from a spark to a flame

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/14055213.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: M/M
Fandom: Teen Wolf (TV)
Relationship: Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski
Character: Derek Hale, Stiles Stilinski, Lydia Martin, Jackson Whittemore, Scott McCall (Teen Wolf), Allison Argent, Chris Argent, Vernon Boyd, Isaac Lahey, Jennifer Blake, Malia Tate
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe, Friends to Lovers, Animal Rescue, firefighter!Derek, Supernatural Vet!Stiles, Misunderstandings, Mutual Pining, Magical Stiles Stilinski, House renovations, Knotting, Anal Sex, Mates, Minor Character Death, No one we love, Bad person dies, Good people win, Roommates, Canon-Typical Violence, Canonical Character Death
Collections: Sterek Glompfest
Stats: Published: 2018-03-22 Chapters: 23/23 Words: 31432

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by teacuphuman

Summary

Derek's life takes a surprising twist when he adopts a cat, gets a roommate, and meets the man of his dreams, all in the same week. If only that man hadn't sworn himself off from love.

Notes

This fic is part of the Sterek Glompfest and is for shoolie, who asked for Sterek and rescue. I hope this ticks all your boxes!

Huge thanks to @fiamac, who worked her beta skills on this and shamelessly fed my Sterek addiction with her ideas! You should go read her stuff because she is one of my heroes and her work is flawless!

This fic is very loosely based on the movie The Nine Lives of Christmas. Very loosely.
Chapter 1

Derek

Derek’s patience is wearing frighteningly thin. They’re shooting the annual firefighter charity calendar today and out of all them, he’s spent the most time in front of the camera. Even when he’s not posing, the photographer is there, snapping away, and there are at least five pictures of Derek eating or drinking while flipping the guy off. The organizer is no better, she keeps hinting that Derek’s partial shift would sell more calendars, but he’s not about to indulge whatever werewolf fetish she’s working with.

His coworkers and so-called friends aren’t much better, standing on the sidelines jeering and teasing him about his angry-sex face, whatever that is. Erica keeps whistling, and Isaac has suggested they hose him down three times so far. His complaints of sexual harassment to Chris, their chief, have been met with a pat on the shoulder and Chris telling Derek he’s being a very good sport.

Allison, one of the EMT’s on duty and Chris’ daughter, keeps giving him double thumbs up from across the vehicle bay, while Boyd, her partner, looks like he’s just happy it’s Derek and not him up there.

After about a hundred shots of Derek with an axe, he simply walks away, ignoring the laughter of his friends and the protests of the organizer. He’s upstairs putting his regular uniform back on when Chris comes in, chuckling at the glare Derek gives him.

“You lasted longer than I thought you would,” he says, leaning in the doorway.
“Guess you lost the betting pool, then.” Derek buttons up his shirt with as much malcontent as he can muster.

Chris scoffs, offended. “Give us a little credit, wouldya?”

Derek grumbles and grabs his bag. He was technically off a half hour ago, and he has plenty of work to do on the house before the sun goes down. The others are in the kitchen, splitting a pizza now that their modeling duties are over for the year.

“You want some?” Isaac asks, offering the box. “You earned it.”

Derek waves him off. “Nah, I’m good. I need to get going.”

“Date with Hot Teacher tonight?” Erica asks, wiggling her eyebrows. “Just remember it’s not the size of the vector that matters, it’s the way the force is delivered!”

“You need help,” Derek tells her, walking away. “And she teaches English,” he tosses over his shoulder.

Allison’s waiting for him by his truck, grinning and holding out a handful of cash. “Your cut, Alpha Hale.”

“Why, thank you,” he says, counting the bills. “Two hundred?”

Alison shrugs. “It’s been a slow month, they were bored and easily riled up. Like lambs to the slaughter.”

“Always a pleasure doing business with you,” Derek fist bumps her and climbs in the truck.

When Derek pulls into his driveway, there’s an unfamiliar dog barking obnoxiously at the lumber pile sitting in the front yard. He climbs out with a low growl, heading straight for the pile to see what the dog has trapped in there. A hiss and the swipe of an orange paw has the dog darting backward before jumping back up and snapping its jaws. Derek snarls at the dog, flashing his eyes until it cuts its losses and runs off.
He ducks his head to look into the small hole created by the different lengths of wood and finds a pair of large, green eyes staring back at him.

“Hello, there,” he says, carefully reaching between the stacks of lumber to pull the cat out. “He’s gone now, you’re safe.”

Derek’s not sure how the cat manages to look unimpressed, but somehow it does.

“Not going to thank me then,” he holds the cat to his chest and checks its collar. “Arlo?”

The cat purrs and rubs its head under Derek’s jaw.

“You’re welcome. Now, off you go home, I’m sure someone’s missing you.” He places the cat on the grass, where it stares up at him blankly. He shakes his head and makes his way onto the porch to unlock the front door. As soon as there’s enough space, the cat is through his legs and inside.

“Hey! Come back here!” Derek calls after it, shutting the door behind him and stalking the cat through the house. He finds Arlo in the kitchen, perched expectantly in front of the fridge.

“Not a chance, buddy,” he picks up the cat again, but no matter how many times he looks, all his collar tells him is the cat’s name; no contact info for its owner. “Okay, you can stay the night, but tomorrow we’re finding out where you belong.”

The cat looks smug, Derek swears it, but he pulls out the leftover rotisserie chicken that was to be his dinner and gives it to his new house guest. He putters around for a few hours, resealing the window in the upstairs bathroom and fixing the lock of the back door so it doesn’t stick anymore. He spends forty minutes staring at the living room wall, trying to put into words the colour he sees in his mind, but it remains as elusive as ever. Eventually he gives up and goes to bed.

The next day after work, Derek’s feeling lost in the pet food aisle, comparing two types of dry food, when he first scents it. He closes his eyes and pushes away the wafting odor of cat food and the general wet cardboard smell of the grocery store to focus on the tantalizing mix of fresh dirt, cinnamon, and heather. There’s a sharp undercurrent of antiseptic and the musk of a multitude of animals, and the depth of the essence coats his tongue, leaving him hungry for more.
“Having trouble deciding?”

Derek’s eyes pop open at the words to find the source of the intriguing scent standing beside him, an expectant, but friendly look on his face.

“I don’t have a cat,” he confesses, holding up the two bags.

The guy wrinkles his nose and all Derek can do is stare. “Ah, okay. I mean, I’m not one to judge, but um, I hear dog biscuits are usually better for, um, play.”

“What? No!” Derek flushes, throwing the bags back on the shelf like they’ve burned him. “No, no, there’s a cat in my house, but it’s not my cat. I found it. Him. Arlo, his name is Arlo.”

The guy smiles, a small dimple popping out amidst the collection of moles on his left cheek, his Whiskey coloured eyes sparkling. “What kind of cat is Arlo?”

“An orange one,” Derek says, decisively.

His laughter is bright and warm. “Right, well those are pretty common, so this shouldn’t be too hard,” he pulls a blue bag of dry food off a higher shelf and hands it to Derek. “This is the good stuff. Alternate it with wet food every two to three days and he should be fine.”

“I’m going to put up posters tomorrow,” Derek tells him, reaching for something to prolong the exchange. “I’m sure someone’s looking for him.”

“You’re probably right. You’re kind of a hero for keeping him while you look and not turning him over to a shelter, you know. Most adult cats don’t make it out of there alive,” his eyes slide to the shoulder patch on Derek’s jacket and he chuckles. “Well, I guess you were already a hero. Now you’re a double hero, go you!”

An awkward silence descends between them when Derek doesn’t respond because, for the life of him, he can’t tell if the guy is flirting with him or is just naturally uncouth. He’s also wondering how weird it is that he wants to christen the guy ‘Whiskey’ in his mind.
The guy clears his throat and looks away. “Right.”

“I left out some milk for him, but he won’t touch it,” Derek blurts, trying his best to find some middle ground.

“Oh, god, don’t give him that,” he says, putting his hand out like he can physically stop Derek. “Most adult cats can’t break down the sugar enzymes in milk, and it gives them terrible diarrhea.” A horrified look crosses the guy’s face, and a deep flush creeps up his neck. “So yeah, no milk.”

“Are you a vet?” Derek asks, amused.

“Ah, almost,” he smiles shyly and bites his lip. “I’m in my final semester at the College for Supernatural Veterinary Medicine.”

“That’s a difficult area of study,” Derek says, surprised at the information.

“Yeah, it is,” he admits, rubbing the back of his neck. “But I’m pretty good at it. Hey, is that Boothbay Grey?”

Derek looks down at his paint-stained hands, where the guy is pointing. “Yeah, how did you know?”

He waves his hands in the air. “I have kind of a memory thing for colours. You painting your house?”

“The house I’m currently in, anyway. I flip them in my spare time.”

“Oh, cool. Well, that’s a great colour, just be careful because if you don’t use the right primer it can look dull. Unless you want it to be dull, then by all means, buy the cheapest primer you can find.”

Derek stares, more than a little taken with the guy’s ability to ramble. “It’s not actually the colour I’m going with. I have six different colours on the wall right now, and I just can’t seem to find the right one. It’s like I can see it in my head, but I can’t match it to anything I find.”
“Is it a newer house, or more traditional?”

“Definitely traditional.”

“I’d go with something more grey-green than grey-blue, then. Like a Silver Eucalyptus, it will open up the room, but still keep it feeling warm, like your eyes,” the guy coughs loudly, clearly embarrassed. “Anyway, keep at it, it’ll come to you.”

Derek’s fangs lengthen, just a bit, and leans on the cart, letting his eyes change colour. “What about red? Is that warm enough?” He gets a thrill from the way the guy’s mouth drops open, soft and pink. Definitely worth a private nickname.

“Ah, um, red could totally work.” Whiskey nods, licking his lips. “If the shade is right.”

Derek huffs a laugh and lets the red fade slowly from his irises, pleased with the response. “You having a party?”

Whiskey blinks in confusion. “No, why?”

Derek nods to the giant tub of ice cream and the econo-size bottle of lube in his cart. Whiskey’s laugh is high-pitched and thin, but Derek can’t help but enjoy the shade of pink that returns to his cheeks.

“That...is going to last me a long time,” he explains, looking pained. “Don’t judge me.” He grabs a bag of dry food off the shelf, tossing it into his cart as he walks away. “Good luck with the cat!”

Derek chuckles to himself and wanders off, wondering how often the guy visits this particular store.
Chapter 2

Stiles

Stiles is at home, brushing his fingers through Edith’s soft fur and yelling at the contestants on Wheel of Fortune, when Lydia’s new commercial comes on. Stiles grins at the screen and holds Edith up so she can see.

“Look, there’s Aunty Lydia,” he coos, waving one of Edith’s paws at the tv. “And there’s Jackson, blurry in the background, where he belongs.”

Edith squawks her agreement and pecks at Stiles’ fingers until he goes back to petting her. Lydia is all sharp smiles and cunning eyes in her ad, showing people she’s the number one real estate agent in the state for a reason, and Stiles beams with pride. Lydia’s been his best friend since seventh grade, and she’s the most awesomely terrifying creature he’s ever met. Until he found Edith, anyway.

Wheel of Fortune comes back on and Stiles’ phone rings, startling Edith enough that the feather Stiles has been straightening comes out and she slashes at him with her claws.

“Fuck!”

“I don’t appreciate that greeting, Stiles,” Lydia’s voice informs him through the phone.

“Sorry, sorry! Edith clawed me. Crap, it’s bleeding.” Stiles frowns at the welling blood while Lydia sighs over the line and Edith tries to climb into his shirt pocket in apology.

“Don’t let her lick it, that’s gross.”

“I wasn’t going to!” Stiles insists, pulling his hand back from Edith’s mouth. A knock at the door has him jumping to his feet, blood droplets landing on the floor. “Shit, someone’s here, hold on!”

He scrambles around the apartment, collecting Edith’s food and water dishes, dumping them, and her, into his bedroom and closing the door. He kicks a toy bird under the couch, picks up his phone, and opens the door to a very well-dressed redhead on his doorstep.
“You could have told me it was you so I didn’t have to freak out,” he says into his mouthpiece, his voice echoing back at him through the phone in Lydia’s hand.

Lydia smiles. “But I like it when you freak out. You talk to yourself.”

“Do not,” he protests, letting her in and going to fetch Edith. He drops her into Lydia’s waiting hands and goes to find a bandaid for his hand.

“How much bigger will she get?” Lydia asks, holding out in front of her and examining the Griffin Sprite.

“Maybe three pounds more?” Stiles guesses. “There isn’t a lot of information about her species available, it’s been so long since one was seen. I’m not even sure if her wings will ever be functional.”

“Daddy Stiles should write a book about you, precious,” Lydia coos at Edith.

“I’ve asked you not to use that voice in front of her, it makes me feel dirty.”

Lydia rolls her eyes. “Are you ready to go?”

Stiles pauses. “Go where?”

“Fiamo’s, Stiles. For your birthday dinner. Jackson is waiting in the car.” Lydia looks unimpressed, but not terribly surprised, and Edith takes advantage of the distraction to jump from her hands and lick at the droplets of blood on the linoleum.

“I didn’t forget,” Stiles tells her, rubbing a hand through his hair. “I just didn’t realize it was today.”

Lydia rolls her eyes. “Whatever, just put on a clean shirt and let’s go, our reservation is in twenty minutes.”
Jackson smirks and shakes his head when Stiles falls into the backseat of the car, and Lydia prods him about how his classes are going on the drive over. Those, at least, Stiles doesn’t mind talking about. He loves school, and he’s at the top of his class, so it’s not hard to get him jammering on and on about the difficulties pertaining to surgery on creatures with accelerated healing.

“But this new compound is a variation of aconite that hasn’t been grown in a lab before because it’s so delicate and dependent on the moon phases, and—”

“Sir?” the maître d prompts. “May I take your...hoodie?”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Stiles slips off his jacket while Jackson snickers and shoots his cuffs.

“Hey, Jackson, how those hemorrhoids treating you?” Stiles asks loudly. “You remember the cream goes on the inside, right?”

“Stop it,” Lydia hisses, smacking him with her purse and leading the way to the table. They stop three times on the way so Lydia can schmooze while Stiles tries to pick out all the supernaturals in the restaurant. By the time they’re seated, he’s confident there are six werewolves, two witches, and an incubus.

They’re halfway through their entrees when Lydia tilts her head and smiles at him across the table. Stiles sighs and slumps in his seat because he knows what’s coming.

“So, Jackson has this friend,” she starts.

“No. No thank you, not happening, nie,” Stiles shakes his head.

“You need to get laid, Stilinski,” Jackson tells him. “Get some actual human touch, not just animal.”

“You’re a lizard, dude, so step down.”

“Stiles, he’s really nice. At least go out with him, let him buy you dinner,” Lydia pleads.
“The last guy you set me up with was married,” Stiles hisses across the table.

“This guy isn’t, I checked,” Jackson assures him between sips of wine.

“How gracious of you. The answer is still no. Lydia, I hate to say this, but matchmaking may be the one thing you’re not good at.”

Lydia’s jaw drops. “You take that back!”

“I’m sorry, but it’s true,” Stiles says, his attention drifting to the tall, dark, and handsome that just walked in the door. He nearly chokes on his wine when the guy turns and Stiles realizes it’s the firefighter from the grocery store. He’s surprised and mentally reliving his own embarrassment, but it gives him an idea. “Ah, I can’t go out with anyone anyway, because I met someone.”

Lydia’s attention zeroes on him in an instant. “Who did you meet?”

Stiles looks to Jackson for help because somehow he already knows this was a mistake, but Jackson actually looks interested in his response, the ass.

“He’s um, a firefighter,” Stiles gulps and turns away from the entrance, praying it’s loud enough in the restaurant that the guy’s superhearing won’t pick him up. “An alpha werewolf. Firefighter.”

Lydia’s lips curve into a wide smile and Jackson mouths ‘knot queen’ at him across the table.

“That’s perfect!” Lydia tells him.

“It is? Why, why is it perfect?”

“Because we have four invites to the Mayor’s Easter Egg Hunt and now you can bring your firefighter and I won’t have to pretend to like Jackson’s friend.”

“Hey!” Jackson protests.
“Oh, be quiet, you know he’s a dud.”

“Yet you were still willing to set me up with him?” Stiles questions.

“Desperate times, Stiles,” she says sweetly. “And, you can wear your new suit!”

“What new suit?” Stiles demands, feeling attacked.

“The one I’m buying you for your birthday,” she explains as their plates are cleared.

“I’m pretty sure I said no to that because it’s too expensive.”

“Stiles,” Lydia starts in her serious voice. “You have worked your ass off to put yourself through school and you deserve to walk across that stage in a nice suit. It’s the least I can do after all you’ve done to support me.”

Stiles squirms in his seat and Jackson kicks him under the table. “Dude, just accept that you’re not going to win this one and take the suit. She’s right, you should look as good as you feel when you graduate.”

Stiles huffs. “It’s really not fair when you two gang up on me.”

“I know,” Lydia soothes, patting his hand. “Jackson will pick you up next Sunday, the appointment has already been made.”

“Wait, no, I can’t do that Sunday, I have an anatomy midterm the next morning, I have to study.”

