The Moon Lives (In The Lining of Your Skin)

by Quixoticity

Summary

Stiles is doing fine. Okay, so he didn't expect to be a single father to an infant daughter at the tender age of twenty-three, but it's working out great. And no, he didn't expect to be a curator in Beacon Hills Museum, where weird things happen with no explanation, but he's rolling with it. And he seems to have acquired a new brother now that his dad's gotten engaged, which, odd, but hey, Stiles is flexible, and there's no such thing as too much love, right?

But then the next twist comes in the form of mysterious new neighbour Derek Hale, who is both insanely angry at the world (it's possible he's murdered people with his eyebrows alone), and adorably good with children. He's also in possession of a truly excellent butt.

Stiles is doomed.
As If You Were On Fire From Within

The summer has been too long, and stiflingly hot. It’s felt like a struggle to find every breath in the suffocating blanket of heat that lies thick and heavy over the town. Heather has been miserable, her limbs aching, hands and feet swollen to double their normal size. She’s uncomfortable in her skin, too hot, too slow, too heavy. She wants to be free. Stiles is contrite. He wishes he could do this for her, but he can’t. He can’t even really help her, other than to tinker with the A.C. in her apartment and scour the nearby grocery stores for any crushed ice that hasn’t been snapped up already. It’s not enough.

She is angry with the heat and angry with him, and the birth follows suit – short and furious and afterwards Stiles feels shaken to his core. He’s never seen anything that looks as much like a near-death experience as the bringing forth of life, and it’s horrifying and amazing in equal measure. Heather turns away, so Stiles holds the baby close. He’s not surprised, but he can’t help the frisson of disappointment that shudders through him when he looks at Heather’s back, curled away from him in her hospital bed.

The pregnancy had been the accidental result of a tipsy one night stand towards the end of Heather’s final year at San Francisco State, when they had run into each other for the first time since high school, on nights out with their respective friends. Over tequila shots their years-old mutual curiosity about how seeing each other naked might be had outweighed their judgement, and they had giggled through some of the most awkward sex either of them had ever had, before they hugged it out and Stiles returned to his last couple of months at Stanford.

Stiles had received a phone call from an irate Heather six weeks later. She had wanted an abortion from the start, not feeling ready to give up the promise her life held, but Stiles had proposed a different plan; that she give him the chance to take the baby, no strings attached for her. He doesn’t know why, but his immediate reaction to the pregnancy had been feelings of fierce protection, of a need to care and protect that fills him like burning. It might be because the baby will be a little bit of his mother; a new beginning. After a long, sleepless night of contemplation Heather had agreed, but over nine long months the strain and the resentment of the pregnancy had drained the pool of their friendship dry.

Stiles still hopes they can re-fill it, little by little, over time. But for now, he has to figure out single fatherhood, feeling it out day by day. And, well, it’s not ideal but at least he’s lucky enough to have a great example of single fatherhood as one of his primo support structures, so he decides it makes sense to go home for a while, until they’re more settled. It’s not home exactly because his dad has moved to Beacon Hills, the next county over from his childhood home, but it’s where his dad is and that’s all that matters.

The unpleasant, bruising heat breaks the day Stiles brings the baby home. The sky has grown dark and solid and the air buzzes with low-level electricity. Deep quakes of thunder send cracks sprawling through the wall of heat, letting jagged spears of lightning pierce it and break it apart. Eventually the bulging clouds are too heavy to hold the rain anymore and it’s released in a warm deluge, hammering down onto the parched earth below, pulling the heat down with it and clearing the air. It rains all day and all night. It feels intentional. Biblical.

Stiles tucks his impossibly tiny daughter into her car seat under the watchful eye of a nurse, while Heather gazes resolutely out of the window at the ceaseless rain. Her bag is packed and sitting on the end of her hospital bed, all the necessary paperwork signed.

‘Are you sure about going back today?’ Stiles ventures, unfurling the baby’s tiny body enough to
draw the straps around it securely. Heather has been chafing to get back to her pre-pregnancy life, and to the new job that awaits her.

‘There’s nothing keeping me here.’ Her voice is flat and toneless.

Stiles swallows heavily. ‘Okay. You know where to find us… If you want to see her.’

Heather shrugs.

Stiles finishes tucking the baby in and then goes to Heather, laying a hand gently on her shoulder. ‘Do you wanna say goodbye?’

She glances at him. She looks tired, but determined and at peace. ‘It’s better if I don’t.’

Stiles sighs, as quietly as he can. ‘Okay. I’ll take her home now, then.’

‘Okay.’

‘Heather… Thank you.’

She bites her lip and nods, turning away from them both, swiping away tears with her hands.

‘If you need anything… Anything…’ Stiles turns and picks up the car seat by the handle, startling a little at just how heavy it is for such a tiny creature, and leaves the room quietly. By the time he’s navigated the maze of hospital corridors and two elevator rides, the baby has fallen fast asleep from the motion. He almost ends up in the basement when he loses himself just looking at her, on one of their elevator rides. She’s pink and scrunched up, with the barest fluff of dark hair on her head. Her velvety skin is so new and so fragile he can make out some of the pin-fine, delicate veins underneath it. She makes soft snuffling noises as she sleeps and Stiles’ heart grows three sizes in three seconds. She’s perfect.

In the lobby, he draws the hood up over the car seat and lightly drapes a thin blanket over the top to keep the baby from getting wet. He’s soaked to his skin by the time he’s made it to his car and spent an inordinately long time messing with the car seat, which is supposed to be all intuitive and new-father-proof, but the damned thing is deceptively complex, and he mutters under his breath while he works his long fingers around the base of it trying to get the relevant mechanisms lined up.

When he’s done, he glances up to find the baby looking at him curiously. It’s the first time he’s seen her with her eyes open. They’re so tiny he can’t really see what color they are yet, and anyway he’s read that it can change over the first few months. He’s not even sure she can focus on him yet, but he’s a brand-new daddy, so he chooses to believe she understands perfectly everything that’s happening and is looking at him with prodigious intelligence.

‘Hi,’ he says, stroking the back of one of her miniature hands with his pinky finger.

She huffs, and then seems worn out with the effort of it as her eyes drift shut again. Stiles knows he should take advantage of this to start the drive to Beacon Hills where his dad is anxiously awaiting them, but he takes another few seconds just to look at her in all her creased, baby-scented perfection.

‘Goddamn,’ he says hoarsely.

He drags himself away and into the driver’s seat. The drive is only an hour and a half, but he’s fully prepared for it to take three times as long if he needs to stop to tend to his baby’s needs. He had fed and changed her just before bringing her home, but he’s still going to check on her at the slightest noise.
By some miracle she sleeps the whole way, lulled by the patter of rain on the windows, but Stiles stops twice anyway to make sure she’s still breathing.

The new house is nice; set back a little from the road and peaceful. His dad pulls him into a long, fierce hug before discarding him entirely in favour of his grand-daughter, who sleeps blissfully for another half an hour before deciding she’s not only awake but hungry, and absolutely livid about it.

Stiles tuts affectionately at her red, cross face, as he mixes up formula in the unfamiliar kitchen. ‘Alright, Hangry, hold your horses, I’m a’comin’…’

It takes forever to get her to drink a few ounces of milk, and then Stiles successfully changes her diaper without getting peed on, his momentary triumph giving way to the need to nap for about a thousand years. He imparts this to the Sheriff, who guffaws unsympathetically and informs him he can kiss napping goodbye for the next decade or two. Stiles would pout were the Sheriff not simultaneously making grabby hands for his granddaughter, allowing Stiles to absent himself to go to the bathroom and wipe the spit up from down his shoulder.

Stiles looks at his reflection in the mirror. His hair is sticking up at all sorts of crazy angles, and he’s pale and sort of terrified-looking, which is fair, he thinks, since the fact he has to figure out how to keep this brand-new tiny human alive is actually completely terrifying.

He spends about an hour freaking out about how bed will happen for either of them, eventually laying her gently on the bed next to him, framed by tightly-rolled blankets to ensure she can’t go anywhere. It’s partly to reassure her that he’s right there, but he also needs the constant assurance that she’s there and that she’s okay.

He’s also read that the scent of a nearby caregiver, and being close to their regular breathing, can help lull a baby to sleep.

It turns out that his daughter vehemently disagrees with this theory.

In the early hours, just before the dawn, Stiles lies awake next to his daughter who seems to be under the impression that she’s a nocturnal being, meeting any objection Stiles has to this notion with ear-splitting shrieks that leave Stiles convinced she’s half-banshee. At just after four he gives up on sleep and scoops her up into a swathe of blankets. He arranges her onto his chest, and pads them both out onto the porch in his bare feet and pyjamas, drawn out by the fresh breath of air that tempts him through the gap of his bedroom window. The rain has stopped.

The sky is clear, the stars scrubbed clean and bright by the downpour. Stiles has always liked the rain, how purifying it can be. The night air is cool and rich with petrichor, and it feels enticingly like autumn is around the corner. He sits on the step, kept mostly dry by the porch awning, and digs his toes into soft, wet grass. He tries to tempt the baby into a little more milk, and then cradles her into him, breathing in the scent of her and rubbing her back. They seem to be getting along okay so far, he thinks.

He talks quietly about everything and nothing, as she clenches and unclenches her tiny fists, regarding him seriously. Eventually, when the sky turns mauve and rose and golden, she falls asleep.

He rubs a tired hand over his face as she chuffs out minute little snores into his collarbone. The sun marks the start of their first day together, the two of them.

He decides to call her Oriana, for the dawn.
Details in the Fabric

Chapter Summary

Thanks for your lovely comments on the first chapter, I appreciate them! :)

Derek rests his head against the cool glass of the window, watching the town as the cab winds its way down Main Street. He finds himself placing all the things that are the still the same. Which is everything. There’s the diner where he and Laura used to fight over whether chocolate or vanilla shakes were better. She had always won, a force of nature since birth, bursting with life and with power that Derek could just never seem to muster. There’s the police station where Derek was held under suspicion after her body was found. There’s the bar he did his level best to get drunk in afterwards, where he fought with his betas and pushed them all away. And over there is a memory of another loss, and there another regret, and there and there and there. He squeezes his eyes shut.

It doesn’t feel any easier being back here. Every loss stays with him, every regret beating a tattoo in the back of his mind. Over years and years they had built up in his bloodstream, heavier and heavier, until they calcified right into his bones. They manifested in a deep, sad ache, and a sense of painful density in his skeleton that he’d hoped to lose with distance, like shedding an overcoat, as he escaped into the heated climes of South America. But of course all the space in the world can't heal a claustrophobia that's within you. You can only ignore it for a while, and for several months turquoise waters and cloud-waterfalls over mountain sides had provided enough of a distraction. Not anymore. He misses his pack, and in the end his need for them had outweighed his need for self-preservation. So he’d come home.

He’d gone straight to Isaac and had a tense, terse conversation communicated mostly via significant silences and furrowed brows. Eventually Isaac had scuffed at the ground violently with one foot and muttered, ‘You left me.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Derek had choked out, tentatively reaching out to grip the nape of Isaac’s neck. ‘I won’t do it again.’

His touch had seemed to unravel something in Isaac and he’d collapsed onto Derek’s chest like a puppet whose strings had been cut. He’d held himself with tension, still, because how could he trust Derek with himself yet, and Derek understood that of course. He was overwhelmed with gratitude that Isaac still seemed to need him at all. He gripped Isaac’s neck a little harder, rubbing his cheek against the top of Isaac’s head. They had stood together in silence for several long minutes.

When Isaac spoke his voice was a little rough. He drew in a shaky breath and said, ‘Erica’s gonna kill you.’

Derek had laughed, but Isaac wasn’t wrong.

He grimaces involuntarily at the thought of the choice words Erica will no doubt have for him – and even more in anticipation of Boyd’s steady, quiet disappointment in him.

He digs his fingers into the worn, soft leather of his dad’s jacket. That was who he was supposed to be – a beta, a mate, a family man. Everyone always said he was just like his dad, a chip off the old block. Now he’s been hardened by self-loathing and grief into someone unrecognisable. A stranger
in his father's jacket. He wonders if his dad would have been disappointed in just the same, quiet, devastating way as Boyd.

He wants to do better, this time. It's not like Beacon Hills could ever be a tabula rasa. He knows that. But he feels like he needs to do better at honoring Laura, and his mom, and the alphas they were and should have been.

He notices the cab driver's curious eyes, refracted at him through the rear-view mirror, and he can't help but shoot back one of the patented Hale glowers. He smirks as the driver blanches and flicks his eyes back down to the road, his fingers whitening as his grip tightens on the steering wheel. Old habits die hard, after all.

He tips the driver generously, Cora's lecture on karma ringing annoyingly in his ears. The guy floors it, driving off in a squeal of tires as soon as Derek closes the door. He doesn't even offer to help with Derek's bag.

Derek turns from the cloud of scorched rubber and goes into his apartment building for the first time in a year and a half. It feels like some sort of weird déjà vu to check his mail and swing himself up the stairs, two at a time, until he reaches the third floor. There are only two apartments per floor, his and his next-door neighbour's doors standing shoulder to shoulder. He lifts his chin and scents the air. Mrs Devonshire's scent is gone, only the barest trace of it lingering in the old, pock-marked wood of the door frames. She hasn't been here for a long time. He purses his mouth regretfully. Another loss, then. It seems Derek will never be free of them.

Instead there's a smell of cedar and musk and sweat – a man, definitely – and something much lighter and sweeter, too. New neighbours.

He huffs out a deep sigh. He'd liked Mrs Devonshire. She had called him 'young man' and had brought him home-made cinnamon cookies to thank him for carrying her groceries.

Best of all she had been extremely near-sighted and mostly deaf, and so hadn't noticed any of the more unusual activities that tended to happen in Derek's immediate, supernatural vicinity.

He flings his duffel bag down with a whump, and digs in his pocket for his keys, so caught up in his irritation over having to deal with new neighbours that he doesn't hear the staccato sound of feet on the stairs. He's caught by surprise when the person crashes into him, though not enough to actually be swayed by the impact, which sends whoever it is bouncing off him and into a crumpled heap on the floor.

Derek blinks down at the person for a second. The tangle of limbs on the floor is clad in an unkempt suit, unfeasibly long hands sticking out at odd angles. One is clutching a phone and one a massive set of keys. The heap of person makes a disgruntled noise and tries to rearrange itself with limited success, so Derek gives in and wedges his hands under what looks to be arms, and hauls the person to their feet.

He ignores the squawk of alarm that emanates from the person – the guy, Derek can now see – who spins, holding his key up in what appears to be self-defence. Derek rolls his eyes.

'You…' the man starts, accusingly, in a voice richer than Derek expected given his gangly frame. ‘You…’

Derek arches a brow, expectantly. The guy looks him up and down and Derek hears him swallow. The air fills with the burnt sugar scent of arousal, deep and sticky like molasses. Derek barely refrains from rolling his eyes again. A lot of people have this reaction to him, and honestly, it's
tedious. He has no respect for people who allow themselves to be led by their libidos. He made that mistake himself, a long time ago and he'd paid dearly.

‘You... are new...’ The guy finishes, eventually.

Derek bites back a sigh. ‘No, I’m not.’

‘Hmm?’ The guy drags his eyes up from Derek’s arms.

This time Derek doesn’t hold back on the eye-roll, and pink blooms on the guy’s cheeks in uneven splotches. Seeing how he affects this guy’s blood makes something flutter in Derek’s chest. It’s unwelcome. Annoyed with himself, Derek grits out, ‘I’m not new.’ He leaves the ‘asshole’ unspoken, but it hangs in the space between them anyway.

‘Oh.’ The man frowns. ‘What are you then, some sort of hermit?’

‘No.’ Derek is taken aback by the guy’s abruptness. ‘I’ve been away.’

‘Ah.’ The guy nods vigorously. ‘That makes sense. I wondered ‘cos I’ve been here three months and I hadn’t seen you before, I mean, I definitely would have remembered you…’

Derek glowers at him.

‘Uh,’ the guy fumbles, thrown but clearly not put off, ‘and your name is...?’

Derek’s eyes tick up to the ceiling in frustration. He doesn’t want to be stood in a stairwell talking to this nosy stranger, he wants to have a scalding shower and drink tea and brood for three or four hours until it’s time to sleep. He makes sure to use his most pained voice as he grits out, ‘Derek.’

‘Well. Hi, new-to-me-but-not-the-building Derek. I’m Stiles.’ The guy – Stiles – sticks out one of his long, finely-boned hands.

Derek snorts. ‘No, you’re not.’

Stiles blinks at him with thick, luxuriant lashes. ‘Excuse you?’

Derek raises an eyebrow into a sardonic arch. ‘Stiles is not a name.’

Stiles purses his lips. ‘It’s a nickname. My real name is even less recognisable as an appellation, so.’

Derek nods once and then lets the silence get awkward.

‘So...’ Stiles tips up onto his toes and sucks his teeth. ‘You’re one of those dudes who’s in beast mode, like, all day long, right?’

Derek’s chest plummets down through his stomach. This guy – this Stiles – knows.

Not only that but he’s an asshole about it. ‘What?’

Stiles pokes him in the chest with a slender, pale finger, and says, with a nervous chuckle, ‘I mean, you’re one of those dudes with a You-tube channel full of videos of you doing six hundred one armed push-ups a day, right?’

‘Oh.’ Derek feels light headed as his pulse re-starts, his blood thudding in his ears. ‘No.’

Stiles frowns a little. ‘Right. So, uh, I should apologise in advance for any noise. I live with my...’ He stops talking with a startled flail of his arms as his apartment door is flung open. A thick curl of
sound - music, television, an oven timer - swirls out into the small hallway, followed by a small body.

‘…disco smurf…’ Stiles finishes faintly, taking in the sight of the small girl, clad only in a diaper, covered from forehead to shin in bright blue paint and rainbow glitter. ‘I apparently live with my disco smurf. Oh my gosh, Ria, what have you been making?’ His voice is a mixture of amusement and horror, but not a trace of anger, and the small girl beams as she toddles towards Stiles, wobbling unsteadily on her feet like she’s unused to walking. Stiles scoops her up, his slender arms strong and sure around her.

Derek can see the baby has Stiles’ big, amber eyes. A crown made of pasta tubes and pipe-cleaners rests atop her downy hair, which is so fine it stands out from her head, like she’s channelling static electricity through her tiny body.

Stiles gazes down at her, drinking her in like a starving man, and Derek suddenly feels too hot and too awkward, like an intruder. He remembers his dad looking at Cora just like that, his face open and tender, his love profound. Derek doesn’t know if he’ll ever get to feel that way. He doesn’t know if he’s even capable of it, now. He grips the cuffs of his dad’s jacket urgently, in case all the love his dad had for them, for their family, has somehow soaked into it and still resides there, stitched into the creased leather and the soft lining. He pulls it more firmly around himself as he slides his key into his door and slips inside, closing it softly behind him.

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Stiles feels weirdly off-balance. He’s usually really good at filling awkward silences - and non-awkward silences, and creating silences where previously there were none, for the sole purpose of filling them - but for some reason, this guy with the angry eyebrows, Derek, has stolen all his words. He’d been genuinely considering whistling to fill the space around them, like an idiot, when Ria appeared with her excited ‘Dada!’ that never fails to thrill his heart.

She grins up at him with big honey-brown eyes that match his own, her mouth and chin all Heather. He turns to introduce her to their new neighbour, puffed up and preening at getting to show off this gorgeous, perfect thing he made, even if she is sky blue and sparkly, but Derek is gone.

‘Huh,’ Stiles says, looking down at Ria. ‘Weird.’

He wanders into his apartment, high-fiving Erica as he passes her before grabbing the oven mitts to pull the mac and cheese out of the oven. ‘You,’ he says, inhaling the scent of bubbling, melted cheese, as Erica hangs up the phone, ‘are the best baby sitter in the world. Fact.’

‘I know,’ she says flippantly, tossing her blonde curls back over one shoulder, careful not to dislodge her own pasta crown that nestles resplendent on her head, but she lights up with a pleased smile anyway. She grabs a wet wipe and dabs at the blue on Ria’s face and hands, trying to get her cleaned up enough to eat.

Stiles pulls a china plate off of the drainer for himself and a pink plastic one for Ria. ‘Sorry I’m a couple of minutes late, I was meeting our new neighbour. Well, old neighbour. Old to the building, I guess, new to us, right Ria?’

‘Dada,’ Ria says solemnly, in agreement.

‘Derek’s back?’ Erica’s eyes go wide and her pasta crown tumbles to the floor, unnoticed.

‘Yeah. You know him?’ Stiles asks curiously, ladling out macaroni and then adding green beans that
he knows Ria won’t eat.

Erica shifts uncomfortably, eyes darting in the direction of the next door apartment. She tilts her head like she’s trying to hear something, which makes Stiles smirk. ‘Uh, yeah,’ she says. ‘He’s sort of… my boss.’

Stiles narrows his eyes. ‘I thought I was your boss?’

Erica shrugs. ‘Well, yeah. He’s… Okay, he’s more like a life coach, then.’

Stiles drops the spoon back into the serving dish, splattering cheese all over the counter and his shirt. He doesn’t care. He raises his eyebrows incredulously. ‘Mr Murder-Face, my next-door neighbour, is your life coach? What does he coach you in, the art of aggressive eyebrows?’

‘Ha ha,’ Erica smirks, walking backwards towards the door, snagging her purse from the coat hooks. ‘Hey, I’ve got a date with Boyd. I better go or I’ll be late for my man! Bye, Ri-Ri, see you tomorrow!‘

She whirls out of the door in a flurry of kisses, and Stiles lets his eyes linger for a second on the space where she was. His heart contracts painfully as he briefly fantasises about a life where the person he comes home to doesn’t immediately leave, but instead eats dinner with them, making conversation about their days, and holds Stiles on the sofa while they watch mindless tv, before settling down beside him in his bed and kissing him goodnight.

His musings are interrupted by the angry wail that indicates Ria is hungry, so he sets aside his thoughts of loneliness, and Derek with his stupidly beautiful cheekbones, and all of the outside world, in favour of delicious melted trans-fats, and soaking in as much of his daughter as possible in their short time together.

Later, after Ria is fed and bathed and slumbering peacefully in his arms in the rocking chair in her room, he lets himself think again about their grumpily handsome next door neighbour.

He sighs and pulls Ria closer to his chest. Everything about the baby’s room is calm, designed to cradle and soothe. He stares for a minute at the wall that adjoins Derek’s apartment, as though it might give him some insight into the mysterious man beyond, but nothing permeates the layers of soft toys and blanket that swaddle the room.

He hums a lullaby into the silence of the room, as much for himself as for Ria, but he can’t help his eyebrows pulling together in a frown. He’s a friendly guy who likes to get along with his neighbours. He juggles his job as one of the curators of Beacon Hills Museum with his daughter and his family and friends who are few but precious. It’s a little lonely but he’s happy. Ria’s happy. The last thing they need is trouble. And Stiles strongly suspects, based on the leather jacket alone, that their new neighbour will be all sorts of trouble.
Derek wakes at nearly noon the next day, to the sound of another heartbeat in his apartment and the smell of coffee wafting richly under his bedroom door. He places the clicking of heels on the tiled floor before his sleep-muzzy brain places the pattern of the heartbeat. Erica. He stifles a groan and closes his eyes, wondering how long he can get away with feigning sleep.

‘I know you’re awake!’ Erica shouts from the kitchen. ‘If you don’t get your douchey ass out here right now then I’m coming in there, don’t think I won’t! And only one of those options ends in you still having balls in ten minutes!’

Dammit. Not long, then.

‘I’m not even dressed, Erica!’ Derek calls back.

‘Don’t give me more incentive, Derek!’

Derek gives in to a groan then, rolling out of bed to land on his toes. He stretches out his shoulders and slowly bends forwards, incrementally lengthening out the muscles that bring his spine into flexion. He wouldn’t put it past Erica to have made coffee just so she can throw it at him, so he needs to be prepared to move fast.

He holds the stretch for a few seconds, enjoying the feeling of elasticity returning to his muscles as he warms them up. He’s secretly thankful for the yoga retreat in Mancora that Cora had dragged him along to, even though he’d rather die than tell her that.

Speaking of dying…

He pulls sweatpants and a tank top on over his boxers, and shuffles barefoot to the kitchen where Erica is waiting. She has vertiginously high heels on, scarlet to match her lipstick and her nails, which are stark against the white of the coffee mug she has her hands wrapped around.

She watches him for a minute, head tilted slightly. There’s still a rawness to her, a slight unpredictability that hasn’t settled from the bite. She bunches her muscles ever so slightly as she watches the world, giving herself away as a predator in a way that born wolves learn to conceal in childhood. ‘Well, well,’ she says eventually, taking in his soft posture and exposed neck. ‘I was prepared for aggressively-defensive-Derek. I thought you’d be out here flexing your muscles, all ‘I am alpha, hear me roar!’’ She takes a carefully nonchalant sip of coffee, but her eyes are blazing and her tone bites, each word nipping a little chunk out of Derek’s flesh. He wonders how many words it will take for her to get the full pound.

Derek lifts a contrite shoulder. ‘I owe you an apology.’

Erica snorts bitterly. ‘Oh you owe me about twelve of those.’

He inclines his head in acquiescence. He’s never been good at words, never been able to articulate
exactly what he wants to say, so instead he holds his hands out, palm up. *Forgive me.* It’s universal, he hopes.

She taps one foot against the tiled floor. ‘No one’s mad at you for leaving, Derek,’ she says at last. ‘It was a shit storm, we get it. No one blames you for feeling the need to go out into the world and find yourself like a sappy nineties Train song.’

Derek rolls his eyes to the ceiling at that, exhaling through his nose. Once he’s made the necessary amount of reparations and has re-earned their respect as their alpha, he is going to make her do so many burpees.

Erica’s fingers tighten on her mug, her large eyes still burning. ‘You need to tell us, though. And leave us a way to get in touch with you.’ She softens suddenly, vulnerability creeping in as she chews her bottom lip. ‘What if we needed you?’

Derek shakes his head. ‘I told Deaton to contact me if there was trouble.’

Erica rubs a hand over her forehead. She looks sad or maybe frustrated, or both. ‘Derek,’ she says, setting the mug down on the counter. The imprint of her mouth is on it, perfect and violent in blood red. She pushes herself off of the counter and walks over to him, asking permission to touch him with a tilt of her head. She lays her hands on his forearms. ‘Derek. We don’t just need you if there’s trouble. We’re a pack. We’re *your* pack.’ Something warm and heavy settles in his chest. ‘We *need* you.’

She draws back so she can look him square in the eye, lowering her voice so it’s intimate and only for him. ‘And if you fuck off without telling us again I will personally make sure that bad things happen to your squishy bits, Derek. Bad. Things.’

Derek swallows and nods. ‘Duly noted.’

She beams, wide and innocent and so fucking dangerous, and skips away to pour more coffee. ‘So. The cliff notes version of the last eighteen months of my life, which I’m sure you’re dying to be caught up on…’ He smiles as he accepts a cup from her, relieved to have apparently passed the first of whatever tests she has set up. ‘Boyd and I are so in love it’s disgusting. I watered your plant so it didn’t die. Your old neighbour went to live with her daughter in Florida so the whole place smells way less like boiled cabbage. Oh, and I work for your new neighbour, Stiles, who’s the cutest fucking thing I’ve ever seen with the exception of his daughter, and Boyd.’

Derek choke a little on his coffee at the idea of Boyd being described as *cute* and then swings back around to focus on the rest. Huh. He had assumed the scent of Erica that permeated their hallway was due to her bringing his mail up and keeping an eye on his place. He’s not exactly thrilled to discover that it’s actually because she takes care of the next-door baby three or four afternoons a week, although he isn’t surprised either – she always has had an uncanny way of getting involved in every aspect of his life whether he wanted her to or not. She’s a lot like Laura was, in that way.

She announces that she needs to get next door, toeing off her heels in favour of flats that she pulls out of her bag, which makes him wonder if maybe she really had been wearing them as armor. Before she leaves she ducks in for a hug. Without her scary shoes she can tuck her head under his chin. He skims his hands over her shoulders, and nuzzles over her hair, and a little of the ache he’s been feeling for months eases up.

‘So,’ she says, ‘there’s a party next door this afternoon, and you’re coming.’

‘No,’ he says reflexively.
‘Yes.’

‘No.’

‘Derek…’ Erica’s voice resumes its ‘don’t fuck with me’ tone. ‘Stiles is great. I’ve been babysitting Ria in the afternoons for six months. They’re like family to me, and I would like it very much if you were properly introduced.’

Derek frowns. ‘Six months? So you knew them before they moved in here?’

Erica flips her hair back over her shoulder. ‘Yup. I was the one who told them the apartment was available. And I might have had something to do with the very reasonable rent they’re being charged.’ She smirks. ‘They’re good people, Derek. I want to help them. Give them a chance?’

Derek groans out a sigh. ‘Fine.’

Erica grins and pats his chest. ‘It’s Ria’s first birthday, so you’ll need to buy a present, and if you could tone the whole murderously terrifying thing down to just vaguely menacing that’d be super.’

The whole thing rushes out on one long exhale, and before Derek has time to even begin to process it she’s gone in a cloud of blonde curls and white teeth, leaving him gaping in the kitchen, wondering what the hell just happened.

*

That afternoon, after a much less confusing reunion with Boyd, he stands behind Erica as she knocks on Stiles’ door. He’s not sulking about being dragged to the party, no matter what Erica says. He’s a grown man and an alpha and he doesn’t sulk. He’s just naturally stoic, that’s all.

Stiles flings open the door to greet them. He’s wearing a stupid shirt that says ‘Stud’ with a picture of a muffin underneath it, and a glittery blue party hat with a triumphant explosion of ribbons from the top. His hair sticks out in about eight different directions around it. He looks like he’s opened the door mid-laugh, his cheeks aglow, like he’s lit up from within.

Derek can’t help but notice how the thin elastic strap of the party hat digs into the pale skin of Stiles’ cheek and jaw, which is otherwise perfect but for a speckle of moles. He has the sudden urge to slide a finger under the elastic, to loosen it from where it’s leaving its thin, angry bite, and somehow soothe the reddened skin. He forces the urge down, glaring down at his own hands in horror to make sure they don’t move under their own volition.

Stiles throws his arms around Erica who hugs him tightly back. ‘I brought Derek,’ she says. ‘He’s useful for lifting, clean up, that sort of thing.’

‘Hey, man,’ Stiles says cheerfully, around the silver blowout he has in his mouth, the stretch of his lips making the words come out as just vowel sounds. Derek nods back.

Stiles turns to lead them through to his living room, and it’s then that Derek notices the pale blue, sequinned tutu around Stiles’ slender waist, because that’s the sort of thing dads do for their daughters.

It makes Derek’s chest feel tight. He doesn’t know why. Stiles is ridiculous. Clearly.

Stiles’ apartment is warm and worn where Derek’s is modern and sharp. The furniture is shabby and thrown together haphazardly, but everything is comfortable and soft. The sofa is large and squishy, with a crocheted blanket slung over the back, and the armchairs are mismatched. There’s a tiny table
wedged against the wall with two chairs and a highchair tucked under it. The bar between the kitchen and the living room is covered with party food. Derek can smell that Stiles has been baking – cupcakes, pizzas and actually a lot of the food that litters the bar. The room is festooned with streamers and balloons, banners that say 'Happy 1st Birthday Oriana', and so much love it brings a lump to Derek’s throat. Derek’s apartment is where he lives. This is a home. Derek doesn’t want to leave.

Erica disappears into the kitchen, and leaves Derek standing awkwardly with Stiles. A small crowd of people are scattered around the room. Ria, the only child there, is holding court in the centre of a circle of older adults. She’s wearing a silvery party dress, and a tiny crown on top of her wild hair. She looks like some sort of magical pixie.

‘We had cupcakes at her day-care this morning, because I had to work,’ Stiles says, rolling the party blower between his long fingers. ‘I figured thirty toddlers in a third-floor apartment with no yard would be a recipe for disaster.’

Derek hums in agreement. Stiles doesn’t seem to need any further response to carry on his cheerful chatter.

‘This is more for me. You know, yay me, I kept a whole tiny human alive for a whole year. Whoop!’ Stiles wiggles his hands in the air, smiling at Derek with his eyes which crinkle warmly at the edges. Derek wonders where Ria’s mom is. He can’t imagine anyone voluntarily walking out on Stiles and Ria.

He stares back at Stiles, suddenly realising it’s probably his turn to talk.

‘Uh,’ he says, ‘congratulations.’ He cringes internally as it comes out far more sarcastic than he intends. He tries to deflect by shoving a small bag at Stiles’ chest. ‘I brought a gift.’

‘Thanks.’ Stiles eyebrows climb towards his hairline in surprise. ‘Hey, Ria, Uncle Derek brought a gift!’ Derek swallows hard. He hasn’t been ‘Uncle Derek’ in forever. Not since the fire. It’s aches like an old bruise.

Stiles crinkles the bag in Ria’s direction, and she clambers to her feet and wobbles over to them, earning a chorus of coos from the nearby adults. Stiles drops to his knees and offers Ria the bag, which she takes with a squeal of delight. Derek feels awkward, still standing, like he’s taking up too much space, so he gingerly perches on the arm of a nearby armchair.

Stiles ruffles Ria’s soft hair as she paws at the gift-wrap. ‘Her hair, dude,’ he says softly, like he’s confiding a secret. The affection in his voice makes Derek’s breath catch in his throat. ‘She looks like a dandelion. Like she’s made of wishes, you know?’

Derek nods jerkily. The room suddenly feels too hot.

The girl lets out a shriek of glee as she finally extricates her prize from the layers of tissue – a soft doll with brown eyes in a sweetly smiling face, and short, flyaway hair made of yarn.

Stiles’ head snaps up to look at Derek. ‘It looks like her,’ he says in surprise.

Derek shrugs noncommittally, not looking at the curve of Stiles' mouth.

‘Dude, that’s so awesome!’ Stiles put a hand briefly on Derek’s arm. The warmth of it unfurls all the way up Derek’s arm. Stiles catches Ria up into a hug. ‘Thank you. Can you say thank you, Ri-Ri?’

The little girl wriggles until Stiles sets her down, then she slips from Stiles’ grasp and toddles over to
Derek, stretching her chubby hands up towards him. He blinks at her for a second until she says ‘Up!’ in an exasperated, long-suffering sort of tone that suggests she’s always having to spell out obvious things for adults.

Stiles snorts. ‘Sorry,’ he says, ‘she can only say, like, five words, but they’re almost all commands. Priorities, I guess.’

Derek catches her up and settles her on his lap, where she places her damp, pudgy hands on either side of his face and launches into a long sentence made up of soft sounds that aren’t words but are definitely conversational. She sounds like she’s explaining something to him, so he says, ‘Uh huh,’ reflexively at her when she beams at him. ‘I thought so, too.’

He flushes when he feels Stiles’ eyes on him. ‘Oh, sorry,’ he nods towards Stiles who is kneeling frozen, staring at them with wide, amused eyes.

‘Oh. No problem. I’m the one who should apologize, really. My kid just accosted you, after all.’

Derek shakes his head, bouncing Ria a little on his knee. ‘It’s alright. I like kids.’

‘Huh,’ says Stiles thoughtfully. ‘She likes you too, seems like. I’m afraid you’ll never get rid of us, now. We’re like limpets. Some of us more literally than others…’ He gestures to Ria’s vice-like grip on Derek’s face with an amused smirk.

‘S’okay,’ Derek says. And looking into Ria’s big, vibrant eyes, he finds he means it.

‘Hey little miss, it’s almost cake time.’ Stiles moves a little closer to Derek, fingers flexing involuntarily. Someone else comes in through the front door, and slams it behind them, and the movement of the air makes Stiles’ scent swirl richly over to Derek.

Stiles smells like that musky, cedar scent that Derek sort of likes, despite himself, but now there’s something else. His nostrils flare as he skims the air, and he has to stop his eyes from flashing red as he catches it – yes, there - the unpleasant bite of sulphur, and, following it like a shadow, the sickly-sweet putridity of decay. Derek reels back a fraction. It’s a smell that haunts him, a smell that he hoped he was rid of. Stiles doesn’t exactly reek of it, not like he would if he were in regular contact with decomposing bodies, but it’s there. He’s been around someone who’s dying.

Derek takes another surreptitious sniff as he passes Ria back over. The infant smells of laundry detergent and lotion, lavender and sunlight. His shoulders sag with relief. She’s healthy. She’s okay.

Stiles pops Ria down on the floor and glances back over to Derek. ‘Everything okay there, buddy?’ Derek catches the dark edge to his scent again.

‘What…’ He swallows to keep from retching. ‘What do you do for a living?’

Stiles’ brow crinkles. ‘I work over at the museum.’

‘You handle stuff? The exhibits?’ That might explain the smell.

Stiles shrugs. ‘Sure, sometimes. I’m sort of an apprentice, so I do a little of everything. Why?’

‘No reason.’

‘Okay.’ Stiles shoots him a curious look, and it seems like he’s about to ask something, but then he catches the sound of whoever the newcomer was and leaps to his feet, crossing the room in a few long strides. ‘Scotty-Scott-Scott-Shabadoo!’ He bellows.
Derek looks away so he doesn’t have to watch the flex of Stiles’ shoulders as he hugs another guy, concentrating instead on the odd, barely-there scent. He tries not to let the memories of finding Laura’s body claw their way out of the box he’s firmly locked them into.

He glances back over at Stiles, who is talking to a young, good-looking guy. They seem to be having a spirited discussion on Batman vs. Superman, which then segues into the sort of odd tangent that Derek suspects is par for the course when conversing with Stiles.

‘…and a bat’s wings’ Stiles says, ‘are actually webbed skin stretched between fingers, so technically they’re flying on the power of jazz hands…’

_They’re not the only ones_, Derek thinks, unexpectedly drawn in by Stiles’ hands. They’re in perpetual motion, those long hands. At first glance it seems like Stiles is flailing, like his enthusiasm for the subject matter is too great to be contained within the confines of his body so his limbs jerk erratically as a means of expressing the excess energy.

But after Derek watches for a while he decides there’s a rhythm to it; it’s more like Stiles is creating a deeper, non-verbal level to his words, the expansive sweep of his arms and angles of his wrists spinning a surprisingly complex, nuanced language of their own from the air. Derek is surprised by how much he finds he likes it. It feels honest, like even if Stiles tried to lie his hands would give him away.

He sits on the periphery of the party, looking in, like he always does. But for the first time in a long time he thinks he might like to be part of it.

‘Hey Derek,’ Stiles calls out, ‘Come and grab a drink, dude, and meet my brother-from-another-mother, Scotty!’

Derek hauls himself to his feet, but only takes a few steps when he’s hit by a whole new smell, one much more present and much more worrying: werewolf. He stops in his tracks and glares at Scott, the source of the smell, who tenses up and glares back. Behind them Erica stands, looking from one to the other, eyes wide in alarm.

Stiles seems oblivious to the sudden tension. ‘Scott, this is my neighbour, Derek.’

Scott nods his head and says, ‘Hi,’ like he’s not staring down an alpha werewolf at a child’s first birthday party.

Derek opens his mouth, but everything is too much; the people, the noise, the memories. The sweet affection from the baby, those spicy-warm elements of Stiles’ scent and the sad-sick undertone, the unexpected additional werewolf in the room.

He swallows convulsively for a second, trying not to let how overwhelmed he is show on his face.

‘Bathroom?’ He chokes out, and then, without waiting for an answer, he turns and flees.

* 

Later that evening, as the setting sun starts to paint the apartment walls buttery golden, Stiles knocks on Derek’s door. Derek rests his head against the cool wood of the door, listening to Stiles’ too-fast heart and the fidgeting of his feet on the linoleum.

He swings open the door part-way. He wants to say hi, but is struck momentarily dumb by the sight of Stiles, eyes tired but smile still vibrant, holding a plate of cupcakes up like an offering. They look homemade and they smell incredible. Derek’s heart does a complicated flip in his chest, which makes
him angry with himself. He’s too raw for this, too split open and too confused to cope with Stiles providing, bringing food to his den.

‘You left before cake,’ Stiles says.

‘Yeah,’ Derek manages, flatly. ‘I had to get back to my, uh, to, to…’ He gropes wildly for something to say. ‘To Isaac.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles looks down at the cupcakes. Then he looks up, his mouth turned up into a wry, resigned smile. ‘I brought enough for you to share with him.’

Derek nods and steps back, allowing Stiles through into his own living room. Boyd is leaning back against the hard, squeaky leather sofa and Isaac is folded into one of his pretentious chrome-framed armchairs. He’d thought he was putting together a cool, modern bachelor pad, but now, through his irritated eyes, it just looks like a cheap Bond-set imitation.

‘Holy fuck,’ Stiles says, eyes huge and wide, looking over at Boyd and Isaac. ‘Did I interrupt some sort of Hotties of Beacon Hills calendar shoot?’

Derek ignores the spark of jealousy that flares up within him. Isaac smirks and saunters over to grab a cupcake. ‘I’m Isaac,’ he says with a shy smile. ‘Happy birthday to your daughter.’

‘Thanks,’ Stiles says. ‘Do you live here too?’

‘Uh,’ Isaac glances up at Derek, uncertain. ‘Sometimes.’

Derek squeezes his hip reassuringly. ‘Whenever you want, you know that.’

Stiles’ eyes track the looks between the two, and he takes a step backwards, stumbling over nothing. Isaac ducks in to save the cupcakes with one hand and steady Stiles with the other. It irritates Derek immensely because jesus, how defenceless is this guy? Stiles laughs self-consciously and examines his hand which he’s managed to smush into some of the icing.

‘Fuck,’ he breathes, ‘thanks. Also, fuck it, I can’t believe I said ‘fuck’ so many times. I’m trying to stop now that Ria’s starting to say words.’ He shakes his head at himself, and starts to lick at the frosting on his hand.

Derek grits his teeth. He’s had a long day and Stiles being in his space is rapidly becoming too much.

‘My Mom always used to say ’monkeys’ if she started to swear,’ Boyd says helpfully from the couch, and what? Since when has Boyd freely volunteered information about his childhood?

Stiles frowns briefly. ‘Monkeys? Really? What, like, fuck-monkeys? ‘Cos I gotta tell ya, I don’t really think that’s better…’

Boyd chuckles. ‘No, like, f-monkeys, or sh-monkeys. God knows what my elementary school teacher thought she was teaching me when we were learning about animals…’

Stiles stops licking his fingers long enough to throw his head back and laugh, and Derek has had enough, because what right does this kid - this kid with the pretty mouth and the lovely hands and the werewolf friends and the scent of death - have to waltz in here and effortlessly connect with people he doesn’t even know, with Derek’s people?

He huffs, angrily, and grinds out, ‘Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, parenting? Elsewhere?’
Stiles draws himself up into a hard line and Derek just has time to think *uh oh,* and feel vaguely sick about the way Stiles' face has shut down, before Stiles rounds on him, hands flying.

‘Oh, you know what, thank *god* you reminded me. Because I’d actually totally forgotten I even *have* a kid in the three minutes I’ve been away from her, bringing some of her *birthday cupcakes* over to you. I don’t know how I’ve managed this long without you, Derek, and your insightful parenting advice which I assume is wisdom based on your long experience of raising the, uh, let’s see, *zero* children that you have. Now if you’ll excuse me I need to get back to my daughter who I have of course left totally unattended and with free access to knives, fire and several exposed wires.’

He flicks both of his hands angrily, like he's shaking Derek off of him, and then spins on his heel and stalks out. Derek stares after him. Somehow the apartment feels so much emptier than it did before.

‘Nice job,’ Boyd says mildly from around a mouthful of cupcake.

‘Shut up,’ Derek responds, tightly.

His jaw aches from where he’s clenched it so long. He crosses his arms in front of his chest to try to contain the unnerving sensation that his ribs are opening up, leaving his soft insides exposed and vulnerable. He doesn’t know why he cares that he’s upset Stiles. He’s always upsetting people, and he’s never cared before. So why does he care what Stiles or his beautiful hands think of him? But he does, and he's ashamed of himself.

‘Erica’s gonna kill you,’ Isaac says, peeling back the wrapper from one of the cakes. ‘Again.’

Oh fuck-monkeys. She is.
Stiles paces the hallway for a couple of minutes, taking long, slow breaths. He doesn’t want to go back into his apartment steaming mad and risk waking Ria up when it had already taken almost an hour to get her down because of her massive sugar high. He can feel his nails biting half-moons into the flesh of his palms as he remembers Derek’s tense jaw, the smug challenge in his eyes. Stiles wants to scream so badly his teeth ache. He’s just so… angry.

He stops and rests his hands on the banister, salt from unshed tears of rage stinging at his sinuses. Derek had managed to land a blow in the one place that really hurts; his parenting. He loves his daughter more than anything in the world, but he has no idea if that’s enough. He has his dad, and Scott and Erica, but essentially he’s doing this alone – he has no idea if he’s enough.

He’s managed to navigate most of the daily challenges being a single parent throws up. He handles the endless cavalcade of plastic cups and plates to be filled and washed, the loads of laundry, the groaning monthly planner that reminds him whose birthday party is next and when to make brownies for the bake sale at day-care. He’s the one who rocks her in the night, he’s the one who changes every diaper, he’s the one who figures out the complexities of teeny, tiny tights every morning. He wrestles with the relentless warps and wefts of their everyday lives, and in general he feels like he does a great job of not freaking out when he dares to consider the head-spinning juxtaposition of it all against the bigger picture - the fact that he’s responsible for a whole other human being. He’s getting her through the day alive from start to finish, yeah, but he’s also shaping her future with every choice. He’s not just making decisions, he’s planting seeds of consciousness. Everything he does matters. It matters so much that he can’t afford to freak out about it. It’s part of the exhausting irony of parenthood.

But damn, it would be nice to freak out sometimes. He can’t even imagine the sweetness of the relief that might come from being allowed two minutes of not having to hold it all together. If someone else were there with him, weaving the tapestry of their lives together, holding on to the other end of those warps and wefts so that Stiles could let go of them sometimes…

He sighs and flexes his hands, shaking it off. He’s doing the best he can. It’s all he can do. It’s enough for Ria, and if it’s not enough for Derek then who damn well cares.

Fuck Derek and his entitled fucking opinions and his stupid fucking stubble. Stiles is doing fine.

Eventually his hands stop shaking and he lets himself back into his place. Scott is curled up on the sofa, reading something on his phone, but looks up in alarm when Stiles walks in.

‘Hey, what’s wrong?’ Scott leans forward to look at Stiles’ face. ‘Did something happen? I knew I should have come with you, did they hurt you?’

Stiles grabs a couple of sodas from the fridge and throws one towards Scott. It’s a source of constant amusement to him that Scott seems to be able to catch a soda from any angle, at any speed, no sweat.
It’s like his superpower or something. That and being unnervingly intuitive to Stiles’ feelings. And Ria’s, for that matter.

He throws himself down into his favorite ratty armchair. ‘What? No. Chill, man. I’m okay, Derek’s just a dick, is all.’

Scott cracks the tab of his soda. ‘Come on, spill.’

‘I don’t know, I guess he’s too macho for cupcakes or whatever. They just seemed to make him mad. Or maybe I made him mad. He was there with a couple of other guys, all of them improbably hot. One of them’s practically living with him, so maybe I was keeping them from a sex marathon or something. I can see how that would harsh your buzz.’

Scott snorts incredulously. ‘How can you get mad over cupcakes? Those things were delicious.’

Stiles throws his hands in the air. ‘I know, right? But you’ve seen the guy, maybe all forms of sugar and fat make him hulk out.’ Stiles shrugs. ‘More likely he’s just fundamentally opposed to me as a human being. Pretty sure Erica’s gonna tear him a new one over his douche-capades today, though.’

Right on cue, a furious female voice filters through the adjoining wall. Scott winces. ‘Oh man, I wouldn’t wanna be his eardrums right about now.’

Stiles takes a long, satisfying sip of soda. ‘Nope. You put Ria’s white noise machine on, right?’

Scott nods, downing his entire drink in two massive gulps before cramming an entire slice of pizza into his mouth. Stiles looks on, impressed. Scott might be sweet as honey but the guy eats like an animal. It’s one of the reasons Stiles loves him.

‘Thanks. Are you staying tonight? It’s been way too long since we had any Stiles and Scotty bonding time, dude. I can’t believe you haven’t even made it out here, before.’

‘I know, I’m sorry, I’m a terrible step-brother. I’ve just been so busy with the surgery and with Allison. And I see you and Ria at Sunday dinner every week.’ Scott leans over to grab the remote. ‘But I promise I am all yours tonight, my man.’

Stiles shifts to the other end of the sofa and he and Scott slump down in a comfortable pile of limbs. He yawns deeply. ‘Good to hear.’ He’s pretty sure he’ll be asleep within about forty-five seconds. He checks the baby monitor that everyone thinks he’s crazy to have because Ria’s never more than about twelve feet from him in his apartment, but he doesn’t care. He’s comforted by her steady puffs of breath.

‘Now that I’ve been here,’ Scott’s saying, his tone a little odd – or maybe Stiles is already dreaming – ‘I’ll definitely be back, a lot more often.’ Stiles warms when he sees Scott direct a dirty look in the direction of the apartment next door. Scott’s a good friend.

Stiles remembers his dad telling him he was dating again, how he’d been up since dawn, fidgeting in the living room until Stiles came downstairs, pacing out the seconds like a metronome. ‘She’ll never be a replacement,’ the Sheriff had said, sagging in relief into Stiles’ hug. ‘She’s something new.’ Stiles had held him tighter. ‘She has a boy about your age,’ John said. ‘Nice kid.’

‘Awesome,’ Stiles had replied. ‘Invite them both to Sunday dinner. I’ll make lasagne.’

That Sunday a tiny, eight-week old Ria had been streaming with cold and refused to go to anyone but Stiles, who had been rocking her for about four straight hours when Scott and Melissa had arrived. Stiles had been near frantic with worry and exhaustion, and hadn’t even managed a bowl of
cereal, let alone a lasagne. Within ten minutes Scott was cooing into Ria’s ear, rubbing her back soothingly, and Melissa had pressed a cup of tea into Stiles’ shaking hands. She had whipped up pasta and meat sauce while Stiles and Scott talked video games until Ria was lulled into sleep. Scott walked in slow circles with her around the living room, never once complaining. He was just there.

The Sheriff had arrived home from a call-out just in time to bear witness to the birth of a truly, epically beautiful bromance. Stiles is confidant bards will sing of it after their deaths.

Scott’s the best, he thinks lazily as sleep overtakes him. He’s almost certain he hears Erica shout the word ‘douche-canoe’, and he smiles into the sofa cushion. Fuck Derek.

*

Derek’s apartment is the same configuration to Stiles’, only everything is opposite. He figures out within a couple of days that his bedroom wall adjoins Stiles’ bedroom wall, which is next to Ria’s room, but now that he’s tuned in to Stiles and Ria’s frequencies he finds he can hear almost everything in the next-door apartment. It’s a special form of torture. He’s been around families since he lost his own, sure, but he’s never had to hear them at their most intimate before.

He tries not to listen in, but good intentions aren’t enough to keep Derek from hearing Stiles sing his daughter to sleep, or put on silly voices when they read together. Derek smiles right along with Stiles as Ria’s sings along passionately to ‘Let It Go’ even though she can’t talk yet. He can hear Stiles’ heart skip when Ria stumbles, and how his tone turns silky and persuasive as he brushes her hair. It’s a shocking, painful reminder of his own childhood, of the everyday rhythm of family, and Derek aches for it so badly that sometimes he leans his forehead against the cool plaster, spreading his palms against the render like he can maybe that way he can soak up their affection and intimacy through osmosis. But the closest he can get to it is echoes through the brickwork. It’s like the walls are taunting him.

He deals with it how he always deals with pain; by channelling it into something physical. He fumbles for running shoes and takes off for the preserve, hoping that by the time he returns Stiles will have left for work and he won’t have to be reminded about all the things he no longer has.

It works well enough that Derek spends the next several days running, determinedly ignoring the sounds of familial domesticity from his next-door neighbours’ apartment. He leaves when Stiles’ alarm goes off so he doesn’t have to hear Stiles’ ecstatic moan as the hot water of the shower hits his skin. He tries to pass it off as a deep-seated need to reacquaint himself with his family’s land, earning himself an unconvinced eyebrow from Isaac, who now spends most nights at Derek’s.

Derek doesn’t care. He runs.

Once he’s heartily sick of running the perimeter of the preserve, he intersperses it with running through town, subtly checking for anything new or worrying. He tries to exhaust himself enough that he falls asleep as soon as his weary body tumbles into his bed, so he doesn’t have to hear Stiles sing the sweet, Polish lullaby that now weaves its way through his dreams.

*

He’s jogging through town on a Thursday, along a quiet pedestrianised street off the main road that he likes because of the way the trees cast dappled shade along the buildings and shield the stores and restaurants from some of the ambient traffic. The fabric awnings stretching over the sidewalk, shading diners from the heat of the day, are almost enough to make him feel like he’s in some European city rather than Beacon Hills.
He stops short when he hears a familiar laugh. It’s not close – he’s across the street and a few dozen feet away – but it rings out like a bell through his chest. He steps behind a newspaper stand and scans the opposite sidewalk for Stiles, and the female companion he can hear him laughing with. He finds them sitting outside a bistro, under a striped black and white awning, large plates of salad and pasta before them.

Stiles is leaning back in his chair. His hair is messy and his pants are crumpled, but his shoulders fill out his dress shirt in an unexpectedly distracting way and his shirt sleeves are rolled to the elbow, revealing pale, toned forearms. Derek can’t look away from the way his wrist-watch flashes in the sun as he gesticulates passionately around his words. Stiles lifts his drink and does something involving his mouth and the straw that Derek is fairly sure should be illegal. By the time he’s got himself back under control, Stiles has mercifully put the drink down.

‘…the way it is under Harris,’ Stiles is saying. The girl with the long red hair nods along carefully. ‘I mean he’s just… stultifying. It doesn’t even have to be me, Lyds, he could bring in Danny on a part time basis. It’s the twenty-first century, you know? We need to have a stronger digital presence. We need to tell a story with our exhibits. You know that Jasper Fforde quote about books being complex imaginotransference technology? Well so should museums be, and we could facilitate that, we could bring stuff alive, I know we could. If Harris just let me look into how other museums are using multi-media platforms…’

‘I know,’ the woman responds, frustration edging her voice. ‘I completely agree with you. But Harris is in charge of the distribution of funds, and he just won’t hear it…’

Derek feels his jaw hang open involuntarily as he watches from across the street. Stiles has always been smart and engaging, but this is different. He’s never seen this Stiles before, this professional, articulate, nerdy Stiles, and… he’s mesmerising.

He watches as Stiles accidentally nudges Lydia’s water glass with one of his hands, and finds himself frowning at the pink that spreads over Stiles’ cheekbones and down his neck as Lydia shakes her head and laughs affectionately. His hands clench. He wants to be the only one to make Stiles’ blood rise like that.

Before he knows what he’s doing he’s crossed the street and is jogging slowly past the bistro.

‘…what the hell does he even do down there in his basement lair, like some sort of creepy creeper? And why does it always smell like rotten eggs, what does he do, try to teach everyone else to suck them?’ Stiles’ fingers abruptly stop their complicated dance through the air when he sees Derek.

Derek?’ Stiles calls out, cautiously reserved. ‘Hey, man.’

‘Hey,’ Derek calls back, slowing to a stop. ‘Working lunch?’ He takes in the sheaf of papers spread messily over the table-top – presumably something to do with whatever Stiles and his companion are talking about. Several of the pages are hand-written, and it makes Derek smile to find that Stiles’ hand-writing is fittingly both ineligible and absolutely beautiful.

‘Yeah,’ Stiles says, ruefully. ‘More like a pity party.’ He shakes himself a little at Derek’s raised eyebrow, and straightens in his seat. ‘Just work stuff,’ he says, feigning nonchalance. ‘You running in this heat? I thought only mad dogs and Englishmen went out in the midday sun…’

‘Well…’ Derek smiles wickedly. ‘I’m not English.’

Stiles blinks at him with big, bourbon eyes, taken aback. ‘Uh. Right. Oh, this is the goddess Lydia.’ Stiles gestures at his companion. ‘She’s my boss-lady at the museum, and my future wife just as soon
as she sees sense and dumps Jackson.’ He lowers his voice to a stage whisper to say, ‘Jackson’s an ass!’ Lydia’s smile is long-suffering but genuine. ‘Lydia Martin, meet Derek, he’s my next-door neighbour.’

Lydia flicks shrewd eyes over Derek and quickly picks up her glass of water, tipping it slightly in Derek’s direction, in greeting. He suspects it’s so she won’t have to shake his hand. He suddenly feels overly exposed standing there for her scrutiny, horribly aware of the sweat trickling down his neck and how his tank top and running shorts are sticking tackily to his flesh.

Lydia, on the other hand, looks like she’s never broken a sweat in her life, in her linen sundress with her sunglasses pushed up onto the top of her head. She looks like porcelain perfection, her red hair and the spark in her eyes belying a fire within her that would naturally draw Stiles’ attention. Derek thinks he’d like her, were Stiles not gazing at her like she’s the axis of his entire universe.

He should walk away. He knows he should. But something deep and primal in him wants to wrest Stiles’ attention back to himself, just to prove to this altogether-too-cool Lydia that he can.

So he rests his hands lightly on the edge of the table and leans into Stiles’ space a little, sucking down the cedar-spicy scent of him, mustering up his most devastating grin. Through his eye-lashes he’s gratified to see Stiles drop his fork onto his plate with a clatter. ‘Stiles,’ he says, his voice like velvet, ‘I wanted to apologise for the other day. I was tired, but I shouldn’t have behaved like that. The cupcakes were great.’

Stiles’ throat works helplessly for a second before he says something that comes out as ‘hnngh’ before he coughs and tries again. ‘No problem,’ he manages faintly. ‘Cupcakes. Yeah.’ Derek’s smile widens at the same rate as Stiles’ pupils dilate, and the air between them turns syrupy.

Lydia makes this faint tutting noise, so Derek says, ‘I like sweet things. So, thanks.’ And then he stands up and stretches his arms over his head because he’s an asshole like that.

‘Uh,’ Stiles says, looking helplessly at Lydia and then back to Derek. ‘Uh.’

Derek smiles again. ‘I should get going. Don’t wanna put off the clientele.’ He laughs a little and gestures down at his running clothes.

‘I really don’t think that’d be a problem,’ Stiles mutters under his breath, staring down someone a couple of tables over who seems to have her phone trained on them. Then louder he says, ‘Good to see you, Derek.’ The thought that he might mean it makes Derek’s blood fizz through his veins.

‘Nice to meet you,’ Lydia smirks at him. He can tell from the look on her face she knows exactly what he’s doing.

Derek nods at them both. ‘You, too. See ya.’

As he jogs away he hears her say, ‘You okay there, or are you in need of medical attention?’, and he can’t help the smug grin that spreads over his face when Stiles replies ‘Jesus, fuck.’

He shades his eyes with his hand, shielding them from the harsh glare of the sun. Maybe Stiles was right about running at this time of day.

He starts to run later in the afternoons, enjoying how the cool, evening air washes over his heated skin. He gets back at dusk. One night as he runs down their block he glances up at Stiles’ living room window and sees him standing there, lighting some sort of lantern that glows in fire tones. He can tell the exact moment Stiles notices him, raising a hand in greeting. Derek raises his own in return. Stiles nods and steps back from the window. Derek doesn’t see him at the window again, but
from then on Stiles lights the candle every night.

It feels like it’s guiding Derek home.
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your comments, they make my day, honestly.

Just to clarify that Stiles, not having lived in Beacon Hills as a child, has no knowledge of the supernatural or the existence of werewolves.

Yet.

Over the next couple of weeks, Stiles doesn’t see much of Derek. Given that Erica spends as much time at Derek’s place as she does at Stiles’, he would have thought their lives would naturally intertwine to some degree, but Derek seems to be set on keeping his existence as carefully parallel to his and Ria’s as possible.

The hallway is the only place where Stiles’ and Derek’s lives intersect, and then it’s Ria that bridges the gap in the aggressive pursuit of her most recent life goal, which is to hold on to Derek’s face as much as humanly possible. Stiles watches on resigned bemusement because hey, he gets it. It’s a really nice face.

Derek doesn’t seem to mind. In fact he chats and coos to Ria, bouncing her on his hip and throwing her up in the air seemingly effortlessly. Stiles gets to watch the flex of his shoulders and arms, and listen to Ria’s delighted belly-laughs, so he doesn’t mind that either.

He minds that Derek won’t make eye contact with him, and he definitely minds that Derek has reverted to cave-person pre-verbal grunting, cutting through Stiles’ air of vague mania with nothing more than the sharp cut of a well-placed eyebrow and a frustrated exhalation. Stiles figures he’s probably feeling guilty over the weird Bistro Seduction, now that Isaac is living with him full time. Stiles doesn’t push it. He doesn’t want to be some sort of tool Derek uses to bolster his own self-confidence every time his faith wavers in his relationship, which is what Stiles presumes the Bistro Seduction was all about. He refuses to just be the lonely, horny guy next door who can always be relied upon to fall over his own feet with lust every time Derek shows a sliver of ankle. He’d settle for friends, though. But even that’s slow progress.

Erica invites Stiles and Ria for pizza at Derek’s apartment one Saturday, but Stiles takes one look at the expensive glass coffee table and backs right up into his own apartment, where everyone ends up piled on the old, squishy sofa except Derek who follows reluctantly, scuffing his feet along the floor like a moody teenager before arranging himself as uncomfortably as possible in an armchair. He looks for all the world like he’s awaiting his own execution.

Erica, Boyd and Isaac seem to have no personal space boundaries at all which makes Stiles wonder exactly what sort of arrangement Derek has going on over there, but he can’t seem to find it in himself to care because Erica is tucked under his arm and his feet are in Boyd’s lap and Ria has appropriated Derek’s face, as per usual, while they all watch Aladdin. If the apartment next door is a sex club, Stiles thinks sleepily as he watches Isaac pull the scarf from around his neck and help Ria arrange it on her hair, like Princess Jasmine, then it’s a very nice one.

He does his best not to watch Derek, but he finds his gaze automatically flicks to him whenever
there’s a funny or poignant moment, wanting to gauge his reactions. He feels Derek’s eyes on him more often than they probably should be, given Isaac is right there. There’s an energy there, something intense and other, that hums between them like a ley line or a magnetic pull. Isaac either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. Maybe there’s something to the swingers theory after all.

But it’s not about sex for Stiles, not really. Obviously he wouldn’t be opposed, if ever Derek were single, because Derek’s Derek and hello, Stiles has eyes. But as he watches Derek peel an orange for Ria and whisper to her that she gets to make a wish because he did it in one go and didn’t break the peel, his chest aches at the thought of how it might be to have something like this every day.

Derek lifts his gaze, then, blushing when he catches Stiles watching. ‘Something my Mom used to tell us,’ Derek mumbles, then he looks away sharply before he busies himself with the task of segmenting the fruit for Ria.

Everyone tenses up a little, and a heavy silence falls over them. Stiles can practically taste the anxiety in the air. There’s obviously some painful history there. After a minute, Isaac drops down to sit between Derek’s legs, stroking a hand comfortably over Derek’s calf as he holds up a little toy hairbrush to Ria so she can brush his curls from her perch on Derek’s lap. Stiles forces his eyes away from the perfect little family tableau the three of them make, squeezing them firmly shut as his chest starts to ache for an entirely different reason.

A few minutes later, Ria crawls up Boyd’s legs and clambers onto Stiles, sprawling across his chest. He strokes her downy hair with one hand, and her back with the other, splaying his fingers so they cover both of her shoulder-blades. She is warm and solid against him and he paces his breathing so his chest rises and falls with hers. She’s everything that matters.

She sucks her thumb as she drifts off into a sticky, orange-scented slumber. Stiles is aware of the creak of the armchair and the click of the front door. He can tell from how the air shifts that it’s Derek. He doesn’t come back.

* 

Stiles pinches the bridge of his nose between his finger, re-shuffling the papers in front of him. No matter how many times he checks and re-checks the paperwork, he can’t find the details for the extra object. He knows Adrian Harris will find a way to blame him for the missing paperwork, and it’s the last thing he needs. As soon as Stiles had stretched out his hand to shake Harris’s on his first day, Harris had oozed hatred for him. Stiles isn’t exactly sure why, but Harris loathes Stiles to his bones, and he has an uncomfortable niggling at the back of his brain warning him that Harris only wants the slightest excuse to axe him.

The new exhibit is a big deal. Well it’s a big deal to Harris, who hasn’t disrupted the status quo in about a decade. It’s pretty much a seismic shift as far as he’s concerned. As Museum Director, he is in overall charge of artefacts and exhibits, and the fact he’s the most boring man on the planet must largely account for the stagnation of the museum in general, Stiles feels. Beacon Hills Museum is small and highly focused on local history. It’s located in a large, nineteenth-century mansion in a quiet suburb, left for the express purpose of housing the museum by a kindly patron with no other heirs. It's full of cobwebbed corners and friable plaster-work, and it smells overwhelmingly of beeswax.

It's beautiful though, or it could be. It could be great, Stiles thinks. It could be awesome. But it's just… not. There’s a Geological room and an Agricultural room, and various historical displays of costumes and objects, focusing on periods like Beacon Hills’ gold-mining era, but everything feels tired and dusty. Nothing has really changed in the ten years that Harris has been in charge, according to Lydia, and it’s immensely frustrating to Stiles that something with such vast potential should be
wasted under the mismanagement of an idiot.

Stiles is keen to modernise the way the museum presents its displays and focus more on the potential of digital development, but Harris insists that there are no funds to spare, and that their bare-bones website, run by an equally frustrated Danny Mahealani, is more than sufficient. Stiles has set up Facebook and Twitter pages for the museum on his own time, but it’s not enough. The only visitors they really have are bored students on enforced field trips, and a few disappointed tourists. It feels like the museum is being run into the ground. The only silver lining is that Harris seems to prefer to spend almost all of his time lurking in his office, which takes up a large proportion of the basement, and so isn’t around to harangue Stiles all the time.

He wonders if the board had hoped he, Danny and Lydia would breathe new life into the place. Harris stymies every attempt. He’s not quite sure how any of them have ended up here. He suspects Lydia is killing time while she completes a book she’s in the middle of writing. She’s only been there three months longer than him, and the staff turnover – except for Harris – is high. No one seems to make it much past a year. Danny is a consultant and spends as little time at the actual museum as he can get away with. Stiles isn’t completely sure what Finstock does, only that it seems to be a little of everything. Stiles himself is there because his dad knew a guy who knew a guy.

It all might be looking up, though, because Harris has finally, finally given a new exhibit the go-ahead. It’s momentous. If they can make this work then maybe it will be the kick up the ass Harris needs to branch out even more.

Stiles has seen all the artefacts safely into the object storage area, ticking off item numbers against the corresponding paperwork and directing them all to the correct area depending on the required storage conditions. He’s sweaty and a bit dishevelled, but he feels like he’s done a satisfying morning’s work. Everything’s in order, bar one small crate.

He can’t match up the number on the side, and the text stamped across the fraying wood is in a language made of symbols Stiles doesn’t understand. He releases the catch and lifts the lid, hoping to match the artefact with an item description. He moves aside the packing materials to reveal a small, earthenware pot. Weird. The new exhibit is on Native American life, and includes things like baskets, cradleboards, beadwork and arrow heads. The pot doesn’t seem to fit.

It’s a tan, misshapen thing with lumps and dips that look like finger marks that the maker never bothered to smooth out. It doesn’t look like it’s been made with love, or cherished in its lifetime, with the exception of the three heavy bands of silver that encircle the neck, irrevocably securing the lid to the body of the pot. Stiles picks it up. It’s heavier than he expects, the surface pocked with divots. He turns it over in his fingers, frowning over the small symbol that seems to been burned into the front of it. It’s a sickly rust color, like dried blood, and looks sort of like a squashed frog, only it’s all sharp angles and harsh lines. Stiles wrinkles his nose, hoping it’s not an indication of whatever was sealed inside it all those hundreds of years ago. He stares at it intently, in case there are any clues as to its origin.

‘Where are you from, ugly little pot?’ Then he yelps and sets it back into its case as quickly as he dares, because he would testify in a court of law that the thing just got fiercely, brutally cold. He looks closely at it, careful not to touch it. It seems normal, but the air around it seems to waver and crackle, and then, suddenly, nothing.

He holds up his gloved hands and inspects them. Tiny, razor-sharp ice crystals cling to the folds of blue latex, burned through in some places to reveal his skin. Stiles swallows heavily and looks around him to see if anyone else is nearby who could come and take a look, but the object storage area is empty. The stupid pot squats malevolently at the edge of his eye-line. If Stiles were crazy,
which he’s not, he would swear it was smirking at him. He jumps again with another loud yelp as his cell goes off in his pocket.

‘Goddamn it,’ he mutters, tearing off his gloves with shaking fingers and grabbing for it. His fingers are red and raw, burned even through the latex.

‘Ready for lunch? Gonna try the new deli on sixth.’ Lydia’s voice is jarringly bright and normal down the line.

‘Oh,’ he breathes deeply through his nose. He just needs to eat, that’s all. His blood sugar’s probably low. ‘Awesome, I’ll come up to meet you.’

He turns to leave and runs straight into Harris. ‘Going somewhere, Stilinski?’ Harris smirks. His mouth is thin and always twisted up into a cruel smirk, like the universe is playing some horrible, cosmic prank on everyone and he’s the only one who’s in on it.


‘You all done here?’ Harris sounds incredulous, like he doesn’t believe in a million years that Stiles could read a few labels and follow some signs. He’s never going to believe Stiles hasn’t messed up. He’s too in love with making a drama out of every little perceived misdemeanour.

Stiles winces. He takes a deep breath and admits, ‘Almost. Just gotta find the paperwork for this guy.’ He points to the pot. ‘I think the delivery guy must still have it ‘cos it’s not here. I’ll follow up on it as soon as I get back.’

Harris shakes his head sharply in exasperation, eyes flashing. ‘Seriously? All you have to do is match the paperwork to the items and you can’t even get that right, Stilinski? And what the hell did you do to that?’ Harris gestures to Stiles’ clipboard full of inventory that he’s highlighted in several colors in an attempt to track down the missing information. ‘That is official museum paperwork, not a coloring book.’

Stiles raises his eyebrows. ‘Sorry?’

‘Just get out of my sight,’ Harris thunders. ‘And report straight to Finstock this afternoon. You can help him clean the room for the new exhibit and get it ready. I’ll deal with this. Jesus, if you want something done right you gotta do it yourself…’

He storms off, muttering. Stiles heart sinks at the prospect of an afternoon of scrubbing and dusting in close proximity with Finstock, who is eccentric at best and certifiable at worst. He curls his stinging fingers into fists.

* * *

The headache sets in through the afternoon, but he refuses to go home. He won’t let Harris win like that. So he hefts furniture around and sets up stands and cleans glass until his arms ache, and all the while the pressure in his head builds and builds until bright little spots flicker, moth-like, at the edges of his vision, and all he can hear is the dull ‘thud thud thud’ of blood pulsing in his ears.

He drags himself home and sends Erica to Derek’s with a weak smile, beyond grateful that Erica has already given Ria dinner. He musters up the last of his energy reserves to get her ready for bed, trying to appear as normal as possible. He kneels on the floor while she splashes in the tub, leaning his aching head against the cool tile, smiling valiantly as she plays with her mermaids. He stands to pull her out of the bath and his head spins vertiginously.
Somehow he gets her in a clean diaper and pyjamas, and places her in her dark, quiet crib. He eases the door shut, and rests against it, exhaling in relief. Now he can have some painkillers and crawl into bed. He prays to any and all deities that Ria gives him an easy night. He pours a glass of water and slumps into a chair to drink it.

Behind him, on the baby monitor, and from her room opposite him, in devastating stereo, Ria starts to cry.

He rests his pounding head in his shaking hands.

*  

When Stiles wakes up, he’s in his bed with no memory of how he got there. Sunlight filters through his curtains. He feels better, but empty, like the pressure is gone but his insides are still sensitive from it. There’s a fresh glass of water and more painkillers by the bed, which he doesn’t remember putting there – never *would* have put there in case Ria got hold of them. *What?*

He gropes for his phone, exclaiming softly in horror when he sees it’s almost four in the afternoon. What the hell had happened? Had he passed out?

Ria?

Icy panic creeps down his limbs. Has she been alone all this time? Then he hears a noise from outside his room. He starts to piece together shreds from the night before; how much pain he’d been in, how Ria had needed him and how helpless he’d felt. How she’d cried until he’d cried too, holding each other. Then there’d been a knocking, late, late into the night. He remembers Derek. He’d been calm and soothing, and had apparently saved Stiles’ ass. Stiles’ heart starts beating again.

He sits up tentatively, relieved to find the pain doesn’t resurge. He downs the water and painkillers, and swings his legs over the edge of the bed, getting gingerly to his feet. So far so good. He’s in pyjamas – he desperately hopes he’d put himself in them before Derek showed up like some stubbly, heroic knight of yore. Stiles shuffles to the door and peeks around the frame, out into the apartment.

Derek is in a t-shirt and sweats that were probably black before he entered some sort of flour shower. He has flour streaked through his hair and dusted through his beard, and he has Ria hoisted on his hip. She is inexplicably wearing a pink bathing suit, yellow rubber boots and her Batman cape, and Derek is bopping around Stiles’ tiny kitchen singing passionately Starship’s ‘Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now’ into a wooden spoon as it blares out of the radio station playing through his phone.

There are bowls piled up in the sink, and bags of flour and sugar are spilling over the counter. Every square inch is covered in a fine layer of flour, making it look like some sort of faded out Instagram filter. It’s a total mess. It’s never looked better to Stiles.

Neither of them notice Stiles until Derek spins around, mid guitar-solo, and stops dead at the sight of him. Ria shrieks ‘DADA!’ and throws her arms up in the air in excitement, releasing two little fistfuls of flour into the air which rain down triumphantly all over Derek and the rest of the kitchen.

Derek stares at Stiles as the flour falls, pink spreading over his cheekbones. Stiles stares back, trying his hardest not to laugh. Eventually Derek says, ‘Um.’

‘Am I dreaming?’ Stiles ventures. ‘Is this a dream? It’s a dream, right? You’re a dream-Derek. That’s what’s happening here.’

Derek squints a bit. ‘If I say ‘yes’ will you go back to bed and get up again in ten minutes so we can
pretend this never happened?"

‘No way buddy, absolutely not.’ Stiles gives in to the massive grin that’s been trying to break through since he peeked around his door-frame.

Ria squirms impatiently until Derek puts her down so she can toddle to Stiles. Her boots leave little floury footprints on the floor.

Derek folds his arms over his chest and glares at the ceiling, huffing out what would have been a derisive sigh had he not gotten a nose full of flour halfway through and sneezed. He looks so adorably put out that Stiles has to bury his face in Ria’s curls to stop himself from striding over and kissing the hell out of him.

‘Hey baby,’ Stiles whispers into her hair. ‘How’s it goin’?’

She grabs two handfuls of his hair and plants a sloppy kiss on his nose, babbling away happily. ‘Bear,’ she says, suddenly, flailing a hand towards Derek, who is standing awkwardly watching them. ‘Bear!’

‘Bear?’ Stiles raises an eyebrow.

‘Uh,’ Derek says, shuffling on his feet. ‘I guess it’s how she says ‘Derek’?’

‘Ah,’ Stiles smiles at Ria, warmth flooding his chest. ‘Well. That’s the cutest thing in the world.’

Derek shrugs and looks down at the floor, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

‘Um,’ Stiles says, smacking a kiss to Ria’s face, ‘what actually happened last night? I know… I remember I was sick? But I don’t, I can’t really…’

‘You were burning up,’ Derek says, raking his eyes over Stiles’ face like he’s trying to find something. ‘I got home late, and as I was passing your door I heard… Ria was upset… So I knocked, I wanted to see if you needed anything, and you… I got you to bed and stayed with Ria. You were so sick, Stiles. You were practically delirious, I don’t know how you were still standing. I almost called for an ambulance. I would have if your fever hadn’t broken in the night.’

‘And Ria, is she…?’ Stiles holds his hand to her forehead, checking her temperature.

‘She’s fine, Stiles.’ Derek holds out a steadying hand. ‘She’s not ill. I think she was picking up on how bad you were feeling. She’s missed you, but she’s fine.’

‘God…’ Stiles breathes. ‘I have no idea what happened. I feel… I feel okay now. Like, more okay than I probably should, given how sick I was. It must have been a twenty-four hour bug or something… I’ve never been sick like that, ever.’ He reaches out to touch Derek’s arm, which is warm, his t-shirt soft. The tips of Derek’s ears turn pink. ‘Thank you. I don’t even know what I would have done without you.’

‘S’no problem,’ Derek mumbles, the pink on his ears darkening a shade. ‘We had fun, right Ria?’

‘So I saw,’ Stiles says, amused. ‘You were giving her a lesson in air guitar, I believe?’

Derek shrugs. ‘You can’t start too early.’

Stiles nods solemnly. ‘I’m glad you’re here, then. I can only play the air tambourine.’

Derek laughs, then, his white teeth shocking against his dark stubble. Stiles can’t help but stare. He
can’t remember ever hearing Derek really laugh before. Then he spots something on the counter near Derek’s elbow.

‘Um,’ Stiles says weakly. ‘Did you guys bake?’

Derek ducks his head. ‘We made scones.’

‘You made scones?’ Stiles is still not a hundred per cent sure this isn’t a dream.

‘Chocolate chip,’ Derek says, disarmingly uncertain. ‘I figured you’d had a shock to the system and, well… Sugar, starch… Good for shock and all that.’

Stiles grabs one and bites into it, not bothering to wait for a plate. It’s still warm, buttery and rich, the dark chocolate a perfect bitter note among the sweetness. Stiles’ knees buckle a little. ‘Oh my god,’ he moans, ‘I think I love you.’

‘I just, uh,’ Derek’s pink flush has spread down his neck, ‘wanted to occupy her with something. I didn’t want to take her out of the apartment without your permission, so baking was the best I could do. I couldn’t watch Frozen again Stiles. I couldn’t.’ A desperate edge creeps into his tone and his eyes take on a slightly haunted look that, yeah, Stiles gets.

‘No, dude, this is so good, you don’t even know. You really went above and beyond for us, man. I have no idea how to thank you.’

‘No need. Ria’s great. She talks more sense than Erica, anyway.’ Derek smirks. ‘She had some, ahem, strong opinions on how she wanted to dress, though, which I’m afraid I indulged. I thought if she cried she might wake you.’

Stiles opens his mouth to say something but is cut off by the shrill blaring of his work cell. ‘Shoot.’ He goes to answer it, heart sinking when he sees it’s Harris. Damn, he thinks, chest contracting in fear. He’d completely forgotten about work. Harris is going to fire him for sure.

‘Hey, Mr Harris,’ Stiles says, trying to keep the misery out of his voice.

He just has time to hear Harris squawk ‘Stilinski!’ furiously at him before the phone is plucked from his hand, and Derek is striding away with it out into the hallway. Stiles stares after him, mouth hanging open. He’s fairly sure Derek’s plan is to throw his phone down the stairs. He wonders if his insurance will cover that.

Ria looks around for Derek, her bottom lip trembling when she can’t find him. ‘Bear…’ she whimpers, sadly.

Stiles scoops her up. ‘It’s okay, baby. Bear’s gonna be right back. I think. I hope.’ He distracts her with her building blocks which he knows will only buy him about six minutes, but it’s enough time for him to pace anxiously around the living room, wringing his hands together. It’s a lot to process… Him being so brutally ill like that only for it just to be over just as suddenly… Derek coming to their rescue, taking care of them both, baking scones… The probable loss of his livelihood… Stiles feels panic claw up into his chest and inhales deeply, then tries to breathe it out.

His front door opens and Derek pokes his head around cautiously. ‘You can have as many days off as you need. Paid. You don’t need to worry.’ He insinuates the rest of himself through the door and holds the phone out to Stiles.

‘How did you… Oh jeez, did you threaten to kill him? Because I understand the impulse, believe me, but I need this job, dude…’
Derek snorts. ‘No. I just… reasoned with him.’ He goes to the kitchen and grabs a plate.

‘You… reasoned… with Harris?’ Stiles can’t stop his nose from scrunching a little in disbelief.

Derek smiles into a scone. ‘I can be reasonable.’

‘Who even are you?’ So far Derek has been so full of contradictions that Stiles can’t be sure. But he thinks he’d really, really like to find out.

Derek braces his shoulders and says, ‘I’m a Hale.’

Stiles shakes his head. ‘I’m not sure I understand.’

‘I’m Derek Hale. My mother was Talia Hale. She and my father set up the Hale Foundation.’

Stiles feels his eyes widen as the penny drops. ‘Uh… The Hale Foundation? As in, the Hale Foundation that gives the museum a very sizeable charitable donation every year that all but keeps it afloat?’

‘That’d be the one, yeah.’ Derek rubs the back of his neck self-consciously. ‘I’m a member of the board. A silent member, usually, but I have enough sway to intervene when circumstances call for it.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles blinks owlishly. ‘Oh. So you’re, like, rich? For real?’

Derek shrugs.

‘But…’ Stiles glances around his ramshackle living room, gaze lingering on the threadbare fabric of the sofa. ‘Not meaning to be rude here, buddy, but how come you’re not in some penthouse somewhere, living some fantastic bachelor lifestyle with fast cars and faster ladies? What are you doing renting a tiny little apartment next-door to me?’

