over to Peter and crouches down to press his hands to the ground. As the restoration spreads from his touch, one kind of grass changes into another which is not all that helpful. They must have gotten off the road, even if they've been moving in the correct general direction.

He keeps at it for a while until he hits the edge of the road. He thinks he recognizes it, even, as the road he took to the Preserve and back many times, although he did only see it from the height of the Roscoe driver's seat, so he might be mistaken.

"Shouldn't there be some sign or something?" He sighs as he restores another bit.

The bottom of a car materializes out of nowhere; Stiles yelps and flinches away, flailing, as it clunks and settles. Peter leaps over to stand between Stiles and the car bottom, but his shoulders relax almost immediately.

"Doesn't seem to be dangerous," he says. "Although the driver would probably disagree with me."

"Why?" Stiles asks, wary.

"Well, there are only their feet left in there. Nice running shoes, high quality."

"What the fuck?"

Stiles scrambles to stand up and looks for himself, and yes, the driver starts at the soles of their feet and ends at the ankle level. Blood is slowly trickling from the top, no longer pumped by a heart but sloshed around in its vessels by the sudden stop.

"Oh God," Stiles says weakly and presses a hand to his mouth in an effort to hold back all the bread that is trying to get out the way it came in.

"I take it this never happened before?" Peter is unperturbed by the grisly sight.

"No! I restored a bunch of road and houses, and there weren't any bits of people lying around! I'd notice!"

"Wonder what changed," Peter muses. "Well, we have the road and the direction. We should keep going."

"Does it really not bother you even a little bit?" Stiles asks, unable to help himself.
"Someone's suffering?"

"The suffering is not yours or mine, stella mia. It's gruesome, yes, but I won't lose any sleep over it." Peter watches him intently. "I suppose you'll condemn me for it."

"No, I..." Stiles swallows some bile. It leaves a burning residue at the back of his throat. "I wish I could just not feel the way I do, actually. Not be the way I am."

"You're perfect exactly the way you are," Peter says firmly, tugging Stiles into a hug. It's a bit awkward with the books and the laptop in the way but still nice; Stiles appreciates that touching seems to be Peter's go-to answer to most of life's problems. By now, craving a hug for weeks at a time and not getting one seems like it happened to some other Stiles in a different life.

Stiles bends his head to press his face against the open V of Peter's shirt and inhales that familiar Peter smell. It makes him less unhappy, running through him almost like a drug.

"Don't think about how much it hurts you to see those unfortunate bits." Peter rubs his cheek against Stiles' hair, scenting him. It's kind of weird as a concept, Stiles is not gonna lie, but it's also exciting that Peter wants their scents to mingle. "Think about how you'll make it better."

"You're right." Stiles breaks off the hug regretfully. He doesn't want to go into the forest and conduct a makeshift ritual over a sentient tree that might be pissed at him. He wants to cuddle with Peter and not think about anything.

He's so tired of having to go on, and on, and on.

"I want to make another plan for after," he says on an impulse.

"Oh? What kind?"

"I want to watch a movie with you or something. At your place, where no one nosy can see us. And I want to cuddle the whole time. Like, I want to latch onto you and not let go for however long the movie is."

Peter smiles at him. It's a small, sweet smile, nothing like his usual leering smirks or roguish grins.

"I'll hold you as long as you like, cuore mio," he says. "Movie or no movie."

For some reason, this makes Stiles blush as violently as when Peter went on that dirty talk tangent.

"Well, good," he says rather inanely. Peter kisses his heated cheek with a pleased hum. "Now that that's settled, come on. The ritual's not going to conduct itself."

Even though there's no practical need for that, Stiles slips his hand into Peter's when they start walking.

As promised, Peter holds on and doesn't let go.

* * *

A new temporal change comes long after Stiles starts worrying about its absence and right in the middle of him quietly spiraling into panic about it, imagining all sorts of scenarios including the Nemeton fully dying, all the Nemeta on Earth dying, and so on. Some trees shoot up from the ground around them in odd patches; they look fully grown but they don't make a forest, just clusters here and there.

"I'm really hoping this is the past or the future," Peter says, pointing up. "Because I have this sinking feeling that those things might be all *now*."

The evening sky is split by several large, jagged rifts; inside those, there's darkness interspersed with distant specks of stars. Stiles stares at them as his blood turns into ice in his veins.

"No," he pleads. "No, no, no!"

"Sweetheart? What is going on?"

"I'm not sure, I—I hope they are not—oh, fuck..."

The earth shakes and rumbles under their feet, and a steadily accelerating wind ruffles Stiles' hair. He has never been so profoundly, completely horrified in his life. This, the air escaping into the deep space, scares him so much that he bypasses screaming and losing his goddamn

mind and comes out somewhat calm on the other side. This is it. If he screws up, the world is done for. To be honest, this sort of thing is exactly what he expected from a task as lofty as saving the world.

He thinks, as quickly as his brain is capable of, while Peter hooks one arm around a big tree and another around Stiles, evidently still intent on holding on for as long as he possibly can.

Option one: He can loop, but that would put Peter and him back into their starting positions, and there's no guarantee that the temporal changes of the next loop will be any better than this one. This might not even be a temporal change, as it were, but a sign of some sort of fatigue in space-time after being broken apart and tossed around repeatedly for so long, which means it'll likely happen again immediately.

Option two: He can try to grab his wayward power directly from the ley lines which should be thick and plentiful here, but that might not stop what is already happening or even work at all.

Option three: He can stop time and search for the Nemeton for as long as he can keep the time still, then conduct the ritual and loop one last time.

A small tree comes hurtling past, torn right out of the ground. Stiles isn't sure, but he thinks the rifts might have gotten bigger already.

All of his options suck, so he chooses the one that seems to have the best chance at success. They are so close, after all.

He calls, and his power unfolds once again, graceful as a bird's wings and ubiquitous as gas. Stop, he tells it. Stop it all.

After what feels like forever and no time at all, he can see the world again. It's stitched through with the gasoline rainbow of his power and so still and quiet. Soil, grass, twigs and entire trees are stuck in the air; the wind has disappeared completely, and when Stiles looks up, he can see no movement. The clouds are motionless, the rifts are not widening, and a stray bird is frozen mid-flap.

"How long is this going to give us?" Peter asks.

Stiles adores how smart Peter is. There's no need to talk him through the options or remind him that Stiles can't stop time for long; he has already thought it all through on his own.

"Most of a loaf of bread and a cup of sugary coffee," Stiles lists. "And I already spent some energy restoring things. In other words, we better hope the Nemeton is right around the corner."

Peter nods.

"How did you find it last time?"

"I talked to it, and it showed us the way to its clearing. I don't know if it can hear us now or if it's been stopped like everything else."

"Can you try unstopping parts of the place, just keep those things in the sky contained?"

"I'm not sure, but even if we find it, it might refuse to open the way. I don't think it liked it last time when I showed up. That drop of my blood, it, uhm, made the Nemeton explode." Stiles takes the piece of the Nemeton out of his pocket to show Peter. "This bit stayed in my hand even though the looping should've made it part of the stump again. I think the Nemeton's aware of the loops on some level."

"Fuck," Peter says with feeling. "Maybe I can track it by scent? Give me this piece, I'll try."

Stiles isn't sure there's much useful scent left there after he washed it with soap, but he hands it over anyway and busies himself by studying the way his magical power weaves itself through the fabric of the world.

Once again, he seems to be the only one who can see it. The little strings of ethereal rainbow light are intangible but when he purposely brushes a finger against one, he can hear the chime of a bell as if his power is responding to the touch the only way it knows how.

He looks at them from every angle; they shimmer the same, no matter which side he chooses. Why are they shaped like pieces of string? Is it somehow connected to the string theory? But they are obviously way, way, *way* too big to be quantum.

Ugh. Magic.

Can he really try to unstop just parts of reality without unraveling the rest? It sounds like a costly experiment if it goes awry. Stiles walks around, absentmindedly scratching at his mosquito bites and pushing aside the stopped bits of earth and vegetation when they are on the same level as his face, and notices a bit of a break in the pattern. His power is distributed evenly throughout, the rainbow strings equidistant from each other, but closer to the ground it looks like they are crowding each other some.

He crouches down, pulls his sleeves over his hands and digs a little hole. The revealed rainbow strings are almost lying on top of each other at an angle, as if something is pushing at them from beneath. What can be pushing at his magic...?

Other magic, of course. This must be a ley line.

Stiles plops on his belly and peers at his piled up power that, concentrated like this, looks like an ethereal acid spill. The way the strings lean seems to be generally pointed into one direction. The question is, is the direction away from the Nemeton or towards it?

A temporal change must be power rushing away from it, across the land. The latest change just happened, so the power must be coming back now for another go.

It's as good reasoning as any, and Stiles is starting to feel not hungry, exactly, but definitely not like he's got a ton of bread in his stomach.

"That way!" He calls out, pointing to where the strings of his power are leaning.

"That way!" Peter says at the same time, pointing there as well. He has shifted his face, and it looks like he's scratched some grooves into the piece of the Nemeton and bitten it a couple of times. "How do you know?"

"I'm following the rainbow," Stiles says very seriously.

As they start in the direction they both found, Peter positively drenches him in exasperation and admiration through the bond. Stiles links their fingers and lets himself smile enigmatically just for a little while before he explains.

* * *

Their respective trails lead them to a bit of land that seems as unremarkable as any other. Peter's nose fails him at this point; all he can say is that the stupid stubborn stump is definitely somewhere very close by. Stiles has to dig seven more holes all over the place to properly triangulate the exact location; in a place this thick with ley lines coming in from all directions it's hard to discern where the rainbow strings are leaning.

Seven might truly be the magic number, because Stiles finally finds it—by walking right into it and stubbing his toe.

"Do you have to be invisible?" He asks, exasperated.