“It’s not going to take all day, just a few hours, you’ll be fine,” she assures him. “Just make sure you tell this guy that we expect to see him on the 30th at the party.”

“We may not even still be together then,” Stiles protests weakly, knowing it’s no use.
“What’s his name?” Jackson asks.

“Who?” Stiles mutters, refilling his wine glass.

“Your boyfriend,” he sneers.

“Oh, um, his name. Well, I call him...sourwolf. And he calls me...Stiles?” His laugh is pathetic, even to his own ears. “Because Stiles is already a nickname, right? And you don’t give a nickname to a nickname because that’s just overkill…”

He’s saved from their scrutiny by one on Lydia’s clients stepping up to the table and Stiles takes his chance, excusing himself to contemplate flinging his worthless, lying carcass off the restaurant balcony.
“Wait, you actually called him ‘sourwolf’?” Scott asks, dropping his books onto one of the empty library tables. “Where he could hear you?”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Stiles groans, dropping onto his chair. “I thought the noise from the restaurant and the street would be enough to cover it.”

“Dude, if he’s an alpha, he could hear that from like, a block away.”

“Oh, he’s an alpha, alright,” Stiles says, miserably.

“So are you going to ask him out?”

“What? No!” Stiles sputters. “You know I’m not dating until after graduation. My career is way more important than having a boyfriend, Scotty.”

“So don’t date him,” Scott shrugs. “Just have some fun.”

Stiles scoffs. “When exactly do I have time for fun between school, studying, and work?”

“Well, you’ve managed to see this guy twice in a week, I’m pretty sure you could have used the time you spent talking on other, more carnal pursuits.”

“Not all of us are built for speed, thank you very much.”

“Ouch, man.” Scott frowns at him.

“Sorry, that’s not what I meant, it’s just...I’m not into the one and done thing. Or even the two and
through. I’m a relationship person,” Stiles explains.

“But you don’t want a relationship,” Scott points out.

“No, I can’t have a relationship.”

“Then what are you going to do about Lydia’s egg thing?” Scott asks.

Stiles drops his head to the table and whimpers. “It’s the Mayor’s egg thing, and I have no idea. God, I’m so stupid, how did I get here, man?”

“By not technically lying, but also not telling the truth,” Scott tells him, helpfully. “Look, it’s a month until Easter, we have until then to find you an alpha werewolf date willing to lie for you.”

“And alpha werewolf firefighter date willing to lie for me,” he corrects.

“Gee, I wonder where we could find one of those…” Scott says, tapping his chin.

Stiles shakes his head. “Dude, no. I can’t ask him, it would be humiliating. Beyond what is bearable, even for me.”

“The only other thing I can think of is setting up an online dating profile and hoping for the best.” Scott opens his laptop and starts clicking around.

“I can’t just specifically ask for an alpha who happens to be a fireman, that’s weird.”

Scott shrugs. “Depends on the site. Some people have alpha kinks.”

“I am not one of those people,” Stiles insists.

“Dude, I know, but if it helps solve your problem, why not give it a shot?” Scott raises his phone and
snaps a picture of Stiles. He’s pretty sure his mouth was wide open, mid protest, but Scott won’t let him see it.

“This is such a bad idea,” Stiles mutters.

“Too late, it’s done,” Scott tells him, his laptop dingding repeatedly. “Oh, wow, you already have three messages.

Stiles grabs the laptop and turns is around, his eyes bulging at the profile Scott set up on TopKnotch.com. “Dude, you can’t tell a group of alphas I have an oral fixation!”

Scott smirks as messages continue to pour in. “Why not? It worked.”
Derek

Derek forces down a sigh and empties his glass. The Whiskey won’t get him drunk, but the burn of it gives him something to focus on that isn’t his present company. Jennifer, or ‘Hot Teacher’, as Erica calls her, showed up at his place just as he was getting ready to settle in for the evening. The day had been long and exhausting, with two callouts for accidents, one with a fatality.

He’d been hoping Jennifer was looking for a booty call, in which case he’d be alone and asleep in two hours tops, but instead she’d declared Arlo unwanted company, rolled her eyes at his paint colour struggles, and somehow talked him into going downtown to meet her friends.

Now that he’s met them, he really wishes he’d stayed home. They’re elitists, for one, and surprisingly dull for witches. They also don’t care much for shifters, if their poorly disguised jabs at his kind are anything to go by.

“So, firefighting must be fun,” the woman says with a thin smile. Derek thinks her name is Cecily, but he can’t be sure.

“It’s a blast,” he deadpans.

“Derek’s also in real estate,” Jennifer preens, stroking his arm and fingering the tree pendant around her neck.

“Well, not really. I buy and restore old houses,” he corrects. He’s not putting on airs for these people and he won’t allow her to do it for him. Derek’s family is practically werewolf royalty back home, and these idiots can barely cast through a crystal.

“Putting all that brute strength to good use,” Cecily giggles, her eyes raking over his torso.

“Tell me,” Cecily’s partner, Duade, or something equally idiotic, pipes up. “Do the new owners mind that you piss in all the corners?”
Derek takes a step forward, just to see the guy flinch, then he excuses himself and goes to the patio for some air. The night is brisk, but there are tall heaters standing watch over the small space, pumping out the smell of burnt dust to compete with food from the restaurant and exhaust from the street. Derek can therefore forgive himself when he doesn’t notice the other person on the patio until he speaks up.

“How’s Arlo?”

Derek turns from where he’s bracing himself on the railing, breaking out a smile when he sees Whiskey from the supermarket sitting there, shivering.

“You remembered his name,” Derek says, impressed. The guy shrugs and tucks his hands under his knees. “I haven’t found him a home yet, so he’s still with me. I’m actually starting to think he’s not a normal cat. Like, maybe he’s got some magic in him.”

Whiskey perks up. “Why’s that?”

“Because I keep kicking him out of my bedroom and shutting the door, but by morning he’s back in bed with me, door wide open. Same thing happens when I’m showering.”

“Lucky him,” Whiskey mutters. “I think you can be pretty sure he’s just a normal cat.”

“Yeah?”

“Totally,” he assures him. “He’s just smarter than you.”

Derek chuckles and sits beside him, close enough to share his warmth. “So who are you hiding from out here?”

“I’m not hiding,” he says, his heart skipping a beat with the lie. “Just getting some fresh air.”

“What does it say about the people we’re with that we have to escape them to feel like we can breathe?” Derek wonders, letting their shoulders press together.
“That we love them too much,” Whiskey answers, wisely.

Derek snorts. “Or too little.”

Silence descends between them, and though it’s companionable, Derek can’t help but want to keep talking to this man who is becoming less and less of a stranger.

“I’m here with a date and her friends.”

The guy sits up a little straighter, shifting away in a move Derek’s sure he means to be inconspicuous. “Oh, you have a girlfriend?”

“No, she’s just...someone I’m dating,” Derek says, closing the space between them once more. Whiskey’s teeth are practically chattering, it’s really the least he can do. “Girlfriend implies a possible future, and I don’t really buy into all that happily ever after stuff.”

“Really?” Stiles turns a little so their knees bump together. “I believe in true love, I saw it first hand between my parents.” There a small smile on his lips, but his eyes are sad and Derek’s close enough to catch the salty tang of melancholy on his skin.

“I want that,” he continues, clasping his hands together in front of him. “Just not until after I’m done with school and have started my own practice.”

“Well, that explains all the lube,” Derek jokes, making Whiskey smile and duck his head. “What happens if you find that person before you’re ready, though?”

“Can’t find what you’re not looking for, right?”

Derek nods in agreement, looking out over the city and wondering if he’ll ever have the chance to feel the certainty they say comes from having someone love you completely. Not that he wants it, but sometimes he can’t help but think about it.
“So how does a werewolf not believe in true love when mates are supposed to be instinctual?”

Derek huffs a bitter laugh and stands, looking down at the guy. “I need more of a guarantee than my instincts usually provide. I should probably get back to my date and her pretentious friends. Witches, am I right?”

“Yeah, good luck,” he agrees softly as Derek heads back inside. “…sourwolf.”

Derek stops and glances back at him, but Whiskey’s large hands are hiding his face.

“Oh my god, you heard that didn’t you?” he whispers, sounding horrified.

Derek waits until the guy peeks out between his fingers, then he smirks and walks away.
Derek

His phone wakes him two hours before he actually needs to be up and Arlo hisses at Jennifer’s picture when it flashes on the screen.

“Hey there, sleepy head,” Jennifer trills in his ear. “Why are you still in bed?”

Derek coughs, clearing his throat of the soot he inhaled last night. “I’ve only been off shift for five hours. Got called out to a fire in Westerley.”

“Aww, poor baby,” she coos, all tenderness dropping from her voice when Arlo meows near Derek’s ear. “Is that the cat? I thought you got rid of it.”

Derek wrinkles his nose at Arlo and scratches the white spot on the top of his head. “It’s not like he’s hard to live with; all I really do is feed him.”

“And allow him to sleep in your bed?” she questions. “I hope you know that as long as he’s sleeping there, I won’t be.”

“Okay,” Derek yawns, rolling over and closing his eyes.

Jennifer huffs. “You’re a werewolf, Derek, it’s weird that you have a cat.”

“Sure,” he agrees, drifting off.

“I’ll come over tomorrow and we’ll take it to my father’s pet store. They’re always finding people to foster animals. If they can’t we’ll drop it at a shelter.”

Derek sighs in frustration. “Do I need to remind you that it’s my cat and I get to make the decisions?”
“But it’s not your cat, Derek. It’s no one’s cat, that’s the problem,” she responds sweetly. “See you tomorrow!”

Derek throws his phone on the floor and buries himself beneath the covers for another three hours until Arlo digs him out, demanding food. He takes the cat to work with him, handing him over to Erica for coddling so Derek can start his chore checklist. He’s putting away the extraction tools when Boyd joins him, Arlo purring contently from where he’s laid out over Boyd’s shoulders.

“I like having a cat around,” Boyd says, running his finger over the pads of Arlo’s back paws.

“Yeah, he’s pretty neat,” Derek agrees. “I’ve never had a pet before.”

“So why don’t you keep him?”

Derek grimaces and picks up a spreader as long as his arm. “Jennifer doesn’t like cats.”

Boyd shakes his head, unimpressed. “I don’t trust a witch who doesn’t like cats.”

Derek pauses and looks up, but Boyd’s already walking away. He set the spreader down carefully and watches them go, something niggling in the back of his mind. But then the alarm goes off and he’s falling in line with the others, stuffing his feet into his boots and climbing on the truck, ready to face a new threat.

Saturday dawns bright and brisk, and after Jennifer drags him to brunch, Derek stops back at the house to pick up Arlo. He does work irregular hours, and he can’t disagree that Arlo might be better off with someone more settled, so it’s worth a shot to find him something better. Jennifer balks when Derek tells her she’ll have to hold the cat on the drive and suggests they leave him in the bed of the truck. That’s when Derek drops Arlo on the seat beside him and starts backing out of the driveway. He tries not to look too smug when Jennifer gives in and runs after them.

There’s no parking in front of the store so Jennifer hops out, complaining about cat hair, and takes Arlo into the store, holding him as far in front of her as she can. Derek finds a spot two blocks over and by the time he sets foot in the store Jennifer is nowhere to be found. Arlo’s there, though, being held by none other than Whiskey.

“Are you stalking me?” Derek asks, pleasantly surprised at how often the guy pops into his life now
that they’ve met.

Whiskey looks stunned, but he recovers quickly, scoffing. “Considering I work here, I think you’re the one stalking me.”

“Well, if I wasn’t before, I’m thinking about it now. I barely even have to work at it.” Derek grins at him and the guy buries his laugh in Arlo’s fur. His scent is light today, masked by the animals around the store and all the pet food, but what’s there is content. “How’s school going?”

Whiskey blows out a breath. “I’m in the middle of midterms, so insane.”

Jennifer appears from the back of the store, wrapping herself around Derek’s arm. “Great news, sweetheart, this guy here is going to take the cat!”

“You are?” Derek asks.

“Ah, no, sorry,” Whiskey says, looking distressed. “I can’t have pets in my building, they’re very adamant about it.”

“Ugh, fine,” Jennifer snaps and Whiskey flinches. “We’ll just drop it off at a shelter.”

“No,” Derek and Whiskey protest in unison, and when Jennifer turns to give Derek a disbelieving look, Arlo takes a swipe at her, leaving a shallow scratch in his wake.

“Oh my god, did you see that?” she screeches, clutching the pendant which has slipped free of her shirt. “That thing is dangerous!”

“No, he’s not,” Whiskey jumps in, cradling Arlo to his chest. “Cat’s are very perceptive, you know, they can sense when they’re not wanted.”

Jennifer’s nails dig into Derek’s arm as she glares Whiskey and Arlo down. “Then I guess this one is a genius. We’re leaving. Now.”
Jennifer stomps out of the store and Derek gives Whiskey an apologetic smile.

“Sorry,” Whiskey says, clearly still annoyed. “I didn’t realize she was so…”

“Psychotic?” Derek offers.

Whiskey huffs and a smile creeps over his mouth, handing Arlo over. “Sensitive.”

“My name’s Derek, by the way. In case you decide to keep stalking me.”

Whiskey nods. “I’m Stiles,” he says, shoving his hands into his apron. “Now you can put a name on that shrine you have of me at home.”

Derek laughs and backs out of the store, keeping Stiles in his sights until he’s forced to turn and make his way back to Jennifer.
Malia is not a Hale for the purposes of this fic.

Stiles

Stiles is still grinning from seeing Derek again, stocking shelves with Malia when his boss calls him into the back.

“Ohh, you’re in trouble,” Malia teases, stacking cans of organic dog food.

“I got a raise on my birthday last year,” Stiles tells her, holding up his crossed fingers and heading to the office at the back of the store.

Ten minutes later, Stiles slumps into one of the chairs in the staff room, shocked and more than a little pissed off. Malia comes in, shielding the flickering flame of the candle stuck in cupcake she’s holding.

“Happy birthday!” she shouts, setting it down in front of him and tossing a handful of paper circles from the hole punch at the till. “What’s wrong, what happened?” she demands when he drags his hand over his mouth.

“I just got fired,” he tells her, his voice cracking.

“Holy shit, why?” Malia slips into the chair across from him and leans across the table.

“For being rude to Jennifer,” he says through clenched teeth.

Malia scoffs. “Jennifer’s a bitch, everyone is rude to her, it’s a coping mechanism.”
“Yeah, well, she complained to her father and he fired me. Fuck, I can’t believe it.”

“This is bullshit,” Malia declares. “You’ve worked here what, three years? You’re the best employee they have, and the only one who actually likes the customers.”

“Yeah, I know, but he’s clearly afraid of her, and she hates me for some reason, so I’m out.” Stiles groans and drops his head on the table.

“Probably cause her boytoy was giving you ‘fuck me’ eyes.”

“What?” Stiles squawks, looking up at her. “He was not!”

“Well, he was looking at you how I was looking at him, and I was definitely giving him ‘fuck me’ eyes.” Malia shrugs and blows out the candle on Stiles’ cupcake.

Stiles frowns and thinks back to their exchange. Had Derek really been looking at him like that?

“I wonder what he sees in her?” he says, picking up the cupcake and peeling back the liner.

“Maybe she has him under a spell,” Malia whispers, wagging her eyebrows. “One where he’s only attracted to supremely bitchy people.”

“I guess I’m out of luck, then, huh?”

“Yeah, but I probably have a shot,” Malia says.

Stiles snorts and stuffs the entire cupcake into his mouth, ignoring the crumbs he scatters on the table. He doesn’t work here anymore, so he doesn’t have to give a shit about the mess he’s leaving behind. This could be an opportunity, he thinks. A new beginning. He’s been here three years, and he’s graduating in a couple of months. He’ll be a doctor. In demand. Unstoppable. Maybe even desirable.

Before he leaves the store, the contents of his cubby stuffed into his backpack, he accepts a date with an alpha werewolf from TopKnotch.com. He’s feeling confident when he leaves his apartment an
hour later, looking good in tight jeans and a blazer. He can do this. He can meet new people and let

go a little. He can just have fun. He makes it another three blocks before he cancels the date, turns

around, and spends the night curled up in front of the tv with Edith. He doesn’t consider it a loss.
Two days later, Derek takes advantage of a grocery run for the firehouse to stop by the pet store and visit Stiles. He needs more cat food, so it’s not a total bullshit excuse, and if he finds his mind wandering back to that wide smile and those honey-amber eyes, it’s only because Stiles is so damn interesting.

He approaches the tall brunette at the till, putting on his ‘friendly’ face, as Allison calls it, and asks if Stiles is in.

The woman scowls, giving him a judgemental once over. “He doesn’t work here anymore. He got fired.”

“About fifteen minutes after you and that superficial, horrible, nightmare of a person you call a girlfriend left. Seems she took offence to Stiles defending your cat,” she tells him, crossing her arms over her chest. “He needed this job, you know? He can’t just wander into the woods and chase down his lunch like some people.”

“Excuse me?” Derek growls. “I had no idea he got fired, and if I’d known Jennifer was going to say anything, I would have stopped her.”

The woman scoffs and flashes electric blue eyes at him, a clear challenge. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because you can hear if I’m lying,” he says, forcing himself to calm down. “I had nothing to do with Stiles getting fired.”