‘I’m not,’ Derek admits, his fingers crumbling the scone into powder. He sighs and mumbles, ‘I own it,’ like he’s confessing to a crime.

Stiles stares at him. ‘The apartment?’

Derek glances up briefly and then back down at his own fingers. ‘The building,’ he says quietly.

‘Oh. Well, fuck,’ Stiles mumbles under his breath, grabbing for two more scones. At Derek’s amused face he says, ‘What? They’re for shock, right?’

‘Also,’ Derek says, 'in the interest of full disclosure... I do have a fast car.'

‘Ah.’ Stiles nods.

The silence that falls feels awkward, like Derek is waiting for the other shoe to fall while Stiles chews thoughtfully.

‘You know, this is great news,’ Stiles announces eventually. ‘If you’re technically my landlord then you can fix my kitchen faucet that’s been leaking for weeks. With, you know, tools. Manly ones. Feel free to be shirtless, should the urge take you.’ He grins impishly.

Derek snorts and shoves at his shoulder, lightly. ‘Shut up, Stiles.’

Stiles huffs. ‘Rude.’ But he’s smiling, and so is Derek.
Later, when Derek’s satisfied enough with Stiles’ well-being, and has put a tuna casserole in the oven for him, he heads home. His blood buzzes pleasantly under his skin and his heart does a little flip every time he thinks of Stiles’ smiling at him. He shuts the door carefully and turns to find everyone waiting for him on the couch. Erica is grinning widely as Isaac rummages around in his jeans pocket and pulls out a twenty, handing it over with a look of deep chagrin. Boyd laughs.

Derek plants one hand on his hip and points at his pack with the other.

‘Don’t any of you say a word,’ he says haughtily, stalking past them towards his room. ‘Not one word.’
In which Erica says lots of words, and Boyd says just a few.

Thank you so, so much for all your comments, I really do appreciate you taking the time to leave them - and to read along in the first place! Thank you.

‘You know,’ Erica says, entirely too casually as she dips the brush back into the bottle of nail polish, ‘I’d make myself available. If you wanted to date.’ She looks at Stiles slyly out of the corner of her eye as she takes a firmer hold of his foot in her lap.

‘Aren’t you dating Boyd?’ Stiles replies incredulously. Seriously, what is going on in that next-door apartment?

Erica snorts. ‘Oh my god, no! I mean yes, I’m dating Boyd, but no, I didn’t mean I wanted to date you. Ew!’

Stiles sniffs haughtily. ‘Tad excessive, Erica. Way to boost a guy’s ego.’

She laughs. ‘No, dummy. If I weren’t climbing Boyd like a tree every night I’d totally be into you. But I actually meant that I’d stay to sit Ria one night if you wanted to go out and have yourself some sexy Stiles time…’ She winks salaciously and then goes back to carefully applying the polish to Stiles’ toenails.

‘Oh.’ Stiles pauses to consider this. ‘Sexy Stiles time…’ He rolls the words around in his mouth, testing out the shape and the weight of them. They feel awkward and heavy with guilt.

‘Well I noticed you hadn’t been out at all since you’ve been living here, unless you have a secret Stiles hatch and a slide down to the ground floor.’ She flicks her tongue over her lip in concentration as she tackles his weirdly curled-in little toe.

‘We should totally make that happen!’ Stiles sits up a bit in excitement, making Erica mutter darkly as he jogs her arm with his foot. ‘Can we make that happen? Can it be one of those twisty slides that make your insides go squicky because I love those! And man, it would make getting Ria up in the mornings so much easier, talk about incentive-’

‘Stiles. Stiles!’ Erica snaps her fingers in front of his face. ‘Focus! You make me smudge this polish, I make you wear the bottle!’

Stiles blinks. ‘Right. Sorry.’ He inhales deeply and sinks back into the corner of the sofa. ‘Um. I don’t know, Erica. I mean I appreciate the offer and all, but… I haven’t been with anyone since Ria’s mom which is, ooh, almost two years ago. Haven’t dated anyone in even longer. I spent the first six months of Ria’s life composed of eighty per cent coffee, twenty per cent dry shampoo. A love life seems so far off the cards for me that I’m pretty much an asexual being at this point.’

‘I don’t know about that…’ Erica does that thing where she smirks like she knows something Stiles doesn’t, which is infuriating, but he forgives her because his pedicure is on point and he’s prepared to forgive a certain level of smugness because hey, the girl does good work.
‘Ha,’ he replies. ‘I’m a twenty-three year old nerdy single dad to a one year old. I’m not exactly beating potentials off with a stick.’

In truth he’d never been beating potentials off with a stick, even in his pre-Ria life. In high school he’d formed a couple of passionate attachments to girls who’d never noticed he existed. He’d reassured himself that college would herald a new dawn of sexual experimentation, but after a disappointing initial dry spell then a few hook-ups that ranged from drunkenly excellent to excruciatingly embarrassing, he’d settled into a long term thing with a guy named Cody, because his heart, like the rest of him is an all-in, _fuck-yeah-let’s-do-this_ kinda guy. He likes getting laid on the regular, sure, but what he craves is the sort of intimacy and affection you just can’t get from a hook-up.

He’d fallen hard for Cody, and for six months had been in a happy Cody-bubble until he’d found out Cody was hard into some dude-bro frat boy named Bradley, and they’d parted on a passive-aggressively bitter note.

Stiles had gone out and gotten wasted. Like, tequila shot wasted. Because tequila is like a liquid band-aid on a broken heart.

He’d been propped against a bar, enjoying being lazily objectified by one or two cute guys when a couple of scarily handsy older ladies had draped themselves over him.

‘Woah, hey!’ he’d protested as a hand groped below his belt, ‘this is bad touching! _Bad touching!’_

Just then a new drink slid into his eye-line at the same time an arm slid around his waist, and he’d turned to find Heather there, glaring the older ladies into swift retreat. He had pulled her into a messy, grateful hug, and she had looked at him with heat in her gaze. Stiles was overcome with heady nostalgia, a newly painful freedom, and a lot of alcohol.

Sometimes he’s sad that the last time he’d had sex was so underwhelming. It would have been nice if Ria had been born of a moment of incredible, soul-shifting connection.

Stiles has never actually had that with anyone, but a guy can dream.

And when Ria was born, well, _that_ had been a moment of incredible, soul-shifting connection. Stiles had never even known you _could_ love another human as ferociously as he loves his daughter. It’s a trade-off he’d make a million times over.

‘You’re too hard on yourself,’ Erica chastises. ‘You have a ton to offer.’

‘What, like my lack of brain-to-mouth filter? My insane hair? The bags under my eyes so large they’d make me pay extra to take them on an airplane? Oh no, wait, it’s my dead-end job with my fascist, myopic boss…’ Stiles flails his hands around and grins dopily to take the bite out of his words, but it doesn’t entirely succeed.

Erica sniffs. ‘Don’t think I don’t know a fishing expedition when I see one, Stiles. I’m not biting. You know you’re awesome.’

Stiles scrunches his nose up. ‘I know I have a certain charm, under a certain light. You know, if you squint. Ow!’ He rubs at his shin, the skin aching from Erica’s swift, hard punch. Really fucking hard actually. She’s surprisingly strong. She must work out with the dudes when they do their ten thousand push-ups a day or whatever they do to keep themselves occupied over there. He takes his mind by the scruff and gives it a shake to stop it derailing into a lengthy Derek-working-out fantasy. He can’t blame it, after all they live right next door to Derek’s _everything_, but there’s a time and a
place, and Erica is uncannily astute about knowing these things, which, no thank you.

He sticks his tongue out at her in response, then sighs. ‘Look, I know there’s someone out there for me, you know? Some day. I believe in love and marriage and all of that. Dude, how could I not when I lived with my mom and dad for the first nine years of my life? But Ria… She’s the love of my life. And whatever happens has to be right for her, so. We’ll wait. All good.’

Erica is quiet for a long time. Stiles assumes she’s replenishing her arsenal of sarcastic put-downs, so he’s not expecting the soft, ‘You’re a great dad, Stiles,’ when it comes.

‘Oh,’ he says, feeling oddly emotional. ‘Thanks.’

Erica screws the lid back onto the nail polish bottle and sits up with a sigh. ‘I don’t think you’ll be waiting that long,’ she says.

Ria starts to grumble through the baby monitor. She’s cutting a molar, and has spent the last seventy-two hours drooling, pouting and shrieking, or some combination of the three. It’s awful. He wishes he could do this for her, wishes there were a way to take her pain. But all he can do is be there for her and hope it’s enough. He knows that while his toenails are now pedicured to perfection, the rest of him is rumpled, and he has blue smudges under his eyes from interrupted sleep. It’s nice of Erica to say, but Stiles? He’s far less sure.

*

Derek startles awake to find Erica sitting on his bed, watching him. She’s in sleep shorts and a tank top, her hair loosely tied up, her face make-up free. Derek likes her best like this. He’ll never tell her that, though.

‘Christ, you’re creepy, you know that?’ He tries to roll over and bury his face in his pillow, but she pokes him in the side until he glares at her with one eye. ‘What?’

‘You love Stiles,’ she says, entirely too smugly for his liking.

‘Shut up, Erica.’ Derek tries to push her off the bed, but she avoids him deftly.

‘You love Stiles and you love Ria and you’re gonna be Mr Stiles and Papa-Derek and then you’ll all live happily ever after and I’ll get to wear a hat to the wedding!’ she sing-songs, clasping her hands beatifically.

Derek sighs heavily. ‘Shut up, Erica.’

She pokes him in the side again. Damn her and her ninja tickling skills. Why did he ever think giving her the bite was a good idea?

‘Stiles told me how you gallant you were the other night! I know we’re not supposed to mention it, but come on, Der. You went over there because you heard them, and knew they needed you. You took care of them. It’s so romantic!’

Derek huffs. ‘The kid was dying, I helped him out. I was being neighbourly.’

Erica snorts. ‘Yes, well, that is in the top three words I would use to describe you. Neighbourly. It’s right up there alongside gregarious and charming.’

‘Shut up. I’m charming. I hate you.’ Derek’s voice is muffled by his pillow.
‘Yeah, way to prove me wrong there, Der. So charming. I can barely contain my swoon.’ Her words drip with sarcasm.

‘Are you going to go away any time soon?’ He asks hopefully.

‘You can try to avoid this all you want but they’re already pack, Der. The way you look at him, he might even be your-’

‘Erica!’ Derek cuts her off before she can vocalise what he can’t bring himself to think about. ‘Look, I’m not going to avoid him anymore, alright, but I’m not going to date him either. He’s a nice kid. He’s got enough on his plate.’

She takes his hand in hers. It’s nice. He’s not used to spontaneous touch, after so long without it. He’d taught himself to pretend he didn’t need it, so it didn’t feel so much like rejection when he didn’t get it. He’d forgotten how much he craves it.

‘You can have nice things, you know. You can’t punish yourself forever.’ Erica is softly earnest.

‘What are you even talking about?’ Derek groans into the fabric of the pillow, which is sadly not opening up into a portal to a different, Erica-free universe, no matter how much he wills it to.

‘You like him but you don’t think you deserve him, so now you’re doing your conflicted brooding thing which involves you being grumpy every time you’re not around Stiles and Ria.’

‘Don’t psycho-analyse me. It’s not even eight in the morning. It’s bad manners.’ He’s pouting but he doesn’t care.

Erica flings herself onto the pillow beside him. ‘He likes you too, you know. Fuck knows why.’

He does push her off the bed then, but she lands gracefully, like a cat, and flips him off as she leaves the room.

Derek lies back, pillowing his head on his arms. He watches the early morning light inch its way across the ceiling. Erica is annoying and impossible and it’s mostly because she’s right.

He does likes Stiles. A lot. And he likes Ria.

He doesn’t know what to do with any of it.

Derek knows how to hurt. Derek knows how to grit his teeth and push through and survive despite his life, not because of it. He doesn’t know what to do with hope, has no idea how to handle opportunity or potential or beginnings. He just survives.

He sometimes wonders who he might have been if not for the fire. If not for Kate. Loss like that changes you. It changes what holds you together and how you think and how you dream.

This strange life he has is built on the ashes of the person he was meant to be, a card house carefully constructed of memories that remind him that once upon a time, he was part of a pack; he was happy; he was loved. The memories sting as much as they soothe. It’s a card mausoleum, really, he supposes.

He glances over to the pull-up bar screwed into his door frame. He’d always been fit and outdoorsy, but he’d inhabited his body differently back then. Now he’s bigger, stronger, more imposing. He’s expanded to try fill the space his mother and Laura left behind, but he still feels like a fraud. He wears his alpha status like he wears his leather jacket. Laura used to channel it through her bones.
There’s a difference, and he knows it.

He’s scared that if he lets someone lay their head upon his chest, they’ll find out how hollow he is inside.

So he keeps people at arm’s length. Pushes them away. He knows how to defend himself, on every level.

But.

Stiles.

How could he have prepped a defence against Stiles? He hadn’t even known there was such a thing as a Stiles.

He was prepared to fight off Kates and had steeled himself against Jennifers. He was prepared for perfect and polished and beautiful. He wasn’t prepared for Stiles.

Stiles, who is weird and flawed, and wide open.

He’s a different kind of beautiful, one Derek didn’t know was out there, and somehow, somehow he’s under Derek’s skin. Derek feels wrong-footed and raw, and way too vulnerable for his own comfort.

He’s spent weeks imagining what it would be like to be part of their little family, to fit himself into the shape of their life. He’d had a taste of it, the other night. He’d settled Ria in her crib and gone to check on Stiles, rubbing his thumb over the back of Stiles’ hand, and the steady sound of their resting heartbeats had filled his own chest so it wasn’t so empty. It had made him feel like maybe he isn’t broken. Maybe he’s just incomplete.

But he’s Derek Hale. He’s the guy that courts death, and then has to watch as everyone else pays the price. His life is defined by loss. His past is so thick with ghosts he’s been stifled by them. He’s never been able to see much further into the future than surviving the next blow.

Stiles is full of light and life, and Derek is darkness and death. He’s everything Stiles never knew he should be running from.

He’s also a werewolf.

He’s pretty certain that, even if he allowed himself to get close enough to Stiles to tell him everything – about Kate, and Peter, about his family and who he really is – Stiles would up-sticks and be out of there so fast there’d be a Stiles-shaped hole in the wall.

And how does Derek come back from that? How can he let his guard down and risk another great loss? How could he start to build a home when he knows what it is to lose one?

He’s been trying to protect himself as best he can. He’s tried to keep his distance. He’s tried to push Stiles away by being an ass, but he just can’t seem to manage it around Ria, who’s too sweet and too precious. He feels like there’s a tangled, knotted-up ball of string where his solar plexus once was.

Derek keeps everything in, and Stiles lets everything out. And something about that cracks Derek open just a little bit. He accidentally shows his weak, soft underbelly, and he hates that Stiles gets that reaction from him.

Like Stiles catching him dancing in the kitchen the other day, covered in flour.
Like the visceral, primal reaction he’d had to seeing Stiles show attraction to someone else. He’d fluffed up his feathers and strutted like a damn peacock, marking his territory – not like he’d really wanted to, or he’d have sunk his teeth into the pale skin of Stiles’ neck like he does in his dreams sometimes – but enough to let Lydia know that Stiles is his. Or at least, he is as far as his lupine self is concerned.

Stiles puts so much of himself out into the world, it’s somehow impossible not to respond, just a tiny bit. So he keeps giving Stiles little inadvertent glimpses of his insecurities and his jealousy and his heart.

And it turns out his heart is fucking ridiculous and completely embarrassing and likes to sing along to eighties soft-rock. Because of course it does.

And his heart – well, Derek’s not sure he has very much control over it at all any more.

He hadn’t been entirely truthful the other night. He hadn’t actually been passing by Stiles’ door. He’d been out, in Jungle. He’d had three or four drinks bought for him by various guys and was trying to distract himself from Stiles’ skin and his mouth and the stupid hair Derek wants to bury his hands in, by losing himself in inferior skin and mouths and hair, when he’d just known. Stiles had needed him, and Derek had known.

Derek is a born wolf. He spent sixteen years in his mother’s pack. He knows what it means to feel a pull like that.

That tangled up, knotted ball of string in the pit of his stomach: one end of that is apparently attached to Stiles.

It scares the hell out of him. But the pull was bigger than his fear. Derek had broken every speed limit to get back to Stiles, but he’d have run if he’d thought it would have been quicker.

Stiles had opened the door, his eyes too bright with fever, and without a word had collapsed against him, transferring Ria into his arms with a trust so unquestioning it had brought a lump to Derek’s throat. Stiles had sighed into Derek’s collarbone and then buried his face in Derek’s neck. ‘You came,’ he had mumbled into Derek’s skin.

‘Yeah,’ Derek had murmured, stroking his fingers over the nape of Stiles’ neck. ‘I’m here now.’

‘S’good. S’good, Derek.’

He’d basically carried Stiles to bed, manfully ignoring Stiles’ rapturous moan as Derek lay him down among his cool sheets.

‘Oriana…’ Stiles had managed, cheeks burning.

‘She’s okay. I’ll stay. Sleep,’ Derek had whispered, brushing his hair back from his forehead and wondering how he had ever thought anyone else would do instead.

‘Mmm,’ Stiles had said, sinking gratefully into his pillow. ‘Stay.’

Derek lies awake at night thinking about that ‘stay’, breathed into the scent-rich fabric of Stiles’ pillow, taking it out and holding it up in the moonlight to see if he can figure out how many facets its might have, if it’s more than just a single-sided syllable that Stiles had tossed out as casually as one might throw a baseball to a friend. But it felt like something more precious than that. Like a silver dollar thrown into a wishing well.
He folds his hands over his bottom rib, and sighs. He's no closer to figuring out what to do. He wants Stiles, but he knows he's not what's best for him. And Derek is nothing if not self-sacrificing. He knows what he wants to do, and he knows what he should do. He just can't bring himself to do either. He plucks at his shirt in frustration. He’ll drive himself crazy if he doesn’t get out of his own head. He decides to run. He’s half rolled over when he’s stilled by the sound of his name – well, his ridiculous, sort of adorable nickname – on Stiles’ lips, through the apartment wall.

‘We’re gonna take these yummy brownies to Bear,’ Stiles says, ‘So we need to put your shoes on, alright?’

‘Bear.’ Ria says in return. ‘Nummy.’

Stiles sighs and says, ‘Ain’t that the truth,’ and his voice is so wistful that Derek can’t help but smile up at his ceiling like some giddy teenager.

He throws a Henley on over his tank top and waits for Erica to call to him that Stiles is there. When he goes out, Stiles is in the kitchen with Ria on his hip, and Erica and Boyd are propped up against the counter.

‘Bear!’ Ria shouts, lunging for Derek so fast she nearly tumbles to the floor. Derek catches her, laughing as Stiles fans himself in relief.

‘Hey, Stiles,’ Derek says. ‘Hey, Ria. How’s the patient?’

‘Feeling much better, thanks,’ Stiles smiles at him, gaze flitting from Derek’s soft flannel sleep-pants to Erica’s skimpy pyjamas. ‘Uh.’ He shakes his head briefly. ‘We brought you brownies, to say thanks for helping us out. I really don't know what we'd have done without you and your magical baby-wrestling skills, and your delicious scones of wonder. So, thanks.’ He thrusts a tupperware box in Derek's direction.

‘No need, but thanks.’ Derek takes the box.

‘Well don’t get too excited,’ Stiles says. ‘There’s pink glitter on them. It was non-negotiable.’ He rolls his eyes at Ria who ignores him in favour of examining Derek’s ears. ‘And I guess they’re terrible for your diet, which must be hella strict, right? To look like...’ Stiles waves a hand vaguely at him, and swallows heavily. Derek watches his throat work. '...you.' Stiles finishes, eventually.

Derek shakes his head. 'High metabolism,' he says flatly, working hard to conceal how pleased he is by Stiles' attention. 'Plus I run a lot.'

'I used to run,' Stiles replies. 'I had ADHD as a kid, so I had a ton of energy to burn. Now it all goes on Ria. Single parenting, man. You learn to eat fast and one-handed or you don’t eat.'

Derek nods, taking the opportunity to just look at Stiles, and appreciate how nice it is to have him in Derek's space. It must come off as more of a silent glower, though, because Stiles starts to talk a little too brightly to Erica.

Derek pours him a coffee and adds creamer and sugar until it's how Stiles likes it, and then offers it up as a non-verbal peace offering. He earns himself a brilliant smile and a murmured 'S'good, thanks.'

'S'good, Derek.'

A sudden jolt of electricity flickers down Derek's spine, and he and Stiles share a long, charged glance before he looks away.
Erica’s face is so smug Derek thinks she might actually implode with it. He sends Ria toddling over to her, chuckling to himself when Ria presses her dribbly chin into Erica’s almost-bare shoulder.

He can’t stop watching the way Stiles’ long fingers wrap around the cup. Considering Stiles can barely take two steps without tripping over something or bumping into someone, Derek never fails to be surprised by how dexterous his hands are. Stiles sips at the coffee, the edge of the cup dragging his full lower lip down a little, and Derek feels heat flash over his skin.

He bites at his own lower lip, letting his sharp incisors slide down enough to break the skin. It heals almost immediately, but the flare of pain grounds him. He hates the way he feels out of control around Stiles. He tries to lock himself down so he doesn’t do anything mortifying in front of his betas, like tell Stiles about how he sometimes thinks about his wrists when he’s in the shower.

He stares at the floor while Stiles finishes his coffee.

As he’s leaving, Stiles sees something over Derek’s shoulder and his eyes widen. ‘You got rid of the coffee table?’

Derek finally meets Stiles eyes. It’s annoying how pretty they are, framed by their thick lashes. He feels his cheeks start to heat up, so he crosses his arms over his chest and shrugs.

Stiles looks down to hide a smile. ‘Okay,’ he says, mostly to himself. ‘Okay.’

After they’ve gone, the apartment seems darker, like a light’s gone out. It’s jarring. Every little noise echoes. Derek is grateful when Erica’s heels clack off toward the bathroom.

Boyd takes a sip from his mug, his dark eyes on Derek. Derek sighs. No peace for him, today, it would seem.

‘You okay?’ He asks Boyd, after a minute of deafening silence.

Boyd sets down his cup and says, ‘There’s this quote I always liked... ‘Birds sing after a storm; why shouldn’t people feel as free to delight in whatever sunlight remains to them?’ Rose Kennedy said that. Think she might have had you in mind.’

Derek stares at him, unsure he’s ever heard Boyd say so many words at once. He swallows. ‘Wanna run with me?’ He says, eventually.

‘Sure.’ Boyd pushes off from the counter and strolls towards the hall closet. ‘Where to?’

‘The preserve. My family’s house.’

Boyd’s eyebrows lift.

‘I was thinking,’ Derek says, stretching out his shoulders, ‘that it might be time to re-build.’

Boyd smiles. ‘Okay. Then let’s run.’
As September bleeds into October, Harris becomes so erratic and antagonistic that even Stiles, whose energy is famously inexhaustible, has to force himself to go into work every day. Harris himself seems like he’s literally wearing out; his skin is gray and papery, stretched over too-sharp cheekbones that suggest alarming weight-loss. His stark angles are accentuated by the stormily dark, bruise-like circles under his eyes. His hair becomes streaked through with white almost overnight. He spends more time than usual out of his basement office, stalking the rooms of the museum, muttering to himself. His patience is as tissue-thin as his skin, worn through in so many places that communicating with him becomes a mine-field.

The new exhibition had been abruptly cancelled due to ‘lack of funds’, which is Harris’s usual lazy excuse for everything, and all the artefacts were sent back to the collections they’d been borrowed from. Harris had seemed to draw satisfaction from everyone else’s disappointment. Stiles wants to smack the triumph from his face.

Harris harbours a similarly intense animosity towards Stiles, as he always has. Every time they’re in the same vicinity he focuses in on him, drawing in his shoulders and rising up, eyes glittering. He’s eerily anguine, spitting venom at Stiles in acidic little put-downs and criticisms.

It’s cold comfort that Harris is unpleasant to everybody. He even loses his temper with Danny, who is about as affable as it’s possible for a human to be. Lydia has to intervene to stop Danny from walking out there and then because god knows they’d never find another tech guy who’s as patient and who charges as little out of sheer good heartedness.

Stiles wishes he didn’t need this job so badly.

He wishes he didn’t like the museum itself, but he finds he really does.

He likes learning about the artefacts, likes doing the tours. He likes the staff and the old, creaky building, and pretty much everything except Harris. The aspects of the work that tie into research and story-telling are a hundred and ten per cent his jam, and he uses some of the little free time he gets to look into how they could capitalise on the potential the museum holds. He loves the idea of engaging kids through interactive, creative learning, of connecting them emotionally and intellectually to the exhibits. Maybe he could save some lonely kid from hours of solitary googling in the pursuit of satisfying their curiosity for knowledge, or at least make them feel like they’re not alone. He thinks it wouldn’t be the worst way to spend his life. He knows that between them, he, Lydia and Danny could really make something of it.

But Harris shoots down every suggestion with a scoff or a cruel smirk, rejecting every new idea out of hand. For now they’re trapped in a suffocating, stagnant pool of Harris’s incompetency and stinging aggression. It sucks.

One afternoon, Harris takes to rifling through the museum literary archives, pawing through the books there jerkily, doing his weird muttering thing. When Lydia points out coolly that he is...
entrusted with the books’ preservation, not destruction, he rounds on her and hisses out that she was hired for her looks, not her opinions, so she should keep them to herself if she wants to keep her job. Stiles has never seen Lydia’s jaw set so dangerously. She sweeps past them towards her office, her posture perfect but rigid. Stiles thinks that Harris’s fraying sanity must have completely unravelled because no-one in their right mind would piss off Lydia Martin. The air around the museum feels thick and tense, like something’s going to explode and all that’s required is a spark. It’s wearing.

When Stiles gets home he’s sunk so deep into his own mind, weighed down with worry, that he barely registers Derek passing him on the stairs. All he wants is to get into his own living room and bury his nose into Ria’s curls, so she drowns out Harris’s rotten-egg stench and reminds him that this is why he does this; he works to live.

Erica takes one look at his face and wordlessly grabs him a beer from the fridge, handing it over before she leaves for the standing Friday-night date-night thing they always have next door (which is exactly the kind of thing a live-in sex-club would do, if you ask Stiles). He swallows down the beer quickly, partly to leave the stress of work behind and partly to numb the painful idea of Derek and Isaac having a cosy Friday night together enough that he can sleep.

Maybe he should have had more than one beer, he thinks, as he wakes on the sofa with a stiff neck and a racing heart, his mind stuttering with flashes of the most unsettling dream he’s had in ages. It had been the moon, hanging fat and heavy over the horizon behind streaks of cloud, and then out of nowhere, a creature, silhouetted against the pale light. It was a man from the shoulders down, powerful and muscled and human-looking, but the head had been that of a stag. Two enormous, bony antlers had branched out of its skull, and its breath had misted hotly from flared nostrils. But the thing that sticks with Stiles, the thing that makes his heart clench in his chest, is the memory of the bright red, glowing eyes. They had burned in their intensity. Stiles shudders involuntarily.

He slips into the bathroom and splashes cold water on his face before he checks on Ria. It was just a stress-induced nightmare, he tells himself. And it was still preferable to thinking too closely about what Derek and Isaac are probably up to on the other side of his bedroom wall. He climbs wearily into bed and curls in on himself defensively as though that will help protect his heart.

*  

‘You wanna go jump in leaves?’ Derek blurts out, then immediately feels the tips of his ears burn pink.

He’d meant to segue in with a ‘Hi, how are ya?’ (‘Like normal people do, Derek’, his mind supplies, in a voice that sounds just like Erica), but Stiles had opened the door with a yawn and a stretch that lifted his t-shirt to show a strip of pale skin over his belly and hips, and he has a pillow crease imprint on his cheek, and Derek’s frontal lobe had sort of frozen and then scrambled and then ‘you wanna go jump in leaves?’ had happened.

Stiles blinks at him sleepily. ‘Say what?’ He leans past Derek to see if anyone else is in the hallway, and Derek grits his teeth to keep from burying his face in his neck, sleep-rich with scent. ‘Um.’ Stiles says, clearly baffled. ‘Do you wanna go jump in leaves?’

Derek crosses his arms over his chest and rolls his eyes. ‘No,’ he says. ‘Not particularly. But it seems like the sort of thing you’d like to do. You and Ria. And we were gonna have a cook-out this afternoon, at the preserve. Where there are leaves. So. You wanna?’

‘Oh my god,’ Stiles exclaims, with an exaggerated sweep of his arms, ‘So much!’ And he smiles one of those huge smiles that seem to come to him so easily. Derek is gratified to see a little life spark back into Stiles’ wide, brown eyes, which have been dulled by stress and tiredness over the last few
weeks. Erica has been worried about him for a while, and privately Derek agrees with her. When Derek had suggested they invite Stiles and Ria to their cook-out she had squealed in an eardrumrupturing sort of way, thrown herself around his neck, and then insisted he be the one to invite them, because she’s annoying like that.

Then Stiles’ eyes narrow a little and his lips purse. ‘Did Erica put you up to this?’

Derek frowns. ‘No.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles bites his bottom lip. ‘Well, then, let’s go jump in some leaves. Should I drive? I have Ria’s seat in my car.’

‘If it’ll transfer I can drive,’ Derek offers. He wants Stiles to relax and wind down a little, not worry about driving.

‘Sure. I thought you said you had a sports car, though?’

Derek shrugs. ‘It’s more of a pony car.’ He sighs at Stiles’ blank expression. ‘I have a fast car. Not toddler-compatible. Isaac’s driving it because he’s leaving early this evening. But I have another car, too.’

‘Alright,’ Stiles tips a shoulder. ‘As long as it has a trunk. Tiny people come with a lot of stuff.’

Derek nods. ‘Ready at two?’

‘Okay. See you later.’ Stiles smiles at him again and it’s like the sun coming out.

Derek stands there for a long moment even after the door closes.

* *

‘Wait… Derek Hale’s other car is a soccer mom car?’ Stiles is gleefully obnoxious as Derek pulls the cruiser up to the curb where Boyd, Erica and Stiles are waiting, Ria propped up on Stiles’ hip. Derek is already beginning to regret inviting him. He almost double-takes when he sees what Stiles is wearing. Only Stiles could show up wearing a red hoody to a cook-out in the woods with a bunch of werewolves. Derek doesn’t know whether to laugh or despair.

‘Shut up, Stiles,’ he sighs, hopping out of the car to hide his embarrassment. He grabs Ria’s changing bag and slots it into the footwell, then puts Stiles’ backpack into the trunk.

‘Aw, don’t be mad,’ Stiles says, heaving the car seat into the back seat. He tucks Ria into it, handing her something that smells fruity to gnaw on, and weaves the seat belt through several openings to secure it. ‘It’s just… you’re full of surprises, you know?’ Stiles glances at him.

Derek doesn’t know what to say, so he chuffs and busies himself putting the hamper of food in the car along with a bag of blankets. Isaac slides the camaro up to the curb behind them, and Derek steps back to let the others pack their stuff into the two cars.

‘So where are we actually going?’ Stiles asks Derek, shutting Ria’s door and clapping his hands together. ‘I’m a sheriff’s son, I feel like I should have asked for more specific details about this in case you’re all secretly axe murderers.’

Derek feels himself settle into a glower. ‘I’m not going to murder you, Stiles.’

Stiles smirks. ‘That’s exactly what a successful murderer would say, Derek. And I notice you didn’t
speak for your friends, clearly you don’t have a ton of faith in them.’

Derek rolls his eyes. ‘I can’t promise nobody’s going to murder you. You’re very annoying.’

Stiles bursts out into surprised laughter. ‘You’re funnier than your face lets on.’

Derek raises an eyebrow. ‘Well you’d be the expert in funny faces, now wouldn’t – oh, fuck…’ He trails off as he watches the cruiser pull away from the curb, with Erica and Ria in the back and Boyd and Isaac up front.

Derek and Stiles stare after them. ‘Dude,’ Stiles says, sounding annoyed but also a little impressed, ‘they totally just baby-napped my baby! And I was right here!’

‘Yeah,’ Derek sends a futile glare after the car. ‘Sorry about that. I don’t know what’s gotten into them.’

‘Guess they like her more than us. Sorry, big guy.’ Stiles pulls open the door of the camaro. ‘Looks like we’re taking this?’

Derek pulls a disgusted face. ‘Her, Stiles. We’re taking her. Not this.’ He gives the camaro a surreptitious pat on the flank, in solidarity.

‘Oh Jesus,’ Stiles says as he folds himself into the car, ‘fucking sports car owners, dude.’

*  

It turns out that, despite all his bitching, Stiles loves the camaro. It’s darkly sleek and glossy inside, and it smells of leather and polish and Derek. Stiles wants to rub his face all over the dashboard. He doesn’t miss the pleased turn of Derek’s lips when Stiles lets out an ecstatic groan as he sinks into the seat, which Stiles refuses to be embarrassed about because it’s the comfiest seat in the world, okay, it’s like a cocoon for his butt. He shares this pithy observation with Derek, who sighs and mutters something about philistines, which Stiles ignores.

He almost yelps when the engine starts because it’s deep and throbbing, and they’re low to the ground and yeah, now he gets why people own sports cars. Or pony cars, or whatever this shiny hunk of metal and lust is. He sort of hopes there are going to be speed bumps on the way, and then he glances over at Derek’s profile, all stoic and beautiful, and he thinks of Isaac in the other car taking care of his baby, and then he really hopes there aren’t any accidentally erotic speed bumps because that would be bad form, and Stiles prides himself on being a good friend.

So he arranges his legs modestly and doesn’t watch the way Derek’s long fingers manipulate the gear stick, or how he looks in those stupidly sexy sunglasses, and instead makes light chit chat which Derek suffers through in silence until the buildings give way to the trees at the edge of the preserve.

Stiles also immediately loves the preserve. He’s never been before, though he’s heard people mention it, and he thinks maybe fate has arranged for him to wait until he can see it at its best. He sucks in a breath as he takes in the harlequin colors of the maples, oaks, spruce and dogwood that are almost glowing in a patchwork of greens, chartreuse, oranges and reds, their tangled branches arching over the road and twining together in Seussian, sculptural shapes.

The west side of the preserve is wilder and more beautiful, Derek says into the space Stiles’ inhale leaves, with trails that are far less well-travelled. Derek guns the camaro up one of the little-used roads, rougher but still car-worthy, where the big-leaf maple trees have carpeted the ground with colourful leaves which the camaro kicks up into riotous, swirling spirals in the air.
‘This is amazing!’ Stiles breathes, his nose pressed against the window, watching the leaves dance and flutter. In the reflection of the window he can see the shape of Derek’s face, now free from his glasses, so Stiles can feel his light eyes trained on him. Stiles feels heat creep up from his belly. Derek is watching Stiles watch Derek, and Stiles likes it. Stiles looks back at the leaves and chews on his lip, and thinks of Isaac.

After several minutes, Derek pulls up behind the cruiser, which is already parked off the road a little way, and together they start to make their way down a small path that leads deeper into the preserve. Neither of them says anything, but the silence is nice. The air holds the fresh dampness of fall, and while it’s not cool enough to wear the jacket he’s brought, Stiles is glad he wore his heavier boots. Derek was right about the leaves – here they’re ankle deep and crisp. Ria will love them.

It’s just a short walk to the little wooden cabin, which has a shale roof with a chimney and looks like something out of a fairy tale. Stiles can hear the others gathered around it, Ria toddling through the leaves in her rubber boots, crunching them in her fingers delightedly. ‘Are we okay to be here?’ Stiles asks Derek anxiously. ‘This looks like private property.’

‘It’s okay,’ Derek says. ‘I own it.’

‘The cabin?’ Stiles can’t believe someone could own an apartment block and this cabin, a soccer mom cruiser and a sexy camaro. Derek is so many contradictions.

‘The preserve,’ Derek replies flatly.

‘Of course you do.’ Because of course he does. Stiles really ought to get used to having this sort of conversation with Derek.

When they reach the others, Stiles is surprised by how little he’s surprised at how they greet him. Erica wraps him in a hug and Boyd reaches out to squeeze the back of his neck with a grin. Isaac smiles at him and slots himself against Stiles’ side, pressing them together from shoulder to hip. They greet Derek in a similarly tactile way, and Stiles can see Derek relax before his eyes as he hugs them all back with varying degrees of intimacy.

Stiles wonders why Derek never touches him.

Now that he thinks about it, he can’t remember Derek ever touching him. He’s fine around Ria, picking her up easily and with no awkwardness. It’s just Stiles. The realisation feels like a kick to the stomach.

He supposes at least that Derek and Isaac never seem to kiss in front of him either. He prays to all the gods that it stays that way.

He shakes himself off and runs to scoop up Ria, and they spend an hour or two playing in the leaves just as Derek suggested. They bury Isaac up to his neck in them, and make towers with Boyd which they run and jump into, and Stiles snaps hundreds of pictures on his camera of Ria tossing leaves into the air. As the breeze catches them and whisks them away like colourful feathers, he feels some of his stress get carried away too. He hasn’t laughed so much in a long time. And all the while Derek is there, puttering about on the periphery. Somehow it makes Stiles feel safe.

He leaves Ria with Erica who is weaving leaf-crowns for them, and goes to grab water from the large hamper the others somehow dragged with them from the car. Someone has gotten a grill out from the cabin, and steaks and sausages are beginning to brown and sizzle at the edges. Stiles’ mouth starts to water.
‘Hey,’ Derek says, appearing from the cabin with a few folding chairs.

‘Hey.’ Stiles lifts his water in Derek’s direction. ‘Thank you for this. We really needed it. Both of us.’ He nods to Ria, whose cheeks are rosy against her dark brown curls, whipped up wild by the wind.

‘Sure.’ Derek smiles at him briefly and disappears back into the cabin. Stiles hates how the smile makes his heart soar.

Stiles takes drinks to Ria and Erica, exclaiming over the twig and leaf crown Erica made for him. He wears it like it’s precious, because it is. He kisses Erica on the cheek and then dumps a load of leaves over her head, making her squawk in fury. When he looks up, Derek is watching them. Even when Stiles gets back to his game with Ria, he feels Derek’s eyes still on him. The only thing that stops Stiles from pushing Derek up against a tree somewhere and kissing the hell out of him is the sound of Isaac’s laughter bouncing around the clearing.

When the food is ready they sit on their folding chairs, in a half-circle, and eat the steaks ravenously, licking the juices from their fingers. Even Ria demolishes an entire hot dog, although Erica lets her smother it in ketchup. Stiles supposes fresh air is good for the appetite. And the soul, he thinks, looking around at Erica, cuddled up under Boyd’s arm, and Derek bestowing a rare toothy grin upon Isaac who is loading up his fourth or fifth hot dog. Stiles breathes in the scent of Ria’s curls, and feels lucky.

He’s so relaxed that he jumps when Isaac gets to his feet and brushes down the front of his jeans. ‘Gotta go, folks,’ Isaac says cheerfully. ‘Can I get the keys, Derek?’

‘I’ll walk you,’ Derek says, and oh - maybe this is when they do the kissing. The steak curdles in Stiles’ stomach.

‘Have fun,’ Boyd says around a mouthful of steak.

‘Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!’ Erica pouts suggestively, making Boyd roll his eyes.

Isaac waves at Stiles and Ria, who is grumbling sleepily into Stiles’ shoulder. ‘Bye!’ Stiles calls back.

‘Where’s he off to?’ He grabs for a blanket to cover himself and Ria. He’s hoping if he rubs her back she’ll be tired enough to fall asleep.

‘He’s got a date,’ Erica says. The blanket almost slips from Stiles’ fingers onto the leafy earth.

‘What?’

‘A date,’ she says. ‘You know, dinner, movie, sex.’ Stiles’ horror must show on his face because she frowns and says, ‘Honey, I hope you’re not the old-fashioned type because I hate to break it to you but that ship has sailed for you.’ She motions to Ria.

Stiles snorts. ‘No,’ he says, ‘Nothing like that. I’m just… He’s going on a date? And Derek’s okay with it?’

‘Yeah.’ Erica cracks open a beer and passes it to Boyd. ‘Why wouldn’t he be?’

‘Oh, wow. Oh, man. That’s very, uh, progressive, I guess…’ Stiles’ head is spinning. If you had Derek, why would you ever need anyone other than… Derek?
‘Wait…’ Erica swigs at her beer. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘He thinks Derek and Isaac are boning,’ Boyd says matter-of-factly.

Erica chokes on her beer. ‘What, really? Derek and Isaac?’

‘Uh huh,’ Boyd snags the bottle from between her fingers. ‘He’s thought so all along.’

Stiles’ heart stops. ‘Are they… not?’

‘No!’ Erica sounds horrified. ‘No way. Derek’s more like a… big brother.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles hugs Ria tighter, rubbing circles into her back as she gives in to the sleep she’s been fighting. He’s grateful to have something to do with his hands so the others won’t see how they’re shaking.

_Derek’s not dating Isaac_… Stiles’ chest fills up with hope so fast the pressure of it hurts against his ribs.

‘Definitely not,’ Erica is saying, flipping her hair back over her shoulder. ‘Derek hasn’t dated seriously in forever. Not since Jennifer. And he hasn’t been in love since Kate-’

‘Erica!’ Boyd’s voice cuts across hers like a whip, as sharp and stern as Stiles has ever heard it ‘We don’t talk about her. Ever.’

‘No. Right.’ Erica sounds contrite. ‘It’s the beer.’ Her expression turns miserable as she sets the bottle down by her chair. It’s dark and unlabelled, and looks like a home brew. Stiles wonders how strong it is if it’s affecting her this quickly. He makes a mental note not to have any. She tilts her head towards Stiles. ‘Derek’s past is his to tell.’

‘Of course.’ Stiles strokes his fingertips through Ria’s curls, picking out the odd bit of leaf debris he finds, mulling over what Erica had given away.

It sounds like Derek’s only dated women.

Jesus. It sounds like Stiles has gotten this whole thing completely twisted.

He’d only thought Derek was bi or gay because he’d assumed he was with Isaac. He’d thrown in a bit of casual flirting because he’s Stiles, and hey, what’s the harm, Derek was off the market anyway. But if he isn’t with Isaac, and he’s only dated women… Maybe Derek’s actually straight.

The thought shatters the bubble of hope in Stiles’ chest and the sharp fragments plummet straight down and churn around in his stomach.

Stiles had made it clear he thought Derek was hot from the very beginning. Derek seems tactile enough with everyone else, but he never touches Stiles. Maybe Derek isn’t just straight. Maybe Derek’s homophobic?

Ria is a hot, heavy weight on his torso, and he pretends to concentrate on her when Derek ambles back to the cabin. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Derek lift his head into the air a bit, and frown. Erica takes a soda over to him and they talk in low voices. Judging by the unhappy look on Derek’s face, she’s probably confessing her over-step with Stiles.

By the time Ria is breathing deeply against him, Derek and Erica have made their way back over and Derek is perched on the edge of a chair. He keeps looking over at Stiles like he’s trying to work
something out. Maybe he’s wondering how Stiles could have thought he was gay. Maybe he’s mad about it. Stiles scuffs at the ground with the toe of his boot. Erica keeps up a bright, steady stream of chatter that fills the clearing. Stiles tries half-heartedly to join in, but honestly, he’s ready to go home and sleep. The thought makes the image of the creepy half-deer half-man creature flash into his consciousness again. Ugh.

Derek stands abruptly and stalks into the cabin, leaving awkward silence behind him.

‘What’s going on?’ Stiles ventures.

‘Oh, you know… Probably too much steak…’ Erica tries to deflect.

Boyd snorts in an amused way. ‘Yeah, it’s probably nothing to do with the fact that Stiles just found out Derek and Isaac aren’t dating each other and now he’s sitting there looking like someone killed his puppy.’

‘Hmm?’ Stiles is aiming for innocent, but feels the back of his neck heat up traitorously.

‘Stiles…’ Erica points a manicured finger at him, because of course Erica would go for full war-paint for an afternoon of hanging out in the woods. ‘Are you sad that Isaac’s on a date with someone else? Because I could have sworn you liked- ow!’ She narrows her eyes murderously at Boyd.

‘What? No! I’m not crushing on Isaac. That’s not it at all.’ Stiles wants to shake his head vigorously but can’t because of Ria. Boyd smiles gently and holds out his hands for Ria, taking the bundle of sleeping baby and cradling her against his own chest.

Erica waits until he’s walked her to the edge of the clearing before turning back to Stiles. ‘Okay. So what is it?’

Stiles sighs and looks up at the branches silhouetted against the sky. He spreads his hands over his knees. ‘I… Oh, god. Look, this might come under the remit of ‘Derek’s private past’, okay, but… I’m a little worried I’ve made a bit, heh, or, you know, a lot, of a fool of myself, by, uh, flirting – harmlessly – but, still, flirting… with a straight guy…’ Stiles winces in anticipation.

Erica stares at him for a long second and then bursts out laughing. Stiles hates her.

‘Don’t you dare laugh at me, Reyes, I will hide the Nutella when I get home, so help me!’

She stops laughing immediately and purses her lips. ‘You wouldn’t!’

Stiles stands up to go and retrieve his daughter because she at least is a kind person whom Stiles never has to threaten with Nutella removal. Well okay, sometimes he has to threaten that, but she at least has the excellent excuse of being fourteen months old.

Suddenly Derek is right there and jesus the guy can move quietly, Stiles never even heard him leave the cabin.

‘Heeeey,’ he says, painfully aware of how truly lame he sounds.

‘Come with me.’ Derek’s voice is oddly gruff, and okay, that is Derek’s hand on Stiles’ arm, all warm and strong, and the sudden and enthusiastic reaction from Stiles’ libido suggests that he is very okay with the man-handling, which, who knew. Derek steers them both through the trees for a few hundred metres. Derek is silent, his face set grimly, and Stiles’ stomach drops again at the thought that he’s somehow ruined this lovely afternoon for everyone.
They reach a clearing where the ground on one side of the path drops away, leaving a clear view over the valley that Beacon Hills nestles in. The daylight is starting to fade and the dipping sun is turning the sky tangerine and apricot. The October cloud is spread across the sky in long, rippling swathes, the grazing illumination of the sun lighting them up first bright white and then rosy. Looking at the transcendence of the afterglow over the town, Stiles can understand how people first came up with their ideas about heaven.

‘Beautiful sunset,’ Stiles says nervously. ‘Beautiful spot.’

Derek hums in agreement. He’s stood several feet away, hands jammed in his jeans pockets. ‘Seemed like maybe you could do with ten Erica-free minutes.’ He clears his throat, then: ‘My dad proposed to my mom here.’

Stiles glances over at Derek, lit up in the buttery sunlight, and has to swallow around the lump in his throat. Derek plus sweetness plus the golden hour is sort of an unfairly devastating combination. Stiles looks back out over the town where people are starting to turn on their house and headlights, so they glitter against the edges of the sunset where the sky is turning from magenta to violet, and then to inky indigo. ‘I don’t see how anyone could say no,’ he says, trying to keep his voice steady. ‘My dad… He’s old school. Took my mom to a fancy dinner and then put her ring in the champagne glass. She nearly chipped a tooth on it.’ Stiles chuckles, but it's hollow.

‘You’re sad.’ Derek says. It’s not a question.

Stiles shrugs. ‘My mom always laughed when she told me that story. But not in a mean way, it was… It was joy. She was always the laughter in our house. Took us a long time to find it again after she died. Dad thought maybe it was at the bottom of a whiskey bottle for a while, but. It wasn’t.’

‘No,’ Derek says, softly and a little closer than before.

‘We’re good now, but sometimes I’m sad for Ria that she won’t ever know my mom. That my mom won’t know her. When Ria laughs, it's just... The best thing in the world, you know? And it gets me sometimes when I think about how much laughter Ria won’t have in her life because she’s not here.’

Derek is warm against his back, close enough that Stiles can feel his breath on the nape of his neck, and they watch together as Venus appears in the blue-hued sky.

‘I get it.’ Derek says, so sadly that Stiles thinks maybe he really does. He wants to ask why. He wants to know Derek. But he also knows that people need to tell their stories in their own time.

Suddenly Derek stiffens and straightens up, and Stiles turns quickly to face him. ‘Are you okay?’

Turning has brought them very close, close enough he could count the dark eyelashes spread over Derek’s cheekbones as he reaches out and runs his fingers over the collar of Stiles’ jacket.

‘Whose jacket is this?’ Derek murmurs. ‘I’ve never seen you wear it before.’

Stiles’ knees go a little bit weak because Derek’s voice is throaty and he smells really good, and Stiles is only human after all.

‘Uh, it’s mine. Well, it used to be Scotty’s, but he doesn’t feel the cold, so he gave it to me.’

Derek pouts which seems to be a weakness for Stiles because he barely protests as Derek shakes his head and starts to push the jacket off of Stiles’ shoulders and down his arms.

‘Hey, what are you, what are you... Woah-kay, and I’m losing the jacket…’ Stiles lets Derek slip the
jacket off, and before he can blink Derek has shrugged off his own and is reaching back to thread it over Stiles’ arms. The process has him leaning into Stiles, so close his chin is touching Stiles’ shoulder. Stiles can’t help but turn into him a tiny bit, and for one long, heart-stopping moment, Derek turns too, brushing his nose over the soft skin under Stiles’ ear and down to the collar of his plaid shirt. Stiles hears him breathe in deeply, and thinks maybe Derek’s going to kiss him, but instead he steps back and looks over Stiles in a perfunctory way.

‘Better,’ he pronounces, apparently satisfied even though the leather jacket hangs too big on Stiles and almost certainly makes him look like a biker wannabe. Then he grabs Stiles’ wrist and leads him back to Ria and the others. Stiles huddles into the soft warmth of the jacket. He has no idea what just happened, but it got him a weird sort of hug and a spin in the best-smelling jacket of all time, so he doesn’t really care.

It’s not until they’re nearly back at the cabin, leaving the valley of stars behind them, that Stiles realises they’ve left his old (well, Scott’s old) jacket behind them in the woods somewhere. Erica has packed up the hamper and bags while Ria has been sleeping and drooling happily on Boyd all this time, so Stiles can’t bring himself to mind all that much.

‘God,’ Erica mutters as soon as Stiles gets near her, ‘Something about a man with a baby, huh?’

‘Yeah,’ he says, watching from the corner of his eye as Boyd carefully transfers Ria over to Derek so he can carry her back to the car. ‘Something about it, alright.’

He scurries over to walk with them. ‘You owe me a new jacket, Hale,’ he says, nudging his arm against Derek’s.

Derek glances at Stiles over the top of Ria’s head, his eyes flashing in the twilight. ‘I dunno,’ he says lightly. ‘You look good in that one.’

Stiles is fairly sure his glowing face could light the way back to the car.

‘It was my dad’s,’ Derek says softly. ‘He would have liked you.’

Stiles doesn’t push for more, but he brushes his fingers over the back of Derek’s hand, because he can do that now, and it feels like it’s a lot.
‘What the hell are you doing?’ Scott sounds fondly bewildered as he collapses onto the armchair opposite Stiles and slings his feet up onto the ottoman.

‘Language!’ Stiles reprimands automatically, even though Oriana is out in the yard playing with Melissa.

Scott huffs and sprawls out in the chair with a satisfied groan.

‘I ate all the food,’ Stiles says by way of explanation, rubbing his belly and smiling down at it, ‘and all the food was glorious.’

‘You are the weirdest, coolest dude I’ve ever met,’ Scott informs him gravely, tilting his head back and spreading his hands over his own abdomen, which remains unfairly flat even though he ate at least as many of Melissa’s roast potatoes as Stiles did.

Stiles hums in agreement, wondering why the sex-club-for-beautiful-people next door to him hasn’t snapped Scotty up and covered him in chocolate sauce yet and then, oh right, he remembers it isn’t actually a sex club, because Derek and Isaac share sibling love not saucy love. Stiles is still trying to process that. Something about it is surprisingly discomfiting.

He’s stoked that Derek’s single, obviously. It’s just that before his leafy reality check, he could fantasise to his heart’s content that the only thing keeping Derek from Stiles’ bed, and Stiles from Derek’s heart, was Isaac in all his tousled beauty.

Now, despite Derek’s increased presence in Stiles’ life – in Stiles’ apartment, actually – the distinct lack of progress on the hot-date front suggests that the thing that’s keeping Derek from Stiles’ bed is… well, Derek. He’s not with Stiles because he doesn’t want to be with Stiles. And that’s kind of a kick in the nuts.

There’s chemistry there, Stiles is sure of it. He often catches Derek staring at his mouth (and sometimes his ass, which makes Stiles’ chest puff with pride because he is one hundred per cent down with being ogled by Derek fucking Hale), is sure Derek has caught his open appreciation in return. Sometimes the air between them feels so charged with electricity it hurts Stiles’ teeth. Derek brings by food quite a lot now, sometimes staying to eat with them, sometimes leaving it at their door like an offering. Derek also seems to harbor a quiet predilection for Stiles wearing his clothes, because Stiles finds Derek’s sweaters left casually in his apartment all the time now, and nobody’s that careless with their deceptively expensive, ridiculously soft, cashmere-blend knitwear, right? Stiles isn’t complaining. October is cold. Well, by Californian standards. So Derek continues on in his stealth campaign to see Stiles and Ria warm and fed, and Stiles eats the food and snuggles into
the sweaters and Derek never comments on any of it, he just does his silently pleased eyebrows, and they drink coffee and hang out with Ria and bicker pleasantly, and are basically a perfect couple.

Except for the part where they’re not a couple, and so don’t do any fun couple stuff like kissing. Which sucks, because Stiles is really into the kissing, and he suspects that with Derek it would be good.

He heaves as big of a sigh as he can manage given the food baby is taking up about a third of his chest cavity.

‘Sup, dude?’ Scott mutters drowsily.

Stiles cracks an eye to look over at him. The afternoon sunlight is pouring through the window, refracting through a hanging copper ornament with a large crystal in the centre that Melissa has hung in the window. It projects hundreds of tiny rainbow-coloured shards of light all over the walls. The Sheriff claims to tolerate it for Ria’s sake, even though he grumbles about it ‘making the place feel like goddamn Mardis Gras every day’. Personally, Stiles can’t see anything wrong with a room feeling like goddamn Mardis Gras every day.

Stiles looks at Scott’s face, which is still perfectly imperfect even when it’s covered in tiny rainbows, the handsome bastard. ‘Not much,’ he says. ‘Got a mad crush on my neighbour, so a little moping here and there, you know how it is. It’s good to have a hobby.’

‘Ah,’ Scott replies. ‘Derek, right?’

Stiles is confident the splotchy scarlet now covering his neck and cheeks will be confirmation enough.

Scott’s throat works. ‘And he’s… not into you?’

Stiles frowns. Scott sounds strained and sort of weird. He knows Derek didn’t make the best impression at Ria’s party, but he’d always had Scotty down as the ‘forgive and forget’ type.

‘Well…’ Stiles says, holding his hands up above himself so he can watch the rainbows ripple over his fingers. ‘I’m embarrassingly available and yet still tragically single, so I guess not.’

‘Then he’s an asshole,’ Scott says ferociously.

‘Aww, Scotty. You always say the sweetest things.’ Stiles smiles benignly up at the ceiling.

‘I mean it,’ Scott sits up. ‘You and Ria are, like, ridiculously awesome.’

‘But that’s just it, right? It’s not just me, it’s me and Ria. Package deal. From now on everything either has to be very clearly a meaningless fling for me, or it has to be the real deal, possibility of a future type of jazz. Commitment, parent-hood, the works. It’s a lot to ask of anyone. S’complicated.’ Stiles shrugs, trying to minimise how much it stings that Derek doesn’t seem to want his particular brand of complicated.

‘Have you thought that…’ Scott clears his throat and shuffles his feet, which sets Stiles’ spidey senses tingling. ‘Maybe you’re too focused on Derek. Maybe you need to widen your perspective, if you’re ready to date again. Play the field, man.’ He wiggles his hand through the air far too casually, and since when has Scott ever been about playing the field anyway? Scott is all about abiding love, the whole hearts and flowers and ‘no, you hang up first’ deal.

‘What do you mean?’ Stiles asks suspiciously.
There’s a long, guilty pause, and then Scott says in a tiny voice, ‘Alison and Lydia, and uh, me, sorta… We might have made you an online dating profile.’

Stiles tries to flip over onto his side so Scott gets the full benefit of his ‘the fuck?’ face, but his limbs don’t end up doing anything his brain tells them to do, not even close, and he ends up flailing wildly for a second before he tumbles onto the floor with a thump. He heaves a sigh, sits up, and then says, with as much dignity as he can muster, ‘You made a hoody-howdy-what-now?’

Scott looks even more uncomfortable, pushing his hair out of his eyes and looking anywhere but at Stiles. ‘An online dating profile…’

Stiles hoists his ass back onto the sofa and digs his fingers into the soft cushions, trying to keep his temper in check. ‘Right. See, the part that I’m struggling to fathom here Scotty is that you made one for me.’

‘Holy shit,’ Stiles interrupts, ‘that’s fucking mortifying. Is it even live?’

‘No, not yet, it was just a back-up for you, for when you were ready. We were trying to be supportive, ya know?’ Scott’s face is pained.

‘No, Scotty, I don’t know. I don’t know why everyone else is so concerned with my love life, jeez, you guys and Erica, man. It’s like having a shit-ton of interfering grandmothers… Damn it, I knew introducing Alison and Lydia was a bad idea…’ Stiles scrubs his hands through his hair. He hadn’t realised he’d been coming across as quite such a sad sack single, but he must be truly pathetic to garner this much interest among his traitorous friends.

‘Stiles… We love you, man. We can tell you’re lonely, is all.’ Scott looks at him with big dark puppy eyes, which is unfair because Stiles is trying to be mad at him, but then John sticks his head into the room.

‘Hey, Stiles, I just got a call from the station. They say there’s been a break in at the museum. They’ve sent a couple of deputies but they wanted me to know since they know you work there. Paramedics are on site, too. Security guard took a hit to the head.’

‘Paramedics? Jesus, is he okay? Clive was on today, right? Damn, I’d better get over there, see if I can help. Can you have Ria for a couple more hours?’ Stiles jumps to his feet.

John nods. ‘Sure thing, kiddo. Keep me posted, alright? And don’t get underfoot!’

Stiles huffs out, ‘God, do none of you have any faith in me?’, just as his jeans start to slip down his hips. He scrambles to yank them back up, banging his elbow on the doorframe as he does so, and fixes the top button as angrily as he can manage, muttering ‘et tu Brute’ down at it because jesus, can a guy not even storm out of a room with any dignity? He narrows his eyes dangerously at his father and his best friend, daring them to laugh. To their credit they don’t, although John is turning a suspicious shade of purple.

Stiles points at Scott and mutters, ‘This isn’t over!’, as he sweeps imperiously from the room, leaving John and Scott staring at each other in bemused silence.

* 

The online-dating debacle is quickly forgotten once Stiles gets to the museum because everything is a mess. A police cruiser is pulled up at a hasty angle outside the main building, and Stiles can see a
glimpse of upturned artefacts and strewn papers through the open main doors. Clive, a sweet, balding man in his early fifties, is sitting on the tail of an ambulance with a paramedic dabbing at a nasty looking gash on his forehead. He’s looks pale and shaken, and his grip is weak when Stiles takes his hand.

‘I’ll live,’ Clive says valiantly, ‘I just wish I’d gotten a good swing in at the son of a bitch. Or at least a good look at him.’

‘What happened?’ Stiles squats down, clasping Clive’s hand between both of his own.

‘I was making my round of the ground floor. Everything was quiet, like always. Then I caught this, this… smell…’ Clive’s face crinkles involuntarily at the memory.

‘Smell?’ Stiles’ curiosity is piqued.

‘Right. Like… like rotten eggs, and something real old. Musty, ya know? And it got so strong I thought I might get ill. But I followed it, and then…’ Clive gestures at his head. ‘Wham. Out cold. By the time I came to, the bastard had wrecked a couple of rooms. Made a real mess. Doesn’t seem to have taken much. Probably just kids, but still…’ His hand is shaking.

‘Yeah.’ Stiles pats at it soothingly. ‘You couldn’t have done anything more, Clive. Do you need me to call anyone for you?’

‘It’s alright, Gina’s coming to pick me up. Thanks, kid.’ Clive attempts a smile, then winces.

‘Sure thing. You let me know if you need anything.’ Stiles stands and makes his way over to the wall that encircles the property, putting his hands on his hips as he watches the activity through the doors.

‘Ever think about joining the force?’ A male voice from beside him makes him jump.

‘Uh…’ Stiles turns to find a young guy in a deputy’s uniform leaning against the brickwork. He’s smiling out from under his hat as he extends a hand, and the smile is oddly familiar.

‘Sorry to startle you. I just overheard you talking to Clive, that’s all. I’m Deputy Parrish. Jordan.’

‘Right,’ Stiles takes his hand. His grip is warm and reassuring. It’s a good handshake for a cop to have, Stiles thinks. He clears his throat. ‘I’m Stiles. Stilinski. And I, uh, sort of know you. Your face, anyway. From the station. My dad works there, I’m not a stalker. Promise.’ Stiles rolls his eyes at himself.

‘Sure, Sheriff Stilinski’s son. I’ve seen you around.’ Deputy Parrish leans in a little and Stiles realises they still have hold of each other’s hands.

Stiles drops his own down to his side, gently and with a pang of regret. ‘Yep.’ Stiles feels heat flood to his ears. ‘Good eye, Deputy.’

And Deputy Parrish – Jordan – twinkles back, which is actually really nice and makes Stiles’ stomach swoop a bit. ‘As if I would forget you.’

Stiles is suddenly very aware of his own tongue. ‘I guess I’m an unforgettable sort of guy.’ He cringes at himself because god, but Jordan doesn’t seem to mind because his lips curve into an all-out grin, and damn if that isn’t a five million dollar smile.

‘I guess you are.’ Jordan’s voice is low and smooth as he holds Stiles’ gaze.
Stiles feels the familiar, flustered heat creep up his neck as he smiles back. He tries to subtly straighten out his jeans and shirt. It’s been a long time since someone outright flirted with him. Not since that weird lunch with Lydia when Derek had done that lethal drive-by (well, jog-by) number on him. He doesn’t think he can really count anything else because leaving someone warm clothing with ambiguous motives, and then hours of silent glowering aren’t exactly in the seduction handbook. The thought of Derek sends a hot flash of guilt through him, which makes him angry with himself because it’s not like they’re even dating.

‘Um, do you, uh, have anything yet?’ Stiles motions to the museum.

Jordan steps back and turns to face the building. ‘Not really. When we’re done processing the scene we’ll check the prints, but honestly, it’s a public building so it’s unlikely we’ll find anything useful. The security camera doesn’t record onto anything, it’s more for show than anything.’

Stiles tuts. Fucking Harris and his cheapskate ways.

Jordan turns back to Stiles and pulls his hat off, revealing neat brown hair and classically handsome features. The sun illuminates his eyes. Green, Stiles notes. Pretty. Not pretty like Derek’s eyes, of course, but then Derek’s eyes are almost inhumanly beautiful so it’s not really a fair benchmark to measure other guys against. Nothing about Derek is a fair benchmark, really.

Jordan smiles again, and yeah, it really is a very nice smile. ‘It would be great if you could double check for anything missing and let me know. Here…’ He pulls a card from his back pocket and presses it into Stiles’ hands. ‘My personal number is on the back,’ he murmurs, stepping in a little closer. ‘Feel free to use it.’ He smells nice. Not as nice as Derek though, he thinks before he gives his mind a mental slap upside the head. Derek will ruin him for everyone else, if he isn’t careful. Derek who still hasn’t expressed an actual interest in him. Or even given him his number. Unlike Jordan. Unless Stiles is reading it wrong.

‘Okay,’ he says, looking up through his eyelashes at Jordan experimentally, trying on one of Derek’s killer moves for size. ‘I will.’

Jordan flashes that lingering grin again and then whistles as he strolls off to the squad car, and nope, Stiles is pretty sure he did not read that wrong. Stiles stares after him for a second, blood buzzing lightly through his veins.

He glances back over to the building where a couple of tech guys are still wandering around.

The ambulance and Clive have gone. Harris is, of course, nowhere to be seen. He's probably out hanging upside down from a rafter somewhere.

He can’t make a start on sorting through the debris with the police still here, so he vows to make an early start in the morning. They all have a couple of long days of clean-up ahead of them.

He calls Lydia on his way back to his dad’s house. She is uncharacteristically nice to him, so he knows that somehow she’s gotten wind of his epic storm out (at least, he hopes that's how Scott painted it, rather than the less impressive flounce it had actually been). Once they've agreed to meet early the next day he settles back in his seat and chews at the inside of his cheek.

He runs the tip of his thumb over the edge of Jordan’s card, tucked into the pocket of his plaid shirt. If nothing else it's a nice little boost for his ego. Maybe Scott was right in thinking he's been too focused on Derek.

When he gets back to the house, Ria is holding court in the kitchen and is largely covered in cake.
She has vanilla frosting in her hair and mashed into the shells of her ears, and judging by the smile on her face she's ecstatic about it. There’s a huge piece of cake set to one side for Stiles, which must have been Scott’s doing. Stiles frowns half-heartedly at it. Damn, it's hard to be mad at someone who apologises in baked goods.

‘You’re forgiven, as long as the thing never ever goes live, ever,’ he says, throwing himself down into a chair at the kitchen table opposite Scott, who has been totally suckered into Ria’s favourite game of ‘repeatedly throw an object onto the floor and see how many times an adult will retrieve it before they lose their shit’. It gives Stiles a sense of evil satisfaction to see that she has conned Scotty into participating and he grins into his cake. Karma is real, yo.

He watches Scott suppress a sigh as Ria flings her plastic spoon across the room with a triumphant squeal. Judging by the reluctance in Scott’s limbs as he ducks to get to it, Stiles surmises he’s been at it for some time already. He makes a mental note to buy Ria the most obnoxiously neon My Little Pony he can find by way of reward.

‘What thing?’ Melissa asks, appearing in the kitchen in her scrubs, her dark curls pulled back from her face.

‘Just a thing…’ Scott’s cheeks are burning.

‘Scott is overly concerned with my sad lack of a love life,’ Stiles says around a mouthful of cake.

‘No, it’s not that…’ Scott says, holding his hands up pleadingly. ‘I just think you can do better than Derek, that’s all…’

‘Ooh, Derek?’ Melissa ninjas up on Ria from behind, wet wipe in hand, weaving between her flailing limbs until she gets a clear shot at her face. Stiles nods to himself in approval. Melissa is wise to the ways of toddlers. ‘Who’s Derek?’

‘Hale,’ Scott says, which surprises Stiles because he didn’t know Scott knew him at all.

‘Oh really?’ Melissa raises an impressed eyebrow. ‘I didn’t know he was back in town. Good looking young man. Nice work, Stiles.’

‘Not dating him,’ Stiles mumbles. ‘Not for a lack of trying on my part.’

‘Oh.’ Melissa’s tone turns sympathetic. ‘Ouch. I’m not surprised he has some issues to work through, though, after everything he’s been through.’

Stiles shouldn’t ask her to elaborate. He knows he shouldn’t. He should not be nosy. He should let Derek confide in him in his own time. If he were a better person, he would. But Stiles is a terrible person, he knows this. It used to keep him up at night but now he’s made his peace with it, so he asks, ‘What do you mean?’

‘There was a fire,’ Melissa says, pouring coffee into a travel mug. ‘The Hale’s family home burned down, out in the preserve. They thought it was arson but they never caught anyone. It would have been… oh, more than ten years ago now. Derek was just a boy. Sixteen, seventeen…’

The fork slips from between Stiles’ fingers and he feels sick and cold. ‘And… his family?’

Melissa shakes her head, sadly. ‘Derek and one of his sisters were the only survivors. His parents, another sister, an aunt and two cousins were in there. It was just awful. They were good people, his family. Did a lot of good for the town. Derek was always such a nice boy.’ She tucks an errant curl behind her ear. ‘A few years later, his sister was murdered. They never caught anyone for that,
either. Derek left town a bit after that. Who could blame him, really?’

‘Oh god…’ Stiles chest goes tight and sore, his breath stuck in his gullet, and he scoots his chair back from the table to get some room. He knows what it took for him and his dad to survive his mom's death. But his whole family... He can’t even begin to comprehend that sort of loss, that sort of pain. He thinks of the leather jacket - Derek's dad's jacket. He would have liked you. He swallows hard, managing to catch his breath, and as the oxygen filters through his veins it carries with it a weird urgency to get to Derek. Stiles is struck dumb with the intensity of it.

He wants to see Derek. Right now. Like, immediately, if not sooner, and wrap himself around him so nothing else bad ever happens to him. His limbs ache with it. He's never felt anything quite like it. It makes the pleasant, buzzy feeling Jordan had left him with seem shallow and sort of cheap. Stiles doesn't stop to examine what it means. He gathers up his daughter and heads for home.

*

Derek opens the door before Stiles has even finished knocking.

‘Stiles... What’s wrong?’ He looks tired, his brows pulled together in concern.

He catches Ria when she jumps from Stiles' hip into his arms, and the smile he gives her makes Stiles' heart skip a beat. At that exact same moment Derek's eyes tick over to Stiles, soft, like he knows, and Stiles is not at all sure Derek hasn't already ruined him for everyone else.

‘Nothing, I…’ Stiles stops. Nothing is wrong, except that everything is. ‘Can I talk to you?’

‘Sure.’ Derek must pick up the uncertainty in Stiles' voice because his eyebrows turn worried. ‘You wanna go to your place? Isaac’s home.’

‘Okay. Yeah. Good.’ Stiles worries his bottom lip between his teeth as he fumbles for his keys, doing a mini fist pump when he finally gets the door open and stands back to let Derek in.

Derek is barefoot despite the October chill, and in jeans and a ripped t shirt that should be ridiculous but is actually just delicious. Clearly Derek doesn’t mind the cooler temperatures – he doesn’t even have goosebumps. That breaks Stiles’ tense mood a little, because his ass does Derek need to be carting around that knitwear every time he comes over. He does it for Stiles.

‘You need a sweater?’ Stiles ventures with a smirk. ‘I have, like, five of yours, if you want.’

Derek’s eyes narrow a little as he sets Ria down next to her box of trains. ‘No, I’m good.’ He turns to Stiles and folds his arms over his chest. Stiles wishes he wouldn't, because it does all sorts of good things for his biceps which is highly distracting. ‘You wanted to talk to me?’ Derek prompts, a sly little smirk of his own ghosting over his lips because apparently Stiles is embarrassingly transparent. Stiles wishes he found Derek half as easy to read.

Stiles sits on the arm of a chair with a sigh. ‘Yeah. Look, I wanted to tell you… I was at my dad’s today, and his fiancée, Melissa… She knows you. Or, well, knew you, I guess. And your family.’ Derek stares at him, unblinking, so Stiles just forges ahead. ‘She mentioned some things about your past. About the fire.’ The words fly out of his mouth and settle straight onto Derek’s shoulders, visibly weighing them down.

Stiles winces. ‘I just thought you should know. That I know. About your family. I didn’t like the idea of secrets, it felt…’ He makes a vague, abortive gesture with his arms, ‘...wrong.’

For a second, Derek’s stoic mask slips, and he looks so unbearably sad that Stiles has crossed the
room and looped an arm around his neck before he knows he’s doing it. Derek freezes so completely
that Stiles isn’t sure he’s breathing, and then, very slowly, Derek winds a tentative arm around Stiles’
waist and holds it there. Stiles exhales into the hug, letting himself soak up some of the warmth that
radiates off Derek. Stiles wonders if Derek always runs so hot. He fights to resist collapsing on top of
him like he’s some giant hot-stone massage pebble.

‘I’m sorry…’ Stiles whispers into the air near his ear. He feels Derek's eyelashes brush silkily over
his neck, sending a shiver skittering down his spine. They stand like that for a long minute. Derek
seems to like hugs, he’s just awkward about them in a way that suggests he doesn't get very many.
He would have had them from his family, Stiles realises. His stomach clenches and he pulls Derek a
little bit closer. Derek doesn't resist. Stiles wonders how many hugs he'd need to give Derek to even
start to fill the deficit. Probably thousands. Stiles would be fine with that.

Eventually he murmurs, ‘You know, I used to hate when people would say they were sorry for my
loss. Like, I know they were actually trying to say they were sorry for my 
[409x598]pain, 
[433x598]but it pissed me off
so much. Those words; ‘for your loss’. My loss. Like she just fell out of my pocket one day. Like she
wasn’t wrenched from me, kicking and screaming. Like I didn’t take enough care.’ Stiles stops
because he can feel Derek suddenly go rigid in his arms.

Derek pulls back from the hug, misery etched onto every feature like he’s worn it there all his life,
and he wraps his arms around himself and sort of hunches in, and it breaks Stiles’ heart.

‘Derek?’

‘Maybe you weren’t careless with your family, Stiles…’ Derek looks away sharply. ‘But I was with
mine.’

The realisation that Derek carries some sort of deep guilt over this, probably has done for years, feels
like a sucker-punch to Stiles' gut. He puts his hands on Derek's shoulders and says gently, ‘You were
a kid. You were just a kid.’

Derek shakes his head, avoiding eye contact. ‘I should have known.’

‘Should have known what?’ Stiles prompts gently.

Derek's throat works furiously. ‘I should have seen what she was planning. I just trusted, blindly, like
an idiot…’

Stiles frowns. 'You... knew the person who did it?'

'I loved her.' Derek's words hang in the air, startlingly brusque. 'Or, I thought I did. I loved who I
thought she was. Now I know that I never really knew who she was. But I thought she loved me,
too.' He drops his head to stare at his bare feet. 'She was just using me to get to them. I was so...
Stupid.'

Stiles steps forward to pull his back into his arms, without hesitation, sweeping his hands over the
expanses of Derek's shoulders as if he might miraculously take away some of Derek's pain through
his skin. 'No, you weren't. Derek... It wasn't your fault.'

'Bear? Bear sad?' Ria stands by Derek's feet, tugging on his jeans, her face crumpling like she's about
to cry.

Derek scoops her up in a heartbeat, nuzzling his face into her neck, which she responds to instantly.
Derek has always seemed to have good, natural instincts with her, knowing when she needs to be
held or when she needs space. Stiles suppresses a pang of envy over the way she buries her chubby
hands into his hair.

'It's okay, little one,' Derek soothes. 'I'm fine.' He looks at Stiles with his inscrutable, complicated eyes. 'I'll be fine.'

Stiles watches them for a moment before thinking, 'Fuck it,' and stepping back in to resume the hug, only this time he has one arm around Derek's neck and one around Ria's warm, soft body. Derek puts an arm back around his waist, and Ria places a damp, frosting-scented hand onto his cheek, and it turns out that it's the warmest, best-smelling hug he's ever had. It's perfect, actually.

'Um,' Derek inclines his head towards the door. 'I should probably leave you to it, it's getting late.'

Stiles pouts as he steps back into the kitchen, trying to dispel some of the intimacy with an attempt at levity. 'Nah, don't go. I'm jonesing for a cup of coffee, can I tempt you? I'm gonna get this little lady to bed, and then I'm feeling like it's a Ghostbusters sort of a night. You in?'

Derek purses his lips. 'Do you have tea?'

Stiles smirks and opens the cabinet to grab mugs. 'Sure thing, Gramps. Is that a yes?'

Derek heaves a long-suffering sigh. 'Alright. Will you refrain from applauding and saying, 'Bill Murray, everyone!' every time Bill Murray says anything?'

Stiles holds up his hands. 'I can't make any promises, Derek. I am but a man, humble in the face of the sarcastic genius that is William James Murray.'

Derek snorts and says, 'Garfield, Stiles,' and just like that everything seems to be back to normal.

Stiles shrugs happily. 'Well, nobody's perfect.'

Derek mutters something that Stiles doesn't quite catch, but it sounds suspiciously like, 'I don't know about that.'
Derek holds the phone away from his ear as Cora sighs down it, her breath crackling down the line.
‘You seriously still haven’t made a move on this kid? He’s pining for you, you’re moping after him, would you please put everyone out of their misery already?’

‘It’s not that simple.’ Derek picks at a loose thread on his plaid sleep pants. He’d liked it better when Cora was off climbing mountains in remote places with very patchy cell signal. Now she’s in Mexico, at a secluded beach resort which allows her altogether too much opportunity to Facetime Erica to gossip about him.

‘Derek…’ Her voice cajoles softly. ‘He’s not going to wait around forever.’

Derek huffs irritably. She’s not just touching on a raw nerve, she’s tap dancing on it in heels. ‘I know that, but what am I supposed to say to him? “Hey, Stiles, I’d love to take you to dinner but in order for you to make an informed decision you need to know that about half the people you know are actually werewolves. Also witches, banshees and about a million other, mostly unfriendly, supernatural creatures exist. If you’re cool with that I know this great tapas place on fifth…”’

‘Yep,’ Boyd says, strolling past in his boxers to grab an apple out of the bowl on the side table. ‘Pretty much exactly that.’

Cora laughs down the line.

‘What’s the worst that could happen?’ Boyd takes a bite out of his apple, leaving a perfect imprint of his teeth in the white flesh.

‘Uh, let’s see…’ Derek cradles the phone between his ear and his shoulder so he can count things off on his fingers. ‘Stiles could flip out, move back in with his dad, refuse to speak to any of us, and need to undergo ten to fifteen years of intensive therapy in order to ever trust again. Not to mention he’d tell the Sheriff and we’d end up dealing with the fall out.’

Boyd nods thoughtfully. ‘That would suck.’

Derek blinks at him. ‘That… would be an understatement.’

‘On the other hand,’ Boyd says, examining the glossy green skin of the fruit. ‘What’s the best that could happen?’

‘Well that’s…’ Derek’s throat works. That’s something he only ever lets himself consider in the most abstract way.

Boyd smiles at him. ‘Exactly.’ He saunters away, tossing the apple core over his shoulder towards the trash can. He gets a direct hit, and looks supremely smug about it.
'You give Yoda the bite since I’ve been away?' Cora’s tinny, far away voice makes him jump.

Derek snorts. ‘Nah. Boyd’s more cryptic than Yoda.’

‘And he’s got a bigger lightsaber!’ Erica shouts gleefully from the bedroom that’s technically the guest bedroom but in reality belongs to Erica and Boyd.

Derek rolls his eyes so hard Cora can probably hear it in Mexico.

He rests his forehead in his free hand. They’re right. Derek has been putting off talking to Stiles for too long already, simply because he’s scared that this is as good as he’ll ever have it. He has a place in Stiles’ home, in his and Ria’s lives. He has hugs and lingering looks and affectionate touches. He has a connection with them both that he’s grown to cherish fiercely. And he could lose it all.

But Stiles won’t wait around forever. Derek’s betas have made it clear they understand the need for Stiles to be told the truth. It should probably happen soon anyway, Derek thinks, regardless of Stiles and Derek’s relationship status, because of their closeness as a group now, and how much time they spend with Ria.

Derek has no idea how Stiles will react. Stiles has accepted him so easily and so completely so far, it’s pretty fucking scary to think about losing that.

Maybe Cora hears the click of his dry throat because she says, ever so softly, ‘Be brave, pup,’ and she sounds so much like their mom that for a second he can’t breathe.

He’s plunged into a moment of nostalgia. Memories flood over him; his mom smiling down at him on his first day of school, her waving from the sidelines of his first lacrosse game, encouraging and supporting him. ‘Be brave, pup,’ she had said. He remembers how she had always smelled very faintly of frangipani and how he had loved to twist strands of her thick, dark hair between his fingers when they all slept crushed together in the family room. She and Stiles would have bickered constantly. She would have loved him. ‘Be brave, pup.’

Eventually he says, ‘Yeah. Okay.’ And then he hangs up before she can get do anything embarrassing like squeal.

He thinks about how to set it up to get Stiles in the best mood possible before he potentially ruins his life. He doesn’t have to think long. This is Stiles, so: food. He ransacks his cabinets and comes up with a box of pancake mix. He hopes it’ll be good enough.

* 

Stiles wakes up, gasping for air. The room is dim and his peripheral vision is filled with dark shapes and odd angles. He’s not at home. After a second he places the beeswax scent around him. He’s in the museum. \textit{What?} He shouldn’t be here. He should be at home, with Ria. He could have sworn he’d gone to bed just like always. Alone, just like always. He ignores the sting in his chest from Derek’s continued obliviousness to his ardor. It’s more important that he figures out how he got here.

He sits up, carefully. Everything is still dark and fuzzy, and he brings his hands up to his face in alarm. They brush past a pair of glasses on a cord, resting on his chest, which is super weird because Stiles doesn’t own a cord like that. He fumbles for the glasses anyway, sighing in relief when he pushes them onto his nose and the vague shapes come into focus. The sinister blurs morph into display cases and art work, all in eerie chiaroscuro because of the low night-lighting in the room.

He rolls slightly so he can brace himself to get to his feet, and that’s when he notices his hands. Or, more specifically, the fact that the hands he’s in possession of aren’t his own. They’re smaller than
his own, more tanned, and noticeably older, skin sagging at the wrist and knuckles. There’s a
wedding band on his ring finger. He holds his hands out before him in fascination, wiggling his
fingers experimentally. He presses them to his face again, letting out a low, surprised noise at the
softness he finds around his jaw-line, the protrusion of his eyebrows, the thick moustache on his
upper lip. He seems to be wearing a pale blue shirt and a navy sweater.