"Is it here, where you're standing?" Peter wanders over and hugs Stiles from behind, putting his chin on Stiles' shoulder. It feels absolutely awesome and also extremely distracting. "How do we make it visible?"

"It can probably do that by itself. Maybe I just need to unstop it."

"Have you figured out how to do that?"

"Nope." Stiles leans down a bit, reaching towards the invisible stump with his hand. "Let's start with poking it."

He's not surprised when his touch works. Isn't this how he undoes the temporal changes that he himself is responsible for? It stands to reason that all he needs to unstop something is to put a bare hand on it.

When the Nemeton makes itself visible, it looks the same as last time: blinking in and out of existence bit by bit, partially now and partially elsewhere. The only notable difference is that Stiles is certain it's glaring at him. He doesn't know how it does that in absence of eyes but that is one hundred per cent what is happening.

"No blood this time, I promise," Stiles tells it. "Peter and I have come up with a little ritual. It should work to make it so I can take back my power and it won't be fucking you up anymore. Well, that's the theory."

The glaring doesn't lessen any.

"I brought that piece of you back, clean as a whistle." Stiles holds up his hand and Peter gives him the piece in a gesture so smooth, it's as if they've been rehearsing this. Stiles puts it on the stump and watches its slow absorption into the main mass. It's a bit freaky but also undeniably cool. "Come on, work with me here. I'm hoping you'll help channel it from your side. I'm not planning to take any of your power, just my own stuff."

The Nemeton doesn't feel like it likes Stiles any better but at least it's slightly less hostile now with its missing piece returned to the proper place. This is probably the best Stiles is going to get; and honestly, he can't begrudge the stump its mistrust. If someone made him explode, he'd be wary of their proclaimed good intentions, too.

The fact that the Nemeton is likely at the end of its tether by now even without Stiles' blood in the mix must help with motivating the Nemeton towards teamwork as well.

"Alright," Stiles says, grimacing at a sudden sharp pang of hunger. "No time like the present, right? Peter, last time you didn't like it here. You said it was hard to breathe, probably because of too much time magic floating around. You should wait a little ways away."

Before Peter has a chance to agree or object, a massive root, thicker than Stiles' torso and long enough to possibly stretch across a football field, erupts from the ground. Leaving chunks of soil to hover all over the place, it bends in a loose circle, trapping Stiles and Peter both with the stump.

"Looks like I'll be attending this party, sweetheart," Peter says after a pause.

It's Stiles' turn to glare at the Nemeton.

"You're a fucking asshole," he tells it. "Peter's got nothing to do with this! I'm trying, okay, I'm actually, sincerely trying my best! Let him go!"

The root doesn't move.

"I feel like I'm missing something here," Peter says. "Why, exactly, is the Nemeton so insistent on the pleasure of my company again?"

"Because that time I gave it a drop of my blood and made it explode, it killed you too," Stiles is fighting an urge to kick the Nemeton. He'd only stub a toe again, but maybe it'll be worth it anyway. Were Stiles contemplating pulling a switcheroo and sacrificing himself anyway with Peter outside the blast radius (not that the idea has ever crossed his mind. Not even a little bit. Not at all. Perish the thought), those plans would have been decisively nixed now. "So now you're a hostage to ensure my good behavior. Your legendary uber tree is a fucking street thug and a garden variety douchenozzle. You hear me, you spiteful bundle of kindling? You suck!"

The Nemeton glares harder. Stiles isn't sure it understands the insults themselves but it's probably able to glean the sentiment behind them.

"Stella mia, I have to point out that it may take a while to convince the Nemeton to change its mind—and an even longer while with the unique brand of diplomacy you have chosen." Peter

drops a soothing kiss behind Stiles' ear. "I don't find it hard to breathe anyway, so I might as well stay and witness an event that is unique even by the supernatural standards."

"You don't?" Stiles frets. "It was really uncomfortable for you last time."

"Did I have your blood protecting me then?"

"No."

"Well, there you go. Just do the ritual, and it'll be fine." Peter sounds so annoyingly calm. Doesn't he get that his life is at stake?

"What if I fuck it up somehow?" Stiles bites his lip.

"I have faith in you," Peter smiles into the side of Stiles' neck.

"That's cool, but personally, I don't have any." Stiles has never had less faith in anything than he does in himself right now. The sheer weight of the responsibility is like a hydraulic press.

"Then it's fortunate, my sweet fragolina, that I have enough for two."

Deep inside Stiles' mind, floodgates open; a tsunami of confidence tumbles out of the bond, so strong that Stiles gasps and his vision goes out of focus for a moment. There's a hint of arrogance and calculation to it, and Stiles can sense smaller streams of affection and possessiveness. They are all alien emotions, not Stiles' own—but he takes the confidence anyway and lets it drown his own uncertainty and self-doubt.

Calm and assured, Stiles reaches for a clump of wet soil hovering nearby and starts shaping the first rune. He can do it. He will do it, and he will succeed.

After some deliberation, they picked the Elder Futhark alphabet for the ritual, both for its pagan roots and its simplicity, perfect for a rank beginner like Stiles. He places the dirt on top of the Nemeton and makes sure to pinch the corners properly to form a nice, sharp Sowilo. This one is for clarity of vision and easy discernment between his power and all the other magic running through the ley lines. Next is Dagaz, for the clean separation of energies; this rune is a bit tricky to make out of dirt but, thankfully, they don't need to be overly precise. The third one is Fehu, for seizing control over his power, and the last one is Teiwaz, the one for taking back what is rightfully his. He lays them out in a rough arch bowing upwards, then adds another one, bowing downwards, underneath, putting the runes in the inverted order: Teiwaz, Fehu, Dagaz, Sowilo. This way, they form an unbroken circle of his intention. Funnily enough, the lower half of the circle, ↑𐌹𐌸𐌰, kind of looks like the word "TIME" if he squints really hard—something which Peter found both hilarious and auspicious since they didn't plan on it.

With that done, Stiles presses his right palm into the middle of his makeshift dirt circle and speaks the ritual phrase cobbled together from the meaning of the runes:

"I see my power, and separate it from all others, and take control of it, and return it to me, for it is mine."

Peter was not particularly satisfied with this phrasing, wanting to add more stuff like "thus", "shall" and "yare" and criticizing the sentence structure. Stiles told him he was a fanciful knave but agreed to tack on the "for it is mine" bit. Compromise is, after all, the art of reaching an agreement that neither side is entirely happy about.

Clumsily structured or not, the phrase works. Stiles' power rises outwards, prim and neat as it flows through the runes and fills the circle. Stiles can feel the Nemeton responding and—

letting—

Stiles—

in—

* * *

He returns back to reality all at once, and he's not much pleased with it. The light is too bright, the smells are too strong, and the sensations are too rough; it's all much too material and tangible, and it feels like sandpaper against a sore spot. He doesn't remember traveling through every ley line on Earth and pulling his power out, per se—it doesn't feel like the sort of experience his still very much human brain is meant to contain—but he has the general idea of existing in a different, bodiless, eternal way as he went on and on in the rhythm dictated by the runes he shaped. See, separate, seize, take. Rinse, lather, repeat. It was pleasant, easy, natural work, even if there was a lot of it, and only now the mental exhaustion of it lets itself be known.

He leans back, letting the weight of his head fall on Peter's shoulder. How long has it been in this world, the one where measuring time matters? Has Peter really been standing here, holding him, for whatever period of time it has been? Stiles can't honestly say if it took months or minutes.

"How are you feeling, stella mia?" Peter rubs his cheek against Stiles' exposed throat. The rasp of the slight hint of stubble is seriously overwhelming.

Stiles thinks the question over and shrugs.

"Corporeal," he offers. "I think."

"That's good," Peter chuckles into his skin.

"You're not gonna ask if I did it?"

"I'm pretty certain you did," Peter says, clearly using some of that unwavering confidence he shared with Stiles earlier. "Congratulations, sweetheart." He punctuates his words with a kiss to the side of Stiles' neck. "Did you run into any problems?"

"No," Stiles admits. "It was... simple and nice. Kind of like how you thought it'd be."

He looks into the sky and frowns.

"The rifts are still here, though."

"Well, they exist in the here and now. I suspect you should loop again to get rid of them... and afterwards nothing else will happen. That is... unless when we loop again, we will loop into a moment when your power is still spilled into the ley lines?" Peter huffs. "Time travel gets confusing quickly."

"Nah," Stiles says. "I have power over time, not the other way around. I collected it from... uhm, everywhen. There's no moment in the past, present or future of today anymore where my power is anywhere else besides in me."

Stiles straightens up. His heightened sensitivity is slowly fading, which is awesome because he'd go ten kinds of crazy trying to navigate it over the course of an ordinary day.

He sweeps the dirt runes away from the top of the stump that is now looking as solid as any other one.

"You can let your hostage go now, nasty tree," he tells it.

The Nemeton slowly, pointedly unfurls its root and pushes it back underground.

"Can you believe this attitude?" Stiles asks, glancing at Peter. When he turns his attention back to the Nemeton, he can no longer see or feel it.

Rude.

He sighs. He's no hungrier than he was when he started the ritual, likely due to a huge influx of power, but he feels rather drained by... everything.

"I suppose we have to loop again now," he says. "For the last time."

"That sounds like a sensible idea," Peter agrees.

Stiles turns his head and kisses Peter on the cheek, just because he's allowed. Then he calls up his power and tells it that he wants to go back.

* * *

A big fat drop of water from the ceiling comes down and lands directly on his nose. Stiles sneezes and hits his already sore head against the floorboards. Ow.

He lets himself lie there on the floor for a couple of minutes, staring at the damp ceiling but not really seeing it. He can already tell that it truly worked; the noticeable sting in the back of his head disappears swiftly, and he knows that if he touches that spot now, he'll only find unbroken skin, healed by his full power.

He has saved the world... from himself. Where does he go from here?