She purses her lips, but her eyes fade back to brown.

Derek pulls out his phone, typing Stiles’ name into his contacts. “Look, can I have his number, or his
“Why, you wanna burn down his house, too?” she asks scornfully.

Derek whips his head up, staring at her in shock, but she seems unaware of how close to home her comment has hit, so he pushes down his panic and anger, and takes a deep breath. “I would like to apologize to him.”

“I’m not giving you that, but his last name is Stilinski. You really want to apologize, you’ll figure out how to do the legwork.”

Derek thanks her and heads back to the firehouse, still reeling from the news that Jennifer was petty enough to get Stiles fired over a cat.

As soon as the groceries are unloaded and put away, he starts googling, trying different ways of spelling Stilinski. He finds a trio of dentists under Stilinsky, and a hypnotist under Stylnsky, but none of the pictures are Stiles. At least if he was a hypnotist, Derek could explain away his intense desire to see him again.

There’s a Sheriff Stilinski in the next county, and there’s something about the tilt of the man’s head and the cool confidence in his eyes that has Derek thinking he’s looking at Stiles’ father. Unfortunately, there’s nothing for Stiles, not even a facebook page, and he doubts calling the sheriff of Beacon County to ask for his son’s phone number will end well.

“Nothing yet?” Chris asks from the kitchen.

Derek sighs. “Nothing that helps, at least.”

“So tell us about this guy,” Isaac prompts, picking at the remnants of his sandwich. “What’s he like?”

“Funny,” Derek offers with a small smile. “Smart, hard working. Incredibly sarcastic, but also really sweet and genuine, somehow.”

“Is he hot?” Erica asks, laughing when Isaac throws his bottle cap at her. “What, it’s important!”
“I haven’t noticed,” Derek insists, but he can feel the blush spreading over his cheeks, and from the way Erica snickers and Isaac grins, he’s sure they heard his lie.

“Aww, Derek’s got a crush!” Erica teases, pinching his cheek.

“Leave him alone,” Allison tells her, dropping down beside Derek. “It sounds like you really like this guy.”

Derek shrugs, not trusting himself to speak.

“I just mean, you don’t talk about him the way you usually talk about the people you date,” she clarifies.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Derek asks.

“Well, for one, we all know way more about him than we do Jennifer, and you’ve been seeing her for months.”

“Yeah, we only know Jennifer’s name because you lost that bet to me,” Isaac adds.

Derek frowns, a little thrown that they’re right, he does talk about Stiles a lot.

“You going to ask him out when you find him?” Chris asks, joining them and setting a cup of coffee in front of Derek.

“Thanks. Even if I wanted to, Stiles is focused on school right now. And I could never keep up with his idea of romance, he’s all about true love and ever after, and I’m really not.”

“Derek,” Allison says gently nudging his arm. “Just because your marriage ended badly, doesn’t mean all relationships are doomed to fail.”
“She tried to kill me, Allison,” Derek reminds her dryly.

“But she didn’t,” she counters, not backing down. “You can’t give up on love just because it didn’t work out one time. And if you’re not into him, why are you trying so hard to find him?”

“To apologize for him getting fired.”

Allison raises an eyebrow. “That wasn’t actually your fault, you know.”

“You need something besides work, Derek,” Chris interjects quietly before either of them resorts to raising their voice. It’s not a new argument, and Derek knows Allison and Chris hold their own guilt regarding his broken marriage, considering his ex-wife was Chris’ sister and Allison’s aunt, but it’s not a wound that’s ever going to fully heal, and they need to accept it.

“I have the house,” Derek tells them, suddenly tired. “And Arlo.”

“So you’re keeping him?” Erica asks, perking up.

“Yeah, I might as well, he doesn’t seem to have an interest in moving on.”

“Good,” Chris says, giving him a warm smile. “That’s progress.”
Stiles steps back into the watery sunshine, crossing off another employment prospect off his list. He’s been to seven different places today, and no one wants to hire someone who will be moving on in two and a half months. Pet stores, groomers, he even offered to deal with the medical waste at a supernatural vet surgery, but they told him it’s handled by a contracted company. The receptionist did hint that he should come back once he has his degree, though, so if he can find a way to magically skip to the end of May, he’ll be set.

This month’s rent is paid, and his severance check will cover the rest of what’s due, but he needs to find something fast if he wants to keep his place and not starve before the end of April. Not to mention that he’s supposed to be using this time to study for midterms and line up actual vet work for after graduation. He could ask Lydia and Jackson for help, but that might literally kill him, so it’s off the table. He doesn’t even have his Jeep to sleep in when he gets evicted because he left it at his dad’s to save money since his apartment is so close to everything he needs. Or needed, rather.

His phone rings, Scott’s face flashing on the screen.

“Hey, Scotty,” he greets.

“Hey, any luck?” Scott asks.

“Not yet, but I’ve got time, it’ll be fine,” Stiles says, ignoring the doubtful sound Scott makes at Stiles’ false optimism. “I’m not panicking.”

“Well, if you’re open to something extremely last minute and very underpaid, one of our dog walkers just sprained his ankle and can’t work for at least two weeks.”

“I’ll take it!” Stiles shouts, startling some birds into flight.

Scott laughs over the line and something warm and wet splatters Stiles’ shoulder.
“Aw, fuck! I just got shit on by a bird,” Stiles whines, searching his pockets for something to clean up with.

“That’s supposed to be good luck,” Scott points out. “And you’re going to need it because I need you here like, five minutes ago. The pooches are starting to whine.”

“Yep, right, I am on my way!” Stiles ends the call and starts running, feeling lighter, despite the bird shit weighing him down.
Derek

Derek comes home at the end of the week to find Jennifer in his kitchen, putting together dinner for them. He pauses in the doorway, frowning at her appearance. He hasn’t heard from her since the day she got Stiles fired, and he doesn’t really have the patience to deal with her right now.

“Welcome home!” She says, beaming, the edge of her pendant flashing in the bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The tree looks darker somehow, the roots that connect it at the top and bottom, making a loop and absorbing the light instead of reflecting it.

“Where’s Arlo?” he asks when he notices the cat’s food dishes are still full.

Jennifer shrugs and turns back to the food. “He didn’t go to work with you?”

“No, he was sleeping when I left. Didn’t you notice him when you came in?” He wanders back into the living room, checking Arlo’s favourite hiding spots.

“Why don’t you go take a shower, dinner’s almost ready,” Jennifer calls, ignoring his question.

“I need to find my cat.”

“Oh, he’s your cat now?” she snaps, slamming a pair of salad tongs onto the counter.

“Yes, he’s my cat, why does that bother you so much? And did you really get Stiles fired the other day?” he asks, losing patience with the farce she’s putting on.

“Stiles,” she says, voice full of venom. “Of course I did, he was horrible to me!”

“You can’t just do things like that, like they don’t matter. He needed that job.”
Jennifer smiles tightly, coming around the counter to spread her hands over Derek’s chest. “Sweetheart, it’s fine. That guy is nothing, and the cat is gone. Everything is back to normal, like it should be. Just you and me.”

Derek goes cold. “Where’s my cat, Jennifer?”

“Who cares?” she cries, stomping back to the food. “It’s a cat, they’re fine on their own!”

Derek takes a deep breath and he can smell Jennifer’s frustration in the air, her anger sparking against the silverware as she sets it down on the counter. “This isn’t working anymore.”

Her eyes snap up to his, dark and furious. “What?”

“You heard me,” he says, quiet but stern.

“You can’t be serious. I just wasted my whole night cooking for you, and you’re going to break up with me over some loser nobody and a freaking cat?”

“The fact that you can’t understand that is exactly why this needs to end. And I know you didn’t make any of this, I can smell the take out boxes in the trash and I just bought that stove; it’s not even hooked up yet.”

“You’re going to regret this,” she warns him, the air around her crackling. “I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to you, you’ll be sorry.”

Derek flashes his eyes and fangs at her, letting out a warning growl. Jennifer rolls her eyes and stomps out, slamming the door behind her. Derek sweeps the food into the bin and heads out in search of Arlo, feeling no regret whatsoever.
Stiles

Jackson picks Stiles up in his new Porsche, looking pretty damn smug for a guy who’s fiancé is the only reason he has any of his precious toys. It had irked Stiles at first, that Jackson is so flashy when Lydia drives a second-hand Prius, but she explained that despite her success, she still needs to come off as approachable to her clients. Someone just like them, whom they can trust to find them a house they can make a home. Or something, he and Jackson had been battling it out on Mario Kart and Stiles had gotten distracted by Jackson passing him. Lydia says it’s fine, and Lydia is honest to a fault, so Stiles doesn’t worry about it. Of course, that doesn’t mean he lets Jackson get away with being a smarmy dick about it.

“So exactly how small is your penis?” he asks, buckling up. “This is a 911, right? I think I read it makes up for as small as three inches, is that close?”

Jackson smirks and peels away from the curb. “Fuck off, Stilinski.”

“You’re in a good mood this morning, did Lydia raise your allowance?”

“She raised something,” he says with a smile and Stiles gags.

“Gross, dude, you know that shit is off limits! She’s like my sister!”

Jackson laughs and slows down for a red light. “You’re not going to ruin my good mood today.”

“Is that a challenge?” Stiles asks, rubbing his hands together.

“I got my bar results,” Jackson admits, an honest smile pulling at his mouth.

Jackson’s smile turns into a grin and his face flushes lightly. “I passed.”

“Oh my god, dude! That’s awesome, congrats!”

“Yeah,” Jackson nods, his eyes looking a little wet. “Yeah, it is.”

“So what’s the plan now?” Stiles asks as they pull up to the tailor’s shop.

“Now I work my ass off and show Lydia I was worth all the time and effort she put in,” Jackson tells him seriously.

Stiles claps him on the shoulder and gives him a warm smile. “That’s a killer plan, I approve.”

“But first, new suits.”

“Right, new suits,” Stiles takes a deep breath, bracing himself. “I don’t get a choice in any of this, do I?”

Jackson snorts and opens his door. “She already ordered it, man, it’s useless it resist.”

Stiles braces himself for the worst and exits the car.

Half an hour later, Stiles is gawking at himself in the mirror, Jackson nodding with approval over his shoulder. The suit is a bright crimson, lightweight and slim cut, making the most of his broad shoulders and narrow hips. His legs look incredibly long, and Jackson and the shop assistant assure him his ass looks even better. The white shirt is crisp and smooth under the jacket, and Jackson picked out a slim black tie and leather dress boots to finish it off.


“Don’t sound so surprised,” Jackson says, smacking him upside the head. “But this is a definite step above the jeans and hoodies you usually wear.”
“Hey, I’m a starving student!” he protests, straightening the tie.

Jackson slaps his hand away. “Not a good excuse. You should wear it out.”

“No way, I plan on hiding it in the back of my closet until graduation day. Edith loves red and she’ll peck a hole through the garment bag and nest in it if she finds it.”

“Lydia will kill you if that happens,” Jackson warns. “But you should still wear it home. Get used to the feel so you don’t look like you’re in the wrong skin when you accept your diploma.”

“You know I’ll have a gown over it, right?”

“Yeah, but you’ll know you’re wearing the suit,” Jackson points out sagely. “And so will everyone else, just by the way you walk.”

Stiles crinkles his nose. “Dude, you’re so weird.”

Jackson huffs in annoyance and turns to the man helping them. “He’s wearing it out, can I get a garbage bag for the clothes he came in?”

Stiles squawks, and the man laughs, offering to burn them in the alley behind the shop.

“Rude!” Stiles tells them, walking away to gather his things.

They’re halfway back to Stiles’ apartment when Jackson takes a wrong turn.

“Did you forget where I live?” Stiles asks.

“Have to make a stop for Lydia,” Jackson explains.
She’d made them send a dozen pictures of Stiles in his suit so she could make sure it was perfect, so he’s not shocked there are other errands involved, but when Jackson parks just down from the local firehouse and tells him to get out, Stiles is frozen in surprise.

“I’m under strict orders to deliver you to your alpha werewolf boy-toy so you can ‘experience a little spontaneity and maybe a quickie’,” Jackson tells him, using air quotes and everything. “Just don’t mess up the suit or Lydia will kill you.”

Stiles opens his mouth to argue, but Jackson gives him a look that tells him there’s no use. If he doesn’t go in there, Lydia will find out and they’ll both suffer.

“Does it ever bother you?” he asks, opening the car door with a jerk. “How evil she is?”

“Nah, it’s kind of a turn on, actually.” Jackson smirks and Stiles slams the door in his face.

He crumples the bag of his belongings in his hand and watches Jackson’s car turn the corner two blocks down, then he spins on his heel and starts the walk home. No way is he going into the firehouse looking for Derek. He has no real reason to, and if he does, he can’t claim Derek’s the one stalking him, so just no. No way.

He’s gone a block and a half when an orange blob jumps out in front of him, meowing pitifully and rubbing against his leg.

“Arlo?” He picks up the cat and checks his tag, making sure. “What are you doing out here?”

Arlo answers with a whine, and Stiles realizes he no longer has a choice about going into the firehouse now because he’s pretty sure Arlo hasn’t suddenly become an outdoor cat. Well, he figures, at least he looks good.

“Excuse me?” Stiles says, walking into the vehicle bay where a handful of firefighters are washing down the trucks. “I’m looking for the owner of this cat.”

A blonde in a tight navy t-shirt leans on her scrub brush and looks Stiles over appreciatively. “He’s my cat.”
“No, he’s my cat,” the tall guy beside her argues, elbowing her out of the way.

“Ah, I’m pretty sure the owner’s name is Derek,” Stiles admits.

“Figures,” the man mutters and turns back to the truck.

“Hey, Derek, you have a guest!” The blonde calls, giving Stiles a wink.

Derek appears from a side door, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a bright smile on his face.

“There you are,” he says, stopping in front of Stiles.

“Yeah, I figured he’d wandered off. Found him down the street,” Stiles explains.

Derek laughs and scuffs his boot on the ground. “I meant you, but Arlo was missing, too. I was hoping I’d run into you again.”

“You were?” Stiles gapes, trying and failing to contain his surprise.

“Yeah, I wanted to apologize for Jennifer getting you fired,” Derek tells him with a grimace.

“Oh, um, thanks. But that wasn’t you, that was your girlfriend.”

Derek scratches a spot on his chest and Stiles’ eyes follow the movement. “She’s not actually my girlfriend anymore.”

“That’s great,” Stiles says with a little too much enthusiasm, making the blonde woman snicker. “For you, I mean. Because she seemed like a real soul-sucking bitch. So, yeah...Here’s Arlo, I’m going to go now.” He presses the cat into Derek’s arms and turns to go.
“Wait, Stiles,” Derek calls, making him pause. “I’m off in an hour, can I give you ride home? Maybe buy you dinner on the way?”

“Oh, that’s, um, that’s not necessary at all,” Stiles protests, his heart beating a mile a minute, no doubt as loud as a drum to the werewolf in front of him.

“Please, it’s the least I can do,” Derek insists, giving him a smile sweet enough to melt his resolve.

“It really is,” the blonde points out.

“He owes you,” the tall guy adds.

Stiles laughs and slides his hands into his pockets. Derek’s eyes trail over his chest and shoulders, and Stiles tries to contain his grin. “Fine, but only if we go to to my favourite place.”

“Of course,” Derek agrees. “Should I go home and change first?”

Stiles bites his lip and reaches for Arlo again. “I know the owner pretty well, I think I can get you in like that.”

“Good, great,” Derek breathes, handing the cat over. “Because I don’t think I can match you in that suit.”

“What, this old thing?” Stiles says, the voice in his head screaming from excitement.

He spends the next hour being regaled with no-doubt embellished tales of heroics from the firefighters and EMT’s, laughing and gasping in equal measure. When Derek’s shift is done, they leave Arlo with Chris at the station and Stiles directs him to his best-held secret.

“I can’t believe your favourite food in town is a taco truck,” Derek muses once they have their food and settle in at an empty picnic table in the square.

Stiles takes a bite of his pork belly carnita and moans. Derek watches him chew for a moment
before pulling his eyes away and shoving half a taco in his mouth.

“It’s like a party in your mouth,” Stiles tells him once he’s in no danger of spitting food everywhere.

They eat side by side in silence, the sun going down behind them and turning everything a nice, hazy purple.

“Okay,” Derek says, wiping his mouth. “That was amazing.”

“I told you,” Stiles says, nudging him with his elbow. A breeze picks up and Stiles shivers, his suit meant for the warmer weather that’s still on it’s way.

“Are you cold?” Derek asks.

Stiles waves him off. “No, no, I’m good.”

“I’ll be right back,” Derek tells him, collecting their garbage and running off. He comes back a few minutes later with his yellow turnout slicker and wraps it around Stiles’ shoulders.

“Thanks,” Stiles murmurs, touched by the small kindness.

Derek’s hands linger on Stiles’ shoulders. “Can’t have you catching a cold. Besides, now I can buy you hot chocolate at my favourite place around the corner.”

“At Fine Grindz?”

“You know it?” Derek asks.

“Dude, their espresso is forty percent of my chemical makeup!”

Once they have their drinks, they walk around the neighbourhood, Stiles telling Derek about his dad
and how hard it was to leave him to go to school, and how Lydia got him through his first year when being away from home ganged up with depression to make his life hell.