He has no idea what the fuck is going on. He makes to get up, wincing as something metal and solid
digs into his hip. A torch, he realises, as he runs his fingers over its lines. It’s attached to his belt, next
to a bunch of keys and a radio. He must be a security guard. On some far-off level he becomes aware
this must be a dream. A really realistic dream. He glances around him at the cavernous rooms, filled
with deep shadows. He makes a mental note to never volunteer for this particular duty at the
museum, because the building is hella creepy at night. He makes it to his feet, his knees aching with
the cold. He looks down at his hands again. This is seriously the weirdest dream ever. He silently
thanks his subconscious with as much sarcasm as he can muster.

He does what he supposes dream-security guards do, and sets off on a dream-round of the dream-
museum. He can’t remember ever having a dream as realistic as this before, right down to the smells.
He ventures a tentative whistle. It echoes. Stiles takes back some of his bad feeling towards his
subconscious because this is actually impressive, and then fuck…

His heart gives a huge, painful clench as there’s movement from somewhere behind him, a loud rush
of air and then a tearing sound that makes his teeth ache in his jaw. He turns on his heel and sees a
bright-white ball of light – from a torch maybe? – disappear into the next room. He charges after it.
He grips the solid weight of the torch between his hands so hard that the metal cuts into the pads of
his fingers. He wishes fervently that he had something a bit more badass, like a baseball bat, but his
subconscious refuses to conjure one up for him, so he braces the torch at shoulder-height and chases
the light. He forces himself to go faster than his worn-out knees will really allow, and he seems to be
gaining on whatever it is, because the light gets brighter and brighter, and as it does, the temperature
of the room plunges. It gets incredibly, painfully cold. It's so cold Stiles can see his breath freezing in
the air as he pants harshly, lungs screaming in protest. His limbs start to shake.

Stiles looks around wildly, trying to blink away the blindness the harsh, white light leaves burned
onto his retinas. There’s a loud scuffling noise near him, too near, and his heart thumps against his
ribs as he turns to follow the direction of it as it skitters around the room, and then suddenly the light
dims and everything is silent. Stiles’ head feels like it might wrench from his neck as he cranes to see
who’s there. Something brushes by him, so fast it’s just a blur. It’s only when the line of pain
blossoms across his back that he realises it’s cut him, somehow. The old-penny stench of blood fills
his nose. He tries to call out, but he can’t make his throat work. The cut must be deeper than he’d
realised because he falls to his knees woozily, his shirt sticking to his back where the blood has
soaked the fabric.

Groggily Stiles registers that something is off about the room. Nothing has been damaged yet, but
something is definitely wrong – and then he realises that it’s the walls. He feels nausea claw its
panicked way up his throat as he takes in the shapes daubed onto the wall, in what looks like blood.
There are uneven and geometric, almost primitive, and they look oddly familiar to him, but he can’t
figure out where he’s seen them before. The shapes glisten darkly on the wall, and somehow he
knows it’s his own blood, but he doesn’t know how. It’s not possible, he was only wounded a few
seconds ago. The room starts to shiver in and out of Stiles’ peripheral vision. He knows he’s losing a
lot of blood because of how his breath rattles in his throat.

That deafening rush of air fills the room again, and Stiles manages to loll his head across to his other
shoulder in time to see a shape emerge out of the shadows. He can tell from the powerful silhouette
that it’s the half-man, half-stag he’s dreamed about before, only before it had been passive, just
looking at him. Now it seems like it’s vibrating with fury, sweat glistening on every thick cord of muscle. It rises from his skin as steam in the frigid air, releasing a smell like a mouldy doormat, that makes Stiles want to gag. The dark fur on its neck and head looks wet and matted and wild. Its eyes burn scarlet, and its hands clench into fists. Its enormous shoulders flex as it tips its massive head back, bares its teeth and screams. Stiles feels the spittle whip across his cheeks.

The scream seizes every cell of Stiles’ being, shakes him into the marrow of his bones, and in vague, fascinated horror, he watches as the creature flings its arms wide, its bones twisting and contorting. The creature groans with a macabre satisfaction as his limbs break and bend, and he hunches over onto all fours as the enormous antlers retract into his skull with a sickening grinding noise, and Stiles falls to the floor.

When he comes to, all he can hear is a wet, rhythmic noise that sounds like an animal panting, and he forces himself to look. The man-stag is gone, but in its place is the biggest wolf Stiles has ever seen. Its head would easily come to Stiles’ shoulder, were Stiles standing, and its maws are big enough to fit around a man’s skull. Its fur is dark, and just as wild, thick with that same ancient, musty smell. The wolf’s eyes burn red. Its hot breath hits the air in patches of freezing fog, hardening into rime ice on the walls and floor nearby. Stiles is paralysed with the cold, except for his heart, which hammers onward, in the valiant hope that he’ll survive this somehow. The wolf roars, and the light gets brighter, and everything smells like blood and frost, only that sharp, old frost smell like you get in musty fridges. Stiles thinks he wants to vomit.

Then his head hurts and everything goes black.

He wakes up.

He’s drenched in sweat and his chest is heaving, but thank god, he’s in his own pyjamas, in his own bed. He scrambles into his bathroom and yanks the light on, pressing his hands to his face in the mirrored cabinet. He’s never been so relieved to see his own reflection, pale and sickly though it may be. He pushes and pulls at his skin, examines his hands, his eyebrows, his back. He’s himself.

He sits down shakily on the edge of the tub. Jesus. He hasn’t had a nightmare that real in… ever. He pours himself a glass of water and waits for the tremors to subside from his limbs. He slips back into his still-warm sheets, letting the residual heat seep into his icy feet.

He’s still staring sleeplessly at the wall when the dawn breaks, sending a wash of wan grey over his bedroom. He drags himself to the shower and turns it on, grateful that Oriana hasn’t woken up yet so he can turn the water up to almost scalding. He watches his skin turn pink under the heat, but he still can’t get warm. He scrubs himself, trying to cleanse his skin of all traces of the dream, and then he lingers in the cloud of hot steam that has built up in the bathroom, waiting for his bones to thaw. He’s still luxuriating in the humidity when he hears a knock at the door.

* 

Derek nearly drops the plate of warm banana pancakes when Stiles answers the door with just a towel wrapped around his slim hips. His skin is rosy at his cheeks and throat, and he still has water droplets glinting in his eyelashes. Derek raises his eyes heavenward because really, universe? Really?

He clears his throat and tries to ignore the breadth of Stiles’ shoulders and the planes of his stomach, and the neat line of hair that trails from his navel to somewhere under the towel. He looks good enough to eat, much more delicious than any pancakes Derek’s ever had. Derek wants to rip the stupid towel off him and drag him back into the shower. Instead he says, ‘Uh, we made too many pancakes.’ He’s thankful now that he brought a prop to occupy his awkward hands. ‘You guys want
‘Obviously. I am never knowingly under-pancaked,’ Stiles says solemnly, which makes Derek shake his head around a wry smile, mainly because Stiles should be fucking annoying but he’s actually just fucking adorable. Stiles motions him inside, his racing heart thundering in Derek’s ears.

‘I’m just gonna…’ Stiles gestures to the towel. ‘Put on clothes. So many clothes. Help yourself to the coffee machine, I’ll be right back.’

Derek watches him disappear into his room, very deliberately not looking at the swell of his ass under the towel. He hears Ria start to shift about in her crib and hurries to get her, grateful for the distraction.

By the time Stiles has returned, towel sadly replaced by as many layers as he’d promised, Ria is sitting in her highchair, her face sticky-sweet with syrup.

‘You’d better be ready to wipe her down every three minutes,’ Stiles says warningly. ‘Otherwise the syrup starts to harden and she’ll be stuck in that chair like an insect fused in amber, and I left my good chisel at the museum.’

Derek snorts. ‘Useful for containment, though. If you wanted to have free reign with the stickers, or something.’

Stiles grins. ‘That’s genius. You’re like a henley-clad Machiavelli! Ooh I could go crazy and build a tower and savor the accomplishment for a hot second without her knocking it down!’ Stiles’ voice turns dreamy.

‘Yeah, that’s it, Stiles,’ Derek teases. ‘Really go crazy.’

Stiles huffs. ‘Mock all you want, my adrenaline-junkie friend, but I am all about taking crazy chances and living on the edge.’ He leans in to steal a bite of Ria’s pancakes, much to her chagrin. ‘Why, just last night, I microwaved a bowl of chunky soup…’ He pauses dramatically and spreads his hands wide. ‘…with no cover!’

Derek laughs. He laughs a lot around Stiles, actually. ‘Living on the edge, huh?’

Stiles smiles. ‘Guess so.’ He looks up at Derek, his wide eyes warm and knowing. ‘I know what you’re doing, by the way. I’m totally on to you.’

Derek starts, guiltily. ‘Hmm?’

‘You’re shamelessly buying my daughter’s love with banana pancakes.’ Stiles shakes his head playfully.

Derek snorts. ‘Well,’ he shrugs, ‘it’s for sale and I want it.’

Stiles is looks at him steadily, and it feels to Derek like he’s looking right into him, that shrewd gaze raking over all of Derek’s hopes and fears and secrets.

Derek blushes and shrugs again.

‘Well I think you got it, big guy.’ Stiles’ eyes flick down to Derek’s mouth, and Derek feels heat flash through his body. ‘No pancake bribes necessary.’

‘No?’
Stiles’ eyes are on his mouth again. ‘Definitely not.’ Then his eyes are on Derek’s, and everything unsaid hangs in the air between them, thickening it with tension.

Derek takes a breath.

He’s not exactly sure what he wants to use it for – maybe to say ‘I like you,’ or ‘I think you’re the one,’ or ‘I’m a werewolf, please don’t leave,’ but he only gets as far as ‘Stiles, I-’ before Stiles cuts him off with a huge yawn that makes his face perform a series of manoeuvres so complex that Derek can’t help but stare at him. He has the most fascinating mouth Derek has ever seen on another person.

Stiles blushes and grins. ‘Sorry, dude. I didn’t get much sleep last night. Had this crazy-weird dream about a demon wolf, among other creep-tacular things. Totally freaked me out.’

Derek takes an involuntary step backwards. It feels like ice has been poured down his veins. ‘A demon wolf?’

‘Yeah.’ Stiles shrugs. ‘Oh, shoot, am I supposed to be all manly and not admit that I had a nightmare that scared the bejesus outta me?’

‘It scared you.’ Derek tries to keep his distress out of his voice.

Stiles’ eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. ‘Well, yeah. It was humongous. Massive teeth. And these glowing red eyes.’ He shudders.

The memory of it flickers over Stiles’ face, and he looks scared, and horrified, and sick, and it’s just because of a dream. It’s like a living, breathing premonition. How will he feel when he finds out Derek is the real thing, demonic red eyes and all? It strikes Derek hard and fast, like a bat to the gut, that it’s exactly how Stiles will look at him when he knows. The room spins as the thought winds him.

‘Anyway,’ Stiles says lightly, flicking his hands away from him like he’s trying to push the dream away. ‘Doesn’t matter now. It was just a dream. You were, um, saying something?’ The hopeful inflection in his voice is torture.

He swallows hard. ‘Yeah,’ he manages eventually. ‘I was just saying that I should get going. Architects to argue with. Walls to sledgehammer.’

It’s like someone has pricked Stiles with a pin. Derek watches as all the cheer and levity visibly drains from Stiles’ body and he deflates slowly into a slump. With all his usual bounce and elasticity gone, Stiles looks worn and tired. It makes Derek’s chest ache.

‘Sure thing, Derek,’ Stiles says. It’s lifeless and resigned. ‘Thanks for the pancakes.’

He won’t meet Derek’s eyes, and suddenly the thought that Stiles is pulling away from him lands on Derek’s chest and squats there, crushing his ribs in on themselves.

*Be brave, pup.*

‘Stiles, wait…’ Derek starts.

But Stiles’ phone has already started to vibrate on the kitchen counter. Stiles frowns down at it. ‘Oh, it’s Jordan. I should take this…’ He thumbs over the screen. ‘Hey, Jordan, what’s up?’

Derek can hear the warmth in the caller’s voice even from several feet away. He’s so busy curling
his fingers into fists to stop himself from breaking any plates that he doesn’t really listen to what this
guy – Jordan - is actually saying.

‘Derek,’ Stiles catches his attention, his eyes wide with distress. ‘I gotta get to the museum, there’s
been another incident. Could you get Erica for me? I need to see if she could take Ria to daycare.’

‘Sure,’ Derek’s voice cracks and he licks his lips and tries again. ‘Sure thing.’

He looks back over his shoulder as he leaves. Stiles is turned away from him, his body curled in
around the phone like he’s cradling it, and he’s talking to Jordan in a low, intimate voice. He doesn’t
look up when Derek leaves.

* 

‘Hey, Lyds,’ Stiles hurries along the sidewalk, crisp leaves crunching under his sneakers. Lydia is
hugging her arms around herself in a slouchy cream knitted sweater that contrasts with how fiery and
autumnal her hair is. She's luminous against the grey sky. He thinks, for the thousandth time, that if
he’d met her in high school he’d have worshipped her ‘til the day he died. He wraps his arms around
her before reaching over to squeeze Danny’s arm. ‘What happened?’

‘Another break-in, they think.’ Lydia sounds considerably more shaken about this one. ‘When I got
here the doors were open, the locks broken. Manny was on security last night and he’s… He’s gone.
And there’s blood. We can’t find him. And they defaced a room this time, drew all over the walls…’
Her voice breaks into a sob and he holds her closer. ‘They drew all over the walls.’

Stiles looks up at the museum building, filled with a sick sense of foreboding. It can't be the same as
his dream. It can't possibly.

‘What… what did they draw on the walls?’ He holds his breath.

Danny furrows his brow. ‘Creepy symbols. Fucking weirdos.’

Creepy symbols. Stiles' stomach drops through his shoes. Oh god.

‘Lydia, Stiles, hi.’ Jordan strides over, reassuringly solid in his uniform. ‘We just got a call… They
found the security guard-’

‘Manny,’ Stiles interjects.

Jordan gives him a half smile. ‘Right. Manny. He’s been found. He’s alive but he’s being treated for
a head injury, severe cuts and bruises, and shock.’

‘Thank god. Where was he?’ Lydia demands.

Jordan purses his lips together. ‘This is where it gets weird… He was found in woodland. Some
hikers stumbled over him. He was disoriented, sounds like he didn’t know where he was or what
happened. Anyway, he was found almost eighty miles away.’

‘What?’ Stiles stares at Jordan in disbelief. ‘Are you serious?’

Jordan raises his shoulders helplessly. ‘I guess this must have happened not long after the museum
closed, and… for some reason the intruders kidnapped him. It’s still a very early stage in the
investigation. I’ll let you know when we know more. I just wanted to reassure you that he’s been
found safely.’
‘Thank you.’ Stiles reaches out to touch Jordan’s hand.

Jordan smiles softly at him, his professionalism slipping for a second, then he’s back to business. He looks down at his notepad.

‘So the vandalism is something different. I don’t know if Lydia mentioned that it looks like it’s blood?’

Stiles feels his knees give out as memories of his dream whirl up to consume him, the coppery stench of the blood making him want to retch.

‘Woah, woah… Steady there.’ There’s a strong arm around his shoulders, where a phantom pain from the dream still burns, but the arm is holding him up, and the voice is grounding him, and it’s Jordan, kind and steadying and there.

‘I’m okay,’ Stiles chokes out, regaining his balance. ‘I’m fine.’

Jordan frowns up at him. ‘Maybe you should get some rest,’ he says. ‘We need to test the blood and dust for prints. You won’t get back into the building for a while yet.’

Lydia looks Stiles over with a sharp eye. ‘He’s right,’ she says, firmly. ‘I’ll stay.’

Stiles is about to protest when Danny steps over and takes his arm. ‘Come on,’ he leads Stiles down the sidewalk. ‘I’ll buy you a coffee.’

‘Yeah,’ Stiles says, still unsteady. ‘That’d be really good actually.’

They get about half a block away when Stiles becomes aware of someone calling his name. He turns to find Jordan jogging after them. Danny moves a few feet away in a pretence at discretion.

‘Hey,’ Jordan says breathlessly, cheeks faintly pink. ‘I wanted to ask if you’d call me? To let me know you’re feeling better?’

‘Oh,’ Stiles’ tired mind can barely process Jordan’s words. ‘Sure. I can do that. Thanks for, you know, thinking of me.’

Jordan smiles and it makes Stiles’ cold limbs thaw a little more. ‘Listen, I know this is terrible timing, but, uh, I wondered if maybe you’d want to go out sometime?’

Stiles blinks at him. ‘Me?’

‘Yeah,’ Jordan smiles shyly. ‘You. And me. Together.’

‘Like… a date?’ Stiles winces when his voice squeaks.

Jordan bites his bottom lip, but he’s smiling. ‘If you wanted.’

‘Um…’ Stiles’ brain is definitely ill equipped for this right now. ‘Look, it’s definitely not a no, but, uh. Can I let you know? I have… there’s a thing I’m figuring out, and I want to be fair to you. I’m sorry.’

‘Sure, of course. Offer’s open any time.’ Jordan seems kind and decent, and he’s definitely attractive. Stiles would have been jumping his bones, if not for Derek.

‘Okay. Thank you.’ Stiles hopes Jordan can see how grateful he is for his patience and understanding.
‘Take care, okay?’ Jordan squeezes Stiles’ shoulder and turns to jog back to the museum.

‘You, too!’ Stiles calls after him.

Danny saunters back over with a knowing smirk on his face. ‘So, Deputy Dreamboat, huh?’

‘Shut up.’ Stiles bumps his shoulder into Danny’s.

‘No, I’m happy for you. He’s a good guy.’

Stiles nods. ‘Seems to be.’ At least he'd stuck around to make sure Stiles was okay when there was trouble, instead of going pale and monosyllabic like Derek had that morning. Stiles wonders vaguely if Derek has some sort of phobia of wolves. Whatever, Stiles is coming to the end of his patience with being shut out of Derek's head all the time.

They walk in silence until they reach the block that the coffee shop is on, then Danny clears his throat. ‘So there’s a thing you’re figuring out?’

Stiles shrugs. Usually he’s the king of words, usually words are totally his bitch, but today… not so much. Exhaustion has shut down his synapses. He’s pretty sure his motor function gets worse when he’s tired, too, but it’s already fairly iffy so it’s hard to tell. He grinds out, ‘Derek Hale.’

Danny whistles. ‘Derek Hale… Tall, gorgeous, angry with the world?’

Stiles snorts. ‘You’ve met him, then.’

‘Yeah.’ Danny smiles coyly. ‘I hooked up with his friend, Isaac, a few times at Jungle.’

Stiles raises his eyebrows. ‘Oh, yeah? Good for you, man.’ Then he joins the dots. ‘Wait, so does that mean Derek goes to Jungle?’

Danny glances over at him uncomfortably. ‘Uh, sure. Sometimes. Not as often as Isaac.’

‘Uh huh. Bet he does pretty well with the guys.’ Stiles asks slyly.

Danny smirks and laughs out an, ‘Uh, yeah, duh,’ before he colours and looks back over at Stiles. ‘I mean, I guess he gets his share of numbers. You know?’

‘Yeah,’ Stiles says, the sting of his rejection hardening into something sharp and flinty in his belly. ‘Yeah, I know.’

*

Stiles arranges for his dad to pick Ria up from daycare and take her for the night. He’s hauling himself up the last of the stairs to his apartment when a movement in a nearby shadow nearly makes him jump out of his skin. ‘Jesus, what the fuck are you lurking out here for?’

Derek shakes his head. ‘I was on my way back, heard you coming up the stairs. Thought I’d check on you.’

Derek closes his eyes. He really can’t deal with Derek’s beautiful, inscrutable face right now, or the way his ripped, dirty tank stretches over his chest. He definitely can’t deal with mental images of Derek with a sledgehammer. He swallows, forcing his focus back onto how he’s actually a bit pissed off at Derek for flaking out on him again that morning.

‘Check up on me?’
'You’re home early.’ Derek takes an uncertain step forwards, fiddling with the zip of his hooded sweatshirt.

‘Yeah. Another break in at the museum. They vandalised the place again. It’s pretty gross. Lydia sent me home ’til they clear everyone to get back in there, but I suspect I won’t get summoned back today.’

Derek frowns. ‘Jesus, I’m sorry. I know how much work it was for you guys to sort out the last one.’

Stiles shrugs. ‘Jordan says it’s not uncommon for people to break in somewhere again soon after the first time. I guess we should have beefed up the security a bit.’

‘Jordan?’ Derek raises an eyebrow. He has dust in his hair, and grime smeared over one cheekbone, and he still looks like he stepped out of a magazine shoot.

‘Deputy Parrish.’ Stiles can’t stop the blush that floods his cheeks. ‘He works with my dad. He’s heading up the investigation.’

‘Ah,’ Derek says, understanding creeping over his face, quickly followed by the fiercest glower Stiles has ever seen on anyone not on America’s Next Top Model.

He looks… jealous. Irritation flares up in Stiles’ belly. Derek has had a million chances to make a move, and he never once has. All he’s done is get Stiles’ hopes up and then fuck off, over and over. Stiles is about as subtle as a flamethrower, so he knows Derek is aware of his massive crush. Derek has almost seemed to be into it – seemed to reciprocate, a little, on occasion. But he always backs off rather than ever take it any further. Maybe he’s been using Stiles for an ego-boost this whole time, before he goes to Jungle and finds someone else he actually deems worthy of fucking.

Stiles’ exhaustion is replaced by something hot, and angry, licking through him. He decides to needle at Derek, because he can and because damn it, he just wants Derek to care.

‘He asked me out, actually.’ Stiles leans back against the doorframe. ‘I had to do a quick locust-plague check, make sure it’s not the end of days or anything.’ He smirks, more than a little bitterly.

‘You don’t seem all that pleased.’ Derek is glaring hard at the wall near Stiles’ head.

Stiles shrugs. ‘I’m tired. I could sleep for a thousand years, right now. And I’m processing. I’m not exactly the guy that picks up adorable guys on the street, you know?’ He’s not normally one for fishing, but he’s drained and freaked out and cold, and the sight of Derek’s jaw clenching when Stiles described Jordan as ‘adorable’ is really fucking satisfying.

Hell, it might be the only indication Stiles gets that Derek gives a crap, since he’s clearly never going to man up and use his words.

Derek arches an eyebrow. ‘You think it’s too good to be true? You should trust your gut on that stuff.’

And oh, that hurts. Clearly Derek thinks it’s too good to be true. The words go straight to a deep, dark place inside Stiles where a little voice lurks that tells him Derek’s way out of his league and any fool can see it. Stiles usually tries to drown that voice out with bravado and curly fries.

Stiles clenches his jaw. ‘I don’t know, Derek. Like I said. Processing.’

‘Are you going to go?’ Derek’s voice is flat, just absent, like he’s checked out, and that’s more hurtful than anything else so far. Derek obviously doesn’t care enough to fight for him. Deep down
Stiles knows he’s way too tired to be rational, and that his exhausted brain is not taking its fair share of responsibility for the way things are between them, but right now he doesn’t care. He’s hurt, and lonely, and he’s fucking mad.

Stiles slips his key into the lock with an annoyed huff. ‘Maybe. I said I’d let him know.

Derek shuffles his feet and mutters, ‘You like him?’

‘Yeah,’ Stiles bites his lip. ‘He’s nice.’

Derek looks up sharply, making eye contact for the first time. ‘You like nice?’

Stiles shakes his head, helplessly. ‘Well. It’s not like it’s a bad thing.’

A muscle in Derek’s jaw ticks a little. ‘Sure.’

‘Plus he’s a deputy, so, you, uniform and all that. Gotta love a guy in uniform,’ Stiles aims for levity but it comes out hollow.

‘If you say so.’ Derek’s voice is completely toneless but he’s glaring at his front door like he’s trying to set it on fire.

Stiles lets the silence hang for an uncomfortably long time, just in case Derek’s trying to build up courage, or find the right words, or something, anything.

*Fight for me.*

Derek is silent.

Stiles suppresses a sigh. ‘Alright, well. I’d better go.

‘Sure.’

Stiles nods jerkily and turns on his heel to open his front door. He’s about to step over the threshold when Derek’s voice stops him.

‘Hey, Stiles?’

Stiles’ heart stops. *Fight for me.*

‘Yeah?’ He’s too nervous to turn around.

He can hear Derek step closer to him, and for a wild second he thinks Derek’s going to touch him. But instead he says, ‘Have fun on your date.’

And Stiles is so fucking done.

‘You know what, Derek? I fully intend to.’

He shuts the door in Derek’s face. It’s childish, sure, but it feels really good.
What I Want Is Haunting Me (Like A Nightmare)

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much, always, for your comments, which I love!

Stiles is too worked up to do anything but pace frenetically. He makes his way back and forth across his apartment, which feels like an empty shell without Ria in it. Stiles can relate; his skin feels like it’s stretched too tightly over his bones and his pulse pounds against it like a mallet against a drumhead. The rhythm is sonorous and tribal in his own ears, his pacing winding the energy up within him like the turning of a clock-work key.

He’s buzzing down to his bones. He’s pissed at Derek and freaked out about the museum, and he can’t decide which he’s more keyed-up about. The dream and the break-in have to just be weird coincidence. They have to be. Right? Otherwise he’s… losing his mind, or something. He stares down at his hands, running his thumb over his left ring finger where the wedding ring had been on the phantom dream-hands last night. It had seemed so real. Eventually he can’t stand the ominous pounding of his own blood any longer, or the sick feeling that it’s amping up into a panic attack, so he grabs his keys and his wallet and heads for the door.

Half an hour later he finds himself in the hospital. He only vaguely remembers getting there, but that’s not entirely unusual for him when he gets anxious. He tends to fixate on a couple of things and zone everything else out. He remembers the reassuring ‘clunk’ of his car door, the cool, textured resin of the steering wheel beneath his hands. It had helped him to breathe.

He’s actually a little impressed with himself that he managed to park in his dissociated state. Parking at the hospital is a bitch at the best of times.

He heads straight for the nurses’ station where Melissa is usually stationed, hoping that someone he knows through her is on today. As luck would have it, Melissa herself is on shift, filling out a chart with singular focus.

When she finally does look up she beams at the sight of him and waves cheerily. Her green scrubs make her eyes look huge. ‘Hi Stiles! This is an unexpected pleasure. What brings you by?’

Stiles can’t help but grin at her. He likes her a lot. She’s warm and caring but she doesn’t take any crap, which is exactly what his bachelor-of-more-than-a-decade father needs. He thinks she and his mom would probably have been great friends.

‘Hey, Melissa. I was actually hoping to check in on someone, even though I’m not technically friends and family. Not that I’m, like, not his friend, because, you know, Stiles is a friend to all,’ he waves his hands around expansively, ‘I just wouldn’t be on his immediate list if you get what I’m saying.’

Melissa pulls at the stethoscope slung around her neck, freeing a dark curl that’s become trapped underneath it. ‘Which someone would this be?’ Her forehead crinkles a tad suspiciously, which Stiles might huff about were he not so busy freaking the fuck out about the rest of his life.

‘Manny? He’s the security guard at the museum, he was hurt last night during a break in. I wanted to
see how he’s doing.’

Melissa’s face softens. ‘That’s really sweet, Stiles. Sit tight, I’ll see if he’s up for a visitor.’ She disappears behind a curtained-off partition, and Stiles waits awkwardly near the nurses’ station. He tries to breathe through his mouth. He hates that pine-antiseptic, hospital smell. It reminds him of too much time waiting with his mom on wards that looked and smelled just like this. Only they had always been hushed, the nurses talking in low, soft voices as if that would soften the blow of the impending loss. It didn’t.

Stiles jumps a little when Melissa reappears. ‘You can go in,’ she says, ‘but just for a few minutes, okay? He’s dehydrated and pretty weak, he needs his rest.’

‘Okay. Thank you.’ He pulls the curtain aside and slips through. Manny is huddled in the middle of a hospital bed, skin ashen against the white hospital robe except for the vicious bruise that covers a good part of his forehead. A woman in her fifties with close-cropped hair is perched on a chair beside him, clinging to his hand, worry etched into every line on her face.

Stiles swallows heavily when he takes in Manny’s greying moustache. He’d had a moustache, in his dream. He flicks his gaze down to Manny’s free hand, which is nestled in his lap. It’s smaller than Stiles’ hands, and age-worn, and so familiar it makes bile rise up in Stiles’ throat.

He coughs. ‘Manny, hey. How’re you doing?’

Manny smiles wanly. His brown eyes are ringed heavily with exhaustion. ‘Hey, good to see you, kid. This is my wife, Trish. Trish, this is Stiles, he works with Lydia at the museum.’

Trish nods in greeting. Stiles doesn’t miss the tremble in her lip when Manny mentions the museum.

Stiles moves to perch in the free chair. ‘I hope you don’t mind me coming by unannounced. It’s just – we were all worried about you.’

‘I’m okay. Sort of mad someone got the jump on me, but eh, you know…’ Manny forces a chuckle and then cringes away from the pain.

‘Is that what happened? Do you remember?’ Stiles tries to keep the urgency from out of his voice. He wants to ask what Manny saw, whether he saw the monsters, too.

‘I don’t remember anything. I started my shift, like usual. Then I woke up in the woods, miles away with the worst headache of my life. Guess they knocked me out cold from the start.’

Stiles breathes out slowly as relief ripples through him. He hadn’t been knocked out early on in his dream, he’d seen it all. He doesn’t remember getting a head injury. The symbols on the wall must have been some crazy coincidence, after all. He’s not losing his mind.

‘I’ve been telling Manny for months that you should have two guards on duty in a building that size.’ Trish chastises gently.

‘She worries,’ Manny says, in tender exasperation.

‘Well, someone has to, it’s not like your boss has been by to see how you are, or even called.’ Trish sets her jaw angrily. Stiles makes a mental note to mention it to Lydia, and see if they can organise a card and some flowers from everyone else to try to make up for Harris’s deficiencies as a human.

Manny shrugs, and then hisses sharply.
‘Honey, your back…’ Trish clucks in concern.

Stiles freezes. ‘Your back?’ A line of phantom pain burns across his shoulder blades. The memory of the coppery scent of blood fills his nose and for a second he’s back in the cloying terror of the dream all over again.

Manny nods. ‘Got a decent sized cut on my back. Looks like some sort of animal did it so they figure it happened while I was out in the woods.’

Stiles shoots to his feet. The symbols on the wall. The cut across Manny’s back. His hands are familiar to Stiles, so is his moustache, and right now his wife is fiddling with the wedding band on Manny’s ring finger, turning it beneath her own fingers for reassurance that Manny is there with her. It’s too many coincidences. It’s not possible...The cubicle feels too small and too hot. Sweat pools against the skin of his lower back as he struggles to find enough air.

He realises Manny and Trish are staring at him, waiting for him to say something.

‘Um,’ he chokes out, ‘I should let you get some rest. I hope you feel better soon, Manny. I’m so sorry this happened to you.’

Manny is still staring at him curiously. ‘Thanks for coming, kid.’

‘Sure, yeah. No problem. Nice to meet you, Trish. You both take care, now.’ Stiles stumbles through the curtains into the shockingly sterile cool of the ward. His head is spinning. What the fuck is going on? He has to try to reason it away as just an uncanny series of coincidences. What other choice does he have?

Melissa slows to a stop in front of him, and, taking one look at his face, announces it’s time for a coffee break. She ushers him into chair at the nurses’ station and presses a warm mug into his hands. The smell of the coffee brings him back to himself a little, the heat thawing some of the shock from his limbs.

He takes a look at the grey liquid and wrinkles his nose. ‘I know I’m not a perfect person, Melissa, but I’m pretty sure I haven’t done anything bad enough to deserve this…’

She laughs. ‘If you wanna make a coffee run to the nearest Starbucks, be my guest, but you’ll need your wallet. There are thirty-four staff on shift on this floor at the moment.’

Stiles sighs deeply, regarding the murky contents of the mug before brightening a little. ‘You know what, if you pass me the filter I’ll just rub the grounds right into my gums.’

She rolls her eyes. ‘You shouldn’t cheek your step-mother to be, Stiles. You never know when I might turn wicked.’ She winks at him dangerously.

‘Well that’s just another reason not to trust this coffee,’ Stiles says, throwing an arm out towards a man in a deputy’s uniform and hat, passing by a few feet away. ‘Officer, please arrest this woman for trying to feed me criminally bad coffee.’

The deputy turns and Stiles immediately feels his cheeks burn as he realises it’s Jordan, eyes crinkled charmingly in mid-chuckle. ‘I’m more likely to arrest you for criminally bad jokes.’

‘Hey, Jordan.’ Stiles rubs at the back of his neck awkwardly. From the corner of his eye he can see Melissa pretending not to watch them.

‘Stiles.’ Jordan smiles and folds his arms. ‘Twice in one day, huh?’
‘Yup. Been a while since that’s happened…’ Stiles mutters before he can stop himself, slapping his hand to his forehead in horror as soon as it’s out. ‘I am so sorry, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m going to blame the near proximity of this substance that’s allegedly coffee and a general lack of sleep.’ He smiles gratefully at Melissa as she surreptitiously removes the mug and waves a goodbye at him.

Jordan smiles. Stiles wishes it made his bones all liquidy like Derek’s smile does. ‘Don’t worry about it. You have a daughter, right?’ Jordan walks with Stiles towards the exit into the main lobby. ‘Your dad talks about you both all the time.’

‘Right. Oriana. She’s one, and she thinks sleep is for pussies, so. I spend most of my free time plotting ways to deprive her of sleep all through her teenage years as penance. Not even kidding, I have a whole spreadsheet. With pivot tables…’ Stiles clasps his hands together dreamily.

Jordan laughs. ‘As is your right as a parent.’ He looks down at his watch. ‘Look, I was officially off the clock a half hour ago, I just came by to check on Manny Ruiz. I know you have a thing you’re working out, and I’m not trying to pressure you, but, uh. Wanna go for a real drink? As friends? Wipe out the memory of whatever was in that mug back there?’

Stiles thinks of his very bad, awful, no good day, and he thinks of Derek as he says, ‘Yeah. Yeah, definitely.’

They meet at a bar a short drive away that is walking distance from Stiles’ apartment, though Stiles doesn’t mention that in case it sounds like a come-on. Jordan had gone by the station to change into civilian clothes, and is admittedly gorgeous in dark jeans and a tight, moss green sweater. Stiles hasn’t bothered to change. He likes Jordan but he’s only this mad at Derek because of his insane crush on him, which is so gargantuan he’s not sure it leaves room for feelings for anyone else. Yeah, he thinks Jordan’s hot - and clearly his feelings for Derek aren’t reciprocated - but he’s for sure not ready to try to hit that when Derek is just next door. What can he say, he’s a classy guy.

Classier than some, anyway. He remembers Danny’s comment about Jungle, and isn’t proud of the frisson of jealousy that runs through him when he thinks of other people putting their hands on Derek. Of Derek putting his hands on them. Fuck, he needs a drink.

Stiles has already snagged a stool up at the bar when Jordan arrives and slides onto a stool next to him. Stiles doesn’t want the intimacy of a booth. He’s hoping he just needs to get to know Jordan a little better. Maybe he’ll feel the need to relocate to a booth later.

‘Drink?’ He asks Jordan, messing with a beer mat to occupy his hands.

‘Sure, I’ll take a beer, please.’

Stiles leans forward to the bar-tender. ‘Hi, my friend here would like a beer, and I’d kill for a rum and rum, thanks.’

At the bar-tender’s quizzical eyebrow Stiles clarifies, ‘A rum and rum? It’s like a rum and coke... only instead of the coke, you use rum.’

‘Rough day.’ Jordan says, eyeing the drink as it’s placed in front of Stiles.

‘Yeah. But better now!’ Stiles chinks his glass against Jordan’s frosty beer glass and drinks, enjoying the burn of the alcohol down his throat. ‘So,’ he says brightly, a little forced but not enough that Jordan should notice. ‘Tell me about you.’

An hour or so later, Stiles has learned that Jordan has parents and a sister whom he adores in Idaho,
is ex-military and served in Afghanistan doing something incredibly brave and dangerous, wants picket fences and a family, and is pretty much perfect for Stiles in every way, except for the fact that he’s not. He’s cute as hell, funny and smart and good, and still Stiles has absolutely no inclination to move into a booth with him. Stiles tips a little more rum down his throat. It’s only his second drink. He doesn’t want to be hungover when he gets Ria tomorrow, and he’s now unaccustomed enough to drinking that he doesn’t want to take any chances.

‘Maybe I needed a change.’ Jordan says, taking a sip of his beer. ‘I don’t really know. I guess I kind of felt drawn here. And I knew there were openings.’ He shrugs. ‘What brought you to Beacon Hills?’

‘My dad. I needed all the support I could get when I first brought Ria home, so I followed him out here.’

Jordan nods. ‘It’s amazing, what you’re doing, you know? The single father thing. Gotta be a tough gig.’

Stiles feels his hackles start to rise, even though he knows Jordan doesn’t mean anything by it. ‘Best gig in the world,’ he says, draining his glass. ‘I wouldn’t change a thing about it. But, yeah, it’s a lot of work. Uh, speaking of which… I should get back. I’ve got to pick her up early in the morning.’

It’s not technically true, he could pick Ria up whenever he wants, but it’s dark outside, and he’s bone tired and ready for his couch.

‘Thanks for bringing me out,’ he says. He means it. It was nice to chat to someone about something other than diapers and Derek-angst.

‘Hey, any time.’ Jordan stands and slips on his jacket. ‘You want a ride home?’

‘Nah, I’m just a block or two away, but thanks.’

‘Let me walk you? I’ll feel better if I do my civic duty and see you to your door.’

Jordan chats as they walk, but Stiles is too caught up in his own head to join in. By the time they reach Stiles’ building, he’s made a decision.

‘Thanks again, Jordan. I appreciate it. I think we’re going to be… great friends, you know?’ Stiles smiles as gently as he can.

Jordan ducks his head, toeing at the sidewalk. The low lights from the first-floor buildings reflect through his hair. ‘Gotcha. Hey, no problem. I have a feeling this is the start of a beautiful bromance.’

Stiles catches him up in an impulsive hug. He’s grateful that Jordan is so uncomplicated. It’s exactly what he needs in his life, his head informs him smugly. Unfortunately it’s overruled by his much messier, dog-loyal heart.

He watches as Jordan walks away, disappearing into each deep pool of shadow between the street lights and reappearing again under each spotlight of fluorescence.

And he has such a nice butt… his pissed off, logical brain informs him. He ignores it, making it count the stairs instead of giving him a hard time as he jogs up to his floor.

He jumps about a foot in the air when one of the shadows next to the window moves.

He presses his hands to his chest and tries to steady his breathing. ‘Oh holy crap. Jesus, Derek, what
the fuck? You scared the shit outta me.’

‘Sorry.’ In fairness, Derek does sound genuinely contrite. Then again, he should, because what the fuck?

Stiles sighs, trying to shake the adrenaline from his limbs. ‘Lurking again? Not on my account, I hope.’

Derek purses his lips and looks over his shoulder again out of the window. ‘Was that him? Jordan?’

Stiles grabs his keys out of his pocket. ‘It was, as a matter of fact. Were you watching me? Because that is hella creepy. Stalking is unacceptable, my dude.’

‘No.’ Derek’s silhouette is fucking beautiful, profiled in front of the window, and Stiles hates him for it. ‘I just wanted to make sure you got home okay.’

‘Jesus, what is it with guys thinking I’m some sort of damsel in distress who can’t make it to my own front door at like eight at night without an escort?’ Stiles mutters, pushing open the door and flipping on his hall light so he can see Derek’s face properly.

Derek is more unshaven than usual, his mouth down-turned at the corners. In truth he looks miserable. Well, good, Stiles thinks. He knows how to fix it.

‘You went on your date already?’ Derek sounds just as darkly jealous as he did earlier, but he’s still not offering up any alternatives, so fuck him.

Stiles rounds on him. ‘Oh fucking hell, is that what this is? Bullshit macho posturing with you trying to prove how big and bad and manly you are, heroically looking out for me and my virtue?’

Derek takes a step back, his face stricken. ‘I’m just trying to... be a friend.’

Stiles pokes a finger into his chest. It probably hurts him more than it does Derek, but it gets his point across, which is that he’s mad, so it’s worth it. ‘Bullshit. You were going to try and scare Jordan off if I brought him up here. This is nothing to do with being my friend. You don’t want me, but you don’t want anyone else to have me. It’s as simple as that.’

‘I – Stiles…’ Derek moves towards him, but Stiles doesn’t have it in him to wait around and find out why.

Emboldened by the echo of the rum running through his veins, and from the ego-boost of Jordan’s attention, Stiles spins on his heel, flips Derek off and says, ‘Suck it, Hale,’ before stepping through his open front door, ready to slam it in Derek’s face for the second time that day.

* 

Derek’s over the threshold and pressed up against Stiles before he knows what he’s doing. All he knows is he needs to be close to Stiles, and he needs to rid him of the scent the deputy has left clinging to him, which makes jealousy burn fiercely in the pit of his stomach. He wraps his hands around Stiles’ slender, strong wrists and pins them against the wall at shoulder height. Stiles’ eyes are wide, more with annoyance than fear, and the familiar, molasses-smell of his arousal begins to creep into the edge of Derek’s consciousness. Pressed against the length of his body, Derek can feel both their hearts beating so wildly that they could be sharing a single chest cavity.

‘What are you doing?’ Stiles hisses out, but Derek can already feel the anger draining out of him in favour of lust and nerves.
Derek can’t help but draw his nose along the smooth line of Stiles’ cheekbone, inhaling the spicy-sweet scent of his skin. ‘Why do you keep shutting doors in my face?’ he murmurs.

Stiles scoffs and looks away to the side, his mouth a hard line. He balls his hands into fists, even though they’re still pinned in Derek’s grip and turns his head back to meet Derek’s eyes. ‘Why do you keep shutting doors in mine?’

His dark eyes are wide and flashing hot with anger, and Derek can feel his body is taut with energy, but he’s not trying to break free. He stays still, but holds eye contact. He allows Derek to press against him but doesn’t let him take his weight. It’s surrender, but strictly on Stiles’ terms, and the combination of supplication and strength is doing dangerous things to Derek’s lupine instincts.

Stiles would be so good to play with, so good to chase, to catch, to seduce. He would be so good… as a mate, Derek finally admits to himself. He would challenge and cherish, and allow the same back.

Derek wants him.

Allowing himself the thought feels like a physical weight has been lifted off his shoulders. He knows there’s no going back for him now.

Something in the nuclei of his cells has changed in response to their shared chemistry, and regardless of what happens now, he will always belong to Stiles. It’s the way of wolves: for life. Often the realisation happens during sex, due to the intensity of the connection and the trust involved in being that vulnerable with another person. Derek’s not altogether surprised that it hasn’t needed to get that far with Stiles; he is so solitary, and so private, that simply accepting the intensity of his own feelings is enough.

He nearly went out of his mind waiting for Stiles to get home so he could try to make it right. It was all he could do not to run downstairs and rip that other guy’s head clean off his shoulders. His lupine instincts have finally overcome his doubts, and he is officially done with the self-flagellation and the self-imposed martyrdom. All he can do is offer himself up and hope Stiles thinks he’s enough.

With Stiles this close, Derek can taste burnt sugar around the edges of his tongue. It makes his mouth water. Stiles’ chest heaves against his own and his mouth is open, his lips pink and wet, and the caramel scent of him is screaming out to something so base and instinctual within him that Derek can’t fight it any more. ‘I was trying to tell you… that I’m sorry I fucked up.’ He whispers into the constellation of moles near Stiles’ mouth. ‘I was trying to tell you…’

He splays his hands and slides them up so he can interlace their fingers together, and then he leans in and kisses Stiles.

He’s careful to hold back enough to allow Stiles the chance to pull back if he wants to. After Kate, he’s always been hyper-vigilant about consent, so he just brushes their lips together and holds his breath, waiting. But Stiles just lets out a soft, surprised, ‘Huh…’ and then tips his head up to allow Derek better access, and as soon as their lips meet again Stiles melts against him, sagging against the wall, fists uncurling.

His thick eyelashes brush against Derek’s cheek, and Derek melts right back, until they’re holding each other up, barely. Stiles’ mouth is lush and warm and Derek wants more of it, wants to claim all of it, so he scrapes his teeth over Stiles’ bottom lip. Stiles opens his mouth immediately, letting Derek lick into it. He tastes faintly of alcohol and that addictive, bitter-caramel scent. He runs his tongue over the roof of Stiles’ mouth, only just stopping his hips from thrusting forwards when Stiles makes a low, contented noise in his throat. Stiles is responsive in a raw, unselfconscious way that Derek
finds impossible to resist.

He gives in to the urge to run his tongue down the line of Stiles’ jaw, and the long curve of his neck down to the juncture of his shoulder, relishing the tang of salt and sugar on Stiles’ skin. ‘Fuck, Stiles… you taste so… sweet…’ He bites down gently on the skin under Stiles’ ear, and he can’t stop himself rutting in response to Stiles’ answering moan, this time.

He suddenly realises he’s got one leg wedged between Stiles’ thighs, holding him up, and if they carry on rubbing up against each other like this with the front door wide open it’s going to get pretty embarrassing for someone soon. The thought of anyone seeing Stiles in a vulnerable position like this makes Derek bristle. He pulls back and tries to get his breathing under control. As good as wall make-outs and frottage feels, and god, it does feel really good, Stiles deserves better right now.

He kisses Stiles once more on the corner of his mouth and then leans their foreheads together as they both breath heavily into the space between them. ‘We should talk…’ he manages, voice thick.

Stiles tears his eyes from Derek’s mouth and swallows. ‘Yeah,’ and he sounds just as wrecked as Derek, thank god. He licks his lips and then says, ‘Wanna buy me a burger?’

‘Now?’

Stiles looks up at him and Derek wants to kiss the smirk off his infuriating, beautiful mouth. ‘Yeah. I figure you owe me a burger at least, for being the most confusing man on the planet and all. Maybe even curly fries.’ He waggles his eyebrows suggestively, but the way he worries at his bottom lip give away his nerves.

Derek smiles and shakes his head. ‘I think we can manage that.’

Stiles’ smile settles a little more confidently on his face. ‘Good,’ he says. He looks down at their tangle of limbs. ‘Gonna have to put me down first, big guy.’

Derek feels his ears burn. ‘Right. Right. Sorry.’ He gently extracts himself from between Stiles’ legs and releases his wrists. ‘Did I hurt you?’

‘Nope,’ Stiles bumps his shoulder reassuringly, then says, heat simmering in his voice, ‘It was good, Derek.’

He leans in to press another lingering kiss to Derek’s mouth, and Derek’s heart swoops in his chest, like he’s some sort of giddy teenager. ‘See, not a mark,’ he holds his wrists up to showcase the flawless skin, and Derek has to bite back the possessive growl that wells up in his throat at Stiles’ unwitting traditional gesture of submission. ‘And if there had been,’ Stiles continues, ushering Derek out into the hallway and letting the door swing shut behind them, ‘you would just have owed me pie, too. So no worries, Der-Bear.’ Stiles giggles at the filthy look Derek shoots him over the nickname.

They make their way down the stairs together in an awkward silence filled with little stolen glances at each other. Once they hit the street, Derek wonders if he should hold Stiles’ hand. He’s really never done the whole casual affection thing before, with anyone other than pack. Luckily - or not so much, Derek can't decide - Stiles has shoved both his hands into the pockets of his hoody, so Derek doesn’t have to navigate that particular social nicety right now. Instead he falls into step beside him as close as he dares.

After half a block of silence, he clears his throat. ‘So do you always have people apologise to you with food?’

Stiles nods sagely. ‘I try to encourage it wherever possible. It’s much more convenient than having
people lie prostrate at my feet all over the place. It’s probably escaped your notice, because I hide it exceptionally well, if I say so myself, but I am not what you might call naturally graceful, I try not to give myself more roadblocks than necessary.’

Derek snorts. ‘You don’t say.’

‘Hey, shut up,’ Stiles protests, bumping their shoulders together. ‘My mom always said my exuberance was a joy to behold.’

Derek looks at him out of the corner of his eye. Stiles looks the same as always – slightly chaotic, like too much electricity runs through him to possibly contain it – but his lips are kiss-bitten. Stiles runs his tongue over them absently, and pleasure twists deep in his stomach. ‘It is,’ he says, ducking his head when Stiles shoots him a sharp, surprised look.

They reach the diner down the block where Derek hangs back to let Stiles choose where they sit. He knows he lost control of himself a little back at the apartment and he wants to let Stiles call the shots now. In the end, Stiles leads them to a red vinyl booth, where they sit opposite each other. Stiles nonchalantly presses his calf against Derek’s under the table. When the brisk waiter comes over, Stiles orders the biggest burger on the menu, with curly fries, and Derek overrules his protests and orders pie for him too. It’s more than worth it for the pink creeping up from under Stiles’ collar. Derek gets a burger with no fries, but he inhales a vanilla shake so fast it leaves Stiles staring. It’s a poor substitute for the taste of Stiles’ skin, but it’ll have to do for now.

‘Sweet tooth?’ Stiles leans forward onto his elbows.

Derek smirks. ‘Could say that.’

It’s fascinating to watch Stiles eat. Derek’s transfixed by the movement of his hands, the lines of his wrists, the bob of his throat as he swallows. A deep satisfaction settles in his chest at having provided food for him. When they’re done, Stiles shoves his empty plates aside and grabs a napkin and starts to tear it into tiny pieces, his leg bouncing under the table. It could be anxiety, but it’s not unusual for Stiles to fidget so it’s hard to tell.

Derek takes a deep breath. ‘Stiles… I’m sorry.’

Stiles freezes, eyes wide. ‘About the kiss?’

‘No. I’m not sorry about the kiss.’ Derek grabs for his hand in case Stiles is about to bolt.

‘Okay.’ Stiles’ shoulders relax but his face is still tense.

Derek sweeps his thumbs over Stiles’ upturned palm, in an effort to reassure him, and shoots him a smile as he echoes his words back to him. ‘It was good, Stiles.’

Stiles softens, but he stays quiet, giving Derek the space he needs to choose his words. Derek likes that Stiles does that, that he makes room for Derek, even through his own personal whirlwind of chatter and perpetual motion.

Derek tries again. ‘I meant that I’m sorry for being so… confusing. For being confused.’ Stiles’ hand twitches so Derek holds it more firmly, pressing his leg more deliberately against Stiles’ under the table. ‘Not about you,’ he clarifies. ‘I’m not confused about you. I know you’re…’ He trails off but presses his fingers more firmly into Stiles’ hand, and Stiles curls his fingers around Derek’s in understanding. ‘I’m not confused about you. But I have… There are things that you should know, and I had to be sure because it puts other people’s safety at risk.’
Stiles sucks in a breath and then says, gently, ‘Derek… Look, I know your past has been difficult. We both have our share of baggage. I want to be clear right off the bat that I’m not looking for casual. Not with you. And that means you signing up for me, and Ria, and everything that entails.’ Derek’s heart does a weird little jump at the words. Stiles plunges on, oblivious. ‘But that doesn’t mean I’m going to move you in with us and wife up and all that. We literally just kissed, like, an hour ago. Maybe we can just… be together for a bit. And then once we get to know each other, then we share the deep dark secrets. Once we know what this is.’ Stiles gestures to the space between them.

Derek blinks at him, and then slowly nods. ‘I don’t want casual, either.’ He tries not to feel stung. He knows exactly what it is for him, what it will always be for him. But he understands that it’s different for humans. They take longer to be sure. It’s one of the things that scares him. Being mated is sort of like being married, in human terms, except weres don’t change their minds. There’s no divorce. Of course Stiles wouldn’t feel that way right off the bat. It’s possible he never will. Maybe it’s too big an ask, for a human kid. And if there’s a reasonable chance that Stiles will change his mind about Derek anyway… maybe he’s right. Maybe they should get to a more secure place before they lay it all out on the line. It’s the pack’s safety at stake, after all.

‘Unless you’re a gang lord or a human trafficker or something.’ Stiles chases his straw around his soda glass with his lips. It’s very distracting. ‘Anything criminal, I should probably know about.’

Derek rolls his eyes. Not this again. ‘I’m not a criminal.’

Stiles grins. ‘I’m just messing with you. I knew that already, dude. Ran a check on you the day I met you.’

‘What?’ Derek arches a brow.

‘My dad’s the sheriff, big guy. You think he hasn’t run background checks on every single person within a ten-mile radius of his granddaughter?’ He curls his tongue around the tip of the straw in an almost obscene way. Derek catches the wicked glint in his eye and he knows Stiles is doing it on purpose. Derek’s in so much trouble.

He sits back a little ‘Huh. Invasive and smart.’

‘Accurate for both me and my methods.’ Stiles beams cheekily. He flips their hands and starts stroking his fingertips over Derek’s palm. It makes heat curl up Derek’s spine, and he’s half a heartbeat away from dragging Stiles back to the apartment and licking him all over when Stiles says, ‘All I really need to know is that you won’t hurt us. Not on purpose.’ His tone is carefully casual, but his eyes don’t leave Derek’s.

Derek looks right back at him without hesitation. ‘I would never.’

Stiles scrutinises him for a second, and seems to be satisfied with what he finds. He signals for the check, and they have a brief, fierce glaring contest over who’s going to pay it, which Derek wins easily because he’s had years of glowering practice.

‘You can pay next time,’ Derek says as they step back out into the cool night air.

‘Next time, huh?’ Stiles nods, a pleased smile playing around his lips. ‘I can do that.’

They scuff along next to each other in the direction of home, some sort of gravitational pull keeping them close, but nerves keeping their hands in their pockets.

‘Was this our first date?’ Stiles asks mildly, after a couple of minutes, hesitantly slipping a hand into
Derek’s jacket pocket. Derek wraps his warm fingers firmly around Stiles’ cooler ones.

Derek tilts his head and considers. They reach the doors to their apartment building. ‘I don’t know,’ he says, pulling the door open. ‘I’d like to take you somewhere nicer than a diner…’

‘Sweet as that is, I was thinking…’ Stiles chews thoughtfully on his bottom lip as they make their way up the apartment stairs.

‘What were you thinking?’ Derek has drawn their hands out of his pocket for their climb up the stairs, but their fingers are still interlaced. He has no intention of letting Stiles go now that he has him.

‘I thought…’ Stiles grins over his shoulder at Derek, his eyes dancing with laughter. ‘…that if we’d already had our first date, we’d be that much closer to our third…’

Third. ‘Oh.’ Dear god, Stiles will be the death of him. ‘That’s… Yeah. You’re right. Excellent point.’

‘Not just a pretty face,’ Stiles says smugly, tapping his free hand against his forehead.

‘Nope. Smart mouth, too.’ Derek smirks at him as they reach the third floor.

Stiles shrugs and lets go of his hand so he can grab him by the jacket, and this time it’s Stiles who backs Derek up against Stiles’ apartment door. ‘Lucky you,’ Stiles murmurs, running his nose down the length of Derek’s nose as he reaches behind to unlock the door.

‘Lucky me.’ Derek lets himself be pushed inside Stiles’ apartment and they stumble to the couch, which Derek half-falls back onto, pulling Stiles down to straddle his lap. Stiles finds his lips with much more urgency before, confidence and desire overtaking the leisurely exploration of their first kiss. Derek tries to keep his hands in safe places, lest he get carried away, but even the firm warmth of Stiles’ waist is too much, so he buries them in Stiles’ thick, soft hair. It's so rich with the scent of him that it's probably just as erotic for Derek as having his hands on his ass would have been. He gasps when Stiles runs his tongue over the shell of his ear and then bites down on his earlobe, taking it as permission to work on leaving a good-sized hickey on Stiles' neck for any passing cops that might take an interest.

When Stiles pulls back to let them cool off, he’s out of breath and his cheeks are red, his hair a mess from Derek’s hands. The hickey on his neck is already a moody purple. Derek surveys him with satisfaction. ‘Alrighty, then,’ Stiles says, sitting back on Derek’s thighs, his voice a little higher than normal. He clears his throat. ‘Oh, man. So, Derek Hale. Does this mean we’re a thing, now? Like… tentatively?’

Derek wants to be so much more than tentative. ‘Does being a tentative thing mean you won’t go on any more dates with Deputy Douche? Because we need to be at whatever level is necessary to make that happen.’

Stiles leans back down, laughs a little into his neck and whispers, ‘I’m all for you,’ shyly into his skin. Derek surges up to kiss back more urgently, trying to convey how much it means to hear him say that. ‘And vice versa?’ Stiles ventures, uncertainly.

‘Of course. No one else.’ As if there ever could be. Stiles looks pleased, and Derek fists his hands in his shirt to pull him back down for a victory kiss that turns deep and dirty, fuelling the fire of lust that burns with increasing insistence in Derek’s stomach. ‘I should go, soon,’ he murmurs reluctantly between kisses, ‘or I won't be able to.’

Stiles eyes are wide and black in the dim apartment. ‘So, stay,’ he whispers. ‘Just to sleep.’
'Stiles...' Derek feels like he ought to argue back, but he can't think of a single good reason why.  

Stiles slumps, crestfallen. 'Okay.'  

Derek runs his hands up to cradle Stiles' jaw. 'What is it?'  

'I haven't been sleeping well,' Stiles admits, awkwardly, like he's embarrassed about what he's about to say. 'Nightmares.'  

'Ah,' Derek says. 'The wolf.'  

'That was part of it, but there was more. A lot more.' Stiles shudders. 'I don't really want to talk about it. But...'  

'Hey, I'll stay if you want me to.' Derek strokes his thumbs over Stiles' cheeks.  

'Thank you.' Stiles' relief is palpable. 'I don't really want to be alone.'  

'You aren't.' Derek kisses his nose. 'You aren't.'
One Look Over the Shoulder

Chapter Notes

Warning for a little bit of smut - going forwards I'll probably change this fic from 'Mature' to 'Explicit' because there's more that wants to be written. I hope that won't put anyone off, apologies if it does.

Thanks for your comments and support <3

Stiles doesn’t expect to sleep well with Derek in his bed. At best, he’s expecting a sort of lustful half-sleep where he’s hyper-aware of the presence of the hottest man he’s ever been in close contact with just a few scant inches away. At worst, he’s bracing himself for another nightmare. But to his pleasant surprise, he sleeps.

It could be that the day has had so many twists and turns he’s utterly wrung out emotionally, like a paper towel squeezed dry. It could be that he knows Ria is at his dad’s house so he’s not having to sleep in that place that hovers just under consciousness, half alert even in slumber, listening for her voice. It could be that Derek is warm and solid and present. It could be all of it.

Whatever the combination of reasons, Stiles sleeps. His sleep is deep and dreamless, and when he wakes he comes into consciousness quickly and without the strange heaviness that has been clouding his mind lately. His first thought on waking is relief that he doesn’t seem to have done anything embarrassing in the night, like strip naked and rub himself all over Derek. In fact they’ve both carefully maintained the chaste distance they established when they had slipped beneath the covers, Derek adorably undone in his black tank and borrowed plaid sleep pants. Even the hand Stiles had fallen asleep holding is now splayed over Derek’s stomach, rising and falling with his steady breaths. He’s stretched out on his back, eyelashes and stubble dark against his skin, mouth soft in sleep.

Stiles is content to lie on his side, curled in towards him, and just look. He hasn’t had a lot of opportunity to unashamedly drink Derek in, so he’s going to luxuriate in this. It’s deeply comforting, having Derek so relaxed beside him. He hasn’t shared a bed with anyone except Ria since Cody. His brief hook-ups had rarely involved anything much more than an awkward post-coital exit talk, almost always initiated by the other participant. He’d thought it would be weird when it finally happened, but it’s like Derek is right where he belongs.

He lets his eyes fall on Derek’s mouth. The lips that he has recently kissed, and that have recently kissed him. His own tingle in response to the memory of their pounding hearts and ragged breath, the urgency and the heat, and the certainty about thirty seconds in that if this was what kissing was supposed to be like then he’d obviously been kissing the wrong people all his life. He takes in the lines of Derek’s face, the tendons of his throat. The surprising delicacy of his collarbones against his thickly muscled chest makes Stiles’ chest expand with something warm and effervescent, until it aches.

Derek’s lips twitch as he draws in a deep breath and then, eyes still shut, says sleepily, ‘Who’s the stalker now?’

Stiles fights the urge to wriggle happily. ‘This isn’t stalking, this is intense concentration I’ll have you know. I’m working on a physics problem.’
Derek raises an eyebrow but doesn’t open his eyes or otherwise move.

Stiles lets his hands bridge the space between them just a little. ‘I’m trying to figure out how it is that a hulking great man takes up less space in my bed than a one year old child. Scientifically it shouldn’t be possible. It’s one of the great mysteries of the universe. Like bumblebees flying.’

Derek laughs. Stiles doesn’t think he’s ever seen Derek laugh up close before, not an unrestrained laugh like this, showing all his teeth, and it is glorious. He finally opens his eyes, which look translucent and green in the morning light, and when he turns to Stiles they’re filled with so much intensity it makes Stiles want to hide his face in the pillow, so he deflects.

‘I’m serious, children defy all the laws of science. Like how the clock says her afternoon nap has lasted an hour but I know it can’t have been more than six or seven minutes or I definitely would’ve gotten more done.’

It strikes Stiles that maybe he should cool it with the baby talk in bed or he might end up scaring Derek off before he’s even managed to touch his ass, and he really wants to touch his ass, but then something miraculous happens and Derek says, ‘So she bends the laws of time and space and she also comes in blue. She’s basically a tiny little TARDIS in a diaper’, all super casual like he hasn’t just rocked the very foundations of Stiles’ world.

Stiles sits up and stares at Derek, who props himself slightly up on one elbow and frowns. ‘What?’

‘Derek Hale,’ Stiles says, incredulous, ‘did you just make a Doctor Who reference?’

Derek shrugs and lies back down on the pillow.

‘Hey, nonono,’ Stiles scrambles over until he’s hovering above Derek’s chest, bracing himself on his hands, ‘you don’t get to shrug this off, this is a momentous day!’

Derek chuffs and says, ‘You’re ridiculous,’ but his cheeks are distinctly rosy.

Stiles dips his head to rub his nose against Derek’s. ‘I have literally never been more attracted to another human than I am right now.’

‘Doctor Who gets you going? Really?’ Derek’s forehead creases like he’s not entirely sure that’s okay.

‘No, idiot. Smoking hot guys dropping off the cuff Doctor Who references while they’re hanging out all sleepy-cute in my bed get me going. Do you have any idea how many of my fantasies you’ve just fulfilled in one fell swoop?’ Stiles pauses to raise his eyebrows suggestively. ‘You totally have a sonic screwdriver, don’t you?’

Derek laughs, despite himself, and says, ‘Shut up, Stiles,’ but it’s fond and he brings his hands up on to rest on either side of Stiles’ waist to hold him there.

Stiles looks down at him and thinks he could stand to wake up to this every morning for the rest of forever. To keep himself from saying so out loud - because that is not a thing you share with your tentative bed-partner whose ass you haven’t touched yet - he blurts out, ‘I really want to kiss you with tongues.’

Derek slowly blinks dark lashes over dilated pupils, tightening his grip on Stiles’ waist. ‘Okay.’

‘I’m gonna go brush my teeth, I’ll be right back…’ Stiles shifts back a little.
Derek rolls his eyes and grabs two fistfuls of Stiles’ shirt, yanking him down again. ‘Shut up and kiss me with tongues, Stiles.’

Arousal twists through Stiles’ stomach because every time he’s with Derek it confirms that he’s really into being manhandled as long as Derek’s the man doing the handling. He manages a breathless ‘M’kay,’ as he slides one hand under the back of Derek’s neck, and licks into his mouth. Derek arches up to meet him, parting his lips and breathing him in, and it’s so unexpectedly sweet that Stiles is giddy with it.

He’d always imagined that Derek would be his usual stoic, controlled self in every situation including kissing, but he’s never been so happy to admit that he was wrong. Derek yields as much as he surges, pushing frantic fingers up under Stiles’ shirt to get at bare skin, letting Stiles move his head a little this way or that. He seems happy to hand control over to Stiles, even though he could probably snap him like a twig. His chest rumbles with low hums, and higher pitched whines when Stiles sucks on his tongue or bites at his jawline, and he scratches at Stiles’ back as he gasps into his mouth. His enthusiasm is so sexy Stiles can barely remember his own name. The unwelcome thought that Derek has probably had a lot of practice sidles into Stiles’ brain. Stiles ignores it.

Eventually he sits back to get some air, his skin buzzing with lust, and they push and tug at each other’s shirts until they’re off and Stiles can finally get at Derek’s bare chest. He’s more hirsute than Stiles, and the coarseness against smooth skin makes Stiles breathless. He doesn’t know if he has a caveman thing or a Derek thing, but it’s most definitely a thing. Derek flips them, seemingly with very little effort, lining their torsos up but not settling any weight on Stiles yet.

‘Der-ek,’ Stiles whines, sulky at the hesitation. He draws his knees up to cradle Derek’s hips and pushes up on his elbows to lick up his neck, bringing their chests together skin-to-skin. He likes the way his skin looks against Derek’s. He likes the way it feels.

Derek kisses him and then pulls back with visible effort. ‘Fuck, Stiles, I want… Is this okay? You said three dates…’

‘I appreciate your concern for my virtue, really I do,’ Stiles gasps, ‘and if you’re worried then we’ll keep our pants on, but I haven’t been with anyone in a really, really long time and if you don’t keep doing what you’re doing I might actually die. I’m so young, Derek, do you really want that on your conscience?’

Derek laughs breathlessly and thrusts his hips down again in response, nuzzling into Stiles’ neck. The rasp of stubble over the sensitive skin of Stiles’ throat dissolves his bones into liquid, and he collapses back onto the bed, letting Derek take over. He keeps one hand over the nape of Derek’s neck, and sweeps the other up over his bare skin, exploring the shape of his shoulders, the groove of his spine, the sweet dip of the small of his back.

Derek bites at his neck and moves against him, lining up the hot press of their erection through the layers of thin cotton. He seems to instinctively know when the angle and the friction are just right, moving fast and sure enough to turn Stiles frantic with growing need, and then back off with the curl of a lip to let the tide of lust recede just a little. He brings Stiles to the edge and then pulls him back from it over and over, until Stiles is so turned on he can’t feel his hands any more. All he can do is dig his fingers into Derek’s neck and the swell of his ass, just under the waistband of his sleep-pants, and hang on. There's no mercy until Stiles finally whines 'Derek... Please...’ into Derek's neck. With a low noise like a growl, Derek holds him tighter and moves them both, the rhythm building the electricity up and up and up from the base of Stiles’ spine and sending it crackling through his limbs.
until he tips over the edge, crying out into Derek’s mouth. A few seconds later Derek follows, stiffening in Stiles’ arms as he bites into his shoulder. When Stiles can feel his hands again, he strokes at Derek’s back until he relaxes down into Stiles’ arms.

‘Oh my god…’ Stiles breathes out unevenly, heart racing in his chest.

‘I…’ Derek mumbles, ‘am buying a box set of Doctor Who dvds and I’m binge-watching them all tomorrow…’

Stiles laughs, brushing Derek’s sweat-damp hair back from his temples. ‘Aw, you’re such a sweet old fashioned thing. Nobody does dvds anymore. It’s all Netflix and chill, now.’

‘Oh for fuck’s sake,’ Derek grumbles. ‘I just got my first dvd player last month.’

Stiles grins, because sexed-out, grumbly Derek is fucking adorable. ‘Seriously?’

‘Mhmm.’ Derek kisses Stiles’ chest. ‘Didn’t have a TV until Erica got one while I was away. I do better with outside stuff.’

‘Huh. Well don’t worry, I’m sure we can still find dvds for you in, like, thrift stores, vintage markets, that sort of thing. Ooh, maybe the museum has some in its archives - ow, hey!’ Stiles rubs at his ass where Derek swatted at it, pouting. ‘Rude. I’m just keeping you current, big guy.’

Derek make a grumpy, growly sound in his throat. ‘Netflix and chill, huh?’

‘Right. But you should probably be forewarned that if anyone else invites you over for that, about ninety per cent of the time it’s just thinly veiled code for casual sex and pizza.’ Right on cue, Stiles’ stomach rumbles, the sound obscenely loud in the quiet room. ‘Oh man, I could eat pizza. A really huge one with all the cheese…’

Derek lifts his head and frowns. ‘It’s eight in the morning. You can’t have pizza for breakfast, Stiles.’

Stiles huffs. ‘Sure I can. Pizza is totally a breakfast food.’

Derek does that perfect eyebrow arch that makes Stiles’ heart flip. ‘No, it really isn’t.’

‘Well then why do they put bacon and sausage on it, Derek? Answer me that!’ Stiles likes Derek’s weight on top of him, he decides. Also Derek’s so warm he’s better than a blanket. He hopes, and not for the first time, that Derek always runs this hot. He’d save so much on heating.

Derek rolls his eyes, and Stiles has a weird sense of premonition, like maybe this is an argument they’re going to have a thousand times in the future. He hopes so. He shifts a little, his pyjama pants getting increasingly uncomfortable. He grimaces. ‘Ew. Okay, showers. You wanna go first?’ Derek shakes his head. ‘Alright, I’ll be right back, and then you and I can continue this discussion further.’

Derek rolls off him with a reluctant groan. ‘There is no discussion, Stiles. Pizza is not a breakfast food.’

Stiles gets unsteadily to his feet, allowing himself a mental fist pump when he doesn’t collapse into a boneless heap on the floor. ‘Bacon and sausage, Derek!’ He steps into his bathroom and gets the shower running, then sticks his head back out into the bedroom. Derek is sitting up, looking a little rumpled but otherwise unfairly gorgeous. ‘Bacon and sausage!’ Then he steps back into the bathroom and pushes the door so it’s ajar, strips off his pants and hops into the shower.

*
Derek thinks about sinking back into the bed and burying his face into their shared scent until Stiles is done, but it takes less than a minute for him to realise that if he stays here, with humid, Stiles-scented steam wafting over him from the bathroom where Stiles is currently naked, he won’t be able to control the urge to throw Stiles over his shoulder and lock them both in the bedroom for the day. And Stiles has a daughter to collect, and presumably other life-activities to attend to, so that can’t really happen. The silver lining is that Stiles is currently hungry, which means Derek can provide, and that makes deep satisfaction settle into his belly.

So instead of hanging around to salivate helplessly over Stiles from six feet away, he cleans up quickly and slips back into the previous day’s jeans. He throws the pyjama pants into the hamper in the corner of the room, and heads next door to get a change of clothes. He’d made sure from Stiles’ apartment that they wouldn’t be overheard. Isaac is home, but sleeping, and Erica and Boyd aren’t there. He’s relieved not to have to deal with any of them yet. None of the pack are embarrassed about sex, it’s not in their nature, but Stiles hasn’t consented to anyone else being privy to their intimate moments, and Erica isn’t exactly known for her subtlety.

He takes the briefest shower he can manage, careful not wash the scent of Stiles from his skin completely, and changes into fresh clothes. Then he gathers a huge armful of food – a well-stocked fridge is one of the perks of living in an apartment full of weres – and grabs his phone, which he’d abandoned last night when he’d heard Stiles’ heartbeat outside the building.

He catches sight of himself in the mirror Erica had hung on the wall by the front door. He looks the same. It feels like he should look different. He runs his fingers over the skin of his neck. It’s a shame that his skin heals too quickly to allow any of Stiles’ ministrations to stay visible. There’s only one kind of bite mark that would stay put. His dad’s mating bite-mark had been on the juncture of his neck and shoulder, just low enough to be covered when he was dressed. Derek remembers tracing the silvery lines of it with fascinated fingers as a child, trying to imagine how it would feel to be marked by the one person you love more than anyone. He hasn’t pictured a mark on his own skin in a long time.

He shakes his head at his reflection. It isn’t something he should be thinking about until Stiles knows exactly what he is.

He rolls his shoulders and heads back next door, depositing his armful of bacon, sausage and peppers on the countertop. He’s just settled on making his mom’s breakfast hash, wanting to satisfy Stiles’ need for meat and cheese, when Stiles’ bedroom door bangs open.

‘Son of a…’ Stiles stumbles through the doorway like he’s mid-fall. He glares back at whatever he tripped over before straightening up and turning, startling when he sees Derek. ‘Oh. You’re here.’

Derek catches the scent of Stiles’ shower gel in the air, and cutting through it is anxiety, sharp and sour. This is not the happy, relaxed guy Derek left twenty minutes before. Something’s up. ‘Yup. Just went to get clean clothes. Is it okay I came back?’

Stiles folds his arms across his chest and shuffles his feet. ‘Yeah, yes, of course. Ooh, are you cooking again?’ Stiles steps into the kitchen but keeps a careful distance between them. ‘I’d never have had you down as a feeder. Sort of assumed you lived mainly off of protein shakes and wagu beef and kale. You know, standard twenty-first century caveman fare.’

‘Stiles. What’s wrong?’ Derek puts the eggs down and takes a slow step towards Stiles, who avoids his eyes and picks at an imaginary thread on his navy shirt (today’s pithy tag line is ‘Free Shrugs’ emblazoned across Stiles’ chest in yellow).

‘Nothing.’ Stiles’ voice cracks a bit and his heartbeat gives away the lie. He clears his throat and tries
to cover the wobble. 'I just think it’s sad that you put clothes on, that’s all. It’s a tragedy, in fact. You know, like a big fat Greek one.’

Derek narrows his eyes. ‘Stiles…’

‘I… It’s just…’ Stiles sighs and scrubs his hands over his face. ‘Okay, this is going to sound really stupid.’ Derek waits him out. ‘I guess I thought you’d be here, when I got out of the shower, and, uh. You were gone.’

Derek tilts his head. ‘Okay…? I’m not sure I follow.’

Stiles slumps against the kitchen counter, blood rising in his cheeks. ‘Ugh. Fine. My buddy at the museum… I guess he’s seen you, uh, at Jungle. Hooking up, or whatever. He said… You’ve sort of got a reputation as a guy who never sticks around ‘til the morning. And I know it already is the morning, but obviously last night we didn’t…’ Stiles makes an awkward, abortive hand gesture. ‘And then this morning we did, so.’

Understanding dawns. ‘You thought I’d fuck and run.’

Stiles blushes even more deeply. ‘I don’t know.’ He rubs at the back of his neck. ‘Maybe?’

Derek shakes his head. ‘Humans. ‘After all the time I’ve invested in stalking you?’

Stiles laughs, caught off guard. ‘Stalking or not, you've always run a tad bit hot and cold with me.’ He sighs. ‘Look, I don’t expect you to, like, wait around for me. You’re not Sandra Dee. I guess I just… You didn’t say you were going, and I possibly, maybe, sort of freaked out there momentarily.’

Derek takes another step closer. He wonders what happened to Stiles in the past to give rise to these insecurities, but he thinks now is probably not the best time for the ‘how our exes fucked us up’ conversation. ‘Look… I’m not going to deny that I’ve met people at clubs. I’ve had casual hook-ups. It was fun. I like sex.’

‘You’re very good at it,’ Stiles interjects with a vigorous nod.

Derek rolls his eyes, biting back a smile. ‘But I didn’t have you, then. You’re more fun. I like sex with you more. So I won’t be going anywhere. And even if I do have to go somewhere… like to get clean underwear… I’ll always be on my way back to you.’

Stiles stares at him. Derek watches his pulse flicker at his throat. Stiles licks his lips. ‘It's probably just as well you don’t use your words all that often, or the whole town would be in a constant state of swooning and nobody would ever get anything done.’

‘Shut up, Stiles.’ Derek ticks his eyes to the ceiling in mock-annoyance, suddenly self-conscious.

‘Yeah, see, now you ruined it. Where did that silver tongue go?’ Stiles hoists himself up onto the counter-side and pouts.

Derek shrugs. ‘Saving it for special occasions.’

‘What, like getting out of speeding tickets?’ Stiles reaches out to Derek and makes grabby hands until Derek steps between the V of his legs, and Stiles can link his arms around his waist.

Derek lets a grin spread over his face slowly and he leans in close to suck on Stiles’ earlobe and then murmur, ‘No. I have better uses for it.’
‘Oh. Oh.’ Stiles buries his face into Derek’s chest. ‘Fuck. You can’t just say stuff like that, Derek.’ Derek laughs and holds Stiles closer.

After a couple of minutes Stiles sighs contentedly into Derek’s chest and murmurs, ‘You’re cuddlier than I thought you’d be.’

‘I don’t look like a cuddler?’ Derek nuzzles into Stiles’ hair as surreptitiously as he can manage.

‘No, you look like a murderer.’

‘Aw, and you say I’ve got a silver tongue…’ Derek snarks back lightly.

Stiles snorts. ‘I just meant that you look so solid I was a little worried it’d be like cuddling with a sideboard or something, but actually you’re surprisingly comfy.’

Derek gives him a flat look. ‘You’ve been comparing me… to a sideboard.’ He’s not sure how to feel about that.

‘You’re winning, if it’s any consolation.’ Stiles mashes his face back into Derek’s chest.

Derek hums. ‘I guess so.’ He tips Stiles’ face up to kiss him. ‘You want breakfast now?’

‘Is it pizza?’ Stiles asks hopefully.

‘Better,’ Derek says, stepping back and handing Stiles a spatula. ‘Trust me.’

Stiles regards him with a complicated expression. Usually Derek’s nose would give him an olfactory advantage, but the blend of emotions in Stiles’ scent is complex too, so all he can do is wait until Stiles says, ‘Alright. But after we’ve eaten, when we’re basking in the afterglow of our mutual mouth-orgasms,’ – Derek can’t help but wince a little at that – ‘I’m gonna need you to go back next door again and either swipe one of Isaac’s scarves or some of Erica’s make up, because I look like I walked right out of a Bram Stoker novel, and not in a suave be-caped way, in an ‘I recently was the victim of a Drac-attack’ kinda way.’ He waves his fingers in the direction of his neck, which bears witness to how very much Derek likes the taste of him despite the fact that Stiles uses words like ‘be-caped’. Or maybe he likes him because he uses words like that. Stiles is just so… Stiles. Derek has never met anyone else who was so much themselves.

Even though part of him bristles at the thought of Stiles covering up the visible evidence of their intimacy, he understands that Stiles has to come into contact with people who might not appreciate the litter of hickeys as much as Derek’s wolf does – like the Sheriff, for example.

He nods and rummages for the right sized knife to dice the potatoes and onions. The kitchen is tiny, so it doesn’t take long. Derek finds what he needs among a tangle of plastic cutlery and sippy cup lids, and resolves to one day, hopefully in the not-too-distant future, give Stiles a properly equipped kitchen, in a home they share as a family. If Stiles will have him.

* *

‘This was your family’s house?’ Stiles presses his fingertips to the glass of the camaro window as they glide up the sweep of road that leads to a house which is beginning to rise up out of generously sized foundations.

‘I grew up here. After the fire it was a ruin, for years. I thought about selling the land, but.’ Derek shrugs as he parks the car.
Stiles opens his door to breathe in the air. ‘It’s lovely here.’

It’s a little slice of heaven, actually. The swath of trees mean that the only ambient noise is birdsong, and the rustle of the breeze through the leaves. It’s more peaceful than Stiles had thought would be possible, given what happened here. He supposes that most of the sadness had been burned into the ruin of the previous house, and now that the ashes have given rise to this new beast, with rafters for ribs and plastic sheeting for skin… it feels hopeful again. Like new life.

Stiles swings himself out of the camaro and crunches over the path to stand in front of the construction. There’s a central section that gives way to two graceful wings, but the walls have an organic curve rather than traditional lines, so it sits naturally in the space. ‘It’ll be beautiful, Derek.’

There’s a pause. Derek’s face is as inscrutable as always, so for a second Stiles worries he’s said the wrong thing, but the way Derek chews on his lower lip as he says, ‘You think so?’, gives away how much Stiles’ opinion must mean to him.

Stiles warms from the inside out. ‘Of course, look at this place. Did you design these?’ Stiles slips under Derek’s arm to get a better look at the plans he has unrolled against the hood of the car.

When he’d called his dad that morning - after a breakfast that actually had been better than pizza, though he’s not about to admit that to Derek – the Sheriff must have sensed something was up because had suggested he come over to pick up Ria after lunch to give him time to ‘handle his business’. Stiles is super proud that he had managed to refrain from a wise-crack about handling Derek’s business. Instead he’d thanked his father and hung up, and then he’d leaned his head back on Derek’s definitely-comfier-than-a-sideboard chest, letting his free hand slide under the soft cotton of the Derek’s henley to stroke the warm skin of his stomach, and had hummed in amenable agreement when Derek had gently asked if he wanted to come with him to check on the progress of the construction of the house. Stiles wasn’t about to miss out on the chance to have a good nose around. Plus it wouldn’t hurt to have some background imagery to flesh out all of his Derek-with-a-sledgehammer fantasies.

Now they’re here he can understand more fully what this place means to Derek, and what it must have taken for Derek to invite Stiles in.

Derek inclines his head. ‘I worked with the architect. I wanted a different layout. More windows than before.’

‘You want to let the light in.’ Stiles murmurs, too absorbed in the details of the plans to notice how Derek’s arm tightens around him. When he eventually looks up, Derek has produced a pair of black-framed sunglasses from somewhere and perched them on his nose, and okay, that's stupidly hot, Christ, fuck the sledgehammer fantasies. Stiles leans in to kiss him on a sharp cheekbone, and then he settles back into the cradle of Derek’s arms, tipping his head back to look at the spectacularly vibrant leaves against the expanse of blue sky, cotton-candy clouds scudding across it. ‘I guess I could be persuaded to visit you out here.’