Stiles sits up, then heaves himself to his feet. There's an unseen part to every averted apocalypse that is rarely described in comic books: clean-up. If Dad comes home and sees

Stiles' bloody clothes lying around, he'll flip.

Of course, Stiles has the option to loop back in time whenever he likes, so he could avoid parental wrath that way. Haha. To be honest, he never wants to see this fucking attic again.

Maybe he can figure out how to loop back to some other moment, just in case he ever actually needs to. A nice moment, preferably.

He picks up the box, grimacing in disgust, and climbs down the ladder awkwardly with only one hand free. Once in his bedroom, he throws it into a corner for the time being and picks through his closet, removing all the bloodied clothes and getting a fresh change; he changes the bed sheets while he's at it, seeing as they are still bloody from when he threw himself on them to call Dad ASAP. With a load of laundry started, he climbs into the shower and stays there for a long, long time, waiting for the hot water and his green tea body wash to make him feel better.

They don't.

Stepping out of the shower, Stiles notices that one of the tiles has a smear of blood on it and a huge crack running across it. It got chipped at the edges, too. It's pretty hard to miss, and the sight of it is almost enough to make Stiles cry as he imagines the hassle and headache of having to get a new perfectly matching tile and put it in somehow, all before Dad comes home. He is so not in the mood for all that, it's not even funny.

Although... maybe he doesn't have to.

Peter pokes him through the bond, probably puzzled by the utter desperation Stiles felt while staring the tile. Stiles makes a halfhearted effort to send back some reassurance, crouches down, wipes away the blood and sets his fingertips on the tile. It's startlingly easy to call up his power now that he's got the knack of it, and in no time at all the crack on the tile disappears. It looks new—brand new, in fact, brighter than its faded neighbors, but Stiles decides to be happy with the fact it's not broken anymore. This is harder to notice anyway, and if Dad asks, Stiles can always say he was experimenting with cleaning solutions or something.

This problem dealt with, Stiles goes into his bedroom, fully intent on taking a nap that will hopefully last at least until morning. In fact, he wouldn't mind it if he slept through the next week; not just because he's tired but also because he's not looking forward to waking up and dealing with all the shit from today. His phone chimes just as he flops on the bed face-down.

"Fucking what?" He mutters.

The message is from Peter, which makes Stiles' annoyance fade away immediately. It's not even the first one in this new, last loop.

Zombiewolf

I trust you're alright, stella mia?

Stiles puts "stella mia" into an online translator and learns that it means "my star". This is... so much sappier than he expected. Peter hasn't been shy about wanting to fuck Stiles, but this doesn't mean "cute ass", or "sexy", or "the next notch on my bedpost". This is, dare Stiles say, romantic.

Like something one would call somebody they'd literally trade the world for.

Zombiewolf

Please note that I shall keep sending messages until you reply.

Zombiewolf

I find myself in a curious position of not needing to go to your house for any practical reason yet still tempted to do so. How much of a chance is there that your neighbors will tell your father you've had a dashing gentleman caller?

Zombiewolf

That was a funny prospect when you held no affection for me, my sweet fragolina. Now, however, I find myself disinclined to facilitate a rumor such as this, seeing as it would be completely true.

Zombiewolf

I can feel that you are alive and unhurt through the bond. I am positively baffled as to why you are not looking at your phone. You are a teenager, are you not? Shouldn't the thing be glued to your hand?

Zombiewolf

I considered how many texts I had sent in the last ten minutes and came to a horrifying realization that the teenager in this relationship might be me.

Stiles can't help the corners of his lips tugging upwards at that one. He can almost hear Peter's voice saying it.

Zombiewolf

Seeing as you are proceeding to cruelly ignore me, I may as well make myself busy and check if we do, in fact, still need to bother with the Rawhead-and-Bloody-Bones. Unless that vulture managed to rid it of all traces of you, it should still be dead, but in that case it would still be prudent to make sure the mundane authorities don't find it.

Zombiewolf

Stiles?

Zombiewolf

Stiles? Hello?

Zombiewolf

Hello? Is there anybody in there? Just nod if you can hear me. Is there anyone home?

Stiles raises his eyebrows but nods. Nothing happens.

Zombiewolf

That was a quote. There's no need to actually nod, my darling nerdy cupcake.

Stiles huffs. Figures.

Me

im starting to get the feeling u r a bit high maintenance

Me

just an inkling, not sure where it came from :p

Me

im fine, & u?

Zombiewolf

I am, as always, a shining example of perfect health and manly charm.

Me

modesty too

Me

u close to the rawhead?

Zombiewolf

I think so. It's hard to tell exactly how far outside the city I need to go now. I stopped the car a minute ago and am now looking for it via scent.

Me

what does it smell like 2 u?

Zombiewolf

Mostly raw meat. It's not a creature of depth and hidden layers.

They keep texting back and forth about nothing in particular, and something in Stiles that was tense relaxes just a little, especially when Peter texts him his address and invites him to come over when he's had some rest. To be honest, Stiles wondered if Peter was going to come to his senses now that the apocalypse was no longer looming around the corner and drop Stiles like a hot potato.

He's selfishly happy that Peter and Peter's senses don't seem to be on speaking terms.

Eventually, Peter sends him a picture of the Rawhead's body, dead and broken.

Zombiewolf

I'm going to have to deal with it to make sure no one ever finds it. It'll take both hands, my sweet fragolina, so I won't be able to text. You should get some rest in the meantime.

Me

k

Me

u too

Me

ttyl

Stiles ponders whether or not he should send something like "xo" but decides against it. The less he tries to be flirty, the smaller the chance he'll make himself look like an idiot.

He looks at the picture of the Rawhead and thinks that maybe he's not the only one who'd like to see it.

* * *

This time around infiltrating the Velasquez' home is laughably easy. Stiles doesn't need to make up elaborate stories or playact; he just parks a block away, comes up to the house and stops the time inside it.

His power is both plentiful and obedient. It's easy to delineate an area of stopped time instead of going for the vague and energy-consuming "all of it", and it's so fast, reliable and intuitive. Someone with a power like Stiles' could do a whole lot of damage in, quite literally, a single moment, and Stiles is uneasy as he imagines someone else with the same ability stealing, killing and generally wreaking havoc.

On the other hand, maybe all those things would have been better than ending the world, which was what Stiles almost did this afternoon. He doesn't have any moral high ground to stand on; if anything, he's looking up from a deep pit.

He wraps his sleeves over his hands and breaks a window in the back, marveling at the way the shards of glass just stop where they are as soon as he stops applying force to them; then he opens it, climbs in and fixes it the same way he did the bathroom tile. There. All good.

Enrique is in the living room, in the same spot he was last time Stiles saw him, frozen mid-movement. Stiles kneels by the coffee table and touches his hand, and Enrique yelps, flinching away from a stranger who has appeared out of thin air.

"Mom!" Enrique calls, his big dark eyes fixed on Stiles. "Dad!"

"It's alright," Stiles says in the most placating tone he can master and raises his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm not here to hurt you, Enrique. I'm a friend."

Enrique scrambles to his feet and runs over to his parents, tugging at their hands. They don't react, and Enrique whirls around, fury and fear on his face.

"What did you do to them?!"

"I just wanted to make sure we could talk without interruptions, Enrique, that's all. They are fine. After I leave, they'll be the way they always are." Stiles has mucked this up already, hasn't he?

Enrique stares at him, wary but not quite as angry anymore.

"Are you... are you a wizard? Like Harry Potter?"

Stiles can't help but snort at that.

"Not exactly like Harry Potter, no. But, I guess, kind of? It's a secret, though."

"Magic is always secret," Enrique says very seriously. "You said you wanted to talk to me? Why?"

He gasps.

"Am I like you? Am I a wizard too?! Did you come to tell me?"

"Uhm, no, Enrique, I don't think you're like me," Stiles tells him, feeling guilty at how Enrique's face falls. However, he doesn't think Enrique has any time-related powers, or the boy would've most likely used them during his encounter with the Rawhead. "But trust me, you don't want this wonky magic thing anyway. It's more trouble than it's worth."

There's a mulish expression on Enrique's face that makes Stiles suspect they're about to be bogged down in an argument about the worth of magic.

"I'm here about the monster," he says hastily. "The one who attacked you."

Enrique glances at the drawing lying on the table, then back at Stiles.

"What about it?"

"I just wanted to tell you that my friend killed it. You're safe now."

Stiles fishes his phone out of his pocket and shows Enrique the picture. Enrique looks at it with a curiously blank face for a few long seconds, and then his face crumples like he's going to cry. He doesn't, though.

"How... how did your friend kill it?" Enrique whispers.

"My friend is very strong and very fast," Stiles says, putting his phone away. "No monster is a match for him."

He doubts it's appropriate to describe the gory stab-through-the-eye death to an 8-year-old.

"Did it hurt?" Enrique asks.

"Yes?" Stiles says cautiously. Even if the quick stab right into the brain didn't hurt, per se, the preceding fight certainly didn't look like the Rawhead enjoyed it.

"Good," Enrique says.

Stiles boggles at that a bit, although maybe he should have expected the bloodthirsty vindictiveness, considering that the Rawhead killed the family dog.

He wonders if it was the right thing to do to come here. Has he managed to give Enrique some closure like he hoped to, or has he only made things worse?

Knowing Stiles, it's probably the latter.

"Why didn't your friend kill it earlier?" Enrique asks suddenly. "Before it killed Rufus?"

Stiles straightens up, regretting coming here at all. He shouldn't have meddled. Why does he always meddle?

Peter sends some wary curiosity through the bond, presumably, in response to Stiles' sharp spike of self-loathing; Stiles can almost taste the undertones of possessive affection in it. He ignores it for the moment as best he can.

"We dealt with it as soon as we could," he says. "I'm sorry we couldn't be fast enough to save Rufus. But we're not all-powerful."