“Lydia’s amazing, man, she’s my guardian angel, I swear. She always has my back, and she’s like, a genius. It’s almost cosmically unfair that someone is that gorgeous, that smart, and that kind.”

“Is Lydia…” Derek pauses and frowns. “Were you and she…together?”

Stiles bursts out laughing, curling over and smacking his knee. “God, no! I mean, I was in love with her for a long time, well, obsessed with the idea of her, really. In middle school, though. Our parents dated for a while in tenth grade and I realized very quickly that it wasn’t meant to be. We’re much better friends than we ever would have been as a couple. She’s like a sister to me now.”

“Oh,” Derek says, looking relieved.

“Besides, she’s engaged to the guy who made my formative years hell.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but we’re past that. Turns out he was struggling with a lot of stuff at home and self-discovery, and a bunch of other terms his therapist made him use to apologize to me. We’re cool, and we both love Lydia, so that goes a long way.”

Derek smiles like he understands the sentiment and takes a sip of his hot chocolate. “So why did you choose to become a supernatural vet instead of a normal one?”

He sits down on a bench, stretching his legs out in front of him, and suppressing a shiver when Derek sits close enough for his heat to ebb through the jacket and into Stiles. “My best friend, Scott, was bit by a rogue alpha when we were fifteen.” Derek sucks in a shocked breath and Stiles nods. “Yeah, I know. He went through a lot and I wanted to be there for him, you know? So I did what I do best and set out to make myself an expert on the issue. It grew from there, branching out to other supernatural species, and pretty soon I was the one everyone brought their problems to. From wolfsbane poisoning to goat sacrifices, I was the guy to see. The local vet let Scotty and I use his back room to see patients, as long as we agreed to move on to actual scientific and mystical schooling once we graduated.”
“And here you are,” Derek says quietly.

“And here I am.”

“And Scott? How’s he doing?”

“He’s good, he’s graduating with me in May and we plan to open our own clinic one day.”

“Specifically for supernatural husbandry, I suppose.”

Stiles shrugs. “Why neuter a beagle when you can pull a three-inch rowan sliver out of the abdomen of a hellhound, you know?”

Derek laughs and it takes Stiles breath away for a minute because it’s lighter and more open than Derek’s ever been with him, and he wants more of it.

“Have you ever considered that you might be an adrenaline junkie?” Derek asks.

“You’re one to talk, Mister Alpha Werewolf Firefighter,” Stiles teases. “Your turn, what set you on the hero path?”

Derek snorts, but he looks serious now and Stiles tries not to mourn the loss of their easy-going banter.

“I was married before,” Derek admits, his voice quiet. “Right out of highschool. Her name was Kate and she was older, not a lot, but enough to scandalize my parents. Which, if I’m honest, was part of the appeal.”

“Rebel,” Stiles accuses and Derek rolls his eyes.

“What I didn’t realize at the time was how she was separating me from my pack. Once we were married she became controlling and manipulative, but I was so wrapped up in her that I didn’t even notice until it was too late.”
Stiles bites his lip, willing himself to stay silent and let Derek speak, even though every speck of his being is screaming out to do something. But Derek seems like the kind of guy who needs space in order to open up, and Stiles is determined not to ruin this.

“My parents tried to warn me,” he continues, clenching his hands around the disposable coffee cup until it crumples. “My sisters even staged an intervention, but I didn’t listen. She convinced me...well, she convinced me of a lot of things, things I knew weren’t true, but it was like I couldn’t say no to her. Like I’d forgotten how.”

“By the time I realized what had happened, she was unhinged. Completely paranoid about losing me, and I couldn’t see a way out,” Derek swallows thickly and Stiles gives him an encouraging smile when he cuts a look at him from under his lashes. “I hitchhiked nearly three hundred miles back to my parents and begged them to help me.”

“What did they do?” Stiles asks in a whisper.

Derek smiles, soft and sad. “They took me back like I’d only been gone a day. Like I hadn’t broken all their hearts and said awful, awful things about them.”

“That’s pack.”

“Yeah,” Derek breathes out a laugh. “That’s pack. I filed for an order of protection and started divorce proceedings, but she’d disappeared. Two months after I left, I woke up coughing with her standing over me. She’d lit the house on fire while we slept and told me my family wouldn’t keep us apart anymore. Then she stabbed me in the gut with a knife dipped in wolfsbane.”

“Jesus,” Stiles swears before he can stop himself.

“I threw her across the room and ran to wake everyone. By the time we got out, the poison was almost to my heart. But I made it through. So did my family.”

“And Kate?” Stiles asks gently.

“She never made it out of the house.”
“Was she, um. A werewolf?” He’s not sure what makes him ask, whether it’s morbid curiosity, or the inability to think of someone willful enough to control an Alpha werewolf like that.

“She was human,” Derek says, giving Stiles a painful smile.

Stiles is dumbfounded, and for the first time in his life, a little afraid of falling in love.

“Sorry, I don’t usually unload like that on people I barely know. Or people I know well, for that matter.”

“Hey, no worries,” Stiles assures him. “I’m honoured that you felt you could tell me about it.”

Derek’s lips quirk up at one end. “You’re strangely easy to talk to.”

“Strange and talk are often words used when describing me, but not usually in that context,” he jokes.

“I guess you’re just that good a vet.”

Stiles laughs, something in his chest loosening when Derek joins in. When their laughter dies off, there’s a comfortable silence between them, like now they’re more than just two people who keep running into each other. It feels nice, and Stiles is loathe to let it end, but real life isn’t going to pause for their budding friendship.

“I’ve had a really good time tonight,” he says, tilting his head towards Derek. “But I have a midterm in the morning and I really need to get home and cram.”

Derek nods. “Let’s get you home, then.”

The walk back to the truck and the ride to Stiles’ apartment feels heavy somehow, like there’s possibility hanging in the air between them. Like they’re sitting at the edge of a moment that will shape the way they interact from here on out.
Derek walks him to his stoop, pausing at the bottom of the stairs to smile shyly at Stiles, and there’s a moment, a single fleeting second of giddy tension, when Derek sways forward into his space, and Stiles panics.

He takes a half step back and Derek straightens smoothly, like he never really moved at all, and it’s fine, it’s fine. Because Stiles isn’t dating until after he graduates and Derek comes with a boatload of baggage and doesn’t believe in love anyway. So it’s fine.

“Goodnight,” Stiles tells him and heads up the stairs, purposely not trying to interpret the look in Derek’s eyes. Disappointment and relief look the same sometimes, don’t they?
Derek

It takes a significant amount of Derek’s control not to jiggle his leg or drag his claws against the concrete bench under him while he waits outside the supernatural vet school for Stiles the next day. He tells himself for the umpteenth time that this isn’t a stupid idea. That he and Stiles are friends now, and that friends can surprise each other without it getting weird.

He hears Stiles before he sees him, the hundred mile an hour ramblings bouncing off the surrounding buildings and making Derek duck his head and grin as he listens to Stiles crow about how well his exam went. His words cut off abruptly when he notices Derek.

“Hi,” Derek says, getting to his feet.

“Hiyee, what are you doing here?” Stiles asks, looking confused, but pleased. The guy he’s with glances between them with puzzlement written plain across his face, and Derek figures this must be Scott.

“I wanted to see how your exam went.”

“He aced it,” Scott says, accepting the elbow Stiles lands on his ribs with grace.

“Great, let me take you coffee to celebrate, ” Derek offers, relishing the way Stiles’ mouth drops open.

“Dude, is this sourwolf?” Scott whispers, even though he must know Derek can hear him fine.

Derek flushes and Stiles looks mortified, clearing his throat loudly and shoving a grinning Scott behind him.

“You bought me coffee last night,” Stiles reminds him. “And dinner.”
“He did?” Scott asks, sounding positively gleeful.

“I know, and I said that made us even, but you still have my coat, and I’m going to need that back before work tonight.”

“Oh, shit, I totally forgot!” Stiles says, smacking himself in the forehead.

Derek chuckles. “It’s fine, I’ll buy you coffee and we can swing by your place and get it.”

“I don’t know if I can—”

“Why not?” Scott asks, frowning. “You’re mostly unemployed and that was our last exam. We’re on reading break, dude, have some fun.” Scott waggles his eyebrows and Stiles looks like he wants to melt into the pavement, but overall, Derek is very entertained and liking his chances at getting a yes.

“Scotty, your face needs to shut up,” Stiles hisses, turning back to Derek with a tight smile. “Sorry about him, he doesn’t get out much.”

“Hey,” Scott protests.

“It’s fine. I’m Derek,” he says, offering his hand.

“Stiles doesn’t talk about you at all,” Scott tells him, sending Stiles an exaggerated wink and a dopey grin.

Stiles throws his hands up and pulls Scott back, breaking their handshake. “Oh my god, okay, we’re leaving!”

“Have fun!” Scott calls after them as Stiles leads Derek quickly away.

Derek opens the door of his truck for Stiles, closing it firmly behind him before climbing in the driver’s side door. Stiles smells nervous, but it’s not strong enough for Derek to regret showing up unannounced, and his warm cinnamon-laced scent soon fills the the cab of the truck.
“So, Scott seems nice,” Derek says, laughing when Stiles groans and disappears into the hood of his sweater.

Derek takes Stiles back to Fine Grindz since it really is the best place in town. Coffee is fun and light, filled with gentle barbs and snappy comebacks, and it’s easy for Derek to start thinking of it as their second date. It’s not, and he knows Stiles doesn’t want that, but it’s relaxed and harmless in a way dating never is for him. Stiles teases him and Derek doesn’t feel the need to be on guard all the time, doesn’t wonder what Stiles is looking to get out of it. It’s nice, and if this is what friendship with Stiles is like then he’ll hold onto it for as long as he can.

When Derek pulls up in front of Stiles’ apartment, he’s confused for a minute by the curses and fumbling coming from the other side of the truck, but the he sees that Stiles’ front door is partially open, and dread pools, cold and heavy in his gut.

“Let me go in first,” Derek tells him, wanting to make sure it’s safe.

“It’s not a break-in,” Stiles says, already running for the stairs. “She found Edith.”

Puzzled, Derek follows him up, pausing out of sight to listen to Stiles speak to whoever is inside.

“I was just leaving you an eviction notice,” a woman says, her voice high and grating. “I knew you were hiding something. I had a plumber come in to look at the leaky faucet and saw the food dishes and toys.”

“Where is she?” Stiles demands, and Derek is startled at the venom in his voice.

“The cat’s under the bed, it ran in there when we came in, all I saw was grey fur. It’s been hiding ever since.”

A strange citrus and wood smell wafts out to him as he hears Stiles return to the outer room. There’s a quiet mewling that sounds not quite right, and Derek starts to wonder just what Stiles has been hiding.

“This is a strict violation of the building bylaws,” the woman, who must be Stiles’ landlord, rants.
“It’s grounds for immediate eviction, and you can bet I’m not a bit sorry to do it.”

Derek huffs in anger and pulls out his badge, stepping into the suite. “I assume you gave this tenant twenty-four hours written notice before a service person was granted access.”

The woman turns to him, startled. “Well, he was complaining about the—”

“Do you know if the building is compliant with the updated fire codes pertaining to multi-level units?” Derek sees Stiles hide his smile in his hoodie, where something small and active is squirming out of view.

“I’m sure it’s—”

“I’ll be by next week to make sure everything is up to state statutes, and if it’s not I’ll have to write you a 777, declaring the building unsafe,” he finishes.

The woman huffs and bustles out the door, slamming it behind her.

Derek turns to Stiles and points at the jacket. “That is not a cat.”

Stiles eyes go wide and he crosses his arms over his chest protectively. “I can explain!”

“First of all, calm down,” Derek tells him, sinking onto a kitchen stool. “I’m not mad, just curious.”

“You promise you won’t tell anyone if I tell you?” Stiles asks nervously.

Derek frowns. “Just what are you hiding in there?”

“Promise me.”

“Okay, I promise,” Derek tells him, holding up his hands.
Stiles steps closer and unzips his hoodie, scooping up a tiny ball of grey fluff and depositing it on the counter in front of Derek. The creature mewls and stretches out, unfurling its short wings and staring up at Derek with violet eyes.

“Derek, this is Edith.”

Derek looks up at Stiles, then back down at Edith, who is slowly inching closer to inspect him. “She has a beak.”

Stiles huffs out a strained laugh. “Among other things, yeah.”

“Stiles, what is she?”

“She’s a Griffin Sprite,” he says, pulling Edith back from where she’s sniffing at Derek’s sleeve. “I found her. Well, it’s more like she found me, really.”

“I’ve never seen anything like her,” Derek says, offering his fingers to Edith’s curiosity.

“No one has, not in a long time. Griffin Sprites aren’t supposed to exist anymore, all the information on them is mythical, that’s how long it’s been. She may as well be a dragon.”

“Maybe she is,” Derek says, looking up at Stiles and jerking his hand away when Edith pecks hard enough to draw blood.

“Sorry, she does that,” Stiles says, pulling her away again. “She likes blood.”

“That’s…neat. And you’re not worried she’s going to hurt you?” he asks, eyeing the vicious little ball of fluff.

“Nah, we’re good. I’m like, her master, or something.”
“Don’t you have to have magic to be a master?” Derek teases.

Stiles winces shoves his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. “Yeah, about that.”

The smile drops off Derek’s face and he straightens up. He knew Stiles was too good to be true.

“So Edith is like, mad powerful, right? She’s like a beacon or an augmentor, she strengthens magic and allows you to have more control, more reach with it. But only if your natural power is strong enough to handle her. If it’s not, she’ll burn you out. Permanently,” Stiles finishes, looking at Derek like he’s ready for him to get up and walk out.

“And your natural power is strong enough to be her master,” Derek guesses.

“Well, yeah.”

“So you’re a witch.”

Stiles laughs. “What? No! Dude, I’m a spark.”

Derek knows he’s staring, but he can’t help it. Sparks are rare, like, super rare. And okay, they’re not Edith rare, but those that are known are some of the most powerful beings in the world. Unlike witches, sparks don’t need spells or tokens to use magic, they can manipulate the energies that exist around them and create their own magic.

“You don’t smell like magic,” Derek points out, and it’s not that he doubts what Stiles is saying, he just can’t believe he didn’t figure it out on his own.

“Well, no,” Stiles says with a shrug. “I don’t smell like anything if I don’t want to.”

“You can control that?”

Stiles flushes. “I can control a lot of things. Not people, nothing like that, but if I wanted to, I could change my appearance. Like, my eye colour, or my hair. I used to do that a lot as a kid, just to mess
“Can I see?” Derek asks, fascinated. “Not your eyes though, those are perfect.”

Stiles’ skin goes from pink to red and his hair changes to match, fading from brown to blonde to copper in seconds and Derek lets out a surprised laugh.

“That’s what I can do on my own,” Stiles says, grinning. “With Edith I could change the hair colour of everyone in this building. Probably on the whole block, but I haven’t tested our boundaries that much.”

“Jesus, Stiles, I don’t know what to say.”

Stiles looks hesitant then, shy and worried, and braced for the worst. “I know it’s a lot, but I swear I’ve only ever used my magic to help people. As a vet, and with Edith, I could help a lot of creatures, Derek. I can save people.”

“Hey, hey, I know,” Derek assures him, laying his hand on Stiles’ arm. “I believe you.”

“Thanks,” Stiles nods and gives him a shy smile. “I should probably start packing up my stuff. Crap, I so did not need this right now.”

“Let me help,” Derek says, not backing down when Stiles gives him a withering look. “My truck is already here, and I don’t work until tonight. I literally have nothing better to do than help you move.”

“Except rebuild your house,” Stiles points out. “But I’m not in a position to say no, so thank you. I can probably crash with Scott, though he’s allergic to Edith, so that’s gonna suck.”

Derek’s eyes trail from Stiles worried face, down to the purring sprite his his hand, and back up again. “You know, I think I have an idea.”
Chapter 12

Stiles is stunned by Derek’s house. For one, it’s massive. Second, the yard! I mean, yeah, right now it’s cluttered with stacks of lumber and scaffolding, but he’s pretty sure the entirety of the apartment he just vacated could fit in the front yard.

“Derek, you’re house has a turret,” Stiles informs him, climbing out of the truck.

Derek squints up at the rounded tower on the side of the house. “Is that what that is?”

Stiles scoffs. “As if you didn’t know. Dude, this house is amazing!”

“It will be,” he says, offhand, heading up the front stairs.

The porch is wide and long, and Stiles already wants to curl up with a cup of coffee and book. Inside, the house is pieced together; some rooms completely redone, and others mid-way through or untouched.

“You just work on whatever you feel like, don’t you?” Stiles accuses. “There’s no organization.”

“It’s organized, it just happens to be organized chaos,” Derek tells him defensively.

“I like it,” Stiles assures him. “Leaves a sense of mystery.” The foyer opens to a maple wood staircase, just curved enough to soften the entrance as it leads to the second floor. “Wow, is that original to the house?”

Derek’s eyebrows do a complicated little dance and his ears go red, but he finally smiles, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I built it.”

“You? That? You built that?” Stiles asks, pointing to the stairs in case Derek is talking about something else.

“Well, my friend Boyd helped, but yeah. I designed it and we built it.”

“Dude, I am seriously impressed right now.”