Derek smiles against his temple. ‘I guess I could be persuaded to let you.’

A sudden, violent shiver overtakes him as a freezing wind twines through his limbs and then is gone as suddenly as it arrives, leaving only goosebumps behind. His mom had always said it was a sign of someone stepping on your future grave. His dad had dismissed it as superstitious hokum. Regardless, he huddles closer to Derek the human hot-water bottle.

He glances around reflexively, something instinctual telling him there are eyes on him. At first he can’t see anything. The shell of the house creaks and rustles, and so does the forest, but there’s
nothing unusual or unnerving about any of it.

But then… *But then…* On the far side of the clearing, from the depths of the inky tree-line, Stiles sees light refract off two eyes in the shadows in a wholly animalistic way. He squints in an effort to make out what it is – he doesn’t want to freak out over a raccoon or something, even if it does appear to be four feet tall with cruel blue eyes.

Slowly the eyes emerge from the shadows, as if in response to the challenge of Stiles’ gaze, and Stiles gets a glimpse of massive paws and matted fur and a muzzle pulled back to bare white, sharp teeth. He gasps in shock.

‘Are you okay?’ Derek’s head snaps up, breaking Stiles’ concentration, and by the time he looks back the creature is gone.

Stiles blinks at the now-empty pool of shadow. He could have sworn he’d seen a wolf. But he can’t have, because there are no wolves in California. And wolves don’t have glowing eyes. It must be his imagination, conjuring up spectres from his nightmares. It would be way too much of a fucking coincidence to dream of a wolf with weird eyes and then to actually see one out in the woods, where such a wolf has never been seen before. He shakes his head as if it might dislodge the vision.

‘Yeah,’ he says, tugging Isaac's scarf more closely around his throat. ‘Little cold.’ It’s not a lie, just a strategic evasion. It’s one thing to be endearingly eccentric by nature – for whatever reason Derek seems to be into it, which, holy wow – but it’s quite another to tell the guy you’re sort of helplessly falling for that his re-built childhood home is awesome, but by the way you’re having nightmarish visions and might possibly need medicating and/or a padded cell. He at least wants to get one really good feel of Derek’s ass before that happens, to keep him warm at night in the asylum.

‘Oh, here.’ Derek immediately slips his jacket off and onto Stiles’ shoulders. He forces himself to relax as the residual warmth from Derek’s body wraps around Stiles, followed by his arms. He resolves to subtly sound out his dad about wolf sightings in the area. Maybe Scott would know if it’s possible for lone wolves to wander this far out of their usual territory. He’s only trying to convince himself, though, because deep down he knows this wasn't any wolf that exists in nature.

As they climb back into the camaro, out of the corner of his eye he sees Derek giving him worried eyebrows. He doesn’t want Derek to think Stiles’ weird mood has anything to do with him, or the house, so he conjures up an impish grin and asks, ‘Can we go back via Elm?’

Derek frowns. ‘Didn’t they just put a ton of speed bumps down there?’

Stiles wiggles his butt into the seat and sighs out happily. ‘Aw, yeah.’
See my dreams unfold (nightmares come true)

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for reading! x

In the end the museum doesn’t open again until Tuesday. The buffer of time gives everything a chance to soften in Stiles’ mind. The dreams seem more ethereal and less graphic through the smudgy lens of memory, and it becomes easier to convince himself that the coincidences are just that; coincidences, nothing more. He feels almost cheerful as he pushes open the heavy, walnut doors and steps over the museum’s threshold. Everything has been cleaned up over the weekend, and the only indication that anything untoward took place is the sharp scent of fresh paint cutting through the rich, familiar beeswax aroma. Stiles follows it through to the source. His dream had been too dark and confusing for him to realise it took place in the Diorama Room, but now his conscious mind matches up the shapes of the shadows in his memory with the display cases.

Stiles has always felt a vague sense of unease in this particular room, which is lined with models of Beacon Hills throughout the last two hundred years. It documents the change in landscape and development, but one wall focuses entirely on fauna and flora, and down the centre of the room a large glass case houses various specimens of taxidermied animals commonly found in the area or now extinct from it. Stiles always tries not to look too closely at the moth-eaten black bear, or the dusty, glassy-eyed mountain lion that seems to glare furiously at a snarling timber wolf. Their poses are an attempt to make them seem wild and life-like, but the effect is closer to expressions of frozen horror. It wouldn’t have been a huge leap for his tired mind to conjure up a weird man-stag creature to place among these other monstrously preserved beasts.

Stiles wonders if the fact he’s always been creeped out by this room contributed to his sub-conscious choice to use it as the backdrop for a sucky dream, but the absence of dust on the display cases along the far wall and the overwhelming smell of paint and bleach confirms this must also have been the room the real attack took place in. At exactly the same time as his dream. So okay, yes, admittedly that’s creepy. He shifts uncomfortably. Coincidences.

He forces himself to go closer to the wall. ‘Face your fears, son’, his mind tells him in his dad’s voice.

The wall is bright white and innocent, with no hint of the symbols daubed in blood. He hesitantly reaches out and touches his fingers to the cool plaster. Immediately his stomach heaves as the iron-rank smell of blood hits him full force, like a sucker punch to the gut, his memory making the room dark and projecting the symbols back up onto the wall. Adrenaline forces its way through his veins and the pain slices over his back, and for a split-second he’d swear he’s back kneeling on the floor wondering if he’s going to die. The hairs on his arms stand on end. It’s so cold.

He wrenches himself from the wall and staggers back a couple of paces, resting his hands on his knees to gasp down air. What the actual fuck… He stares hard at the wall like he might be able to intimidate it into offering up answers, but none are forthcoming. Anger flares up in his belly. He sort of wants to throw himself at the wall and kick and scream until something somehow starts to make sense. Instead he lets his anger sharpen his focus. He’s done with trying to pass everything off as coincidence, he’s done with fumbling around in the dark. His dad has always told him to trust his
gut, and his gut is telling him something fucking weird is going on and it’s about time he figured it out. It’s time to take back some control.

‘There you are…’ Lydia clacks into the room, clad in navy and vertiginous heels and a sense of purpose. She pauses when she sees him. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Yeah,’ Stiles manages, straightening up. ‘Yeah, everything’s fine. You guys did a great job cleaning up in here. Thanks for giving me the weekend.’

‘No problem,’ Lydia shrugs. ‘You looked like you could use the rest.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Stiles nods enthusiastically, grateful for the chance to shift his focus to happier memories, like the very pleasant night Derek had spent in his bed on Friday, ‘and boy did I ever rest. Definitely. I did so much resting. Like, all the resting. I am super well rested, so. Thanks.’ Stiles flails his hands around for added verisimilitude, but Lydia isn’t buying it.

She arches an eyebrow. ‘Spill.’

He sighs in a put-upon way to keep from jumping up and down and squealing, because this is still Lydia and he doesn’t want to be a dork about it in front of her. He can jump up and down and squeal with Scott, later. ‘Things may have… progressed… with Derek. And I’m not saying any more, because a lady doesn’t kiss and tell, but I am willing to say I have now seen him shirtless and,’ Stiles lets out a low whistle. ‘My… God…’

Lydia gives him a strange little half-smile and hums noncommittally.

‘What?’ Stiles asks, suspicion flickering through his blood.

‘Nothing,’ she says breezily. ‘Just… be careful. Okay?’

Stiles frowns. ‘Okay… Any particular reason?’

Lydia shakes her head and picks up her pace. ‘Did you know your boy has some family history on display here?’

‘No, where?’ Stiles allows himself to be distracted, curiosity piqued, but he files her response away for later inspection.

‘All through, really. See the old Hale estate on the preserve, there in the models? And there’s a family tree and some old photos upstairs in the society rooms. His family’s been integral to the area for decades. They were powerful. They still are, in some ways.’

Stiles chooses to ignore the ominous tone of her voice in favour of believing she’s referring to Derek’s biceps, because he’s aware she’s not completely convinced of his good intentions after the Bistro Seduction. Instead he decides to sneak back later to spend his lunch hour happily stalking the Hales of yore, with no intention of telling Derek or Lydia about it.

In order to divert the conversation from the subject, he tells Lydia about how Ria’s new method of self-defence when caught with contraband is to throw it at your head and run away cackling, which is fine if said contraband is, say, a package of wet wipes, and way less fine when it’s your empty coffee mug.

By the time they reach the small, chaotic office they share, they’ve both managed to relax into each other’s company. Lydia grabs some paperwork for Stiles to go over and then steels herself to go and see what Harris wants them to do, if he’s even there. As she leaves, her shoes tip-tap sharply on the
floorboards, like steel pins.

Stiles goes to the door and listens carefully to make sure no-one else is near, before gently closing it behind her. Then he throws himself down in his ancient office chair, which creaks when he leans back and throws him on the floor if he tries to spin around in it, which honestly just endears it to him more. After one final check to make sure nobody is in sight, he pulls out a pad of paper and a red pen, and he begins to draw.

* 

He ends up leaving the museum later than usual, having lost several hours to trying to re-create the symbols from his dream. Countless pages are currently hidden in his desk drawer, discretely wedged under his ‘what to do in the event of a zombie apocalypse’ handbook and his emergency stash of jelly babies. He’d called Jordan to ask for copies of the photographs of the symbols from the crime scene to see if they’ll match his sketches. It feels like a formality at this point; he knows in his bones that they will.

It had absorbed him to the point that he hadn’t noticed the shadows growing long across the floor, and he curses under his breath as he lopes up the stairs to his apartment, taking them two at a time. He remembers Erica saying she has reservations for the early showing at the movies with Boyd, and he doesn’t want to face her wrath on top of everything else. His phone had died at some point during a mid-afternoon phone argument with Harris, who thinks Stiles is responsible for vandalising all the staplers (he isn’t) and stealing all the pens (he is), so he hasn’t been able to call Erica to let her know he’s running late. He’s fully expecting her to open up a can of verbal whup-ass. He actually wouldn’t be surprised if there was some literal whupping of his ass, too.

He also has a nagging feeling that he should be out buying an obnoxious toy for one of Ria’s day-care friends whose birthday it is soon. He makes a mental note to check the planner before he falls asleep on the sofa in his underwear. He hurries into the apartment, getting briefly tangled in his suit jacket as he tries to shrug it off before he’s gotten the buttons all the way undone. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I know I’m a horrible tardy person, and you are a-’ He freezes when he’s greeted with the sight of Ria and Derek on the floor of the living room, in what appears to be a nest made of cellophane strips. ‘-Derek,’ he finishes. ‘You are a Derek.’

Derek inclines his head. ‘Good eye.’

Ria jumps up with a delighted ‘Da!’ and makes a beeline for Stiles, who lifts her up and kisses her before shifting her to his hip so she can mess with his necktie.

He narrows his eyes at Derek, barely suppressing the urge to stick out his tongue. ‘Shut up. Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy you’re a Derek, I’m just confused about why you’re not an Erica.’

‘Because Erica had to leave an hour ago to make her reservations.’ Derek frowns a little. ‘She left you some voicemails I think, and sent you a bunch of texts.’

‘Ah.’ Stiles pulls his sad, dead phone from his pocket and brandishes it at Derek before plugging it into its charger on the side table. ‘Ran outta gas. Thanks for saving my butt, though, I thought Erica would be kicking it by now for sure.’

Stiles has to applaud Derek for manfully resisting the urge to comment on his butt, because honestly, Stiles would have been all over that opportunity like a donkey on a waffle. Derek does indulge in an even smirkier smirk than usual, but then Stiles’ attention is drawn away then to his living room, which seems to be under attack from a swarm of jellyfish floating from the ceiling.
'Dada, jellyfish!' Ria explains, waving her arms around at them.

'So I see. These are awesome!' Stiles runs a cellophane tentacle through his fingers. 'Did you do these?' Ria beams at him. Stiles presses his lips together to keep from laughing when he realises the bodies of the jellyfish are dvds, gleaming iridescent in the lamplight.

He shoots a sly glance at Derek, who looks like he wants the ground to swallow him up.

'So, uh, I assume it was Erica’s idea to turn my living room into the beautiful briny ballroom?'

Derek gives him a flat look.

'From Bedknobs and Broomsticks?' Stiles tries. 'Come on, man, it’s Angela Lansbury. It’s a classic.'

Derek just looks carefully blank. 'I think maybe they watched Nemo…'

'Ahh.' Stiles raises an eyebrow. He isn’t about to leave it there because he’s kind of an asshole like that, but hey, a black-belt in Badgering is part of the package Derek signed up for. 'And Erica just happened to donate her dvd collection to the cause?'

'Sure, let’s go with that.' Derek purses his lips and glares hard at the ceiling.

Stiles laughs and drops Oriana down onto the floor before throwing himself down next to Derek. 'I can’t believe you got her to make one jellyfish let alone eight.'

'Turns out she really likes to tape things to other things.' Derek shrugs and holds up his left hand, showing Stiles his thumb and first finger which have been stuck together haphazardly with about half a roll of tape.

Stiles shakes his head at it. 'Ever thought about setting up a day-care? Moms would line up around the block for a chance to see you crafting with their little angels. We’d be stinkin’ rich, man.'

Derek snorts. 'Not sure why you think you’d be getting a cut of the profits.'

'Hey, I’d be there too. I might not fill out a regulation ‘Derek’s Day-care’ uniform t shirt as well as you but I have a certain something. I could be the dork of their dreams, I’m tellin’ ya.'

Derek leans into him just a tiny bit, enough to make Stiles warm all down his left side, and brushes the back of the knuckles of his tape-free hand down the side of Stiles’ neck, sending a delicious shiver down Stiles’ spine. 'Good day?'

Stiles hums. 'You know those days when trying to adult is like trying to get one ice cube out of a glass, and then like thirty fall on your face?'

Derek squints at him. 'No, not really.'

Stiles smiles, because of course Derek doesn’t. He pulls them both to their feet, listening in to the sounds of Oriana lecturing one of her dolls in her bedroom. 'You wanna do something tonight? Within the confines of my living room, obviously. Netflix and chill?' Stiles waggles his eyebrows suggestively.

'I can’t… Got plans.' Derek inclines his head in the direction of his apartment.

Stiles tuts. 'Unbelievable. What plans could possibly be better than pretending to watch Netflix with all this?' He gestures down his body with one hand.
The corners of Derek's mouth lift a little. 'We’re just going out to the preserve. Erica and Boyd are joining us later.'

'What, like, to the cabin?' Stiles frowns out of the window where it’s already almost dark.

'We’re gonna camp out.' Derek busies himself un-taping his bound hand.

Stiles grabs a bottle of water from the fridge and uses it to point at Derek. 'You’re gonna freeze, is what you’re gonna do.'

The corner of Derek’s mouth twitches up. 'It’s just one night. And… I’ve got a warm coat.'

Stiles wrinkles his nose. 'But how do you sleep without your pillow? Don’t answer that. I’m not a loser. Um.' He coughs to cover his embarrassment. 'I’m kind of an expert on camping.'

'Really.' Derek turns to face him more fully. It’s hard to tell, because Derek’s face is in its default setting of ‘glower’, but Stiles is pretty certain it’s a more mischievous glower than usual.

'Sure, I’ve been like, two, three times. And googled the shit out of it, obviously. Ergo…' Stiles points both his thumbs smugly at his own chest. 'Expert. And you get the benefit of my expertise.'

'Lucky me,' Derek says dryly.

Stiles glares at him. 'Laugh it up, big guy, you’ll be laughing on the other side of that pretty face when you fail to take any of my amazing advice and spend the night shivering on the cold hard ground, wake up frozen into a praying mantis-like form and then spend the whole of the next morning saying things like ‘Oy gevalt, my aching back!’ and looking for aspirin and feeling oh so very ancient and guess who won’t be there to rub your poor muscles and kiss it all better: that’s right, me, I won’t be there-mmph…'

Derek grabs Stiles’ wrists just as he flings them dramatically outwards, and kisses him before the rant can work up to jelly-of-the-month-club proportions. Stiles thinks he should probably be offended or something, but hey, there are way worse ways to be shut up.

Derek pulls back a little, eyes still trained intently on Stiles’ mouth. 'We camp out every month, Stiles. We got this. No worries.'

'Right…' Stiles murmurs back. 'Outdoorsy… Well, fine. I guess I’ll watch Breaking Bad and eat a lot of Chinese food and cry myself to sleep.' He smirks sarcastically at Derek, who rolls his eyes in a gesture that’s already comfortingly familiar. 'Ooh actually, it gives me the chance to call Scott so we can gossip about you without you being here.'

Derek’s eyes tick over towards the window and he mutters something that sounds like ‘Pretty sure Scott’s busy tonight, too,’ but before Stiles gets the chance to ask what that’s meant to mean, he suddenly realises that Ria has gone much too quiet. Nothing instills fear in parents like a suspiciously quiet child, so Stiles looks around abruptly to see what trouble she might be getting herself into.

'I think she’s playing hide and go seek,' Derek offers, somehow reading the crease of Stiles’ brow. 'I was teaching her before you got home.'

'Alright then,' Stiles calls out across the apartment. 'Here I come, ready or not!'

They make a show of loudly searching the apartment, even though Ria’s giggles bubbling through her open bedroom doorway are a bit of a giveaway.
Eventually they make it to her door, and both Derek and Stiles stop short at the sight of Ria sitting smack in the middle of the room, a bright pink blanket over her head, yellow rain booted feet sticking out of one edge. The whole blanket is shaking with laughter.

Stiles nods approvingly. ‘Hide and go seek…’ He says, filled with pride. ‘Nailed it.’

Later on, once Derek has left for his, frankly insane, bonding-through-frostbite camp-out and Ria is tucked up in her crib, Stiles sits back against the threadbare sofa cushions and thumbs through his phone contacts until he reaches Scott. He huffs out a sigh as it goes to voicemail again. He doesn’t bother leaving a message; he’s already left two, and he guesses Allison won’t think Stiles’ desire to stay up late and talk about boys is a good reason to interrupt all the overly-romantic sex they’re probably having right now.

Stiles gets to his feet, stretches his arms over his head to work the kinks out of his shoulders, and sighs again, deeply. He could be having overly-romantic sex right now. Or at least super-hot, glowery frottage with stubble and gentle bickering. It’s really very inconsiderate of Derek to have other plans.

Ordinarily Stiles would have spent the evening doing all those things you can’t really do around your brand-new sort-of-boyfriend, like eating corn on the cob or indulging his online scrubabble habit, or pretending he’s a guest on WTF with Marc Maron (sometimes they laugh, sometimes they cry, sometimes Stiles pretends to be British just to keep things fresh), but he’s not really feeling it tonight. He wanders over to the window to blow out the candle he habitually lights there to let his mom know they’re home safe every night. Once he does, he leans against the window frame, watching a few dark silhouettes hurry along the sidewalk.

At first he thinks it’s the chill emanating from the glass that makes the hairs on his forearms stand on end and goose-bumps spread over his skin, or maybe it’s his own over-active imagination turning shadows into spectres, but suddenly an uneasy sense that he’s being watched prickles over him. He glances at the windows of the buildings opposite, and sees nothing but closed drapes and darkness. He scans along the street, grateful that the moon is full and bright, so more of the street is illuminated than would be usual for this time of night.

After a breathless minute of searching he catches, tucked into a dark corner, two electric-bright flashes of blue light trained right on him. He’s seen them before, at the Hale house, but then they belonged to a wolf. Now they’re at a height and width that suggests they belong to a human. Anxiety creeps across his skin like frost on glass. No matter how much Stiles strains to see, he can’t make out anything more than the eyes burning in a patch of shadow that’s deeper than the rest, and he can’t leave Ria to go and check it out further.

He stares back at the eyes for several seconds to show them that he’s not afraid, and then, slowly and deliberately, he draws the drapes shut. He takes a deep breath to try and calm his shaking hands, and then he crosses to the coffee table and grabs a piece of paper and one of Ria’s crayons. He notes the date and time and what he saw, and after a moment, adds what he can remember of his dreams and the other incidents to it as well, staring at the dates and details. Nothing becomes clear yet, but Stiles decides to keep at it. He hasn’t been the sheriff’s son all these years without picking up a tip or two about what to do if creepy mother-fuckers start hanging around. If he sees or senses something weird, he’ll write it down, and in the end it’ll come to him. He’ll find a pattern or a key to unlock it or something, because Stiles is shit-hot at analysing stuff like this, and now something skeevy is watching his home, where is daughter is, it’s fucking personal.

He spends about an hour turning the tangle of information over and over in his mind, trying
unsuccessfully to pick a hole in it, before he sees the time and gives in to the need to go to bed. On
the way he reaches into the back of his closet to draw out his old, beaten-up baseball bat, and stashes
it down the side of the bed. It’s crazy, he knows. He’s on the third floor of a secure building. They’re
safe. But still. He thinks he might have felt more secure if he’d known Derek was just on the other
side of the wall. He considers calling Erica and asking to speak with him, but he doesn’t want to be
needy, and it’s not like Derek could do anything from out in the preserve anyway. What would he
even say? ‘Hey, Derek, I’m freaking out because a shadowy dude with glowing eyes is standing on
the other side of the street and doing absolutely nothing…”

Yeah, no thank you.

He buries his face into the pillow Derek had used when he’d stayed over that Friday night. His scent
lingers very faintly in the folds of the fabric, and it’s this comfort that allows Stiles to fall asleep.

He wakes up to daylight, what feels like seconds later, with adrenaline pumping painfully through
his veins. He’s breathing so hard his chest aches, his head swimming with disjointed shards of
dreams full of screaming and fear and glowing eyes.

‘Ugh…’ He rolls over and punches the pillow in frustration, and then promptly squawks and falls out
of bed as a low knock on the door echoes through the apartment.

He tiptoes down the hallway, still feeling on edge from his dreams and the person watching last
night, and inches open the door, flinging it wide open as soon as he sees Derek standing there.

Stiles is pretty sure he’s in the same jeans and Henley he was wearing last night, and he looks
uncharacteristically rumpled. He’s more unshaven than usual, and his hair is damp at the temples like
he ran all the way here, but he looks lit up, like he’s had the best night ever. He looks happy.

Stiles barely manages a surprised ‘Hi,’ before Derek is sliding his hands around Stiles’ jaw and
kissing him urgently. Stiles can feel Derek practically vibrating with energy against him.

‘Morning…’ Stiles manages, breathlessly wondering if Derek is high, or if he just really likes
camping. ‘I didn’t think you’d be back this early.’

Derek looks down to hide a smile. ‘Wasn’t supposed to be.’ His hands are steady and he doesn’t
smell like booze, and when he looks up his eyes aren’t bloodshot or dilated, so Stiles supposes he’d
really meant it when he’d said the great outdoors agrees with him.

Stiles smirks. ‘Don’t tell me… you missed your pillow.’

His eyes crinkle at the corners, which is not a thing that should be sexy but somehow, on Derek it
really, really is. ‘Something like that.’

Stiles sighs. ‘Such a loser. No idea why I put up with you. And you have leaves in your hair, Christ,
what were you guys doing, scampering around the woods skyclad all night?’

Derek grins. ‘I don’t scamper, Stiles. I’m gonna go shower. I’ll be back with breakfast?’

‘Okay.’ Stiles is aware of how epically he’s failing to contain his stupid grin. ‘Hey, wait, you didn’t
give me an answer on the whole skyclad thing, don't think I didn't notice!' He calls out as Derek
opens his own apartment door. The only response is Derek’s laughter ringing out around the
hallway.

Stiles shuts the door and backs up against it, smiling and biting his lip like a fool.
He checks his phone on his way towards a shower of his own, in case he’s had any response from Scott, but there are no calls or texts. He scrolls over to check his news app as he waits for the water to warm up. He’s half hoping for an arrest to have been made with regard to the museum break-ins, but he as soon as he sees the top headline his heart stops, and he fumbles and drops his phone. He thunks to his knees on the bathroom tile, scrabbling to retrieve it from where he’s thankfully dropped it on the soft mat.

He lights up the screen again with trembling hands, and there, real and stark against the white background: *Teenager Missing After Wolf Attack in Beacon Hills*

‘Madeleine’s distraught parents reported seeing an unusually large, apparently wild wolf…’

‘…first wolf attack in California in over a century…’

‘Police have called in expert trackers to comb nearby wooded areas…’

‘16 year old Madeleine Klein is missing, feared dead.’
Derek stuffs his hands in his pockets and stares up at the sky, which is as grey and apprehensive as his mood. He watches as a tall, thin man with a hawkish nose comes out of the doors, cradling a trembling guinea pig in his arms. It’s wearing a tiny pink, crystal-studded harness and a leash, and Derek thinks for the millionth time that he will never understand humans.

But it isn’t a human he’s come to see. He rocks up onto the balls of his feet and back down again. He’s not at all sure that this is a good idea, but the knowledge that there’s a beta here, in Beacon Hills - with, at worst no control, and at best no pack, protection or alpha – bothers him so much he can’t in good conscience put it off any longer.

He moves for the door, trying to breathe through his mouth because the faint smell of blood and urine, covered by the much stronger, acrid scent of antiseptic and thick, cloying fear, makes his stomach roil, even though it’s exceptionally rare for werewolves to throw up. He lowers his head and stalks to the desk, glaring a growling dog into silent submission, much to its owner’s surprise.

‘Do you have an appointment? Or… an animal?’ The round, blonde lady at the desk asks, giving him a pointed once over.

‘I’m here to see Scott McCall,’ Derek says tightly. ‘Could you please let him know Derek Hale is here?’

‘You’re going to need an appointment, honey, Dr. McCall is very busy this afternoon.’

‘He’ll see me.’ Derek stares unblinkingly at the woman – Susan, her tag says – until she blanches and backs away into one of the consultation rooms. Derek recognises a nearby heartbeat and follows it until he sees Deaton, leaning against the jamb of the office door. They exchange curt nods. Derek expected to hear from him following the news about the missing teenager, but so far he’s kept his distance. Derek doesn’t know whether that’s bad or good. He never does, when it comes to Deaton.

A woman and a young girl come out of Scott’s room with a mouse in a small carry cage, followed by Scott himself, in blue scrubs. He holds Derek’s gaze for several seconds, keeping his own steady and level. His courage is impressive, for a lone beta, Derek thinks. Or stupid. Possibly both.

Scott doesn’t break eye contact as he says, ‘Hey, Mr Deaton, I’m gonna take my lunch break, alright?’

Deaton looks from one to the other, nods, and disappears into the office, closing the door firmly behind him. Scott grabs a dark jacket and pulls it on over the scrubs, directing Derek outside and around back to a small, walled garden area. They both sit on the wall, keeping a wary distance from each other. It’s purely academic on Derek’s part; an attempt to put Scott at ease. He’s faster and stronger than Scott, and they both know it, just like they both know that Scott doesn’t trust him.

Derek tips his face up to the sun that’s peeking weakly through the grey cloud, and breathes the fresh
air deeply into his lungs. ‘I don’t know how you stand it in there…’

Scott shrugs nonchalantly, but Derek can smell the irritation rolling off him already. ‘You get used to it,’ he says acidly. ‘Why are you here?’

‘I think we’re overdue a talk.’ Derek says, eyes still closed against the October sun.

Scott scoffs. ‘By about two years, I’d say…’ There’s bitterness in his voice and in his scent.

Derek cracks an eye, curiously. ‘That when you got bitten? Two years ago?’

Scott shrugs again, his jaw set. ‘More or less.’

Derek nods slowly and then sits up and opens both eyes to look at Scott’s face. ‘My pack were out in the preserve last night, for the full moon. I looked for you. Didn’t catch your scent anywhere. Never have, actually. Which led me to wonder what it is you do on the full moon…’

Scott lifts his chin, sharp irritation clouding his scent. ‘How is that your business?’

‘Because you’re a bitten werewolf with no alpha and a girl went missing last night.’ Derek lets his voice harden and his eyes flash red. ‘And as Beacon Hills is my territory, that makes your whereabouts my business.’

Scott shifts back away from him minutely, but doesn’t cringe away like Derek thought he might. He mutters, ‘Allison.’

‘Allison Argent.’ It’s not a question. He’s been around Stiles when he’s mentioned her, so it’s not a shock, but it still sits very uncomfortably with him. He doesn’t think he could ever trust an Argent, now. He’s not sure any werewolf ever should.

‘She helps me,’ Scott’s eyes flash gold, protectively. ‘We have a secure place. She uses mountain ash. I want to be sure I won’t hurt her.’

‘And in return she doesn’t hurt you.’ Derek manages to keep the sarcastic edge from his voice, but he crumbles the wall beneath his fingers to dust as if it were friable sand rather than solid brick.

‘She helps me.’ Scott repeats, his shoulders stubborn. ‘When I got bitten I… had no idea what was happening to me. She’s the only thing that’s gotten me through this. She had some knowledge already and there’s a book… She’s been incredible.’ Scott’s face lights up and he unconsciously takes something out of his pocket and runs it through his fingers.

‘She’s your anchor,’ Derek says in sudden understanding.

‘She’s my everything.’ Scott is fierce. Derek respects that.

‘I can help you,’ he offers. ‘With control, during the full moon.’

‘You’d help me? Why?’ Scott turns to face him, then, eyes wide with surprise.

Derek furrows his brow. ‘You wanna spend twelve nights a year trapped in a basement for the rest of your life?’

Scott rolls his eyes in a gesture so reminiscent of Stiles that they could be brothers. It makes him warm to Scott more. He likes this guy, despite himself. He’s loyal and honest, and the fact he’s managed two years with no pack or alpha is testament to his strength. That takes determination and work, and fire. Derek can see why Stiles adores him.
‘No,’ Scott says, ‘I mean… you were born here. This is your territory, Mr Big Shot Alpha. But I got bitten two years ago and haven’t heard a damn word, so why are you showing up here now… Because of Stiles?’

Derek quirks a brow. ‘Stiles doesn’t know anything, though yeah, it’s true that you’re important to him. But you’re right, I should have been here sooner.’

‘Where have you been all this time?’ For the first time, Derek sees a flash of vulnerability under Scott’s defensive exterior. Guilt shoots through him for not having been there when this kid needed him.

He sighs. ‘It’s complicated.’

‘Yeah…’ Scott stands up to leave. ‘You’re gonna need to do better than that. Way, way better.’

‘Are you questioning me?’ Derek bristles, his blood instantly up at being back-talked by this pup. His mother would never have allowed such disrespect.

Although, he reminds himself, Scott wasn’t raised as a Were, doesn’t know how he's meant to behave around an alpha. He exhales slowly through gritted teeth.

‘Alright,’ Derek stands too, and holds his hands palm up, halting Scott in his tracks. ‘Okay. After the fire, I went to New York with my sister. She became the alpha once my mother died. We came back here once I got done with college. Wanted to try to make a life here, but… she was killed. Someone killed her.’ Scott’s eyes widen but he doesn’t say anything. ‘I found out when they showed up and threw it in my face. They’d done it for her power. I made it my life’s mission to avenge her.’ Derek can’t stop his eyes from flashing red at the memory. ‘Took me a couple of months to figure out the alpha thing once I’d killed him. I'd just started to build a pack when they found my sister’s body in the mountains, and arrested me for it. After they let me go I buried her, and then… I needed family. I hadn’t had time to build that with my betas. So I went to my other sister. And now I’m back… trying to do better.’

Scott stares at him for a long time with eyes full of suspicion. Derek gets that. He wouldn’t be falling over himself to trust anyone if he were in Scott’s situation.

Eventually Scott says, ‘And Stiles?’

‘Is important. To me.’ Derek’s eyes flicker to the object Scott is rolling through his fingers. It’s an arrowhead, worn smooth around the edges.

Scott lifts his eyebrows. ‘Like… Allison important?’

Derek just looks at him, because if he’s going to tell anyone that then it’s going to be Stiles.

Scott seems to understand. ‘Important enough to tell him?’

‘Yes,’ Derek says, knowing Scott can hear his heart beating steadily. ‘If he wants us to be something, then I’ll tell him. I don’t want to lie to him.’

Scott stares at him again like he’s trying to see through his skin and read the soul of him. ‘Stiles is important to me, too.’

‘I know.’

‘You’ll take care of him?’
That stings, even though Scott hadn’t asked with any malice. It’s just that his greatest failure is not taking care of the people he loves, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t worried about failing again with Stiles and Ria. ‘I’ll do everything I can.’

Scott nods. ‘I don’t need you to take care of me.’

‘Okay.’ Derek swallows around a hard little lump of disappointment that settles in his throat. This kid would be a good addition to his pack, but he obviously doesn’t trust Derek enough. Derek supposes grudging understanding is the best he could have realistically hoped for, from their first meeting.

‘I have questions, though.’ Scott toes at the ground awkwardly. ‘About werewolf… stuff.’

‘Okay. Why don’t you… come find me when you’re ready. You can talk to my betas, too, if you’d rather.’

‘Yeah.’ Scott flicks his eyes up. He’s clearly still apprehensive, but the level of suspicion is less, Derek thinks. ‘Alright.’

‘Alright.’ Derek turns and heads back towards the parking lot, leaving Scott alone in the garden behind him.

Derek slows when he sees Deaton standing next to his car. ‘You know anything?’ He asks.

Deaton shakes his head. ‘No. I’m making enquiries.’

‘Was it a rogue werewolf?’

Deaton purses his lips. ‘I don’t know. If it is then they’re exhibiting highly unusual behaviour.’

‘I checked out the house on my way here,’ Derek says. ‘I didn’t catch any scents. Whatever did this is masking their scent somehow.’

‘Interesting.’ Deaton taps a finger on his chin, his dark eyes thoughtful. ‘Call me if you find out anything else.’

‘Sure.’

Derek’s cell vibrates in his jacket pocket, and he can’t help a small smile when he looks down to see that it’s Stiles. By the time he looks up, Deaton is gone.
I've changed the rating of the fic based on this chapter - if the naughty stuff isn't your jam, you can pretty much skip everything from Derek calling Stiles an idiot through to the asterisk that follows it, and just know that naughty stuff happens.

The plot picks up over the next couple of chapters - I promise there'll be answers in the end! In the meantime thanks for hanging in there with me.

Stiles rests his elbows on the desk and presses the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. His limbs are sand-bag heavy. He shuffles through the sheaf of papers once more; his sketches, the photos that Jordan sent over (which, unsurprisingly are a near-perfect match to his sketches), the police report for the missing girl that he might have possibly obtained illegally by guessing his dad’s predictable password for the police computer system.

There’s a connection lurking in the depths of his mind somewhere and it’s taunting him, like a forgotten word on the tip of his tongue. His synapses are sparking and he needs something, just a little jolt for the spark to flare up into a flame.

He’s spent the week working his way through the museum’s limited collection of linguistic books, hoping something will jump out at him that will be the key to unlocking the mystery of the symbols, but it’s hard going and his eyes are gritty in their sockets.

‘Ugh…’ He leans back in his creaky chair and watches the dust motes float in the buttery sunbeams that stream in through the window. Maybe he’s trying too hard to force it. His dad has always said he thinks best when he’s not thinking at all.

His phone buzzes, jolting him out of his funk, and he can’t hold back his smile as he grabs his bag and makes for the front desk. His smile gets impossibly wider when he sees Derek skulking there, hands stuffed in the pockets of his leather jacket, and Ria charging around the lobby in a little pink dress with a gold crown on a headband stuck on her head, at a wonky angle.

‘Hey,’ he says, leaning up to kiss Derek’s cheek shyly, drawing in the smell of him surreptitiously. As far as Stiles can tell, Derek never wears cologne, shunning anything strongly scented. Stiles loves the natural fragrance of his skin; earthy and bucolic, like moss and juniper and rain, cut through with something wild and fresh that Stiles can’t place. He has a secret theory that Derek, born and bred on the preserve, and now found there most days, somehow soaks up some of the extra oxygen that all those trees produce and carries it around in his skin. It’s not exactly scientific, but it explains why Stiles can breathe just a little bit easier when he’s near.

‘Hi.’ Derek turns his head to kiss Stiles back, his ears adorably pink-tipped.

Oriana ignores Stiles completely in favour of sprinting back and forth as fast as her legs will carry her, which is really freaking fast now she’s had a few weeks of practice. Speed she has down; stopping, not so much, preferring to crash land against the nearest available surface. Stiles half expects that she’ll never master it totally; after all, he never has.
‘She looks great,’ Stiles says, ‘though I’m wondering if I should have spent more on the dress. She’s going to set light to herself running around like that in all that polyester…’

Derek snorts. ‘She’ll be okay. Are you getting ready here?’

‘Sure am!’ Stiles hoists his bag in the air with a flourish. ‘I definitely can’t tempt you to dress up with us?’

‘Absolutely not.’ Derek’s face is deadpan.

‘Aww, come on, Der. It’s Halloween. And there’s more than one Mario brother…’ Stiles flutters his eyelashes and puts on his most persuasive grin, but Derek is unmoved.

‘One hundred per cent no, Stiles.’

‘Fine.’ Stiles pouts a little on principle, but not too much because he’s counting the fact the Derek agreed to trick or treat with them at all as a solid win. ‘I’ll be right back then.’

He leaves Derek among the few sad plastic pumpkins and fake spiderwebs that Harris had allowed them, and makes for the bathroom, humming happily. His good mood is rapidly marred by the unwelcome appearance of Jackson, blocking the hallway. Stiles tries to get away with a curt nod, but Jackson is clearly in the mood to play, stepping in front of him so he can’t pass by. ‘What do you want?’

Jackson crosses his arms over his chest. ‘I was in the neighbourhood, picking up Lydia. Seeing you is just a happy coincidence. You rent yourself some company, Stilinski?’

Stiles rolls his eyes, not dignifying that with an answer.

Jackson snorts. ‘That’s Hale, right?’

‘Derek,’ Stiles grits out.

Jackson smirks, which usually just makes Stiles want to punch him, but something about this particular smirk is even more annoying than usual. He’s so… smug. ‘And he is dating you?’ The words ooze from him, dripping with disbelief.

‘Problem with that?’ Humiliation pulses viciously through Stiles’ veins with every heartbeat, but he’ll be damned if he lets Jackson see it.

‘Not at all. You could totally land a guy like that. Look at you, you’re like a…’ Jackson waves a hand vaguely down Stiles’ body, ‘…three. Maybe a four after a few shots. He’s what, an eight… nine… Nothing weird about that at all.’

Fucking sarcastic asshole. Stiles feels a blush start to make its way up the back of his neck, but he keeps his chin high, fingers clenched around the strap of his rucksack. ‘There’s more to life than shredded abs, Jack-ass. I wouldn’t expect you to know that since that’s literally all you have going for you.’

‘And yet I’m dating the girl of your dreams,’ Jackson’s eyes glint dangerously. ‘So they’re clearly working for me. And, oh look, seems like the girl of your dreams is also the girl of his dreams… That’s gotta be awkward for you.’

Stiles’ eyes slide over to where Lydia is standing, having some sort of seemingly intimate conversation with Derek. His hands are spread pleadingly and she’s shaking her head firmly.
They’re close together, too close really for people who’ve just met. They're too far away for Stiles to make out anything they're saying. Lydia snaps something at Derek and he makes an exasperated gesture with his shoulders and takes a step back.

‘Ooh, he struck out,’ Jackson murmurs, mockingly in Stiles’ ear. ‘Better luck next time, Der… Actually,’ he runs a hand over his flat stomach, ‘I was gonna take my jacket off, but I think I’d better keep it on now, for your sake. Since your man can’t keep it in his pants. Wouldn’t be fair to you.’

‘Sure,’ Stiles scoffs with more confidence than he feels, ‘because you’re really his type.’

Jackson smiles lazily. It doesn’t reach his eyes. He's almost reptilian, and its creepy. ‘I’m everybody’s type. You on the other hand… You don’t actually believe he’s into you, do you?’

‘Well, Lydia is inexplicably into you, so miracles happen I guess,’ Stiles says coolly, looking back over at Derek who has stepped back in closer to Lydia. ‘I trust him.’ He says it to convince himself as much as Jackson.

‘Maybe you shouldn’t…’ Jackson’s face is alight with something triumphant and knowing, and Stiles hates him so fucking much right now.

Stiles flashes hot with anger, blood rising in his cheeks. ‘You don’t know anything about anything, so just. Fuck. Off.’

He shoulders past Jackson into the bathroom, ripping off his thrift store suit as angrily as he can without damaging it, and shrugging into his outfit. Then he takes a second to run cool water from the faucet over the thin skin of his inner wrists, trying to cool his temper. He doesn’t know why he lets Jackson get to him, he knows he’s just a fucking tinman with no heart and a big mouth, but still.

He’d seemed so damn sure of himself, when it came to Derek being too good to be true. It tugs at all the insecurities tangled up in a ball inside himself that he usually tries to ignore. He sighs and shakes himself, splashing water on his neck. He’s not going to let this ruin his night.

By the time he comes out of the bathroom, Jackson is mercifully gone from the hallway, but Stiles’ heart sinks when he sees that he’s just moved over to stand near Lydia, and he and Derek seem to be having an epic glare-off. Derek is winning, Stiles is gratified to note. Derek always wins at glaring.

It’s like his super-power.

His usual low-level resting glower has escalated into the kind of fully-blown scowl that Stiles has only ever seen on Buffy the Vampire Slayer, never in real life, and he’s focused it wholly on Jackson. Stiles doesn’t know whether to be worried that Jackson might be eviscerated on the spot, or pleased about it. He supposes he should be worried. After all, he’d probably be the one having to clean up the mess afterwards.

He ambles up to the three of them. ‘Hey, Lydia,’ he says in a falsely cheerful voice. ‘I guess you already know Derek. Jackson, this is Derek, my…’ He fumbles for the right word, not wanting to give Jackson the satisfaction of saying ‘friend’ but not wanting to freak Derek out with anything else.

‘Boyfriend,’ Derek finishes off for him, with a pointed look over at Jackson like he somehow knows what a gigantic dick Jackson’s been. Stiles feels a pleased little swoop in his belly at the word.

‘Right. He’s my boyfriend. And I’m his. Boyfriend, I mean. So. That’s excellent. Really good stuff.’ He chews on his lower lip to hold back a ridiculous grin and presses into Derek’s side, briefly.

Derek doesn’t stop staring Jackson down, his eyes burning with an intense dislike that surprises even Stiles, given Derek just met him and there’s no way he could have overheard their conversation.
Stiles wonders if he should grab the nearest fire extinguisher, just in case, since he’d be basically useless if the two of them actually had a fight, but then Derek brings his fingers up to brush over the back of Stiles’ neck and it’s so nice it makes Stiles go weak at the knees, like a fucking teenager, Jesus. Ria finally notices him, and barrels over to him to be picked up, chattering away in Ria-speak at a hundred miles an hour. Stiles catches the word ‘Bear’ at least three times, and he’s relieved it’s not just him that seems to be obsessed.

When Ria pauses to draw breath, Stiles looks up to find Lydia punching Derek’s number into her phone, flanked by two hulking, glaring idiots. He looks from Lydia to Derek and back, and somewhere deep down, in an ugly, insecure place in his chest, a poisonous little idea takes root in all of Jackson’s bullshit. He wonders if it’s possible that Derek likes Lydia. That maybe the Bistro Seduction was all for her benefit, that maybe he hates Jackson so much because Jackson is standing with his arm slung possessively over Lydia’s shoulder.

He feels faintly sick.

He tries to shove the cankerous thoughts aside, refusing to let Jackson win, and instead announces too brightly that it’s time to leave for trick or treating, which is a relief for everyone. He grabs Ria’s hand and heads for Derek’s soccer-mom car (which Stiles has affectionately nicknamed Honkers, just to see the abject horror on Derek’s face every time he says it), and he doesn’t look back. They’re meeting up with a few of the parents from Ria’s daycare, and a few friends, to do a pre-planned route. Stiles is glad to have a distraction from Jackson’s unpleasantness. Stiles had fully expected Derek not to want to come, but he had agreed readily. Over the last few days there have been several sightings of wolves – or maybe just one, lone wolf, no-one knows – all over town, and Stiles suspects this has something to do with Derek’s willingness to accompany them.

The car ride is short and Ria is joyous, and Stiles emerges from Honkers with his Mario moustache and red hat firmly in place, along with a renewed determination to be chipper, for her sake. The area is quiet and suburban, and all the white wooden houses are decked out in bright Halloween decor. Stiles thinks it would be nice to have a stoop to put a pumpkin on, someday. As they make their introductions to the rest of the group, which includes Danny and his four-year old nephew, he notices that Derek is a little less murderous but still determinedly monosyllabic with everyone else, standing slightly apart from the group, back ramrod straight. When Danny asks after Isaac, Derek shoots him a flat look and shrugs that he doesn’t know, even though he must see Isaac staggering to the coffee machine every morning. It’s weird to see him like this.

Stiles has always known Derek is unusually easy-going with them, drawn out of his shell mostly, Stiles assumes, by Ria’s irresistible cuteness. But over the last few weeks he’s gotten used to that Derek – to his Derek, his and Ria’s - and Derek is reasonably relaxed with Erica, Boyd and Isaac, but when he thinks about it he realises he’s barely seen him interact with anyone else… He’s used to soft little smiles that flit unbidden over Derek’s face when Stiles says something snarky, to sweet touches that soothe after Derek snarks back. Stiles wasn’t really expecting this contained Derek with the slightly pained expression and the defensive posture. It’s unsettling to see him shut down so quickly.

It makes Stiles wonder how well he really knows Derek, after all.

_Fucking Jackson._

Stiles would normally try to annoy Derek out of his mood, but it’s not like his is much better, so instead he tentatively slips a hand into Derek’s jacket pocket, pressing their palms together. He exhales in a relieved rush when Derek seems to immediately relax a little at the touch. Movement helps, and Derek’s shoulders creep downwards from his ears over the course of the walk to the first
two houses. He glances over at Stiles, in his dungarees and stick-on moustache, and says, ‘You look ridiculous.’ It’s all fondness and no heat, so Stiles beams back because there’s his Derek.

Stiles scoffs and says, ‘I look awesome. You’re just jealous because my facial hair is finally manlier and more resplendent than yours,’ and tucks himself a little more into Derek’s side, and everything seems to finally sink back into normality between them.

Who cares if Derek sucks at small talk when their fingers are laced together and there’s a little smile playing around his lips – a smile that Stiles made happen. So what if Derek comes off as kind of an asshole to everyone else? It’s not exactly the worst thing in the world if he and Ria get to have this Derek, just for them. It’s actually… sort of nice. Stiles holds his hand tighter, something warm and satisfied unfurling in his chest, and they walk in silence for a bit, watching Princess Peach follow Yoda and, bizarrely, the Easter Bunny, down the sidewalk.

It becomes apparent after a few minutes, that while Ria is more than happy to play dress up at home, she regards whole crowds of shrieking, costumed kids with intense dismay. She seeks refuge in Derek’s shoulder, because she’s also deeply suspicious of Stiles’ moustache, which Derek says is a sign of good judgement on her part, and refuses to come out.

‘So,’ Stiles says, pushing his bright red hat back on his forehead a little in frustration, ‘this is going well.’

Derek smirks sarcastically, and pings one of the straps on Stiles’ blue overalls. ‘I’m having a good time…’

‘Of course you are,’ Stiles says, twiddling his moustache, ‘I’ve never been sexier.’

Derek heaves a put-upon sigh and mutters something about not being able to believe this is his life now, but he dutifully carries Princess Peach from door to decorated door on his shoulders as Stiles capers about and requests candy in an exaggerated Italian accent, so Stiles thinks he can’t mind too much really.

This is Derek, he reassures himself.

If he didn’t want to be there, he wouldn’t be.

Fucking Jackson.

*  

It’s not until much later, once they’re back at Stiles’ apartment and Ria has passed out after an insane thirty-minute candy high, that the doubts start to creep back in. Stiles lounges on the sofa with his sweatpant-clad legs slung over Derek’s lap, fussing with one of Derek’s hands. Once he’s satisfied that Ria is fully asleep, with her white noise machine on, he pokes Derek cheekily in the side and says, ‘So how come you’re such a sourpuss around everyone else, and a pussycat with me?’

Derek just grunts and pulls him closer.

Stiles splays out Derek’s fingers, wishing he could read Derek’s palm with any accuracy because then they could avoid this conversation, but all he can tell is that he has really nice hands. Lean, but solid. Warm. Masculine. Sexy. He likes them. Eventually he works up his courage. Swallowing hard, he ventures, ‘Derek…’

‘Stiles…’ Derek sounds like he might be falling asleep.
Stiles clears his throat. ‘Do you like Lydia?’

There’s a pause, and then Derek says, in that flat, inscrutable way of his, ‘What.’

It’s not a ‘no’. Stiles sits up a little bit to better see his face, since clearly verbal clues will not be forthcoming. Derek’s eyebrows are drawn together, either defensively or in confusion, Stiles can’t tell. He’s still working on interpreting Derek’s eyebrows. He wonders briefly if there are any helpful YouTube tutorials that might give him an in. For now he settles for repeating, ‘Do you like Lydia?’

‘What the hell are you talking about, Stiles?’ Derek doesn’t seem mad, just baffled, cocking his head as he looks at him like Stiles is some unfathomable mystery.

Which is crazy, because Stiles is like, the most fathomable guy in the world. He is fully fathomable, and it’s Derek who’s the mystery.

‘I just…’ Stiles lets his eyes roam vaguely around the room to try to avoid looking directly at Derek. ‘You act weird around her. You seemed to hate Jackson on sight, and then there was the whole bistro thing, a while back…’ Stiles waves a hand around unhelpfully. ‘It occurred to me you might be acting this way because you’re jealous…’

Derek blinks owlishly. ‘Wait… you think I like Lydia? And what, I’ve been using you all this time to somehow get to her, only to be thwarted by her knuckle-head boyfriend?’

Stiles shrugs helplessly, fighting down a blush. Now that Derek says it out loud, it sounds kind of stupid.

Derek just looks at him for a long, long moment, sliding his gaze lazily over Stiles’ body. Stiles can’t decide if he wants to curl in on himself in embarrassment or strip off and dance around under the intense heat of Derek’s attention. He doesn’t think he’s ever been looked at like this before, and it makes lust twist sweet and sharp in his gut.

Derek pushes Stiles’ legs off his lap, ignoring his indignant squawk of protest, and then shifts and slowly lowers his body onto him. Stiles’ mouth goes dry. Derek’s surprisingly agile for such a built-up guy, which is unfairly hot. The solid weight and heat of him is so good that Stiles can’t help but arch up against him, shifting them slightly, gasping out as the press of their mutual arousal sends a shower of hot sparks up his spine. Like a tendon reflex, he brings his hands up to hold onto Derek’s shoulders.

‘You,’ Derek breathes, rolling his hips down purposefully, ‘are an idiot.’

Stiles’ eyes roll back in pleasure but he doesn’t want to give Derek the satisfaction of knowing that, so he tries to pass it off as annoyance. ‘Gee, Derek, it sort of feels like you’re trying to make a point here, but you’re so subtle I can’t tell what it is…’

Derek chuckles, the vibrations travelling from his chest into Stiles’ own. ‘Such a little shit.’ He nips at one of Stiles’ earlobes and then nuzzles into the sensitive skin behind Stiles’ ear murmuring, ‘Wanted you then… Want you now…’ which sends Stiles’ heart slamming into his ribcage. He barely stops his hips from trying to match the rhythm of his heart because Derek isn’t even touching him for god’s sake, except for the trail of wet, scratchy kisses he’s laying down his throat.

‘Gonna show you,’ Derek whispers into his skin, sliding a hand around Stiles’ side to hold him in place as he noses under the neckline of his t shirt and inhales deeply. Stiles feels his cheeks flame as he catches a glimpse of Derek’s hooded eyes, his skin humming with every blissful touch of lips and teeth and hot, moist breath.
Derek sits up and tugs his own tank off, and all Stiles can do is stare at him, transfixed by the unconsciously sinuous roll and stretch of the muscles of his abdomen and arms.

He’s breathing heavily, head swimming somewhere slightly outside the moment, so he’s less than useful when it comes to helping Derek in his efforts to remove Stiles’ clothes. He manages Stiles’ plaid shirt well enough, but then loses patience with the t shirt, diving back in to nip at the curve of Stiles’ jaw like he can’t help himself. His fingers scrabble urgently at the fabric and he sounds as wrecked as Stiles feels when he says, ‘Jesus, Stiles, how do you… I need… Fuck, can you take this off…’

‘Yeah, okay, good,’ Stiles shoves at Derek’s chest to get him to sit up again and then follows him, only hitting him in the face once as he manoeuvres the cursed garment over his long limbs and head. ‘Oh fuck, sorry, sorry…’ He gasps out, but it’s lost in the deliciously filthy groan that Derek lets out as he sinks back down, bare skin on bare skin.

He runs his fingertips over Stiles’ collarbones and chest, down his biceps and then traces them lightly over his stomach. He rubs a thumb over one of Stiles’ nipples, grinning wickedly as Stiles curses, and then he dips his head to flicker the tip of his tongue over the sensitive flesh. Stiles cries out, his head falling back onto the couch cushions which exposes his neck in a way Derek can’t seem to resist. ‘Want you,’ Derek mumbles between wet kisses to his collarbones, 'so much.' Derek hisses as Stiles buries his fingers in his hair and pulls lightly on the thick, soft strands at the back of his head, but when he moves his hands to stroke down Derek’s sides he grabs for Stiles' wrists.

‘Nuh-uh,’ Derek encircles his wrists easily and presses them to the couch pillows by Stiles’ head. ‘Not today.’

‘But I-’

Derek cuts Stiles off with a kiss. ‘Shut up, Stiles.’

‘Shutting up.’ Stiles lets his arms go lax.

Derek moves his hands to Stiles’ waistband and then sinks to his knees between his legs, pulling Stiles’ sweats and boxers down in a smooth movement. Stiles’ breath catches in his throat because Derek’s expression is rapt, and he has to fling an arm over his eyes because he feels exposed and vulnerable and so turned on, and yeah, he gets it. Derek wants him. He doesn’t think anyone has ever wanted him this much before, and he’s not sure how it’s happened that the person looking at him so, so... reverently, is someone he wants just as much.

Derek slides his palms up Stiles’ thighs, digging his thumbs into the meat of them, and then god, there’s hot breath ghosting over his hip bone, and in a sudden moment of panic Stiles blurts out, ‘Uh, you don’t… You don’t have to do this…’

He sort of hates himself because hey, self-sabotage much, but blow jobs are... Well, honestly, Stiles likes the theory of them more than the practice, which is a damn shame because he spent a lot of time during his teenage years studying the theory, but the reality has always been a little awkward and fumbly and underwhelming. It’s usually good but never great, and Cody had managed to work it so Stiles was almost always the giver, telling him anything else was a waste of Stiles’ pretty mouth. If Cody reciprocated it was perfunctory; just a necessary stage of foreplay to go through to get to the good stuff.

Derek’s hands still on his thighs, but don’t withdraw. ‘You want me to stop?’

The ‘No!’ is out of Stiles’ mouth, embarrassingly fast and loud, before he can stop it.
Derek chuckles again, only this time it vibrates through Stiles’ thighs which really shouldn’t feel as good as it does but god, it feels so good. ‘Okay. Because I really don’t want to stop. Alright?’

Stiles’ heart pounds in his chest. ‘Okay. Yeah. Okay.’

There’s a satisfied hum from Derek, that shivers over Stiles’ skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. Abruptly, Stiles sits up a little. ‘Oh! I’m clean, by the way. I was tested after Heather. Um, after Ria’s mom. I haven’t been with anyone since.’

His cheeks are on fire at the admission of his sexless existence, knowing that Derek has no trouble finding partners whenever he wants, but all Derek says is a mild, ‘Okay,’ and then he runs his tongue up the groove of Stiles’ hip and his shoulders are bare in the lamplight, and Stiles can’t remember how words work, after that.

Derek smooths his thumbs over the sensitive tendons that stretch over Stiles’ sharp hip bones, pinning him back to the sofa cushions, and then sinks his mouth down over Stiles, and the only barely coherent thought in Stiles’ head is ‘holy shit, he’s so hot,’ and he doesn’t mean just like, attractive hot, he means like actually hot. Derek always seems to run warm – maybe it’s to do with the fast metabolism he mentioned before – but the wet heat of his mouth is just on the good side of scorching, punching the air out of Stiles’ lungs.

Derek’s throat rumbles with this sort of growl that feels, woah, incredible, and the combination of the vibrations and the sight of Derek reaching down to press a hand against his own arousal has Stiles throwing his arm back over his face to bite into his forearm, trying to hold himself together. Stiles wants to watch, he really does, but they haven’t actually done anything but make out and cuddle since the night Derek stayed over, and Stiles knows the visual of Derek between his legs will ensure this is over embarrassingly fast. And it’s much, much too good for that.

Derek is somehow more attuned to Stiles than his previous partners, noticing how a particular movement of his tongue makes Stiles gasp, how the barest scrape of his teeth along Stiles’ length elicits muffled curses. He traces the shape of Stiles’ cock like he’s trying to memorise it with his tongue, light and teasing. He trails his fingers up Stiles' thigh to wrap his hand around him and jack him slowly, applying enough pressure that his tongue is free to work over the head in torturous, swirling movements. He slips his other hand under Stiles to cup the curve of his spine, splaying his fingers over the skin there, and his hand is hot, too.

‘Oh god… Just like that…’ Stiles digs the fingers of his free hand into the couch, trying to hold on to something to keep him from falling apart as Derek presses his tongue in harder.

It feels like Derek is everywhere as the heat surrounds him, his tongue like a brand, his fingertips trailing fire over Stiles’ skin. The heat smoulders deep in Stiles’ abdomen, burning up and out through his limbs, over his throat, building and building in relentless waves until it’s nearly unbearable. He fights it at first, trying to stay in control, wanting it to stop because it's too much but also to never stop ever. In the end all he can do is give in to it, letting the pressure and the heat overwhelm him, trusting Derek to take care of him in the end. His legs are shaking and his stomach is trembling, and all he can hear is his own fractured breathing as he tries desperately to suck in enough oxygen to not pass out.

He can feel his body tensing incrementally under Derek’s careful ministrations, like the string of a bow being pulled back, and then Derek takes him in deeply, swallowing around him, and does something unholy with his tongue and Stiles can’t take it anymore, choking out a broken sound of warning seconds before his hips snap forward in blissful release as he arches up to meet his orgasm. It takes him over completely, the blood and bone and sinew of his body burning away until Stiles is only aware of incredible, immersive pleasure, and the hot points of Derek’s fingertips pressed into his
skin, reminding him that Derek has him.

Derek keeps swallowing, keeps working him over, drawing out every last second of pleasure until Stiles gets oversensitive and has to gasp, ‘Shit, stop, I don’t wanna die like this… No wait, I really do… Oh fuck it, I can’t decide…’

Derek laughs and kisses his hip bone, the tenderness of the gesture making hot tears prickle behind Stiles’ eyelids. He reaches out for Derek, blinking blindly even in the low lamplight after having covered his eyes for so long, hauling him up to press shaky, feverish kisses to his mouth. He tastes sharp and salty and perfect. After a while Stiles' breathing calms and his limbs feel pleasantly sated.

‘Better?’ Derek asks. His eyes are soft and amused.

‘Mmm,’ Stiles sighs contentedly, wiggling his butt into the soft cushions. He feels floaty and tired and so good right now. He hopes, fuzzily, that Derek feels good too. ‘Wait,’ he forces an eye open, ‘but you…’

‘I’m fine,’ Derek says, grabbing the blanket from the back of the couch and drawing it over them. ‘I already did.’

Stiles stares at him in disbelief. 'Wait, really? Just from...' he gestures a hand down towards his lower half, 'to me?'

The corner of Derek's mouth ticks up, and he shrugs. 'Like I said... I want you.'

And that is... ridiculously hot. Stiles licks his lips. 'Kay. You next, though. Nap first. You napping?' He can’t hold back a yawn, then. He doesn’t think he’s ever felt as tired in his life as he does right now. He’s pretty sure his muscles are going to ache in the morning, in the best way.

Derek murmurs something into his jaw, but Stiles has no idea what it is because he’s already sinking into sleep.

*

Stiles wakes up, somehow in his bed rather than on the couch, with a head full of dreams. He sits up and grabs for his notebook to start scribbling down the details while the images are fresh. The dreams had been clear again, tonight; flashes of moonlight and jagged antlers, sweat steaming from overheated skin, and glowing eyes. And the symbols, always the symbols. Only this time they hadn’t been on walls or photographs… Stiles closes his eyes and gropes for the memory. They’d been in ink, not blood, and they’d been… stamped, on wood! He’s seen them before. His eyes fly open and he frantically writes in the notebook again.

*Symbols on wooden crate containing creepy jar for Native American exhibition

Plan: Break into Harris’s office for paperwork. Don’t get caught. Don’t die.

He fucking knew he’d seen them before. He doesn’t know why the memory has eluded him this long, only that he has trouble remembering anything about that day, the details shimmering and darting out of his reach like a shoal of silvery fish every time he grasps for them. He’d put it down to the after effects of his illness. But now he recalls the crate in perfect clarity, and the strange, squashed-frog symbol on the front of the jar and he knows it’s all connected. He lays back among the pillows, breathing heavily from his efforts, and clutches his notebook to his chest with shaking hands. It’s not until he’s calm enough to set the notebook down and roll onto his side that he notices that Derek isn’t there.
Derek runs with a sharp-edged focus he hasn’t felt in weeks, muscles straining, lungs burning. He’s been distracted by Stiles lately, he knows he has, but surely he can’t have been so distracted that he’s missed other signs?

He’s shifted into his full wolf form because his senses are most honed that way, and he needs his hearing at its best because he’s tracking a lone sound in a town of a few thousand people. It should be nearly impossible, but this sound… He’ll never forget this sound.

It’s a sound he never thought he’d hear again, least of all in the hallway outside his and Stiles’ apartments. It had been brief, but very definitely there.

By the time he’d pulled his shirt on and wrenched the door open, it was gone.

Derek had no choice but to follow.

The sound is moving, shifting, weaving in and out of wooded areas and residential areas. It doesn’t take long for Derek to realise he’s being led in a wild dance, that the sound doesn’t intend on being caught before it’s good and ready.

Derek doesn’t care. He re-doubles his efforts to find it, pulling in ragged breaths, straining to hear the wet thumps over the sound of light traffic and other night animals.

He’d know it anywhere. It’s a sound he used to hear every day, as familiar to him as the sound of his own name. It's a sound he snuffed out himself, a long time ago, that echoes through his dreams.

It’s a heartbeat.

It’s Peter.
You dream of baring your soul (Instead you bare more skin)

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all your kind words and support, it's genuinely awesome

The sun is up and over the horizon before Derek gives in and stops hunting. He’s been in the preserve for over an hour with no sound of the heartbeat, and his chest is sore, lungs burning, and he’s tired and dusty and absolutely furious.

He’d lost the sound on his run out from town, shrinking back into the shadows at the shrill ululation of police sirens, hiding from the smudgy illumination of the neon lights. He catches snippets of deputies on their radios: another wolf attack. Another missing person. His heart sinks sickly into his stomach. It’s too much to hope that Peter has nothing to do with this… He waits until he’s sure there’s no way he can help, no trace of another wolf for him to follow, and then lopes onwards to scour the preserve for any sign of the missing person, or of Peter.

There’s nothing.

Derek shifts back into beta form, tips his head back and lets out a howl of angry frustration, long and clear into the sky, before collapsing onto a thick, gnarled fallen tree trunk, sinking his head into his hands.

The morning air is cool and sweet against his skin, wisps of clouds clinging to the pale sky like dewy cobwebs. Somewhere nearby there’s rustling and a fluttering of wings, somewhere else a raw call from one creature to its mate. The preserve is waking up. He lets himself calm, digging his bare toes into the cold, wet earth to ground himself.

This isn’t going to be like last time. He’s an alpha now, with betas, with his own m- …with Stiles, with a pack to protect. He’s not alone.

He sends a pulse of energy through the bonds he has with his betas, urging them to come to him. They train in the preserve most mornings anyway, it’s just a little earlier than usual. Derek isn’t exactly verbose, so he prefers to build trust with them through physical training. When he races Isaac through the underbrush, or spars with Erica, or practices joint locks with Boyd, he feels close to them. He feels like he’s doing something right.

It’s a strange thing; the bond. It’s a conduit for communication within the pack, a connection through which to exchange energy or feelings, sometimes commands, all intangible but somehow more pure for not being distilled into words. There’s no confusion over inflection or semantics, or any of the uncertainty that ties Derek up in knots when he’s talking to humans, there’s just understanding on a basic, instinctual level.

As a child, he’d found it deeply comforting to have a constant connection to his mother. He remembers feeling her love flow through it, golden and warm, like sunlight. Laura had tried so hard to replace it. He had loved her for that. And Peter had taken it from him.

He remembers the day the bond shattered; how cold he’d felt, how terrifying it had been to be untethered and anchorless. He’d been forced to face the world alone, for the first time in his whole
life.

So he’d turned in on himself, had anchored himself in his pain and his rage and his fury, because they were all the truth he knew, and he had forced himself to be better, to be faster, to be stronger, to survive.

He’d sunk his teeth into Peter’s neck, and as he’d watched the light die in his eyes, something deep inside Derek had died too. Something soft and hopeful had crystallised and hardened, and he’d carried the jagged lump of ruthlessness and regret around his neck ever since, like armor. He’d known, watching the blood soak into the earth beneath him, that he’d never be the Derek of his childhood again.

He’d buried Peter. He’d dug his grave and returned him to the earth, which is more than Peter had graced Laura with. All alone, he’d planted wolfsbane until it covered the monster his uncle had become. He still remembers the susurration of the breeze through the stems, blowing the too-sweet, decay-like scent over him. Just the smell was enough to make his head spin and bright spots appear at the edges of his vision. He remembers how the plants had risen tall and proud, the flowers violently purple like bruised skin, marking the site as a tomb, a memorial, a warning. The flowers had flourished; of course they had. They are the flowers of death. It had seemed fitting for Peter’s grave to give life to more death. Cyclical, as everything is in nature.

Only this time nature has taken the concept far too literally, he thinks, bitterly. Peter is back, his heart beating again, blood pulsing through the veins in the throat that Derek tore out, and Derek has no idea how. But he’s going to find out. And he’s going to stop Peter before he hurts anyone else.

He registers the deep gashes he’s gouged into the wood under his fingers, and slowly retracts his claws. He presses his palms against the cool dampness of the moss to soothe the memory of the wolfsbane burning the skin from his hands.

He hears his betas approach from far away, crashing and crunching through the woods. Derek snorts and makes a mental note to cover moving silently over all sorts of terrain as part of their training. He forgets sometimes, how new his betas are. How impulsive.

He stares up into the sky for a minute, trying to decide when to tell them about Peter. They know the bones of what happened with Laura. They know enough to be freaked out. He decides to see Deaton and try and figure out how it’s happened, so at least he’ll have some answers for them.

He stands and rolls his shoulders, feeling the joints of his shoulder click satisfyingly, and then takes off into the preserve, running as quietly as he can. Erica will be pissed he made them hunt him so early in the morning, but it’ll be worth it for Isaac’s laughter. He’s worked so hard to earn Isaac’s laughter.

One of the things he likes so much about Stiles is how easily he laughs. His mouth is always curved up a little at the corners waiting for an opportunity to smile, like he lives in constant anticipation of delight. It doesn’t seem to matter whether the humor is slapstick or witty or ironic, Stiles laughs. He’s even quick to laugh at Derek, who has never been known as a funny guy. But still, Stiles presses his face into Derek’s throat and laughs at his little sarcastic comments, lets it bubble up out of his own chest and into Derek’s, and the warmth feels a lot like the love he felt when he was a kid.

The thought makes him settle into himself again. He can’t afford to let Peter get away from him. There’s too much at stake in this new life he’s scraping together for himself.

*
Stiles spends the better part of a week being frustrated on several different levels. The most distressing is the incredible helplessness he feels when he hears about the second missing person, a local college student named Charles. Two days later a young mother is taken in the night, and two days after that, a child - this time in broad daylight, from a playground full of kids and their parents. The eye-witness reports are consistent: an enormous wolf with glowing eyes appears out of nowhere, and the next thing anybody knows, the wolf is gone along with an innocent person, and no trace is left behind. Stiles can see the worry etched into the lines of his dad’s face, can hear it lacing his voice. Despite the increasingly brazen nature of the attacks and the expert trackers they’ve called in, the police have nothing. The town is on lock-down, the streets emptying quickly after dark. It’s eerily quiet everywhere, like the whole place is holding its breath. It’s miserable.

Stiles quickly figures out that he dreams of the antlered man and of the gimlet-eyed wolf every time someone goes missing. He’s more certain than ever it’s all linked somehow, and now to Harris, and he's filled with grim determination to get to the bottom of what’s going on. All he needs to do is get into Harris’s office and break into his filing cabinet.

Simple.

Except, to Stiles’ deep chagrin, it appears as if Harris has actually moved into his creepy basement office and never intends to come out again, save for brief trips to the bathroom and, Stiles assumes, for sustenance. Stiles doesn’t know how he’s surviving down there, really. Every time Stiles catches a brief glimpse of Harris’s chalky-skinned figure in the hallway leading to the bathroom he expects to see that he’s transformed into some sort of freaky mole creature, with webbed fingers and entirely healed-over eyes. But Harris seems to still be in roughly human form, even if he is fading like a wilting plant shut away from the sun.

Stiles tries to be in work as early and as late as he can, but no matter the obscurity of the hour Harris is there, ensconced in the basement like something out of a gothic horror novel. There’s never a window of time long enough for Stiles to make a move. It’s infuriating, and patience has never been his forte, so he fidgets and complains and generally makes a nuisance of himself until Lydia snaps that she’s trying to concentrate on writing a report for the upcoming annual board meeting, and sends him off to do some menial, time-consuming chore. She enjoys doing that way too much, Stiles thinks grumpily as he grabs a duster and a can of furniture polish and makes a start on polishing the front desk. He's rubbing the cloth over the wood in slow concentric circles when something in his brain clicks and he realises that Harris will be required to show up to the board meeting, and that will leave a perfect opportunity for Stiles Stilinski, PI, to break into his office. He's anxious about having to wait two days to do it, but it's the best shot he has.

At least it gives him time to hunker down with his phone and research all the different kinds of wolves found in the USA and their behavioural habits. It’s clear this isn’t any of the breeds documented so far, but Stiles isn’t ruling out the possibility of some psychopath genetically engineering a wolf-monster-hybrid thing and sic-ing it loose on the world. Stiles gets pretty far down the rabbit hole of what might make a GM wolf-monster’s eyes glow - jellyfish chromosomes, maybe? - before Lydia yells at him to go and help Finstock clean all the metal plaques in the museum. And man, there are hundreds. After a surreal afternoon spent listening to Finstock’s theories about the museum break-ins being down to the Illuminati (Finstock explains, with utmost sincerity, that he himself is a member of the Hallouminati, a local brotherhood devoted to cheese and whey products and Stiles just has to stare at him because what even), Stiles resolves to do the rest of his research on his own time.

The problem with that is he keeps getting distracted by the awesome but incredibly torturous frustration that comes with dating Derek Hale. Derek has been around a lot in the last week, sticking closer than ever. Stiles isn’t complaining one bit. He’s there when Stiles gets home, usually cooking
them dinner. He’s there to read to Ria, to watch her while Stiles runs to the laundry room, to do the dishes with. He’s there in Stiles’ bed every night. It's basically the best thing ever.

Stiles learns a lot of new things about Derek. He learns that Derek likes to get up before dawn to run, and somehow forces Isaac to go with him. They’re out for hours at a time, and Derek seems to push himself to the point of exhaustion before they come back each day, but it never depletes his appetite for spending time with Stiles and Ria. It turns out that Derek had a big family before the fire, but now has one younger sister still living, whom he adores and fears in equal measure. He learns that while Derek eschews most forms of technology, in quiet moments he almost always has his stupidly perfect, surprisingly delicate nose stuck in a book. Stiles’ mouth had literally watered the first night he’d wandered in from the bathroom to find Derek propped up against the pillows reading Joseph Conrad, all stubbly and intellectual (holy hell, is there anything hotter than a hot guy reading?) and dear god Stiles wants to touch him.

He can, to a certain degree. Derek is, happily, just as into making out with Stiles as Stiles is into making out with him, and he seems to welcome Stiles touching his face, his hair, his back. And all of that is stupendous, obviously, all of that is freaking fantastic. But.

Stiles wants to touch him everywhere. He wants to explore every single inch of his skin with his fingers and with his tongue, but somehow, despite Stiles’ best efforts, it always ends up the other way around. He doesn’t know how Derek does it, only that he’s a sneaky bastard because one minute Stiles is skating a hand up under Derek’s tank top, pressing kisses to his beautiful collarbones, and the next Stiles is floating on a post-orgasmic haze with Derek still depressingly clothed from the waist down beside him. He’s like a gruff, well-read sex ninja.

Sometimes Derek gets off, too, depending on what they’re doing - but never through Stiles actively touching him, and never naked - so while Stiles has a reasonable idea of the general landscape of Derek’s body, he never gets to touch or taste. Stiles does his best to subtly reassure Derek that he doesn’t care if he has a scar or if his junk’s a little lopsided or he’s missing a leg or anything. At this point he’s just pretty sure he’s going to die if he doesn’t get a hand down Derek’s pants soon. And it’s not just because he’s hot like burning, though Derek’s gorgeous, of course. It’s more that Stiles wants to make him feel as good as Derek makes him feel.

Stiles spends three nights in a row trying out all of his very seductive best moves because he’s Stiles, and his general approach is to throw himself at a problem and hope the sheer force of his kinetic energy will barge it out of the way, but this time nothing works. He wonders if he should be taking it personally that Derek, who has openly professed a love of sex, doesn’t seem to want to get down with him- at least not in a naked-wrestling sort of way.

Finally he resolves he’s going to have to actually talk to Derek about it, which, ugh, awkward, but he really ought to know if Derek has serious issues so that Stiles can make sure he doesn’t inadvertently cross any lines. Stiles isn’t actually a sex pest, despite his dad’s concerns during his teenage years (admittedly not entirely unwarranted, mainly stemming from a five page poem on the perfection of his long-term crush’s suprasternal notch that he’d submitted as an English assignment during his Sophomore year, and which Stiles still feels was undervalued because his use of enjambment was beautiful, okay). He's even triumphantly made it twenty-three years without a single person following through on their threat of a restraining order (although in fairness those were more down to accidental criminal damage due to clumsiness than to stalking or whatever). The point is, he wants to make Derek happy, however Derek wants to be made happy.

But when he turns to bring it up while they’re brushing their teeth that night, Derek stares at the toothbrush dangling from his mouth, and somehow Stiles ends up with his back against Derek’s bare chest, his head cradled in the hollow of Derek’s clavicle while searing, minty kisses are mouthed
over his throat and shoulders, leaving tingling skin in their wake. Stiles tangles his fingers in Derek’s hair while Derek pushes down his pajama pants and strokes him slowly to completion, watching Stiles in the mirror the whole time, intense and worshipful, pupils blown wide. Stiles watches too, even though his embarrassment shows in the flush spread over his throat and chest. But he likes the way their skin looks pressed together, likes the way Derek looks wrapped around him, likes Derek’s breath on his neck. He watches Derek and wonders if his dad will kill him for having fallen in love with this guy already.

‘Derek…’ Stiles watches Derek’s reflection carefully, trying to gauge his expression.

‘Mmm?’ Derek still has both arms wrapped tightly around Stiles’ waist from behind, his chin resting on Stiles’ shoulder. He seems content.

Stiles licks his dry lips. ‘I want to touch you.’

Derek looks up and meets his gaze in the mirror steadily.

‘It’s okay if you don’t want me to,’ Stiles says hastily, ‘but if for some reason you thought I didn’t want to I thought I’d make it clear that I do. Want to. So.’

Derek cocks an eyebrow and smirks. ‘Yeah, no, you’ve been clear…’

‘Sooo…’ Stiles waggles his eyebrows suggestively.

Derek tightens his arms, his brow creasing uncertainly. ‘It’s not that I don’t want you to, I just… Want to take it slow.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles tries hard to keep the disappointment from his voice, and mostly succeeds.

Stiles feels the movement of Derek’s throat as he swallows and says into Stiles’ shoulder, ‘Because you’re special.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles’ heart jumps into his throat. ‘That’s, um, that’s. Yeah. I’m down with that. I – you too. You know?’

Derek huffs a little laugh of warm air into Stiles’ neck, and something about the chemistry between them makes the oxygen in Stiles’ lungs turn to helium and he’s pretty sure his chest is going to explode if it keeps inflating with happiness. Or maybe he’ll just float away.

Derek kisses him and allows himself to be flirted into the shower (if Stiles actually trips and stumbles them both in there, well then no-one else needs to know, especially not Lydia who would never let him hear the end of it), and it’s Derek who strips off his own wet sleep pants, and Derek who hands Stiles the shower gel with a gentle nod.

Stiles manfully keeps his gaze on Derek’s face, which is actually not all that difficult when Derek’s pretty eyes are framed by dark, spiky lashes dusted with tiny water droplets that glitter like diamonds in the bathroom light. Stiles stares dizzily at the colors in his eyes. They remind him of lying on the grass, looking up at golden sunlight dappling through tree leaves, framed against a summer sky.

Stiles blinks back to himself, but holds the eye-contact between them even as he finally gets his hands on him and they’re skin on skin on skin, even as he warms the gel and smooths it down over Derek’s back and sides and hips. Derek holds himself completely still, barely even breathing, and for the first time it occurs to Stiles that Derek is actually nervous. Stiles has to bite at the inside of his own cheek to keep from being overwhelmed by what that says about how much Stiles might mean to him.
So he kisses Derek as he washes him, whispers sweetly teasing things to him as he holds him close and works bubbles over his body, enjoying the way it makes Derek’s ears turn pink, and he doesn’t push for more because this closeness, this skin-to-skin closeness in the humid, narrow space under the steady stream of warm water, is already the most intimate thing Stiles has ever experienced with another person. It’s enough. It’s more than enough, being allowed to care for him like this. Stiles wonders how long it’s been since Derek’s had this.

When he moves around to massage soap into Derek’s back he notices with surprise the tattoo that spirals out to span Derek’s shoulder blades. He traces the three whorls with reverential fingertips as he asks what it is.

Derek’s breath catches in his throat. ‘It’s a triskelion. It’s… to remember my family.’

‘What does it mean?’ Stiles watches, awed, as droplets of water bead on Derek’s shoulders and trickle down over the beautiful lines of them in shining rivulets.

Derek shrugs in an attempt to appear casual, but Stiles can feel the tension settle in across his neck. ‘It’s an ancient symbol. It can mean any number of triplicities.’

‘Well… what does it mean to you?’

Derek hesitates, and Stiles gets the feeling that now Derek is naked in front of him in just about every way a person can be. ‘Uh. Spirit, mind, body. To keep growing. To keep going.’

‘Oh…’ Stiles presses his fingertips more forcefully and smooths them up and out, massaging the broad span of Derek’s back. ‘Just keep swimming? Like a… like a propeller?’

Derek snorts, and Stiles can feel the tension draining from his shoulders. ‘I guess, yeah. Or running.’

Stiles kisses it. ‘It suits you. It’s like… perpetual motion. Forwards and outwards.’

Derek tips his head forwards with a low groan as Stiles presses the pads of his long fingers over Derek’s back, working out the residual strain he feels in them.

‘You know,’ Stiles says, to distract himself from Derek’s naked everything, ‘Speaking of running. I could give you a tip or two about working out if you wanted…’

Stiles sees the corner of Derek’s mouth twitch up. ‘You could?’

‘Oh yes. I have quite the extensive regimen. And let’s face it,’ Stiles runs his hands over Derek’s biceps, which could feed a family of four for a week, ‘you’re letting yourself go. I mean Jesus, Derek, look at these arms, they positively *spindly*…’

Stiles yelps as Derek turns and hoists him up against the wall of the shower, nuzzling briefly into his neck. ‘Spindly?’

‘I’m just saying,’ Stiles says breathlessly as he hooks his legs around Derek’s hips, ‘you need to keep up with all my hotness now, so you might need to start putting some effort into your workouts rather than half-assing it like you clearly have been…’ Stiles descends into helpless laughter as Derek’s fingers dance over his ribs and up under his arms in a tickle fight Stiles has exactly zero chance of winning. Eventually, with tears of mirth streaming down his cheeks, he shoves at Derek’s chest and begs for mercy. ‘Okay, okay, you win! Put me down you big lug…’

Derek complies and then turns to grab them towels, but mutters darkly the whole time. Stiles is pretty sure he hears the word ‘spindly’ more than once.
When they’re back out in the steamy bathroom, Derek gently lets his fingers trace a pattern of moles on Stiles’ collarbones. ‘Hey, Stiles…’

‘Mmm?’ Stiles rubs a towel over his hair absently.

Derek takes a breath. ‘I think we should probably have that talk soon. The one we didn’t have in the diner.’

Stiles drops the towel abruptly and it falls to the floor with a wet splat. ‘Um. Sure. Yeah, okay.’

He reaches out to smooth away the worry from Derek’s forehead. Whatever secrets Derek has to impart, they’d have to be pretty fucking bad to come between them at this point. Derek clearly doesn’t fully understand the depths to which Stiles’ blind love extends.