Enrique starts crying, heartbreakingly quietly, and Stiles doesn't know what kind of tears those are. The only thing he knows for sure is that Enrique probably wants a hug from his mom now either way.

"I'm sorry," he repeats and makes his escape through the same window he used to come in.

Once he's outside, he lets time resume its normal course and then makes his way back to Roscoe. He climbs into the driver's seat and lays his head on the steering wheel, feeling much like a toy whose battery's gone dead.

Could he just stay like this? No one would mind a weird guy parked here day and night, right? Maybe some moss will grow on him. That'd be gross but cool.

The sound of knocking on the car door startles him, and his head slips, connecting with the car horn. It blares loudly, and a familiar voice comes from the direction of the door.

"Do you have to be so jumpy, Bilinski? Look what you did, you've gone and rendered me deaf now."

"Sorry, coach," Stiles mumbles, confused.

What is Finstock even doing here? Stiles is reasonably sure he didn't find him at this block in that first loop.

Finstock is looking at Stiles intently, hands in his pockets. Stiles fidgets.

"Uhm... Can I help you, coach?"

"Nah," Finstock says. "Go home, Bilinski, get some damned sleep. I'm exhausted just from looking at you."

He doesn't say anything else. Stiles is even more confused.

"Alright?" He offers hesitantly.

"That's the spirit," Finstock says, sounding satisfied.

He turns around to leave but then stops and looks over his shoulder.

"You're a good kid, Bilinski. Drive safe."

Stiles watches him go, bewildered. What just happened? What was that all about? Finstock is weird, sure, but that was extra weird.

Does Finstock... remember something from the loops?

Stiles mulls that suspicion over and finds that he doesn't care. Finstock won't use whatever he knows to hurt Stiles, and he clearly doesn't know everything if he thinks Stiles is a good kid. And if Finstock has some kind of power of his own, well, this is Beacon Hills. A town chock-full of creatures, magic and memories.

Stiles can't wait to get the hell out of here.

He starts Roscoe up and drives home. Very safely so.

* * *

Back home, Stiles putters around the house, hoping that habitual chores will help calm the aching anxiety in his gut and shear off some of the thick, greasy apathy that are fighting for dominance. He wipes off some random dust, neatens up the couch cushions, folds up his newly clean clothes and sorts through the vegetables in the fridge, planning out several dinners to avoid anything spoiling. Throughout it all Peter sends him sporadic bursts of playful poking through the bond; Stiles is glad for them but the joy simply doesn't have enough space to take root in him.

Afterwards he picks up the box from his room and proceeds to do what he planned: take it into the back garden and go to town on it with his baseball bat. It tires him out even more, and looking at the pathetic pile of wood chips doesn't do anything for him, not like he hoped. Who cared if the box is destroyed? It won't make him any happier. It won't take away the knowledge about Mom hating him, or him killing Dad, or the horrors of the apocalypse. Maybe this was how Enrique felt upon learning that the Rawhead is dead; no less lost and hurt than before.

He gives up trying to do anything as futile and goes back to his bedroom. With his duvet pulled all the way over his head, Stiles closes his eyes and tries to will himself to sleep but the moment he stops actively thinking about something innocuous, memories from today-that-technically-never-was and the more distant past keep coming up. Mom hurting him, over and over, getting ever more desperate in her attempts to kill him. His power torn from him. Tara trying to soften the blow but still confirming that Dad is dead. The temporal apocalypse ripping the town apart again, and again, and again. The Rawhead trying to eat him alive and almost succeeding. Peter dying in increasingly horrifying ways. Stiles' own carelessness, and stupidity, and selfishness. Were it not for Peter, the world would never have seen this

evening; loop after loop, Stiles couldn't figure out anything useful, much as he prides himself on being smart, and when he was spoon-fed the right answer, he needed to borrow Peter's confidence to pull it off.

Fact is, Stiles is a first-class moron. And also a pathetic, useless, inept garbage fire of a person with the power of an atomic bomb at his fingertips that he's *already* used to the detriment of literally everybody—which he managed to get away with completely.

And, thanks to having promised Peter, Stiles is going to have to live with all that.

His fingers itch to dial Peter for some distraction from his thoughts, but he forbids himself to even put a hand outside his little duvet shelter. Peter needs his rest too. It's been a long, long afternoon for them both, and he doesn't need Stiles whining and demanding to be entertained.

Stiles wishes he felt at least a little proud knowing that he'd averted the apocalypse. Somewhat accomplished, maybe. He'd take even simply being relieved by the fact that it's over. But all he feels right now are heavy, marrow-deep hurt and all-encompassing indifference that stands between him and the world like a pane of dirty glass.

Maybe saving the world is not a place of triumph, glory or happiness.

Maybe it's just a place for the weary to finally rest their heads.

Stiles curls up on his side, hugging his knees to his chest, and, eventually, falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

- Cuore mio (it.) — my heart.
- "Hello? Is there anybody in there? Just nod if you can hear me. Is there anyone home?" — Peter is quoting [Comfortably Numb](#) by Pink Floyd.

Next up: Peter's POV epilogue!

Chapter 9: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter is jerked awake by the sound of knocking. It puts him in a foul mood immediately because he's already been torn out of sleep three times by spikes of fear and anguish from Stiles' fully open bond and two more times by his own incessant need to double-check that he can still hear Stiles' heart beating next to his own.

(Stiles' kitchen has so many knives, too many)

There better be a fire in the building or something else on that scale. If a neighbor has come to borrow sugar in a fit of midnight baking, Peter is going to have to deal with the second body for today very soon.

He mutters a few choice words as he sits up, throwing the blankets aside. Mr. Muppet, disturbed by the noise and movement, lifts his head from where he's been sleeping on one side of Peter's pillow and mrows curiously.

"You stay put," Peter tells him. "I'll handle whatever this is."

Pulling on his bathrobe, Peter walks over to the door and listens. There's a single heartbeat out there... a very familiar one, at that. He doesn't even bother opening his laptop and logging into the stream of his (illegally installed) security camera to confirm.

He switches on the lights and unlocks the door with the appropriate haste, and sure enough, it's Stiles on the other side, clad in sweatpants and a t-shirt that proclaims his support for single mothers; his hair is sticking out every which way, and his eyes look wild with emotion and evident lack of sleep. He smells and feels like acute embarrassment and aching need.

Peter's beautiful, wondrous star.

Before Stiles can even find any words to explain why he's here at ass o'clock in the morning, Peter reaches out and pulls him in, kicking the door closed behind him. There. In Peter's arms is definitely where Stiles belongs, and Peter rubs his cheek against Stiles', realizing belatedly that with looping again and them not having met afterward Stiles has no Peter's scent on him. Absolutely none. What a travesty.

"Sorry for showing up at, like, the rudest time ever," Stiles says. His lips brush Peter's ear as he speaks. "I just... You said to come over after resting. I, uhm, I think I've had all the rest I can stomach for now."

"Why's that?" Peter brushes one hand down Stiles' back in a soothing movement. Human skin is always cool to the touch for him unless they've got a raging fever, and he can feel that slight hint of a chill through the thin t-shirt.

"I've been having nightmares all night," Stiles confesses. His embarrassment morphs into shame. "I just can't bear trying to sleep again, at least not tonight, and I—well, I had to come see you. I can feel you through the bond, but still, it makes me feel better to see you with my own eyes."

"Do you want to talk about the nightmares, stella mia?" Peter asks. He'd like to know what they are about but he's not going to push unduly. Stiles has already come to him (to Peter! Over his father, over McCall, over anyone else, Stiles has come seeking comfort from Peter, and Peter revels in the fact even as he doesn't understand it). If he wants to talk about it, he will.

"Not really, no," Stiles sighs. "Look, uhm, I'm sorry."

He makes to pull away, and Peter lets him, even though losing their physical contact so soon sets his teeth on edge.

"I should go home and make myself busy with something. I didn't mean to keep you from res..."

Stiles' voice trails off as his shame, sadness and anxiety abruptly get replaced by awe, wonder and adoration. He's looking over Peter's shoulder, further into the hallway, and Peter doesn't actually have to turn around to know what is going on: Mr. Muppet's footsteps may seem silent to a human ear but always make enough noise for a werewolf to hear.

"Is that... Mr. Muppet?" Stiles asks, starry-eyed.

Peter has to hand it to his wily beast of a pet: he weaponizes his cuteness with lethal efficiency. He saunters out of Peter's bedroom like he owns the place; a tiny ball of messy gray and white fluff, his stubby tail straight up, he yawns, showing his pink tongue, and makes another inquiring mrow. He's not even within sniffing distance yet, and he's already got Stiles wrapped around his soft paws.

"Indeed." Peter gestures between them, mostly to entertain himself seeing as no one else present is paying him much attention. "Stiles, meet Mr. Muppet. Mr. Muppet, meet Stiles."

Stiles crouches down, offering his hand for Mr. Muppet to smell. Mr. Muppet obligingly trots over and inspects it before butting the side of his head into Stiles' fingers, blatantly scent-marking him. Peter marvels at the audacity.

"Can I pick him up?" Stiles asks.

Peter shrugs.

"I should think you can," he says. "I've seen you lift heavier things."

Stiles snorts and carefully picks Mr. Muppet up, laying him along one arm like a baby and scratching his belly lightly. Mr. Muppet wraps his front paws around Stiles' hand without letting the claws out and starts gnawing at his fingers.

"Aww, you're trying to eat me too?" Stiles coos, sounding like he might not mind too much if Mr. Muppet were indeed to harbor such bloodthirsty intentions. "Who's the softest, cutest, sweetest little kitten on the planet? You are!"

"I take it you like cats?" Peter deadpans.

"Yeah," Stiles lifts his head and grins. There's a lightness to him that Peter has never seen before, and all it took to put it there was one insolent furball. "We couldn't have one 'cause dad's allergic, though. I wanted a pet and got a python once but that didn't end very well."