Derek smirks. “Is that what that looks like.”

Before he can demand Derek show him absolutely everything else in the house, Arlo slinks in, going up on his hind legs to paw at Stiles’ knees. Edith pokes her head out of his hoodie and before Stiles can stop her, she clamours out and jumps to the floor.

“Whoa, hey now, be nice to Arlo, baby,” Stiles tells her, crouching down to prevent any mischief. For his part, Arlo doesn’t seem worried and purrs loudly as he rubs against Stiles’ calf. Edith’s tongue comes out to scent the air and she must like what she finds because she runs straight for the cat, squawking and pouncing for his attention.

“I think they like each other,” Derek remarks, a small smile on his face.

“Yeah,” Stiles agrees, getting up. “I guess that settles it then, we’re staying. But I’m paying rent.”

Derek crosses his arms, and hello biceps. “Stiles, I’m the reason you got fired, you’re not paying rent.”
Stiles opens his mouth to protest, but Derek’s palm curves over his mouth, silencing him. He must be in shock because he doesn’t struggle, just breathes in the warmth of Derek’s skin and tries to hide how much he likes it.

“If you want to help out around the house, I won’t say no, but you’re not paying me rent, okay?”

Stiles nods slowly and Derek removes his hand, stuffing it in the pocket of his jeans.

“Okay, I think this can work,” Stiles says, forcing his heart to slow down. “Us, living together. Sleeping together. Well, no, not, not sleeping—” he laughs, too high to be natural. “But, you know, sleeping...under the same roof. Together. Us. You and me. And. You know what I mean, I’m going to shut up now.”

Derek’s eyes are laughing, but his smile is carefully polite. “You room is up the stairs on the third floor; make yourself at home. I’m going to go grab your stuff from the truck.”

“Right, yep, I’ll just stay here,” Stiles says, watching Derek walk away. “And melt into the floor,” he mutters, pressing his head to doorframe when he hears Derek’s laugh from the front yard. Fucking werewolves.

Stiles makes his way through the unfinished kitchen and up the backstairs. Then up again, because Derek’s given him the room in the turret and it makes Stiles want to break out in song like a freaking Disney Princess. From the window he watches Derek carry in all of his belongings in two trips, no doubt showcasing his werewolf strength for the stay at home moms of the neighbourhood.

Once his things are dropped off in his new room, Stiles hides. Technically, he’s unpacking, but most of the stuff in the apartment was included in the rent, so all he really has are two suitcases full of clothes, his textbooks, notes, and four boxes of magic bits and bobs. And his suit, of course, which he hides in another bedroom closet and magically barricades the door so Edith can’t get in. He hopes.

Once Derek leaves for work, Stiles can’t contain himself anymore and he wanders from room to room, absurdly pleased with the post-it notes he finds, listing what still needs to be done. Derek’s writing is loopy, but squished, and Stiles makes a game out of deciphering the words. If he can read it, he adds it to his own mental list of things he plans to help with while he’s here.

Derek’s bedroom is on the second floor, the door wide open to reveal a sturdy looking king size bed covered with a well-loved black and red quilt, which in turn, is covered in orange cat hair. Stiles snorts to himself and moves on, because Derek doesn’t need to come home to the scent of Stiles lingering outside his door. Sure, he could mask his scent, but that hardly seems fair when he’s staying in the man’s house for free.

In the living room, he finds Arlo and Edith curled together in a pink armchair, and several misguided shades of blue on the wall. He’s happy to note that Derek opted for a high-end primer, and now that he’s seen the house, he knows he was right about it needing more green. He glances around at the paint cans, not finding anything close to what he needs. But he has his magic, and he has Edith, so really, impossible is not a word he is going to give much credence to.

“Come on, missy, I need you for a minute,” he says, scooping Edith out from the curl of Arlo’s body.

Stiles places half the paint cans in a line, leaving the others alone in case Derek hates it when it’s done. He sits down with Edith in is lap, closing his eyes and listening to the room. He can feel Derek here, his imprint stronger than it is in the other rooms. It’s calm and at ease, content, which is weird since he said he’s been having so much trouble choosing a way to finish it.
There’s another emotion Stiles can’t quite place, but it’s not a negative feeling, so he lets it be and
moves on, pulling energy from the house around him, drawing from the essence of its past and from
Derek’s hopes for its future, until he can feel it swirling around him. Edith mews and stretches in his
lap. This is easy for her, hell, it’s easy for Stiles, but there’s a balance he’s careful to maintain. If they
take too much, the house could come down on top of them, but if they take too little, it won’t be
perfect for Derek. And that’s what he wants, isn’t it? He focuses on that need, that desire to make
Derek happy, and he casts it into the paint. Arlo cries out when the cans start to shake, but Edith calls
back to pacify him.

It takes a minute, but once everything settles, Stiles opens his eyes, depositing Edith on the floor so
he can pry open the lids. He laughs when he uncovers the perfect shade, and then he gets to work.
Everything he needs is right there, and he only has to chase Edith away once when she steps in the
paint tray and tracks it across the hardwood. He fixes it, but she gets a scolding and pouts in the
armchair, letting Arlo coddle her.

By the time Derek gets home in the wee hours of the morning, Stiles has finished and is cleaning up
the brushes. He hears Derek come in and waits.

“It’s perfect,” Derek gushes, coming through to the kitchen where Stiles is trying hard to hide a smug
smile. “How did you do that?”

Stiles shrugs, leaving the brushes on some paper towel to dry. “The room has an imprint. All I had to
do was tap into it and it told me what colour it wanted to be.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Oh, not really,” Stiles argues, turning away so Derek won’t see him blush. “I’m used to being active
all the time, so being unemployed doesn’t exactly suit me. I needed something to do.”

“Well, thank you. I really appreciate it.” There’s an awkward moment when Derek steps up next to
him and they just stare at each other, Stiles refusing to break the silence and Derek looking like he’s
trying not to say whatever’s on his mind. Derek looks away first, his gaze finding Edith and Alro in a
nest of canvas drop cloths on the table. “Looks like those two are still getting along.”

Stiles sighs. “Haven’t left each other’s side since you went to work. I’m nothing to her, now. I’ve
been replaced.”

“Me, too, it seems,” Derek says, smiling. “At least we’ll have each other, right?”

Stiles clenches his hands, reminding himself that Derek isn’t flirting, he’s just being friendly. Because
Stiles doesn’t want him to flirt, doesn’t want Derek showing interest. Not in him. Not now.

“Ah, there’s food on the stove, if you’re hungry.” Stiles picks up Edith, despite her protests, and
heads for the stairs.

“It smells great, where did you order from?” Derek asks, absently rubbing his stomach.

“Um, I made it. I hope you don’t mind, but I hooked up the stove.”

Derek blinks at him. “You did? With magic?”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “YouTube, dude. You’re not the only DIY king around here.”

Derek chuckles, plucking the lid off a pot and inhaling. “Do you want to join me?”
Stiles freezes with one foot on the bottom stair. He shouldn’t, he knows that. He shouldn’t at all want to sit and eat with Derek. To enjoy more of his company, soak up more of his unwitting charm, insert himself further into the man’s life.

“I already ate. I’m just going to head up to bed,” Stiles throws over his shoulder, with a tight smile.

Derek doesn’t respond, but Stiles catches sight of the disappointment that crosses his face before Derek turns back to the stove. He lays in bed for another hour, lecturing himself on not overstaying his welcome.
Chapter 13

Derek

Derek struggles through the rest of the day, feeling too tight in his skin, his wolf itching to break the surface of his restraint. It’s only three days until the full moon, and he’s going to have to go running every night until then if he hopes to get through it without snapping at anyone. Despite what some people think, Derek doesn’t actually enjoy being grumpy. He hates feeling like his wolf is barely contained, making him lash out and withdraw into himself.

It’s especially hard now that Stiles is always around, touching all his things and leaving his scent trail everywhere. Derek can’t even jerk off in the shower because all he can think about is that Stiles did the same thing the night before, and if he really focuses, he can tell exactly what tiles he covered in come.

Stiles starts talking the minute Derek gets home, handing Derek a loaf of fresh bread to slice to go with dinner, and even that can’t cover the rich scent of Stiles, and contentment, and home.

“The ad said no early birds, but it won’t hurt to be a little early,” Stiles goes on, unaware of Derek’s wandering mind. “I mean, the worst that happens is we have to wait a bit, right? Derek?”

“Huh?” Derek says, blinking back to awareness.

“The estate sale tomorrow morning for stuff to stage the house with? We good to go?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Derek nods, pulling the breadknife out of the knife block, and since when do they have a knife block?

“Full moon’s got you squirrelly,” Stiles observes, somehow keeping it from sounding like an accusation or a judgement. “Is it always like this for you?”

Derek shakes his head. “No, I’ve just got a lot on my mind,” he explains, keeping his eyes on the slices he’s cutting. If he’s really careful, he can make them all perfectly equal and not think about how right it feels to be domestic like this with Stiles.
“Do you believe in love at first sight?” Stiles asks, and Derek flinches at the knife cutting into his finger.

“What?” he asks, shoving his hand into his pocket to hide the blood. He can already feel the wound healing, but if Stiles knows, he’ll insist on checking it, and Derek doesn’t think he can restrain himself if Stiles touches him right now.

Stiles smiles, nodding his head at Arlo and Edith, cuddled together on the cat bed Stiles bought for them.

Derek clears his throat, but it does nothing to ease the tightness he feels there. “They make it look easy.”

"My mom used to say that falling in love with the right person is easy,” Stiles tells him, and there’s such a wistfulness in his tone that Derek has to look away.

"I’ve never felt that,” he confesses quietly. “Not for real.”

"Me either. But that doesn’t mean it’s not true,” Stiles tells him, smiling softly and turning back to dinner.

Derek is still jumpy the next morning when they get to the estate sale. As Stiles predicted, the estate agent glares at them and makes them wait until exactly 9 am to enter the house. He mindlessly follows the sound of Stiles’ voice as he reads aloud from the item guide.

“That’s a great armoire,” Stile enthuses, pointing the piece out in an upstairs bedroom. The whole house is dank and smells of death to Derek, so he moves closer to the open window. “Think it leads to Narnia?”

Derek grunts and endures Stiles rolling his eyes and pulling him to another room. Stiles is distracted, so Derek lets himself be drawn into watching him. His hands flit around as he natters, landing on almost every object, and it takes a minute, but Derek finally works out that he’s taking the pulse of the pieces. Once he knows, it’s fascinating to watch Stiles interact with the house, his nimble fingers stroking over embroidered fabrics and cherry wood, teasing out the history of the furniture until he’s satisfied with what it’s telling him. Derek wants to buy everything Stiles takes an interest in, just to make him smile, but Stiles laughs and tells him their house needs brighter accents, not weighted down sofas from the turn of the 19th century.
They make their way into the sunroom, shouldering past the growing number of people wandering around, and Derek’s wolf snaps to attention when he hears Stiles’ quiet gasp. He can’t see him through the crowd of people that are suddenly everywhere, but he can smell the desire coming off him as though they’re standing side by side.

He finds him in front of a small folding table, littered with tacky knick-knacks and costume jewelry, hand gripped tight around a large, cloudy, pink stone.

“What is it?” Derek asks, staring at the taut curve of Stiles’ fingers.

“Fancy yourself a witch now, do you?” a familiar voice sneers from the doorway.

Derek snarls and Stiles’ hand clamps down on his wrist as Jennifer saunters into the room.

“What are you doing here?” Stiles asks, his voice hard.

Jennifer smirks and tosses her hair over her shoulder. “I came for what’s in your hand, Stuart. And since it’s obviously not in the budget of the unemployed, you can hand it over.” She steps closer and holds out her hand.

“But it would make such a pretty paperweight,” Stiles snarks, his nails digging into Derek’s skin to keep a handle on the low rumble emanating from his chest.

Jennifer scoffs. “You have no idea what you have there, little boy. Wouldn’t know what to do with it even if you did. Give it to me before I decide to take it from you.”

Derek steps between them, growling and flashing his eyes. Jennifer takes a cautious step back and his wolf howls in victory, preening at successfully protecting his mate. He takes hold of Stiles’ hand and with one last warning snarl at Jennifer, drags Stiles out of the house.

Derek is too busy indulging his wolf’s attachment to Stiles and its perceived conquest to realize Stiles has grown quiet. It takes Stiles pulling out of Derek’s grip for the scent of his agitation to reach Derek’s nose, and he whimpers in reaction to it. He curses himself for letting his wolf get the better of him, hunching into himself and giving Stiles space.
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—” Derek shudders, mentally kicking himself. “I shouldn’t have acted that way, I had no right.”

Stiles snorts. “No, dude, that was awesome, I just can’t let you buy it, and she’s right, I can’t afford it myself.”

Frustration clouds Stiles’ scent and Derek steps closer, laying a hand on his shoulder. “What is it?”

“Uncut beryl,” Stiles says quietly, holding up the stone. “A pink emerald. Crazy powerful and ridiculously expensive.”

Derek frowns at the gem. To him it looks dull and meaningless, but he trusts the reverence in Stiles’ gaze. “What could she do with it?”

Stiles blows out a breath, his cheeks puffing out adorably. “Nothing good.”

Derek nods and plucks it out of Stiles’ hand, turning for the estate agent’s tent. Stiles jogs after him, sputtering.

“What are you doing? Did you even look at the listing price?” he asks, fumbling through the guide’s pages.

“I don’t need to,” Derek tells him, taking a numbered ticket from the stand. “If this thing can hurt someone, we have a responsibility to keep it safe.”

“And I appreciate that, I do, but Derek, I don’t think your account balance can cover it,” he whispers, glancing around at the other people in the tent.

Derek steals himself and meets Stiles’ eyes. “Yes, it can.”

Stiles’ mouth goes slack, but whatever he sees in Derek’s gaze shuts him up and he turns back to the guide. Five minutes later, he’s leaning against Derek, his shoulders shaking with laughter.
“What’s wrong with you?” Derek hisses. They’re next in line and the estate agent is already eyeing them with distaste, obviously still sore about their early arrival.


Derek frowns at him and Stiles shoves the guide under his nose. The uncut gem looks as unremarkable in the photo as it does in his hand, and sure enough, the listing price is only thirty dollars.

“It’s not real?” he guesses.

“Oh, it’s real,” Stiles chuckles. “They just have no idea what it is. I don’t think they have any idea that the previous owner was a witch.”

“Lucky for us.”

“And unlucky for whoever buys half the furniture in there.”

“Is it cursed?” Derek asks, startled.

Stiles shrugs. “Nah, it’s just unfriendly.”

The people in front of them step away, and Derek drops the gem on the table with his most charming smile.

The agent’s lip curls, but he instructs the accountant to write up a slip, and then Derek and Stiles are driving away, triumphant and a little startled at how easy it was to get away with a nearly priceless magical implement.

That night, Derek makes spaghetti and they eat in the living room, watching HGTV reruns and laughing at Stiles’ commentary. The gem is sitting on the mantle and when it starts to get late, Derek lights a fire, hoping to keep Stiles downstairs with him a little longer. Arlo and Edith curl up in front
of the flames, Edith’s snoring punctuating the pleasant serenity of the evening.

“Thanks,” Stiles says, rolling his head along the back of the couch to grace Derek with a soft smile.

“For what?”

“For trusting me with that,” he says, nodding at the beryl. “You didn’t even ask what I would do with it.”

Derek shrugs. “I trust you.”

“You do, don’t you? Stiles says, like he can hardly believe it. “That means a lot to me.”

Derek can feel the flush building under his skin so he slouches further in to couch, grinning when Stiles draws a ball of light out of his palm and it floats to the ceiling, like a small moon, full and reassuring, just for him. Like everything Stiles does is, at least somehow, just for Derek.

He doesn’t realize he’s sliding sideways until his head hits Stiles’ thigh and he makes a content noise at the hand in his hair. In that moment, he’s completely happy. Having Stiles beside him eases his wolf, and Derek knows he’d be perfectly happy to end every day just like this. Basking in their combined scent, Stiles hands on him.

“You’re a little drunk,” Stiles laughs.

“Yeah,” Derek agrees, rubbing his cheek against Stiles’ jeans. “How did that happen?”

“It’s the beryl, it enhances the positive feelings we have,” Stiles explains.

Derek wrinkles his nose at the warning signal his brain is trying to send him. “We have positive feelings?”

“We have something,” Stiles says, quietly. “Man, I didn’t realize how much I love this couch. Like, it’s so soft and cushy. I want to sleep on it. I may want to sleep with it.”
“Please don’t,” Derek says, hooking his arms around Stiles’ leg. He understands the sentiment, though. He’s dazed, and sleepy, but he’s also pretty sure he didn’t realize how much he loves Stiles. And the house, and their life together.

“We built a home,” Stiles mutters, body relaxing into sleep.

Derek has a brief moment of clarity when he panics at maybe having spoken his feelings out loud, but Stiles’ breath turns heavy and sweet, and Derek can’t help but follow him into slumber.
Derek

Derek spends a solid ten minutes standing at his bedroom window, watching Stiles haul a ladder and boxes of fairy lights into the backyard before he gets dressed and goes to investigate. He makes sure to let the back screen slap closed so he doesn’t startle Stiles into falling off the ladder.