Suddenly Derek turns his head sharply and says, ‘What the fuck? Here?’, and there’s a loud knock on the door, and then Derek is frowning spectacularly as he races out into the bedroom. Stiles wobbles and ends up landing on the toilet seat with a bit of a thunk and a put-out ‘Hey!’, but Derek has already pulled on jeans and a t shirt at lightning speed. What the hell is going on?

Stiles reluctantly trails in to do the same, though with considerably less grace because his own sweatpants aren’t as cooperative over his still-damp skin. By the time he’s persuaded a t shirt to unroll down the length of his body, Derek has answered the door and Stiles can hear low, angry voices. Curiously he steps out into his apartment.

Derek is standing at the front door, staring at a man like he’s a ghost. The man – a tall, good looking guy with blondish hair – smiles a perfect, toothy smile that’s eerily reminiscent of Jackson in the way it doesn’t reach his eyes, and Derek honest-to-god growls in return.

Stiles gasps a little, partly in surprise and partly in arousal, because the sound sort of does something for him, but at the noise of his exhalation Derek stops, whipping his head around. Stiles has never seen him look so hard-edged, his lips pressed together grimly, eyes a brutal glitter in the shadows of the dimly lit room.

The stranger takes advantage of Derek’s momentary inattention to slip silently in through the door. ‘Hello,’ he says cheerily, crossing the room. Derek flinches as the word drops into the silence like a falling tombstone. The man moves gracefully, but never takes his eyes off Stiles. He’s so watchful that it feels predatory, and an unpleasant feeling of déjà vu pricks over the back of Stiles’ neck. Everything about him is making Stiles’ primal instincts scream to run.

The man stops just a little too close to Stiles and holds out his hand, but when Stiles reluctantly sticks out his own to shake it, the guy brings Stiles’ wrist up to his nose and inhales deeply, his breath hot over Stiles’ pulse point. Stiles can’t stop his nose from wrinkling in distaste, yanking his hand back as fast as he can.

Derek is between them in a split-second, shielding Stiles with his body, holding the guy at arm’s length.

‘You don’t touch him,’ Derek grits out. ‘Ever.’

The man tuts. ‘Where are your manners, dear nephew? I know you were taught better than that.’

Nephew? Stiles didn’t think Derek had any family other than Cora. There’s clearly no love lost between the two men, related or no; Stiles is pretty sure he can hear Derek grinding his teeth into powder next to him, his whole body trembling minutely with rage. Derek looks bigger, suddenly, and more imposing. He’s a totally different guy to the one that stood in the shower not twenty
minutes ago with constellations dusting his eyelashes, nervously baring himself to Stiles. Now he looks… dangerous.

The man cocks his head. ‘I’m Peter Hale,’ he says smoothly to Stiles, his eyes firmly on Derek. ‘Derek’s uncle. And you are… Derek’s.’ He curls his lips back into that cold smile.

‘I’m Stiles,’ Stiles says firmly. ‘And you’re creepy.’ He turns towards Derek and gestures at creepy Uncle Peter with his thumb. ‘He’s creepy.’

Derek’s lips twitch involuntarily. ‘I’m aware.’

Peter looks at Derek knowingly. ‘But he isn’t, I take it? Aware, I mean?’ He inclines his head enough that Stiles is in no doubt he’s being talked about.

Derek just glares at him stormily.

‘I’m not aware of why you’re in my apartment unannounced at after eleven at night, if that’s what you mean.’ Stiles does his best to sound affronted rather than freaked out.

‘Forgive my intrusion into your… personal time. No wonder my nephew’s annoyed,’ creepy Uncle Peter says, flicking his eyes up and down Stiles’ body appreciatively. Stiles feels his hands ball up into irritated fists, and a quick glance at Derek tells him that Derek’s had exactly the same reaction.

‘But I was in the neighbourhood.’

‘I’m surprised to see you looking so well,’ Derek grinds out through his tightly clenched jaw. ‘Last time I saw you, you were on your last legs. Particularly sore throat, if I remember rightly?’

A muscle in Peter’s jaw jumps, but he still smirks. ‘Yes,’ he says mildly. ‘Luckily I have a friend who specialises in those sorts of ailments. Now I feel like a new man.’

‘Why are you here?’ Derek’s face contorts for a half second with some unidentifiable renegade emotion before his mask of impassivity slips back into place, save for the homicidal eyebrows.

Peter’s laugh is like a whip cracking out. ‘The very question philosophers, scientists and playwrights have tried and failed to answer for centuries. What makes you think I’d have any luck?’

The two Hales stare at each other unblinkingly until the moment is broken by a muffled cough and a sad cry coming from Ria’s room. The air thickens tangibly and Derek shifts so he’s half in front of Stiles and half between Peter and the door to Ria’s room. Stiles feels, with a stony certainty, that Peter is a very bad dude, but god help him Derek’s protective streak is sexy as hell.

‘Don’t let us keep you, if you need to be with your daughter,’ Peter says, and wait, how does he know Stiles has a daughter? ‘Derek and I should talk. It’s been a long time.’

Derek nods stiffly. ‘Not here. You wait out there.’

Peter smirks. ‘I’m sure I’ll see you again very soon, Mieczyslaw.’ As he leaves through the front door, Stiles catches a glimpse of Erica and Boyd in the hallway waiting to escort him god-knows where.

Stiles turns to Derek, almost tripping over in his haste to get answers, hissing out, ‘What the fuck, Derek? Why do you have a secret uncle who sniffs people? How does he know I have a daughter? Why does he know my name? And how is his pronunciation of it better than mine?’

Derek looks pained as he grabs Stiles’ flailing wrists and draws them in to his own chest. ‘Try not to
get too worked up. I don’t know anything right now. I gotta go, but I’ll be back okay?’ He brushes a
distracted kiss onto Stiles’ temple and disappears after Peter, leaving Stiles to wallow in his confusion
and his worry for exactly five seconds before he takes a deep breath, pulls himself together, and goes
to his daughter.

It’s not until he slips between his sheets, alone for the first time in several nights, that it occurs to him
to wonder how Derek knew his uncle was at the door before he’d even knocked.
No-one speaks during the car ride to Derek’s cabin, but the silence hangs heavily enough to be deafening. Isaac drives so Derek can be next to Peter, who is flanked on the other side by Boyd. Derek is fairly confident that he could overpower Peter, especially now he is an alpha and Peter isn’t, but his instincts send distrust snaking through his veins so he doesn’t take his eyes off him. Peter sits passively between them, hands folded in his lap. He’s congenial enough, and makes no move to escape.

Out of the corner of his eye Derek can see Erica sending him furious glares. He can only ignore them for now, but he knows she’s right to be angry that Derek hadn’t told them of Peter’s apparent resurrection into their lives. He’d wanted to get answers for them first, but given how cryptic Deaton has always been, in retrospect it wasn’t the best plan. He should have prepped them for this as much he could, rather than letting them be blindsided like this.

He knows Peter will smell Erica’s anger. He always did have a talent for sniffing out the fault lines between people so he could put just enough pressure on them to watch the fissures appear. Breaking people up – breaking people – had always been his favorite hobby.

Derek had lost Paige because Peter had wanted to have his fun.

He thinks about the way Peter had looked at Stiles with hunger in his eyes, how he had touched him, pressed his nose to his wrist right where his skin is most fragile. Baring a wrist is an ancient show of supplication from one werewolf to another, like baring a throat. Peter knew exactly what he was doing when he drew Stiles into an unconscious show of submission to him, right in front of his face. Derek’s incisors lengthen, unbidden, in response. He had barely held back from tearing Peter’s head off there and then. He still hasn’t entirely tabled the idea.

Peter gazes steadily forwards, out into the night, his face relaxed and unworried. The headlights illuminate the passing trees as they whip past, stretching their long, gnarled fingers out towards each other from either side of the road, flickering past bleached then black, repeating, like the film of an old movie. It’s eerie, even to Derek’s eyes.

He turns his attention back to Peter, who has started to hum lightly under his breath, the smug bastard. Tearing Peter’s head off makes its way back up to the top of Derek’s agenda, right under ‘interrogate Peter’ and ‘cause Peter excruciating bodily pain’.

Eventually smooth tarmac turns to bumpy earth track beneath their tires, and Isaac draws the car to a stop. Derek wraps a hand around the nape of Peter’s neck, letting his claws barely slice through the skin, and hauls him out into the night.

The wind blows strongly, its cold edges stinging at Derek’s cheeks and ears as they surround Peter and frog-march him down the leafy path, each werewolf with a restraining hand on some part of Peter’s body. Derek doesn’t notice the cold. He barely notices anything except the heartbeat he’s been hunting all week, the heartbeat that hunts him through his dreams, that he never thought he’d
They burst through the cabin door and Boyd flings Peter down into one of the small folding chairs that has stayed set up near a rickety, pock-marked table. Derek takes the chair opposite him as Isaac hits the light switch and then melts back into the shadows that pool at the edges of the room. They never stay in the cabin itself, so it’s more storage space for the grill and oddments of furniture than a living space. It’s chilly and a little damp, but it smells reassuringly of forest and pack and home.

Derek lets the scent fill his lungs, calming his shredded nerves, and then sits back in his chair and raises an expectant eyebrow at Peter, who is fading in and out of the meagre pool of light the lone, bare bulb provides. His skin is chalky, his eyes black. He looks like a macabre charcoal sketch of himself.

Peter leans his elbows on the table and steeples his fingers, gazing impassively at Derek. ‘You’ve been hunting me.’ His tone is casually curious.

‘You’ve been hiding from me.’ Derek’s other eyebrow climbs up to join the first as irritation flashes through him.

‘Touche.’ Peter smirks. Derek wants to slap it off his arrogant face.

‘How long have you been back?’ He struggles to keep his tone in check.

Peter spreads his hands and examines his fingernails. ‘In town or in general?’

Derek shrugs stiffly, claws digging into the denim of his jeans. He’s not sure what he’s doing to give Peter the impression that this is some kind of cosy family catch-up, but he’s pretty sure that breaking every one of Peter’s fingers in several places would help remedy whatever it is.

‘I wasn’t gone long before my friend helped me out,’ Peter says mildly. ‘Not long enough for the rot to really set in. Afterwards I left town to… re-evaluate my priorities. I’ve been back a few weeks.’

Derek’s incisors slice through his lower lip, and he retracts them. The flesh is healed before he even licks the bead of blood away. He manages to keep his tone steady as he says, ‘You said you had a friend who helped you come back. Who is it?’

‘Forgive me if I don’t tell you.’ Peter’s eyes are deep and unreadable in the dim light. ‘I wouldn’t want them to catch that sore throat. It was rather nasty.’

‘Huh.’ Derek stands up and paces, flexing his hands. ‘Loyalty. Not an emotion I thought you were capable of. And,’ he leans in close and lets his eyes flash hellfire red, ‘I will never forgive you. For anything.’

Peter sits back and rubs his fingers along his jaw. ‘Then it seems I’ve wasted my time in coming here.’

Derek scoffs. ‘Because my forgiveness was clearly your end goal here.’

‘Is that so hard to believe? That after everything I might… change.’ Peter’s face is carefully artless in a way that makes Derek’s stomach twist in unpleasant nostalgia. It was the face Peter had always worn when he was leading people into trouble.

‘People don’t change.’ Derek is absolutely certain of that.

‘You haven’t,’ Peter says, amused. ‘Still falling in love with humans. Really, Derek, one would think
you’d have learned your lesson after Kate…’

Derek is on Peter before Boyd can move to stop him. He smashes Peter’s head down onto the table so hard that he hears the wood splinter, can smell the iron-sharp tang of blood in the air. He thinks, detachedly, that at least that means Peter isn’t a cyborg, and then mentally rolls his eyes at himself as he realises that thought was entirely Stiles’ influence. ‘It wasn’t a human who killed Laura,’ he hisses savagely in Peter’s ear, ‘was it?’

Peter cranes to turn his head so he can lay his cheek on the table, exposing the length of his neck to Derek in supplication. Derek bites back a noise of surprise. Peter had only ever submitted to Derek’s mother under extreme duress. It confuses Derek’s alpha instincts, which recoil at the idea of hurting someone in a position of submission, and Derek shoves himself away, angry with himself for succumbing to Peter’s manipulations.

‘I…’ Peter slurs through a mouth full of thick blood, ‘am sorry about Laura.’

‘Bullshit!’ One of the betas spits from the shadows of the room.

Peter squeezes his eyes shut, not moving to lift his head from the table. ‘After the fire… I woke up and I’d lost everything. I’d lost Talia, my childhood home, my pack. My mate. I lost my mind.’ He opens his eyes, glowing icy-blue, and looks straight at Derek. ‘I hope you never have to know what it feels like to lose your mate, Derek. He seems to be good for you.’

Derek growls, low and terrible, deep in his throat.

‘Don’t worry,’ Peter says, lifting back up to a seated position and examining his jaw to see which teeth are loose. ‘I don’t want to hurt him.’

‘You hate humans.’

‘I hate their fragility,’ Peter replies. ‘They’re always so close to death. Living with one… Loving one… It can drive you mad.’

Derek plants both hands on the table so he can lean in close enough that Peter can feel the heat from his skin, taste his certainty on his breath. ‘If I ever see you set foot anywhere near my apartment building… I will rip your throat out with my teeth. Again. And this time I’ll make sure there aren’t enough remains leftover to revive you.’

‘Are you going to let me live?’ Peter sounds curious rather than surprised.

Derek purses his lips. ‘Haven’t decided. Are you going to tell me why you’re really here?’

Peter smiles, small but shark-sharp. ‘I’m here to help. Something’s here, in the town. Something bad.’

Derek smirks bitterly. ‘We’d figured that much out ourselves. We just weren’t sure it wasn’t you.’

Peter shakes his head. ‘It took a child. I’m not interested in hurting children.’

‘I was a child when you took Paige.’ Derek crosses his arms over his chest.

There’s a silence, a breath, a heartbeat. ‘I’m not that man anymore.’

Derek’s jaw tightens. ‘You’re not any man, anymore. You’re Frankenstein’s monster.’

Peter flinches, just a tiny, aborted movement, but Derek doesn’t miss it. Then the wolfish smile is
back. ‘Now, now. That’s no way to talk to blood, Derek. Not if you want to know what I know.’

‘What do you know, Peter?’

Peter hums and leans back in his chair, tilting it so it balances on the two back legs. ‘I know I could murder a cup of tea.’

Derek entertains a brief, vicious fantasy where he kicks the chair out from under him and then hits him with it. It’s childish but immensely satisfying.

‘Do you have Darjeeling?’ Peter’s voice floats through, interrupting Derek’s violent thoughts.

‘Is he for fucking real?’ Comes another, outraged voice. Isaac, Derek registers vaguely.

He squeezes his eyes shut and thinks of Stiles curled up warm and sleep-sweet in his bed, where Derek should also be if there were any justice whatsoever for him in the universe.

He stalks to the tiny cabin kitchen and scrabbles for the kettle. It’s going to be a long night.

*

Derek doesn’t come back that night.

Stiles misses him more than he really should, given they haven’t actually been together all that long, but when he wakes up it feels wrong that Derek isn’t there, curled into the space Stiles has started to naturally leave for him on the other side of the bed.

It sucks.

Instead, he goes to retrieve Ria, who is sleepily stirring in her crib, and brings her in with him instead. They spend about an hour watching cartoons until Stiles’ brain starts to dribble out of his ears (because cartoons are abso-fucking-lutely not what they used to be okay, Bubble Guppies – what the fuck?) and as Stiles presses his nose into Ria’s curls, breathing in the lavender fragrance of her baby shampoo, he can’t help but let his mind drift to how nice it would be to have his head pillowed on Derek’s arm while Derek pretended to read but actually watched Peppa Pig, just as avidly as Ria. He sighs wistfully, and hugs a squirming Ria just a little tighter.

He’s dozing lazily when his phone buzzes on the bedside table, startling him into banging his shoulder on the headboard which in turn bumps his water glass off the table onto the floor.

‘Lo?’ He says, sitting up and stretching out his shoulder, surveying the water spillage sadly.

‘Hey,’ Derek’s voice is no less sexy for being funnelled down a phone line.

‘Morning gorgeous,’ Stiles says, instantly cheered. ‘How’d it go with Peter?’

The line is silent except for a static crackling that makes Stiles think Derek must be outside somewhere, on his cell.

‘That good, huh?’ Stiles ventures into the silence. He slips out of bed, leaving Ria cuddled in with the tablet, and heads for the coffee maker.

‘That good, huh?’ Stiles ventures into the silence. He slips out of bed, leaving Ria cuddled in with the tablet, and heads for the coffee maker.

Derek sighs. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just a shitty situation. I’m sorry you were involved.’

‘Hey, it’s not your fault. And I can totally handle myself. I threw down my best bitch-glare and he was putty, dude, he was *quaking.*’ Stiles flicks the coffee maker on and rummages for a cup for Ria’s
Derek chuckles, just a little, soft sound down the phone, but it makes something warm and fluttery come to life in Stiles’ chest.

‘Look, I’m not exactly impressed with your creepy uncle, but I’m not worried about him either, okay? I could give the Stilinski stink-eye to, like, eleven shitty uncles simultaneously if need be.’ Stiles grabs a teaspoon from the drawer and pops it into his mouth, just for something to do.

‘Eleven?’ Some of the strain has lessened from Derek’s voice and he sounds warmer, amused. ‘Pretty specific.’

Stiles hums. ‘Well I’ve done the math. Literally, like with protractors and stuff. It was for a maths project back in high school. Of course, I did it using the width of an average man, not your uncle specifically, and I’m about five inches taller now, so that changes up the variables a little but I’d say it’s still pretty accurate.’

Derek laughs for real, then. ‘Stiles, I-‘ he’s cut off by a noise somewhere just out of Stiles’ earshot, a voice maybe, and he doesn’t sound happy about what it’s saying if the frustrated noise Derek makes is anything to go by. ‘I have to go.’ He sounds like he’s pouting, which is too fucking cute. Stiles pops the teaspoon back in his mouth to hold back the hysterical giggle that threatens to come bubbling up from his chest.

‘Come over later? I’m home with Ria today so she’ll probably papier mache me to an armchair and force me to watch Curious George all day.’

‘Not a fan?’

‘Well I mean, if the guy in the snappy suit doesn’t know it’s a chimp not a monkey then he shouldn’t be allowed to have it, in my opinion. And he just lets him roam around the city, just like, fucking shit up and pooping everywhere. That is an irresponsible lesson to teach children, my friend. Pick up after your pets, you know?’

Derek laughs again, and Stiles sort of wants to take the moment and frame it, or maybe pin it to a corkboard along with every other golden laugh he teases out of Derek so he can stand back and bask in their glow on his insecure days.

‘I miss you.’ The way Derek says it, so simple but so intense, knocks the breath right out of Stiles’ chest and the teaspoon clatters to the surface.

Stiles strokes one finger down the back of his phone like he's stroking Derek's cheek, like maybe he can will the tenderness to somehow transmit through to Derek. ‘Miss you too, big guy. Hurry back, alright?’

‘Alright.’

He allows himself a single, triumphant fist pump, because he’s a rock star with a smoking hot boyfriend, and if a man can’t fist pump Jersey Shore-style in his own kitchen well then where can he fist pump, right? He pours coffee into a cup, grinning goofily, and grabs the lid for Ria’s milk.

A few months ago he was pathetically single and now… this.

This could really be something.

He wishes all the idiots he went to high school with could see him now, bringing a smile to the face
of a guy who’s as sweet as he is sexy. Maybe the string of disappointing liaisons that make up his past were all leading up to this one, great guy. Maybe he had to take a few hits before karma could intervene and make everything come up Stiles. He snorts a little at his own innuendo and then spends a productive ten minutes teaching Ria how to Z snap. He figures that once she’s mastered that, high fives, and how to peel an orange by herself, he’ll have covered all the major parenting bases.

His phone buzzes again and he thumbs over the screen, his heart doing that familiar, delicious little jump at the prospect that it might be something from Derek, but instead it’s a message from Lydia that reads ‘Let me know when the bachelor party is so I can leave the country’.

He squints at the embedded image but can’t quite make it out, so he opens it up wider on his screen.

It’s a photo of Scott, taken from a bit of a distance, bent intently over a display of engagement rings in the window of a Jewelers at the mall.

Stiles lets out an undignified squawk. What the fuck? He had just spoken to Scott on Friday and he hadn’t mentioned anything about engagement ring shopping or impending proposals, the sneaky bastard.

He’s not surprised Scott’s thinking about wife-ing up – he’s actually sort of surprised Scott and Allison haven’t tied the knot already and had babies made of rainbows and sunshine – but Scott not keeping him in the loop about it is a deep betrayal of their bromance, which is based on a solid foundation of trust and tacos. Scott is going to owe Stiles so much guac to make up for this – the really good kind, made with fresh avocados and love, not the stuff out of a tub. The complexities of avocado stone removal, usually a solid no-go area for Stiles and his many limbs, would make a worthy penance, along with a great deal of grovelling, and best-man duty, obviously.

He sets Ria up in her highchair with milk and strips of toast that she gleefully starts mashing into a paste, and then he calls Scott.

Scott has the audacity to answer with a casual ‘hey, man,’ like he hasn’t just taken their bond of brotherhood and torn it asunder.

‘Don’t you ‘hey man’ me!’ Stiles replies, sounding, he hopes, more convincing than he feels, because actually he wants to jump up and down and squeal about how happy he is for them both but he doesn’t want Scott to get out of it that easy, so he says sniffily, ‘You are a lying liar that lies, and I am mad at you!’

There’s an oddly leaden pause and then Scott says in a very small voice, ‘What?’

‘You, is what! You and your life made of secrecy and lies. I thought we were friends, man, full disclosure, the whole shebang. We’ve shared things, dude! Like, feelings type things. I thought we were brothers!’ Stiles waves his free hand around to emphasise his ire, even though Scott can’t see it.

‘Uh…’ Scott wavers, ‘Of course we are?’

‘Oh hell no, dude. Brothers don’t keep their other brothers in the dark about major life events and let them hear it from third parties, brothers tell their other brothers over beers…’ Stiles pauses for dramatic effect, ‘…and home-made guacamole.’ Seed planted, he sits back to see if it will take. Scott is the sweetest guy in all the world, but he usually needs his hints to be about as subtle as a wrecking ball with the word ‘HINT’ painted on it in six-foot neon letters.

There’s a frantic scrabbling sound from Scott’s end, and what sounds like urgent whispering. Stiles frowns and waits it out.
‘Dude,’ Scott says, sounding breathless and wracked with contrition, which okay, does make Stiles feel a little bad for reaming his ass like that, ‘I am so sorry. I am… I swear to god, I’ve wanted to tell you since the day we met, I just… Can’t believe you’re even still talking to me right now, honestly…’

Stiles shifts guiltily. ‘Well I mean, it’s not all that bad. Nothing’s going to change or anything, right? We’re still best buds.’

‘Of course we are.’ Scott sounds oddly fierce, which makes a cold, unsettled feeling start to trickle down Stiles’ spine. ‘You know I’d never hurt you, right? Or Ria.’

‘Yeah. I know,’ Stiles says hoarsely. What? Does Scott think Stiles is in love with him or something? He knows he’s overreacted to this whole engagement thing for dramatic effect, but really, he doesn’t think he’s given off that sort of vibe to Scott.

‘It’s under control,’ Scott says. ‘I’ve never hurt anyone, not even on a full moon. Allison helps me, and Derek says he will, too.’

Stiles’ heart picks up, beating an anxious tattoo against his ribs. ‘Derek?’

‘I’m glad he told you. I knew if anyone would understand it would be you, man. Hey, Allison says she’s here for you if you have any questions for her.’

‘Questions?’ Stiles grips at his coffee cup like a lifeline, because he’s pretty sure he isn’t in Kansas anymore, Toto.

‘Yeah, about being, like, a human mate. Although Derek’s an alpha so I guess it might be different.’

Stiles carefully sets the coffee cup in the sink. He takes a breath, and then another, weighing his words in his mouth to make sure he sounds relatively normal before he says, ‘Whatcha talkin’ ‘bout there, Scotty?’

Scott sucks in a breath. ‘Damn. Derek didn’t tell you he’s an alpha?’

The cold feeling spreads down Stiles’ arms, making his hands feel oddly numb. He holds his free hand out in front of his face, examining it with interest, and then says, ‘Derek didn’t tell me anything, Scott. Lydia texted me a picture of you getting an engagement ring.’

Stiles feels the silence as it descends, plunging icily through his skeleton and out into the floor. He feels dizzily like maybe he’s still asleep, maybe this is just another crazy dream. He can’t quite understand what it is that Scott’s saying, but it seems like at the very least Scott might have some mental health issues that Stiles isn’t aware of.

Scott says, ‘Oh.’ It plunges into the silence like a stone, sending ripples out to the corners of Stiles’ apartment.

‘Yeah. Oh.’ Stiles cradles the phone between his chin and shoulder so he can hold up his other hand for examination. ‘What are you talking about, Scott?’

There’s another pause, and then, ‘Can I come over? I… think that might be best. I’ll bring Allison.’

‘You do that, Scotty,’ Stiles says, massaging his temples. ‘You do that. Be here in an hour when Ria is down for her nap.’

‘I… Shit. Yeah. See you.’
The phone clicks, and then there’s silence except for Ria joyfully splattering spoonfuls of her milky toast-paste all over the kitchen. Stiles doesn’t even notice. He's tired. He's so, so tired. It's been a crazy, intensely stressful month, with way more questions than answers, and now the creeping insanity is permeating into even the safest and most familiar corners of his life; into his friendships, his relationship, his apartment.

He wipes up Ria and the mess robotically, and then goes to put on his baggiest jeans and a thick sweater. It’s not that cold in the apartment, but he feels like he needs the armor. He seats himself in an armchair and waits, grimly.

He has no idea what the fuck just happened with Scott, and he has no idea what it has to do with Derek, but he’s done with being the last one to know about everything. He wants answers, and today is the day he starts getting them.
The nature of reality (Is pure subjective fantasy)

Chapter Notes

Warnings for, like, all the angst.

Thank you so much for reading, and all the amazing support!

After about forty-five minutes Stiles tries to get Oriana down for her nap, texting Scott to use the spare key he’d entrusted him with when he’d first moved into the apartment.

Ria, of course, does not go to sleep as easily as Stiles had hoped. He winds up spending the better part of an hour reading and singing with her before she relents. He hopes the steady smile he’s plastered on is masking the way his heartbeat thrums anxiously in the back of his throat.

By the time he goes back out to the living room, Scott and Allison are sitting rigidly on the tatty sofa, shoulder-to-shoulder like they’re facing an execution squad. Stiles nods uncertainly at them both, and Allison responds with a weird little half wave. The atmosphere is more tense and awkward than it’s ever been between the three of them, including that time Stiles accidentally high-fived Allison’s boob – and that had been pretty fucking awkward.

‘Did you guys want a drink or something?’ Stiles tries to ignore how thready his own voice is as he perches on the arm of a chair. Something about being on slightly higher ground is reassuring.

Scott’s eyes slide nervously over to the mugs in the kitchen sink, like maybe Stiles will use them as ammunition, and shakes his head no, then he exhales loudly through his nose, fiddles with a loose thread on his jeans, and says, ‘About two years ago, out in the preserve, I got bitten…’

Stiles frowns a little, nonplussed. This is not what he was expecting. He doesn’t really see how this ties into Scott having some sort of mental health issue – but maybe Scott’s secretly on drugs, he thinks, and this is how it all started? ‘Okay…?’

And then Scott blurts out, ‘And now I’m a werewolf.’

Silence settles solidly between them, a wall that no-one’s quite sure how to breach. Scott’s staring at him wide-eyed, waiting for something, and Stiles doesn’t know what because he’s not exactly au fait with the proper social etiquette for asking your best friend if he’s lost his mind. Then it occurs to him that he’s never cared about proper social etiquette before in his life, and now would be a shitty time to start, so he says, ‘Dude, what the fuck?’

Scott looks pained. ‘Look, I want you to know that I wanted to tell you this before, it just hasn’t been the right moment or whatever. You had Ria to deal with and then your job and the move, and it was all so new for me, too…’

‘Scott,’ Stiles interrupts, spreading his hands in frustration, ‘what the fuck?’

Scott grabs at the back of his own neck. ‘Just hear me out?’

Stiles nods helplessly, mind whirling. He’d gathered from the phone call that Scott was having some issues, but he hadn’t expected a total psychotic break, or whatever this is. How could he not have
noticed? Why isn’t Allison helping him? Maybe delusions are like sleep walking and you’re not supposed to try to bring the afflicted person back to reality in case it makes it worse? He swallows hard and tries to concentrate on what Scott’s saying and not appear outwardly like he’s freaking out over his best friend hallucinating lycanthropy into existence.

‘I’d been out in the preserve,’ Scott’s saying earnestly. ‘Someone was riding a horse down a trail there and it got injured, went down. It was beyond help. I had to put it down. While I was out there I guess I lost my asthma inhaler.’

Stiles rocks back a little. ‘You have asthma?’

It’s this, as much as anything, that worries Stiles, because he’s never seen any evidence of Scott having asthma, and wow this must be something heavy if Scott’s delusions include this level of detail. Melissa hasn’t ever mentioned Scott suffering from anything medical, so it seems likelier it’s drugs…

Scott shakes his head. ‘Not anymore. Back then it was bad. Like, really bad. So, uh, on my way home I realised I didn’t have my inhaler, and those things are like, seventy-five bucks, so I turned back to see if I could find it. It was getting dark, I couldn’t see much. There was noise, I remember, and all these deer ran by me in this, like, panic. I tried to get back to my car but I guess I tripped and fell, and then there was this wolf, this massive wolf just growling at me with glowing eyes… It bit me.’ Scott presses a hand to his stomach, below his ribs and above his waist, eyes narrowing in phantom pain at the memory.

A wolf… Glowing eyes… Stiles feels nausea clawing its way up his throat, because this is sounding far too familiar for comfort. Scott must be weaving details from recent local news reports into his hallucinations.

‘I just fucking ran, man. I wasn’t gonna die out there.’ Scott’s voice is thick and charged, like he’s genuinely affected by the memory. ‘I made it home, but I… started to change, uh. It was crazy. I thought I’d gotten some sort of infection from the bite and I was having an insane surge in adrenaline before I had a heart attack or something. I didn’t understand what was happening to me. But then I met Allison, and she, um, she did. She had actually followed me back from the preserve because she knew I’d need help.’

Stiles eyes Allison suspiciously. She doesn’t look like a drug dealer – or so Stiles thinks, from his reasonably limited experience – but then, the whole sweet and innocent thing might be an act. Maybe she could actually kill him with her little finger.

‘Stiles…’ Scott interrupts his train of thought. ‘When I got bitten I was infected with something. Allison’s… sort of an expert in the virus. I was bitten by a werewolf Stiles, and now I’m one, too.’

Stiles blinks at him for a long moment and then bursts out laughing, because Jesus, Scott must be on some seriously good shit.

‘Stiles?’ Scott’s looking at him, all adorably confused and a little bit hurt and then Stiles realises he’s being kind of an asshole.

‘Oh shit, sorry man. Look, I… I’m here for you, you know that, right? There are places that can help you. Both of you. We should get you both checked out medically and there are some great rehab centres, we’ll get you clean, get you better…’

Scott furrows his brows and stares at him blankly until Allison murmurs, ‘He thinks you’re on drugs’ into his ear.
'I’m not on drugs!' Scott keeps his voice below a yell, with a glance in the direction of Ria’s room, but his eyes are glittering in consternation. ‘I swear to god I’m not on drugs!’

Stiles sobers up and looks at Allison. It’s hard not to believe him when he’s so serious. Stiles’ heart breaks for him. ‘Hallucinations, then?’

Scott stands, hands spread pleadingly. ‘No, man. I’m not crazy. It’s a thing.’

‘Are you guys dicking with me?’ Stiles looks at Allison, whose face is gravely serious, like she actually believes this insanity. ‘Why would you do that?’

‘It’s the truth, Stiles. I’m a hunter,’ Allison says, in her usual sweet, level voice. ‘A werewolf hunter.’

‘Of course you are,’ Stiles says weakly, because it looks like Allison’s fully bought into this, too. He glances around his apartment, wondering if he should have thought out possible escape routes more thoroughly.

‘Or, well, I was one. Before Scott.’ Allison continues. ‘I was in the preserve the night he was bitten. I was supposed to watch him, and if he hurt anyone during his first full moon… I was supposed to kill him. But I saw him confused and alone, and I just had to help him, and then we fell for each other.’

‘Oh,’ Stiles murmurs. ‘Romeo and Juliet, werewolf-style. Obviously. Look, Scotty,’ Stiles holds his hands up slowly, like he’s dealing with a wild animal, ‘I think we should go talk to your mom, okay? She’ll know how to help you.’

Scott stands and walks around the coffee table, dropping down to crouch near Stiles. ‘I can prove it to you, but you need to remember I won’t hurt you, okay?’

Stiles shifts backwards in alarm. ‘Um… what?’

‘I’m strong, Stiles. Really strong. And fast. I have enhanced senses. Like I know Ria had toast and milk for breakfast.’ Scott’s eyes are big and dark, and utterly sincere.

Stiles scoffs, nodding towards the remains of the breakfast which have solidified into concrete-like streaks on her high-chair. ‘Not exactly proof-positive. Gonna have to do better than that, buddy.’

Scott leans in a little closer. ‘I know you had a visitor last night. Someone who’s never been here before. I know you read The Velveteen Rabbit to Ria and then sang the song about the butterflies, because I could hear you, even from down the stairs. I know you had hazelnut coffee before we arrived because I can smell it. Like I know you have a packet of mint mojito gum in your pocket.’

Stiles’ breath catches then, and he fumbles in his pocket before shakily drawing out the packet of gum. He jumps to his feet and takes a few steps away from Scott. ‘How did you…?’

‘Stiles,’ Scott says from his crouched position, voice low, ‘about Derek…’

Stiles smirks bitterly, trying to keep himself from panicking by flipping rapidly through the rolladex of his mind to try to come up with another explanation for this craziness. ‘What you wanna sniff his butt or something, get to know him better?’

‘No, Stiles, it’s…’ Scott’s head turns towards the door, ‘he’s here…’

Stiles suddenly realises that the pounding in his chest is actually a pounding at the door, and there’s a voice calling his name and it’s Derek.
He whirls around and strides to the door, yanking it open. ‘Will you knock it off?’ He hisses, through clenched teeth at Derek who looks flushed and wrecked and perfect. ‘Ria is sleeping.’

‘Stiles,’ Derek says, just one urgent syllable like it’s been wrenched out of his chest, following Stiles into the living room, lunging an arm out to grab for Stiles’ arm or shoulder. Stiles doesn’t want to be touched right now, so he yanks his arm away with a ‘Hey!’; but before it’s even left his mouth Scott is there, a barrier between him and Derek, one arm out to keep Stiles back and the other raised to strike.

He holds himself like a fighter, every limb bunched up with power, and his fingers are curled and tipped with lethal looking claws. Stiles ducks back, afraid, and then he sees how Scott’s lips are curled back to reveal long, gleaming incisors – fangs, Stiles’ logical mind helpfully supplies through the thundering sound of his own heartbeat – and his eyes, oh god, Scott’s eyes are glowing golden.

A low, threatening growl reverberates through the room, and it takes Stiles a second to realise it’s coming from Derek. Derek who suddenly seems to be even taller, even wider, more solid. Derek who has long, pointed teeth of his own, whose eyes are glowing red like embers in a fire. Like the eyes in Stiles’ nightmares.

Shock hits Stiles square in the solar plexus, punching another startled, hysterical laugh right out of him. ‘Holy shit,’ he whispers breathlessly. ‘Holy fucking shit, this is real, this is real…’

Stiles watches in grim disbelief as the two men stare each other down in the middle of his apartment, apparently fighting over him. He grabs at the back of an armchair, gripping it hard enough that his knuckles turn white so he doesn’t fall down. He doesn’t know what to think or how to feel, this is crazy, this is lunacy, this is… real. Werewolves are real and god knows what else and fucking hell, Stiles has had dinner with them and played video games with them and…

Derek is a werewolf. Derek who has been intimate with him, who’s been alone with his daughter, who he’s trusted, like an idiot…

Fucking Derek, his stupid fucking muscles and his stupid fucking face that Stiles loves, and woah… Hold the phone. Pull the emergency stop cord on the love train. No more of those thoughts, thanks, brain. Like, at all. Stiles does not love Derek. How could he possibly? He doesn’t even know Derek. Clearly.

And then, with blinding clarity, Stiles knows exactly how to feel. He’s fucking furious.

He whips back around to step between the two morons in his living room, extending an arm out to shove a hand against each of their solid chests.

‘I don’t know what the fuck you two think you’re playing at,’ he grinds out, anger pulsing through him with every heartbeat, ‘but can I remind you that my daughter is sleeping right through there and if you scare her so help me I will disembowel both of you!’

The reminder of Ria has everyone backing down in an instant, Scott and Derek both hanging their heads in embarrassment.

Stiles looks helplessly between them, the old familiar pain flaring up around his ribs, constricting his lungs. He can’t believe he’d trusted so easily, can’t believe he’s been so blind. ‘I don’t know what the hell that was, but you will not do it in my apartment ever again, got it?’

Scott nods sheepishly, toeing at the floor, and Derek grunts gently and looks away.

‘Good,’ Stiles shoves at their chests again. ‘Now both of you are gonna get your shit together and sit
your asses down on the sofa of shame so you can give me some answers!’

Scott shuffles back over to sit next to Allison, but Derek stays standing.

‘Stiles,’ Derek says, his voice rough around the edges – probably from all the growling, Stiles thinks bitterly – ‘Stiles, I know Scott told you.’

‘How do you know?’ Stiles furrows his eyebrows. God, his head hurts. ‘How did you know to even be here right now?’

‘Sorry. I’m sorry. I just, I…’ Derek gestures self-consciously towards his own apartment.

‘Oh my god,’ Stiles stares at him. ‘You heard, didn’t you? You can hear through my fucking walls, oh my god…’ He runs his hands through his hair in horror because Derek has been able to hear every nuance, every tiny detail of his life for months. All this time he’d thought he and Derek had this amazing connection, that Derek had intuitively known when he was ill or hungry or lonely because they were so compatible, and it turns out that Derek’s had this unfair fucking advantage all along. Every time Stiles made a cup of tea, Derek knew. Every time Ria coughed. Every time Stiles had whispered Derek’s name in the shower like a prayer - a prayer that eventually Derek had answered… Stiles’ cheeks flame with mortification and betrayal.

‘I tried not to,’ Derek says softly. ‘I didn’t want to invade your privacy…’

‘Oh, good.’ Stiles spits out, ignoring the way Derek flinches back from the burn of his caustic voice, ‘Well as long you’re an ethical werewolf I guess that’s fine, then. Apart from, you know, not mentioning the fangs when you had my dick in your mouth…’

Derek closes his eyes, fists clenched at his sides, only moving to slightly turn his head towards the surprised noise Allison makes as Stiles’ crassness. ‘You…’ He abruptly lifts his chin to scrutinise Allison. ‘You smell like Kate. Like she used to smell, before.’

Allison regards him steadily but doesn’t say anything.

‘Oh right. Derek, this is Allison Argent, Scott’s girlfriend,’ Stiles says with a sarcastic bow in Allison’s direction. ‘Sorry for forgetting to make the introductions ‘til now, I’ve been slightly preoccupied with finding out there’s a whole supernatural underworld that is not only real but has had its hands down my pants, so. Busy day. Also, who the fuck is Kate?’

‘Kate was my aunt,’ Allison says, round-eyed. ‘She used to live with us when I was a kid, but. She had a disagreement with my dad and left, and then she died a few years ago.’

‘She was my ex,’ Derek says tonelessly. ‘She set the fire that killed my family, she… She was a hunter. She hated werewolves. I didn’t know.’

Stiles’ eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. ‘Wait… your family were killed because they were werewolves?’

Derek swallows hard. ‘Yes.’

‘Fuck.’ Stiles stumbles backwards until he finds the kitchen counter to rest against for support. ‘Your family were murdered because of this and you didn’t think that would be at all relevant when you got involved with me and my daughter?’

Derek scrubs a hand through his hair helplessly. ‘Why do you think I fought how I felt about you all that time? And I tried to tell you, that first night at the diner, but you thought we should get to know
each other first—'

‘Oh my god, Derek, because I thought your big secret was that you were in, like, witness protection or that you’re secretly super into adult colouring books or something, not that you’re not human!’

Derek hunches in on himself, making himself a wall. ‘I was going to tell you, but I had to be sure. I have to protect the others.’

‘Wait, there are oth… Oh my god. Erica? Boyd? Isaac?’

Derek nods miserably. ‘Scott… didn’t tell you that?’

‘No. He did not.’ Stiles shoots Scott a death glare. Scott looks like he wouldn’t mind if the ground opened up and swallowed him. ‘I just can’t even believe this… Erica babysits Ria. Holy fuck I need… Show me.’

‘What?’ Derek eyes him nervously.

‘I wanna see.’ Stiles can feel himself getting a little shrill, but really, who could blame him. ‘I wanna see who I’ve really been in bed with all this time.’

Derek blanches visibly. ‘Stiles…’

Stiles balls his hands into fists and grits out, ‘Show. Me.’

‘I…’ Derek nods his head slowly. ‘If that’s what you really want. I’ll do, uh, a beta shift. A half shift. There’s not enough room in here for a full shift.’

‘Dude, you can fully shift?’ Scott interjects, half rising from where he’s been sitting on the couch but wilting back under the force of Stiles’ glare.

Derek stands a little straighter and closes his eyes, breathing deeply, and then his face just changes, the muscles shift and the planes move and hejust changes…

Stiles steps closer, eyes roving over the teeth, the claws, the altered planes of Derek’s face, the changes in his facial hair. The monster that’s been lurking just under the surface all along.

‘Holy shit… And you…’ Stiles points at Scott. ‘You do this too?’

‘Yeah,’ Scott’s voice is small. ‘I can’t fully shift, though.’

‘Fully shift… What does that mean?’ The room feels too hot, Stiles’ skin too tight, and he thinks vaguely that he might pass out. Maybe unconsciousness would be better than this.

‘I can turn into a wolf,’ Derek says through his elongated fangs, and then he opens his eyes and Stiles gasps because they’re glowing bright, blood red.

‘And you,’ Stiles forces out, ‘can do this any time? I was under the impression the whole werewolf thing was sort of a once-a-month kind of problem.’

Derek’s eyes flicker, maybe at the use of the word ‘problem’, Stiles thinks, but all he says is, ‘Any time.’

‘Right.’ Stiles crosses his arms in front of his chest. ‘And you let me leave my baby with you, even though you’re… this?’
Derek’s features smooth out until they appear human again. ‘I’m sorry. I have complete control, I’d never scare her or hurt her. But, like I said, this… is why I fought everything I felt for you.’

Images flood through Stiles’ over-wrought mind, some remembered, some imagined. Images of Derek listening in from the periphery of their lives, of Erica’s fingers smoothing through Ria’s hair, of Ria confused, scared, hurt. His tongue exploring Derek’s mouth and never discovering its many secrets. Jackson’s face, alight with triumph, because he’d goddamn known, Stiles realises. And Stiles, for all his self-proclaimed smarts and killer instincts, had never suspected a thing. It’s the sting of this humiliation that makes him hit back with, ‘Maybe you should have kept on fighting it.’

There’s a long, terrible moment of silence. Derek is stricken, his beautiful eyes fixed on Stiles’ face, and Stiles starts to feel guilt soften the sharp edges of his anger. He sort of wants to reach for Derek, wants to take his pain away, because even though Stiles is hurting too, he cares about Derek so much, but he can’t shake the memory of those teeth, those claws, those eyes…

‘Oh god,’ Stiles is across the room in an instant, grabbing for his notepad. ‘Oh god, oh my god…’

‘Stiles, what?’ Scott chews on his bottom lip, agitated.

‘The people, the missing people…’ Stiles rifles through the papers urgently until his trembling fingers find what he’s been looking for. ‘The creature that’s been seen taking them… It’s a wolf. With red eyes.’ He unconsciously moves backwards towards Ria’s door, putting distance between himself and Derek.

‘You can’t seriously think this is me?’ Derek recoils, horrified.

Stiles grabs at handfuls of his own hair. ‘How the hell do I know? I don’t even know you.’

Derek’s eyebrows draw together in shock, in outrage, in anger. ‘I would never do this. And I would never hurt you, or Ria, I swear…’

Stiles paces back and forth in front of Ria's door, trying to straighten everything out in his brain, but it’s all too much. The hurt, the confusion, the shock, the humiliation, the fucking disappointment… For years he’s watched his friends pair off, waiting for his turn. He looks at Derek, all cut-glass beauty and dry humor and sweetness and secrets and lies, and he can’t believe really let himself think, for a second, that this might be real.

Stiles wants to speak but the tumble of words that usually spill forth freely all snarl up in a knot in his throat, choked by the extent of his vicissitude, and he can’t breathe, he can’t breathe… ‘Just…’ He flings his hands out desperately. ‘Just get the fuck out.’

‘Stiles, please,’ Derek says, desperately, but Stiles can’t deal with him right now.

‘Get. Out.’ Tiny white pinpoints of light swim at the edges of his vision, and his lungs are burning and why the hell is everyone just standing there looking at him?

‘Just get out, give me some space! Leave me the fuck alone!’ He sinks down into his haunches, feeling more exposed and vulnerable than he’s ever been in his life, and then suddenly Allison is there, holding out her arms to him, like a drawbridge lowering, like a lifeline.

She feels like the safest place he has right now, so he lets her hold him, lets her count their breaths together, and he keeps his face turned firmly into her shoulder so he doesn’t have to watch Derek and Scott leave.

*
Derek retreats. Anything else would make him more a monster in Stiles’ eyes.

It had been a physical wrench to walk away from Stiles, leaving him with a still-rattling chest and hot, angry tears in his eyes, but Derek would never force himself on Stiles in any capacity, and Stiles wants space. Stiles wants to be away from him. So Derek will respect that, no matter how much it hurts.

And oh, it does hurt.

It’s an unbearable pressure under his skin and in his bones, like the accumulation of blood and pain under a bruise, only it’s his whole self, every inch of his skin an agonising ache. It’s not new, this white-hot loss. There’s a certain sense of inevitability to it, now. He almost welcomes its cruel familiarity. When Stiles had looked at him with affection… he hadn’t known what to do with it, not really. He’d always been waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for it to end. He’d never fully trusted that Stiles would see everything that he really is, and want him regardless.

He hadn’t been fully prepared for the horror in Stiles’ eyes as he looked at Derek’s partially shifted face. He wants to shove the memory down, down, to bury it so deeply it never sees the light of his consciousness again, but instead he forces himself to relive it, searing it into his memory. He can pull it out when he’s tempted to give in and contact Stiles, taste the bitterness of the rejection on his tongue, remind himself that Stiles doesn’t want him.

The pressure builds and builds, so he runs, like he always has, to stop it from breaking him apart.

Against his will, his feet find the irregular beat of Stiles’ panicked, hurting heart, and he runs to that – from that.

He finds himself at the rocky outcrop in the preserve where he gave Stiles his jacket that night a few weeks ago, and he drops down to sit on flat, rough stone and look out over the town. He’s grateful he blindly threw on his running gear and left his clothes from earlier in his own apartment - he can still smell Stiles on his leather jacket and he just can’t right now.

He hadn’t expected to be so affected by the way their scents mingled together, that night. He hadn’t expected to find himself struck dumb by the loveliness of Stiles’ eyes against the colors of the preserve, the pink of his cheeks against the rest of his pale skin. He hadn’t meant to give in to it.

He curses himself for veering from his self-inflicted ‘no relationship’ rule. They’ve never ended well for him. At least he can make sure casual hook-ups are completely on his own terms. They give him a little of the physical touch he craves, but he’s always in control, always protecting his heart. He never gives more than he can afford to lose.

He’d been careless, giving in to Stiles. And now here he is again.

Stupid.

He breathes in the mulchy air, exhales slowly. He used to play with his sisters in this clearing, when they were kids. They’d played at being kings, queens, mer-people, winged creatures who could fly near the sun. But they’d always come back to their favorite game in the end - making dens and catching rabbits, playing at being alphas like his mom and betas like his dad, because they knew, somehow, that no fantastical creature’s life could really be as magical as theirs already was, full of bone-deep connections to the ones they loved.

He remembers how Laura had looked, laughing, hair wind-wild, as certain in her future as she was in her past.
She would never have messed everything up so badly.

For a second he lets himself really feel the loss of her, of his mother, of his dad.

He closes his eyes, giving himself over to the hurt, letting himself sink into it, under it.

In a minute, he’ll pick himself up and put himself back together again, and go back to dealing with his responsibilities.

In a minute, he’ll retreat back into the shell he so carefully constructed for himself, to protect himself from exactly this. He’ll curl back around himself to hide his soft, wounded underbelly. He’ll go back to being his usual laconic self and after a day or two people will give up on trying to bother him into talking about it.

In a minute, he’ll set his jaw and square his shoulders and glare down anyone who tries to draw attention to the fault-line around his heart.

In a minute.
Every time I try to rise above

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took longer than usual, I was waylaid making dragon wings, no word of a lie.

I'm pretty sure canon has Derek's birthday in December but I decided to change it to match his fake ID and have it be early November, 'cos Derek is clearly Scorpio-ing the shit out of life so it felt appropriate.

Thanks for all your comments, which I really enjoy and appreciate!

Erica storms out of the cabin, hair flying around her face. In her leather-buckled top and tight pants she’s sort of magnificent, Derek thinks, all fiery lips and passion, like something ancient and elemental.

He’s not sure whether the effect is enhanced or ruined by her shoving her phone against his chest with a hissed ‘What did you do?’

He suppresses a wince. ‘I take it you talked to Stiles?’

‘No,’ Erica puts her hands on her hips. ‘He won’t talk to me. He texted me to tell me he won’t need me to watch Ria for a while, but when I called him it went straight to voicemail.’ To the untrained ear she might appear to be more angry than anything else, incensed at the idea that anyone would dare to ignore her calls.

But Derek knows better. He knows from the flash of white teeth that drag on her painted lower lip. He knows from the fragile note that runs through her voice like a thread of spun glass. He knows from the way her eyes flicker down to the ground, her thick lashes obscuring her real emotions. She’s hurt.

She’s also Erica, so she covers it up with brassy hair and attitude. She pouts at him. ‘I’m awesome, obviously, so I’m going to go ahead and assume you did something stupid to piss him off?’

Derek sighs, slowly. ‘He knows about us.’

Her eyes widen. ‘You told him?’

‘No. Scott did. I got there just after he found out.’

‘Woah.’ Erica’s hands fall from her hips, her fingers uncurling from the angry fists. ‘That’s good though, right? He had to find out sometime.’

Derek swallows. ‘Right.’ He shifts his weight on his feet, crunching skeletons of dried-out leaves under the heavy soles of his running shoes.

‘And, um…’ Erica steps a little closer. ‘You’re not back at his apartment showing him the benefits of werewolf endurance when it comes to glorious man-sex?’

He can’t help how his eyes avert briefly from her gaze. ‘No.’
Erica studies Derek’s face carefully. He wonders what she finds. Eventually she tears her eyes from his, and fixes them on the phone in her hand, on the scraps of text that make up Stiles’ brusque-sounding text message. ‘Oh.’ The sound echoes dully out into the woods, through the air that’s perfumed with the rich, mineral-sweet smell of forest litter decaying back into the earth, and Derek knows she understands.

Then he sees her eyes lift back up to him, rising in conjunction with her hope, as she says, ‘Maybe with time?’

Derek opens his mouth to say something too short and too honest before he stops himself. He’s brutal with himself and his own heart. He doesn’t have to be with hers. Instead he nods twice and says, ‘Yeah. Maybe.’

She nods back, satisfied for now, and falls into step beside him as they turn back towards the cabin. It looks so innocuous tucked away among the trees, framed by weathered bark and blue sky. It’s jarring, somehow, something straight out of a fairy-tale imprisoning a monster.

Derek takes a long breath through his nose and forces his attention out of his own mind and onto cabin. ‘So. Peter?’

Erica snorts. ‘The same. Smug, cryptic asshole. No revelatory villainous monologues, if that’s what you were hoping for. He’s made Boyd walk him out into the woods to pee four times in the last two hours, so he might not live to see tomorrow.’

Derek rolls his eyes on Boyd’s behalf. One might think his uncle had a death-wish, if he hadn’t recently worked so hard to prove the opposite.

‘Isaac?’

‘Checking the perimeter of the preserve for any signs of Peter’s special friend showing up.’

Derek nods his approval. After himself, Isaac has the keenest sense of smell. Derek’s also not sorry to keep him as far away from Peter’s cankerous influence as possible.

Inside the cabin, Boyd stands near the door, shoulder blades resting against the wall, arms crossed murderously over his chest. He doesn’t move when Derek walks in, but relief flits briefly across his face.

Peter is sitting in his usual chair, lazily scratching at the table-top with one extended claw.

‘Ah,’ he drawls, eyes lighting up at Derek’s arrival, ‘the prodigal nephew returns! We’ve suffered for the lack of your sparkling conversational skills. Although this one,’ he inclines his head in Boyd’s direction, ‘is a worthy replacement. I don’t believe he’s said more than five words in as many hours.’

‘I hear you haven’t been doing much talking, yourself,’ Derek says acidly, crossing to the cool-box that Isaac went out to get in the early hours. He tosses Peter a bottle of water before downing one himself.

‘Well if you hadn’t left in such a hurry to occupy your own tongue with Stiles,’ Peter gleefully rolls the syllable around his mouth, drawing it out, possessing it, ‘you might have persuaded me to loosen my own.’

Derek growls lowly and he can’t stop himself from crushing the plastic bottle in his clenched fist. The sound of Stiles’ name formed in Peters voice, in his breath, makes red spots appear around the edges of his vision.
Peter casually taps his own bottle against the edge of the table, watching him curiously. He sees the moment Peter’s nostrils flare as he scents the air Derek’s brought in with him, sees Peter’s eyes dart up to find his for a moment. He knows Peter knows. You can’t hide your emotions from someone who’s made a twenty year study of them. Peter’s a rat-bastard but he’s far from stupid. That’s what’s always made him so fucking dangerous.

‘Oh, I see,’ Peter says with a smirk. ‘Not occupying your tongue after all. Other than to say goodbye to him.’

Derek’s hit with a heady wave of emotion, his own and his betas’, the fresh heat of the confusion and anger stirring up the raw, unprocessed emotions already roiling in his belly. Rage slams up into his throat and down into his limbs, and he turns, grabs at the back of the empty chair and hurls it towards the wall next to Peter before he’s really aware of what he’s doing. It shatters on impact, shards flying around the room, leaving a ragged gash in the wooden wall. He looks down at his own traitorous hands, chest heaving to contain his pounding heart.

Peter hasn’t moved other than to raise an eyebrow. ‘This is what humans will do to you, Derek,’ he says, calmly examining his fingernails. ‘They’re so fragile. In their bones, in their beliefs, in their… attachments. They don’t know what commitment means, and even if they do, they’re only ever a hair’s breadth from death. You know, if you’re not careful it could drive you crazy…’ He grins a wide, manic grin that doesn’t reach his eyes.

Scarlet spots keep blooming in the periphery of Derek’s vision, like blood drops falling into water, and he fights to stay in control.

‘Have you thought about giving him the bite?’ Peter’s tongue darts slowly out over his lower lip. ‘He’d make a gorgeous wolf…’

It’s Peter that hits the wall this time, bowing the wall with a solid, sickening crack. He slides down to the floor, blood trickling from his nose to seep into his pale sweater. He examines it, clucking in mild irritation. ‘This is cashmere blend, Derek. Have you no soul?’

Derek is on him in a second, grabbing fistfuls of the offending sweater to haul Peter up. ‘He’s got nothing useful to tell us,’ he grits out. ‘After dark, we kill him. We’ll make sure there’s nothing left to resurrect this time…’

Peter’s face morphs into something that looks oddly close to proud. ‘You know,’ he wheezes out between ragged breaths, ‘I might not have much to tell you, but there’s something I could show you…’

Peter’s heartbeat is elevated but steady. It doesn’t mean anything; Peter mastered the art of deception long ago. Derek lets go of the sweater, abruptly. Peter still manages to land on his feet, and Derek hates him violently.

‘What do you say, nephew? Up for a family field trip?’ Peter smirks grotesquely, his teeth smeared with his own blood. Derek swallows down his disgust.

‘Derek…’ Boyd mutters, low and urgent, ‘he’s bullshitting you.’

The kicker is, Boyd’s probably right. There’s no way this isn’t part of some devious master plan Peter’s cooked up, but all Derek can see is the fear in Stiles’ face as he’d realised that Derek, in his scarlet-eyed wolf form, had just become his number one suspect for all the missing people. He remembers how it felt like something was crushing his chest from within when Stiles had unconsciously put himself between Derek and Ria. If Derek can find who’s really doing this, if he
can make Stiles see he’s not a monster… Maybe there’s a chance they can still be friends. Maybe Derek won’t lose him completely.

Much as he hates the idea, Peter is the only lead he has right now.

He ignores Boyd’s groan and the sound of Erica’s palm slapping against her own forehead as he says, ‘Tonight. Last chance.’

Derek makes his way out of the cabin. He doesn’t look back.

His feet unconsciously take him back to the clearing, where he sucks in great lungfuls of air, trying to cleanse himself of Peter’s insidious presence. From his stance above the town he watches as rain saturates the horizon, blurring down from the grey cloud in broad brushstrokes, turning the far-off mountains into a sfumato masterpiece. He watches for several minutes until he’s satisfied that it’s moving away from town. The last thing he needs on this stupid expedition with Peter is the complication of heavy rain.

In the pocket of his sweats, his phone starts to ring.

He waits for several seconds before he looks at it, unable to decide if he wants it to be Stiles or not. Right now, in this moment, there’s still the slimmest of chances for him, a fragile little smoldering spark of hope cradled deep within his chest, and he knows there’s a good chance talking with Stiles will extinguish it for good. He shakes himself out of his indecision on the basis that Laura would have laughed for years over his heart essentially becoming Schrodinger’s cat and even now that she’s gone he can’t bring himself to let her win.

He fumbles with the phone uncharacteristically, his heart pounding in his throat as he turns it to see the display. It’s Cora. He slides his thumb over the screen just as it’s about to ring out.

‘Happy birthday big brother!’ she chirps down the line. Derek winces. Ah. Yeah. That.

‘Thanks,’ he says, hoping his usual reticence will keep her from noticing his maudlin tone.

‘I thought, since we missed so many birthdays, that I would get you the greatest gift there is this year – time with me! My flight lands tomorrow afternoon, can you pick me up at the airport?’

Derek closes his eyes and exhales heavily through his nose. Screw the rain. Without a doubt, this is the last complication he needs right now.

*

The sense of imminent threat leaves with Scott and Derek, and Stiles is able to start catching his breath in ever-increasing increments as Allison counts softly against his ear.

‘Scott didn’t do this, right?’ He whispers, voice hoarse in his sore throat.

She shakes her head emphatically. ‘No. I’ve been with him every night there’s been a disappearance. I swear to you, Stiles, he has nothing to do with this. He’s still a good, good person.’

She’s kneeling on the floor with him, her fingers smoothing his hair back, and her face is soft and open. She smells like roses – Stiles wonders randomly if chemical smells would be a no-no for Scott’s supernaturally sensitive nose – and somehow it feels innately wrong to harbour suspicion towards anyone who smells like roses. He thinks he can trust her – he really, really wants to - but he’s seriously doubting his own judgement right now.
'And Derek?’ His heart is pulsing uncomfortably in his mouth.

‘I don’t know.’ She tilts her head sympathetically. ‘I wish I did.’

‘But… it’s possible it’s him?’

She massages her forehead with slender fingers. ‘I… It’s possible, yes. Unless you were with him on some of the nights?’

Stiles thinks back, cycling through the nights they’ve spent together. He always has nightmares, when there’s a disappearance, although he doesn’t trust Allison enough to tell her that. He’s pretty sure he’s never had a nightmare with Derek asleep next to him. ‘No. One time… One time we fell asleep together but he was gone when I woke up.’

Allison’s dark eyebrows rise. ‘You fell asleep together?’

‘A few times, yeah.’ He straightens as he sees the surprise on her face. ‘Why?’

‘It’s just… He must really trust you, that’s all.’

‘You have no idea how much I wish the feeling was mutual…’ The nightmarish wolf from his dreams stalks the forefront of his mind, flashing gimlet eyes at him. Stiles can almost feel the heat of its breath ghosting over his face.

‘Stiles…’

‘A wolf is taking people. A wolf with red eyes. And Derek can… he can do that, he can change into a wolf?’

The words sound garish and ridiculous in his mouth, but Allison just nods seriously. ‘It’s a Hale thing.’

‘Are the eyes a Hale thing?’

‘No, the eyes are an alpha thing.’

‘What does that mean?’ He chews at his lower lip.

She exhales and tips back onto her haunches. ‘Come on,’ she says, tugging at his arm gently. ‘Let’s get comfortable and I’ll tell you everything I know.’

More than anything Stiles is desperate for information. It feels like a veil has been ripped away from in front of his eyes, and the truth that lies behind it is so blinding in its clarity it makes his head hurt. The enormity of his entire life – his entire world – never having been quite what he’d thought it was is far too much to take in. He’s numb with confusion and exhaustion, and the only way he can process any of it is to break it down into smaller, more manageable chunks of information. He needs facts and logic and knowledge right now, needs to understand, before he can begin to comprehend the enormity of the emotion that’s slung itself in a dead weight over his shoulders.

They settle onto his old sofa, curled around cups of hot tea to ease the residual ache in Stiles’ ribs, and they talk. Allison starts by telling him about her family, about her militarised childhood and her skill as a tracker and an archer, and then Ria wakes up so Stiles brings her in to play around their legs.

He’s hit by how surreal it all is; them sitting in his ordinary living room, under the crocheted blanket
his mom knitted while she was pregnant with him, while he learns about a whole supernatural world that’s been hidden from him. He’s fascinated in an intellectual, detached sort of way, listening to Allison explain the Argent code about killing werewolves while he watches the back of Ria’s curly head as she sings nonsensically to the doll Derek bought her for her birthday.

His instinct is to google the hell out of it all, but Allison moves his laptop firmly away from him, insisting he’ll probably only find a whole lot of Twilight fanfiction, and instead offers up readily all of the answers that she and Scott had painstakingly pieced together through anecdotes from her own training, her family’s bestiary (holy shit, Stiles can’t believe that’s actually a thing – his hands literally itch with the need to get into it) and Scott’s own hard-earned experience.

‘So only Derek can change into an actual wolf,’ Stiles says, ‘and only Derek’s eyes are red?’

Allison looks down at her tea, wrapping her fingers more firmly around the mug. ‘He’s the only alpha in the area.’

The wolf in Stiles’ mind, the one stitched together from shadows and fevered scraps of remembered nightmares, contorts its muzzle into a macabre grin.

Stiles fights down a bizarre urge to bare his teeth right back at it.

He tucks a long leg up under himself and asks, frowning, ‘What does that mean, though? Like, how does being the alpha make him different?’

*He’s kind of my boss,* Erica had said. *Like a life-coach.*

Of course, that was when he’d been convinced the next-door apartment was an elite sex club for the breathtakingly beautiful, not a werewolf den. He misses those days.

Allison shifts uncomfortably in her seat. ‘Maybe you should talk to Derek about this… Scott’s a beta, so I only know what my family taught me about alphas, which doesn’t exactly show them in the most positive light…’

He quirks an expectant eyebrow at her and she sighs in defeat.

‘There’s one alpha per pack, the rest are betas usually, or omegas. They usually have golden eyes, like Scott’s. The alpha is the leader. They’re the only ones who can turn humans into werewolves. They’re faster and stronger, they have better senses. They’re also known to be… more aggressive. Manipulative. They have larger, um, sexual appetites…’ Allison blushes and averts her eyes as Stiles thinks back to Danny telling him how Derek hooked up a lot at Jungle. His own cheeks burn in embarrassment, but he’d rather know, so he pushes through it.

As far as he can tell, Scott’s pretty much the giant puppy he’s always been, but Derek… Derek is something else. Derek is hard-edged, libidinous, dangerous. Red eyes. Sharp teeth. Unknown.

*Excellent taste in possible life-partners, as usual Stiles,* he thinks to himself, then sits up straight, slopping tea over the side of his cup.

‘Wait, can you… can you be turned through sex?’ He wonders wildly if that’s why Derek was always so cautious. ‘Through kissing?’

‘No,’ she lays a calming hand on his arm. ‘No. You need to be bitten. There are rumors that if a scratch from an alpha is deep enough it could turn you, but it’s not proven.’

He settles back into the cushions in relief. ‘What…’ He pauses to force a smile for Ria as she mashes
a chubby fistful of cheese-curls into her mouth. ‘What did he want with me?’

Allison shrugs helplessly and sets her mug down, drawing her denim clad knees up to her chest and settling her arms around them. ‘You’d need to talk to him about that, too.’

Stiles nods slowly. ‘Hey, you said betas usually have golden eyes. Does that mean there are other colours sometimes? Like… like blue?’

Her forehead furrows in surprise. ‘How do you know that?’

He wishes he could trust her enough to tell her why. ‘Lucky guess,’ he fronts.

Allison purses her lips briefly. ‘Sometimes a werewolf’s eyes will be blue. It’s rare, but it happens. The lore is complex, but essentially it happens if the werewolf has taken an innocent life.’

‘Oh.’ Shit. That wasn’t good news. The hair on his forearms and at the nape of his neck pricks at the memory of icy-cold eyes in the shadows right across the street. ‘How… how do I keep them out? Of my apartment? Please tell me there’s a way, I have to protect my daughter…’

‘You could use mountain ash. It creates a barrier against almost all supernatural creatures. I can show you how to use it, but you’ll need to practice… I can do it for you until you’ve got it down.’

Stiles scrubs a tired, incredulous hand through his hair. ‘Wait, you’re telling me I need to put my faith in burned wood? Whatever happened to silver bullets?’

‘You could use those too,’ Allison says, entirely serious, ‘but I don’t have any. I have silver-tipped arrows but you don’t have the room in here to wield the bow.’ She looks around the room appraisingly like she’s some sort of fucking badass spy or something. Stiles can’t quite believe this is sweet, gentle Allison. ‘You should be okay just lining the windows and doorway, but ideally the whole apartment would be lined with it.’

Stiles snorts. ‘What, in case Derek punches the adjoining wall down?’

She nods, in a ‘well, yeah, dufus,’ kind of way.

‘Oh…’ Stiles mutters faintly. ‘Don’t tell me he can leap tall buildings in a single bound?’

Allison does a funny scrunchy thing with her face. ‘Scott can jump fifteen, twenty feet from standing. So yeah, probably. With a run-up.’

‘Oh my god…’ Stiles laughs, but there’s very little humor in it. ‘Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it’s Superwolf…’

‘They’re kind of amazing, you know? It took me a while to really see it, but now, it’s like. Wow.’ Her eyes are sincere.

Stiles thinks it’ll take him a while to get to ‘wow’. Maybe it’s there, faintly woven into the rest of his complex emotional tapestry, but he’s pretty sure he needs to work through ‘what the fuck is happening’ and ‘holy god I’m going to die’, first. He distracts her with a few more of the questions he hadn’t had the presence of mind to ask when Scott and Derek were in front of him all hostile and growly.

He’s inexorably drawn in by the story of how she and Scott worked through the early months of his new life and new body together, how Scott had learned control through sheer hard work and will power in the absence of an alpha to guide him. He only struggles now on a full moon, and then he
willingly allows himself to be contained in a room sealed with mountain ash – insists on it, in fact, Allison says, sounding both awed and incredibly sad.

‘Derek’s not the one who bit him?’

‘No. He didn’t even know about Scott until he got back into town, he’s been away since just after Scott was bitten. It’s hard not to resent him for leaving, though.’

‘Is that why they were all…’ Stiles curls his fingers into cartoonish claws and bares his teeth with a growl, ‘…just now?’

‘Oh,’ Allison laughs. ‘In a way. Werewolves are incredibly territorial, and it seems like they both see you as part of their own packs.’

‘Me?’ Stiles slops the cold dregs of his tea into his lap. ‘Are you serious? I think I’d know if I signed myself up to be part of a werewolf pack Allison, let alone two!’

She smiles gently at him. ‘It’s not as conscious as that. It’s just… how they feel. It means they think of you as family.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles’ skin feels too hot and too tight. He has no idea what to do with that, really.

They order pizza and talk and talk, and somehow he manages to get Ria to bed. It crosses his mind briefly to go to his dad’s place, but Melissa will be there and he doesn’t want to have to lie about why things are weird between him and Scott. He’ll figure out tomorrow if he’s going to stay in the apartment or not.

He declines Allison’s offer to stay the night with a grateful hug, but he does wrest a promise of a lesson in mountain ash voodoo from her before she leaves. He double locks the door after her. He knows it wouldn’t work against Derek – hell, it wouldn’t be enough to keep Derek and his stupid muscles out even without werewolf strength, if Derek was really determined to get in – but it makes him feel a little better anyway.

Derek thinks of him as pack, Stiles reiterates to himself. It doesn’t seem like he wants to hurt him. It doesn’t mean he’s not hurting other people, though, and there’s no way Stiles can be okay with that.

He’s wrung out, so exhausted he can barely remember how to make pyjamas work. His mind buzzes numbly with all the new pieces of information, each fighting for context, for a place to fit within the jigsaw puzzle of his mind.

He knows so much more, now. He knows more about the world and about his family and about Derek. He just doesn’t know how he feels about it, yet.

He stares at his own reflection in the mirror. He feels like a different man to the guy who stared back at him this morning.

Derek’s a werewolf, and the part of him that’s wolf is seriously dangerous.

But he’s also a man.

He’s sharp claws and tender touches, razor teeth and soft kisses, animal instinct and human control. He’s apparently a supremely ruthless, powerful leader. But he’s also Derek, who took care of Stiles when he was sick, who bakes and gives Stiles his jacket, and makes cellophane jellyfish with his
daughter.

His daughter.

She’s the reason that Stiles can’t let himself get caught up in what he’d like Derek to be or what he hopes Derek is. He can’t take the risk, not with her. He needs to find out who Derek really is and how involved he is with all the insane things that have been happening in Beacon Hills since… well, since Derek arrived back in it, he realises grimly.

He’ll start with breaking into Harris’s office tomorrow, as planned. And for that, he needs to sleep.

* 

He closes his heavy-lidded eyes, and when he opens them again he’s somewhere else. The room is large and unfamiliar, one wall entirely made of glass panes. It smells like fresh paint. The night sky outside is velvety and studded with stars.

He seems to be lying on the floor, but he’s comfortably arranged on some blankets, face mashed against a warm chest that he knows without moving is Derek’s.

He runs an exploratory hand up Derek’s side, heart beating a little faster when he realises Derek is naked, all that skin uncovered at last. He pulls back a little, to drink it in. A cursory glance down reveals that Stiles is naked too, but for his red hoody, unzipped and soft around his shoulders. He likes them being bared to each other like this. He hums quietly and presses himself against Derek more firmly.

Derek’s mouth curls up a little in sleep. It’s sweetly intimate and fucking beautiful.

Stiles breathes in deeply, savouring the momentary light-headed rush he often gets in close proximity to Derek. He’s happy.

He’s not weighed down by complicated emotions or confusion or uncertainty. Not here.

Here, he feels a deep sense of peace.

Here, none of it matters.

Because he’s dreaming.

There’s a dizzying sense of falling, and then Stiles is somewhere else, heart pounding at the loss of the moment. Even though he knows it wasn’t real.

He’s fairly sure this isn’t either, he thinks, as the cold from the earth beneath him seeps through his threadbare pyjama pants. He tentatively gets to his feet, bare toes digging into damp soil. He’s in the woods. The night is eerily silent around him. He turns on the spot, trying to get his bearings, taking in the pine-scent of the air and the smallish lake off to one side, its glossy, onyx surface reflecting the stars.

A lump of dread sits in the bottom of his stomach, hard and heavy. His breath starts to come in ragged pants, anticipating the antlered creature, or maybe a wolf, behind every tree. A movement catches the corner of his eye, and he cranes through the darkness to see several figures moving down the trail that circuits the lake. None of them seem to have any sort of flashlight, which is weird, but it’s not slowing them down.

‘Fuck,’ he whispers. They’re coming right at him.
He catches a sound on the breeze, carried ahead of the grey-shadow people making their way along the path in single file. Christ, he knows that voice. It’s Derek. One of the figures behind him is crowned with hair that glows white in the moonlight, and Stiles instantly knows it’s Erica. *Fuck.*

They don’t seem to have seen him. Stiles is gripped by a strange sense of certainty that he shouldn’t be here. He’s barefoot on a carpet of fallen pine needles, in ratty old pyjamas, utterly defenceless and he *should not be here.* He looks around frantically for a second before ducking down behind some rocks, hoping the night will cloak him.

As they get closer Stiles can make out the hulking silhouette of Boyd, and the tall elegance of Isaac. They’re flanking someone else. Stiles realises with a sick jolt that it’s Peter. He supposes it’s not all that surprising that his subconscious would conjure up Uncle Creepy to be part of this creepy tableau of creepiness.

They get closer still, but no matter how much Stiles strains to hear them he can’t make out any words, just muffled voices, like he’s on the other side of a thick pane of glass. Derek’s mouth is set in a grim line and Erica looks murderous, but Peter seems to be enjoying it all immensely. Stiles stares at the shaded planes of Peter’s face. Something about him makes Stiles’ skin crawl so uncomfortably that he can’t hold back an involuntary ‘ugh…’, which leaves his mouth in a soundless, disgusted huff of air.

Derek’s head turns abruptly in his direction, a faint frown creasing his beautiful features. Stiles is sure his thundering heart must be giving him away, but though Derek glares right at him for several long seconds, he seems to be looking right through him. Stiles holds his breath. In the end Derek shakes his head, just a tiny bit, shoves his hands deeper into the pockets of his leather jacket and picks up his pace.

Stiles can’t help but take the opportunity to stare at him unashamedly, watching how Derek is lit by the moon. With the clarity of hindsight he can see the power in Derek’s frame, how his muscles bunch and pull, even under his thick clothes. There’s a surety to the way he moves, like he knows exactly where he’s putting his feet even though the forest floor is uneven and rock-strewn and it’s that dark, impenetrable pocket of night that comes right after midnight. His face is as impassive as ever, but as he passes within inches of the rock Stiles is crouched behind, Stiles can see how Derek’s nostrils flare minutely in response to the scents of the woods, how his head tilts one way or another to chase a far-off sound.

It’s sort of fascinating.

Of course, Stiles tells himself, this is a dream, so it’s probably just his brain superimposing these traits onto Derek, trying to make sense of everything he now knows.

The group pass Stiles, plunging further down the path. Stiles lets them get about fifteen feet ahead before he slips out from behind the rocks and pads after them. He’s vaguely aware that his feet should be sore, but the ground just feels cool and soft under his bare feet.

The group – the pack, Stiles corrects himself – only walk for a few minutes more before they reach what seems to be their destination. It’s a house, larger than Derek’s cabin and more refined, but clad in the same rough-hewn wood that gives the impression it’s grown right out of the ground.

It’s long been in disrepair, Stiles can see from his vantage point, half-hidden behind a rough tree trunk, although by now he’s fairly sure the pack can’t see him. The window panes are cracked and broken in their frames, the door broken off its hinges and just wedged back into the gap. The cladding is damp and peeling, and Stiles can see the shape of graffiti picked out in the low, silvery moonlight.
The pack all stand for a second and stare up at the building, before Peter starts forward and kicks at something on the ground – the ashy remains of some sort of camp fire, Stiles thinks – and then Derek steps up to the door, wedges his fingers around the edges and yanks it free of the frame like it weighs nothing.

‘Woah…’ Stiles exhales out. It occurs to him that it should be scary, watching Derek effortlessly fling a solid wooden door several feet away, and in a way it is, but it’s also… sort of hot. He sighs internally at his traitorous libido.

Boyd disappears into the yawning doorway, followed by Erica and then Peter, Isaac close behind, but Derek pauses at the threshold and turns, once again looking straight at Stiles. A flicker of confusion flits across his face as he tips his face up and appears to breathe in deeply. Then he rakes a hand through his hair, shakes his head again, and is gone.

They’re only in the house for a minute or two before they re-emerge, forming into a loose circle around Peter while Erica and Isaac say something that involves a lot of gesticulating. Derek stands, arms folded over his chest, listening quietly to them, but his eyes keep roving over the thicket of trees where Stiles stands.

Then Peter says something that draws Derek’s attention, and Stiles takes the opportunity to slip from the tree line into the house. It’s so dark he can barely see anything. It’s empty and damp and it smells cloyingly of mold, and Stiles can’t figure out why they were here until – oh. He sees it, illuminated by a shaft of pearly moonlight that lances through one of the broken windows. A spiral, scrawled on the wall in some sort of liquid that glows slightly. It’s as tall as Stiles is, and very deliberately drawn, whorling out several feet from the centre point like a huge fingerprint. Stiles knows with absolute certainty that this is what Derek and the pack have come to see.

He’s about to have a snoop around the place and try to figure out why his subconscious would choose this as a setting, if there’s any Freudian significance to any of it, when a muffled, inhuman shriek rents the air.

He takes off towards the pack, manoeuvring his long limbs into a run before stumbling over a stump and smacking against a tree close to where they’re clustered together at the water’s edge.

Everything happens very fast after that, just a blur of shapes and fear and the smell of blood in the air. By the time he reaches the pack, down by the water’s edge, Isaac is crumpled on the ground, a deep gash blooming over his forehead. He seems disoriented. Erica crouches over him.

Derek yells something at Boyd, who nods and then shifts, eyes glowing yellow in the darkness. He lifts his head to scent the air and then sprints off through the trees, limbs pistoning like a machine built just for the purpose. Another yell from Derek and Erica follows, leaving Derek and Isaac alone by the water’s edge.

Peter is… Where is Peter? Stiles swivels his head frantically but there’s no sign of him. The bastard.

Derek sinks down into a defensive stance in front of Isaac, arms spread, claws slicing through the darkness, and roars into the night. It shakes Stiles down to his bones.

He catches a movement in the shadows of the trees, up in the branches, sees the glow of moonlight on shining scales, something monstrous that looks human and reptile, both and neither, scales and claws and tortured eyes. It moves so fast Stiles can hardly follow it. He tries to yell a warning to Derek but no sound comes out. There’s soft, leathery swish, a movement of shadow, Derek leaps, teeth bared, but he’s too late. There’s the crunching thwack of flesh on flesh, of breaking bones as two bodies clash, and Stiles has the brief impression of a long dark column of scaly muscles, a harsh,
sinister hiss, and then Derek is flung, convulsing, out into the middle of the lake.

Stiles watches, helpless and horrified, as Derek is swallowed up by that hewn-onyx surface. There’s a bare splash, ripples, then nothing.

Where’s Derek? Why isn’t he coming back up?

It’s just a lake, no current to drag him under, no rip-tide to bind him and choke him, he should have re-surfaced by now.

Panic claws at his chest and Stiles screams his useless, silent throat hoarse, screams at Isaac, screams at Derek and at the still water that’s closed around him like he was never there.

He skids over to Isaac, grabs him by the shoulders and shakes him, but his hands ghost through him and Isaac doesn’t react, just holds his head, groaning, eyes unfocused.

Stiles screams and screams but no-one comes. He knows it’s a dream but it feels so real that he can’t just stand there. He doesn’t even think about it. He runs to the water’s edge, and wades in, fighting the push of the water until he’s deep enough to plunge into it.

The hit of the water knocks the air from his chest, freezing and solid and pitch black, but he reaches out blindly, diving deeper. He forces his eyes open. He knows there’s no chance of finding Derek – it’s been several long seconds, although it feels like hours, and Stiles can’t quite shove away the nauseating thought that maybe the reason Derek hasn’t come back up is because he was somehow dead when he hit the water. He swims faster, pushes harder through the wall of water, groping around for something, anything. He’s not even sure he’d feel Derek if he found him, maybe he would sink straight through him like he did Isaac, but damn it he has to try. His lungs burn with the effort, and he can feel pressure, too light inside his skull, too heavy outside, and he thinks maybe this is one of those haunting dreams where he dies.

And then he finds him.

Just a brush of flesh against his fingertips at first, so soft he thinks he’s imagined it, but he surges forwards anyway and grabs, and god, it’s Derek, Derek’s arm. He clutches at it and hauls and Derek floats up towards him, and Stiles would sob with relief if he had any breath left.

Derek’s limbs are frozen and heavy, his eyes closed, but Stiles gets his hands around his waist and heaves him upwards. With the last traces of his strength he braces his shoulders and shoves, and thank god Derek moves, up and up, just breaking the surface. Stiles holds a fistful of his t shirt, vice-like, and kicks out.

He surfaces, gasping in air in huge, dragging breaths. His vision clears. He’s home. He flings back the comforter.

He’s dry, other than where his slouchy Henley is soaked with sweat. His feet are clean and unmarked.

His hands are empty. No Derek, marble-cold and heavy. No Derek, bare and sleep-warmed.

He collapses back into his pillows, trying to calm his racing heart, his racing mind.

It was an imaginary glimpse into the best of how life with Derek could be, and also the worst. As if that lessens his confusion at all. He doesn't know if the worst-case scenario produced by his mind, currently fevered by exhaustion and the influx of information and supernatural possibility, is anything like Derek's reality, but based on what Allison's told him it very well could be. He would, at least,
constantly be expecting their life to turn into that. Fear and danger and pain.