Peter is not enthused by the idea of a father who didn't bother looking into hypoallergenic cat breeds—or did and deemed them too expensive. Stiles loves that bumbling fool, though, so Peter keeps his opinion to himself.

"Come on," he says. "I'll make us some hot chocolate."

He starts for the kitchen, and Stiles follows, all thoughts of leaving knocked clean out of his head by Mr. Muppet's appearance. Peter makes a mental note of that; he seems to possess a potent secret weapon against Stiles' sadness and self-hatred, and he shall not hesitate to utilize it.

"Can I help?" Stiles asks.

"You can keep that little menace contained so he won't try to trip me up."

As Peter gets the milk out of the fridge, Stiles takes a seat by the table, crooning at Mr. Muppet:

"Don't listen to the big meanie Peter, Mr. Muppet. You're not a menace, you're beautiful, and adorable, and perfect in every way, yes, you are..."

Peter rolls his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips. In truth, he's pleased that his packmate has taken such a shine to his pet.

If Peter has his way, eventually Mr. Muppet will be theirs.

He tosses a cinnamon stick into the milk and adds a small splash of vanilla extract. While the milk is heating up, Peter chops a bar of chocolate into small chunks. He doesn't have that much of a sweet tooth, and he only keeps chocolate specifically for this purpose. It's dark and high in cocoa butter; Stiles might like something a little sweeter, so Peter adds a couple spoonfuls of sugar to the milk, as well as salt on the tip of a knife.

"That looks fancy," Stiles says. Mr. Muppet has gotten tired of lying down and climbed onto Stiles' shoulder; he's sniffing at Stiles' ear, tickling him with whiskers and making him giggle. "Not making hot chocolate with powder and water like us peasants?"

"I prefer having things just the way I like them, mon bijou." Peter pours the chocolate chunks into a bowl and sticks it into the microwave for thirty seconds on low heat. "Besides, I think you'll like it too."

He takes the chocolate out, stirs it and puts it back for another thirty seconds. When it's melted and the milk has reached scalding temperature, Peter taps his electric stove off and moves the pot away from the hot spot before fishing the cinnamon stick out and adding the chocolate. He's precise and finicky, perhaps more than he would be if he were only doing this for himself; but he wants to be sure he does well since it's his first time in many years making sustenance for a packmate. Admittedly, back before the fire it was not something he got to do often since cooking wasn't one of his duties; and more than that, at the time his whole pack were his family. He's never had a chance to provide food or drink of his own making to a packmate he wanted to woo.

Stiles is something new and exhilarating, so Peter takes care with every single step of the process. The resulting cups, topped off with whipped cream (it's canned stuff, but at least it's good canned stuff) and freshly grated nutmeg, look picture-perfect. Peter brings them over to the table where Stiles is slumped in his chair for Mr. Muppet's benefit: that intrepid explorer has managed to burrow into Stiles' shirt and is now roaming under the fabric, unable or unwilling to find an exit.

"Here," Peter sets a cup next to Stiles and steals a kiss from those tantalizingly lovely lips. Stiles feels surprised, then pleased; Peter basks in his desire and affection but stops the kiss before it turns truly heated.

Stiles tries the hot chocolate, immediately acquiring a whipped cream mustache, and moans at the simple physiological pleasure of tasting something good. The deep-seated primal part of Peter is both satisfied by the sound and craves more of it.

"Oh my God," Stiles says reverently. "This stuff is worth all the fuss with heating milk and so on. Holy crap, this is so good."

He keeps taking sips of it, absorbed in the contentment it brings. The last of his remaining tension bleeds out of the line of his shoulders and the way he holds his head, and Peter is quite certain he could spend hours just like this, with nowhere to go and nothing to hurry for, in this companionable silence.

Mr. Muppet pops out from under Stiles' shirt, having finally figured out how, and tries to climb up and lick some drops of chocolate from Stiles' cheek. Peter reaches over and plucks him off.

"Aw, can he stay?" Stiles looks mournfully at Mr. Muppet who is very huffy about being banished to the floor.

"Not if he tries to sneak chocolate, no." Peter takes a sip of his own chocolate—one of his better efforts, even with the extra sugar—and engages in a staring contest with Mr. Muppet. "It's highly toxic to cats."

"What?!" Stiles covers his cup with one hand, as if afraid Mr. Muppet is going to leap all the way up to it and steal it. "You're never, ever getting any, do you hear me, Mr. Muppet?"

Mr. Muppet sniffs at them both, sits down primly and starts washing his paw as if he never wanted to do what he wasn't allowed to in the first place. Stiles laughs, helplessly charmed.

"You know, after trying your hot chocolate I'm really excited about the other things you recommend," he says. "Like those mai tais."

"How did you know I like them anyway?" Peter wonders.

"One of you told me," Stiles says, some sadness returning. "He suggested that we go to Hawaii, drink those things and have tons of sex."

Ah, his... other selves. Peter dislikes hearing about them. They didn't survive where he did; clearly, he's the superior Peter and shouldn't have to stand in their shadows. He can't begin to fathom how they managed to win Stiles' favor despite their storied history, and it smarts that he wasn't the one to do it. According to Stiles and his sum-of-paths theory, all Peters are one Peter, but as Peter has no access to those memories, the reasoning seems a bit thin to him. He doesn't feel like he's those other Peters also, and if he accepts that he is, then he is the one to blame for missing the first changes in Stiles' attitude towards him and their first kiss.

He'll be the one to get their first night together, but still, he despises those interlopers lost to time for taking what is his.

"That does sound like something I'd suggest," Peter says. "Would you like to go? Surely, we deserve a vacation after today."

Stiles makes a complicated face.

"Don't get me wrong," he says, "I'm loving the idea of you wet, basically naked and tasting like pineapple, like, this is a spank bank worthy idea, but it has just now occurred to me that I'm a broke high schooler which means you'd be the one paying for the whole thing."

"So?" Peter doesn't comprehend where the obstacle is.

"So I don't want to mooch off of you," Stiles scowls. "This," he makes a vague gesture between himself and Peter, "this is not some kind of sleazy power play sugar daddy thing, and I don't want it to turn into anything like that. I need my own money, and I want to pay for half the trip, and I want to be able to buy you those mai tais, not just the other way around."

Peter blinks. He has been chomping at the bit to provide for Stiles, but he hasn't thought about being provided for. Would he like that? Stiles taking care of him in return, as equals?

Yes, he realizes with a delighted thrill. Yes, he would.

"I see what you mean," he says. "But you're not eighteen yet, which means your legitimate job options are severely limited."

He watches Stiles grimace, acknowledging the logic in his words.

"Not that it has to be legitimate," he remarks. In truth, he's curious how Stiles has squared his goody-two-shoes morals with the knowledge of Peter's blood-stained past and how far Stiles might be willing to go to achieve his goals now. "You've got power over time itself. I imagine it wouldn't be too strenuous for you to stop time, clean out a bank or two and walk away unseen."

"I'm not going to rob a bank!" Stiles splutters, scandalized indignation streaming through the packbond. "That's all someone's money! People's savings! And the way I can do it, the bank will probably blame the tellers and have them pay it all back, and with those salaries their grandchildren will still be up to their ears in debt!"

Oh, bother. There those morals are.

"Alright, alright, no banks," Peter says and aims a roguish grin at Stiles who doesn't seem to be able to stay annoyed for long in the face of that. "How about... robbing someone who deserves it, then?"

Stiles rolls his eyes, his exasperation coming through clearly from every source.

"Like who?"

"Drug dealers," Peter offers and gets rewarded by a thoughtful look on Stiles' face. "Human traffickers. Illicit firearm traders. Corporations that keep dumping waste into oceans because fines are cheaper than proper disposal. Honestly, there's a lot of choices out there. You could fund several years in a 5-star hotel in Hawaii single-handedly after only a cursory once-over of any major city in America."

Stiles gives the matter some serious consideration, and Peter congratulates himself on successfully navigating the thorny maze of Stiles' morals. Personally, Peter doesn't much care where Stiles gets money, just so long as the lack of it stops being a hindrance on the way to Hawaii or wherever. For example, Stiles is going to be done with high school and off to college in a year. Peter will, of course, follow his packmate anywhere (the last thing he intends to do is let Stiles go now that he has him), but a broke Stiles is a Stiles who, due to a misplaced sense of pride, might want to live in a cockroach-infested dorm with moldy showers and a stoner roommate instead of a rented apartment that Peter is paying for. Frankly, that just won't do.

"I... can't find a fault in your logic," Stiles says. "Robbing a drug dealer feels like a good deed, honestly. People like that should not be rich. And we could also swipe some evidence for the police. You know, as an anonymous tip. I could just as easily stop time at a police station and leave it on someone's desk. And I could donate at least half of that money! It would do so much good in charities."

Peter is not surprised that Stiles needs to be a vigilante and a philanthropist to make peace with the idea of personal enrichment. It's fine with him either way.

"That too," Peter nods. "And then, Hawaii. And, if a university of your choosing happens to be so stupid as not to give you a full scholarship and beg you to come study there, you could set aside enough to pay for education anywhere."

"Well, dad's got a college fund for me," Stiles says, eyebrows rising. "Although I don't think it's big enough to pick and choose among all of the schools in the world."

"Exactly." Peter adds another point to the list of things that irritate him in Sheriff Stilinski. Stiles should have the best of everything and lack for absolutely nothing. Why does Peter

seem to be the only one to understand this simple, self-evident truth? "I imagine you've got a lot of plans for your education, what with your love for physics. Perhaps your powers can even provide you with some extra insight into the inner workings of the universe. Stiles Stilinski, the Nobel Prize winner? Doesn't that have a nice ring to it?"

Stiles snorts.

"Oh, don't even get me started on combining science with magic. Any time I start thinking about it, nothing makes any freaking sense. Magic in general is like that. You, for example," he points at Peter, "also don't make sense."