“What are you doing?” Derek asks, squinting up at the tree Stiles is climbing into. There are three of them around the stone patio out back, cheerful and promising with their soft, pink blossoms.

“Backyard appeal,” Stiles tells him around the cord in his mouth. He pulls himself into the tree and Derek is momentarily distracted by the dimples on either side of his lower back where his shirt has rucked up. “A little goes a long way when you’re trying to sell.”

“Does it?” Derek asked, amused.

“Hey man, Lydia has taught me a lot about this stuff. Mostly by enlisting my help with manual labour, but after a while it starts to stick.”

“Well, it looks good. Or it will, once it’s done. Maybe I won’t want to sell after all your improvements,” Derek teases.

“I have a theory about that,” Stiles mutters, his eyes going wide when one of the branches makes a sharp cracking noise.

“Unless you fall out of the tree, break your arm, and can’t finish.”

Stiles pauses to look down and swallows nervously. “I might be a little higher than I thought.”

“Need me to get the ladder truck and pull you out like a kitten?” Derek teases, ignoring the way his stomach jumps at the thought.
“Meow,” Stiles tells him, dropping a string of lights on his head. “I want the lights to go all the way up, but it seems I’ve found a flaw in my execution.”

Derek waves him down. “Get out of there and I’ll bring home a taller ladder from the station. We’ll do it together after we go look at kitchen tile, I just have to do something for work first.”

“Does it include saving a grown man from his own best intentions?” Stiles asks, using the top of Derek’s head to steady himself as he steps back onto the ladder.

“Nah, I only have to do one of those a day. You could come with me, though, if you want. You might get a kick out of it.”

“Do I get to ride in a fire truck?” Stiles asks, lighting up.

Derek can’t help but smile back, brushing cherry blossoms out of Stiles’ hair. “I’ll even let you run the siren when we get there.”

‘There’ is the local elementary school, and just as he’d suspected, Stiles is thrilled. He sits on the floor, surrounded by a four grade two classes, wearing his plastic fire hat with his name scribbled on the front in blue sharpie. He watches with delight as Derek answers firefighter and werewolf questions alike, and Derek can’t help but preen when his eyes keep straying back to Derek in his yellow turnout gear.

“Firefighting clothes need sexier names,” Stiles observes once they’re back at the station and Derek is putting the equipment away.

“It’s built for function, not attractiveness,” Derek tells him, closing the cabinet.

“So are people, but some of us still manage to be sexy as hell,” Stiles jokes.

Derek lets his eyes roam slowly up Stiles’ body, from his long legs and narrow waist, over his capable hands and strong forearms, accentuated by the rolled cuffs of his plaid shirt, to his broad, muscular shoulders and the long, pale column of his mole-dotted neck. He’s still wearing the plastic fire hat, but it does nothing to mask his appeal, and Derek feels a strong urge to scent him. Maybe mark him up a little. Just enough that Stiles won’t forget it’s there.
Stiles clears his throat and Derek looks away, flushed.

Erica pops around the corner, grinning at Derek in a way that tells him she can smell exactly what he’s thinking about. “You two want to do a lunch run for us before you take off?” she asks innocently, waving their order list.

“I’ll go!” Stiles squeaks, grabbing the list and taking off.

Derek watches him go, clenching his jaw, frustrated by his slip.

“Derek, just tell him,” Erica says, uncharacteristically gentle.

Derek shakes his head. “There’s nothing to tell.”

She sighs, but doesn’t push it, and Derek walks away, on the search for something else to occupy his mind.

Time marches on smoothly, Stiles working with him, side by side, to put up the backsplash in the kitchen and finish painting all the rooms. They eat breakfast together after Derek’s morning runs, and argue over bathroom tile and light fixtures while sharing a pot of coffee and trading sections of the newspaper. The house starts to come together around them and Derek finds himself looking forward to coming home, relaxing at the their mixed scent in every corner, underscored by that of Arlo and Edith, who are still attached at the hip. It takes him a while to place the feeling he gets when he walks through the door and the tightness he carries in his chest eases, growing warm and bright when the four of them are there together. The house feels like home, and for the first time in over a decade, Derek doesn’t feel the need to run from it.

Two weeks after they speak to the class of kids, Derek clamours out of the truck, covered head to foot in soot and sweat, and smelling like burned fowl.

”Who barbecue's a turkey in a fireplace?” Derek spits.

”Holidays make people do crazy things,” Chris tells him stripping out of his tunic.
“Stiles said the same thing the other day when he read about a woman who decided to eat a hundred year old fruitcake last Christmas.”

"Another Stiles story,” Erica notes.

"They’re living together and Derek is falling in lurve,” Isaac teases, knocking his shoulder into Derek’s.

"That’s not true,” Derek snaps, tearing open his jacket with more force than necessary.

"Sorry,” Isaac corrects. “He’s falling in lurve and is too blind to see it.”

"I’m not in love, it’s not like that,” he insists, struggling to keep the growl out of his voice. His feelings for Stiles are complicated and unwanted, and the others making light of them sets his wolf on edge.

"What’s it like then?” Chris asks lightly, leading them upstairs.

Derek exhales forcefully through his nose, pushing down his frustration. "We’re just friends.”

Isaac leans on kitchen counter. "Friends who spend all their time together.”

"And live together,” Erica adds.

"And you think about him when you’re not together,” Boyd pipes up from the table, where he and Allison are playing cards.

Isaac smirks. “Probably going to ask you to meet his family next.”

“No, no,” Derek protests. “We don’t live together, he’s only staying with me until he finds a new place, and I only spend time with him because he’s there, okay?”

"Uhuh," Erica says, not convinced. "You’re five minutes from scenting him."

"Unless he’s done it already," Allison chimes in.

Derek hunches his shoulders and lets out a low warning growl. "Stiles is a temporary roommate. Nothing else."

They all stare at him, sympathy and disbelief in spades on their faces.

"Right," Chris says, clapping him on the shoulder and pushing him toward the shower.
Stiles

Stiles groans and faceplants on Scott’s couch, pressing his face into the cushions until he’s struggling to breathe.

“Dude, I really don’t think this as big a deal as you’re making it out to be,” Scott says, kicking at Stiles’ legs until he moves them.

Stiles sits up and accepts the beer Scott hands him, taking a long swing. “This is going to ruin everything, I just know it. God, how am I this stupid, Scotty? I mean, it’s a freaking love crystal, how did I think it wouldn’t bring all these feelings out?”

“You said it only enhances what you already feel, though, right? So it’s not like it’s making you love Derek, you already did.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know that!” Stiles whines. “And I was happy not knowing it, you know?”

Scott frowns. “Not really, no. And if Derek was being all mushy and lovey too, isn’t this a good thing? You feel the same way.”

“But neither of us wants this!” Stiles insists, throwing his hands up. “I swore to myself I wasn’t getting involved with anyone, anything, until after graduation and after I have steady work.”

“Graduation is just over two months away and you’ve applied, like, everywhere. So what if you’re a little ahead of schedule on this one thing?” Scott reasons.

“Because I’m in over my head, Scott. I don’t just like Derek. I’m in love with him,” he admits, and it hurts, because he wants to be happy about it, but he knows Derek doesn’t want that.

“Maybe you should just tell him.”
Stiles laughs, loud and unhinged. “That is never happening!”

Scott grumbles and kicks him again. “Stiles, you live together, you do everything together, and you’re pretty perfect for each other. Because, you know I love you, man, but you can be a lot, and Derek never seems fazed by the crazy shit you spew.”

“I do not spew,” Stiles protests, offended.

“He gets this dopey smile on his face when you go off on a tangent, like you’re the smartest, prettiest, most excellent thing he’s ever seen.”

“I am the smartest,” Stiles mutters, cuddling his beer.

“Anything has to be better than feeling like this, right? You smell like despair, and it’s not at all pleasant.”

Stiles scrubs his hand through his hair and groans. "Derek’s not looking for anything serious, and neither am I right now. And I don’t want to ruin our friendship over one heated night of lust-filled passion, argh, it would be so good, Scotty!” He bangs his head on the table and slides to the floor.

Scott lets him wallow for a minute before nudging him with the toe of his shoe. “Look, do you want to know how he feels about you, once and for all?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he admits.

“Well, he’s a werewolf,” Scott points out. “And werewolves have certain tells, you know that.”

Stiles blinks up at him, lost.

“You need to see if he wants to scent you.”

Stiles scoffs and looks away. "What am I supposed to do, stop showering? Scott, I’m not going to put either of us through that.”
"No, look, just don’t shower in the morning, and go for a run."

“And then?” he prompts.

“Then think sexy thoughts about him before you go in the house and bare your neck. If Derek’s into you, he won’t be able to resist getting close.”

“And if he’s not into me?” Stiles says and holds his breath.

“He’ll probably leave the room to get away from your rankness.” Scott grins and drains his bottle.

Stiles scrunches up his nose. “Your plan sucks, Scotty.”

“Yeah, but I’m all you have.”

Early the next morning, Stiles is standing in the kitchen, drinking directly from the carton of orange juice because he just stumbled his way through a three mile run, his body feels like it’s on fire, and taking out a glass seems impossible. He managed to keep himself upright, but he’s been home ten minutes and he’s still panting. Derek makes this stuff look so easy and Stiles hates him a little bit for it. That is, until he hears the front door open.

Derek’s been at work all night, and Stiles spent his run thinking about him in nothing but his yellow fire slicker, so the house is no doubt filled to the brim with the smell of sweat and arousal. Kind of what his room smelled like through high school, if anything Scott says is true, and right now Stiles has nothing but doubt for the words that come out of Scott’s mouth because the front door has closed, but there’s no movement happening in the house.

He’s just about to sneak a peek at the foyer when Derek walks in like nothing is amiss.

“Morning,” Derek says, not even sparing Stiles a glance.

Stiles bites his cheek to keep in his sigh and puts the orange juice back in the fridge. He makes sure
to tilt his head and bare his neck enticingly, but all Derek does is clear his throat and leave the room. Well, so much for that idea. He feels ashamed and rejected in equal measure, and he doesn’t think he’s going to be able to look Derek in the eye for a while because he is being so very obvious, and Derek is clearly not into it.

“Guess I’ll just shower and regrout the kitchen sink,” he mutters, but before he can move, Derek is behind him, hands braced on the counter on either side of Stiles, and his nose is dragging slowly up the back of Stiles’ neck, sucking in his scent greedily, like he’s starving for it. Derek’s mouth presses into the space behind Stiles’ ear and he shudders. Stiles whines at the touch and Derek jerks back, looking horrified when Stiles turns to him.

“Derek?” Stiles whispers, reaching out.

Derek takes two steps back and looks away. “Go shower,” he barks, and escapes into the backyard. By the time Stiles gets to the door, all that’s left of Derek is his shredded uniform on the grass.
Chapter 16

Derek

Derek keeps to the trees behind the house until he’s certain Stiles is gone, then he slinks home and proceeds to freak out about what happened in the kitchen. He goes back to the firehouse, planning to camp out on the couch, but Boyd takes one look at him and nars to Chris.

They all attempt to calm him down, but even the humans understand what scenting means to a wolf, and Derek has no patience for their placating lies.

“Have you met his people?” Isaac asks, and Derek knows he’s trying to gauge how hard separating the two of them will be.

Derek shakes his head. “He doesn’t have many. I’ve met his best friend, Scott, but his dad is in Beacon County. Lydia is here, but she’s a bit of an enigma. I get the feeling she’s the one to impress.”

“What does he smell like?” Allison asks bluntly, making the wolves wince.

Derek raises his eyes from his hands to her concerned face. “Home,” he croaks and Allison drops down beside him and wraps an arm around his shoulders.

“Derek, why are you so reluctant to admit you’ve fallen for him?” Chris asks, his pale blue stare cutting through Derek’s bullshit, as usual. “Are you ashamed of him?”

The growl is out of Derek’s throat before he even registers it, and Allison’s arm tightens around him. “I didn’t choose this!” he spits through his emerging fangs. “Neither did Stiles, and he doesn’t want it, he’s made that perfectly clear. I should have some say in who I fall in love with, and when.”

Chris gives him a sympathetic look and shakes his head. “Love doesn’t work that way, I’m afraid.”
Chapter 17

Stiles

Stiles is in the kitchen cutting up fruit for his lunch when the front door opens. His hands shake and he briefly considers fleeing up to his room because Derek didn’t come home last night and Stiles sat up for hours, worrying. The uniform was gone from the yard, so he knows Derek waited for him to leave after their...whatever it was, but he obviously didn’t want to see Stiles and is probably only here to ask Stiles to leave. Well, jokes on him because Stiles is already mostly packed.

“Hey,” Derek says, walking in and pouring himself a cup of coffee. “Can I help?”

Stiles stares at him, knife mid-way through an apple, but Derek just smiles, and oh, okay, this is how they’re playing it. Fine, he can totally act like nothing happened and his entire fucking world hasn’t been upside down for the past nineteen hours.

He clears his throat and gestures at the fridge with the knife. “There’s ham in there, I already cut the bread.”

“Mustard?” Derek asks, sticking his head into the fridge.

“Sure,” Stiles says, focusing on the apple. There’s tension between them, and he can’t help but want to poke at it. He needs answers. “So, you didn’t come home last night.”

Derek’s hand stills for a moment, then he deposits the ham on the counter and shrugs. “I’m a grown man, I can stay out all night if I want to.”

“Well, you’ve got a family now, so not coming home isn’t really an option anymore,” Stiles tells him, every word feeling like it’s being scraped out of his throat.

“What?” Derek says, and if Stiles didn’t know any better, he’d swear Derek looks scared.

“Arlo, you have to at least put out food for him before you go and be back before noon to refill his water because you know how fast he goes through it.”
“Oh, Arlo. Right,” Derek says, shaking his head a bit.

“Everything okay?” Stiles asks, and he knows the question is loaded, like he’s tossing handgrenades at their friendship.

Derek’s eyes meet his, earnest, but regretful. “Everything is fine,” Derek assures him.

“Yeah?” he breathes, and he wants to cry because no matter what else happens, he doesn’t want to lose Derek’s friendship.

Derek gives him a shy smile. “Yeah, Stiles. We’re good.”

They eat lunch together, and it’s not like it was, but it’s close, and Stiles will take what he can get. His phone buzzes as he’s finishing his sandwich and he wipes his hands on the napkin Derek slides over to him, groaning when he sees Lydia’s message.

“What’s wrong?” Derek asks.

“Lydia,” he huffs. “She’s making me go to this event tonight, and I may have completely forgotten I agreed to attend.”

Derek snorts. “That sounds like you.”

“Hey, there were circumstances, okay? I agreed in a moment of weakness, and I kind of promised I’d bring a date.”

“That wasn’t very smart.”

“I know, but again, circumstances,” Stiles tells him, taking a deep breath and biting the bullet. “You know, this would be a lot more tolerable with you there to make fun of all the stuffed shirts with me.”
Derek swallows his last mouthful of milk and carefully puts down his glass. “You want me to meet Lydia?”

“Well, and Jackson, but he’s hardly noteworthy, so you can ignore him,” Stiles jokes, his fingers digging into the sides of his chair.

“Um, I, ah, I have a work thing, actually,” Derek mumbles, getting to his feet and dropping his dishes into the sink.

Stiles bites his lip and tries not to let his disappointment show. They’re good, but apparently not back to normal, yet. “I thought you were off tonight.”

“Things got shuffled around at the last minute, that’s where I was last night,” he explains, and Stiles doesn’t need to hear Derek’s heartbeat to know he’s lying. “I should actually get ready to go. I guess I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Are you sure everything’s okay?” Stiles asks, turning in his seat to face Derek, desperate for some truth. “With us?”

Derek smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes, and he doesn’t seem to realize he’s edging around the table so he doesn’t come close to touching Stiles. “Yeah, it’s fine.”

Stiles can’t watch him leave, so he sits there until Derek slips out the front door an hour later, without saying goodbye. He showers and puts on his suit in a daze, locking Edith out of the room so he can be miserable in peace. He almost breaks down when he opens the bottom drawer of his dresser to get his cufflinks and the pink emerald rolls out of an old pair of socks.

Humiliation, regret, and despair churn inside him and he sinks to his knees, fighting back tears. It’s all he can do to shove the gem back into the socks and slam the drawer shut. The feelings don’t fade completely, but he knows that’s because they’re real and the stone has only brought them to the surface. If the depth of them is troubling, it’s only because he’s so good at ignoring them. And if he was good at it before, he needs to be an expert at it now, for just a little while longer.

The party is in full swing by the time he gets there, and he follows the tinkle of Lydia’s laugh to where she’s holding court in the living room of the Mayor’s mansion.
“Stiles!” she cries, kissing him on the cheek. There’s a glass of champagne in her hand, but it’s untouched, and Stiles knows she’s in full-on professional mode, so he hangs back with Jackson and waits for the others to fade away.

“Why is it called an Easter Egg Hunt when it’s really just a cocktail party?” he grumbles.

“Tax write off,” Jackson tells him, handing Stiles a champagne flute. Stiles swallows it down and reaches for another, ignoring Jackson’s raised eyebrow. “Things going that well, huh?”

“It’s fine,” Stiles shrugs, mocking Derek’s voice. “Everything’s fine.”