But all he can see is Derek’s face. How it felt to have him. How it felt to lose him.

How could he live like that? Could the first dream ever make the second worth it?

He grabs for the baby monitor on his bedside table and cradles it close to his chest, letting his own breathing sync up with Ria’s peaceful, baby snuffles.

Heart versus head.

He just doesn’t know.
Stiles wakes up, stiff and disoriented, a grinding headache resonating through his skull. He gingerly showers and brushes his teeth, trying not to put too much pressure on his aching head. He feels like he’s aged about forty years overnight, and keeps shooting surreptitious glances down at his hands to make sure he’s not having another ‘invasion of the body-snatchers’ moment, but all he finds are his own long, pale hands, slightly shaky from exhaustion and clammy from nerves.

Even Oriana is uncharacteristically subdued, probably affected by Stiles’ own grim mood. She’s bright, and surprisingly perceptive for a being that is focused on snacks seventy-percent of the time, and he’s never been great at hiding his real emotions. He tries to make up for his lack of buoyancy by lavishing her with reassuring touches, which reminds him of how Derek is with Erica, Boyd, and especially Isaac. It’s a weirdly comforting thought; they’re all just animals on some level or other, whether they’re human or superhuman.

After breakfast he draws out a dusty box from the recesses of his closet and rummages through piles of receipts for electronics, concert tickets, and his graduation certificates until right at the bottom his fingers brush cool, cracked leather. He huffs out a little noise of triumph as he pulls out the small leather case containing the lock picking kit his dad got for him when he first became Sheriff of their hometown, years ago. Following a series of personal threats from a perpetrator John had later apprehended, he’d taught Stiles the basics of self-defence, how to get loose from almost any kind of restraint, and how to pick locks. Stiles slips the case into his back pocket, and stands to leave, but finds himself staring at the wall that adjoins Derek’s apartment for a long moment.

On instinct he shoves a few things for himself and Ria into an overnight bag, calling his dad from the parking garage to see if they can stay for a few days. He needs some time and some space, he thinks, and he won’t get it in his own apartment.

He hangs up after their brief conversation, feeling a little guilty for how worried the Sheriff had sounded about him, and buckles Ria into her car-seat, pressing a kiss and a whispered ‘love you, baby,’ to her downy forehead. She pouts and hums and is grumpily beautiful. He can’t help but smile.

As he turns the key in the ignition and the engine coughs twice and dies, his headache ramps up, thrumming painfully through the bone of his jaw. He lets his head rest on the steering wheel briefly before snatching up all his bags and his daughter and galvanising his long legs into something resembling a run. It’s raining outside, a sad, gray drizzle. They barely make the bus. Stiles wishes fervently that they hadn’t, when the heavily-perfumed woman boxing them into the too-hot, stuffy seat decides to run through every single ringtone on her phone. He watches the rain run down the windows in long rivulets, turning his view of the town blurry and surreal.

He finally makes it to the museum, having dropped off his very cranky daughter at daycare, and dumps his soggy bags in his office, ignoring the arch look he gets from Lydia for his time-keeping and general squelchiness. He figures, remembering the look on Jackson’s face, that if Jackson knew about Derek then Lydia did too, so she’s not currently his favorite person anyway. He angles himself
pointedly away from her, but does accept the coffee she places in front of him with a mumbled 'thanks'.

She perches on the edge of his desk. ‘You okay?’

He scrubs a hand tiredly over his face and through his still-wet hair. ‘No.’

‘Do you need me to stay with you?’

He jerks around to face her, surprised at how gentle her tone is. Lydia is known for being whip-smart and pragmatic to the point of brutality. Tenderness is a new look on her, but there’s definitely something softly reminiscent of it around her eyes as she looks at him. He swallows and shakes his head no. He knows she’s being unusually nice to him when she doesn’t even tear him a new one for showering her in tiny droplets of water like a dog shaking its coat out.

She hums. ‘Sure? Harris will be fine going to the meeting alone. He only wants me there to organise his papers for him anyway.’

‘I’ll be okay,’ Stiles manages. 'I plan to keep busy.'

A door slams and Lydia and Stiles both hold still, listening to the approaching footsteps. Harris stalks past the office door – although he’s limping a little, Stiles notes - with a hissed, ‘In your own time, Ms Martin…’

She sighs and stands to leave, pulling a tailored raincoat on over her dress. ‘We’ll be back this afternoon. And then maybe we can talk? And, um…’ She shoots a significant glance towards the lock pick kit he has hidden in one of his hands, and then tilts her head towards the direction of Harris’s office. 'Be careful.'

Stiles does his best to stay nonchalant as he nods, and she slips away after Harris, seemingly satisfied.

He forces himself to sit still long enough to finish his coffee, watching the clock tick in front of him as he gulps at the scalding liquid. Slowly, slowly, the seconds fray away, until eventually they unravel into half an hour, and Stiles figures he’s safe enough now to do his secret-squirrel thing. A quick look around confirms there’s no-one else in the building, so he flips the lock on the main doors and then hurries towards Harris’s office, heart beating out of his chest.

He squats in front of Harris’s mysterious door, the main barrier, in his mind, between him and some actual answers, and finds that adrenaline has steadied his hands as he carefully inserts the narrow tension wrench into the key hole. He briefly fumbles with getting the pick out of the little leather wallet, but as soon as he slots it into the top of the lock, muscle memory takes over, and he applies a little torque to the wrench as he wiggles the pick back and forth until he feels the pins set, one by one. Thankfully it’s a relatively simple, older lock, but it still takes him longer than it used to – he kicks himself a little for not practising as regularly as his dad had said he should. Regardless, he picks it in a couple of minutes, and he allows himself a little fist pump as the door swings inwards.

He brushes his hand down the inside of the wall until he finds the light switch, and flips it, flooding the space with stark, white light from several fluorescent strip lights. Stiles takes a deep breath and steps over the threshold.

The smell overwhelms him first as he descends the first half of the wooden stairway down into the windowless, bunker-like space, pausing on the small mid-landing to adjust to the stench of sulphur and rot that make his stomach roil and his head spin. He wonders if this is what hell smells like.
Despite the evil smell, the rest of the office is disconcertingly normal. Stiles reaches the bottom of the stairs and stands in the middle of the space, turning slowly. He doesn’t know what he was expecting – something a whole lot more macabre, honestly, like a resident sinister raven, or skull candle holders, or a toast rack made of ribs - but this isn’t it.

There’s a large desk near one wall, with a leather desk chair. An enormous, ancient computer takes up about a quarter of it, and the rest is strewn with paperwork. Stiles can see letters pertaining to the museum, in tall, wobbly piles, untouched and gathering dust, and a spasm of anger shoots through his stomach. No wonder the museum is failing… He exhales slowly and tries to keep his head in the game as he flicks over the rest of the room with magpie eyes.

Gunmetal grey filing cabinets line one of the other walls, and the opposite wall is taken up with floor to ceiling bookcases, stacked haphazardly with files and books. Stiles raises an eyebrow at how chaotic it seems. He’d had Harris down as OCD, for sure, especially given how hard he rides Stiles for every little thing, but it seems like he doesn’t apply his exacting standards to his own work-space.

Stiles walks slowly to the desk, breathing carefully as he leans over it so as not to disturb anything. If Harris finds out he was in here he’ll be fired for sure. He frowns as he takes in. There’s been an accumulation of stuff here over time, sure – some of the post-marks on the letters are from as far back as six months ago, and some are from this week – but nothing seems to have been touched after it’s been dumped on the desk. All the letters are unopened and the computer keyboard is covered in a fine layer of dust. Yet Harris is in here for hours at a time. What is he doing, just sitting in his chair?

Stiles chews on the inside of his cheek as he straightens up. He goes to the filing cabinets, trying to figure out which one might contain paperwork about the exhibit that never happened. He discounts the employee files and the cabinets that contain files before that financial year, leaving him with two. It’s a matter of minutes to pick the locks on them.

He rifles through them, finding the paperwork crammed into a hanging folder in the top drawer of the second cabinet. He paws through it all with shaking fingers, but there’s nothing about the weird little pot. He smacks his palm against the cabinet in frustration. ‘Goddamnit…’

He looks helplessly around the room again. This can’t be it. It can’t.

An undefinable noise filters from the museum floor above down through the still-open doorway. Stiles freezes, holding his breath until the last echoes of it fade away. No one should be here, except maybe Finstock, and he-

Wait… Finstock.

A memory of Finstock surfaces in Stiles’ mind, razor-edged now it’s been jolted free. It was just after the bloody symbols on the wall, Finstock had been rambling, full of increasingly wild theories. ‘Course the guy who owned this house was a little…’ Finstock had waggled his fingers near his head to convey the impression of madness, and at the time all Stiles had done was hold back a snort of laughter at the irony. ‘Absolutely sure the place was haunted by his dead wife. Even had part of the cellar converted into a psychomanteum, allegedly, although they never found it when the museum took the place over.’

Part of the cellar… Stiles is pretty sure that this basement also used to be part of the cellar, before it was modernised with concrete and fluorescence. But it’s definitely on the small side, for such a big building. They can’t use a subterranean level as storage for the museum because it would cost too much to protect it from the insistent advance of the damp, so they converted and extended the back of the ground floor of the house for the archives and artefact storage.
It would make sense, then, Stiles thinks, for the basement to be bigger than this.

*What if…*

The logical place to start, in accordance with every gothic horror movie ever, is the bookcase. Stiles runs frantic fingertips over its wooden frame, feeling for any anomaly, any bump or ridge, but comes up with nothing but a splinter. He frowns at the jumble of books, sucking at his sore finger, trying to find anything that looks more worn, less dusty, out of place… Anything.

But nothing.

He experimentally tugs at the spines of a few books, just in case, but the bookcase stays put, solid and unyielding.

The walls are bare, painted concrete. There are no tell-tale scrapes on the floor that suggest the arc of a secret door, no helpfully worn, finger-shaped divots in the plaster.

‘Fuck.’

He admits defeat with a frustrated grunt, resolving to ask Danny if he can access the blueprints for the building online to see if he can work out if there’s any chance there’s a secret room here.

He turns to leave, brushing his thumb over the carved wooden rosette on the side of the handrail thoughtfully, when – wait, why is there such a fancy handrail in here? The rest of the basement is sparse and frugal, but this… this is solid, quality workmanship. The staircase is in two parts at a ninety degree angle to each other, joined by a small mid-landing. It hugs the wall the whole way down but there are banisters on both sides, until it ends with a wide curtail step and a thick, carved bottom baluster. It’s a staircase meant to be seen.

The staircase in the basement in Stiles’ childhood home was preformed concrete, and in his dad’s new house it’s a bare, open wooden thing. Nothing fancy. Nothing special. These treads are enclosed and the staircase is fully walled off underneath so as not to allow any storage space underneath it, which is odd, right? Given that the whole point of a basement is for storage…

Stiles crouches down to examine the banister, exploring the carvings, pressing his fingers into the grooves and spirals. He tries pressing on each leaf, on each intricate rose, until finally, finally, one tucked away right around the back gives under the pressure. Stiles yelps and stumbles back as there’s a faint groaning noise, and right in front of him, the whole of the lower half of the staircase flips up. The walls stay where they are, as does the handrail, but the stairs and the treads swing up as if on a counterbalance, until they’re parallel to the floor, opening up a dark passageway underneath.

‘Woah…’ Stiles approaches it, bent and cautious, heartbeat thumping in his palms. He can see an inky patch of space and beyond, the tip of another metal railing; another staircase.

Stiles stoops to duck under the stairs into the newly revealed darkness, checking out the hefty, iron mechanism that swings the stairs up and down. It’s old-fashioned, but solid, and it seems to have been well-maintained judging by the lack of noise or juddering.

The temperature is immediately lower here, in this pool of shadow, and it feels like it gets lower the closer Stiles gets to the dark dip of the new staircase. The metal of the railing is so cold under his fingertips he can barely touch it, so he shoves his hands in the pockets of his ill-fitting blazer, and draws in a shuddery breath before he carefully makes his way down the narrow, helical staircase.

He’s painfully aware of the sound of his footsteps grating on the metal steps. Thankfully there are only a few, just enough to spin him down and around, until Stiles can see the glow of a faintly lit...
doorway cut into the stone wall.

His eyes adjust slowly to the low light, which is coming from a sconce on the wall which burns in a low, greenish flame. It seems to burn brighter in response to his presence as he steps further into the room, until finally he can make out what must have once been the old cellar. It’s made of pale, rough stones, that curve up into a series of arches that make up the ceiling.

There’s another bookcase here, this one meticulously organised to house thick, well-worn books, many of them hand-written, as well as jars and pots and what seems like hundreds of old candles in various colors. The greenish half-light bounces off the twisted shape of vials and bottles, lined up and filled with powders and liquids of all kinds and colors. Stiles doesn’t recognise anything except… Except the earthenware pot that zapped him that day.

‘Harris, you bastard, what did you do?’ Stiles whispers as he looks at it, suddenly aware of how his blood buzzes in his ears. He takes a hurried step back, tripping over the arm of a scuffed, leather sofa and knocking into a table with his hip, sending several metal crates crashing to the floor.

The floor is cold, bare flagstone, but Stiles catches glimpses of rough shapes drawn out in pale chalk. Some remind him of the shapes drawn on the walls in blood, but the largest one, in front of a huge mirror in a gilded frame that leans up against the wall, is a big circle. It’s a little like a compass, struck through with lines of chalk, smaller shapes, and what looks in the strange light to be dried blood.

Then Stiles realises that the giant mirror is… odd. There’s no reflection. No greenish light, no blanched and terrified reflection of Stiles; nothing. The longer he looks at it, the more the gnawing fear in Stiles’ gut grows. The buzzing is deafening, something electric in the air making all the hair on his arms stand on end. His heart feels like its buzzing along with the air, it's beating so fast. He steps right up to it, watching his breath condense on its black, still surface.

Slowly, he lifts a hand, stretching out his fingertips to touch.

From inside the mirror, the beast touches back.

Stiles stares at it, at the hot flare of its nostrils, at the blood red of its eyes, and the bare of its teeth. It stares back. It goes to grip his fingers, but he instinctively wrenches them away, staggering backwards on a scream, every dream he ever had of the huge, antlered creature made real. He can still feel its icy fingertips against his own, can taste its sour breath in his own mouth.

The mirror is still and dark again. Stiles doesn’t know if the beast can come through it. He doesn’t wait to find out. He’s no match for it, alone. He runs.

He flees back up the stairs, back out into the basement, and he doesn’t take a breath until he's frantically poked and jabbed at the baluster until he's found whatever it is that makes the staircase swing back into place again. He takes the stairs two at a time and slams the office door shut behind him, stopping just long enough to grab his still-dripping bags and lurch back out into the rain.

He locks the museum doors with violently trembling hands. No force on earth could make him stay there, now.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The dreams were real. They were real and now he has something concrete, now he has evidence he can show to his dad. Now he’s proved to himself that he’s not going crazy, thank god, but also holy shit because the dreams were real… Fuck…

The dreams have been real all along. Which means maybe last night… Derek disappearing under the
surface of that black, still water, star-studded like a piece of fallen sky... *Derek.*

He scrabbles for his phone, and calls his dad’s house. Melissa has finished her shift for the day and agrees to pick up Ria to save her from another bus ride in the rain, and then he barely hits the ‘call’ button for Derek’s phone before his own whimpers and dies. Stiles curses and takes off sprinting.

The bus journey back to the apartment is torturously slow and Stiles internally curses every person who gets on or off. He jiggles his legs and drums his fingers restlessly on the fabric of his pants, earning himself several dirty looks from other passengers. He doesn’t care. It’s very likely Derek was actually nearly drowned last night, all Stiles wants is to know if he’s okay. He runs from the bus stop to his building, skidding through the doors into the lobby, ribs loosening in relief as he hears a familiar voice echoing down from the floors above. It’s Derek, sounding alive and healthy and definitely not recently drowned. Stiles frowns a little at the sound of another voice, one he doesn’t recognise.

‘Seriously, Der,’ the female voice says, ‘I’ll just run a photo through a reverse image search engine. No biggie.’

‘You really think something’ll come up?’ Stiles has to smile at how dubious Derek sounds about the idea of technology as a solution to whatever his problem is.

‘Worth a try. You can find people that way, you would think this would be easier. Easier than Deaton at least.’ There’s a laugh in the girl’s voice, too, which makes Stiles feel sort of… sick.

‘People? Really?’

The girl sighs audibly. ‘Have you never seen *Catfish*?’

‘I try not to watch anything about cats,’ Derek says dryly.

There’s a pause before the hallway fills with bubbling laughter which twists through Stiles’ chest because the girl must know about Derek’s wolfiness to catch his irony. ‘Jesus, Derek,’ the girl says (probably while running her hands over his biceps and looking up at him through her eyelashes, Stiles thinks bitterly), ‘did you just make a joke?’

‘If you had to ask then probably not.’

The girl laughs again, and Stiles is done with listening to it, so he swings quickly up the stairs. Derek is in the hallway, locking his apartment door, one arm wrapped around the girl. She’s beautiful, Stiles registers through his haze of envy, all gorgeous long hair and pouty lips. She looks perfect wearing Derek’s leather jacket, pressed up against his sculpted shoulder. Stiles is sodden and splotchy in comparison.

He can’t believe he was *stupid* enough to be scared for Derek last night when he was obviously out picking up girls and not giving a single shit about Stiles.

Derek and the girl turn to face Stiles, and the girl has the gall to hold up a hand and say ‘hi,’ like it’s no big deal that she’s clearly been here boning his sort-of-maybe-ex boyfriend while he’s been at work nearly *dying.*

Stiles crosses his arms across his chest and glares pointedly at the arm that rests across the girl’s shoulders, the fingers rubbing circles into her collarbone. ‘Wow, Derek. I see you haven’t wasted any time,’ he grits out. ‘You’ll be pleased to know I’m just back to get my pillow and then I’ll be leaving, for the foreseeable future so you don’t have to worry about being discrete, not that it seems to be a major concern for you right now.’
The girl’s jaw drops a little and her eyebrows rise at exactly the same time as Derek’s, and then they
do this terrifying simultaneous eye-roll, and Stiles’ stomach plummets as he realises he’s gotten this
very, very wrong.

‘This is my sister, actually,’ Derek says tightly, increasing his grip on her protectively, ‘though it’s
good to know that’s what you think of me.’

'I'm visiting for his birthday,' the girl - Derek's sister, which Stiles can now see in their stupidly
beautiful bone structure - says.

'Doesn't matter, Cor,' Derek mumbles, pink staining his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

Stiles moves his mouth, trying to summon words up, but they stick in his chest at the sight of the hurt
that flashes across Derek’s face before Derek shuts it down.

‘I came straight here from the airport,’ his sister says, eyebrows drawn together in an achingly
familiar frown, ‘I didn’t realise no-one would be here. Derek just came to pick me up.’

'C'mon, let's go.’ Derek turns slightly towards the stairs, eyes glued firmly to the wall somewhere
behind Stiles’ head, and right, Cora… Derek’s only living sister, the one he thought had died in the
fire but who had somehow survived… Derek had told him a little of how they’d found each other
again when both had thought all was lost, but Stiles doesn’t think he’d really understood what that
meant for Derek until now, seeing the way he holds his sister close to him, like her flesh and blood
and breath are miraculous. Like Stiles holds Ria.

Stiles is stunned breathless at the realisation that this is what Derek meant when he’d said people
would be put at risk by him telling Stiles. Derek has already lost everything once. Stiles had wanted
honesty, for Ria’s safety, and Derek had shied away from it for his pack’s safety.

Stiles still doesn't know if he can trust Derek - he hadn't even known it was Derek’s birthday, for
god’s sake - but for the first time, Stiles thinks he begins to understand. And this enlightenment
comes about four minutes after he’s colossally hurt Derek, again. Because of course. One hand
wants to reach for Derek and the other wants to face-palm. He barely refrains from doing either.

‘But… aren’t you two, um…’ Cora makes an obscene hand gesture, but in the face of Derek’s stony
glare instead clears her throat and says, ‘Isn’t this your guy?’

A pause hangs heavily in the air, and Stiles’ heart clenches as he realises Derek probably doesn’t
know how to answer the question. He can feel his shoulders hunching under the weight of the
awkwardness.

‘This is Stiles,’ Derek says, finally.

‘Look, I’m sorry, man. But, uh, in my defence, I don’t have any super-senses to help me out here.
I’m just a puny human who has to take things at face value.’ Stiles blurts out with a weak smile, a
futile attempt to lighten the atmosphere. ‘Speaking of super-senses, shouldn’t you guys have heard
me coming?’

Derek nods to the headphones hanging around Cora’s neck, blaring out the faint, tinny sounds of
music, and then to the rain outside, and shrugs. ‘Ambient noise.’ He stares down at his own toes so
ferociously Stiles is worried he might set them on fire.

‘Ah. Derek…’ Stiles manages, but Derek has already drawn his shoulders together and set his jaw.

‘Look, Stiles, this has been a fun little ego-boost, but we really should go.’ Derek shoulders
forwards, Cora trailing a little behind to shoot a look of absolute derision over her shoulder at Stiles, and yeah, he’s been on the receiving end of a matching ‘gonna punch you in the face any second now’ expression from Derek a few times too, in the early days.

He hears the tail-end of Cora’s, ‘Do I need to kick anyone's ass, here?’, feels the echo of Derek's, 'Only mine,' resonate in his own chest.

'Shit...' The headache returns in full force and he rubs at his temple as he lets himself into his apartment. He still needs time, and he and Derek need to really, really talk. But not now. Not when there are demons to vanquish.

He plugs in his phone, jumping as it buzzes with a text as soon as it comes back to life. He bites his lip, wondering if its from Derek. It’s Lydia, saying she has news about Harris and can Stiles meet her before work in the morning.

Stiles takes a deep breath. He thinks of Manny, in the hospital, thinks of the size and the power of the thing he encountered in the mirror. He thinks if he sends his dad in there now, there's a very real possibility the Sheriff will be killed. Stiles has no idea what he might be getting into here, but he knows he can't do this alone anymore. He needs to put his trust in someone, to take the risk. Someone with strength, and knowledge. Someone who'll stand with him.

He calls Scott.
Careful What You Wish For

Chapter Notes

Posting this early because my schedule is crazy over the next couple of weeks - hoping to still get the next chapter up by next weekend, but just in case...

Warnings for memories of Derek's past in some detail.

P.S. I've added 'miscommunication' to the tags as suggested, good call, thank you.

It feels like Scott should look different to Stiles now, but he’s still the same, familiar, comforting presence he’s always been, standing nervously on the front doorstep in jeans and a hoody, hair mussed up. He shifts on his feet like he’s too anxious to let himself in. ‘Hey,’ he says, and his voice shakes just a little, and it’s all Stiles can do not to wrap him in a huge bro-hug.

‘Hey.’ Stiles steps back to let Scott and Allison into the living room. His dad and Melissa have taken advantage of a rare night off together by going to the movies. Stiles chooses to ignore the entirely-too-gleeful look on his father’s face as they’d walked out of the door, stoically reassuring himself that they’re only going for the popcorn and platonic hand-holding and definitely not to make out in the back row.

Scott clears his throat and toes at the floor. ‘You look good.’

Stiles snorts. ‘Thanks. Been hitting the gym on the reg, trying to make sure the chalk outline of my dead body is on point, ya know?’

Scott purses his mouth like he’s not sure if Stiles is joking. ‘Sorry I didn’t pick up your call, I was running. Allison gave me your message. Said you were in need of an expert in, um, what was it exactly… supernatural fuckwittery?’

‘Yup. That’s why I made you bring Allison and her magical bestiary flash-drive. You’re just the muscle…’ Stiles grabs a can of soda from the fridge and lobs it at Scott’s head, softening even further to his still-stupidly adorable best friend when Scott brings a hand up to catch the can easily, like he always has. ‘Man, this werewolf thing really explains a lot about the way you eat…’

Allison grins in assent as she snags a bottle of water and takes a seat.

Scott smirks. ‘I thought you were mad at me…’

‘Oh I am.’ Stiles leans back against the kitchen counter and pops the tab on his own soda. ‘I’m mad that you lied to me, and trust me buddy, you still have some serious making up to do. But you’re still… you. My best friend, my brother. You’re still the guy who stuck with me through the hardest time of my life. I’m pissed that you kept this from me, but I get that it was new for you, too, and you were scared and trying to figure it out any way you could.’

Scott watches him with dark eyes. ‘And Derek?’

Stiles sighs. ‘Derek... Derek’s a born werewolf. He knows what he's doing. And he spends half his time as a full wolf with red eyes. People are being taken by a wolf with red eyes, and I really want to
have other suspects, man, you have no idea how much I want there to be other suspects, because the
guy is really important to me. But so far…” He mimes a zip motion through the air. ‘Look, I know
you physically couldn't have done this, so it's... not quite so hard to wrap my brain around it. Plus
I've known you ten times longer than I've known him. Realistically, I’ve only known Derek a couple
of months. He’s still such a mystery, in so many ways. I just, I don't know, man.’

Scott tilts his head. ‘But you wanna trust him?’

‘Of course.’ Stiles nods ferociously. ‘With all my heart. But I don’t know what his deal is, Scotty.
And until I know more about him, I can’t risk my daughter. But you… I know you’re just trying to
figure out a way to live as normal a life as possible. And let’s be honest, if you were going to hurt us,
you’d have done it by now.’

‘He wouldn’t,’ Allison says, and Stiles can’t help but warm at the way Scott’s cheeks flush at the
strength of her conviction.

And that's really what it comes down to, Stiles thinks. He shares in that conviction, because he
knows the rest of Scott's heart. Scott's an unlucky kid who has been coming to terms with himself.
Stiles just can't shake the instinctive feeling that Derek is much, much more complex. And maybe it's
unfair to Derek, to feel so differently toward him than he does to Scott, but gut instinct is really all
Stiles has to work with right now. Well, that and the bestiary.

‘Did you find something out? About the wolf that’s been taking people?’ Scott drops down into a
seat at the dining table.

Stiles sits opposite him, palms flat to the table. ‘It’s kind of a long story…’

‘Got nothin’ but time for ya, man.’ Scott settles more fully into his chair, and under his intent, serious
gaze, Stiles begins to talk.

The unburdening is a huge relief. Scott and Allison listen carefully, interrupting only to clarify details
or ask pertinent questions, never with censure or derision. He talks about the dreams, the museum,
Manny, Harris, Derek… He talks about it all.

After he’s done, spent and dizzily light-headed, all he can do is raise an eyebrow as Scott says, ‘I
need to call Deaton,’ and Allison nods as Scott slips from the room.

She catches Stiles’ wide-eyed look of alarm. ‘Don’t worry. He knows about Scott, and Derek. About
most of the supernatural, uh, fuckwittery, actually,’ she smiles softly.

‘Oh,’ Stiles leans back in his chair, trying to process this new piece of information. ‘Well, shit. I
thought Scott was making some sort of self-deprecating dog joke…’

She’s quiet for a moment and then says, ‘I don’t know what’s happening, but we’ll figure this out,
Stiles. Together. You’re not alone.’

The words rush through him, swooping giddily, transforming themselves into remembered words,
whispered into the shell of his ear by Derek, words that had soared through his chest like rare, exotic
birds, weightless, beautiful. ‘You’re not alone.’ Another inhale and Stiles is back in his dad’s kitchen,
and the words fall to the ground. Crumpled paper cranes.

He swallows. ‘Did you bring mountain ash?’

‘Sure,’ she nods. ‘Want to practice?’
Scott returns having arranged to meet Deaton first thing in the morning at the clinic, and Stiles texts Lydia to get her to meet them there. He wants to know everything she knows; all cards on the table. It'll be a rag-tag little bunch, but Stiles feels something like hope in his belly for the first time in ages.

He spends the rest of the evening focused on mastering the best defence he has for himself and his daughter. Allison and Scott are both surprised and impressed by how quickly he progresses with the mountain ash. It must be the intensity of his motivation, Stiles thinks, listening to his daughter’s peaceful breaths through the baby monitor.

Allison supervises Stiles while he seals the window of the room he shares with Ria, and the doorway. It’s utterly bizarre to see Scott press a hand up against the invisible barrier, unable to pass through it, but it reassures him enough to settle down in bed for the night, though he keeps his trusty baseball bat under the bed just in case. Thoughts of Derek inevitably saturate the last of his waking thoughts. He’d meant it when he’d told Scott that the biggest obstacle for him now, in moving forwards with Derek, is how much Derek deliberately holds back. Not just the werewolf side of himself, but everything. Stiles sighs into his pillow, wishing there was a way to know him. He just wants to know…

He wants to pore over the bestiary on his laptop, but the light from the screen would disturb Ria, so he forces himself to close his eyes. Sleep tugs at the edges of his mind, the feeling of being pulled down and down into a dream familiar now, a dropping sensation like turbulence, mild panic that makes him want to clutch at arm-rests or a safety belt that isn’t there. He breathes into this place he recognises as semi-consciousness. He doesn’t know how the dreams happen, or why, but they’ve always at least been informative. Maybe he’ll find out something new.

He succumbs.

_The air is white, ambient sounds oddly muffled._

_It’s snowing, Derek realises in amazement, holding out his hands as the white flakes flutter down from the sky, catching on his clothes, his bag, the trees around them. It hasn’t snowed in Beacon Hills in years, and never in March. It doesn’t even feel cold out. It seems like a miracle._

_He looks over to Laura to see if she’s noticed. She’s staring up at the sky in confusion as snowflakes get caught in her dark hair._

_He glances up, too. It had been sunny enough at school to play basketball on the outside court, but now the sun is hidden behind a wall of cloud. He’s always imagined snow-clouds to be white, powdery, magical things, but these are thick and grey, streaked with black, like smog._

_Laura starts to run._

_The closer they get to home, down the narrow track from the main road where the school bus drops them off, the thicker and faster the flakes fall. Derek notices, suddenly, that the flakes aren’t melting on his skin, and there’s a strange smell in the air that makes his nostrils and throat burn. Something in the depths of his brain is screaming at him that this is all wrong, to turn back or run home faster, something. He can’t even begin to process the sensory overload right now. Suddenly he just wants to hug his mom and have her tell him it’s fine, weird stuff like this happens sometimes. Maybe they can make snow angels together, like they do in the movies._

_As he runs, he tentatively sticks his tongue out to catch a snowflake, like he’d always dreamed of doing when he was a kid. His reflexes are good so it only takes a try or two to catch one._

_He chokes on it._
It isn’t snow. It’s ash.

Stiles watches everything unfold through Derek’s eyes, feels it all through Derek’s heart, but can change nothing. It’s like he’s watching a home video of things that have happened, things that are past; unchangeable. It’s torture.

As the thought floats through his unconscious mind, the view through Derek’s eyes spins and shifts.

The air is cold and clammy. It smells like mold and cooking meat and singed hair, overlaid with a thick, sweet perfume. It’s an expensive brand with heavy base notes, splashed on expansively deliberately to confuse Derek’s sense of smell. The room is dark except for a blinding spotlight trained directly at his eyes. It sears into his corneas so he can’t see anything else around the edges of it. It burns through his closed eyelids. It leaves bright spots popping in his vision whenever he squeezes his eyes shut to get away from it.

He tries again to scrabble at the iron links of his chains uselessly, tearing his fingernails anew so the blood seeps down his hands, over his wrists and down his arms.

He’s used to pain in brutal, intense flashes. He’s used to gritting his teeth and riding it out until his body heals itself. But this time he can’t heal. He’s never had to endure pain over time, never had to know the misery and the exhaustion of pain getting gradually worse with no hope of reprieve. Every time his body tries to heal, the synapses are sparked out by the current of electricity that hums through his skin. It buzzes through his brain and through his blood and in his ears. Derek thinks he’s probably going to die here, in this dank basement room, alone. He thinks it might be preferable to dying when she comes back.

Suddenly there’s a heavy metallic sound that grates over Derek’s bones, and then the slow click of heels descending the concrete staircase. The smell of the perfume gets stronger. Derek wants to be sick, retches, but there’s nothing in his system to expel. He can’t see anything in the abyss surrounding the spotlight, but he can hear the footsteps getting closer, and he instinctively tries to twist away. A laugh rings out. It’s cruel and sharp and it bounces off the walls of the concrete cell, echoing back to Derek’s ears a thousand times louder. Abruptly, the buzzing stops and the current dies down. It takes a few seconds for Derek’s body to start healing itself, the familiar sensation of flesh knitting back together a sick, sweet relief from the constant anguish.

It must show on his face, because suddenly there’s a swift jab to his gut, and more electricity, only this time it’s more, so much more, and god it hurts. It’s like every muscle in his body has cramped up in terribly synchronicity, contracting and contracting until it feels like something has to give, has to snap, maybe his spine. Derek prays for it. His skin burns, it’s aflame, and surely it shouldn’t be possible for a creature to feel this much pain without dying?

The current disappears. Derek slumps down, the wolfsbane laced iron bands cutting cruelly into his wrists as he bears all his weight on them. He hears the tendons ripping but there’s nothing he can do. He catches movement at the edge of his vision. Some sort of taser or cattleprod being twirled lightly through fingertips as though it’s nothing more than a cheerleader’s baton. He supposes there’s not much difference in Kate’s eyes; it’s all just a form of entertainment to her.

Soft fingers caress his cheek. ‘Oh, Derek…’ Kate leans in to him, her breath a brand on his neck. She watches as the burns on his skin bubble and then heal over in front of her. Her face is alight, beatific. ‘You were made for pain, weren’t you, sweet monster. Look at you.’ She rakes her painted nails down his battered chest. Her hair brushes his shoulder. He used to crave the softness of it, the intimacy of it against his bare skin. Now it makes his stomach clench in revulsion. ‘I’m not really surprised,’ she muses conversationally. ‘Your body was all you were ever good for. What a shame for your family. If you’d had two brain cells in your pretty head maybe you’d have figured me out.
sooner. Maybe you’d have saved them.’ She cocks her head, taunting him. ‘But you failed them, didn’t you Derek? You were stupid and blind, and you let them all down… Too obsessed with your dick, like the animal you are…’

He feels hands on his ass, on his groin, as she bends to lick a wide stripe up his stomach and he thrashes violently to get away from her, he can’t stand her on his skin, knowing this is how she’d undone them all.

She throws her head back and laughs as she presses the metal tip of the prod into his chest, right over his heart, and shocks him again.

Two nights later he half-staggers, half-crawls back to the motel room he’s renting with Laura. The room is mercifully empty when he gets there.

He drags himself into the bathroom and looks at his reflection in the mirror. The mouth Kate had kissed, the skin she’d touched, the body that had turned out to be useless in saving his family. He loathes everything about it. He sets the water to scalding and steps under the spray, trying to rub off every trace of her and of his wrongdoings. He’s not sure if the hot water running down his face is from the shower or if he’s crying. He looks at his own hands on his skin, at the broken nails and the ingrained blood in the creases around his knuckles.

Kate’s hands are perfectly manicured, pale and soft, with beautifully maintained nails.

Derek’s hands have never been instruments of anything but tenderness or affection.

She’d called him a monster, but he knows who the monster is.

Stiles hears a sound, knows it’s his own low sob, into his pillow, feels the cut of his sheets where he’s twisted his fingers into them viciously.

Derek and Laura stand in the twisted wreckage of their childhood home. They cling to each other, because there’s no-one else left to cling to. Everyone is buried, now, safely delivered back to the cool sanctity of the earth.

Everyone except poor Peter, trapped inside the shell of his burned body. But at least he’s safe, too, now, being taken care of in a special facility. Laura has made sure of it. She’s a good alpha, even though she shouldn’t have to be yet.

She is keeping Derek safe too, by making the decision to move.

Derek hasn’t had the courage to tell her that all this loss is his fault. He can’t tell her about Kate, about how she had called and offered him comfort and instead had tormented him with what she’d done.

He wishes Kate had killed him, too. He wishes she’d let him burn. It should have been him.

He wants to reach for Laura, but he feels too guilty to ask for any comfort from her. He can’t ever tell her.

He’ll lose her, he’s sure of it. He can’t lose her.

She is everything he has. His whole life, now.

Then one day Laura is gone.
Derek spins.

Stiles is aware, on some level, of hot tears on his cheeks, cold sweat pooling on his back. He feels all of Derek’s pain, all of his loss. He's no stranger to grief, but dear god, how has Derek survived this?

Anger.

Anger burns in the pit of his stomach as white-hot and fierce as the fire that destroyed his house.

Anger is his constant companion. Pain, too, and guilt, and loneliness, but his most faithful, most reliable friend is rage.

It drives him mad and keeps him sane. He’d be lost without it.

It sharpens his senses, kills his compassion, obliterates his mercy and deafens him to Peter’s pleas as he tears into the tendons of his throat.

The anger is extinguished along with Peter’s breath.

Redemption.

Redemption tastes like blood.

Derek stands over Peter’s shattered body, in the shadow of the house by the lake where Peter once lived with his mate.

He wonders who he’ll be now, without the burn of the anger inside him. He goes to the edge of the lake, to the little wooden jetty that Peter’s mate used to like to dive from, and crouches to see if his face has changed, and that’s when the first wave of new power hits him.

In the ripple of the water he watches as his blue eyes bleed through with red.

By the time Stiles opens his eyes to the first rays of light lancing through the curtains, the mountain ash barrier undisturbed, he feels like he's lived a whole other lifetime. In a way he has; Derek's lifetime. Stiles' heart is breaking but he doesn't know if it's for Derek or for himself. He knows more, now, than Derek would probably have told him in a decade, and he feels guilty, hot and liquid in his stomach, at the violation. He counts his breaths in and out, trying not to freak out at the memory of Derek killing Peter. Of Derek's blue eyes. But Stiles just saw Peter the other day, he reassures himself, and Peter was alive and skeeving, so how could it all be real? He's sceptical, mistrustful of his own mind.

He decides to try to discretely bring some of it up with Deaton, who is apparently an unlikely oracle for all things occult. Super-weird, if you ask Stiles, given his day job is mostly sticking thermometers up dogs' butts, but obviously Beacon Hills is not your regular humdrum little town, and Deaton is not your regular humdrum veterinarian. He hopes Deaton is more forthcoming than he's seemed to be on the few occasions Stiles has met him, picking Scott up from the clinic. If nothing else, he's becoming increasingly desperate for a peaceful night's sleep.
Derek floats in a space somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. He’s aware of himself here, of
the form and texture of his memories and his emotions, but he can keep himself separate enough
from the nebulous shapes of them to allow a more objective examination than when he’s fully
awake, when it all becomes a part of him again, confusing and unclear.

He’s actually grateful for Cora’s visit because she has at least distracted his betas, who are supremely
pissed with him after their ill-advised field trip to Peter’s old house by the lake. The discovery of the
revenge spiral has created more questions than it’s answered, and to have it followed up with an
attack from that crazy looking scaly thing and Peter’s subsequent escape… Oh, and the nearly
drowning, too. Yeah, not Derek’s finest alpha hour.

They’re right to be angry with him; he’d made them follow through on a plan they’d all disagreed
with, after all. He’s angry with himself, too, not because of the plan so much, but more because he’d
been so distracted he’d let a lot of it catch him off guard. He’d been caught up in Stiles, as usual, and
he’s starting to hate how out of control it feels.

It’s bad enough he sees Stiles in his dreams – or at least feels him, the essence of him, present there
with him, but now he’s seeing Stiles everywhere, too. Out in the preserve the other night, the
reminder of Stiles had been everywhere he’d looked. The retroussé turn of his nose echoed in the
slope where the land meets the lake, the pixie curve of his jaw in the arching of the branches
overhead, the tree roots making a map of the fine network of his veins. He really thought he’d caught
Stiles – a scent or a sound, both or neither - on the breeze, but when he’d looked he wasn’t there.

In the water he could have sworn he’d felt Stiles’ hands on him, his strong, safe hands, pushing and
pulling him to the surface. He knows he did. He also knows he can’t have. He’s reasonably certain
he’s losing his mind.

He’s heard stories, of course. They all heard them as pups on pack nights, sprawled around a fire,
tucked into their parents’ laps and under their arms, cheeks glowing with love and reflected flames in
the purpling evening light. Werewolves love for life, his father was fond of saying, gazing over the
dancing fire to his mate. A heartbond. A tether. A love that adapts to flow around whatever obstacles
it faces to always remain.

They’re not an entirely impractical species; often if a mate is lost or taken while the pair are relatively
young, the remaining werewolf can love again, the old love receding just enough to allow a new
love to spark and burn alongside it, the opportunity for a new family to forge. But in some cases –
and it isn’t lost on Derek how often people describe him as ferociously stubborn – it rages on,
blistering, scorching, unchecked, burning the werewolf up with loss and madness.

Like it had with Peter.

Derek detects the scent of Cora’s concern, creeping down the hallway like fog, long before the
purposeful rap of her knuckles on the door brings him fully into consciousness.

He groans pulls the comforter over his head like a shield. ‘Nope.’

She ignores him and pushes the door open, rich coffee overpowering the smell of worry that seeps from her. ‘Yup.’ There’s a scrape as she sets the mug down somewhere, and then the comforter lifts as she wriggles her way underneath it and into the crook of one of his arms.

He heaves a long-suffering sigh, using it as an excuse to pull her closer, her dark hair spilling over the pillow. ‘Is there any particular reason I’m not asleep anymore?’

‘Yeah,’ Cora says, pinching his side lightly. ‘Sun’s up and you’re wasting valuable hours of stalking moodily across horizons like some sort of Byronic antihero.’

Derek glares at her, although the effect is somewhat dampened by the dimness of the light that diffuses through the comforter. ‘I do not stalk moodily across horizons.’

She lifts one eyebrow into a devastating arch that Derek recognises all too well as a Hale trait. ‘Have you tried calling him?’

Derek thunks his head back into his pillows. ‘He asked for space.’

‘Alright, so don’t sit on his face while you do it.’

It startles a small chuff of a laugh from Derek’s chest. ‘Jesus, Cora.’

She lets the silence fall over them for a minute, soft and thick like the comforter that makes up the edge of their little bubble. ‘Boyd seems to think it’ll all work out.’

Derek snorts. ‘Last I checked he wasn’t actually an oracle.’

Cora hums. ‘If anyone could intimidate fate into doing things their way it’d be Boyd.’ She turns slightly towards him. ‘I’m still rooting for you guys.’

He can taste her hope, sparkling across his tongue like starbursts. He closes his eyes. The blanket covering them narrows his world down enough that it’s distilled into something clearer and less muddied. More honest. ‘You shouldn’t. I don’t know what I was thinking.’

She lifts up a little and props herself up on an elbow. ‘Are you serious? He’s adorable! And feisty. I thought he was gonna make your balls into a bowtie when he thought you’d brought a girl home. You need someone who’s not afraid to stand up to you. Also did I mention adorable?’

‘It’s not that. He’s still…’ Derek swallows, the effervescent hope turned sour in his mouth. ‘…good. But he’s right. Everyone around me… Everyone gets hurt.’

She presses her forehead to his cheek. When she speaks her voice is calm, but there’s urgency in the fingers that grip onto his arm and his chest. ‘That’s not… It won’t always be that way, Der. This was a happy house, when we were kids. It can be that way again.’

Derek is too overcome to answer her, unable to voice even a fragment of the dream he’s had in mind since he started renovating the house; one that takes the happiest days of his childhood, with dappled sunlight and running through the woods and so much laughter, and interweaves them with two sets of golden-brown eyes and two matching smiles, the best parts of his past forming a foundation for something good in his future.
He keeps telling himself it’s just a pipe dream. He’s not meant for precious, beautiful things, he can’t take care of them.

But he can’t quite let the dream go yet.

Maybe he’ll be able to once he gets a hard ‘no’ from Stiles.

He debates whether or not he should call Stiles the whole time he’s in the shower, so focused on his internal struggle he barely pays any attention to his betas until he’s fiddling with the overly complicated coffee machine, trying to get himself another strong cup of coffee before rinsing Cora’s mug ready for when she’s out of the one working shower in the whole house.

He suddenly registers Isaac’s heartbeat, strong and a little elevated.

‘So…’ Isaac says, awkwardly lounging against the kitchen counter, the picture of pseudo-casual, studied nonchalance. ‘Your sister, huh?’

Derek freezes for a second, then turns, very slowly, and glares, very hard.

Isaac’s nervous laugh soon fades, and mere moments later he’s backing out of the room, a sickly shade of white. Derek gives a little satisfied nod from where he’s still propped up against the kitchen counter.

He feels a little more like himself. He heads back to his room, still framed with un-plastered stud walls, and crouches on the unfinished floor to straighten up the mess of blankets that make up his bed. His heart jumps into his throat when he finally catches sight of the display on his phone, blinking the arrival of a new text.

Stiles wants to meet.

*  

In the grey early morning, Stiles’ mind feels like it's in a hundred fragmented pieces, each one containing a remembered dream turned translucent in the light of day. He’d hunched over coffee for hours before dawn, trying to reassemble his shattered night.

Every dream was of Derek, although nothing as clear as those first fevered, fretful dreams that filled his bones with horror. He’d dreamed of dark haired women – Derek’s mother, perhaps, and a teenage girl, too. Derek had wept for her. Maybe she was another sister. It was all too fleeting to hold on to.

But then, sprinkled like sugar over the painful shards of the other dream, slivers of sweetness...

*Stiles spread under Derek in an unfamiliar bed that smells of them both. Derek’s fingers on him, in him, practised, sure. Stiles coming over the sheets in a shiver at the sensation of teeth at the nape of his neck. Derek’s satisfied rumble and Stiles’ sleepy assertion that Derek had started it so Derek would be sleeping in the cuddle puddle, like it’s an argument they’ve had a thousand times before.*

*Fierce bickering at Home Depot over whether to get Jasmine White paint or Apple Blossom White paint, an intense, whispered stand-off that ends with them grabbing whatever is closest and running to the car to kiss each other feverishly over the centre console.*

*Ria’s laughter as Derek chases her through the trees of the preserve. Stiles watching from the porch of the restored Hale house, sipping a cold beer, smiling.*
Derek’s lips on his bare skin. The deep certainty of love.

Stiles shakes his head clear and downs the cold coffee, hoping the unpleasant bitterness will shock him back to himself.

He considers the possibility that it’s his guilt making an appearance through his subconscious. He remembers the look on Derek’s face in his apartment, and then again in the hall when he’d seen him with Cora. He’d been so hurt. Stiles is hurt too, and angry, and scared, and he needs more time to work through all of those things, especially since he still hasn’t really gotten to the truth of everything that’s been happening. But despite all that, he cares deeply about Derek, and he can’t just switch that off. His head tells him to be wary; he doesn’t really know who Derek is, or what he’s capable of. His head reminds him of glowing blue eyes bleeding red. His head is smart. But his heart. His heart is steadfast and stubborn, and it still wants Derek.

He closes his eyes, trying to box the overwhelming confusion off so he can deal with it later. He needs all his focus to be on this meeting with Deaton and Lydia. He leaves Ria with his dad, whose day off it is, grateful that he doesn’t have to take her to day-care. His dad feels like the safest place for her right now. He leaves a message on Harris’s phone to say he won’t be coming into work today, hoping that Derek’s vaguely threatening call to Harris all those weeks ago will buy him a little more time before Harris tries to fire him.

Sitting next to Scott on a plastic chair in a room that smells like antiseptic cleanser, the walls papered with informational posters about flea remedies, it feels oddly like he’s waiting for a job interview. There’s a low, anticipatory hum of nerves through his limbs. Allison murmurs urgently into her phone in the opposite corner. Stiles isn’t sure who she’s talking to, but judging by the crease in her brow it isn’t good.

Happily, Scott proves to be an excellent distraction since it turns out that now the floodgates have opened, he can’t wait to share every single detail of life as a werewolf with Stiles. He vacillates from puppyish overexcitement to bashful pride when he talks about his enhanced abilities, sneakers scuffing at the linoleum floor of the back room of the clinic as they wait for Deaton to get done sharpening his cat neutering equipment, or some such horrific thing.

‘I mean I freaked out a little ‘cause, like, how do you explain to your dentist that you have retractable fangs, right?’ Scott says earnestly.

Stiles does a sort of full-upper-body nod-shrug move because yeah, he can see that might lead to awkward questions, and Scott keeps talking.

‘But then I remembered that they banned me from my dentist anyway after my last check up because he asked the nurse for suction and I totally thought he meant me, so I sucked his finger for like thirty seconds, which, okay, sort of mortifying. I figure the werewolf strength probably extends to teeth though, so as long as I floss every day I – what?’

Stiles stares at Scott unblinkingly, mouth open. ‘I… Seriously? He asked for suction and you… Okay, I have no idea how you’ve made it this far without me around to keep you alive and out of jail, Scott.’

Scott just flashes his – admittedly perfectly adorable – smile, but it fades into a frown when he cocks his head towards Allison who is staring at her now-silent phone, anxiously chewing on her lower lip.

‘What?’ Stiles sits forwards.

‘News is spreading,’ Scott says. ‘Among the hunters. The disappearances, the wolf sightings. A
couple of the hunting families think the Argents should have handled it already.’

Stiles raises his eyebrows. ‘And by ‘handled it’, they mean…’

‘Handled Derek.’ The look in Scott’s eyes confirms Stiles’ suspicions that they’re not talking about a few measured questions over a cup of java.

His stomach lurches violently. ‘Oh. Well, fuck. But there’s no proof.’

Scott studies his shoes intently. ‘I know. But some of the other hunting families are… Well, they’re not as progressive as Chris and Allison. They see werewolves as animals. Constant threats that should be neutralised as soon as there’s even a chance one of us has gone rogue. They’re going to come here, if something isn’t done soon. To handle it themselves.’

Allison turns to face them, her face ashy. Stiles opens his mouth to say something, but is stopped short by Lydia turning up just as Deaton quietly appears to beckon them towards a doorway into a private room, into which they trudge in grim procession. Stiles mashes out a brief message to Derek, asking him to meet in the parking lot, the echo of Kate’s manacles ringing in his ears. Derek deserves to know if more people are after his blood.

He shoves his phone in his hoody pocket and leans against a metal counter-top, folding his arms over his chest. He can’t help but watch Lydia as she perches up on a tall stool and smooths out her skirt, her face pale but otherwise unruffled, and somewhere in his brain some puzzle pieces slide around and slot into place.

‘You know about Scott,’ he blurts out, unable to hold back until general niceties have been exchanged.

She blinks at him for a second. ‘Yes.’

‘And Allison? And Derek?’

She nods. ‘Yes.’

‘For how long?’

‘I guessed just after you introduced us,’ she tucks a stray strand of her hair behind her ear. ‘I already had some knowledge, and Scott just fit with what I already knew.’

‘And you never told me?’ Stiles wonders how many times he’s said those words over the last couple of days. He feels pretty proud of himself for taking it in his stride when he’d discovered Deaton is a druid and the emissary of the Hale pack, and had made himself known to Scott shortly after Derek returned to Beacon Hills from his soul-searching mission. Stiles suspects he’s detaching himself from it all so he can have a truly epic freak out down the line at some point.

Lydia shrugs and gives him an arch look. ‘I’m not that interested in your life. Besides, it wasn’t my secret to tell. I tried to give you a heads up when I realised you were getting serious about Derek. But Harris…’ Her eyes narrow dangerously. ‘Harris is my business.’

Stiles straightens up and begins to pace, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his pants. ‘Harris is everyone’s fucking business, if what I found in his basement is anything to go by.’

Lydia nods. ‘Allison told me. I’ve been watching him for a while. I didn’t realise you were too, until yesterday. You think he’s connected to the disappearances?’
‘Definitely. I just don’t know how, exactly. So. Tell us what you know.’ Stiles comes to a halt on the opposite side of the metal examination table to her.

Lydia reaches into a tote bag and pulls out a tablet, opening up some sort of spreadsheet which details all of Harris’s shady behaviour, and Stiles can’t help but fall a tiny bit in love with her. ‘Here…’ She points at one part of the screen. ‘He used the new exhibit as an excuse to order in boxes from museums that don’t exist, and as far as I can tell, none of them ever left the museum when he cancelled the exhibit. Here, you can see that sums of money have gone missing. They’re small amounts, but regular, and he refuses to explain them. He gets rid of any staff member that asks questions. And at the meeting he took a call, so I followed him. It sounded like a woman. He was scared of her I think. Whatever’s going on it sounds like he’s in way over his head. Kept asking to meet her face to face, until eventually she agreed to meet him in a couple of days. I noted down the details.’ Lydia taps out a text and within a couple of seconds everyone’s phones ping as they receive it.

‘Alright,’ Scott says, rubbing his hand over his face. ‘So when he meets whoever this woman is… we’ll be waiting.’

‘And do what, in the meantime?’ Allison asks.

‘I’ll keep working on the bestiary with you,’ Lydia says, and then at Stiles’ questioning glance, ‘I’m translating it from archaic Latin.’

‘You know archaic Latin?’ Stiles stares at her, impressed and a little turned on.

Lydia smirks. ‘I got bored with regular Latin, in high school.’

Stiles practically bounces on his feet. ‘That is so awesome. Can you teach me?’

Scott snorts and nudges Allison. ‘How are we friends with this pair of weirdos?’

‘Uh, says the werewolf to the hunter, fuck you very much,’ Stiles retorts. ‘Alright, so what do I do? Keep having these crazy dreams?’

He jumps when Deaton clears his throat gently from a corner. Honestly, he’d forgotten he was there. The guy’s nearly as expert a lurker as Derek.

‘Can you tell me more about the dreams?’ Deaton asks gently.

Stiles takes a deep breath and goes through it all from the beginning, leaving out the part about the sex dreams and the details from the dreams about Derek’s past.

‘And the dreams are always about Derek?’ Deaton taps his fingers against his chin thoughtfully.

‘If I’m not dreaming about the monster…’ Stiles sighs. ‘Unless the monster is Derek and literally all I ever dream about is Derek. Is there…’ He watches Deaton’s face carefully. ‘Is there a chance it could be him?’

Deaton frowns in contemplation. ‘It could be,’ he says, and Stiles’ heart sinks. ‘I don’t see why he’d do this, though. He doesn’t behave as though he’s gone rogue, and there’s no logical reason for him to take people. It doesn’t make any sense. It’s only the sightings that force me to consider him a possibility at all.’

‘But you are considering him,’ Stiles clarifies flatly.
‘I always consider every possibility.’ Deaton says, frustratingly vague.

Stiles pushes a hand through his hair. ‘And what are the possibilities for what’s happening to me?’

Deaton purses his lips. ‘I have some ideas, but I need to speak with a friend before I’ll know anything for sure. I’ll leave today to talk to him, I shouldn’t be more than a few days.’

‘As emissary of the Hale pack,’ Allison interrupts, ‘you should know that there’s a good chance hunters will be here by then, for Derek.’

Deaton nods gravely. ‘Who?’

‘The Kriegers. Maybe others.’

Stiles gets the impression that the Kriegers are seriously not nice people. Deaton seems to agree. ‘I’ll hurry.’

‘You think my dreams are connected somehow?’ Stiles grips the edge of the metal table so tightly his knuckles turn white, reflected in the silvery surface.

Deaton meets his gaze. ‘Everything is connected.’

Stiles tries to press him for more, but Deaton is a rock. A rock who speaks mainly in maxims, it seems. He makes statements, not small talk, and resolutely refuses to allow Stiles to dredge further details from the enigmatic murk of those statements, no matter how much Stiles fishes for them.

Stiles produces his own folder of scrawled thoughts, and Deaton bends over the symbols in interest. He thinks they look familiar, maybe a variation on ancient Inuit markings, and takes a copy of them so he can research further.

In the end they agree that Allison should go straight to her father to see if he can hold off any other hunters, and that Lydia should go to work as normal and keep an eye on Harris’s movements. Stiles feels guilty letting her go alone today, but he needs to be near Ria, and his body is bowed with accumulated exhaustion from all his broken sleep. Deaton leaves Scott in charge of the clinic and disappears, presumably to lurk his way towards his mystery friend, and Stiles assumes that means they’re all dismissed for now and heads back to his car.

For all that his limbs feel almost numb with tiredness, his mind is humming like a live wire as he runs through everything again and again. He’s so preoccupied that he manages to severely misjudge how close the kerb is, trip over fresh air and bang his shin on the tail pipe of his car. He curses as he bends to examine the rip in his skin, visible through a shredded tear in his pants.

‘You okay?’

Stiles jumps at the sound of Derek’s voice, wincing as he jars his shin. ‘Shit, fuck. Ow. Hi. I meant hi. Hi. And yes. I’m okay, thank you.’ He can’t help but stare at Derek. He always does when he’s been away from him for several hours, like his mind simply can’t hold on to how gorgeous he really is unless he’s right there in front of him, real and solid. Even unshaven and hunched into himself in a clear attempt to hold himself back from touching Stiles, fuck, he’s gorgeous.

‘I can help. I…’ Derek gestures towards Stiles’ shin, where blood is starting to seep out into the fabric of his chinos. ‘Can I?’

Stiles shrugs. ‘You’re not gonna go all Narnia on me and whip out a vial of healing potion that Santa gave you, are you?’
Derek sighs and says, ‘Shut up, Stiles,’ mildly.

‘What? Dude, after the week I’ve had, I believe that literally anything is possible.’ Stiles waves his hands around for dramatic effect.

Derek gives him eyebrows that are, Stiles feels, unnecessarily judgemental, and points at the front seat of Stiles’ jeep. ‘Sit.’

Stiles does as he’s told, opening the door and hoisting himself sideways into the seat so his feet are dangling over the front tire.

Derek carefully places a warm, large hand, palm down on his shin. Almost immediately the sharp pain ebbs away and Stiles feels floaty and sort of golden. ‘Oh.’

Derek glances up at his face and then back down at his hand, where black tendrils are snaking up past his wrist into his forearm. ‘Better?’

‘Mmm,’ Stiles sighs in contentment. ‘That’s nifty.’

The corner of Derek’s mouth quirks. ‘I can’t heal it permanently. Just take the pain temporarily. No vial of healing potion from Santa.’

Stiles flashes back to Derek examining his hands in the shower, comparing them to Kate’s. He remembers her voice. You were made for pain. He clears his throat. ‘Does it hurt you to do that?’

Derek shrugs. Stiles reaches out to grab his wrist. ‘I don’t want it to hurt you.’

Stiles squirms under the intensity of Derek’s gaze, dropping his wrist quickly. All his physical instincts are crying out to hug Derek, to comfort and be comforted, but intellectually he still doesn’t trust him. He tries to distract himself from the urge to throw himself into Derek’s arms. ‘Could Scott do this?’

‘Yeah. I can teach him how.’ Derek bites his lip in a moment of uncharacteristic vulnerability. ‘You and Scott are good, now?’

Derek looks down at the ground sharply. ‘Of course I do. I was actually going to say that I’m glad.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles picks at the frayed tear in his pants. ‘Okay. Thank you. Look, about the other day. The whole thing with Cora. I was a dick, and I’m sorry.’

Derek stares at him. It makes something hot and liquid trickle down Stiles’ spine, right to the base of his abdomen. Derek clears his throat carefully. ‘I know you’ve heard things about me, that you think I’m some sort of player, but—’

‘It’s not you, okay,’ Stiles interrupts with a flail of his hands, his impulsive, perpetual motion a stark contrast to Derek’s careful, controlled stillness. ‘It isn’t anything you’ve done. I just, uh. I don’t get it. Me. I don’t get why you’re settling for me.’

Derek frowns, his brow faintly creased in adorable bafflement. ‘It’s not settling,’ he says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. ‘I like you.’
Stiles scoffs, aware his face is cycling through a range of incredulous expressions right now. ‘Right, like it’s that simple.’

Derek blinks at him. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Uh, no, not really.’ Stiles can feel heat settle in his cheeks in uneven splotches.

‘Humans over-complicate things.’

Stiles snorts. ‘Yeah, that’s rich coming from the most complicated person I’ve ever met in my life. And I’m friends with Lydia Martin, so.’

Derek sighs and rolls his eyes in his familiar, affectionate way. ‘Fine. I like your hands.’

Stiles stops waving his hands around long enough to stare at them. ‘Say what?’

‘I like your hands,’ Derek says, slightly strained. ‘I like your laugh. And… I like the way your heart beats.’

*I like the way your heart beats.* Stiles can’t tell if he means it literally, or if it’s supposed to be some sort of comment on his moral character.

Stiles mouth opens and closes several times before he manages, ‘Is that some sort of metaphor?’

Derek hits him with another eye roll. ‘Always over-complicating…’

Silence falls between them, and for a minute they’re just two awkward boys, scuffing at the ground, trying to figure out their feelings.

‘Ria isn’t a complication,’ Stiles says softly.

‘No,’ Derek responds. ‘I understand, you know? How important it is to protect the people you love.’

Stiles swallows thickly. He wants to trust Derek so badly his chest aches with it. ‘Allison says hunters are coming,’ he blurts out. ‘Unfriendly types, you know? They’re coming for you. Because of the disappearances. It’s actually why I wanted to see you. To warn you.’

Derek nods slowly, his eyes flashing from blue to red for a split second, then back again.

Stiles watches, wondering how to figure out if there’s truth to any of the dreams. He takes a deep breath. ‘Derek… I need to know… What color were your eyes, when you were a beta? Like, what color did they glow?’

Derek looks at him for a long moment. Stiles watches the muscles of his throat work as he swallows, then he opens his mouth and says, ‘Blue. They used to flash blue.’

Later, Derek thinks back over what he could have said - *should* have said - to Stiles that afternoon in an unromantic parking lot, under the steady scrutiny of those beautiful, lambent eyes, when Stiles asked why Derek liked him.

‘Because,’ he’d wanted to say, ‘you make me feel like the moonlight does - strong and ancient and hopeful, and myself.’ But the words were fireflies caught in the prison of his ribs, not ready to be released into the world in case their lifespans are too short.
He holds them in his chest, carefully, tenderly. He wonders if he’ll ever be able to give them to Stiles.

But he thinks of the look on Stiles’ face when Derek had said ‘blue’.

Derek isn’t ashamed of what he is. He's fiercely proud of being a werewolf. It's a gift. He'll never apologise for it.

But the things he's done...

Stiles knows for sure, now, that he’s taken an innocent life. He could have tried to explain about Paige, but the words still sound hollow, even now. He's never forgiven himself for it. How could he ask forgiveness of anyone else?
I'm so sorry I haven't had the chance to respond to your comments yet, life is going way faster than I am right now, but I really, really appreciate them all.

At the moment there are four more chapters and an epilogue written/outlined, but I haven't made that official yet because sometimes what I sit down intending to write isn't what actually gets written at all, but it will be somewhere around that mark, and you all are amazing for sticking with it, frankly!

Stiles strokes his long fingers through Ria's damp curls and settles her closer into the crook of his neck, making a cradle of his arms so he can shift his weight to his other leg and begin rocking her again. Her eyes have fluttered closed with exhaustion but her breaths are still shuddery from the crying fit that had begun half an hour before when she'd demanded first Erica and then Derek, and Stiles had been able to produce neither. He and Ria have been at his dad’s for two days, and the abrupt change in her routine must have begun to take its toll.

He starts to walk with her up and down, in front of the window.

In the armchair opposite, the Sheriff takes a swig from his bottle of beer. ‘Ready to talk about what’s up with you and Derek?’

Stiles bounces Ria gently, ignoring the burn beginning to build in his upper arms. ‘Not much to talk about.’

John sets his beer down and wipes the back of his hand over his mouth. ‘You sure you’re my son? Cos my kid always has something to talk about. Can’t usually shut him up, in fact. He just goes on and on and—’

‘Ugh, fine.’ Stiles licks his lips, trying to choose his words carefully. ‘It’s complicated, but. I was really starting to like him. And I think he feels the same about me. Then I found out he’s been… not lying, exactly, but not exactly honest either.’

‘Okay…’ The Sheriff rests his elbows on the arms of the chair and steeples his fingers under his chin. ‘So what’s bothering you, the lying, or whatever he’s been lying about?’

‘Both. Though I think he was working up to coming clean on his own. But, uh, I’m pretty sure that he’s… hurt people. In the past.’ It’s far too complex to even try to approach the subject of a possible link to the disappearances.

‘Have you asked him why?’ John looks at him steadily, much more calmly than Stiles would have expected.

‘Asked him why?’ He cards his fingers through Ria’s hair again, trying to soften the pang that jars through him when he thinks about Derek.

‘Why he hurt people?’
‘Does it matter?’ Stiles tightens his arms around the warm weight of his daughter.

John shrugs. ‘Sometimes I hurt people. It’s part of the job. Hell, I’ve killed people, Stiles.’

‘Derek’s not a cop.’

‘I’m aware,’ John says dryly. ‘I hurt you, son. Not being around enough after we lost your mom.’

‘It’s… that’s different.’

‘I’m just saying that intent matters. Not everything is black and white, right or wrong. Sometimes good people make dumb choices or get backed into a corner. People fuck up. I did, and you forgave me. And vice versa. Might be worth trying to understand what’s going on with him, before you write it off as a lost cause.’

Stiles purses his lips suspiciously. ‘You been watching Doctor Phil again, old man?’

John shakes his head. ‘No. But I did parent a wise-ass kid through some really stupid teenage decisions and watched him come out the other end a pretty decent guy.’

‘Huh.’ Stiles is surprised. ‘I thought for sure you’d go all Bad Grandpa. Hunt him down, pop a cap in his ass, the whole shebang.’

‘Look, kiddo, if the situation warrants it I’ll shoot him in the kneecaps, you just say the word. But you obviously like him. Both of you.’ John nods at Ria and takes another deep pull of his beer. ‘You know your mom always said that the great paradox of parenting that no-one ever tells you about, is that you get this little tiny human that you love with all your heart, more than you ever thought it was possible, and you get about twenty minutes to have that all to yourself. Then you gotta spend the rest of your life figuring out how to let them go. You have to share them, watch them grow, let them make mistakes. The aim of the game is to give this human, that you love more than life, the necessary skills so they don’t need you anymore.’

Stiles buries his nose in Ria’s curls, breathing her in. The words resonate with a bittersweet truth somewhere in his chest, although the sweet far outweighs the bitter. His father stands and puts a hand on Stiles’ shoulder.

‘You’re not sixteen anymore, Stiles. I can’t tell you what you should do, I gotta let you figure this out for yourself. I trust your judgement. You’re a grown man, and a good one at that. You’ll figure out what’s right.’

Stiles sucks in a lungful of air, his hands suddenly a little shaky. Part of him wants to beg his dad to just please, please tell him what to do already. Absolve him of the responsibility of making the right choice, take the weight off his shoulders. And part of him – the bigger part of him – is buoyed by his father’s faith. As he slowly tracks across the floor, overly-warm with Ria tucked into his chest, he has a moment of slow lucidity.

He decides to forgive himself for holding onto his own faith in Derek being, fundamentally, a good man. He knows his heart will hold onto that belief until there’s indisputable proof to the contrary. He’s been berating himself, feeling naïve or stupid for that. Not anymore. It’s just who he is; the man that he’s grown up to be. If his dad can be proud of that, maybe he should be, too. It doesn’t mean he has to do anything crazy, or take risks with Ria. It just means he accepts that his stubborn, loyal heart still believes in Derek. The decision to allow himself to have hope makes him feel like he’s coming back into himself from somewhere far away, and he’s filled with a fresh determination to figure this whole thing out once and for all.
He swallows, returning his dad’s shoulder squeeze with a tender pat of his own, hoping it’ll convey all the things he’s too raw to say in a steady voice, like thank you and I love you and I’ll always need you, are you crazy? Instead he clears his throat and offers up a wobbly grin. ‘Definitely too much Doctor Phil, Dad. Wow.’

*

Derek strides into the living room and shoves a sheaf of papers into the huddle of his betas.

‘What are these?’ Erica blinks down at the printed sheets in confusion.

‘Plane tickets.’ To somewhere far away, with a return date far in the future. Derek’s heard rumors about the Kriegers, knows they’ll want his head for a trophy and won’t hesitate to take down anyone that gets in their way. His betas are still inexperienced, still relatively raw. He needs them gone, for their own protection.

‘Ooh do we get to take a vacay?’ Erica sits up from the pile of pillows on the floor, letting her book slide to the ground.

‘Sure. Why not, that works.’ Derek shrugs and turns to leave.

‘Um, why are these for tonight?’ Cora's suspicion is palpable, thickening the air in an instant.

Derek grits his teeth. ‘Stressful few months. You all deserve some sun. Even werewolves need vitamin D.’

‘Bullshit,’ Boyd says, brow furrowed. ‘You’re sending us away from Beacon Hills.’

Derek sighs. He should have known they’d never just do as they were told. ‘Maybe,’ he grinds out, ‘I can’t handle any more of your immature beta drama. Every fucking day, non-stop. I need a break.’

‘Then you leave,’ Cora says angrily.

‘Watch yourself,’ Derek growls, whipping around and letting his eyes flash, trying to ignore the way four pairs of eyes glower back at him sullenly. ‘Could you just, for once, do as your alpha tells you without being stubborn little shitheads about it?’

‘Not really,’ Erica mutters.

‘Doesn’t sound like us at all,’ Cora mumbles, arms folded over her chest.

‘You did this before,’ Isaac says suddenly. There’s betrayal in his voice. ‘Pushed us all away. You promised you wouldn’t do this again. You promised.’

‘This isn’t the same,’ Derek says brusquely, hot guilt forcing his hands to flex into fists. Isaac’s eyes are hurt and it’s making his chest ache.

‘It’s exactly the same.’ Boyd glares up at him. ‘We’re not stupid, Derek.’

‘We’re supposed to be pack!’

‘Damn it, you are, I’m trying to keep you idiots safe!’ Derek slams out a hand in frustration and accidentally lodges it in a freshly rendered stud wall. ‘Fuck.’ He pulls his hand out, leaving a large hole behind him. He wipes his hand off on his jeans, breathing heavily, then lays his palms on the unbroken section of cool plaster next to the hole.
'What’s going on?’ Erica is beside him, tentatively reaching out to touch his arm. Some of the tension bleeds from him at her touch.

‘Hunters are coming for me,’ he admits quietly. ‘The Kriegers. Maybe others. They think I’m behind the wolf attacks. I want you long gone by the time they get here.’

‘Fuck that noise!’ Cora says from his other side, winding her arm around his back.

‘You guys need to leave,’ Derek repeats.

‘Not happening. You think you’re the only self-sacrificing idiot in this pack?’ Boyd asks, nudging at his shoulder.

‘Too much sun gives you wrinkles, anyway,’ Erica chimes in, increasing her grip on his arm.

Derek glances up at Isaac, sees the steel in his eyes.

‘We’re pack,’ Isaac says. ‘We’re staying.’ He rips the printed paper in half and lets the pieces float down around him. ‘We’re also ordering pizza.’

*

Stiles sits on the porch, watching his breath condense and then evaporate into the night air. Behind him, the house sleeps silently.

He sits, toying with a beer bottle, for a long time before he says, ‘You can come out now. I know you’re there. I saw you from the window, like an hour ago.’

There’s a pause and then a dark section of shadow peels itself from the side of the house and Peter steps into the dim pool of the porch light. He looks shady because he’s dressed in dark clothes, and also because he’s Peter. Stiles takes a nonchalant sip of his beer, hoping it will calm his rabbiting heart. ‘You’ve been watching me. For weeks.’

Peter shrugs. ‘On and off, yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Well…’ Peter swings around to sit on the porch steps, next to Stiles. His nearness makes Stiles’ skin prickle. ‘At first I was curious about what it is that has my nephew looking to the future for once, instead of wallowing in the past. Then I got curious about you.’

Stiles takes another sip of his beer, careful not to let his hands shake. ‘Nothing special about me, Peter.’

‘Oh I don’t think that’s true at all,’ Peter’s eyes flash in the darkness. ‘I think you’re very special. Smart, loyal, very pretty mouth.’

Stiles snorts. ‘It’s sad that this isn’t even the creepiest thing that’s happened to me this week.’

He hopes Peter chokes on the scent of his disgust.

‘Plus,’ Peter says, undeterred, ‘I think you could be all sorts of fun, if you just let loose a little. Tell me, Stiles… have you given any thought to taking the bite?’

‘Nope.’ Stiles pops the ‘p’ obnoxiously.
Peter pouts sardonically. ‘Pity. I haven’t had anyone to really play with in a long time. I was on my way to creating my own little pack, a while ago. But it didn’t work out.’

Stiles glances at him sideways for a long moment. ‘You were an alpha.’

‘Was, yes. I took the power from my niece.’

Stiles nods slowly. Peter taking the power means… he killed Laura. Which would make the timing… ‘You’re the one who bit Scott.’

‘Ten points to Stilinski.’ Peter grabs the beer bottle and takes a sip. The thought of his mouth where Stiles’ has been makes Stiles’ stomach turn. ‘Don’t worry, Scott’s my only werewolf progeny. Though not for lack of trying…’

‘Because Derek…’

‘Ripped my throat out,’ Peter says casually, his fingertips dancing over the skin of his neck. ‘He didn’t appreciate my grand plans of world domination. Some people are woefully short-sighted.’

Stiles can’t stop his mouth from falling open and his mind runs urgently through all the episodes of The Walking Dead, trying to catalogue the various kill methods and seriously, what even is his life? ‘And yet you're not dead, you're here, on my porch, creeping on me. How is that?’

Peter smirks and shrugs. ‘Can’t divulge that. I always feel it’s best to maintain a little mystery in a relationship…’

‘We,’ Stiles gestures into the space between them, ‘do not have a relationship. Like, at all. Nothing. Nada. Zilch.’

Peter chuckles. ‘Shame. I really do think you’d make a beautiful werewolf. But Derek would never give you the bite, anyway. Not after Paige. You know, thinking back, Derek has always been so tediously moral about murder.’

Stiles wrinkles his nose reflexively. ‘And you’re not?’

‘Like I say… I’m much more fun.’ He flicks his tongue out over his bottom lip and is, for a brief second, every inch a wolf, powerful muscles bunched under his innocuous clothes.

Stiles hums, and then says, very carefully and clearly, ‘You have my answer. I want you to leave, now. And I don’t want you to ever come back here. Do you understand?’

‘Well,’ Peter says, rising gracefully, ‘since you asked so nicely and didn’t use that wolfsbane powder I know you have in your pocket... How could I refuse? I’ll see you again though, Stiles. I look forward to it.’ He grins, revealing sharp, white teeth that glint in the moonlight, and then he melts back into the shadows and is gone.

Stiles sits rigidly still and silent for several minutes, listening hard for any sign that Peter is still there. When he hears nothing but the rustle of wind through leaves, he stands, pulls a bottle of mountain ash from his pocket, and sets about making a circle around the whole house.

He files away the name Paige for later, and rifles back through the rest of the conversation with Peter. *Derek has always been so tediously moral about murder.*

‘The intent matters,’ his dad had said. ‘Sometimes good people make dumb choices or get backed into a corner.’
Allison had said the same thing when she was teaching him how to use mountain ash. For some reason that feels significant.

The intent matters.

He wonders what Peter's intention had been. If he'd intended to lure Stiles away from Derek he'd certainly gone the wrong way about it.

He completes the circle, and heads for bed, hoping the reassurance that Peter will be forced to stay on the other side of the barrier will be enough to allow him to sleep tonight. He falls asleep almost immediately, one hand pressed against the warmth of Ria's back.
I am sooo sorry for the long wait between updates. I think maybe I stared at this fic too long and it all went fuzzy, no matter what angle I side-eyed it from, so I took a step back, wrote something else to get out of my head a bit, and came back to it. If you’ve stuck with it then thank you, sincerely.

Presenting: a clusterfuck.

Because that's what happens when everyone is sketchy and no-one uses their words.

‘Damn it, Scott!’ Lydia hisses, murderously, ‘if you do not get your stomach under control *right now* you’re going to ruin everything!’

Scott’s eyes go big and baleful, like a kicked puppy. ‘I can’t help it,’ he says, rubbing his stomach dejectedly. ‘Stake outs make me hungry. Steak’s my favorite!’

She stares at him, incredulous. ‘You do understand that going on a stake out is not the same as going out for steak?’

‘Yeah,’ Scott mutters with a pout, hunching further into his hoody. ‘But they shouldn’t call it a stake out if they don’t want to make me hungry. I’m a *werewolf.*’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Can’t you go catch a rabbit or something?’

‘Don’t worry, buddy, I got your back.’ Stiles fishes around in his backpack until he pulls out a twinkie that’s a little squashed but totally still edible. ‘Or, you know, front.’ He gestures at Scott’s stomach. ‘Whatever.’

‘Did you raid Ria’s snack stash for this?’ Scott asks, brightening up immediately.

‘Obviously,’ Stiles says, reaching for a twinkie of his own. ‘I came prepared. This sort of chicanery is totally my *steeve!*’

Lydia glares at them like she would eviscerate them both on the spot if she could. She shakes her head at Scott, who is licking cream from his fingertips. ‘I can’t believe your insatiable stomach has become the soundtrack of my life…’

‘Welcome to my world,’ Stiles jams the rest of his twinkie into his mouth and chews, trying to settle himself into a more comfortable position against the cold concrete wall. Of course *this* would be the part of his childhood secret-supernatural-world-fantasies to turn out to be pretty much on the money, he thinks, huffing a sigh that echoes around the inside of the little store that stands on the forecourt of a disused gas station on the edge of town.

Everything else so far has lived very much down to his expectations (he’d thought there’d be more corsets for a start, thanks for nothing, *Underworld*), but this is almost impressively creepy, as locations for shady shenanigans go. It’s been in disuse for long enough that weeds grow through the cracks in the asphalt and snake up the grey exterior of the building, forcing their way through rotting
window and door-frames. The linoleum covering the floor of the store is ripped and curling, and to Lydia’s disgust there are things living under it. The whole place smells overwhelmingly of damp. The long window that overlooks the forecourt is covered in thick cardboard that is sagging and turning green with mildew, which throws the interior into an unpleasant, murky half-light. It gives the oddest sensation of being under water.

Scott, Stiles and Lydia have propped themselves up on the floor behind the counter, off to one side of the door, so they can’t be seen from the forecourt where gas pumps peel and rust, the price of the gas the last time it was sold there frozen behind dingy perspex screens.

Even the road the station is adjacent to is now closed off, leaving only a dirt track just wide enough for a car, though none ever attempt it anymore. It's utterly secluded, only inhabited by birds and bats and the bugs under the floor. The forecourt is surrounded by an overgrown tangle of grass and trees, which at least is perfect to conceal Allison, who’s covering them with a large array of weapons, none of which Stiles is allowed to stroke (highly unfair, in his opinion – you drop a crossbow one time, jeez).

Stiles rolls his neck, letting the vertebrae pop satisfyingly. For all that this place is a ten on the Stilinski Scale of Sinister Shit, he wouldn’t actually have minded if the bad guys had factored in a couch, or a wingback chair or two... maybe a bar. They’d arrived hours before Harris’ meeting, determined not to let him get the jump on them, and the waiting around is starting to really fucking suck.

Lydia has, of course, brought along a foldable pillow-thing in her magical purse that was clearly a gift from Mary Poppins (Lydia insists it’s Mulberry, but whatever, Stiles knows better), and sits with her legs elegantly crossed, eyes closed. Stiles glares at the pillow-thing jealously, making a mental note to get one to add to his backpack of essentials in the event of future stake outs, and then catches himself in the middle of the tripped-out thought. He doesn’t actually want there to be future stake outs, he reminds himself sternly. Normal is what he wants, obviously. Steady. Safe. He distracts himself from any troublesome, dissenting thoughts by trying to re-arrange his legs into a position that allows blood-flow back to his poor, numb ass.

Suddenly Scott sits forward, dislodging a large, rotten section of linoleum with his sneakers. Something with far more legs and eyes than it could possibly have a need for scuttles off towards the shadows. Stiles tries not to think about what's living under the square of lino he's currently sitting on. Scott tilts his head, listening hard. ‘Someone’s coming.’

Stiles checks his watch, wincing as his butt-cheeks prickle with pins and needles as circulation returns. If it’s Harris, or the mystery woman Harris is meeting, they’re a little early. He can’t hear the sound of a car, so they must be on foot. Scott frowns and pushes up so he’s crouching on the balls of his feet. ‘They’re moving fast,’ he whispers under his breath. ‘Too fast…’

Stiles turns his head just as the door is thrown open, letting shafts of sunlight pierce the dusty gloom of the store. He squints to make out who is silhouetted against the door, barely suppressing a resigned sigh when he makes out Peter, dishevelled and breathing hard. Fuck his life, seriously.

He hauls himself to his feet and opens his mouth to say ‘What the fuck are you doing here?’ when he’s beaten to the quick by Lydia, also now on her feet, stepping forwards slowly and saying ‘It’s… you.’

Peter stands frozen, clearly taken aback by Lydia being there. They’re stare at each other for a long moment, transfixed. When he speaks it’s gentle, almost fond, like he’s trying not to scare off a wild animal. ‘It’s me.’
Stiles looks from one to the other and back again, and decides to redact his earlier statement to just ‘What the fuck?’

Peter’s expression is unreadable, but he’s clearly wrong-footed as he alternates between staring at Lydia and turning to shoot frantic glances back out of the doorway behind him, and Lydia… Lydia looks shocked and furious and terrifying.

Scott takes a step in front of her, trying to put himself between her and Peter, though Stiles thinks he’d for sure bet on Lydia in a fight right now – but how do they even know each other? She’d said she had some knowledge of werewolves even before she met Scott… Is Peter the cause of that? Why wouldn’t she have said something?