"Me? How so?"

"What possible influence can moonlight have on werewolves, considering it's not some special light but just reflected sunlight?" Stiles sounds like he's gearing up for a lengthy rant. Peter settles a bit more comfortably into his own chair to listen. "By that logic, the moment you go out during the day, you should turn into a ravening beast! So that whole extensive lore is just bogus! But something does happen on a full moon, and I've noticed that Scott gets more aggressive before it's actually all the way full, so there must be some gradual kind of influence building up. The only thing I can think of is gravity since the movement of the Moon affects the gravity it's exerting on the Earth, like the tides, but what does that say about magic then? How is it reacting to those minor gravity changes, exactly, when it's not tangible? I mean, do you have some liquid magic sloshing around in your brain or something? And there are so many creatures out there who are magical but don't care about the Moon at all! How's that work then?!"

He rakes one hand through his hair and drains his remaining hot chocolate in one long gulp, sincerely worked up by the gall of magic daring not to make sense.

"For that matter, I don't make any sense either! What is even power over time? Science has yet to come to an agreement about whether or not time actually exists! What the hell is it that I have power over?"

"Well, I'm no scientist, but I'm pretty certain that *something* exists," Peter offers. "You are without a shadow of a doubt controlling something real."

"Yeah, but what is it? Some previously undetected substance that fills the universe?" Stiles wrinkles his nose. "Are we going all the way back to Newton being stumped by how light and gravity work and making up an invisible, intangible substance called aether that is very handy for explaining away anything that doesn't fit? That's such a cringy cop-out. Besides, we do know a little more about the nature of time as we perceive it now, and the only thing in physics that actually follows the linear arrow of time is entropy. Is that what I actually control? When I stop time, all motion stops. Does it mean I halt entropy? But how? Is it all of it? Or just some? If I stop time for a fruit fly for a week, will it live a week longer than its peers or still die when it's supposed to? If I stop time for a cube of ice and put on a table in a room, will it still melt? If yes, will it keep the cubic shape or become a puddle? What if I can pick and choose how I can stop time for something or someone?" Stiles' eyes shine, and Peter relishes in the unbridled, inspired curiosity flowing through the bond. "Can I create a sort of self-contained entropy loop inside an object that would keep going on indefinitely without

draining me for power all the time? Would that essentially mean a condition of perfect stasis? Creating something that will survive even the heat death of the universe? Would that work on a person, and if yes, does that mean I could make us literally immortal?"

Stiles takes a deep breath, calming down a little, but his cheeks are still flushed with excitement, and the way he sits reminds Peter of nothing more than a bird poised to fly.

"But how would any of that work, on the particle level? How does any magic work? The only vague idea I have so far is that magic might exhibit wave-like behavior and consist of many different types, just like there's a bunch of different known particles, but I wouldn't know how to even begin testing that sort of thing, especially when so much of magical output is tied into the input of a sentient user instead of just happening naturally. Not to mention I'd need to build any detecting equipment from scratch since the current stuff people are using doesn't seem up to snuff. This is such a mess, Peter!"

Despite all of his outrage, Stiles grins at Peter, breathtakingly wild and full of life. This is, Peter perceives, the way Stiles hunts: for knowledge and the underlying truth of the world rather than living prey, relentless and excited by a seemingly insurmountable challenge.

"If anyone can make sense of it, it's you," Peter says with conviction and finishes off his own drink. It's late, and Stiles seems like he has put enough distance between himself and the nightmares to risk dozing off one more time. There's very little that Peter can contribute to scientific research, much as he adores listening to Stiles talk about it, but if there's anything that he's capable of, it's taking care of Stiles. "Let me just take care of washing up so that a certain menace doesn't get into the leftover traces of chocolate, and then we can go try to sleep again. Do you think you're up for it?"

He hates how subdued the idea makes Stiles.

"I... I guess I can try," Stiles agrees. His reluctance is written in his face and pouring steadily through the bond, but he can't just not sleep and he knows it. "Do you, uhm, do you have a guest room?"

"What would you need a guest room for?" Peter asks as he washes the cups. "You're sleeping in my bed."

Stiles' eyes widen.

"You mean, you want—"

"Obviously, not right now," Peter points out. "Can you imagine the hit my ego would take if you nodded off in the middle of the proceedings? No, you should be well-rested for anything vigorous to take place."

"Oh," Stiles says with a mixture of relief and disappointment.

They really shouldn't put sex off much longer, Peter thinks as he steps around Mr. Muppet trying to shake him down for a treat. There's no need for it to be an elephant in the room, afforded more and more ominous trepidation as time goes by.

"Come on," Peter says, picking Mr. Muppet up and depositing him in Stiles' arms. The distraction from fretting works beautifully. "Just don't let him lick that chocolate drop off your face."

"What? Where?" Stiles rubs at his face, nowhere near the spot.

On an impulse, Peter leans over and licks it off. Combined with the taste of Stiles' skin, it's even better.

"There," he says. "All clean."

"Did you just... lick me?" Stiles asks, incredulous.

"I'm planning on licking many parts of you, mon trésor," Peter tells him, which effectively prevents any further questions.

They climb into bed: Stiles rolls to lie on his side, and Peter, shedding the bathrobe to stay in his underwear, follows suit and presses himself along the length of Stiles' body from behind. He tugs a blanket over them both, wraps an arm around Stiles' chest, holding him close, and buries his nose in Stiles' hair, gorging himself on the scent. It feels amazingly peaceful, even with Mr. Muppet prowling the edges of the pillow and mrowling, perplexed by the sudden disappearance of the free space where he was sleeping only a little while ago.

What can he do to make this happen every night? As Mr. Muppet climbs up the slope of the blanket and curls up in the little dip by their hips, Peter starts scheming but is soon interrupted by the apprehension and self-loathing coming from Stiles.

"What is it?" He asks.

"I'm learning how to control that stupid bond ASAP," Stiles mutters, not bothering with pretending that nothing is wrong. "I'm just... You're not disappointed, are you? I mean, that we're just going to sleep right now. And even if we weren't, I, uhm, I don't actually know how to do any of that stuff. You probably want someone with experience. Someone who isn't nervous."

Peter can't begin to guess which part of his behavior thus far indicated that he wants anyone except Stiles; he suspects it wasn't actually him but the twisty pathways in Stiles' mind that seem to lead nowhere except towards that bizarre self-hatred.

Frankly, Peter doesn't get it. His own primary goal in life is survival, and with it comes the implicit rock-solid foundation of considering himself worth surviving, the opinions of others notwithstanding. He invested so much effort into clawing his way out of a grave that the idea of putting himself in there voluntarily is utterly alien to him.

Nonetheless, these are the demons that haunt Stiles. Peter doesn't have to understand in order to try and drive them away. Admittedly, he doesn't always know what kind of effect his words or actions will have—it was certainly hard to swallow when he realized it was his idea about the origins of the time apocalypse that had largely driven Stiles to trying to take his own life—but that is true about anything. All he can do is what he sees fit.

"If I wanted someone else, they'd be here right now, but it's you in my bed, stella mia." Peter kisses the back of Stiles' neck, and it's a testament to Stiles' forgiving nature that it doesn't seem to call up any negative emotions connected to the forcible taking of memories. "And I shall make sure that you forget to be nervous."

"That seems like a tall order," Stiles says.

"Alright, I see you're going to insist on worrying yourself into a tizzy," Peter concedes. "How about we have sex tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Stiles squeaks.

"Technically, today, seeing as it's past midnight," Peter corrects himself. "Unless you'd rather wait? It's fine if you prefer that, tesoro mio. We can wait for as long as you like if that's what will make you more comfortable."

"No, I..." Stiles swallows, and his nervousness spikes. Then he abruptly relaxes and snuggles back into Peter. "I don't wanna wait."

Pure, unadulterated trust flows through the packbond. Peter has never felt anything like it.

"Alright." Peter nips Stiles' ear lightly, eliciting a gasp. "But for now, goodnight, ma cerise."

"Night," Stiles echoes.

Peter is drowsy, already starting to see the first vague snatches of a dream, when Stiles speaks again.

"Last time I woke up, I thrashed around so much that I threw myself off the bed," he whispers. "I know I can't do much damage to you, no matter how much I flail, but you'll make sure I don't accidentally hurt Mr. Muppet, won't you? He's so tiny."

"Of course," Peter murmurs into Stiles' hair. "I'll keep you both safe."

Oddly, that is enough to make Stiles fall asleep first.

* * *

Peter wakes up warm and languid. Daylight is filtering past the edges of the curtains, and Stiles and he, apparently, stayed in the same position all night, despite all the grave warnings of thrashing. The bed now smells like both of them, their scents intermingled, including that curious subtle note that Peter only noticed in Stiles' scent yesterday after meeting him at the Stilinski house: something changing yet always standing out, acrid and sweet at the same time, metallic at one moment, gunpowder at another, welding fumes at yet another one.

Pack, Peter thinks, inhaling deeply. *Mine*.

He gives himself a few minutes to enjoy simply lying next to Stiles, the sounds and steady rhythms of his breathing and heartbeat, the long, lithe lines of his body, the sheer cozy intimacy of Stiles being the very first sight that greets him upon waking. There's an

uncomplicated yet deep pleasure in that, and Peter feels like every cell of his body is thrilled at the same time.

It's unthinkable that Stiles tried to kill himself. A Stiles-shaped gap in Peter's life would have been...

Peter doesn't want to dwell on it. Trying to imagine that feels a bit like trying to sink back into his old insanity.

Eventually, he slides out of bed without waking Stiles up and goes to brush his teeth and take a brief shower. When he returns, Mr. Muppet is licking Stiles' chin, purring up a storm, and Stiles is laughing; a stray ray of morning sun lights up his skin and eyes, and Peter is struck anew by just how devastatingly pretty Stiles is.

"Good morning, sole mio," Peter says, leaning down to claim his own morning kiss.