Lydia, of course, knows everyone at the party, and they all seem to have something to say to her that can’t wait. Jackson plays the dutiful partner, hanging back slighting and smiling politely while he eyes the mansion with a speculative eye. Stiles gives them seven years before one of them runs for office. He breaks off from the Lydia fanclub—he is the President, after all, and she knows how deep his devotion goes—and navigates his way to the little boys room. On his way back, a very large Easter Bunny corners him in the hallway and gets a handful before Stiles can break away to stumble back to Lydia and Jackson. He’s only been there an hour, but he’s halfway to drunk and done with being polite.

“So, where’s your firefighter?” Lydia asks.

“Couldn’t make it, had a last minute work thing,” Stiles tells them, bitterly. Lydia raises a eyebrow and Jackson claps him on the shoulder.

“We’ll meet him next time,” he says, pointing out someone in the crowd to Lydia.

Before long, Lydia is pulled away again, taking Jackson with her and giving Stiles a stern command that he’s not to leave. He wanders around the edges of the party, drinking and ignoring everyone who looks in his direction because none of them are Derek, and even the one who is Derek, isn’t looking at him, and holy shit, that’s Derek. Derek is here. Not at work, like he told Stiles, but at a party with his arm around a lithesome blonde who goes up on her toes to kiss his cheek. That’s Derek, laughing at something she says and pulling her close.

Stiles’ stomach drops, bile climbs up his throat, and he only just manages to swallow it down before he’s stumbling through the guests, no doubt creating a scene as he rushes to the open front door. He makes it outside without emptying his stomach full of champagne on the marble floors, but there’s a
hard ball of fury in his gut, a hot ache in his chest, and tears staining his new suit.
Chapter 18

Stiles

Stiles packs up what’s left of his things when he gets back to the house. He lets Edith stay with Arlo because he knows she’ll be sad to lose him, but they both seem to sense he’s upset and wind up sitting on his pillow, watching with wide eyes as he paces back and forth in the dark, sniffling and tossing clothes in his suitcase.

He stands perfectly still when he hears Derek come home, forcing his heart to slow and his breath to come out long and even when Derek stops at the bottom of the stairs leading to Stiles’ room, listening. Derek retreats and Stiles sits in the darkness, cried out and numb, until the sun comes up.

When he hears the shower start up, he grabs his bags and Edith and bolts down the stairs. He scribbling out a note in the kitchen when Derek walks in, flushed and still damp from his shower. Stiles’s heart speeds up and he silently curses himself for not thinking to write the note out last night.

“I figured I’d be gone by the time you got up,” Stiles tells him. “I was just writing you a note.”

Derek leans across the island, plucking the note out of Stiles’ hands. “About what?”

“I got a job and found a place, so I’ll be out of your hair,” Stiles says with false cheer, not caring that Derek can hear the lie. “Thanks so much, again, for letting us stay here so long.”

Derek watches him, stricken, as Stiles scoops Edith off the counter and deposits her in his hoodie. He walks around the other side of the island and heads for the front door.

“Stiles,” Derek calls, and god, he sounds wrecked. Stiles glances at him, fighting to keep the hurt off his face. “You don’t have to go. You can stay. I want you to stay.”

Stiles can feel his resolve crumbling, and Edith is already crying out for Arlo, but he thinks about Derek scenting him, then lying to him. He pictures Derek’s arm around that woman’s waist, and the way her lips lingered on the stubbled skin of his cheek, and he takes a shaky breath. “I’ll have the rest of my things out by the end of the week, and I’ll drop the key through the mail slot.”
Edith whines and Derek’s eyes snap to where she’s struggling to get out from the depths of the hoodie. “What about Arlo? He’s going to miss you guys.”

“Is he?” Stiles asks, his voice sharp and mean.

“Yes,” Derek says emphatically, stepping closer.

Stiles shakes his head and tries not to think of what might have been. “Some things just aren’t meant to be, I guess.”
Chapter 19

Derek

Derek moves through the rest of the morning in a fog, catching the scent of Stiles around every corner and driving himself half mad with longing and regret. He doesn’t know exactly what it was that finally drove Stiles away, but Derek is sure it’s his fault. Arlo alternates between yowling at the door and glaring at him until Derek takes pity on the both of them and heads into work two hours early, taking the cat with him. The loss of Stiles is sharp and raw in his chest, at a depth which quite frankly frightens him, but the world marches on around him and he can’t wallow in self pity at home anymore.

By the time his shift actually starts, he’s cleaned and inventoried all three trucks, helped Boyd restock the ambulance, and put a hole the size of his fist through the cinderblock wall behind the station. He’s watching the wounds on his knuckles heal when Chris whistles from the vehicle bay.

“Get in the truck, Hale, we’re going for a drive.”

The drive turns out to be a grocery run, and the truck is his own. If they’d taken the rig, the others would have had to come along, and Derek knows how Chris likes to lecture him without input from the peanut gallery.

“This your attempt to distract me?” Derek asks, mid-way down the baking aisle.

“Distract you from what?” Chris asks, tossing six boxes of brownie mix into the cart Derek is pushing. “Stiles leaving? Way I see it, you’re better off.”

Derek’s eyes flash red, but Chris isn’t even looking at him, already moving down to the syrup display.

“I mean, it’s probably for the best, right?” he continues, one bottle of maple and one of blueberry syrup joining the brownie mix. “You didn’t want to lead him on, after all. It’s not like you’re in love with Stiles, you just like him. You got used to him being around. To doing stuff together. That’s all, right Derek?”

Derek glares at him and Chris stares back, direct and unflinching until Derek sighs and collapses on
the bar of the cart. He knows he’s not fooling anyone, except maybe himself and Stiles, and his heart feels so broken he just can’t do it anymore.

“I’m in love with him,” he confesses, miserably.

Chris’ gaze softens. “What are you so afraid of, Derek?”

“You know exactly what,” Derek bites out. “Everything.”

Chris scoffs. “Werewolves are so dramatic. You let Arlo in with no problem, that cat literally bullied his way into your life, and you went along with it.”

“Cats aren’t people,” Derek points out with a huff. “And I don’t need anyone else in my life, complicating things.”

“You know, only the ones who mean something can complicate it. You never let Jennifer, or the ones before her, do that.”

“Stiles is different.”

“I’ll say he is,” Chris says, bracing his hands on the end of the cart. “Look, I know you’ve been guarded since Kate, and believe me, I get it. But Stiles isn’t Kate and it’s not fair for you to treat him like he is.”

“I don’t think—”

“No, you do think, and honestly, you do it too much. I know what she did, Derek, and I know we all played a part in it, and we all have regrets, but if you can forgive Allison and I, and have us in your life, why can’t you have Stiles, too? Who is pretty damn faultless in all this, by the way.”

“I don’t blame you for what she did, you know that,” Derek insists, the memory of smoke and pain overwhelming him. “And I don’t think Stiles is like Kate. He would never do something like that, he doesn’t even yell at me for leaving my socks in the living room; it would never even occur to him to treat someone the way Kate did. He was horrified when I told him.”
“You told him?” Chris asks, straightening. “How much?”

Derek’s cheeks burn with unease. “All of it.”

“Jesus, Derek, and you don’t think he’s worth it?” Chris asks, visibly frustrated with how obtuse he thinks Derek is.

“I know he is,” Derek hisses. “That’s the problem. He’s too good for me, Chris. He’s kind, and funny, and he sees the best in people, and all I do is blot out his light. I’m too damaged to be any good to him. Even if I give in and tell him how I feel, one day he’ll realize I’m not worth it, and he’ll leave. I can’t survive that, I know I can’t. And if he stays, I’ll never forgive myself for dragging him down.”

Chris gives him a broken look, like it’s torture just to hear Derek speak, but he doesn’t look away. He holds Derek’s eye until they’re only inches apart. “Derek, I need you to listen to me closely. You need to hear what I am saying, okay? You are not damaged. You got hurt, and maybe even broke a little, but you are not damaged. You survived, and you’re thriving, and you deserve love. To give and receive it. But all of that does not mean you get to make Stiles’ decisions for him. You don’t get to take that away from him like it was taken from you.”

Derek is stunned. There’s a tightness in his throat, tears on his cheeks, and Chris’ strong arms around him, and all he can do is cling. Because he believes what Chris is saying, every word of it, but he knows there’s more work to it than that. The practice is always harder than the theory, but he owes it to Stiles, to himself, to at least try. Because he does love Stiles, more than anything, and Derek knows he’s worth the fight.

He fists his hands in Chris’ shirt, and leans into the comfort he offers and hopes that maybe, just maybe, Stiles will think he’s worth it, too.
Chapter 20

Stiles

Stiles steals back into the house the next day, using his magic to ensure that Derek is actually gone and hasn’t just loaned his truck to someone, as is his wont. There’s a warm flutter in his chest when Stiles thinks about how generous and tender-hearted Derek is towards his friends, his pack, but it grows cold and still when he remembers he’s not counted among them anymore.

Edith is clawing her way out of his hoodie before he can get the door closed, and she runs off in search of Arlo the moment her feet hit the ground. Stiles pauses in the kitchen, glancing around at all the work he and Derek put into it, all the time spent working side by side, picking out tile and fixtures, and adding them to the house. Stiles knows they poured their hearts into these walls, and he can only hope the echo of them doesn’t grow cold when Derek decides to sell.

Love is funny like that. It seeps into the cracks in the foundation and the grooves in the wood, sealing the holes with warmth and affection, making the home feel welcoming. But when that love turns, it can be devastating, breeding contempt and anger in the places that used to house dedication and respect.

Mostly, Stiles just feels regret. Like if he’d been honest, with himself mostly, but with Derek, too, he could have avoided all of this heartbreak. He knew he wasn’t looking for someone to share his life, but he moved in with Derek anyway. Let him become an extension of his very being, coiling his way around Stiles’ heart and leaving his mark on Stiles’ soul. He knows it’s there because he can feel it. A painfully deep throb that whispers ‘Derek. Derek.’ when his body and mind grow too quiet.

Scott blames himself because of the scenting ruse, but Stiles knows he was too far gone before that. He had feelings for Derek when he moved in, and yes, Derek lied about things, too, but at least it wasn’t to himself. While he was busy building a friendship, Stiles was fantasizing about a happily ever after, even if he wouldn’t admit it to himself. It seems silly now, to think that Derek would think of him like Stiles was someone to spend a life with. Like it could be that easy to find his forever.

He shakes off his reverie, knowing Derek will be able to smell his complicated emotions, and heads upstairs to get the rest of his things. He borrowed Scott’s car to move them, but he wants his scent to be stale by the time Derek gets home. He picks up as much as he can carry, ignoring Derek’s open door as he passes, and continues down the stairs, nearly shouting when he finds Jennifer standing in the kitchen.
“What the hell are you doing here?” she asks, hands on her hips as she glares.

Stiles drops his boxes on the counter. “I could ask you the same thing. I know Derek dumped your sorry ass.”

Jennifer’s eyes narrow and Stiles thinks it’s a good thing looks can’t kill. “Looks like you’re in the same boat. Where is he?”

The words are like a knife to the chest, and Jennifer smirks at his wince.

“Why are you here?” Stiles repeats.

“I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“Fine, I’ll just call Derek and tell him you’re trespassing. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled.”

She crosses her arms and smiles. “Go for it. And while you’re at it, go fetch me that paperweight he bought you. I’m sure he’ll be expecting it back now that he’s had his fun with you.”

Stiles snorts, picking up his boxes. “You’re even more clueless than you look if you think either of us will ever give you the beryl. Now, I’m going to take these to my car; if you’re still here when I get back, I’m calling the police.”

He doesn’t shoulder check her on his way out, but it’s a close thing. He can feel Jennifer’s eyes on his back until he’s beyond the front door, and it’s amazing how light he feels without the weight of her stare.

She’s gone by the time he gets back to the house, but he does a tour of every room, just to be sure. Well, every room except Derek’s. He’s still not willing to leave a trail in there, and he knows Derek won’t appreciate him invading such a personal space. Once all his things are in the car, Stiles goes back in for Edith, calling her with a sharp whistle and frowning when she doesn’t materialize. He made sure to close the door quickly when he came in and went out, and she’s not the type to run, but he hasn’t seen her since they got here.
He checks under the furniture and in all her favourite hiding places, but there’s no sign of her or Arlo. When calling her with his magic doesn’t work, he gives in and checks under Derek’s bed, knowing that sometimes Derek’s supernatural signature can distort Stiles’ senses. Like, say, his total lack of sexual interest in his roommate.

Panic starts to beat in his head when Edith isn’t under the bed, and his thoughts flash to Jennifer’s appearance. Stiles is pretty sure she showed up for the beryl, but what if, when Stiles ruined her plans, she stumbled onto something even more powerful. Like an exceptionally rare Griffin Sprite.

Stiles rushes back to the kitchen and out the back door, pulling magic out of the air in an attempt to track Edith. Sure enough, there’s a pale gold filament stretching from the house into the woods beyond the backyard, the dark maroon of Jennifer’s magic dancing around it.

“Shit, shit, shit!” he chants, pulling his phone out of his pocket. He might be heartbroken and embarrassed, but some things are just more important than pride. He has no idea if Jennifer knows what Edith can do, and he’d rather not find out. If she’s not powerful enough to contain Edith’s bump to her strength, they could flatten half the neighbourhood.

“Stiles?” Derek answers, and the hope and surprise in his voice is gutting.

“Jennifer showed up at the house and took Edith. I need you to help me follow their trail and I need you here now,” he spits out, gripping the phone so hard the plastic cracks. If Derek refuses, he’ll do it himself, but it sure would be good to have some backup.

The snarl that cuts across the line is so deep it leaves his ear buzzing, and Stiles has to pull the phone away. If it also sets his heart pumping and his skin tingling, no one has to know.

“I’ll be there in five minutes,” Derek tells him, and the line goes dead.

Stiles slips his phone back in his pocket, rubs his hands on his jeans and starts for the trees, knowing Derek will catch up. He can’t wait any longer if he hopes to stop Jennifer from doing anything potentially deadly.

Within three minutes, Derek is beside him, wolfed out and panting.

“Dude, did you run the whole way?” Stiles asks, goosebumps rising on his arms when Derek’s
uniformed shoulder brushes his.

“It was faster than driving,” he growls through fanged teeth. “How long has Edith been gone?”

“I can’t be sure since she took off looking for Arlo as soon as we got to the house, but Jennifer’s been gone a good fifteen minutes.”

“Arlo’s at the station. Why were you at the house?”

Maybe it’s the fangs causing the gruffness in Derek’s voice, but Stiles bristles at the question. “I told you I’d get my things out. If you didn’t want me in the house, you should have put them on the curb.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“This way,” Stiles cuts him off, veering to the right when the filament shifts.

“Can you feel her?” Derek asks, nostrils flaring as he scents the air. His hands sweep across the ferns and brush around them, mapping their course, and razor-sharp claws really shouldn’t be that sexy, but Stiles is weak and has a hard time looking away.

“I can see her energy trace, Jennifer’s too, and Derek, I don’t think she’s a witch. I’ve never seen anything like what she’s leaving behind.”

“How is it different?” he asks, and Stiles could kiss him for always cutting to the chase and asking the right questions.

“It’s not solid. It’s not even really fluid, it’s more like smoke. Dark red, almost black, and it’s keeps blotting out Edith’s. Like it’s strangling her magic. Did Jennifer ever actually say she was witch? Because you’d be able to hear the lie, right?” Stiles looks over his shoulder, and despite his mega-brow, Derek looks like he’s basking in every word Stiles says to him.

“I don’t think she ever said it directly, but most of her friends are witches.”
Stiles shakes his head, frustrated. “That doesn’t mean anything, if she’s something more powerful, she could be feeding off them and they wouldn’t even know it. Witches are usually so absorbed in their own magic, they don’t notice when something feels really off. Unnatural magic like theirs takes too much focus, that’s why they use familiars to channel, it keeps them from getting lost in it.”

“Boyd,” Derek says, stopping in his tracks.

“Boyd is a witch?” Stiles asks, confused because he’s never heard of a were that can cast. It goes against the magic that makes them wolves.

“No,” Derek dismisses. “Arlo hated Jennifer and the feeling was mutual, you saw it yourself at the store. Boyd told me not to trust a witch that doesn’t like cats.”

“Boyd is a very smart man,” Stiles tells him, grabbing Derek’s sleeve to keep them moving. “Did you ever see her with an animal, of any kind?”

“No, never,” Derek says, looking away. “She hated going to her father’s store, and she didn’t—she didn’t even like my wolf.”

Stiles gives him a sharp look. “What do you mean?”

“Wolves are...boasters. We like to show off our shift to people we...people who are important to us. For acceptance. If someone is uncomfortable with our wolf, we cut our losses because we know we’re not safe with them. Jennifer hated it.”

“That makes sense,” Stiles says, his mind whirling. “Scott is always in beta form when we’re hanging out.”

“Then he feels very comfortable with you,” Derek says quietly.

“And you flash your eyes at me hourly,” Stiles says, choking on the last word. “I mean, you used to.”
“Stiles—” Derek starts, his voice full of emotion.

“But what kind of person hates it?” he plows on, refusing to focus on anything that isn’t getting Edith back. “I can see feeling wary, or uncomfortable, but hate? That’s extreme. Unless…” he stops, jostling forward when Derek bumps into him.