Peter’s eyes slide from Lydia to Scott, and Stiles curses silently as they light up in recognition. ‘And it’s you,’ Peter says, a smirk lifting the corners of his mouth.

Scott scowls, and Stiles notices his fangs slide down to rest on his lower lip.

Before he can say anything, Peter cocks his head to one side, curses softly, and as abruptly as he arrived, he vanishes. It’s like a spell has been broken. Lydia lets out a choked-off little sob and stumbles back, all the willpower that was seemingly holding her up as she stood before Peter draining out of her now he’s gone. Stiles grabs for her shoulders, taking her weight, and lowers her carefully to the floor, kneeling in front of her. She seems out of it, far away inside her own head.

He wants to know what the hell is going on, but Scott’s urgent ‘Stiles!’ interrupts him. He jumps up to join Scott at a small area of window they’ve removed the mouldering cardboard from so they can see out.

Stiles squints through the smudgy glass, trying to see where Peter went, but at Scott’s hissed instruction looks towards the treeline to the left, where a familiar form emerges.

‘Oh Jesus, fuck…’ Stiles mutters as Derek runs across the forecourt towards the store. He supposes it’s something that at least Erica, Isaac and Boyd don’t seem to be with him. With Harris due to arrive at any moment, this would be the least convenient time ever for the entirety of his lycanthropic social circle to show up unannounced. God knows it’s inconvenient enough to have to figure out why Peter and Derek are there.

Unless Derek and Peter are the other party in Harris’s shady creeper convention?

Jesus. Fuck.

This time when the door bursts open, Stiles is ready for it. He plants his hands firmly on his hips and faces Derek squarely on.

Derek is in a white tank and jeans, which are ripped and muddy, and he’s panting heavily like he’s been running through the forest. His hair is soaked, his feet bare. His arms and face are streaked with dirt and thin lines of blood, maybe where roots or branches have whipped at him, though any gashes have already healed. Even now, while he’s slowing down, Stiles can see how fully he inhabits his body, how controlled his movements are, how precise and aware. He’s so fucking beautiful Stiles feels like the breath has been punched from his own chest, and as his gaze finds Derek’s face his words fade out entirely. The wildness that is usually so carefully contained within the hard lines of Derek’s body has broken free in his extraordinary eyes, the green and blue and gold bleeding through to an intense glow of red around the edge of his irises. All Stiles can do is stare.

Derek stares back. ‘What… the hell…’ He finally manages, sucking in lungfuls of air. Stiles
manfully ignores the trickle of sweat that makes its way down Derek's chest.

‘I might ask the same of you!’ Stiles retorts furiously, stupidly relieved to have found his voice. ‘Are you here to meet Harris?’

‘What.’ Confusion crinkles Derek’s brow. ‘Of course not, why would I be meeting Harris?’ He lifts his head and scents the air, which Stiles firmly tells himself is not hot. At all. When Derek opens his eyes he’s looking right at Stiles, eyes flinty. ‘I was tracking Peter, and then… you were here. Are you… Were you meeting Peter?’

‘No!’ Stiles folds his arms across his chest. ‘He was here, showed up like a big lurky weirdo, was lurky and weird and then took off.’

‘Why are you here, then?’

Stiles opens his mouth but promptly closes it again to keep everything from spilling out. Believing in Derek’s innocence with his heart isn’t the same thing as knowing it with his head. He ends up shrugging awkwardly. ‘Long story.’

Something like disappointment flickers over Derek’s face before it’s schooled back into its usual inscrutability. He nods. ‘I see.’

Stiles has to flex his hands by his sides to keep from going over to touch him, and make it better. When he’s here, so close, Stiles is reminded of the deep, near-constant ache within himself. He misses Derek. All he wants to do is throw himself at him and rub his face in his scruff and bite his ears, and bring a laugh to his stupid, serious face, but he can’t do any of that (totally normal and not-at-all weird) stuff until he’s proven Derek has nothing to do with any of this. Which is why it’s really fucking frustrating that he’s shown up right now because everything keeps pointing to Derek being involved somehow.

‘You really didn’t know Harris was coming here?’ Stiles demands.

Derek jerks his head over to Scott. ‘He can tell if I’m lying,’ he says. ‘Through my heartbeat.’ He addresses Scott directly. ‘It’s one of the things I was going to teach you. People’s hearts lie right along with them. You can tell.’

Scott’s arms are folded defensively in front of him, his eyes flashing darkly. ‘There’s a lot of things an alpha should have taught me.’

Guilt slides unpleasantly down Stiles’ spine. He hasn’t had a private moment to tell Scott about Peter being the alpha that bit him, yet, and besides, he thinks Scott would want to try and hunt him down, and they don’t have time for that right now.

A muscle ticks in Derek’s jaw. ‘That’s true. I still can… will… After all this.’

Scott looks at him, eyes roving over his face like he’s searching for something. Eventually he nods, though his voice is tight. ‘Ask him again, Stiles.’

Stiles takes a breath. ‘Did you know Harris was going to be here?’

Derek looks right at Stiles as he says, clearly, ‘No. I was tracking Peter. I followed him here, and then I smelled you.’

Scott mutters, ‘Truth.’
Stiles' eyes close involuntarily under the weight of the relief that his loyal, eternally optimistic heart is pumping around his body. Sadly he doesn’t have time to fully appreciate it, because right then Derek’s head snaps toward to the forecourt. ‘Car,’ he says, then shakes his head. ‘Two cars.’

Scott grunts his agreement. Stiles sees the front hood of Harris’s car, thick with dust from the trail, slide into view, and instinctively he yanks Derek in and out of eye-line. He’ll just have to hope Harris doesn’t notice the store’s open door once he gets out. It's a conscious effort to let go of Derek’s tank top and take half a step away. It’s only really been a few days that they’ve been apart, but somehow he’d forgotten how warm Derek always is, how responsively his muscles move under Stiles’ hands.

Derek reflexively raises his hand to brush Stiles’ hair back from his forehead, his fingertips leaving a tingling trail of heat in their wake. Whatever this energy is that’s between them – has always been between them – it's still there, latent, coming alive at the touch of their skin.

Stiles wants to lean into it, wants to turn his face and press a kiss to Derek’s palm, even though that would be really stupid because this mess is far from being straightened out. He wonders if the tingly feeling Derek leaves upon his skin is actually all his reason and common sense exiting his body. The moment fractures when Derek seems to catch himself and drops his hand like he’s been burned with a whispered ‘Sorry.’

‘S’okay.’ Stiles remembers why they’re actually there and is about to move to be able to see out of the window, when Lydia, who has been hunched over with her head in her hands, having a silent meltdown, sits up poker straight. She uncovers her face to reveal glassy eyes, and then she opens her mouth, and she screams.

The scream is the single loudest thing Stiles has ever heard. He throws his hands up to cover his ears, notices Scott has done the same, and Derek has nearly been brought to his knees by it. It’s shrill but steady, far longer than any human should be able to hold a single note for.

Through the sliver of exposed glass, Stiles sees Harris’s car judder and grind to a halt. He never sees the second car, but he’s sure this is a scream that can be heard for several hundred feet, so he assumes it’s made its escape. Shit.

The scream goes on and on, stretching itself out over several long seconds, unnatural and inhuman.

When it eventually fades away, it’s like the molecules of the air still reverberate with it. Stiles feels odd and shaky, his blood vibrating in his veins and his skin raw from the force of it. Much more and he’s sure the windows would have shattered.

He drops down and scrambles on all fours to Lydia, gently taking her wrists to pull her hands down from her face, which is chalky pale and streaked with tears.

‘Lyds…’ His voice is hoarse, like his throat is lined with gravel. ‘Jesus, Lyds. What happened? You okay?’

She looks at him with scared, confused eyes, and he gets the feeling there’s a lot more to Lydia than even he’d realised.

‘You’re a banshee.’ Derek asks – well, says, in his flat, inflectionless way – as he strides to the door to check out the forecourt.

‘What?’ Stiles can’t help his mouth falling open in disbelief. ‘Like a banshee banshee? As in, a genuine, bonafide, harbinger of death type banshee?’
‘I don’t know, I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘I’m sorry, I just, I couldn’t help it. I don’t know, it was like I had to scream.’

‘What did you hear?’ Derek asks, turning to look at her. ‘When you were screaming. What did you see?’

Lydia shakes her head like she’s trying to clear the sound from her ears. ‘I…it sounded like… the air was ripping apart? And I could smell the blood.’

‘I hear it, too,’ Scott says, two seconds before a crossbow bolt lodges itself in the door-frame a scant inch from Derek’s arm.

Stiles lets out a yelp, but Derek’s already in motion, instantly jerking backwards and spinning so he’s hidden behind the end of the counter, crouching.

‘Hunters,’ he says, looking at the end of the bolt that’s plunged deep into the frame. ‘They’re here. Shit, I got so caught up in chasing Peter I must have gotten careless. They don’t want you guys. I’ll lead them away.’

Stiles’ heart hammers in his chest. ‘No, Derek, wait. Just, just stay, okay? Allison’s out there, she can…’

‘She can’t take them all,’ Derek says, and Stiles knows he’s right. ‘Give me a head start and then get outta here.’

‘Derek…’ Stiles knows he must sound desperate but he doesn’t care. ‘Lydia’s scream… Doesn’t it mean someone’s going to die?’ Not you, he repeats in his head like a mantra, like a prayer. Please not you.

Derek looks down at the ground. ‘Stiles... Harris. I can’t hear a heartbeat.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles feels nausea claw its way up his throat. ‘God.’ He’d disliked Harris intensely but the idea that he’s dead…

'I'm sorry,' Derek says, brushing his fingers against the nape of Stiles' neck. It's deeply comforting, somehow. 'I have to go.'

'Derek... You don't even have shoes on...' He's not sure why it matters to him, why he thinks it would make a difference, but in that moment it's important to him.

Derek looks over his shoulder at him, and his steely expression softens momentarily. ‘I'll be fine. I’ll be careful,’ he says gently. ‘You, too?’

Stiles nods. ‘Yeah.’

Derek nods towards Scott and quirks an eyebrow at Stiles. ‘Don’t do anything stupid.’ Then he rocks his weight onto his back foot, bunches his muscles, and takes off. Stiles hears vague shouts and the whizz-thunk of a few more arrows or crossbow bolts as they lodge into the exterior wall of the shop, in Derek’s wake.

All Stiles can do is crouch there, with an arm around Lydia, trying not to call out, or cry, as Derek runs out among a whole bunch of trained werewolf hunters who all want his blood.

He can’t believe how wrong this has all gone. He works on counting his breaths in and counting them out. The most important thing is they all make it home alive. He needs to make it home to Ria.
Melissa will be giving her an afternoon snack right about now, he thinks, letting himself cling to the safe domesticity of the thought like a life-raft.

After several taut minutes of silence, tension twanging in the air between the three of them, Scott declares it safe to leave the safety of the little store and together they step tentatively onto the forecourt. Peace has once again descended, but this time there’s no background hum of insects, no birdsong from the trees. The silence feels deafening and accusatory. A quick glance around tells Stiles that there’s no blood trail, or anything else to indicate that Derek was hit or caught, which is something. It seems like Harris was the only casualty.

Allison comes running across the forecourt to throw her arms around Scott. ‘You’re okay, oh my god...’ she says, distraught, ‘The scream, I was so scared, and then I couldn’t see who was shooting. And they were all hidden, I couldn’t, I couldn’t...’

Scott soothes her with kisses. ‘None of us knew this would happen,’ he murmurs into her hair. ‘I think we should get back and try and call Deaton.’

Allison puts her arms around Lydia’s shoulders, leading her back to the track which leads to the car they’d brought and left half a mile or so away. Lydia moves numbly but her hands are shaking violently, and when Stiles looks down he realises his are too.

Reluctantly he forces his feet to move towards Harris’s car. ‘We should... his phone...’ Stiles says, even though the thought makes his stomach roil. The hood is still hot to the touch, dust particles jumping under the rumble of the engine that’s ticking over. He can make out Harris’s slumped figure, sprawled across the steering wheel, and his stomach lurches violently up into his chest. He falts. He can’t do this. Then Scott puts a warm hand between his shoulder blades and together they make their way to the driver’s side window, which is rolled down.

Harris looks more peaceful than he has for several months, Stiles thinks. If it weren’t for the crossbow bolt sticking out of his jugular, you could be fooled into thinking he was sleeping. Sort of. Well, the bolt and all the blood that has sprayed the inside of the car, running in grotesque rivulets over Harris’s waxy skin.

‘They must have been aiming for Derek, and Harris just... got in the way,’ Scott says. He sounds muffled, like he's talking through thick glass.

‘Huh,’ is all Stiles can manage. There really is a phenomenal amount of blood. The thick, iron stench of it coats the back of Stiles’ throat, and his knees go weak as he struggles to get enough air past all that blood, and the world sort of tilts a bit and goes wobbly at the edges, and then everything is blissful, blissful black.

*  

By the time he comes to, he’s on Scott’s couch tucked into the fluffiest pink blanket he’s ever seen. He can’t quite grasp why he’s here, but he remembers it was bad. His mind flashes to Harris slumped over his steering wheel, and he burrows deeper, wondering if it might not be better just to stay here, in the cocoon of this blanket, for all eternity and eschew reality and all its homicidal assholery. Then he catches the smell of frying bacon, and he begins to reconsider.

‘Hey,’ Scott pats him tentatively on the shoulder as he passes him a bacon sandwich.

‘Hey,’ Stiles says around a mouthful of sandwich. He feels a tiny bit better for the meat and carb combo. Enough to brave yanking the blanket down a little, anyway.
‘I shouldn’t be giving you this,’ Scott nods towards the sandwich. He’s not in the same hoody and jeans as earlier. Stiles must have been out of it for a while. ‘I should be making you eat salad. I had to carry you back to the car and man, your ass is way heavier than it looks!’

‘Shu-up a-ho!’ Stiles says around the last bit of sandwich, affronted. ‘I’m a hundred and fifty pounds of lean, muscular perfection, dude.’

‘Well Derek sure seems to still think so,’ Scott says with an eyebrow waggle that’s probably meant to be suggestive but comes off more as a sneer.

Oh god. Derek. Stiles gropes for his phone, almost too afraid to look at it in case of what he might find. ‘Is he alright? Have you heard from him?’

Scott shrugs. Stiles’ heart clenches when he finds nothing from Derek, so he sends a hopeful, pathetic, ‘You’re still alive, right?’ out into the ether.

Almost immediately his phone pings back. ‘Of course. You better be, too.’ A weight lifts off Stiles’ chest.

He thumbs out, ‘Nah, totally text haunting you. It’s like regular haunting but with more respect for your personal space and less breaking shit.’ He sends it before he can overthink it.

Derek responds, simply, ‘Lucky me.’ Some hot, indefinable emotion floods through Stiles, and turns his bones into liquid.

As he sinks back into the couch pillows, the memory of that afternoon’s disastrous stake-out pushes itself to the forefront of his mind until he can re-live it all in horrific clarity. ‘Dude,’ he says, leaning forward and lifting up the blanket so Scott can climb in there with him because if ever there was a time for bro-snuggles, it’s now. ‘What the fuck happened?’

Scott shakes his head in slow disbelief. ‘I don’t even know.’

‘Harris is dead.’

‘Yeah. Allison made a call to the police, anonymously, from a pay phone out of town.’

Stiles nods, slowly. ‘Lydia’s a banshee.’

‘She’s sleeping. Has been since we got back. Allison’s been checking out the bestiary, trying to get information for her. It’s patchy but it’s the best we’ve got.’ Scott presses a little closer to Stiles’ side. ‘Who was the first guy who came in? The one she recognised?’

‘Peter Hale.’

Scott looks up at him sharply. ‘Derek’s uncle? So... The hunters were after Derek, and Derek was tracking Peter. But who was Peter after? What does he have to do with anything?’

Stiles squeezes his eyes shut briefly, trying to figure out the best way to break it to Scott that Peter is the alpha who bit him, and that he abandoned him because Derek killed him to avenge the murder of his sister, but he’s been resurrected somehow and is not only a Very Bad Dude, but is also, inexplicably, semi-stalking Stiles.

He decides, in the end, that there’s probably no gentle way to spin that particular yarn, so maybe just getting it all out there is best, when Lydia clears her throat from the doorway. Even free of make-up and bundled into one of Scott’s sweaters she’s beautiful, Stiles thinks – maybe even more so. She
shuffles in a little. Her red hair is twisted up on top of her head, so Stiles can see a faint crease mark on her cheek from a pillow.

Stiles watches as she steels her shoulders, takes a breath, and then says, ‘Peter’s the one who bit you, Scott. I know, because he bit me, too.’
Blood on the snow of winter (back are the eyes of coal)

Chapter Notes

I must apologise again, profusely, for the length of time between updates. There are only a couple of chapters left and I really want to make sure I address everything and don't leave anything up in the air, so I'm trying to take a bit of time to go through and double check it all before posting

Thank you so much for sticking with me!

One quick note - I decided to go back and make the small adjustment of widening the age range of the missing people, so it's a more random cross-section of people from young to old. It doesn't affect the plot, it's just a detail that was niggling at me.

‘I thought…’ Scott’s brow furrows as he processes. ‘I thought we just established you’re a banshee, but now you’re telling me you’re a werewolf?’

‘No.’ Lydia folds down into an armchair in one movement, like all the air has been expelled out of her. ‘I didn’t turn. I’m… immune, I guess.’

‘Immune?’ Allison appears like magic to press a mug into Lydia's hands, tendrils of steam curling up and out into the room. She sounds just as confused as Stiles feels, which isn’t terribly reassuring given that she’s basically their residential supernatural expert.

Lydia sucks in a breath. ‘I was bitten. A couple of years back… within a couple of days of Scott getting bitten, from what I can work out. It was pretty late, and Jackson and I drove to the preserve after a date. We just wanted some privacy. Jackson was still living with his parents and I had a roommate, and there’s a nice place with a view of the town at night. It's romantic.’ Lydia’s wistful expression clouds over into something darker. ‘I don’t remember much about what happened once we were out of the car, but I remember there was a noise. Jackson and I, we ran. Got separated. He got away. But I… I remember fear, and red eyes that I ran from, and then pain. I passed out. When I woke up, I had this bite…’ She slides the mug onto the table and gestures down to the side of her abdomen. ‘And I just knew somehow that I’d been bitten by a werewolf. I knew they existed. And I knew I hadn’t known before, because I’ve always kept a journal. I’m methodical, you know? I’d have researched it. Written about it, learned everything… I’ve re-read all my old journals so many times, since I was bitten and there’s just… Nothing. The Lydia who wrote those journals… That’s not who I am, now. I’ve never really been the same.’

Stiles watches the fine, thin skin on her wrists as she twists her hands together. Ironically, since he just found out she’s not actually human, she’s never seemed more so. She’s always been so sure, so fierce, but now she’s breakable and uncertain.

‘But you didn’t turn?’ Stiles asks, leaning in closer. Lydia chews anxiously on her bottom lip, withdrawing a little further into the over-sized hoody, holding it around herself like a protective shell.

She takes a shallow, controlled breath. ‘No. But I knew all this stuff about werewolves, I… I had memories that weren’t mine, I checked in my journals, with my mom… I lost time a lot, those first few weeks after I was bitten. I’d come into consciousness with no idea where I’d been or what I’d
done. Once I woke up out in the preserve, and… I was missing some clothes, I don’t know what happened. Jackson thought I’d gone out there with someone else… cheated on him… But I would never do that. We broke up anyway, for a couple of months, until I told him what was really happening.’

A puzzle piece slots into place in Stiles’ mind as he flashes back to Jackson’s knowing, triumphant face that night at the museum. ‘You told him everything. And about Scott and Allison, too, after you met them? That’s how he knew about Derek before I did?’

He’s not especially proud to admit that Jackson lording the knowledge over him – feeling sorry for him over it – sends red-hot needles sliding into the freshly healing wound of Derek’s deceit. He bites at the inside of his cheek and reminds himself that it wasn’t a deliberate humiliation on Derek’s part. It was just unfortunate that Lydia chose Jackson to confide in, and Jackson happens to be a self-serving, smug-faced moron.

A look of discomfort flickers across Lydia’s face, the closest thing to guilt Stiles has ever seen on her. ‘Yes. I wasn’t thrilled about you being in the dark about it, but it was your relationship, not mine. I threatened to cut Derek’s balls off if he ever hurt you, though, alpha werewolf or not.’ She sniffs, haughtily, suddenly much more herself. ‘That still stands, by the way.’

Stiles ducks his head to hide a smile because, yeah, he knows. Lydia is definitely badass enough to take on an alpha werewolf and win. She remains, Stiles thinks, even at her most vulnerable, completely flawless (except for her deeply questionable taste in men).

‘After I told Jackson about being bitten, I seemed to lose time less and less,’ Lydia continues. ‘It hasn’t happened for a long time now. I thought it was just the after-effects of the bite, I thought it was out of my system. I made it a personal mission to learn everything I could about lycanthropy, just in case. But I never turned, and all the weird stuff stopped happening. That’s why I never mentioned it to anyone but Jackson. I didn’t think it was still affecting me… Until today.’

‘When you saw Peter…’ Scott prompts, gently.

‘Right.’ A shadow falls over her face. ‘I recognised him. He was in my dreams. In my memories. Seeing him right there, in front of me, real… It made me remember things. I never realised he was a real person. Maybe it triggered something, I don’t know. I’ve never screamed like that before.’

Stiles allows one eyebrow to arch sardonically as he says, ‘I don’t know, my eardrums are still recovering from that time I spilled hot chocolate on your shoes…’, which has the desired effect of making her laugh.

‘Not like that, idiot,’ she says. ‘Like I couldn’t control it. It was like I had to scream. And all I could hear was that sound, the noise of the cross-bow…’ She pales and tails off. ‘It was… It was just Harris, though? Derek’s okay?’

‘Alive and kicking.’ Relief washes over Stiles as he confirms it, and then guilt, because relief is not even a slightly appropriate reaction to any part of Harris’s death. At the same time, he doesn’t know what he would do if Derek had fallen at the hands of the hunters. The thought makes him light-headed and he digs his nails into his palm until he feels the bite of broken skin, trying to ground himself. ‘So,’ he says, trying to think his away around what the development of Lydia’s abilities means. ‘If the screaming happens again we know it’s… some sort of a warning? We might be able to stop whatever it is from happening?’

Lydia sighs, twisting her fingers together. ‘I don’t know. I wish I could control it better…’
'You can learn to control it, to a degree,' Allison says, thoughtfully, from the doorway she's leaning against. ‘The bestiary describes banshees who can break things or move them with their scream. You should look at it as untapped potential.’

Lydia grimaces. ‘Right now all I see is untapped memories. All that time I lost to those fugue states… I want it back. I want to know what I did.’

‘Lydia…’ Stiles sits forwards and reaches for her hands. ‘Are you sure? You might not like what you find out.’

She nods, her chin set in determination. ‘I want to know.’

Scott grabs his phone from the table. ‘Then I guess we need to get hold of Deaton.’ He dials the number, digging his claws into a throw pillow when Deaton’s voicemail kicks in. He leaves a message and follows up with a couple of texts for good measure. Allison decides the best way to soothe everyone’s frazzled nerves is with more tea (Scott, who hates tea, blames this on Downton Abbey, thanks a bunch Netflix), and she and Lydia disappear into the kitchen to make some. Stiles is fine with tea, but he wouldn’t say no to something a little stronger, honestly. He scrubs at his hair, trying not to re-live the sound of that crossbow embedding itself into the wood next to Derek’s arm.

‘Did you know it was Peter that bit me?’ Scott says suddenly, sounding more exhausted than angry.

Stiles looks down at his hands. ‘I just found out. I think maybe Derek knew, but… Peter died. Right after he bit you and Lydia.’ Stiles thinks maybe because he bit Scott and Lydia. He's beginning to understand, he thinks, why Derek might have felt he had no other choice. Looking at his best friend's anguished face, remembering the twist of Lydia's hands... Stiles isn't at all sure he wouldn't have done the same. Sometimes good people do bad things, his dad's voice reminds him. Sometimes they don't have a choice.

‘He died?’ Scott squeaks. ‘But we just saw him!’

‘I know. He’s back.’ Stiles shrugs helplessly. ‘I don’t know how. And I’m pretty sure Derek doesn’t know how, either. He just is.’

Scott exhales through his teeth. ‘That’s fucked up, bro. What the fuck is even happening to this town?’

‘I don’t know, man. All I know is that suddenly the crowd I hang with have turned distinctly disreputable.’ He smirks mischievously over at Scott, who snorts. ‘In fact,’ Stiles says thoughtfully, ‘I do believe I’m actually the most respectable of all of you, now. This has literally never happened to me before…’

Scott laughs, the tension falling from his shoulders a little. He leans back among the sofa cushions and stares up at the ceiling. Stiles lets himself sink backwards too, glancing around the small apartment with new eyes. He’s always liked it here; Allison keeps everything light and airy and sticks to muted tones of off-white and shades of blue, clearly influenced by her French heritage. Scott’s influence is found in the shots of warm, bright color here and there, and in the solid, intricately carved pieces of furniture. The overall effect is soothing, but always with something beautiful or interesting to draw the eye. It’s the furthest thing from a werewolf lair Stiles can possibly imagine, but then again his life these days pretty much slides along a surreal scale that starts at 'improbable' and goes right on up to 'totally-impossible-yet-still-apparently-happening’, so he shouldn’t really be surprised.

Scott rolls his head to face him. ‘Allison told me Derek was the alpha of the area, after I turned. I
knew he hadn’t been the one to turn me, but I still thought he might come and find me. Take me under his wing or something. But instead he left…’

‘I’m sorry…’ Stiles leans in until they’re shoulder to shoulder. He can’t imagine what Scott must have gone through, especially those first few days alone. He’s gathered that Scott's dad was a jerkwad who abandoned Scott and Melissa when Scott was just a kid, so he knows Derek's perceived rejection must have hit a raw nerve. Allison’s family have all but disowned her with the exception of her dad, who still sees her, but refuses to acknowledge Scott’s existence. It must have been so lonely, so scary. It strikes Stiles that Derek might be a good guy, but he doesn’t always make the best alpha-life choices.

‘It is what it is,’ Scott says, bitterness bleeding through his resignation.

Stiles exhales, slowly, through his teeth. ‘Not necessarily,’ he ventures. ‘Maybe once all this is over, if he turns out not to be some great force for evil, he could tutor your fuzzy little butt in whatever it is you guys do when you’re all wolfed out. Howling at the moon? Catching squirrels? Whatever. You know he can take someone else’s pain for them? He could probably teach you how.’

Scott raises his eyebrows. ‘Doesn’t sound like you wanna activate that online dating profile anytime soon…’

‘Hey, you promised you were gonna delete that!’ Stiles pokes Scott in the arm, which probably hurts him more than it does Scott, but is satisfying anyway.

Scott flashes him a tired grin, and Stiles suddenly realises the extent of his own exhaustion, heavy in his bones. He sighs and tries to articulate where he’s at in a way that doesn’t just sound like idealistic nonsense.

‘I can’t be certain here…’ Stiles presses his fingers to his forehead, then moves them to his chest. ‘But I am, here. I can’t help it. Like, I know it’s technically still possible that it’s him, but I just can’t make myself believe it. Somehow I can’t help but trust that he’s good. Misguided, sure, but good. You know?’

Scott looks at him steadily for a long moment. ‘Okay.’

Stiles’ heart lifts a little, because of course if anyone would buy into idealistic romantic nonsense it would be Scott ‘Gooey Marshmallow Center’ McCall.

‘We gotta find a way to prove it then, bro,’ Scott says, nudging him with a hard-planed shoulder. ‘Get these hunters off all our asses so you two can have your happy ending.’ He pauses at Stiles’ expression and twists his mouth up. ‘Don’t you say a word, Stilinski, I meant it in a romantic way…’

Stiles snorts out a laugh. ‘Oh so did I, believe me…’

‘Jesus, you’re such a perve…’ Scott shoves at his shoulder and Stiles shoves back, and they’re about two seconds away from a full-on wrestling match (which Stiles would have won, obviously, because Scott might have superior strength but nobody matches Stiles for tactics) when Scott’s phone lights up, skittering across the coffee table.

‘It’s Deaton,’ Scott murmurs, thumbing over the screen and putting it on speaker.

Stiles sits, idly chewing at his thumb nail as Scott and Lydia explain everything to Deaton, who only interrupts them to ask for details or clarifications here and there. Deaton is predictably annoyingly unruffled by the discovery that Lydia has newly unlocked banshee abilities, humming contemplatively down the line like she’s told him they’re selling a new sort of banana bread at Trader
Stiles chews harder at his thumbnail in irritation. Like, he knows Deaton’s a druid and an emissary and therefore much more experienced in the complexities of supernatural fuckwittery than Stiles is, but would it kill him to be a little bit impressed by the coolness of Lydia’s badass banshee abilities? Or, like, concerned about her, or something?

Instead, Deaton is as calm and self-possessed as ever. ‘Being a banshee would account for why Peter’s bite didn’t take,’ he confirms to Lydia. ‘But it wouldn’t necessarily explain your black-outs.’

‘Well we aren’t getting answers out of Peter any time soon,’ Scott mutters, so darkly that Stiles shares a worried glance with Allison.

‘Is there any other way?’ Lydia sounds worn through, but determined.

‘You could try entering into a meditative state,’ Deaton says in a vaguely disinterested tone. ‘There’s a ritual that could help.’

‘You don’t need to be a druid?’

‘It’s more spiritual than magical,’ Deaton explains, ‘but it draws on magical influences. Usually memory retrieval is a complex process, but with your new abilities coming to the fore and you seeing Peter today, there’s a chance this will be enough.’

Stiles takes notes as Deaton briefly describes the ritual, which involves burning herbs in the flame of a candle. Yesterday Stiles would have found that immensely underwhelming, even though the herbs have to be cut with some sort of specially consecrated knife and the candle has to be tallow and dyed orange. After the anti-climactic realisation that wood ash keeps werewolves in check just as effectively as sexy silver-tipped weaponry, yesterday’s Stiles would have hoped the props for this would be a little more dramatic (maybe a crystal made from the distilled of tears from virgins - god knows he’d cried enough of them, before he lost his V card - or bottled frost from the first full moon of the millennium, or something), lamenting the fact that, alas, the universe seems determined that any and all of Stiles’ forays into the world of the magic should only involve burned plants.

Today’s Stiles, shaken and shocked and still sore from his panic attack, is immensely relieved that throwing a little rosemary at a candle wick is as dramatic as this is going to get.

He glances down at his watch. It’s almost six. He’s not going to get home to see Ria before Melissa puts her to bed, he realises, a pang of want shooting through his chest so sharply it makes his breath catch in his throat. He longs for the comfort of her slow, steady breaths, the warming solidity of her against his chest. It’s a selfish urge. She’s more than fine with Melissa and his dad, and they’re not expecting him home any time soon because he’d told them he and Scott were going to the batting cages and then to have a guys’ night at a bar. He’s needed here – Lydia needs him, and so does Scott, and anyway, he doesn’t think he could walk away from this if he tried. He’s close enough to answers he can practically taste them, fizzing on his tongue.

Once they can figure out how Peter fits into this, maybe he can figure out Derek.

He’s startled from his thoughts by the sound of his own name. Deaton explains that he’s on his way back to Beacon Hills with information for Stiles that he wants to discuss face to face in the morning. Stiles is too drained to feel the appropriate amount of fear in response to that, instead pulling the pink blanket back up around his neck as the world’s least effective defensive mechanism.

By the time Deaton has rung off, Allison already has a large tote bag slung over one shoulder and is
hovering by the door. ‘I’ll go to the clinic to pick up the herbs and the candle,’ she says, glancing around at them. ‘I’m assuming we want to do this tonight?’

‘Yes.’ Lydia nods firmly.

Scott frowns. ‘I’m coming, too.’

‘No.’ Allison shakes her head. ‘With the other hunters around, it’s best that you keep a low profile for now. I’ll be fine.’ She pats her denim jacket, which makes a suspiciously metallic clunking sound, and Scott nods and sits back reluctantly as she slips out of the door.

He keeps his eyes trained on the door the whole time Allison is gone, holding his body taut like he’s ready to spring up and tear after her at the slightest hint of any trouble.

Stiles gets it.

He forces himself to sip his now lukewarm tea as a way to distract his restless hands from texting Derek. He realises he has no idea where Derek is right now; presumably they can’t be hiding out at the apartment, or the Hale house, as the hunters will be aware of both. When he lets himself think about it, he can feel the panic, jagged and icy in his chest.

He’s determined not to let it overwhelm him, tries to channel it instead so it sharpens him, makes him more aware. He’s fairly dubious about the meditation ritual, but the important of intent has been reinforced to him so many times over the last few days that he’s determined to give it his best shot, for Lydia. For them all.

Scott doesn’t seem to have breathed since Allison left, and Stiles starts to wonder whether werewolves pass out like everyone else does in the event that they manage to end up with more worry than oxygen in their bloodstreams. He jerks his head around to face Lydia when he gets a sudden thought.

‘Do you want Jackson to be here for this? Should we call him?’

Lydia thinks for a long moment. ‘No,’ she says eventually. ‘He’s been really distant this last few weeks and I’m not sure where we are right now. I feel safe with you guys.’

Stiles feels a pleased flush start to warm the back of his neck.

Scott jumps up at the sound of keys in the door, striding across the room to pull Allison into his arms as soon as she steps across the threshold. He skates his palms over her shoulders and arms, rubs his cheek over her hair, and in return she burrows her face into his neck. Stiles knows now that Scott is scent marking her, probably the only audience-appropriate thing he can do to assuage his anxiety at her being away from him and potentially in danger.

The memory of Derek sliding his body-warm leather jacket up Stiles’ shoulders flutters upwards into the forefront of Stiles’ mind, and the flush increases in intensity as he realises Derek was likely scent-marking him. Marking him out as his own. Arousal curls unexpectedly through his gut at the thought and yeah, Stiles is apparently more than fine with that particular lycanthropic quirk.

Lydia ends up sliding down to sit cross-legged on the floor, looking expectantly up at Stiles, who does the same. Scott moves the heavy wooden coffee table out of the way like it weighs nothing, then leans over to flick the lights off, leaving them with the low glow of one remaining lamp. Then he folds himself down onto the floor. He’s shortly followed by Allison, and they somehow organically arrange themselves into something reminiscent of the obligatory séance scene in every eighties tween movie.
Stiles is still fairly dubious about the whole thing, but Scott’s expression is as earnest as Stiles has ever seen it (which is saying something because, Scott), and Allison’s eyes are wide and fixed on the candle that Lydia is lighting, and Stiles reminds himself that if they’re really committing to this then so should he.

*Intent matters.*

He reads over the notes he made earlier, and Lydia follows along, her hair burnished and red-gold in the lamplight.

She places a sprig of rosemary across the wick, and some anise root, and then lights the candle. The flame flares up, tall and blue in the centre. Scott clicks off the last lamp, leaving the room lit only by the stuttering, dancing flame. Stiles can’t tear his eyes from it. Lydia starts to chant something in another language – Latin, Stiles thinks vaguely, and then she waves her hands over the flame so the heat carries the heady, herbal scent through the air.

Scott and Allison join in chanting after a couple of minutes, and soon the air is filled with low, rhythmic sound and scorched rosemary-anise scent. The energy it creates is strange and anticipatory, building thicker and thicker in the air until Stiles can hear the weight of it, straining at the molecules around them, a faint, metallic crackle in the air. It’s so much more potent than he expected. All he can hear is the chanting, all he can smell is herbs and fire, all he can see is the electric-blue centre of the flame, searing into his retinas. Nothing else is present, and it feels like the crackle in the air is goading something, inviting something else in to take the place of everything his senses are missing.

After a few minutes, he feels heaviness enter his limbs, filling him up like a sponge soaking up water. It’s not unpleasant, just odd. The chanting is still there but it’s muffled, and everything is cross-faded. He gets the familiar feeling that he’s falling. It reminds him of the way he gets before he dreams, but this time he knows Scott is there to keep him safe, and Allison, and Lydia, no matter what he might find lurking in the corners of his mind. So he lets himself fall.

The world is white. The ground is the same shade of white as the sky, so it’s impossible to tell where one meets the other. The landscape stretches in an unbroken, barren swathe for miles, from one horizon to the next. There are no trees, no mountains. Just snow and a sky heavy with more snow. Nothing moves. Nothing is alive, here. Each breath crystallises in the air in front of him, sparkling there until the next warm exhalation shatters it and then freezes around it.

The only break in the endless white is Stiles’ shadow, puddling at his bare toes and reaching up over the rippling snow in front of him to make him seem impossibly tall and broad. He glances around the impossible stillness. Still nothing. He doesn’t know why he’s here.

A movement in front of him catches his eye. His shadow moved.

But he didn’t.

He stares intently as the shape of his shadow’s skull changes, increasing, lengthening up and out into the branched shape of antlers. His heart stops. It is him. He raises his hands to feel the antlers that have grown from his skull, scrabbles his fingers into his hair, but finds nothing.

There’s a noise behind him. A huff. A whine. It’s small noise, but it sounds… sad. Desperate.

Stiles turns, slowly.

The beast with the stag head stands there, mercifully, definitely separate from him. It stands before him, looking at him, and he looks back at it. He wants to bolt, but there’s no point. He could never
In the diffuse light, it seems different, somehow. Stiles looks at its eyes, and for the first time they aren’t glowing. They’re bright, bright blue, and disconcertingly human. It lets out the same sad, quiet noise, and spreads its hands and suddenly it’s softer, still harsh in form but also fragile, just like the landscape. It feels like it’s trying to speak to him, trying to make him understand.

It bends, slowly, and with two fingers it draws out a shape in the snow.

Stiles spreads his own hands in return, and opens his mouth, but before he can speak, he wakes up.

Stiles blinks.

The candle has burned down a little, fat rivulets of hot wax streaking its sides. The rosemary and anise root is ash.

‘Stiles?’ Scott’s slurring a little, like he’s out of it. He notices that Lydia’s eyes are closed and her breathing is deep and concentrated, but she’s still sitting upright with her hands upturned on her knees. Scott and Allison are awake but a little muzzy, it seems.

‘Gimme… Do you have paper?’ Stiles asks, grabbing gratefully for the notepad Allison offers him.

He sketches out the now-familiar lines of the squashed frog shape that the beast drew in the snow.

‘That’s… I know that,’ Allison says, leaning forwards to see better in the flickering, shadowy candlelight. ‘It’s associated with demons, like a warning or a barrier.’

‘Demons?’ Stiles drags his hands through his hair. ‘It’s a demon. Of course it is… That symbol was on a jar in Harris’s basement, a jar I touched when I was storing the exhibits. I remember it felt weird. Cold, but like, burning cold. The beast that I see, in my dreams, it drew it for me. It wanted me to know. I think it was being held in the jar and Harris released it. He’s been controlling it, somehow. And it’s… Can I see the bestiary? I think maybe I can figure out what kind of demon it is.’

Intense cold is a recurring theme in all his dreams in which the beast appears. It can’t be a coincidence. Cold, snow, ice, frost… It’s a starting point, at least. If he can figure out what it is, he can figure out how to stop it.

‘Yeah,’ Allison nods, eyes wide. ‘Of course.’

‘Dude…’ Scott grips Stiles’ bicep with warm, strong fingers. ‘You know what this means, right?’

‘Yeah…’ Stiles replies, weak with relief. ‘It’s not Derek.’

‘But if it was Harris,’ Allison says low and urgent, ‘and he’s gone, then… Who’s controlling it now?’

‘I don’t know,’ Scott says. ‘Maybe… Maybe it means it’s over?’

‘Or if it’s out there, uncontrolled…’ Stiles says, chewing on his thumbnail, ‘maybe it’s just beginning…’

'We need to try and get into his phone,' Scott nods across the room to where Harris's phone is silently charging on a side-table.

'Danny might know how...' Stiles suggests, but before they can talk about it further, Lydia slumps
forwards with a gasp, resting her head in her hands, her hair spilling around her face. Her white-knuckled fingers dig into her temples. ‘Oh my god…’ She whispers.

Stiles shuffles over and pulls her into his side. ‘You okay?’

‘I don’t know. I remember… flashes. Bits and pieces, but it was all so slippery...’ She swallows. ‘I remember mirrors. And moonlight. I couldn’t hold onto the details, but I... I think I helped bring Peter back. I remember seeing him, his body. He was dead. And then he wasn’t, anymore.’

‘Fuck…’ Scott breathes.

‘It must have been the night Jackson found me. The night I was missing clothes. I couldn’t remember anything…’ Her voice is unsteady. She takes such pride in her self-control, so Stiles can’t imagine how violated she must feel to have had her autonomy corrupted like that. He’s amazed she’s holding it together as well as she is.

‘It’s not your fault,’ he murmurs into her hair, holding her close. ‘Peter did this, somehow. When he bit you, probably. It’s not your fault.’

She clutches at him briefly and then sits up straight. Stiles can already see the distress in her eyes hardening into anger. ‘I’m going to hunt that bastard down,’ she mutters darkly.

‘If Derek doesn’t get to him first,’ Stiles sighs. He’s probably out there right now, courting all sorts of danger from the hunters, just to try to hunt him down.

Allison wraps Lydia up in a hug of her own, and then says softly over Lydia’s shoulder, ‘I’m going to speak with my father. Arrange a meeting with the hunters, and tell them what we know. Hopefully we can get them to back off.’ At Lydia’s questioning eyebrow she explains what Stiles saw, and how they now believe it’s a demon rather than a wolf.

‘That makes sense,’ Lydia says slowly. ‘It would explain why Harris is… was… so secretive. So defensive.’

Allison hums thoughtfully. ‘It’s my understanding that it’s one thing to summon a demon, but actually controlling one is another matter. It’s supposed to require a huge amount of magical energy, something only a druid or a darach could manage. He must have been using his own life force as a substitute.’

Images of Harris over the last few months, increasingly worn and sickly, flash through Stiles’ mind, and nausea roils up in his stomach. ‘Jesus. Why would he do this?’

‘I don’t know, maybe because he was a shady sadistic bastard who enjoyed hurting people?’ Scott offers, the gloriously prosaic counterpart to the ceaselessly whirring beehive of Stiles’ mind which is throwing up a million different, increasingly insane explanations.

‘He’s gone,’ Stiles says. ‘But I want to know for sure that it’s over, which means I have work to do.’

He checks his phone to find a text from his dad, sent hours ago now, reminding him that he and Melissa are on early shifts in the morning and will be in bed when he gets home. He’s a little surprised to register that it’s after midnight already.

He stares at the word ‘home’, marked out starkly on the screen. He hasn’t been back to his little apartment in a while now, and he misses it. He misses the little home he’d built with Ria, and he misses the life they’d begun to shape, and he misses Derek, but more than anything right now he misses Ria.
He decides to go back to his dad’s and research from there. Hopefully being in close proximity to his
daughter will help soothe his restlessness enough for him to focus.

Allison insists on driving him home, and despite his protests he’s grateful for it. He’s only just
beginning to understand how vulnerable he is compared to his friends, how defenceless and weak.
He slips his hand into the pocket of the hoody he’s wearing and curls his fingers around the cool,
smooth plastic of the flashdrive that contains the bestiary, reminding himself that he’s not completely
useless. He can research the shit out of this demon, and then he’ll make a plan to take it down, once
and for all.

His determination carries his feet from the car to the front door, and if he picks up to more of a jog
when he crosses the exposed patch of lawn, well he’s pretty sure Allison won’t judge – because
there are monsters in the dark, after all.

Bearing that in mind, he makes a quick circuit of the house with his little bottle of mountain ash.
Peter’s still out there somewhere, and it’s the only defence Stiles has against anything, other than his
trusty baseball bat, so he’s damn well going to use it.

Allison watches over him from the car, engine idling as she waits by the curb. He blows her a kiss in
thanks, and hears the engine roar to life and then die away as she drives back to Scott.

He lets himself sag back against the closed door. The house is dark and cool and quiet, and he
breathes deeply into his lungs before he heads for the kitchen. There are two mugs in the sink, and
Ria’s bib is slung over the back of her highchair. He lets the domesticity – the normality – of it
soothe him.

He grabs his laptop, plugs in the bestiary, and settles in with a pot of strong coffee.

He sinks so deeply into his research that he barely notices his dad and Melissa when they trudge into
the kitchen, just as the sky starts to turn from inky to charcoal-smudged. His eyes are dry and gritty
and his teeth feel jittery because of his tremendous coffee consumption, but he doesn’t care because
he’s getting somewhere.

He has a notebook in front of him with various words scrawled haphazardly on it – ice demon,
shape-shifter, kidnappings, cryokinesis, man, bear, wolf – and at the bottom of the page, pressed
hard into the paper and circled several times: Ijiraq.

He doesn’t move from the table other than to repair, with shaky hands, the mountain ash circle after
his dad and Melissa leave. Peter has expressed an interest in him before, and it was Peter who bit
Scott and Lydia, Peter who came back from the dead. Stiles isn’t taking any chances. Luckily there
aren’t any neighbours out and about this early to witness what must appear to be very odd behaviour,
now he’s no longer cloaked by the night.

He turns back into the house. He really should get some sleep, he supposes, but he’s too wired from
finally being within touching distance of actual answers. Anyway, Oriana will be awake in an hour
or so and at this point he’s probably better off on no sleep at all than on a few restless scraps. He
grabs the fresh cup of coffee his dad made, and turns back to his laptop.

The cup slips from his hands and shatters on the kitchen floor, splintering into shards over the tiles
and over the bare, dirt-smeared feet of the beast.

For a split second the beast – the Ijiraq – looks at him, eyes smouldering again, like coals in a fire. Ice
particles crystallise on the tiles and in the air, glittering in the thin beams of early-morning sun that
light the kitchen. The Ijiraq doesn’t move, it just looks. Stiles looks back, and everything is silent.
Then the air around it shimmers, thickens, contorts, like it's folding in on itself. The change in air pressure makes Stiles’ ears feel stuffy and weird, and he struggles to find enough breath for a second, and then, as quickly as it came, the beast is gone.

Stiles stares at the place it had been, watches as the frost on the floor melts into condensation.

He swallows hard to pop his ears and then finally, finally forces his limbs to move as he grabs for his phone and scrambles up the stairs, two at a time. He doesn't dare breathe until he sees Ria’s curls splayed thickly across her pillow, her chest rising and falling in peaceful sleep.

He closes the door carefully and sinks to the ground, jabbing at his phone screen with shaking fingers.

'Stiles?' The voice at the other end sounds as frantic as he feels. 'Jesus, Stiles, what's going on? You're not okay, I can feel- I can hear it in your breathing...'

'Derek,' Stiles says, pressing himself to the wall like a sentry, even though he knows he couldn't stop the Ijiraq if it came back, couldn't stop it if it came for Ria because it was in his house, it was real.

Stiles hesitates. He knows he has no right to ask, not really, not after everything, but.

'Derek, I need you.'
The habits of my heart (I can't say no)

Chapter Notes

Thank you thank you thank you, always, for sticking with this! <3

This is part one of a longer chapter, part two should be up this weekend.

There's some ass-whuppings lined up for future chapters so this one is a slightly softer prelude to that.

Derek drops his head back to rest against the window, hoping it won’t crack further against the weight of his skull. He grimaces at the ominous grinding noise, glass shifting against steel, but the window holds, and he releases a breath of relief.

He twists to sit sideways, back pressed against the grimy plastic side of the subway car. He props his arm up along the metal rail that makes up the back of the seat, and brings his feet up to rest on the second of the pair of seats. The heavy fall of his boots sends a cloud of dust billowing into the air.

Derek sneezes, sending another grinding groan through the steelwork. He sighs, equal parts frustrated and forlorn.

He hates it here.

He hates how the lack of natural light fucks with his circadian rhythm so he never knows what time of day it is. He hates the dust – hates the concrete dust and the rust spores and the billions of particles of crap that the ancient fabric of the subway seats releases into the air at the slightest touch. He hates how the particles cloy in his throat and needle irritantly at his sensitive nose. Everything here makes him sneeze. He hates that.

He hates the depot, hates the rusting, mouldering subway car, hates this whole fucking situation. He hates feeling so cut off. He doesn’t know when that happened – he always used to crave solitude, seek out isolation. Now he chafes against it, wants to know what’s happening outside these walls. He wants to know everyone out there is safe, wants to know where Peter is and how he keeps evading them so skilfully.

He hates that his pack are stuck here within these walls with him, suffering through the same dust and damp and danger.

Derek wonders, not for the first time, if it wouldn’t be better just to give himself up to the hunters.

The pack could find another alpha. One who has the first idea of how to take care of them. He supposes he should be grateful that things with Stiles never had the chance to get any more serious, or he and Ria would be in the hunters’ crosshairs as well.

His heart twists in his chest, like it always does at the thought of Stiles.

Stiles, who managed to get under his skin and into his chest and who crackles like electricity in his blood. And who is definitely up to something, judging by his presence at the gas station earlier (yesterday? He doesn’t know anymore). Up to something he can’t – won’t – tell Derek about. Stiles’
reluctance to confide in him had stung, he has to admit – but how can Derek blame him? He’s not exactly a safe place for Stiles.

He’s not a safe place for anyone.

He glances around the subway car, tracking the movement of a spider as it performs its macabre dance across its web, advancing towards a fly already helplessly entangled in the sticky, silken threads. The spider’s tip-toeing motions become less graceful as the fly’s struggle agitates the web, but it holds on nonetheless, its progress toward its prey steady and inexorable.

Derek’s mouth twists in distaste and he looks away.

He remembers Stiles telling him at length about spiders and their amazing inner hydraulics or hydrostatics or something, he hadn’t really been paying close attention because Stiles had been soft and touchable in one of Derek’s sweaters, eyes lit up in enthusiasm. Their scents had mingled together to create something new, something familiar and comforting and intoxicating, and Derek hadn’t been able to stop himself from pulling Stiles into his lap to kiss him quiet. He’d let him go when Oriana had wandered into the room and held out her arms to Derek, smirking into Ria’s velvety curls when he’d noticed how Stiles’ cheeks were dusted pink by the kiss.

He lets out a low growl and squeezes his eyes shut, annoyed at how easily he’d allowed himself to get lost thinking about things he can’t have. He should be coping better. It’s not like he hasn’t lost people before.

His fingertips drum out an unconscious rhythm on the fabric of the seat for several minutes before he catches it and forces himself to stop. It’s Stiles’ influence, he thinks ruefully. Derek always used to pride himself on his silence, his stillness, but Stiles is in constant locomotion, always tapping or jigging or humming, always movement, always noise. Derek must be picking up his bad habits.

The carriage shakes as someone climbs in, dirt and bits of trash bouncing up and down on the floor in time to the rhythm of the footsteps. Derek doesn’t look up.

‘How long are we gonna stay here?’ Boyd swings himself into the seats in front of Derek’s, the metal frame groaning under his bulk.

Derek shrugs. ‘Not sure. Can’t go back to the apartment or the house.’ It would be much too easy for the hunters to track them down there.

Boyd grunts out an affirmation. ‘Can’t stay here forever.’

‘No.’ Derek tries to sound calm and steady. He wants to give the impression that he knows what he’s doing, that his pack are right to stay with him, wants to be the calm and effective alpha they need.

But.

He’s floundering, his judgement thrown off by guilt and uncertainty. He’s brought them here to hide, but only narrowly avoided leading the hunters back because he’d gotten so focused on Peter he’d been careless. Even though their hide-out remains safe for now, he has no idea what his next move is.

‘You’re not sleeping.’ Boyd never sounds accusatory or judgemental, just casually conversational. It’s what makes him one of the few people Derek enjoys being around. He’s never judged Derek for anything; not for Kate, not for Peter, not for leaving. Not for Derek losing himself in casual sex, the carousel of flesh providing a poor alternative to meaningful connection. And not for Derek finding that connection in their clumsy, overly loquacious, sarcastic, unexpectedly beautiful next-door
neighbour.

‘I’ll sleep when I’m dead,’ Derek says. The half-hearted joke falls flat in the grey, dingy carriage.

Boyd nods and passes him a can of soda, cracking open one of his own and knocking it against the edge of Derek’s.

They sit together, the companionable silence only broken by the fizz of carbonation and the sounds of their throats working. After a few minutes Erica finds them. She plops into the seat on the other side of Derek so he can run his hand down her neck.

She tips her head into his touch and hums in satisfaction. ‘Want food? Cora’s got hot pockets.’

Derek shrugs. ‘Yeah. In a few.’

Erica scrubs at a patch of dirt on her pants. ‘So this is where you hung out as a kid? A disused railway depot?’

‘Mmhm.’ He and Laura had made a den here, in that way that teenagers do. They had brought their friends to party and smoke pot, pretending to get high right along with them, buzzed off the adrenaline of their secret instead. He had only stopped hanging out here after he’d met Paige.

Erica snorts. ‘Even as a teenager your tastes ran to the post-apocalyptic…’

Derek laughs mirthlessly. ‘Guess so.’

‘Well the food’s appropriate,’ Erica muses. ‘I’m pretty sure hot pockets and cockroaches are the only things that would make it through a nuclear apocalypse unscathed.’

Derek smirks. ‘I feel like I should make some sort of asinine comment about the two of them fusing together to create a new super-race of processed-cheese-secreting insect overlord. You know, in Stiles’ absence.’

Boyd nods sagely. ‘He’d probably call them ‘cockpockets’ and then snort soda out of his nose.’

A laugh bubbles up out of Derek’s chest for the first time in days. It feels weird and creaky, but good nonetheless.

Boyd nods, in a satisfied, ‘my work here is done’ sort of way. ‘Come on,’ he says, putting on large, warm hand on Derek’s shoulder. ‘Scalding, vacuum-wrapped processed-cheese-secretions await!’

The smile manages to stay on Derek’s face, quirked into the corners of his lips, as they make their way out of the subway car, Erica’s golden hair almost blue-hued under the weird fluorescent lights. The smile drops when his chest suddenly, inexplicably fills with sick, icy dread. He gasps, reaches for one of the upright metal poles to steady himself.

His chest squeezes in panic, sending his blood thrashing in his ears.

It has to be Stiles. The only times he’s felt this before is when Stiles had been ill that night, and then again when Stiles had a panic attack after he found out half of his close friends were werewolves.

Derek’s jumping down from the subway car and half way out of the door before he knows what he’s doing, sprinting past the shocked faces of his pack. ‘I have to… Stiles…’ is all he manages before he’s shouldered the door aside.

His phone rings in his pocket, and he slows down just enough to allow breath for a tumble of urgent
words as he answers – he doesn’t know what, can’t remember later.

‘Derek… I need you.’

‘You’re hurt?’

‘No, I… I know what it is, the thing that’s taking people, I figured it out but I, it was in the house, and Ria’s here, and it’s gone now but I just… fuck, it was right here and Ria’s here and my dad’s at work and I, I couldn’t have protected her, Derek.’

Derek’s heart catches in his throat at the despair in Stiles’ voice because he knows. When it comes to realising too late that you couldn’t protect the people you love… yeah. Derek knows. Maybe that’s why Stiles called him. ‘I’m on my way, okay?’

‘Okay.’ Stiles’ relief is palpable even through the phone. ‘I’m… Thank you.’

Derek runs harder even as he hangs up, boots slapping heavy against the tarmac in time with the slam of his heart against his ribs. He’s so consumed with the need to get to Stiles that all he hears is the ragged gasp of his own breath, so the touch of a hand on his arm makes him stagger slightly in surprise.

‘Derek,’ Isaac is there, hair damp at his temples, pushing hard to keep up with Derek’s enhanced speed. ‘Wait, we’re… Wait for us.’

Derek slows down, glances back to find the whole pack behind him, a good way back along the road.

Idiots. ‘What are you doing? Go back inside where it’s safe!’

Isaac shakes his head. ‘If it’s Stiles, we… He’s pack. We want to help.’

‘Derek!’ Cora calls, a flinty note in her voice that reminds Derek painfully of their mother. ‘I know you want to get to him but we have to be more careful than this or we’ll put everyone in danger!’

Derek stops, finally, bending to brace his hands on his thighs as he drags air into his lungs. She’s right. ‘You should go back,’ he gasps out. ‘I’ll be much less noticeable on my own.’

Erica snorts. ‘Derek, I know it’s ass o’clock in the morning, but do you seriously think a six-foot, two hundred pound you sprinting through town is somehow inconspicuous?’ Derek wants to bite back at her because he doesn’t have time for this, but deep down he can admit the truth in what she’s saying. She flips her hair over her shoulder, spreads her hands. ‘Let’s just take the fucking car, yeah?’

He hesitates for a second, calculating how long it will take them to get to the hidden car (which he now can’t help but refer to as Honkers in his own head, god-dammit Stiles) and then drive to Stiles’ and yeah, it’ll end up being quicker and less conspicuous than the whole pack running through town in jeans and leather and heavy boots.

At his nod they change direction and head for the generic parking lot on the edge of town where they’ve stashed the car. The camaro is still in the underground lot at the apartment building as it’s much too high-profile to use, but Honkers (he silently rolls his eyes at himself as he slides into the driver’s seat) is far less noticeable. He grits his teeth for the whole drive, barely restraining himself to abide by speed limits because he can’t afford to get pulled over.

They park a couple of blocks from the Sheriff’s house and wait for an agonising sixty seconds to
make sure they weren’t followed, and then Derek is out of the car so fast he’s not sure he’s left the
door intact.

The heavy feeling of dread in his chest still hurts, but it’s easing with every step, every breath pulling
in just a little more oxygen, and then he’s crossing the lawn to the Sheriff’s house, so close he can
hear Stiles’ rapid heart-beat inside. He wants to press his hand against Stiles’ chest to soothe it, wants
to bury his face into Stiles’ neck, wants to -

He doesn’t expect the barrier, hitting it at speed so the impact sends him back a few steps.

He stands, chest heaving, and reaches out a tentative hand.

Resistance.

Oh.

‘Derek?’ Cora’s there, testing the barrier, and Boyd too. The air flares around their hands, subtly in
the grey early dawn. Mountain ash.

Derek stands frozen as Erica pulls out her phone. ‘We’re here,’ she says. ‘But we can’t pass through
the barrier.’

He hears Stiles inhale sharply, both through the phone and inside the house. ‘Fuck. Right. Fuck.
Sorry, I’m sorry.’ There’s the sound of a scramble of limbs, feet thundering down the stairs, and then
the front door is flung open and Stiles is there, rumpled and pale, kicking away the fine line of black
powder that keeps them apart.

Derek folds his arms around his chest and looks over at his pack, because he can’t look at Stiles.
They all stand motionless, Isaac’s mouth slightly ajar.

‘Stiles…’ Erica sounds stung and Derek realises that sometimes he forgets she’s known Stiles the
longest.

‘I’m sorry,’ Stiles starts, and out of the corner of his eye Derek can see blood rushing to the surface
of his skin in deeply flushed blotches. ‘It wasn’t for you, it was-

‘No,’ Derek interrupts. He swallows hard, forces himself to ignore the hot flash of hurt and consider
the bigger picture, forces himself to look at Stiles, finally. ‘It’s smart. It was smart. She’s your
daughter. You had to protect her.’

‘Didn’t work, though, did it,’ Stiles says miserably, a sob in the back of his throat, and Derek thinks
there’s a new light of understanding in the way Stiles looks at him.

‘At least now you know it couldn’t have been any of us,’ Isaac mutters sullenly. Derek shoots him a
sharp glare, but is grateful for Erica slipping an arm over his shoulders. Despite being the youngest,
Isaac has been through some serious shit with his own family that makes it hard for him to trust other
people. In particular he has some issues around rejection and abandonment that mean that this will be
difficult for him to understand.

‘I’m sorry.’ Stiles says again. ‘I… So much weird stuff has been happening the last few months that I
just… And with Peter out there somewhere…’

Derek feels his eyebrows climb into his hairline. ‘Peter?’

Stiles scrubs his long hands over his face. He’s wearing the same clothes as yesterday, Derek notices.
The sharp reek of fear surrounds Stiles, but under that Derek catches the stink of the old gas station still clinging to his clothes, as well as Scott and Lydia, Allison and aniseed, Ria and rosemary. When he lowers his hands, he reveals purpling smudges under his eyes. ‘Can we go inside and talk about all this?’ Stiles offers tentatively.

‘I don’t know, can we?’ Isaac mumbles caustically. Derek lets his eyes flash red until Isaac looks down and scuffs at the sidewalk.

‘Not now. We’ll talk about it later,’ Derek murmurs. Isaac nods sulkily, suddenly every inch the moody teenager he’s supposed to be.

‘I…’ Stiles takes a step closer to Isaac. The sleeves of his plaid shirt are rolled up to the elbow. Derek can’t stop staring at the stretch of bare skin. He notices Stiles’ hands are trembling, ‘I can put more coffee on?’

Isaac glances up despite himself. They’ve been living on bottled water, Dr Pepper and microwave food for days. ‘French roast?’

‘French roast,’ Stiles confirms. ‘And there’s pancake mix, but I’ll need to leave it to someone with steadier hands than me right now.’

Isaac sniffs and straightens the soft blue scarf that’s wrapped round his neck. ‘I like pancakes.’

Stiles bites his lip. ‘I know. But in return I’m going to have to ask you to use your werewolf strength to fight any random ice demons that materialise unexpectedly in the kitchen.’

Isaac tilts his head like he’s considering. ‘Deal.’

‘Ice demons?’ Boyd asks, but Derek puts a hand on his back and moves him towards the house. Stiles looks wiped out and shaky, and Derek wants to be in the house closer to Ria, and he knows Stiles must too.

‘First we drink the coffee,’ Derek says, hoping he sounds stronger than he feels, ‘then we kill the things.’

*

‘Oh.’ Derek can smell it as soon as he steps into the house, his nostrils flaring around the smell of sulphur and ozone and something sharp, like frost.

‘Wow,’ Isaac says from behind him. ‘Ice demon.’

‘Yeah,’ Stiles makes his way to the coffee machine, pulling it open and grabbing a jar of coffee. ‘In the kitchen. So. Yeah. That happened. Apparently that’s the sort of thing that happens to me, now.’

Derek narrows his eyes, taking in Stiles’ still shaking hands, his rabbiting heart-beat, his constant glances up towards the room where Derek can hear Ria sleeping. ‘Cora, make coffee. Isaac, you wanted pancakes. You make them. You…’ He grabs Stiles gently by the elbow, lets his voice go softer, deeper. ‘Come.’

He guides Stiles out into the hall.

‘I can hear her.’ Derek nods towards the stairs. ‘She’s fine. I promise I’ll tell you if she’s not.’

Stiles nods. ‘Oh. Okay. Yeah.’
Derek wants to wrap his arms around Stiles, to pull him into a hug, but he doesn’t know if Stiles trusts him enough to make that a reassuring gesture.

He tries to think of something that would be reassuring. ‘You want me to check the house, just in case? See if it’s been anywhere else?’

‘Please. I don’t think it has, though. It seemed… deliberate. I don’t know how it got through the mountain ash. It just appeared out of nowhere and then…’ Stiles waves his hands around. ‘Poof. Gone. If it wanted to hurt me there was nothing stopping it.’

Derek tips his head. ‘Certain things can avoid the barrier. Deaton would know more.’

Stiles chews anxiously on his lower lip. ‘He’s coming here this morning as soon as he’s back. I called Scott and Allison too, they’ll be here any minute. I think, uh. I feel like we’re all getting our wires crossed and we just need to lay all our cards on the table, you know?’ He makes a jerky, expansive gesture with his arms and knocks a picture from the wall. Derek makes a mental note never to play cards with Stiles. Stiles huffs a laugh as Derek whips a hand out to catch the frame before it hits the floor. ‘Oh, thanks. So yeah, that was a lot of metaphors, but, uh, no more secrets, is the gist.’

Derek inhales slowly, holding the breath at the back of his throat. He’s trained himself, over the years, to become a naturally secretive person. Knowledge is power, after all, so letting other people get to know you is essentially giving them power over you, in Derek's eyes. His heart thumps nervously in his chest and his palms feel damp, but he knows that pooling their intel and various strengths is their best chance to make sure Stiles and Ria stay safe, so he swallows and says, ‘That’s probably a good idea.’

Stiles seems to relax a fraction. ‘Yeah. And. Also.... Honestly, I just wanted to see you. So, um, thank you for coming. I know you… I didn’t have a right to ask, after everything.’

‘Stiles.’ Derek frowns and gestures to the space between them. ‘I know this is… complicated. But if you need me, then... I’ll be here.’

Stiles is silent for a long moment, squinting over at him with curious eyes like Derek is some sort of mystery he can’t quite fathom. ‘I… Yeah. Thanks. Same. You know? Like. Ditto. So.’

Derek nods awkwardly, ears burning. He tries his best not to need people. He doesn’t see that changing any time soon. The odd scent of the ice creature is already softening out and fading away, and in the confined space of the hallway where Stiles and Ria’s scents have been layered into the walls and the carpet a thousand times over, along with those of the Sheriff and Melissa, all he can smell is home. He looks down at the photo in his hands, where a much younger Stiles waves cheekily out from under the hair of a dark-haired woman wound around him. They share the same smile. It must be Stiles’ mom. Derek feels cracked open, too raw; he always has, in the face of the sweet, nostalgic domesticity Stiles always seems to create around himself.

‘Derek…’ Stiles goes to take a step towards him, but before he can say anything Derek hears Ria start to mumble sleepily above him.

‘Uh, Ria’s waking up.’

Stiles smiles a little. ‘Like a walking baby monitor. Nifty.’

Derek feels the word 'nifty' float out and tug at the corners of his mouth, trying to lift it up into a smile. It seems to be Stiles' preferred adjective for lycanthropic abilities. Derek’s mom would have
been appalled. For some reason that makes Derek want to smile all the more.

‘Alphas can hear the heartbeats of pups while they’re in the womb,’ Derek murmurs, eyes on the stairs. ‘Almost as soon as the heartbeat begins, if the young are their own.’

The silence around them grows oddly thicker and he glances over to find Stiles, flushed and fiddling with one of his rolled-up cuffs.

‘Um.’ Derek shuffles awkwardly to try and break the sudden tension. ‘Should I uh, check around upstairs while you get her?’ He doesn’t feel comfortable going into private spaces without Stiles close by, it feels too intrusive.

Stiles nods. Derek follows Stiles up the stairs, glaring down at his own feet so as not to fixate on the perfect curve of the khaki-clad ass right in front of his face. He’s only about seventy per cent successful, but he thinks he does a reasonable job of not getting caught looking.

He pokes his nose into each of the bedrooms as discretely as he can. It turns out Stiles is right – there’s no trace of the sulphurous, ozone-sharp scent up here. He’s checking the bathroom when he hears Stiles start to chatter with Ria and he’s hit in the stomach with the memory of the days when he would sit alone in his room and let this exact sound wash over him, reminding him of what having a family is like.

He's on the verge of overwhelmed, so he slips away downstairs as quietly as he can, letting Stiles have his moment with Ria.

In the kitchen the air is coffee-rich, and there’s a stack of pancakes on the counter. Derek nods his approval to Isaac and Cora.

‘No sign of any ice demons anywhere but here,’ he says, pouring himself coffee and leaning back against the counter. ‘Scott and Allison are on their way. Deaton too.’

‘But… why are we here?’ Isaac asks, quietly, pushing a forkful of pancakes around his syrupy plate.

‘Because you insisted?’ Derek offers, drinking deeply from his cup. It’s good coffee. He really should get a kettle stashed away at the railroad depot. Maybe a Keurig. That might at least take the edge off the whole ‘running for your life for something you didn’t do’ thing, which unfortunately does seem to be Derek’s thing. He figures he might as well be properly prepared.

‘Right,’ Isaac frowns down at his hands. ‘But, I mean, we’re not exactly Stiles’ favorite people, even if he has accepted you’re not some rogue homicidal maniac rampaging your way through the town. We’re still werewolves. He still doesn’t trust us. I don’t get why he wants us here.’

‘He wants his daughter safe,’ Boyd says from behind his own mug of coffee. ‘And Derek has a vested interest in killing this ice demon because it’ll stop the hunters from trying to kill him. He’s the strongest and the fastest of anyone Stiles knows. Of course Stiles wants him on his team.’

Derek blinks, unsure how he feels about Boyd’s mercenary analysis. Sure, it’s more in Derek’s comfort zone to be needed purely for his speed and strength, an expectation he has half a chance of living up to. But a small part of him still hopes Stiles wants him close for more than that; for comfort and support and… Not love. His cautious mind shies away from the thought. Friendship, maybe. Even that fills Derek with something sharp and scared. He’s not sure he’s ever really had a friend before. Maybe tagging along as the muscle is the better option after all.

‘Also,’ Boyd says, stirring creamer into his cup. ‘At some point Stiles and Derek are going to get married and have lots of loud, sarcastic little werepups that fall over their own feet all the time and
then punch you in the face when you laugh about it. So there’s that.’

Derek chokes on a mouthful of coffee.

‘Fucking hell Boyd, that’s not even biologically-’ he trails off, head reflexively turning towards the door when he hears Stiles and Ria at the top of the stairs, seeking them out their voices and scent instinctively. Worry ripples through him as it occurs to him that Ria probably won’t even remember him. She’s so small and it’s been several days since they saw one another. He has no idea whether a one year old would remember the gruff, grumpy dude that sometimes hung around making heart eyes at her dad.

‘I’ve got a surprise for you, little lady,’ Stiles is saying, soft into her ear. ‘Are you ready? Ta dah!’ He rounds the corner and Ria takes everyone in, blinking around at them with wide, golden brown eyes that are identical to Stiles’ own. She’s wearing rainbow-striped jammies and her hair sticks up from her head in soft, curly tufts, and the realisation of how much he’s missed her hits Derek square in the chest. She purses her lips and for a second Derek thinks she’s going to cry, but then she beams, showing off the few tiny, pearly teeth she has. She gets a little shy then, tucking her face into Stiles’ neck. He smooths her hair down and murmurs gently to her and yeah, Derek isn’t over this at all. Not even close.

Derek meets Boyd’s knowing smirk with a glower, which makes Ria squeak with laughter and giggle something into Stiles’ shoulder. ‘Yeah? You want Bear?’ Stiles says, laughing a little when Ria makes grabby hands for Derek’s face. ‘I don’t know, man, she just loves those angry eyebrows,’ he says as he passes her over.

There’s an outraged snort of betrayal from Erica, but Derek ignores it because Ria is warm and funny and she smells of lotion and lavender and sunlight, just like always. She’s just the same, Derek realizes with relief - he had tried so hard not to think about what he was missing. She grasps his face in her tiny, chubby hands, prodding at his eyebrows, his nose, his stubble. He can’t help but cuddle her in closer, rub his hand over her downy hair. He catches himself guiltily. He shouldn’t be scenting her. He’s not her parent, not her alpha. Not anything.

He glances over to find Stiles watching them with warm eyes. ‘She really missed you.’

‘I…’ Derek clears his throat, holds Ria a little closer. ‘Me too.’

‘Of course she did, because why would she miss the person who took care of her for hours a day, for months before Derek even got his furry ass back from his grim little pilgrimage to wherever-the-hell he went,’ Erica mutters darkly to herself, lip jutted out in a truly epic pout. Ria giggles and reaches for her. Stiles is right, she must just really like grumpy people, the tiny little weirdo.

Derek tuts as he passes Ria over to Erica. ‘Jealousy. It’ll give you wrinkles.’

He smirks as she squawks, watching with some satisfaction as a little of the worry unwinds from Stiles’ frame.

He’s still edgy enough that the sound of Scott at the door nearly has Stiles dropping the plate of pancakes. He goes to open the door and there’s low, urgent muttering, and then Scott appears, cordial but tense, followed by a tired-looking Lydia. The genial atmosphere immediately turns awkward as Scott looks around at the werewolves spread over every surface of the kitchen. Ria struggles down from Erica's arms and makes a bee-line for Lydia's long, softly waved hair.

‘For anyone who hasn’t met,’ Stiles says, too bright and too brittle, one hand rubbing at the back of his neck, ‘this is my best buddy and brother-from-another-mother, Scott. No one is to eat him,
capiche? Not even a nibble. Good. This is Lydia, my colleague and very good friend. Also, she’s a banshee. Guys, this is Erica, Isaac, Boyd, and of course you know Derek already. Scott, you’re not to eat any of them either. Got it? Excellent. No-one is ripping anyone’s throats out. My dad just repainted this kitchen, he’d be furious…’

Scott’s nose wrinkles as he picks up on the faint traces of the ice demon that cling to the grout of the tiles. ‘Holy sh... shmonkeys. It was really here.’ He glances around the room. ‘Did you tell them about last night?’

‘No,’ Stiles says, carefully not looking at Derek. ‘I thought we’d all talk together. Where’s Allison?’

‘She’s seeing her dad. Trying to get him to meet with the hunters, explain what we know. When she called him this morning he said he thinks another family has arrived, so we really need to put an end to this. Deaton’s on his way, should be here any minute.’

‘Alright, good.’ Stiles sounds anxious but determined, fiery and simmering around the edges in the morning sun that slants through the kitchen blinds. ‘We should probably get settled in the living room, then.’
I am, again, so sorry for the long gap between updates. I would buy you all apology curly fries if I could.

I'm going to try my hardest to prioritise writing more this year, to make sure this gets finished properly.

Thank you so, so much for sticking with this, you wonderful, patient people!

Stiles looks around his dad’s living room. The various werewolves squashed into the sofas and armchairs make for an odd tableau, especially since Derek’s pack are as touchy-feely as ever and have arranged themselves in some sort of ridiculous puppy pile on the loveseat, a tangle of enmeshed limbs and preternatural beauty. Now that Stiles knows who Cora is he can see a little of Derek in her striking bone structure and her clear-water eyes, and holy wow, are the Hale genetics ever ridiculous.

Derek stakes his claim on a single armchair, dropping down into it with a grace that never fails to make Stiles’ mouth go a little dry. He’s wearing one of his worn-in henleys with thumb holes, and soft-looking jeans, and it’s all very casual and pared-back but the stretch of the denim around Derek’s thighs makes Stiles’ heart stutter embarrassingly, and the thin cotton top only emphasises the power in Derek’s chest and arms. The arms that, pre-werewolf revelations, always made Stiles feel so safe. The arms currently cradling his daughter, who is ecstatic at having Erica, Derek and Scott all together.

Ria has her usual magical effect on the hard lines of Derek’s face, instantly softening them into something warm and tender as he bends over her, feigning immense interest in a squishy fabric book about farm animals that makes all sorts of obnoxious noises. She always particularly likes toys that are loud or flashy. Definitely my kid, Stiles thinks with a faint smile.

‘God,’ he says, glancing around at the assembled company. ‘I feel like we’re those kids from Scooby Doo, about to solve a mystery. I’d be Velma, obviously. Lydia would clearly be Daphne, but with a genius-level IQ.’

Derek narrows his eyes. ‘I swear if you offer me a Scooby snack…’

‘No worries, man. You’re totally Fred.’ Stiles grins at him, not missing the faint colour that spreads over the crest of his cheekbones.

Derek inclines his head a little and grunts, ‘Acceptable.’

‘Scott is Scooby Doo,’ Stiles finishes, ducking to miss Scott’s swipe. ‘Kidding! I’m kidding!’

Derek rolls his eyes like he’d somehow forgotten Stiles can be a little shit, and the familiar bitterness of the expression makes Stiles want to kiss him.

He has to drag his attention to his phone suddenly when his dad calls him to let him know that Harris has been found dead – because, oh right, Stiles is not supposed to know about that yet – from injuries sustained from what they believe is a stray bolt from an inexperienced deer hunter.
‘Stupid kids are always messing around with stuff they’re not properly trained in…’ the Sheriff mutters with a heavy sigh. Stiles decides not to do anything to disabuse him of the notion, though he feels guilty for the deception. The Sheriff’s office has decided not to release the news of Harris’s death publicly yet but the museum will be closed for a couple of days while the police take a look around Harris’s apartment and office to figure out what he was doing alone in an abandoned gas station. Stiles tries to hit the right notes of shock and horror (the horror is easier than the shock), and promises to pass the news on to Lydia too, holding eye contact with her while he says goodbye and hangs up the call.

‘You don’t think they’ll find the cellar?’ Lydia asks, chewing her lip a little.

Stiles shakes his head. ‘No. They’ll be focused on checking through his paperwork, not finding secret rooms.’

‘Um, excuse you but what now?’ Cora interjects, one of her dark Hale eyebrows raised into a perfect, scathing arch.

‘Um…’ is all Stiles manages, before Deaton taps on the door, and is let in by Scott, adjusting to the number of people with one small nod of his head. He declines tea, settling into one of the wooden occasional chairs that Stiles’ mom bought compulsively from thrift shops throughout his childhood because she was anxious about being a good host. She was always stockpiling various cabbage based dishes (the kind her own grandmother used to make during her childhood in Poland) in the freezer, for the same reason. Stiles’ dad had just tutted and rolled his eyes, face soft with affection. Kind of like Derek’s face usually is around Stiles and Ria, in fact.

Stiles’ cheeks burn at the thought. He clears his throat hurriedly.

‘Alright,’ he says, grasping his own knees. ‘I wanted us all to be together because, uh. Well, because we’re all in this together. I don’t want any more secrets. I need to know what you guys know. Anyone not down with that?’ He looks around, satisfied with the silent nods and shrugs he gets. ‘Alrighty then. I guess I should go first.’

He takes one deep, fortifying breath, and then it seems like he doesn’t take another until everything has come spilling out about the dreams, about the museum, about Harris and Lydia and Peter, about the Ijiraq (Deaton offers a slow nod to confirm Stiles’ theory); about everything.

Derek sits in stunned silence, occasionally blinking back to himself to smile in response to Ria’s hands on his face, and pass her a new toy.

The tidal wave of words seems to swirl around, thickening the air, until eventually the flow slows and stops, and Stiles is left breathless while the words sink into everyone and slowly, slowly the air feels clearer. After a few seconds of silence, it’s Isaac who says into the void, ‘And Derek didn’t know any of this?’

Stiles flinches under the sharp edge of accusation in his voice, finding Derek’s eyes – green and gold, in this light - just for a split second before Derek wrenches them away to stare at the floor. It’s enough for Stiles to catch a glimpse of the hurt blossoming there.

‘No.’ Stiles says, leaning forwards. ‘And look… I’m really sorry if I hurt any of you. But like I said, it’s been a bizarre couple of months and I’m just… figuring out how best to keep my daughter safe.’

‘We want that too,’ Erica gestures to the pack. ‘But we also need to figure out how to keep Derek safe.’
Derek makes a small, annoyed noise and glares at her, but Stiles ignores him.

‘Of course.’ Stiles twists his fingers in the hem of his shirt. ‘That’s why we’re here. That’s why Allison and her dad are meeting with the hunters today, to explain everything and hopefully get them off Derek’s case. But we also need to figure out whether the Ijiraq is still dangerous, and I was hoping you would help us.’ He looks pleadingly again at the pack before his eyes settle on Derek, whose face is guarded.

‘You know we will,’ Derek says tightly. Stiles can’t tell if he’s pissed that they even had to ask, or if he’s pissed because Stiles has kept so much from him.

‘Thank you. Look, I have some of my answers. But I still have questions. Like a million of them. And I want to start,’ Stiles leans forward towards Derek, ‘with Peter.’

A muscle ticks in Derek’s jaw, an indication that he’s fighting to keep control of his face. Stiles wishes he wouldn’t.

‘I’m still not really sure,’ Derek admits, his brow pinching into a frown that Stiles wants to kiss smooth. ‘I wish I knew more. All I know is that he’s here. He’s deliberately masking his scent somehow, which means he’s got help. When we had him, that time he came to your apartment, he, uh, took us out into the preserve. To the house he lived in, before he lost his mate in the fire at my family’s house. There was a revenge spiral there that he wanted to show us, but… He escaped before we could get any more information from him.’

Stiles feels his face sliding into an expression that’s complicated and confused, a reflection of the tangle of different feelings knotting themselves up in his chest because yet another one of his weird dreams apparently came to life or something and everything is so beyond fucked up right now. ‘A revenge spiral?’

‘It’s a symbol werewolves use among themselves,’ Derek explains. ‘It signifies revenge. A blood debt to be paid. I don’t know who left it for him but… With Peter? It could be any number of people.’

‘He’s a bad guy?’ Scott asks, mouth twisted in something like disappointment.

Derek sighs. ‘He’s always been… complicated. He was trapped in the fire, injured badly enough to put him into a coma for a really long time. We didn’t think he’d wake up. Maybe it would have been better if he hadn’t, because when he did he was…’ he tails off, but the darkness in his voice says all Stiles needs to know.

‘He was out of control,’ Cora says, face flinty. ‘Killed our older sister to become the alpha.’

Stiles inhales sharply. ‘Jesus. Why?’

She lifts a shoulder. ‘The Argents burned our family alive. Peter lost his sister, his mate, an unborn child. Everything. Her eyes are glassy and focused intensely on Derek. ‘Grief made Peter crazy. He wanted revenge on the hunters who set the fire, and thought he needed Laura’s power to do it. I’d only just found out Derek and Laura were alive, I was so close to tracking them down. He killed her before I could see her. And the power just made him crazier.’

Stiles’ heart aches for her. He can’t imagine what it must have been like to find someone you thought was gone, and then lose them all over again. ‘That’s when he bit Scott and Lydia?’