"What's that one mean?" Stiles smiles up at him, so very comfortable in Peter's bed, and everything is right with the world.

"My sunshine," Peter tells him and kisses Stiles' cheeks when he blushes. There's something devilishly, enticingly satisfying in how flustered Stiles gets and how much, judging by the emotions coming through the bond, he seems to like it.

"I should go brush my teeth," Stiles decides, squirming out from under the blanket. "I've got morning breath."

"There's an extra toothbrush in the drawer under the sink," Peter calls after him.

This is very much in line with Peter's plans to make breakfast. It's going to be simple because Stiles is hardly the type to be dazzled by fancy food, but everything is going to be as flawless as it can be: a fluffy omelet, crisp bacon, golden toast, some sliced fresh vegetables with a squeeze of lemon juice and a sprinkling of sea salt. It's not just the urge to provide, either; it's part of Peter's plan to make Stiles associate him with nice things, not only apocalyptic dangers and constant dying. Good food, restful sleep, a cute kitten, and, later today, mind-blowing sex. Stiles is not a werewolf; pack doesn't mean as much to him as it does to Peter since he's never had one before nor felt the need for it. Peter has to work to make sure Stiles won't want to explore other options (age-appropriate options without blood on their hands) once he's grown further away from the events of yesterday.

Stiles comes into the kitchen and slinks behind Peter, putting his arms around him with a wave of uncertainty, as if he expects Peter to push him away.

"Can I help with anything?" He asks.

Peter turns his head to catch Stiles' lips in another kiss. The anticipation makes it feel like the air around them is charged with electricity; Peter can't wait to put his lips on all the rest of Stiles, mark that creamy skin with love bites, push inside him and watch his face as he comes undone. Soon.

"You can get things out of the fridge," Peter offers. Stiles licks his lips, as if chasing Peter's taste, and Peter contemplates delaying breakfast in favor of having Stiles right here against the kitchen wall. The olive oil should work as a lubricant, right? "Butter, jam, whatever you like."

"What do you like?"

"It's my fridge," Peter reminds him. "I like everything in there."

"Fair," Stiles allows.

When there's nothing left to do besides wait until Peter is done with the omelet, Stiles takes a seat by the table and watches Mr. Muppet weave between Peter's feet in a persistent demand for food.

"Why'd you name him Mr. Muppet?" Stiles asks.

"If the shoe fits," Peter shrugs. He dangles a bit of bacon in the air; Mr. Muppet puts his front paws on Peter's shin and opens his little maw as wide as it will go with an imperious meow. "See what he does with his mouth? I got Sesame Street flashbacks the first time I saw it."

Stiles laughs. There's still sadness and hurt to him, but it's more of a background this morning rather than all there is.

"My pet python did something kind of like this," he says. "Only even wider."

"Maybe I should have named you Python," Peter tells Mr. Muppet. The latter is distinctly unimpressed. "No, you're not getting this bacon. It probably contains more fat than you do."

"I can give him his food if you point me to where you keep it," Stiles offers.

"No, he's eating after we're done," Peter shakes his head. "His cat food is supposedly good for him, but it stinks to high heaven as far as I'm concerned. I prefer not to eat with that wafting all around me."

"I don't think he likes this system," Stiles notes.

"I'm bigger and stronger, and I'm the one who can actually reach the cabinet with his food," Peter shrugs. "His vote is invalid."

"You really are a big meanie, aren't you?" Stiles snickers.

"I'm a big bad wolf," Peter says, showing his fangs briefly. To his delight, it only makes Stiles snicker harder.

The omelet is done, and Peter takes a seat as Stiles puts the first forkful in his mouth.

"Wow," Stiles says, rather unnecessarily as Peter has already sensed his pleasure. "Can you make every breakfast I'll ever eat, please? Also, what did you put in here, cocaine?"

"The secret ingredient is learning to use one's supernatural senses to discern just the right amount of seasoning as well as the correct moment to take it off the heat," Peter tells him, and Stiles snorts around the second bite.

Since that first question was obviously meant to be a joke as well, Peter only replies to it in his mind: that can be arranged, sweetheart.

* * *

The sun is bright and hot, the smells are multitudinous and overpowering, and the cacophony of the big city is positively deafening. Peter soaks it all in, staying out of the way of people hurrying past. It has been some time since he last visited a city as big as San Jose, and he finds that he has missed the sheer energy of a place like this. Beacon Hills is home... but not every home is forever.

"So what do we do now?" Stiles seems just as overwhelmed as Peter, despite not having werewolf senses.

"Whatever we like, *stella mia*," Peter says. These things seem so simple to him, yet they puzzle Stiles. For some reason, Stiles expects there to always be things he *has* to do; unpleasant yet unavoidable chores one is forced to endure, and he is ready to endure them to the bitter end.

Maybe if Stiles' general expectations for life were closer to Peter's, the apocalypse fueled by Stiles' very own power would have been a lot less troublesome. Peter knows better than to voice this suspicion, though, and transform this day from a good one into a listless, self-flagellating one. Not like he has any definitive proof that some of the events he's seen were less random than others anyway; perhaps they were the result of the universe spinning some cosmic wheel of misfortune that was not rigged in any way after all. Maybe they can talk about it some years down the line, when Stiles is not as brittle and vulnerable anymore.

"For example," Peter continues, "you are currently twenty-one to anybody who might like to check your impeccable ID, so I can do this in full view of the jealous public."

He tugs Stiles close and kisses him. Stiles has made good progress with wrestling his end of the packbond into submission, but his emotions still trickle through more often than not, and Peter enjoys the desire his touch summons.

It has been two weeks since the apocalypse, and Peter can say with great satisfaction that every aspect of Stiles' erstwhile virginity (and the accompanying anxiety) has been by now thoroughly removed. Neither of them misses it one bit. Although it was a bit of a surprise when Stiles' inherent healing turned out to be fast enough to be somewhat of an impediment to Stiles staying stretched long enough for them to make any use of it; Stiles had to learn to halt it at will after he got over being mortified and exasperated.

Peter feels thrilled, covetous, possessive, positively giddy at the knowledge that Stiles uses this newfound skill at all times to keep at least one love bite intact in an unobtrusive spot. There should be one on Stiles' left inner thigh right now, hidden by his jeans, left there with a

conscious effort because Stiles wishes to carry the evidence of being marked by Peter on his skin. Peter didn't even think to ask for that; it was Stiles' very own idea.

"Maybe we should get the money thing done first," Stiles says, looking slightly dazed by the kiss and like he'd prefer to go back inside the hotel and christen their bed. "Then we could spend some of it, I guess? I did some research online, there's a bunch of restaurants I'd love to take you to, and there are lots of events and stuff. And we could rent a car and go for a drive along the coast? I haven't seen the ocean since I was a little kid. Well, except for that one time at the end of the world, but I was busy trying not to get shot too much and didn't really look."

"Well, you won't get shot at all this time," Peter tells him. "Let's get that out of the way, and then you can spoil me rotten."

Stiles smells ever so pleased by the idea. Peter wonders if Stiles has had any opportunities to spoil someone he liked before (discounting the way he keeps slipping Mr. Muppet extra treats when he thinks Peter isn't looking); if not, Peter is more than happy to fill the void.

The robbery itself goes smooth as butter. Prior to taking the train to San Jose, Peter did his own research; the gang activity here is rich and ripe for culling. Even if there are some supernatural beings mixed in with regular criminally inclined humans, none of them have any sort of control over time, and Stiles holds tremendous, incredible power. Peter can't even sense anything happening when Stiles wills it and time stops, and the two of them walk through a frozen world as if they are the only ones who are truly alive.

This is, bar none, the sexiest thing that has ever happened to Peter, and he ends up sucking Stiles off right there, in the garish living room belonging to an individual unfortunately named Triple C. Stiles is both scandalized and hopelessly aroused, and the combination only serves to make Peter more eager. Really, who could have resisted?

"I'm glad you were with me," Stiles says once they are back at the hotel and stuffing stacks of money into the safe in their room. It's not an ideal solution, as far as financial savvy goes, but they need to wait until Stiles is eighteen before he can open a bank account without his father there. "I was worried something would go wrong, but I knew you'd have my back if it did. Although," he adds, exasperated, "you didn't have to go for exhibitionism. What if my control slipped and someone actually saw us?"

"Then I would've dealt with them and got back to worshipping your cock with my mouth," Peter shrugs. "Your control didn't slip, though. You know, it opens up some interesting possibilities."

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like whatever idea you've just come up with?" Stiles asks dryly.

"Hear me out," Peter says, pulling Stiles into his lap. For all of his grumbling, Stiles goes willingly and wraps his arms around Peter. "You will have to go back to school soon..."

"Oh no..."

"All those long, long hours while you're forced to sit in a room with various dullards, not allowed to go out and see me."

"Uh-oh..."

"I'm just saying, nothing stops you from texting me for a booty call at any moment and stopping time so that we can enjoy each other anywhere we like, be it in front of others or not. Have you ever thought that the desk in the principal's office looks very sturdy? I know I thought that when I was a student there."

"Peter! No!" Stiles' whole face is scarlet. "I have never once thought about fucking on the principal's desk!"

"Obviously, we don't have to do anything you don't want to do," Peter kisses the corner of Stiles' mouth. "But I simply wanted to let you know that if you did want to do that, we could. You're in control, not any arbitrary rules of propriety."

"Those rules are there for a reason!" Stiles sounds outraged but he smells like a mixture of intrigued, hopeful and lustful.

"And the reason is that people don't want to see other people randomly having sex in public places. But if they are frozen in time and can't actually see it, what's the harm?"

"This is what corruption is, isn't it?" Stiles narrows his eyes, playful. "You're corrupting me."

"Of course, tesoro mio," Peter agrees easily. "Is it working?"