Derek nods. ‘He was heading for town, biting people against their will. I… that’s not how we do things. Not ever. I had to put a stop to it.’
The silence in the room is palpable, knife-edged.

Stiles struggles to force out the words that stick in his throat; it’s an odd sensation for him, accustomed as he is to verbalising almost every thought in his head without hesitation.

Eventually it’s Lydia who seeks the confirmation Stiles is afraid of. ‘You killed him?’

Derek nods again, slowly, not meeting Stiles’ eyes.

Stiles breathes carefully in through his nose and out through his mouth, trying to calm the rapid tattoo his heart is beating against his rib-cage. He’d suspected Derek had killed Peter, and now he knows for sure… He’s not sure how he feels about it. It’s scary, yeah, but he thinks about what his dad had said about intentions, and about whether any human would have been able to stop Peter’s lethal rampage… He thinks about the heartache Derek ultimately prevented, even though he hadn’t been able to prevent his own… and Stiles thinks, among the chaos of emotion inside him, what he predominantly feels is relief, and understanding.

‘And I brought him back,’ Lydia says quietly.

‘There’s a ritual,’ Deaton interjects. ‘I think he implanted thoughts or memories into you when he bit you, so you’d know what to do.’

Lydia nods, looking faintly nauseated.

‘It seems like after he was brought back he disappeared pretty quickly,’ Cora says. ‘We thought maybe he’d found out I was alive and was trying to find me, but he never did. And now he’s back in town, and we don’t know why.’

‘Seems like a hell of a coincidence that the timing aligns so perfectly with this Ijiraq thing,’ Stiles muses. ‘I just can’t figure out how he fits into it.’

‘We should focus on the Ijiraq,’ Lydia leans forward and puts a gentle hand on Stiles’ knee. ‘We need to figure out how to stop it for good. Work backwards from there.’

‘I must admit,’ Deaton says, steepling his fingertips together, ‘I’m impressed at how much you’ve put together, Stiles. My associate is a specialist in rare derivatives of ancient Inuit languages. He took a look at the symbols for me, and came to the same conclusion as you.’

Scott snorts. ‘That’s my guy,’ he says, clapping his hand on Stiles’ back. ‘Master of Google-fu. Does in four hours what it takes other people four days to do!’

Deaton silences him with a flat look. ‘There’s more. I wanted to talk to him because you, specifically, interest me, Mr Stilinski.’

Stiles blinks, nerves clawing back up his throat. ‘Um. Why?’

Deaton clears his throat. ‘These dreams, you have. These visions. It seems to me that you’ve connected with the Ijiraq somehow. Could you have, at any point, come into contact with the jar it was contained in?’

‘I…’ Stiles shakes his head. ‘I mean, yeah. I touched it. But I was wearing gloves. It was weird. Cold. So cold it burned through the latex. But I… It’s just a jar, right?’

Deaton’s eyes are dark and inscrutable. ‘Did anything odd happen to you after you came into contact with it?’
‘I got sick. It was…’ Stiles can’t stop his eyes ticking over to Derek. ‘It was the night Derek first came over, he took care of Ria for me.’

Deaton shoots Derek a sharp look. ‘You got sick and Derek came over?’

‘I was passing,’ Derek murmurs, jaw clenched tightly under Deaton’s measuring eyes.

Deaton rubs a hand over his chin. ‘I’ve noticed that you’re unusually proficient in mountain ash, Stiles, for someone who has never encountered it before.’

‘I... guess?’ Stiles blinks, swallowing hard. ‘Is that… relevant?’

‘Maybe.’

Stiles barely holds back a sigh of frustration. ‘Could you maybe give me the Reader’s Digest version of what you’re referring to? It’s just we’re a little pushed for time… Or you could let me look at your books?’

Deaton’s nose wrinkles the tiniest amount. ‘Out of the question, no-one touches my books but me.’

‘Deaton.’ Derek’s voice is low and urgent. ‘Talk.’

‘Alright. Bear in mind this is all theoretical...’

Stiles nods impatiently. ‘Gotcha.’

‘Magic is all about energies,’ Deaton says. ‘Natural energy, supernatural energy, energy in different dimensions. Certain beings have the ability to harness these energies in various ways... Hence the different kinds of druids, witches, darachs... And so on. Over time we can hone the ability. Train it.’

Deaton stares hard at Stiles’ face, like he’s searching for something. ‘All humans are exposed to these energies, but the theory is that some are more, shall we say, perceptive to the unique frequency of supernatural energies than others. More... conductive...’

‘I don’t... what?’ Scott scowls, trying to figure out exactly what he means.

‘Stiles is copper wire,’ Lydia adds, with the air of someone explaining something very simple to an idiot. Deaton nods, but Scott doesn’t look any less confused.

‘Stiles... is magic?’ He ventures hopefully (Stiles knows Scott would think it was extremely cool of his best buddy turned out to be Harry Potter – it’s possible they’ve had one or two speculative conversations about how awesome the broomstick travel would be if either of them ever got summoned to Hogwarts as mature students).

‘No, not really,’ Deaton purses his lips. ‘But he is sensitive to other people’s magic, and to supernatural energies. It’s amplified further when he puts intent behind his actions.’

Lydia taps her fingers on her knee, contemplatively. ‘That’s why the meditation ritual affected him so strongly? Why he mastered mountain ash so quickly?’

‘There’s a theory, unproven mind you, that humans who are highly perceptive to the supernatural world actually operate on a more enhanced frequency than usual, themselves. They attract supernatural frequencies and are attracted to them.’

Stiles very carefully does not look at Derek, and he can tell Derek is very carefully not looking at him. No-one else has any such compunctions however, and Stiles feels the air warm up under the
heat of several pairs of interested eyes. His shirt feels damp across his back, and his knows his cheeks are doing their dorky blotchy thing.

‘So… Stiles is…’ Scott hedges.

‘Catnip,’ Stiles finishes for him, failing to keep the manic edge out of his voice. ‘No… wolfnip. Demon-nip? I am…’ He waves his hands around vaguely, ‘…all the nips. Wait, that sounds bad. Nippy? God, no, that’s worse. I need a different analogy. What’s the wolf equivalent of catnip? Bones? Oh goddamnit…’ He covers his face with his hands and groans, and then Scott fails to stifle a wet sounding laugh, and then Erica laughs, and the whole moment collapses under the weight of its own absurdity.

Deaton hums through a razor-thin smile. ‘This is all just speculation, I must remind you. We can’t know anything for sure. But my best guess is that the demon made contact with you when you touched the jar. Your glove likely had a small hole or tear that allowed your skin to touch it directly. Your natural sensitivity to supernatural energies meant that it made a connection with you, even through the jar. It’s likely that’s why you became ill. The dissonance… your body rejected it. But it’s possible it left you with very temporary transference of abilities.’

‘You... What?’ Stiles demands, aghast. ‘You’re… Are you telling me I was possessed?’

‘Not exactly. The demon would have been confined to the jar. But some sort of brief energy exchange took place, most likely.’

‘What abilities are we talking about, here?’ Lydia’s voice is cool and composed, a cold compress to the anxiety that itches at Stiles’ temples.

Deaton slides some tattered, yellowing papers towards her, which she scans at lightning speed. ‘Ijiraq demons are born of extreme cold, it’s where they thrive,’ she translates aloud. ‘They’re typically solitary entities. They’re demons of chaos, of mischief. They especially like to make people disappear, to move them from one place to another, far away, without explanation. In order to do so, they can transform themselves. They play with perspective, shift into different forms, and they create… I suppose wormholes would be one term.’

‘Wait…’ Stiles sits forward so abruptly his knees knock against the coffee table, slopping cold coffee onto the carpet. ‘So like… I can time travel? Like zap around the universe helping in the fight against the Cybermen?’

Deaton frowns. ‘No, it’s more like… they create a fold in the fabric of time and space. A shortcut. They can bypass almost any barrier, physical or supernatural. You can likely do the same, but to a much lesser extent. Or at least, your subconscious can, under very specific circumstances. You follow the connection you have with it, so you end up in the same time and place as it. It’s likely that the demon has been contained, somehow, and when it’s let loose there’s an energy spike that your subconscious is still drawn to.’

Stiles thinks back over the last few weeks. It’s an indictment of how bizarre his life has become that this all actually sort of makes sense. ‘The dreams, um. They did seem more vivid in the beginning. Like I had more agency, even though I wasn’t physically there. The very first time I was me but in someone else’s body. Lately it’s been… like I’m latent in a different observer, or hovering somewhere around the edge of it all.’

‘This isn’t something I’ve personally encountered before, but I would hazard a guess that the transference was strongest directly after you’d touched the jar. I expect your dreams will become less frequent and much less vivid as the connection fades. What’s fascinating is that the demon seems to
seek out your connection from its end also, especially now it seems to be untethered… It doesn’t want to hurt you, it even acts like it’s trying to communicate with you…’ Deaton’s gaze is steady and unwavering, and Stiles has the unnerving feeling that Deaton wouldn’t turn down the chance to dissect him and see what’s really going on in his head.

‘So… it’s not over, then, even though Harris is dead?’

‘It certainly seems to want something from you,’ Deaton says with a slight lift of his shoulders.

‘The connection works both ways…’ Lydia offers, gently.

There’s a beat of silence, punctuated occasionally by little snores from Ria, who has given up on the boring grown up conversation and fallen asleep against Derek’s chest.

Scott clears his throat. ‘So, like… fucking hell…’

Yeah, that about sums it up.

Stiles laughs, a startled, choking sound. ‘So my subconscious, what? Follows an energy trail? Like the tail of a shooting star, or something?’

‘It’s likely you dream about Derek for the same reason,’ Deaton says, oblivious to the major technicolor flush that drowns Stiles’ cheek because oh god, as if this weren’t enough of an emotional rollercoaster.

‘Um. What.’ Derek is staring at him and Stiles is painfully aware that Derek is not blinking.

‘Especially if you’re mated,’ Deaton says, eyeing Stiles’ neck.

‘Wait, what?’ Stiles all but screeches. Derek’s eyes are closed but his ears have turned a telling shade of scarlet.

Stiles drops his face into his hands, relying on werewolf super-hearing to make sense of his muffled, ‘Oh my god. Could you guys, uh, give me and Deaton and Derek… a few minutes of privacy?’

Everyone files out with remarkably little protest, presumably because they can all hear everything from wherever they are in the house, with the exception of Lydia, but she always knows everything anyway. Stiles doesn’t have the spare emotional capacity to feel foolish for his human impulse to create the illusion of privacy.

He lifts his head to look at Derek, who is as impossible to read as ever. The space between them feels thick with unspoken emotion and uncertain expectations.

‘I take it you’re not mated, then?’ Deaton asks, and this time Stiles can’t help but make a noise that’s something like the verbal equivalent of someone falling flat on their face.

‘No,’ Derek mutters, face shadowed with something suspiciously like guilt. ‘No biting. No mating.’

‘Mating?’ Stiles hisses furiously because it really would have been awesome if someone had mentioned that was a thing.

‘Dreaming?’ Derek bites back and yeah, okay. Maybe they’re both guilty of a lack of full disclosure of important things.

Stiles wipes his damp palms on his khakis. Suddenly his nerves are stripped wires, raw and sparking and exposed. ‘So, uh, I sort of… I’ve been having dreams about you. Um. Your past, specifically.
Sometimes the present. As in, what you’re doing that very minute type of thing.’

‘My past?’ Derek asks, dully.

‘I’m sorry,’ Stiles hurries the words out. ‘I didn’t mean to invade… I can’t really control it, or I… I would never want to take something you didn’t want to give.’

He watches the muscles work in Derek’s throat until finally, ‘It’s… fine,’ breaks free.

Stiles drops his head because he knows that it’s not. ‘You don’t have to do that,’ he murmurs. ‘You can be pissed at me, you know?’ Stiles can deal with Derek being angry with him, he’s a big boy. What he can’t deal with is the thought that Derek is offering up his own comfort to secure Stiles’s, and he knows that’s absolutely something Derek would do without a second thought.

Derek pauses for a beat and then shrugs with a soft, resigned sigh. ‘I would have told you whatever you wanted to know, anyway.’

Something hot pricks behind Stiles’ eyes, and he rubs at them briefly with the heels of his hands, then turns to Deaton. ‘So… I’m dreaming about Derek because… my subconscious follows his energy? Even though we’re not mated?’

‘He’s pack,’ Derek interjects. ‘Does that make a difference?’

Deaton shrugs. ‘Possibly. You can be connected even if you aren’t mated.’

That weird look flickers over Derek’s face again, but before Stiles can chase it Deaton looks at him and says, ‘Are you spending periods of time intensely focusing on Derek before you sleep?’

Because apparently Deaton wants to make sure he destroys every single shred of Stiles’ dignity before the morning is out.

Stiles’ cheeks flame. ‘I… yeah. The other night I stressed about how little I knew about him for a few hours and then dreamed about his past all night.’

Deaton nods. ‘Your curiosity manifested as intent.’

‘And intent is important…’ Stiles says slowly, ticking everything over. ‘So if, um, hypothetically, Derek happened to be in, you know, mortal peril, in one of those dreams…’ He lifts his eyes to look straight at Derek. ‘Say he was, uh, just off the top of my head, here, thrown into a lake by a giant scaly lizard dude and seemed to be drowning… Could I have hypothetically summoned all my catnip super powers and physically… helped?’

Derek’s mouth drops open. Stiles doesn’t know whether to feel triumphant at finally cracking Derek’s implacable mask or horrified that the other night is evidently a thing that actually happened.

‘Hypothetically,’ Deaton muses. ‘You could have manipulated the transference energy into something physical. If you wanted to badly enough.’

‘I did,’ Stiles says with absolute certainty.

Derek looks at him properly for the first time.

‘I did.’ Stiles repeats.

‘This is fairly rare territory to be honest,’ Deaton leans forward in interest. ‘I’d be very interested in doing some tests with you if you’re interested…’
‘No,’ Derek practically snarls. ‘He’s not.’

‘Well,’ Deaton says with an amused sniff. ‘Clearly there are strong feelings in the equation. That would explain why you seek him out, on every level. And his energy seeks you out in return.’

‘Huh,’ Stiles manages weakly.

Deaton checks his watch and gets to his feet. ‘I’m afraid I really need to go,’ he says, gathering his briefcase. ‘I have an appointment in the clinic first thing.’

Stiles sits frozen for a moment, watching the space Deaton has left behind, before scrambling to his feet and running out after him.

‘Hey, woah, hey, hi. I just have one more itty bitty question…’ He skids to a halt in front of Deaton, who looks down at his watch pointedly. Stiles has to swallow down a derisive snort. He doesn’t care how dedicated a veterinarian Deaton is, there’s no way giving a pedicure to Mr. Manoli’s macaw is as interesting as this ice demon, even if the parrot’s favorite past-times do include glaring malevolently at everyone in the room while it calls them all ‘ballsacks’ in a vicious, pervasive stage whisper.

Stiles rubs at the back of his neck, lowering his voice even though he knows every single supernatural being except Lydia could hear him a mile away, and Lydia just innately knows everything anyway. ‘Theoretically, if I also had dreams about Derek that weren’t from his past… Say they were what appeared to be very much a possible, uh, montage of glimpses into the future. More, uh, rom-com than horror movie…’

Deaton sighs impatiently and stares at him expectantly.

Stiles rolls his eyes. ‘Well say that, theoretically, this was happening. Uh, is it possible that I was seeing his actual future? Like a ghost of Christmas yet to come kinda deal?’

‘Nothing about the future is fixed,’ Deaton says, frowning a little, ‘and it’s possible you had standard fictitious dreams in amongst your subconscious visits to Derek’s timeline. But yes, it’s also possible they were glimpses of the future.’

‘Oh,’ Stiles says, numbly. ‘Oh, wow.’

Glimpses of a future where they're together.

A future with Stiles, Ria and Derek.

A future where they’re happy.

‘Like I say,’ Deaton says briskly, side-stepping Stiles and making his way to the side-walk, ‘nothing is certain.’

Presumably he’s worried about being actually helpful instead of vague and worrying.

Stiles shuts his mouth with a click, watching as Deaton crosses the sidewalk to his car. Right before he lowers himself into the seat he looks over at Stiles, whose hopes for further useful information rise like a warm pocket of air in his chest.

‘Tell Scott I expect him back at work on Saturday,’ is all Deaton says before he shuts his door and drives away.
There’s a strange, sinking feeling as the warmth evaporates.

He turns on his heel slowly and faces the house. He has about six steps in which to process the fact that Harris is dead and yet the demon is able to seek Stiles out, because apparently they have some sort of subconscious connection that Stiles can’t control.

Just like he can’t control his connection to the six-foot, grumpy-ass werewolf currently sulking in an armchair in the living room – the guy he’s been totally gone on since about seven seconds after they met – and apparently mates are a thing and now Derek knows Stiles dreams about him, and they’re no closer to knowing what the hell Peter is up to and – fuck…

It’s a big ask of those six steps.

It turns out he doesn’t even get that, because the doorway is abruptly blocked by a skein of dark hair and those familiar, stern brows.

‘Um. Hi,’ Stiles says with a dorky wave.

Cora narrows her eyes at him. ‘I don’t know whether to hug you or punch you in the face, right now.’

Stiles laughs shakily. ‘You’re definitely a Hale, then.’

She snorts, then nudges one of the pumpkins on the porch with the toe of her sneaker. ‘This is a difficult time of year for us. My mom loved Thanksgiving.’

Stiles’ heart moves up to flutter somewhere near his throat. ‘I get it.’

He does. For years after his own mom’s death, the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas had been nothing but a painful reminder of the absence of her, for both him and his dad. If anyone understands the requiems that punctuate a life lived to the rhythm of a broken heart, it’s Stiles.

Cora’s eyes flick over him, and she hums. ‘Maybe you two do have more in common than a shared interest in each other’s dicks. Whatever. Just be good to him or I’ll mount your head on the wall over my fireplace.’ She says it so casually that it takes a second for it to fully sink it, but once it does Stiles is suitably scared, barely managing a nervous giggle and a jerky nod in response.

He glances at the door into the living room, where Derek is currently trapped by his sleeping daughter. He wants to go to him, wrap him in a hug and whisper apologies into his skin, but he thinks Derek deserves his full attention, and they have an ice demon to dispose of – somehow – first.

He doesn’t exactly know how, but he has an idea of where to start. So, as the world outside slides out of the last of the lavender shadows and into the apricot sunlight of morning, he sighs, reluctantly turning away from Derek, and heads instead for the kitchen, and the rest of the pack.

‘Erica,’ he says into the silence that falls thick around him as soon as he enters the room. ‘Can we talk?’
The cold comes with a sting (a sting across my hands)

Chapter Notes

I am, as ever, sorry for the time this is taking (adulting is turning out to be a lot like that gif where the one penguin slaps the other upside the head, who knew), and stupendously, stupendously grateful for you guys sticking with me.

Stiles stands in the doorway of the living room, looking in.

After his conversation with Erica and the rest of the pack his feet carried him here, sure and without hesitation, but now he’s stalled at the threshold, the weight of his exhaustion and emotion forming his very own invisible barrier.

He allows himself a second to try and memorise the scene in front of him; Derek and Ria curled together in his dad’s armchair, the former impossibly huge and impossibly gentle, the latter fast asleep, her pink cheek smushed against Derek’s collarbone. Her curls are damp around her hairline, probably because Derek runs so warm, but her tiny mouth is slack in peace. It seems she likes having a werewolf as her own personal hot water bottle.

He can’t help but stare at the way his fragile daughter is cradled in the crook of Derek’s sturdy arm.

Despite his dreams telling him a future – their future – is possible, Deaton had reminded him of what he already knows. Nothing is certain. So he wants to remember everything he can about this vulnerable, lovely moment, before Derek notices he’s there and is rightfully angry with him for not telling him everything that’s been going on, especially about the dreams that invade Derek’s past and privacy.

Derek looks beautiful, like always, but now Stiles lets himself openly look he notices the shadows under his eyes, and a paler pallor to his skin, like he’s been out of the sun for a while. He wants to touch, to kiss, to apologise, but he’s not sure what Derek wants. The fact he’s even here at all is incredible, given some of the things Stiles had said to him. He could have - probably should have – left town. Left the hunters behind, along with Stiles and Ria and all their complications. The thought that he still might leave sends a spike of sharp fear lancing through Stiles’ chest.

Derek’s nostrils flare suddenly, and his brow sinks into a heavy, melancholic furrow.

Stiles blinks at him, taken aback. ‘What is it?’ he asks, trying to take a surreptitious sniff in the direction of his own armpits in case they are the humiliating cause of Derek’s thunderous expression (although he figures a certain amount of stress-sweating should be allowable, given the circumstances).

‘You’re scared of me.’ Derek shakes his head with a humourless, resigned chuckle. 'More scared of me.'

‘What? No, I’m not,’ Stiles protests.

‘You reek of it.’ Derek looks away, eyes and jaw set hard. ‘I knew this would happen, once you found out about Peter.’ He starts to unfold from the armchair, big hands still cradling Ria like she’s
made of porcelain.

‘Hey, no.’ Stiles holds up his own hands placatingly, catching Derek’s gaze before continuing, to ensure he hears the truth of Stiles’ heartbeat. ‘I’m not afraid of you. I’d never have left Ria with you all this time if I was.’

Derek’s brows rise doubtfully.

Stiles takes a tentative step into the room. ‘I…’ he swallows. He never usually struggles with words – if anything he struggles to rein in the excess of them that spills out of him unbidden – but the air between him and Derek is thick and sticky with everything unknown, uncertain and unsaid, and it makes what he wants to say catch in his throat. ‘I’m not.’

‘Okay,’ Derek finally says, softly, pink shading his ears and cheekbones. He mutters, ‘Cos I didn’t really want to give her back yet,’ so quietly that Stiles only just catches it, spooling it up and tucking it away in that safe place in his chest where he holds all of Derek’s unexpected, precious tenderness when it’s offered from behind that gruff, scowly exterior.

He bites his lip to hold back the goofy grin that threatens to overwhelm him. ‘Better hang on to her, then. She looks pretty comfy. She hasn’t been sleeping well lately, she must need it.’

Derek still hesitates, holding tension in his frame for a few long seconds that flood Stiles with guilt. After their early-morning unburdening he feels the start of something like hope; like he can start to really work on trusting Derek again. Judging by the tentative way Derek settles back into the chair, limbs and face softening ever so gradually as he melts back around Ria, Stiles isn’t at all sure Derek feels the same about him.

He’d like to find out, though, and Stiles is nothing if not audacious in his pursuit to know the unknown, so he takes another step into the room.

‘Can I?’ Stiles tilts his head towards the chair.

Derek’s eyes flick over to him in surprise. ‘Sure.’

Stiles forces his feet to unfreeze and take him the rest of the way to the armchair. Derek moves a little, like he’s offering Ria up to him, but with a small shake of his head, Stiles joins them. He carefully folds himself around Ria’s back, resting half of himself on the armrest opposite from Derek. He moves as gingerly as he knows how, trying to not to disturb his daughter or the intimacy of the moment she’s found with Derek.

It’s a little awkward to spoon himself around Ria, and he ends up with his chest just a few millimetres from Derek’s forearm, and the length of their thighs pressed together. Derek doesn’t move away, just holds himself absolutely still and watches Stiles quietly. Once Stiles has pulled his legs up onto the ottoman, he lets himself exhale into the leather backrest of the chair.

His mom might have collected a motley assortment of occasional chairs, but his dad has always stayed true in his affections to this armchair. He’s always joked that it gains laughter and worry lines at the same rate he does, the leather making it feel present and alive in a way that a man-made fabric never could. It’s been a mainstay of Stiles’ childhood, worn soft over years of coffees and cuddles, ballgames and beers, whiskey and grief and growth. It’s stoically withstood them all, offering cool, familiar comfort within its masculine lines.

Stiles can’t articulate to Derek what it means to have him here, in this chair that he’s loved all his life, with his daughter, caring for her. He’s pretty sure he’d sound crazy.
He looks up into Derek’s steady, cool-blue gaze. There’s no hint of red there, now, just the softly hued striations of green and grey and gold that make Stiles’ heart dance dorkily against his rib-cage.

He fumbles clumsily for some words, eventually coming up with, ‘Finding out about Peter… It just confirmed what I already knew.’

Derek’s eyes flinch closed. ‘That I’m a killer,’ he says, dully. Stiles notices the uncertainty in his hold on Ria, sees all the self-doubt and self-loathing behind those pretty, perplexing eyes before Derek shuts them away.

His heart stumbles painfully. He shakes his head again. ‘That you’re so much better than the worst thing you’ve ever done.’

Derek jerks back a little, letting his eyes slide open and find Stiles’ own. A soft ‘oh,’ slips from his mouth, wrapped in a sigh.

It seems to release a little more of his tension, too, and when he cradles Ria closer he doesn’t pull away when Stiles’ arm brushes his own.

There are a million more things Stiles wants to say, half-sentences filling up his chest with a near-painful urgency, but he knows now isn’t the time.

Instead he nods towards the kitchen and says, ‘I’m guessing you heard all that?’

‘Yeah,’ Derek replies with another small frown. ‘Are you sure?’

Stiles swallows thickly. ‘No,’ he says, honestly. ‘And yes. I know Erica thinks I’m stupid.’

‘Probably.’ The corners of Derek’s mouth catch up in a wry little smile. ‘But not for this. She gets it. She’d just like to be here, too. She likes beating up bad guys.’

Stiles laughs quietly, trying not to jostle Ria. ‘Why does that not surprise me.’ He sighs. ‘I just want Ria to be with someone she knows. Someone who can protect her. She’s not safe here with me, and my dad has no idea about anything supernatural. Erica’s fast and strong and… ya know, super. And Ria loves her. Erica, uh. She suggested Isaac go with them since he’s the fastest.’

Derek inclines his head just a little. ‘They’ll take good care of her.’

‘They will. Any of you would. But Scott needs to be here for Allison. Boyd’s apparently unbeatable when it comes to punching people in the face, and god knows we might be in need of that later on. And you,’ Stiles says gently, ‘can’t be the one, even if you are her favorite. Given your illustrious status at the top of the hunters’ most wanted list.’

One of Derek’s brows quirks up a little, and Stiles has a pretty good idea of what he’s thinking.

‘Derek…’ Stiles worries at his lower lip, searching for the right words. ‘I know I reacted… badly, when I found out about you. I said some really shitty things, because I was mad at you, and… and I felt stupid. I thought I knew you better than I did. But I’m starting to see that you are who you’ve always been. Just… Just more.’

It’s possible there’s cause for hope, after all, because Stiles’ opinion still seems to matter a whole lot to Derek, judging by the way he seems to have stopped breathing and blinking.

Stiles keeps his voice and his heartbeat steady. ‘I know you’d never hurt her. I’ve always known that.’
‘You were right to be scared. You’d be stupid not to be. I’ve done…’ Derek rests his head back on the cool leather of the chair, letting his eyes slip shut again. He sighs. ‘I’m proud of what I am, Stiles. I’ll never apologise for being a werewolf, it’s… it’s a gift. But I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of.’

‘I know.’

‘No, you don’t.’ Derek shakes his head sharply.

Stiles lets one hand curl over Derek’s wrist, so he can feel the pulse there, thrumming strongly through the thin skin. ‘I know enough to know that everything you’ve done is with good intentions. I know how much that matters.’

Derek’s eyes fall back onto him, darker and more intense.

‘I know you love Ria.’ Stiles brings up his other hand to stroke the back of a finger over Ria’s velvet-soft cheek. Derek swallows and nods shakily, and it’s all Stiles can do not to wrap his arms around both of them.

He smiles ruefully. ‘I also know you’ve got a giant target on your back, right now. And so do I, in a different way. So we both have to walk away from her, just for a little bit, to keep her safe.’

Derek nods slowly, bringing his knees up to mirror Stiles’ pose. Stiles thinks that together they must look like two parentheses curled protectively around a comma, two barriers keeping a little symbol of peace safe from all the danger and the chaos out in the world.

‘Erica’s taking her away someplace, this afternoon?’

‘Yeah.’ Stiles lets his thumb rub slow, unconscious circles into Derek’s wrist. ‘I told her not to tell me where. It’s better if that information isn’t in my brain at all, since it isn’t fully my own at the moment. And then after dark I’m gonna go to the museum and end this thing, one way or another.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ Derek says immediately.

‘I know.’ Even if Derek is basically a walking target for hunters and their cross-bows, Stiles knows that won’t stop him from waltzing (well, moodily stalking) into danger if it means he’s there to put himself between it and Stiles.

He wishes he were selfless enough to absolutely refuse to bring Derek with him, but honestly, he’s already sick over distancing himself from his daughter, and somehow he knows that his chances of making it out of the evening ahead unscathed are so much better with Derek by his side.

‘You’re sad,’ Derek says, matter-of-fact but soft.

‘I would give up anything for her,’ Stiles says, one shoulder lifting into a shrug. ‘I walked away from my career. The future I’d had all planned out. I let it go, and I never looked back. It was harder, trying to walk away from you. But letting go of her… Walking away because I know I’m not the best thing for her right now, that’s…’ He tails off, shaking his head. There isn’t a word.

‘We’ll figure it out,’ Derek says with quiet ferocity. ‘I’m not going to let anything come between you.’

Stiles nods, closing his eyes against the burning behind his eyelids.

Derek slips his hand around the nape of Stiles’ neck and squeezes lightly. Stiles guesses it’s a
werewolfy sort of thing, this fascination with necks, though this is more of a protective reassurance of a gesture than anything sexual. He leans into the touch, wondering if he ought to be finding these behavioural quirks stranger than he does. In actual fact it feels… sort of nice.

The instincts that he now knows govern Derek – the need to touch, to scent, to protect – all feel natural, and Stiles finds he adapts to them instinctively as well, knowing innately when to respond in kind and when to allow Derek space. He and Derek are different, sure, but it occurs to him that they’re not necessarily incompatibly so.

Derek’s palm is soothingly warm, his fingers strong and familiar. The weight of his hand is perfect and grounding, like an anchor. Stiles holds on, this time wrapping his fingers around Derek’s wrist to keep his hand there.

He must fall asleep, and so must Derek, because the next thing Stiles is aware of is frantic, massively unsubtle whispering.

‘-seriously not know what it means when an alpha falls asleep with you-’
‘-different for humans. Especially for Stiles, he falls asleep anywhere-’
‘-so fucking cute though, come on, you gotta let me take one more pic-’

‘Ugh, you guys are the worst, get the fuck outta here…’ Stiles complains sleepily. There’s whispered laughter and a scuffling sound as the culprits bolt away from the door. Stiles blinks opens his eyes, blinking around muzzily. Ria is gone – Stiles can hear her laughter from the kitchen – so it’s just him and Derek nestled into the armchair together.

‘Ria woke up a while ago, Scott’s feeding her,’ Derek says in a low, sleep-rough voice. ‘Was gonna leave you to nap but uh…’ he glances down to where Stiles hand is still firmly holding onto his wrist, ‘you were hanging on pretty tight.’

‘Mm. Sorry. S’fine,’ Stiles says, overcome by a sudden yawn. He’d forgotten the blissfully soporific feeling of curling up with a warm, cuddly space heater, and Derek doesn’t seem to be in any particular hurry to move either. Stiles smiles. ‘More than fine.’ He breathes in deeply, enjoying the familiarity of having Derek beside him. ‘Hey,’ he ventures, ‘I heard some of that extremely ineffectual whispering, and uh… What did they mean about you falling asleep with me?’

Derek pulls a face. ‘Ah, you know. They witter. It’s not important.’

Stiles narrows his eyes. He’s not buying it. ‘You’ve fallen asleep with me before, though,’ Stiles persists. ‘Don’t they know that?’

A sigh heaves through Derek’s chest. ‘Guess not.’

‘Why is it a thing, though?’ Stiles asks, jabbing a finger into Derek’s side. He feels the motion reverberate right back up to his shoulder and makes a mental note to jab werewolves less, or at least to find a suitable jabby-finger replacement device because he’s actually fond of having fully functioning knuckles.

‘I don’t know, Stiles, maybe because they’re idiots with nothing better to do than gossip about people and take pictures of them while they’re sleeping like fucking weirdos!’ Derek only raises his voice a little, but it still sparks a flurry of laughter in the kitchen.

Stiles barely stifles a sigh as he senses Derek retreating back into himself, but he keeps poking at the issue because it’s all he knows how to do. It’s a character flaw across much of his friendship group,
come to think of it.

He’s not an idiot, and even if he was, it wouldn’t take much to connect the dots. ‘Is it…’ He bites his lip and then bites the bullet. ‘Is it something to do with this mates thing Deaton was talking about?’

He’s so pleasantly suffused with the return of his warm and fuzzy Derek-Feels that he’s not prepared for how instantly Derek’s face shutters, and the speed with which he sits up, withdrawing all of his comforting warmth and solidity.

‘Uh, Derek?’ His heart plummets down towards his chucks, and he suddenly realises that, sure, he doesn’t know exactly what the concept of ‘mates’ might mean to a werewolf, but it’s obviously something special. And he’s realizing, now (right now, in the midst of this scary and dangerous crisis, because he has a stellar sense of timing, obviously), that he’s not exactly opposed to being something special for Derek.

‘The mates thing…’ Derek rubs a hand over his face awkwardly. He doesn’t seem to want to meet Stiles’ eyes. ‘It really isn’t something you need to be worrying about, Stiles.’

Oh.

Oh.

God.

There’s finality in Derek’s voice, and the set of his jaw, and something else, too – something shadier, skating around embarrassment, or shame.

Stiles blinks a few times as the words sting at him, cutting white-hot and sharp and humiliating into the old, achey bruises left on his heart from the people before who had never thought him good enough for their forever. He nods, swallowing hard and angling his body away from Derek’s to try to gain whatever scant distance he can. ‘Right. Gotcha. Say no more.’

Derek swivels his head back towards him, brow furrowed deeply. ‘Stiles-’

But before he can continue Lydia knocks on the door. ‘Stiles, Ria’s gonna need a bag,’ she says soft and apologetic. ‘I thought you’d want to be the one to get it together.’

‘Please,’ Stiles scrambles up from the chair, grateful to have an excuse to leave this painfully awkward moment. He takes the stairs two at a time and busies himself packing a bag for his daughter, glad to have a task to distract him from what lies ahead.

He’d really hoped – because of the dreams – because of how Derek has shown up for him, over and over – because of the way Derek looks at him sometimes, like Stiles is the one that’s magic - that a future was possible for them. But maybe it was all just wishful thinking on his part. Maybe werewolves only take other werewolf mates. Maybe Stiles was only ever going to be temporary. Maybe Stiles’ initial bad reaction to Derek’s true nature had caused irreparable damage to their already fairly uncertain, undefined relationship.

A hundred different thoughts spark up and start to race away from him. He shakes his head as he tries to rein them all in before they consume all his focus. Right now he has to concentrate on the limited time he has left before Erica and Isaac take Ria someplace safe. He grabs her diaper bag and a rucksack, quickly packing everything he thinks she may need for several days. Once he’s satisfied he scans the room two or three more times, and then trips down the stairs.

Ria is just finishing up destroying a banana in the kitchen, having mostly mashed it over Scott’s face,
and has just begun adding fistfuls of gloopy raspberry as embellishment.

‘Dude,’ Scott says, squinting at him through his face-full of mashed fruit. ‘Your kid’s a goddamn menace!’

Stiles is filled with a rush of warm affection for his best friend, for reminding him that a lot of things might really fucking suck right now, but some things never change. ‘Of course she is, she takes after her daddy.’ He swings himself into a kitchen chair, beaming at Ria before tilting his head in Scott’s direction. ‘You got a little something…’ He waves a hand vaguely near his face.

Scott glares at him, which honestly, he’s terrible at even when he’s not a walking fruit salad.

Someone pushes a cup of coffee into his hand which he’s grateful for even if he sort of wishes it were something stronger. He’s aware of Derek’s presence in the room somewhere behind him, but he ignores it in favour of pulling ridiculous faces at his daughter and drinking in her burbling laughter. She reaches for him without hesitation. He’s always loved that about her; how she comes to him without a trace of doubt that she’ll be rejected, the surety and possession in her touch. He’s never belonged to anyone before, but he loves belonging to this curly-headed spitfire of a child.

He blocks everyone else out as best he can, getting her changed and dressed and reading her their favourite story, but too soon Erica appears, uncharacteristically tentative as she gathers up Ria’s bag.

‘Time, huh?’ Stiles’ voice sounds thick and strange to his own ears.

‘Yeah.’

‘You got her car seat?’

Erica nods.

‘Okay, then.’ Stiles heaves a sigh, propelling himself to his feet with the force of his exhalation, and crushes Ria to his chest, smiling when she gathers his shirt in chubby fists and holds onto him just as ferociously. ‘Love ya, kiddo.’

‘Bah,’ Ria says back solemnly, big brown eyes earnest.

Scott sweeps in then, fruit-free, and gathers Ria up to smush kisses into her hair, and Stiles hurries to grab the doll she can’t sleep without – the one Derek gave her for her birthday – and gives it to Isaac, impressing upon him the essential necessity of the doll at bedtime if he and Erica want their eardrums to remain intact.

‘You remember how to clip her into her car seat?’ He asks Erica anxiously.

‘Yes, Stiles, jeez…’ Erica punches his arm lightly in mock exasperation. ‘She’s safe with us,’ she follows up with, softly, pulling him into a brief, fierce, one-armed hug. ‘I won’t even let her get any visible tattoos, I promise. I’m responsible as fuck.’

He chuckles wetly. ‘I know.’ He still has to shove his hands deep down into his pants pockets to stop himself from running down the drive after them and grabbing Ria back. She doesn’t cry, thank god, just squeals and tugs on Erica’s hair, cackling when Erica blows raspberries on her palm.

He keeps a cheery grin plastered on his face for Ria’s sake, where it stays, fixed like rigor, until the door has shut behind them and their footsteps have long since faded.

When he turns around, slowly, hands still jammed into his pockets, he finds himself alone except for
Derek, who is propped awkwardly against the doorframe.

There’s an uncomfortable, urgent pull in Stiles’ chest that he recognises as his desire to hold onto Derek for dear life, but it’s matched by an equally fierce desire not to touch him at all, in case the touch unravels the threads of sanity that are oh-so-loosely holding him together right now.

‘Stiles…’

Derek’s voice has taken on this soft, sympathetic cadence that makes heat prickle at the corners of Stiles’ eyes, and he’s crossed his strong, protective, fucking stupid arms over his chest and he looks like every fevered romantic fantasy Stiles has ever had and yeah, no. Stiles can’t even, right now.

‘I’m fine,’ he says hurriedly. He doesn’t care that Derek can hear the lie. ‘I’m fine. Really. I just gotta…’ He jerks a thumb over his shoulder toward the stairs that he’s backing up towards. ‘Yeah.’ He takes off for his room as fast as his uncooperative limbs will take him because he one hundred per cent refuses to cry in front of Derek right now, and anyway, he has shit to do before the sun sets.

*

Several much-too-quiet hours later, just as the sun is beginning to turn the sky the color of honey, Stiles makes his way back down the stairs.

Lydia sits alone in the kitchen, sipping a mug of tea. She’s unfairly self-composed, for someone who just found out she’s a banshee a couple of days ago. ‘Scott, Cora and I are going to head out to check on Allison,’ she says. ‘We haven’t heard from her all day. Scott was going to go alone, all guns blazing… Well… flexing…’ she amends with a smirk, as Scott strolls into the room in jeans and a sleeveless tank, all smooth, tanned skin and corded muscle, the glorious, manly bastard. Lydia raises an eyebrow. It’s oddly terrifying for such a small gesture. ‘I suggested it was unwise for a werewolf to wander around a nest of hunters alone,’ she continues. ‘You’ll be astonished to know that the thought hadn’t occurred to him.’

Scott sputters a little in token protest but it fizzles out into a shrug because she’s right. She always is.

He thinks he catches the murmur of Cora's voice, probably talking to Derek somewhere in the house, and realises that it's a good call on Lydia's part to take her with them since she objectively has the most experience with hunters out of all of them, except Derek. He's reminded sharply of how very new this is, to all of them, and how incredible his friends are for stepping up like this against a largely unknown threat. Stiles’ heart constricts in his chest under the weight of his worry and his gratitude. ‘You could have gone with Erica and Isaac, ya know? You would have been safer.’

Lydia turns to him, silhouetted against the apricot sky, which turns her hair into a fiery halo. She taps her manicured nails against her mug in irritation. ‘Stiles,’ she says, voice dripping with disdain. ‘I appreciate the concern, but please remember that, while I may look like a princess…’ She flips the flaming tendrils of her hair over one shoulder and eyes him in a way that makes him feel very, very scared, ‘…I’m a goddamn queen. And I’ve got this’ She nods decisively, and drains her tea.

‘Fair enough,’ Stiles wheezes, blinking at her rapidly, trying to process his usual fear-arousal response to her as fast as possible before Derek puts in one of his perfectly-badly timed appearances.

He’s saved, once again, by Scott McCall, actual earth angel (wolf-angel? Can werewolves be angels? Wait, are angels a thing, too? Stiles files his questions away for a future, less death-defying moment.) ‘What is that?’ Scott gestures to the object tucked down by Stiles’ leg.

Stiles draws out the product of his afternoon’s work. The baseball bat is covered from handle to
rounded tip with carved runes that he’s optimistically purloined from the bestiary and some very odd Google searches. In the remaining gaps of exposed wood, Stiles has tapped in a variety of nails and wire and other sharp things (because his newly discovered and as yet unexplored supernatural mojo might well fail him, but he has long experience of inflicting injury on others through wild flailing, so it’s a comfort to know he has that as a back-up).

The result is pretty damn bad ass. Stiles is exceedingly proud of it. He still has to figure out how to walk with it without ripping his jeans and/or actual flesh, but that’s just a matter of practice.

‘Not taking any chances, huh?’ Derek asks from behind him.

‘I know it’s hard to believe, but there are some circumstances where my biting wit might not be enough,’ Stiles says, with a smirk and his best attempt at a nonchalant shrug. Then, because he’s keyed-up and punchy and an idiot he says, ‘Or even a bitey werewolf.’ And then he holds up his two index fingers in front of his mouth to mimic fangs, just in case the two werewolves and the banshee didn’t get it already.

He briefly considers using the bat on himself.

Lydia stares at him in something akin to horror, which, yeah, fair.

‘Aaanyway,’ Scott says, mercifully cutting off Stiles’ near-hysterical giggle just as it’s about to burst from his throat, ‘we’re gonna get going. Allison hasn’t answered any of my calls or texts.’ He shifts anxiously on his feet, eyes flashing from golden to brown, giving a hint at the wildness he’s still learning to keep in check.

‘She’s fine, I’m sure,’ Lydia says, ‘but he’s not going to stop fidgeting until he sees it with his own eyes. Then we’ll circle round to the museum and meet up with you in a couple of hours?’

Stiles nods. ‘Okay. Keep us updated?’

Lydia tilts her head, her gaze shrewd. ‘Don’t do anything stupid. At least not until we get there.’

Stiles huffs in mock-outrage, while Derek balls his fists in actual outrage. ‘He’ll be with an alpha werewolf,’ Derek grits out tightly, ‘I’m not about to let him go off half-cocked.’

Lydia wrinkles her nose and snorts delicately. ‘Not reassuring.’ She gets to her feet, briskly.

Stiles and Scott do their usual complicated fist-bump-bro-hug-secret-handshake deal, and he pulls Lydia in a perfumed hug. Cora huffs impatiently from the hallway, bouncing on her feet, and Stiles realises it must be hard on the werewolves to be cooped up like this. He casts a glance over at Derek, who is unnaturally still in comparison. He has his arms folded over his chest again - maybe it's his way of keeping his own feelings locked inside - and Stiles can't help but admire his iron self control. Then Cora, Scott and Lydia disappear into the evening. Stiles is actually vastly reassured by Lydia going with them. Even though Scott and Cora are the one with the supernatural strength, and realistically Lydia’s about as big as one of Stiles’ thumbs, Stiles would back her in a fight any day – would have done even before the banshee revelation. Boyd appears then, from god knows where, loitering in the darkened hallway, the shadows making his lean angles much more menacing, and yeah, Stiles is glad he’s on his team, too.

Stiles ducks into the living room and put in a brief call to his dad where he manages to cover about thirty-five different topics in sixty seconds, and turn his dad around enough that he confirms the cops are no longer at the museum. He also establishes that his dad and Melissa have date night tonight and are at a diner in town and will then be seeing a movie, so the coast is good and clear.
‘I love you,’ he finishes, making sure to take his time with this, because it’s important.

‘Love you too, son,’ his dad says back gruffly, sounding a little surprised and a lot pleased.

He swallows hard before he makes the next call, schooling his features into something genial and goofy. This is, he thinks as he presses ‘dial’, the hardest part of parenting – not just sucking it up over and over and over to do things you really don’t want to do, not just taking the hits so your kids don’t have to, but plastering a smile on your face while you do it so they don’t worry. He feels a warm rush of love for his parents, for all the struggles he never knew they went through, for all the smiles they gifted him in exchange for his peaceful sleep.

Erica answers his call brightly – evidently they have made it to wherever they were headed that night. Stiles sees Ria in the background, watches her light up in a smile all for him when she hears his voice. His chest aches with love for her, and how for how lucky he is to have her, to have this light that shines all the brighter when everything else feels so dark.

They chat for a minute, Stiles soaking up all the reassurance and strength he can through the screen. There’s no question of whether it’s enough; it has to be and that’s all there is to it.

He says his goodbyes, guilt washing over him when he sees Ria’s bottom lip tremble right when the call disconnects.

It’s for the best, he tells himself. For her, and for him, and for everyone else who has lost someone to this fucking ice demon. He gives himself a hot second to breathe deeply in and out of his nose, zoning out briefly, unable to comprehend that he’s about to head out into the night with his alpha werewolf boyfriend/ex-boyfriend/it’s-complicated-status to track down a supernatural bad guy and kick its butt, what the fuck.

Coming back to himself, he turns to find Derek watching him like the massive creeper that he is, his face soft and almost sad. He almost asks what’s wrong, but before he can Derek shrugs on his jacket and says, gentle but brisk, ‘Time to go.’

The burgeoning dusk has made the shadows stretch long over the sidewalk, so they stick to the charcoal pools as they make their way to Stiles’ jeep. Derek and Boyd both sit in the back since there’s less chance of being seen, and Stiles drives. Their shadowy figures in the rear-view should be sinister, or something, it occurs to Stiles, but the absurdity of it overwhelms him and he gives in to the urge to laugh. It feels good - alive - even if Derek and Boyd exchange baffled glances that suggest they both think he’s lost it.

Other than Stiles’ bout of hysterical laughter the journey is deathly quiet – it’s not especially surprising given that Derek and Boyd are hardly the most loquacious guys in the world. Thankfully it’s a short journey, and they make it to the museum just as the Monet sunset gives way to a Van Gogh night sky. He parks around the corner and jumps down from the jeep, wiping his clammy palms on his chinos as he stares up at the dark heft of the building that holds so many secrets. He’s grateful for the solid, reassuring weight of the baseball bat in his hands once he grabs it from the footwell.

The museum is silent, its windows dark. The front doors are shut and locked, with no evidence that anything’s amiss except for a notice pinned up on the wall explaining that the museum will be closed for the next few days. Stiles knows that the owners will probably have Manny or another security guard come back in the morning, once the police are officially done with Harris’s office, so they need act now to have any hope of fixing this thing.

Stiles doesn’t have front door keys, but he does have his trusty lock picking kit, and it’s only a few
minutes until the doors swing open. Stiles glances over to Derek, his features unreadable in the shadows. The last time they were at the museum together Derek merrily announced that Stiles was his boyfriend. It’s head-spinning to think how much has happened in the brief time since.

Literally head-spinning, it seems like, because as one Derek and Boyd whip around, heads cocked, ears tilted to the indigo-streaked sky. ‘Is that one of ours?’ Boyd asks.

Stiles strains to hear but can’t catch anything but a low bass hum of traffic drifting over the cool night air, with a melody picked out in the high strings of cicadas.

‘No,’ Derek replies. ‘Definitely not.’

Boyd hums. ‘Want me to check it out?’

‘Yeah. But be careful.’ Derek claps Boyd’s shoulder somewhat awkwardly, and Stiles wonders – and not for the first time - if Derek isn’t wholly comfortable in his alpha skin.

‘You got it. I’ll be back.’ Boyd takes off at a jog.

‘What’s happening?’ Stiles feels his anxiety ratchet up a notch at the sight of Boyd’s retreating back.

‘Werewolf howling,’ Derek says. ‘They might be in trouble.’ He must see the worry on Stiles’ face, or hear it in the skitter of his heart, because he reaches out to touch the nape of his neck again. It’s just the barest brush of fingers, but Stiles feels comfort flooding through him in their wake. ‘I’m not going to leave you,’ Derek murmurs.

Stiles swallows heavily. ‘I know.’ He takes a deep breath and turns into the building. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

He leads Derek down the rabbit warren of corridors towards Harris’s office. The office door is unlocked, the inner room left untidily churned up the policemen who’d searched it all. Stiles thinks idly that Lydia will be furious when she sees it.

Derek stays close to him as they make their way down the stairs, and closer still when Stiles activates the mechanism for the stairs. Derek’s surprise and awe are evident and immensely gratifying.

‘Clever little fucker,’ Derek mutters, peering down the second stairwell.

The air at the mouth of the underground room is damp and freezing. Even with Derek warm at his side, Stiles still shivers at the sudden apricity. He clutches his baseball bat more firmly in his hand.

‘Down there,’ he nods towards dark mouth of the narrow staircase.

‘Okay.’ Derek takes the lead, which Stiles allows because Derek is all big and muscled and supernatural and shit. He’s pretty stealthy, too, despite his size, Stiles notices as he follows, heart pounding in his throat.

‘Holy shit,’ Derek breathes when he reaches the bottom, taking in the full extent of Harris’s Creepy Room of Creepiness.

‘I know, right?’ Their voices fall oddly into the space, flat and muffled where they should echo and bounce. The air feels thick and charged in Stiles’ ears. He shakes his head and pushes his tongue against the roof of his mouth to try to pop them, but it’s to no avail. A shiver trickles down his spine. He shrugs it off and heads for the shelves where he saw the jar before.
The room is arctic – the floor, ceiling and walls are covered with a thick, powdery layer of frost that refracts green sparkles of light from the eerie lamplight, and Stiles’ every breath hangs in the air in front of him before he breaks each frozen cloud with his body as he walks to the side of the room.

Stiles thinks it would probably be pretty fucking cool if it weren’t so abjectly terrifying. He pauses to pull a pair of his dad’s thick gloves out of his pocket and shove his achingly cold hands into them, taking the chance to look back at Derek while he does so.

Derek is so warm Stiles can see the air shimmering around him, condensing onto his jacket and his skin in glittering green droplets. His adorable nose is wrinkled up in distaste. Stiles cocks an eyebrow at him. ‘Stinks like sulphur,’ Derek explains, sounding far away and strange. ‘And ice. It’s sharp.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles turns back to crunch the last few steps to the shelves, his chucks leaving prints on the frosty floor. When his breath clears, he reaches up – only to discover the jar is gone.

‘What?’ He feels his way to the back of the shelf – nothing. ‘Shit. No.’ He scans the rest of the shelf, then the ones below and above, but there’s no sign of the jar. ‘Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.’ He smacks his palm against the wide wooden strut, ignoring the way it stings even through the knitted wool.

‘Stiles?’ Derek is beside him in an instant.

‘It’s gone,’ Stiles chokes out. ‘We’re too fucking late.’

‘What? No.’ Derek stretches up to grip at the solid shelf, using it to hoist himself high enough to see. His shirt and jacket ride up over his taut stomach, and his ass and arms and his everything look amazing, but Stiles is too pissed off to really be able to appreciate it, which only serves to piss him off more.

Derek lands lightly on the balls of his feet (if Stiles had a score card he’d be scrawling a ‘9’ across it right now – one point lost for lack of flourish on the dismount) and turns to him, the dark expression on his face telling Stiles all he needs to know.

There’s no sign of the mirror either, though Derek thinks neither object can be long gone given how very thick and fresh the frost still is.

Stiles watches as Derek takes a cursory sniff around the room, but the stench of sulphur, rancid even to Stiles’ human nose, drowns out any lingering scents. There are no footprints but their own, which is super weird, and also massively frustrating because Stiles has no fucking clue where to go from here, and all his hopes of a best case scenario (find ice demon within half an hour, eat snow cones, have a friendly chat, hug it out like bros, get all the missing people set free, send ice demon on his way with a Mets hat and one of Ria’s glitter stickers, bring Ria home, learn to ride a horse overnight and then ride off into the sunrise with Ria safely in his arms and Derek firmly between his legs, live in a gothic-chic castle in the Swiss Alps and wear a lot of fabulous cloaks – or some approximation of that) start to rot and die. Even the worst case scenario, which involves a whole lot of death and dying and getting dead, had hinged on them finding the fucking jar.

He has no idea what to do now.

His mind buzzes with questions as they trudge back up the winding stairs. He checks his phone for messages from Scott or Erica or Boyd or anyone, but there’s just infuriating silence. He’s so busy muttering out his frustration that he doesn’t really register the strange noise Derek makes as he steps back into Harris’s office until its already happened.

‘Derek?’ Stiles takes the last step up to the doorway and cautiously steps through it into the dark
room, which, what the fuck, he could have sworn they’d left the lights on. In the dark he doesn’t notice the large, prone form of Derek’s body on the floor near the desk until he near as damn falls over it, dropping his baseball bat in the process. ‘Shit, shit, shit…’ Stiles bends down to press his fingers to his skin, which is warm thank god, and he can feel the thrum of his pulse in his veins. Jesus fuck, jesus fuck.

He twists around in his crouch when he catches another strange noise – an electric humming, or buzzing, that makes all the hair on Stiles’ body stand on end – and the shape of something swinging through the air towards him.

He fumbles for the bat but he can't find it in the darkness, damn his ungainly stumbling.

‘Aw, fuck,’ Stiles says, right as whatever is making the buzzing noise makes hard contact with the meat of his shoulder, and his whole body fills with sharp, searing electricity, sparking over his skin and buzzing through his blood, fuck, he can even feel the bite of it in his teeth, and he’s vaguely aware that this really fucking hurts and then everything is blissful black.

*  

When he opens his eyes groggily, frowning against the echo of the electricity that still whines, aching, in his bones, everything is still black. He blinks several times, trying to keep his breathing even, trying to calm the panic that rises in his chest. Slowly slowly his eyes adjust to the gloom, and than god, because nothing is scarier than what lurks unseen in the dark – the possibilities are far more terrible than the reality, Stiles knows.

At least, he really hopes.

He forces himself to inhale then exhale, slow and shaky, concentrating on how it feels to suck the air into his lungs, how it feels to push it out, how it reminds him that he’s still here, still breathing, still alive.

This is what he needs to do, he decides. Concentrate. Focus. Keep the spectre of panic in the periphery, because the last thing he needs is to lose his shit entirely. So he breathes, and concentrates, and catalogues what he can.

They’re not at the museum any more, he’s pretty sure. It’s chilly but not cold and there isn’t the reek of sulphur in the air, nor the softer scent of the floor polish that pervades the rest of the building.

He’s sitting up, propped up against some sort of pipe, in a room that is unfinished judging by the feel of the rough concrete walls under the pads of his fingers. His hands are bound behind him and the pipe, trapping him in this one spot. He gingerly tests the restraints – metal. Good. He smiles grimly into the darkness.

The smile fades when he hears the growl.

It’s a low, savage, entirely animal noise, and it’s the only other noise in the room right now. He turns his head to find the source, startling as far back into the corner as he can get when he notices the eyes. They’re blood red and glowing and furious, and they’re trained unblinkingly on Stiles.

The growl gets louder until it fills the whole room, reverberating off the walls, and still the eyes don’t blink.

Stiles yanks at his handcuffs, but they hold and so does the pipe he’s attached to, and the eyes aren’t getting closer but the growl just gets louder and louder until it ramps up into a roar that threatens to split Stiles’ skull.
It occurs to Stiles that now might be a good time to panic, after all.
Every single thought evaporates out of Stiles’ head, with the exception of a single apt syllable: *Fuck.* He instantly stops moving, terror tensing every limb. He even holds his breath to stay as still as he possibly can, trying to placate whatever enraged thing is in here with him, in the dark.

His petrification seems to pay off, thank god, and the ferocity of the growl wanes just a little.

Slowly, shakily, Stiles begins to take shallow breaths, trying to control the unpredictable effect his panic has on his already less-than-stellar muscle control, while he runs through his mental catalogue of what to do in the face of an animal attack. Ridiculously, the only fun fact he can dredge up is to cough when faced with an angry kangaroo (super helpful in this moment of extreme crisis, thanks so much, brain).

He does not – cannot – think about Ria, where she is, whether he’ll see her again. He can’t afford the distraction, and in any case will not allow not seeing her again to be an option. Not ever.

The red eyes stay trained on him, flickering now and then as the creature blinks, though it never moves its gaze from him. Stiles forces himself to look back rather than cringe away or give in to a Lydia-level screaming session, straining his eyes to pick up any details at all about what it is. No matter how hard he tries he can’t make out anything in the gloom surrounding those red eyes except a sense of bulk - a deeper, darker solidity to the shadows that makes up the creature’s form.

A solidity that, he realizes with a sickening, sinking sensation, is getting closer, underscored by the horrifying scuffle of rough scrapes and clicks on the floor that Stiles thinks must be claws.

The growl gets louder, closer, until it’s so close Stiles can feel the vibration of it through his skin, through his veins, through to the tip of every hair. The bulky shadow of the creature looms, breathing hot over Stiles’ neck. The dank smell of the room they’re in is overpowered by sweat, and something base, something primal – fear, sour at the back of his throat.

Stiles gropes for his lock picking kit but the angle is all wrong without shifting his weight, and if he does that then he leans further out towards the hulking silhouette of the creature, bridging the already diminishing gap between them further.

He flinches as he feels breath, hot on his cheek now, his heart kicking up into an uncomfortable thrum behind his ribs. He sneaks a glance over towards the creature, which just holds itself right up close to Stiles, in his space, *growling* - and suddenly Stiles notices that its breath, which is hotter than human breath would be, isn’t condensing. It’s dark as fuck wherever they are but it’s not *cold,* which
means whatever the other half of this hellish tête-à-tête is, it isn’t the Ijiraq. And Stiles has only seen one other supernatural creature with glowing eyes and a hotter-than-normal body temperature, which means…

Werewolf.

Okay, he thinks. Okay. Could be worse, right? Better the devil you know, and all that. He swallows hard, and, acting solely on instinct, tilts his head just slightly to expose his vulnerable throat in submission.

If nothing else, he wants the creature to kill him quickly and not play with its food, so he hopes it will rip his throat out with minimal fuss.

The growling ebbs away into rough, ragged pants. Stiles barely dares to breathe as something soft brushes down over the length of his neck, inhaling his scent.

Stiles swallows hard, decides to take a chance that there is some aspect of humanity to this creature – is not at all above begging for his life if it will do any good, so he whispers ‘Please’, out into the darkness.

The creature freezes, then Stiles feels the heat of its body recede as it retreats from his personal space just a little. It’s the closest thing to a lifeline Stiles has, so he tries again. ‘Please. Please.’

And the creature complies, backing up further. Stiles notices another noise as it does so – a heavy, metallic scrape – the drag of chain on concrete – and it dawns on him he is not the only prisoner, here.

Which means…

Oh no.

The creature makes another noise – something close to a grunt. This time Stiles listens. Between his dreams and his increasingly dreamlike reality he’s been exposed to more than his fair share of grunts, growls and roars over the last couple of months, but this time, now that he has an idea of what he’s listening for, he detects a note that’s distinctly human, a timbre that sounds heart-stoppingly familiar.

It makes the noise again, and yeah, Stiles has definitely heard that particular intonation of grumpy before.

He licks his sore, dry lips. ‘Derek?’

There’s a pause, just for a heartbeat, and then the creature is back, face buried into Stiles’ neck, inhaling deeply, clawed hands pawing at Stiles’ chest, and Stiles turns his head, breathes the creature in, relying on scent to make up for his lack of sight and yes, thank god, when he gets his own nose right up close to skin he can catch the faintest hint of juniper.

Derek.

‘Oh my god,’ Stiles breathes out, relief suffusing him so hard and fast it gathers in tears at the corner of his eyes. ‘It’s you, it’s you, are you okay?’

Derek presses closer and Stiles frowns as something scrapes at the skin of his neck, smooth and metallic – something definitely not part the bumps and ridges of Derek’s beta-shifted face, unfamiliar though they may be to Stiles. It feels like something wrapped around his head, but Stiles can’t tell what, though the thought that Derek has been chained in any form fills him with white-hot, lancing
anger. He tries to control it, knowing that Derek can pick up on the hormones in his scent, and all Derek seems to want right now is comfort. So Stiles tries to make a cradle of his body, as best as he can, to make it clear Derek is welcome to curl into him, and he keeps talking, spilling out any nonsense he can in a low, even tone.

‘It’s okay, I’m okay. I was so worried about you, but we’re right here, it’s gonna be okay. I’m so sorry I got you mixed up in this Derek, but I’m gonna fix it, okay? Gonna get you home.’

He twists his wrist around, trying to grab for the lock-pick kit in his back pocket. He’s gotta get Derek out of here.

He just manages to brush his fingertips against the soft leather of the case when a door in the middle of the opposite wall is flung open and light floods the space. It’s artificial, fluorescent, but after so long in the dark Stiles and Derek both flinch from the sudden, piercing brightness. Derek’s weight disappears, but Stiles can’t see why, can’t reach for him, and fuck he hates being out of control like this so much.

After several seconds blinking away the dark spots that have formed at the edges of his vision, Derek comes into focus – Derek who is red-eyed, dishevelled, partially shifted and bound at the ankle and wrists to thick metal chains. Most distressing of all is a rudimentary metal muzzle that wraps around his lower face. Despite this, he recovers faster than Stiles, spinning round and dropping into a defensive crouch between Stiles and the two guys who saunter through the door and stand, silhouetted briefly against the searing rectangle of light from the door before the door swings closed.

One of them must flick on a light switch because a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling pops and flickers to life, and Stiles gets his first look at where they are (some sort of roughly hewn, grey concrete, windowless cell, with absolutely no helpful identifying features) and the guys who are holding them there.

At first Stiles thinks he’s seeing double, that maybe he’s concussed or something, but then he realises that the two guys are identical, though one is in a black tee, the other white. They’re all-American, muscle-bound, heavy-browed guys that Stiles doesn’t remember seeing around town before – hunters, maybe? It would explain the muzzle. But why would they keep Derek here in this state, why not kill him straight away? And why keep Stiles?

One of them looks up, and in the fluorescence of the bulb light his eyes flash deep scarlet.

Awesome, Stiles thinks, grimly. More werewolves.

Then the other guy’s eyes flash a matching shade of blood red.

Perfect. More alpha werewolves.

Stiles supposes he shouldn’t be surprised. He is, after all, werewolf-nip.

One brother looks them over and laughs derisively, sneering down at him and Derek, backed up as they are into a corner. ‘Looks like we interrupted a moment between the Alpha and his human pet.’

‘He’ll thank us, in the end,’ the brother in black (whom Stiles immediately names Abercrombie in his head) says. ‘Once he comes to his senses, he’ll regret every second he ever spent in human company.’

Interesting. Stiles hasn’t yet met a werewolf with an openly hostile attitude to humans and now he’s met two. Twin idiots, if you will.
They might be idiots, but they’re bright enough to maintain a calculated distance from Derek, Stiles notices, feeling a hot rush of pride that even shackled and clearly incapacitated in god knows how many ways, Derek is a force to be fucking reckoned with.

‘Why are we here?’ Stiles asks, raising his voice to be heard over the sinister rumble that’s kicked up in Derek’s chest. ‘What do you want?’

‘To stop unnatural alliances like yours, for a start,’ the one in white – Bitch, naturally - says, which is frustratingly unhelpful, exposition-wise.

‘Are you mad because we’re both dudes, or because we’re prettier than you, or what?’ Stiles needles, drawing his legs up to his chest to make room for Derek to do some hella-intimidating prowling.

‘Shut your mouth,’ Abercrombie says, sounding amused – almost bored. ‘Before I shut it for you.’

‘Hey now,’ Stiles snarks back, ‘don’t hate me because I’m beautiful. It’s not my fault my waffle iron is hotter than you two.’ He smirks at the brother in white, who drops fang and lurches towards him, lip curled in ostentatious revulsion.

Derek rises fluidly to his feet with a savage roar and throws himself as far as the chains will allow, claws slashing viciously through the air until they connect, just barely, with the skin of the younger guy’s jaw.

‘Woah,’ the other brother says, grabbing the first by the scruff of the neck and hauling him back out of Derek’s reach. ‘No killing the prisoners. Not if you value your own life, and mine.’

‘Fine,’ he spits out, pressing the back of his forearm to the nasty looking cuts on his face. ‘But we at least need to chain up the dog properly.’

Abercrombie rolls his eyes, reaches back and picks up a weird looking metal stick from where it was resting against the wall. Stiles’ stomach lurches as he recognises it from his dream – and Derek obviously recognises it too, judging by his furious, frantic struggling.

‘No, please!’ Stiles begs. Not this, he can’t let this happen to Derek again. ‘I’m sorry, okay, I’ll do whatever, tell you whatever you want, please, anything, please…’

But they ignore him, thrusting the metal into Derek’s flesh, ignoring him as he drops to the ground and convulses.

‘Fuck…’ Stiles breathes shallowly, trying not to vomit. He has to look away, knows Derek probably wouldn’t want him to see him like this anyway, but his stomach lurches up to his throat and his pulse hammers in his wrists.

Eventually Derek sinks down to the ground, prone and quiet. Each brother grabs a limb and they drag him to the far wall, yanking the chain that attaches to his wrists high up and attaching it to a metal hook in the wall above Derek’s head, high enough that Derek is drawn up to his toes, stretched out and completely vulnerable, eyes glazed over. He’s still partially shifted – Stiles would put money on it being something to do with the grotesque muzzle that covers his face.

Stiles grimly decides, in that moment, to take these two guys down, along with anyone else they’re working with.

Abercrombie leans in close to Derek, running his fingers over the muzzle. ‘You know,’ he says, soft and silky. ‘I had such high hopes for you. The alpha of Beacon Hills. The stories they tell about
you... Thought you'd make such a fun addition to our pack.' He laughs, a dry, skeletal thing. 'Then to
get here and find you on your knees for that...' He throws a disgusted glance over towards Stiles,
which, rude, man.

Derek doesn't say anything, but he lifts his chin so he can look right into the alpha twin's eyes, and
doesn't look away.

Abercrombie smirks. 'Pathetic. So, you see, you've forced our hand on this one. We never wanted to
do this to one of our own.' He looks over at Stiles, who is glaring daggers at him from his corner,
then crosses the space between them faster than any human could and squats down. 'You on the
other hand,' he says, grabbing Stiles by the chin and tilting his head so their eyes meet, 'I would
thoroughly enjoy killing.' His fangs lengthen and Stiles feels the sharp points of claws digging into
his jaw.

'So why don’t you?' Stiles shouts, trying to covering his fear with volume and false bravado. ‘What
do you want with us?’

'You’ll see,’ the guy says, grinning over to his brother. He stands swiftly, and Stiles thinks that’s it,
they’re leaving, but then suddenly he kicks out hard, catching Stiles square in the stomach.

Pain explodes over his abdomen, making tears prickle behind his eyes, and he slumps to the side a
little, coughing.

Derek comes to instantly, roaring and thrashing so hard to get loose that Stiles hears the tearing of
tendon and flesh in his shoulders and wrists from across the room. Derek ignores it, but Stiles can’t.

‘Derek,’ he yells as hard as he can through the pressure in his chest, ‘Derek don’t...’

Bitch snorts in amusement. 'Enough,' he says to his brother. 'Time to go.' Then he produces a couple
of bottles of water and says, ‘We’re under orders to give you these. I’ll just leave them here...’ He
throws them down on the floor, out of reach of Stiles’ legs because he really is an epic dick.

‘I look forward to seeing you later, human,’ Abercrombie winks.

Just before he leaves, he turns out the light.

The lock clicks in the door, leaving Stiles and Derek alone again in pitch darkness, and that is it,
Stiles is done with this helpless damsel in distress shit. He sits up as straight as he can, ignoring the
way the metal of the handcuffs breaks the skin on his wrists as he fumbles for his kit once more.

It takes longer than he’d like to get free of the cuffs, but at least he’s free, thank fuck, and he stands
on shaky legs.

‘Derek…’ Stiles scrambles over to him, surprised by the familiar weight of his phone in his pocket.
He grabs for it. ‘Derek, I’m gonna get us both out of this, okay, I’m just gonna – fuck…’ The phone
comes to life, but there’s no signal at all – which is presumably why he’s been allowed to keep hold
of it at all.

He mashes at the screen until the torchlight comes on, but it’s not enough, not enough to let him help
Derek as quickly as Derek needs, so he reaches out, feeling around blindly until he finds one of the
water bottles the Moron Brothers left for them.

Stiles curses as the bottle falls and rolls away, grabs again, finds it. Once he has it he puts the phone
on the floor near Derek, sets the bottle on top of it, and as the light filters through and is dispersed by
the water the gloom is lit with an eery, blue-ish light. It's by no means perfect but it’s enough.
Derek, who is hanging from his wrists at a very strange angle, is watching him from the corner of his eye. He makes a noise—a wet little laugh, and mumbles something but it’s mangled around the muzzle-contraption.

Stiles gets to his feet and goes to him. ‘Hi,’ he whispers, swallowing hard to stop himself from crying. Derek won’t make eye contact, and looks so defeated Stiles’ chest aches.

‘Gonna get you down now, big guy,’ Stiles whispers, grabbing for his trusty kit. It takes several minutes to figure out the lock on the ancient manacles (and what the fuck is with these guys and their aversion to fucking cable ties, Jesus Christ), stretched up as Stiles is on his toes, and with limited light. The muscles in his arms and shoulders protest after a while, so god knows how Derek must be feeling, but he finally gets it with a little hiss of triumph.

Derek falls heavily to the floor.

Stiles isn’t quick enough to catch him but he follows right after, putting his arm under Derek’s head and tilting it so he can work at the clasp at the back of the muzzle. He notices a prong of silvery metal that is designed to enter the mouth once the muzzle is clamped tight, and wonders if it’s this that is stopping Derek from shifting at will. The muzzle springs free, and Stiles removes it gently but throws it violently, trying to get the wretched thing as far from them as he can. He turns his attentions straight back to Derek, using tender fingertips to smooth over the red-raw indentations the muzzle has made in his skin. He’s never been in such close proximity to Derek’s unfamiliar, werewolfy features. Stiles can’t help but stare, nosey individual that he is.

Derek notices him looking. ‘Not scared of me, huh?’ he slurs weakly.

‘No,’ Stiles says, immensely relieved that Derek seems to be able to form words now. He hopes it means whatever has kept him trapped in this semi-shift is working its way out of Derek’s system.

‘I didn't know you,' Derek rasps out. 'With that thing on my face. I didn't know me. I could have hurt you.'

Stiles finds one of Derek’s hands with his free hand and takes it firmly. ‘Okay, truth time. I was scared. For you, not of you. As soon as I knew it was you it was gravy. You might not have known my name, or yours, but you knew who you were. You'd never hurt me.’ He knows Derek can hear the truth of his words, hopes they settle somewhere in Derek as certain and solid as they feel to Stiles. Derek has done nothing but have Stiles’ back over and over. In fact, out of the pair of them, Stiles has been the one to do the hurting.

There’s a pause, where Derek studies him intently. Then he says, ‘Gravy…’ and rolls his eyes, which makes Stiles grin.

‘Admit it, there’s no one else you’d rather be stuck in a concrete cell of doom with right now.’

‘I’d rather be stuck in a cell of doom with anyone else right now,’ Derek murmurs, lisping slightly around his fangs which would be extremely endearing were his words not all mean and chest-crushing.

His hurt must be visible even to Derek and his famous obliviousness, because he squeezes Stiles’ hand and says, ‘I’d rather have you safe.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles ducks his head, glad that the gloom will be going some way to tame his blushes.

‘Though you have your uses,’ Derek says, nodding towards the lantern Stiles made. ‘Clever little shit.’
Stiles beams. ‘Damn right. Lucky you.’

Derek smiles but then his eyes scrunch closed in pain and his mouth turns down at the corners.

‘Derek…’ Stiles curls his fingers around Derek’s palm. ‘What can I do?’

A noise punches free from Derek’s chest, high and pained, and Derek sucks in a breath. ‘My shoulder,’ he says. ‘I… think it’s dislocated.’

‘Shit. Okay… It’ll heal though, right?’ Stiles asks, looking down over Derek’s too-pale face. The indentations from the muzzle have faded already but sweat beads at his temples and his eyes are underscored by dark, bruise-like shadows.

‘Yeah, but…’ Derek says with a bittersweet little grimace. ‘In the wrong place. It'll heal where it is now…’

‘Oh.’ Stiles frowns. ‘So you need it to be… relocated?’

‘I don’t wanna ask, but…’ Derek presses his mouth closed in a thin line, trying to stay in control of himself and god, he’s been through so much already Stiles has to try to help if he can.

‘Okay,’ Stiles says. ‘Okay. I’ll just… I’ve never done this… And I don’t… Fuck, I don’t have signal on my phone, I-’

‘Stiles,’ Derek interrupts him. ‘It'll be okay. I know you can do this. I need you to do this.’

‘Yeah.’ Stiles nods. ‘I- Okay. Um. I’m gonna lie you down.’ He sets Derek’s head down on the concrete floor and with Derek now lying flat he can see that holy wow, one shoulder is seriously not okay and that is super gross.

‘Derek…’ he whispers under his breath, a little angry now because he knows Derek did this trying to get to him. ‘What if I can’t do this. What if I hurt you?’

‘I’ll be fine,’ Derek says simply. ‘I heal.’

Stiles sighs because that is such a very Derek-y thing to say.

‘That is,’ Stiles grits out, fighting the now-familiar build of nausea that burns in his throat, ‘not the point.’ He blows out a shaky breath as he runs a hand over the shoulder and down Derek’s arm, muttering to himself all that he can remember from Biology class, late night Youtube videos of frat boys doing stupid shit to each other and then trying to fix it without telling their parents, and the parental first-aid course he took. He takes careful hold of Derek’s forearm and gently pulls, but Derek’s whole upper torso moves, Derek hissing involuntarily in pain. Fuck.

Thinking fast he braces a foot gently against Derek’s rib-cage to give him some counter-traction, and grabs again for Derek’s forearm, pulling it down and slightly towards Derek’s abdomen, increasing the pressure in slow increments since he doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing. All he can do is pray on everything he loves that it’s right.

Derek closes his eyes but otherwise stays motionless, and Stiles has no clue if he’s okay or not. After a few endless moments he feels something give deep within Derek’s shoulder, and the angle of Derek’s shoulder becomes normal again. ‘Oh god,’ Stiles breathes in relief.

‘Thanks,’ Derek sighs, offering up a strange toothy smile, then he promptly passes out which, rude - what if Stiles had wanted to pass out? Stiles tuts over Derek’s bad manners even as he settles back
down on the floor and awkwardly hauls gently gathers Derek up so he’s lying in the V of Stiles’ legs, his upper half cradled in Stiles’ arms.

Stiles lets himself close his eyes, and allows the relief of having Derek solid and alive in his arms provide a temporary buffer from the horrors of their situation. His heart feels like it’s gone ten rounds with an angry kangaroo (presumably because it hadn’t thought to cough in self-defence). His stomach aches, a respectable bruise no doubt forming where Moron Brother number 2 had kicked him all unsportsmanlike, but the ache in his chest is worse. He misses Ria, yearns to know she’s safe.

With Ria in mind, he starts to hum the Polish lullaby his mother sang for him and that he now sings for her, smiling involuntarily at the memory of the near-immediate state of ataraxy the song induces in his daughter.

He hopes it does something similar for Derek, strokes his hair and, very carefully, his face while he sings. And slowly he notices the ridges in Derek’s brow smooth out under his gentle fingertips, his eyebrows return (he makes a mental note to ask Derek where they even go because what the fuck, could that be any more ironic), and his fangs recede.

Eventually the Derek in his arms is Derek in his fully human form. Stiles holds him just as carefully, and continues to sing.

After a while, just as he’s about to launch into his twelfth or thirteenth rendition of the lullaby, he notices that Derek’s eyes have opened, and Derek is watching him, his battered but beautiful face inscrutable.

Stiles looks down at him, brow raised. ‘Stalker,’ he says, but the accusation holds no heat, just affection.

Derek looks embarrassed to be caught and makes to sit up, though he’s clearly still unsteady from whatever was in his system. ‘We need to move,’ he says.

‘You need to recover.’

‘You don’t tell me what to do,’ Derek grits out. ‘I am an alpha werewolf’

‘Yeah. You’re also a stubborn pain in the ass,’ Stiles shoots back. There’s nothing he wants more than to try and get back to Ria, but he knows he can’t get past Abercrombie and Bitch without Derek at least being able to support his own weight. ‘I want to get out of here as much as you do, believe me. But I need you strong, Derek, I need you healthy, I need… you.’ He bites his lip. ‘Please.’

Derek glares at him, but he settles back to where he was, weight resting against Stiles’ body.

Stiles feels gorgeously warm, all of a sudden, sort of hazy around the edges, like a tropical tide ebbing in and out, and his pain is - Wait… his pain is… He looks down to see Derek’s hand pressed against his bruised stomach, black lines of pain snaking their way up his forearm.

'Stop that,' Stiles smacks his hand away. 'Don't you dare. I'm a big boy, I can handle a bruise. You need to focus on getting yourself better.'

Derek fully huffs like a sulky school boy and then pouts which is way more attractive than it has any right to be. When Stiles looks back up to meet Derek’s eyes, he realizes he’s been busted staring at Derek’s mouth. Derek’s eyes drop to his own mouth, then, and Stiles becomes very aware of how much of each of them is pressed against the other.

Derek clears his throat, breaking the spell which had begun to weave itself around them, entirely
inappropriately given the less than romantic circumstances. 'We really should move,' he says.

‘Give it a few minutes, okay?’ Stiles manages. ‘We can talk ‘til you feel better.’

‘Great.’ Derek sounds less than impressed with this plan.

‘Yeah,’ Stiles bounces a little where he sits, jostling Derek in his lap. ‘I have questions! Like, a lot of questions.’

‘Oh god…’ Derek says, pinching the bridge of his nose and looking like he’d give anything in the world to pass out again if he could.

‘So…’ Stiles says, consciously trying to remember not to jiggle his legs like he usually would in case hurts Derek. ‘Abercrombie and Bitch are twin alphas, huh? I didn’t know that could happen.’

Derek scowls. ‘It can’t.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles blinks rapidly as he processes that. ‘What… does that mean?’

‘It means at least one of them has had to kill for it.’

‘Oh.’ Stiles blanches. ‘Oh, man.’ He notices the tension that has once again settled into all of Derek’s joints at the mention of the two alphas who stand between them and freedom. ‘Okay, next question,’ he says overly brightly in an attempt to distract Derek just a little from their dire straits. ‘Vampires: are they a thing and do they sparkle? Discuss.’

*

Derek makes a supernaturally rapid recovery once he’s fully regained consciousness and Stiles has liberated him from his ankle chains, though his shoes are nowhere to be found. He even does an angry standing-backflip (which is like a regular standing-backflip but with added glowering) to prove to Stiles how very fine he really is, which is highly persuasive and also ridiculously hot. This turns out to be embarrassing on many levels now he knows Derek can not only smell his reaction to him, but can presumably smell it a whole bunch on account of their being trapped in what is effectively a ventless bunker, so, yeah. Awkward.

Stiles wonders, for a second, if all the emotions he has felt since they’ve been here are still in this little room, trapped, with no place to go – if Derek has to taste Stiles’ fear at the back of his throat as well as his own, his exhaustion, his pain, his lust. He wonders what being heartsore smells like to Derek. Although right now, his arousal has probably eclipsed everything else because jesus god, standing backflips. Stiles is but a man, after all.

Derek, to his credit, just clears his throat and carries on checking the door for weak spots. It’s solid metal, which reinforces Stiles’ suspicion that they’re in some sort of bunker, and the hinges are too close to the wall for Derek to get any sort of purchase on, so Derek decides on a more direct route - brute force.

As a precaution Derek puts his ear to the door and listens, eyes flashing scarlet as he tells Stiles he can make out Boyd’s heartbeat, albeit faintly, which means it’s some distance away. There’s no sign of any other life close by, he says.

‘So,’ Stiles says, a little breathless, ‘we know the alpha twins are under orders from someone. And we know they’ve been watching us long enough to set a trap for Boyd at the museum to separate us. Ready to find out what the fuck is going on in this crazy town, once and for all?’
‘Yeah,’ Derek replies, biceps straining as he heaves at the door handle, making the bolts holding it shear with metallic squeals. All too soon Derek pulls the handle right out of the door.

*(Hot.)*

The door swings open a crack in its wake, let a slice of bright light cut into the room.

Derek shoots him a quick glance. ‘Are *you* ready?’

Stiles, who is not remotely ready, nods enthusiastically, all jittery bravado. ‘Yes. Definitely. I got your back, Der.’

Derek grins, a flash of white teeth in the shadow of the door. ‘Lucky me.’

Then he pulls open the door and slips out into what’s beyond.

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