Stiles kisses him, forceful and sweet. Peter surrenders to him, reveling in being wanted, trusted, liked; having all three at the same time, handed to him at no cost besides being himself, is a heady, brand-new feeling.

"We should go get sandwiches from that food truck people are raving about online," Stiles says, slipping off Peter's lap and stretching. "And then the coast? Do you think we should take Mr. Muppet with us, or is it too hot for him right now?"

Peter considers Mr. Muppet who has adapted to the hotel room in no time (the pet fee is outlandish but it's worth it, considering that there's no one in Beacon Hills Peter would have trusted to look after his cat besides Stiles who was already coming with him) and is now napping in a sunny spot on the floor.

"We'll take him another time," he decides. "When we're going later in the day and it's not as hot. I suspect he'll be ecstatic about getting to play in the sand."

"We're going to have to wash him after, aren't we?" Stiles winces. Mr. Muppet hates water with vengeance and, should any get on him, is not shy about spreading his misery around.

"Maybe just brushing the sand out of his ridiculous long fluff will be enough. We can look up a vet clinic around here and call to ask for advice." Peter is not enthusiastic about wrestling a furious Mr. Muppet either.

"Good idea," Stiles nods. "Let's go get those sandwiches?" He brandishes a thick stack of hundred dollar bills and grins. "I'm buying."

Peter notes that Stiles never says a specific no to using his powers solely for having sex all over the school. If Peter gets a text message that says "so uhm booty call?" sometime within the first week of September, he won't be surprised; although he isn't counting on it as a sure thing. Stiles is a bit obsessed with using said powers responsibly and sometimes afraid that doing it too often will destabilize the universe, never mind that he clearly used them for all sorts of frivolous reasons when he was a child (dinosaurs in the backyard, anyone?) and that didn't bring about any negative consequences. Goodness and conscience, Peter has learned, are not entirely rational things, even if Stiles does approach most things in a logical way.

They get those famed sandwiches—as good as advertised—and walk slowly in the general direction of a car rental. The city is bustling around them, everyone in a hurry to get somewhere besides them. Stiles slips his free hand into Peter's; his shyness melts into joy as Peter grips his hand right back.

"I don't think I've told you yet, but I finally emailed Ingrid Olsen the other day," Stiles says.

"Did she reply?"

"Yeah. I got a bit spooked by how excited she seemed, to be honest. From what you told me of her coven's reputation, I'd think she gets a lot of messages from those who want to study magic. Doesn't she?"

"Supernatural people are still people," Peter notes. Ingrid probably does get a lot of messages, they are just from those who'd like to use the results of her coven's work rather than join their search for better understanding of magic. "Very few are academically inclined to the point of devoting their lives to it, and among those not many can afford to pursue research avenues that they can never ask a grant for from mundane sponsors. Not to mention that it's rare to meet someone as brilliant as you on either side of the divide."

Stiles rolls his eyes.

"You don't need to butter me up, I already like you," he says, and the beat of his heart lets Peter know it's true.

"Good," Peter says. "You should remember that when Ingrid tries to lure you away to her coven."

"I'm not a witch," Stiles laughs. "I didn't even tell her I have any kind of magic of my own at all. Why would she want me?"

It's a daily struggle for Peter. He wishes for Stiles to understand that wanting him in whatever capacity he'll allow is the most natural state for anyone in the world to be in; and on the other hand, he'd like to keep Stiles to himself where it matters, and a part of him is afraid that Stiles will not choose Peter when it occurs to him that he does have a choice.

The smart thing to do would be to ensure that Stiles' sense of self-worth is tied to Peter's opinion; to manipulate Stiles until he is certain that no other choice exists for him. Surely, otherwise Peter will sooner or later lose this too, this far-fetched, ludicrous fairy tale where he has a loyal, smart, powerful, witty, affectionate, beautiful packmate with a bond that is strong and true. And yet, every time Peter looks in Stiles' eyes, be they dim with crippling depression or bright with cautious joy, the smart thing feels like nothing short of sacrilege, and day after day passes with Peter doing nothing but making a sincere, earnest effort to help Stiles heal.

It feels like going against his every instinct; like taking a step off a cliff without knowing if the ground below is one inch or one mile away. Maybe this kind of consistent stupid recklessness is the price he needs to pay for Stiles staying with Peter (always, always, forever) out of his own volition.

If so, Peter will gladly pay it for the rest of his days.

"Because you're brilliant," Peter lifts Stiles' hand to his lips to kiss. "It's not buttering up when it's true."

The tips of Stiles' ears turn pink.

"Well, I'm not moving to Norway without you," he says. "And I'm not sure I want to be in a coven. That sounds like letting someone tell me what to do, you know?"

"We could go there together," Peter offers. Hiding their relationship from everyone they know in Beacon Hills is a strain; even after Stiles becomes legal, there will still be problems. Getting very far away from all that sounds great, and catching up with Ingrid face to face wouldn't be any hardship. They haven't been able to do that since their college graduation. "I can make sure Ingrid doesn't try to strong-arm you into anything in her enthusiasm."

"Huh," Stiles says. "You know, every time we talk about the future, it's like there's a whole bunch of new roads I haven't considered before are opening up. I was thinking CSU, maybe? But, like, wow, Norway. Studying magic with witches."

"You can go to the University of Oslo for more mundane studies," Peter points out. "They're not bad, I think."

"Don't I need to speak Norwegian for that?"

"You could learn if you wanted to."

"You think so? I kind of suck at languages."

"Norwegian's not that difficult a language when you already have English under your belt. They also might have some English language programs?"

"Something to research, then," Stiles sighs. "I'm starting to think I don't have enough hours in the day to look into everything already, and I'll have school soon. Classes take up so much time."

It's funny to hear Stiles of all people complaining that he doesn't have enough time, and Peter snorts.

"Oh, shush, you," Stiles bumps his shoulder, knowing exactly what it is that Peter is laughing at. "Maybe I should graduate early and spend a bit of time figuring this stuff out while everyone else is still stuck in the classrooms."

"You won't miss your friends?"

Stiles takes a big bite of his sandwich in a clear attempt to stall and think.

"I don't think I've seen Scott in weeks," he says in the end, and there's a quiet, resigned hurt to his scent. "Looks like if I don't come to him, he won't come to me... so maybe I should stop fooling myself. And I don't have any other friends. I'm the weird spastic kid, not the cool interesting kid."

"Their loss, my gain," Peter tells him, meaning it in a very literal sense. Those who are disloyal should be cut off altogether; Peter killed his own niece for abandoning him, and nothing that has happened since has changed his opinion on that. "If you want to graduate early, stella mia, I support you wholeheartedly."

"Because that would mean I'd have more time to come over and tire Mr. Muppet out by playing with him so he wouldn't have the energy to sharpen his claws on the bed covers?" Stiles teases.

"I see you have uncovered my fiendish plan," Peter says, and Stiles laughs.

They've got a week to spend in San Jose, courtesy of the Sheriff being off to some kind of cop conference out of state. Seven days of doing whatever they like among a sea of strangers, loaded with money and power. Peter doesn't think it's going to be enough to help Stiles realize that his life should always be like this, easy and pleasant, and that he doesn't need to do a single thing to deserve it. But at least it's going to be a glimpse of their possible shared future, something to hold on to when they are back in Beacon Hills with prying eyes at every corner.

Maybe Peter can even cajole Stiles into looping to this moment here and now once or twice so that they can have a longer vacation. If not, well...

Either way, they have all the time in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, this is an author's note that is not necessary to the story so you can skip it without missing out on Steter or plot. Nevertheless, I want to share this and I feel here is the best place for it.

Once upon a time, around March 2024, I was sitting on my couch and pondering the metric tons of fanfiction I had read shortly prior. Mainly, I was mulling over the array of Stileses presented there, running the gamut from dark and ruthless to a selfless hero. All of them, barring the totally blatant OOC, seemed to grow from the canon; each version of Stiles had its roots there, waiting for the right AU nudge to show itself. I couldn't settle on one I preferred to the others or one I personally wanted to write the most, and thus this mad, ambitious idea was born: I decided I wanted to write three novel-length fics exploring Stileses with different shades of morality.

It could have easily become an abandoned project, collapsed under the weight of its own sheer scale, but, miraculously, it didn't. Shortly, this trilogy grew truckloads of details, notes and ideas and gained a trope I find fascinating and wanted to do my own way because I was tired of the traditional interpretation (the empath in *Their Mixed Feelings*), a trope I love with all my heart with just a little bit of a twist (the time loop in this one), and a trope I adore but rarely see done in a way that hits me in the right spot (the unapologetic villain in *Mockingbird*). I knew I wanted to make them all fast-paced thrillers, if slightly different in sub-genre, and that they would all be Steters, and that I would have to do a crapton of research on a dizzying variety of things I planned to include. And with all those plans in my head, I wrote. And wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote. The amount of words I have produced since then is, frankly, insane, and this has been an exhausting, exhilarating, addictive, all-consuming and utterly unforgettable journey. I'm glad I took it, even if I feel like I need a sizable break from writing in general until my brain stops aching. I don't feel like I've actually explored all there is to Stiles, though; and I also have more TW ideas but they range from hefty to gargantuan *writes and deletes about 800 words of excited ramblings about plot bunnies* so I don't know if I'll get around to writing them down in the future.

Anyway, even though these three stories all exist in completely separate universes, they share some themes explored from different angles and a bit of meta-continuity, such as taking place one after the other on a timeline (TMF in January, *Mockingbird* in April and ASOOH in the summer, all in 2011). I won't make them into a series to avoid confusing people who would rightly assume that a series means a set of stories in the same universe, but in my head they will always be one series exploring the possibilities of Stiles, a character who has a firm spot among the top-3 of my favorites of all time.

Whether you have been following the trilogy all along or only read this one (I guess you must have read this one if you're here, perusing this author's note), I hope you've had as much fun and joy reading it as I had writing it. Thank you for being here <3

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