“What is it?” Derek asks, his hand warm and deadly on Stiles’ arm.

“Does Jennifer have any marks? Like, a, a tattoo or a birthmark? Anything that is always on her?”

Derek’s shifted brows come together as he thinks and Stiles wants to smooth the wrinkles out with his fingers. Derek is beautiful shifted, all power and restraint. It makes Stiles want to weep because they could have been so perfect together.

“She has a pendant. Refused to take it off, even when we…”

“Right,” Stiles says crisply, thrown from this train of thought by the reminder that Derek has actually had sex with this horrendous woman. “What does it look like?”

“It’s a tree. Kind of. It’s like a tree trunk with roots growing out of both ends.”

“Do the roots connect, making a circle?” Stiles asks, going cold.

“How did you know?” Derek asks.

“Fuck, she’s a druid, Derek. A motherfucking druid!” Stiles hands pull at his hair and he has to bend over to try to catch his breath because a druid has Edith, and Stiles doesn’t know if he can stop her.

“Breathe,” Derek tells him gently, crouching beside him and rubbing circles across his lower back.

“She’s going to burn Edith out,” Stiles gasps, his chest contracting so sharply it hurts. “This is all my fault. How could I have been so stupid?”
“This isn’t your fault, it’s Jennifer’s. She took Edith,” Derek insists.

“Edith must be so scared. She’s never been out of the house without me. God, I was so careless with her.”

“No, Stiles, you’re wonderful to her and she knows you’ll come for her. But we need to keep moving.” Derek’s fingers curve around his waist, hauling him upright, and when Stiles turns his head, Derek’s red eyes bore into his, worry and determination clear in his gaze.

“I should have realized what Jennifer is,” he says.

“We both should have,” Derek concedes. “Now, move.”

Stiles takes a jagged breath and lunges forward, thankful that Derek keeps his arm around him. Edith’s signature is almost completely lost to Jennifer’s darkness and they need to find them before it’s completely gone.

“Do you think she’s just after power? I mean, what if she wants revenge for you dumping her?”

“It doesn’t matter what she wants, she’s not getting it,” Derek growls. “If I have my way, she won’t walk out of these woods.”

“It’s not easy to kill a druid,” Stiles remarks, serious and quiet, because if they’re really aiming for that, they need a plan.

“The trees,” Derek says, his voice a hushed whisper. His hand tightens on Stiles, as he nods ahead of them.

Stiles looks up, mouth falling open at the sight of the dying forest. Leaves are falling to the ground like raindrops, the trunks turning black and brittle before their eyes.

“What is she doing?” Derek asks, breathing hard through his nose.
“I think she’s using Edith to syphon magic,” Stiles responds, clutching at his chest as his own magic howls in terror.

“From the forest?”

Stiles shakes his head, leaning into Derek. “From the earth.” He turns to Derek, appreciating the fear he sees in Derek’s eyes. “If we try to stop her, we may not survive.”

“If we don’t, will anything survive?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles answers truthfully.

Derek nods and offers his hand. Stiles stares down at it, wishing with all his heart that Derek was offering it under any other circumstances. Still, if his life is going to end today, it might as well be alongside the man he loves.

He takes Derek’s hand and they run.
They find Jennifer in a clearing near the centre of the woods, the earth charred black under her kneeling form. Her face is no longer that of a young, beautiful woman, but of a creature filled with a supernatural power she was never designed to contain. Her eyes are sunken and her hair is nothing but singed wisps that cling to her clothes. Where it’s not split and weeping, her skin is the white of bones left to bleach in the sun. This isn’t what power looks like, Stiles thinks. This is perverse and twisted. Trying to fit a square peg in a round hole that’s located in an alternate universe. This should never be.

Edith is in her hand, mewling weakly in between full-body shudders. Stiles starts forward, but Derek stops him. Jennifer doesn’t seem have noticed them, and it makes sense to keep the element of surprise. Derek’s hand slips away and Stiles watches in fascinated horror as he disrobes and sinks into his full alpha shift, his body twisting and contorting in a ways that should be impossible, until he drops onto all fours, giant paws sending up a cloud of ash.

“You’ve been holding out on me,” Stiles accuses, unable to keep the awe out of his voice.

Derek huffs and nudges him forward.

“Oh sure, make me go first. Big chicken,” he whispers. He’s not sure why his own power isn’t being summoned by Jennifer, and he’s not about to look a gift horse in the mouth, so he pulls from within until his fingers crackle with energy.

They have a plan. It’s not a great one, probably not even that good, but without knowing just what Jennifer is capable of, it’s the best they could come up with while running her down. Derek leans into him, his sleek black head knocking Stiles’ elbow as a ball of blue light forms between his hands.

“On three,” he breathes. “Three!” Stiles pushes the ball outwards as Derek leaps towards the clearing. Jennifer’s attention is pulled from her spell and she sends Derek flying through the air, his body colliding with a copse of dead trees, which crack and tumble on top of him.

Stiles’ magic hit its target, and he races across the clearing, falling to his knees beside Edith’s tiny, shivering body.
“You’re a spark,” Jennifer accuses him in a deep, empty voice, climbing to her feet. Her pendant swings freely from it’s chain, the metal roots twisting around and around to strengthen the circle. “What a sad, little surprise you turned out to be.”

Stiles scoops up Edith and tries to make a run for it, to get her away and safe, but Jennifer’s magic lashes out at him and he crumples to the ground, her spell pushing through him with the force of a hurricane. Edith yeows and squirms from between his spasming fingers as Stiles flies up the air, flips over, and slams to the ground once more, a sharp pain bursting across his thigh as he lands on his keys.

“How long have you been hiding the sprite?” Jennifer demands, hurling Stiles up and then down again. “How did you keep it from killing you?”

“I swear to God, if you hurt her—”

Jennifer laughs, raspy and deep. “Hurt her? She tried to take a chunk out of me the second I picked her up.”

_That’s my girl,_ he thinks, and Jennifer must see his smirk because he bucks into the air again, the back of his head connecting with something sharp and unforgiving as he lands.

“But I still cracked her,” she taunts, stepping closer. “All it took was a little _pressure_ in the right spot.”

Stiles grits his teeth as blood trickles from his nose and over the side of his face.

“You know what I think, Stiles,” she sneers, staring down at him like he’s something unpleasant under her shoe. “I think it will take half as much pressure to crack you wide open. What do you think, Derek?”

Stiles can’t see Derek between the black spots in his vision, but he hears the snarl and the wet sound of tearing flesh as Derek attacks Jennifer from behind. Light shatters the darkness of the scorched woods, and Derek’s howl turns into a wounded cry as he’s caught and suspended by Jennifer’s magic. “Naughty puppy.”
“Leave him alone!” Stiles shouts, stumbling to his feet only to fall back to his knees.

“Why? He’s pathetic,” she spits. “Cut off from his pack, unable to stay in one place for too long, unwilling to give into his nature.” There’s so much venom in her voice that Stiles flinches.

“Why did you come back?” he asks, panting. Blood is dripping from the cut on the back of his head, but he clenches his jaw until his sight clears. Derek is frozen in mid-air, his lips pulled back in a vicious snarl and his eyes burning red like he can kill Jennifer if he just stares at her hard enough.

“Having an alpha werewolf at my heel would be very useful,” she muses.

Stiles lets out a single startled laugh. “Derek would never be at your heel.”

“Well not now!” she shrieks, turning back to him. “Not with you in the picture!” Jennifer screams and Derek howls as a slash appears in his flank.

“Stop!” Stiles pleads, throwing his hands up and letting his magic flow through him. He hits her squarely in the chest, but she only stumbles back a few steps, laughing.

“Nice try, sparky, but I’m beyond you now. Nothing can stop me.”

Another mark is carved into Derek’s side, and a sob is wrenched from Stiles’ chest. He drags himself another three feet, and something jabs in him the leg, but he can’t stop to remove it because he has to get to Derek before Jennifer kills him. He has to figure out how to save them, because he can live with heartbreak and unrequited love, but he can’t live in a world that doesn’t have Derek in it. Not when Stiles has a chance to save him.

Jennifer throws her head back in delight as she runs a thick branch through Derek’s middle, crowing when he shifts back into his human form. Tears spill down Stiles’ cheeks, but the earth is too dry and dead to absorb them, and they just sit there, mocking him.

“Stop,” he pleads, almost at Jennifer’s feet. “You’re killing him!”

“That’s the idea,” she cries, the branch twisting.
Derek howls, but it’s human and weak, and Stiles’ heart seizes in response to the sound. He claws at the cauterized earth and for a moment he thinks it’s still burning because his thigh is warm and tingling. It’s then that he realizes his keys aren’t in his pocket, the beryl is. His eyes snap to Derek, willing him to look down, but Derek’s face is twisted in a mask of pain and Stiles isn’t sure if he’s even still fully conscious.

Stiles breathes out and focuses his magic on finding Edith, on calling her to him. She’s hidden behind the remains of a bush, but she opens herself to him, allowing him to draw enough strength to get him on his feet, his fist clenched around the heated gem in his pocket. He can feel his pulse through the stone, it’s dull tattoo racing the stuttering panic of Derek’s heart.

“I love him,” Stiles proclaims, as loud and steady as he can muster. He’s staring hard at Jennifer, but from the corner of his eye he sees Derek’s head roll to the side.

Jennifer looks over her shoulder and laughs. “So?”

“There’s power in love.”

“Only if it’s returned, boyfriend,” Jennifer mocks. “I know Derek, and he doesn’t love anyone. Not even himself.”

“You’re wrong,” he insists. “He’s changed. That’s what love does, it helps you evolve.”

Jennifer rolls her eyes and starts toward him. Stiles acts before she can take another step, lunging forward as he pulls the stone from his pocket. It’s glowing a bright, iridescent pink, and it distracts her long enough for Stiles to press it to her forehead.

A jolt goes through him as soon as the gem makes contact and he’s thrown back, landing in the bush hiding Edith. Jennifer’s scream shakes the trees, turning them into crumbling ruins and sending ash cascading to the ground in dark clouds. Stiles slaps his hands over his ears and Edith claws her way up his hoodie to jump inside.

When the glowing subsides and he can actually see Jennifer, the beryl is embedded in the centre of her brow, the flesh around it melting away. It’s grotesque and horrifying, but he can’t look away as her skin disintegrates, breaking apart in chunks and falling to the ground to hiss and smoke.
The spell holding Derek breaks and he falls to the forest floor, grunting softly at the impact. Stiles rushes to him, sidestepping what’s left of Jennifer, and collapsing as his borrowed energy runs out.

“Derek,” he gasps, wanting to touch Derek but unable to find somewhere that won’t cause him pain. He settles for brushing Derek’s hair back, gently scratching over his scalp like he knows Derek enjoys. “Derek, can you hear me?”

“You,” Derek whispers, a violent cough cutting him off. His body seizes, and Stiles can see his body trying to heal around the branch.

“I need to take it out, Derek. You won’t heal unless it comes out.”

“You,” he repeats, grasping for Stiles’ hand.

“I’m here, Der, I’m not going anywhere.” Stiles squeezes Derek’s hand and then lets go, grabbing hold of the thick branch. It juts out from under Derek’s ribs, covered in blood and splintering, but if he doesn’t get it out, Derek’s body is going to give up and let him die. He plants his shoe on Derek’s shoulder and uses the momentum of rolling him onto his back to yank the tree limb all the way through.

Derek snarls, his features slipping into his beta shift to kickstart the healing process. The force of the removal sends Stiles stumbling back and landing on his ass. Edith yelps from the depths of his hoodie, but he ignores her in favour of crawling back to Derek to make sure the wound is closing.

It’s gaping and ugly, but the edges of the hole are twitching, knitting organs, muscle, and skin back together. Stiles breathes out in relief, a manic giggle bursting out. Derek’s eyes snap open and his hand clamps down on Stiles’ wrist. Stiles freezes, looking down into the red eyes of his alpha.

“You love me,” Derek rasps and passes out.
Chapter 22

Derek

The scent of comfort, and safety, and home are in his nose before he even registers that he’s awake. His body is sore, his skin feeling stretched too tight over his bones, and his gut is an aching knot of discomfort, the newly repaired flesh irritated and swollen. But he’s alive, and he can’t be sorry for that.

With his eyes still closed, he can hear the hushed voices of Allison and Boyd, their quiet steps around the kitchen, clear and rhythmic to his ears. Arlo is purring at the foot of the bed, his soft breath muffled by Edith’s fur where his face is pressed against her body, making sure she keeps close.

There’s a warmth along his left side, and he’s afraid for a moment to open his eyes because, if it turns out not to be Stiles, he won’t be able to hide his disappointment from whomever it really is. But there’s a pretty good chance it is Stiles, and Derek knows in his bones that he can’t afford to waste another moment guarding his heart against what he wants so completely.

“You’re awake,” Stiles whispers, saving Derek from his own awkwardness in the moments after he opens his eyes. He’s laying on his side, facing Derek, and there are dark circles under Stiles’ eyes. His skin is pale and his lips are dry and cracked, no doubt a result of the amount of magic he used in the woods.

“You’re here,” Derek responds, and wants to pull the blanket over them both and hide from the world until their bodies finally say what their mouths have failed to.

Stiles frowns, looking unsure. “I can go.”

“No, stay.” Derek rolls on his side, wincing at the lingering pain, and Stiles reaches out to stop him.

“Hey, careful, you’re not fully healed yet.”

“I noticed,” Derek tells him, squirming carefully until he’s comfortable. Stiles watches him move, never quite meeting Derek’s eyes.
“I called the station right after you passed out,” Stiles says, his teeth dragging across the pad of his thumb. “Seemed faster than calling 911.”

Derek grunts. “Smart.”

“They dragged us both back here and cleaned us up. Chris made me promise I wouldn’t leave the bed until you woke up. Symbiotic healing and all that.”

“Right,” Derek says staring resolutely at Stiles’ chin. Lots of supernatural beings heal faster in groups, drawing strength from their pack, but wolves are the only ones who can stimulate healing in others, drawing away pain and jumpstarting a cycle of synergetic restoration.

“Why did the beryl kill her?” Derek blurts. He knows he should go slow and be gentle, but Stiles is starting to smell anxious again, like he’s already got one foot out the door, and Derek needs to know the truth before he leaves.

“You know why,” Stiles says curtly.

“No, I don’t. Did you know it was going to do that?”

A muscle in Stiles’ jaw ticks, and when his eyes finally meet Derek’s they’re fierce and full of challenge. “Are you asking me if I killed her on purpose?”

“I don’t know,” he answers honestly, gentling his voice. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“She was going to kill you, Derek. I couldn’t let that happen.” The admission is raw and desperate, and Stiles’ fingers clench against the sheets, turning his knuckles white. “I didn’t know what it would do, but it was the only thing I could think of to stop her.”

“Okay, okay, I know. I’m not mad, I just don’t get why it...melted her.” Derek pries Stiles hands away from the bedclothes, but before he can lace their fingers together, Stiles is pulling back and away, rolling onto his back and huffing up at the ceiling.

“It enhanced my feelings,” he says, his voice thick. “It was a love crystal, and you were dying, and I
used what I had to, to...to save you.”

“You used your love. You love me,” Derek clarifies, his heart jumping.

“Yeah, you said that already.” Stiles mutters, sitting up and swinging his legs off the bed. “I’m gonna let you do your wolfy thing in peace. Thanks for helping me get Edith back, I’m sorry for all the...yeah.”

“You love me,” Derek repeats, louder. “As much as I love you.” The conversation downstairs stops as abruptly as Stiles does, though he’s still sitting with his back to Derek when Allison and Boyd slip out of the house. “Jennifer tried to use us against each other, and our love for each other stopped her. The beryl knew how we felt and amplified that to take her down.”

“Do you have any idea the depth of a feeling needed to do something like that?” Stiles whispers, glancing over his shoulder.

A smile spreads over Derek’s face, and he reaches for Stiles’ hand. “Yeah, I do.”

“Say it,” Stiles tells him, a tear rolling down his cheek.

“I love you,” Derek says, the rawness in his voice begging Stiles to believe him.

“Then why did you lie to me?”

Derek sits up too fast and presses a hand to his stomach, grunting at the pain. He looks up at Stiles, panting through his discomfort. “I never lied to you.”

Stiles laugh is cruel and ugly, but there are still tears in his eyes, and it makes Derek’s heart flutter madly in his chest.

“You did,” Stile tells him, turning so they’re face to face. “The night I asked you to meet Lydia and Jackson. You said you had to work, but you didn’t go to work, did you?”
“Yes, I did,” Derek insists. He can smell the hurt and anger rolling off of Stiles, but he doesn’t know what to say to make it stop.

“Then why were you at the Mayor’s party, Derek? And if you love me, why were you and that blonde woman all over each other?”

“You were there?” Derek asks, confused. Even with all the people that had been there, he thinks he somehow should have picked up Stiles’ scent.

“That was the event I asked you to. The one you told me you couldn’t attend because you had to work. Sure didn’t look like work when she was kissing you,” Stiles spits.

“Whoa, okay, hold on,” Derek pleads. This is not going at all the way it should be, but he can save this. He can fix it. “That woman was the Mayor’s wife, and yes, she was a little handsy, but it was completely one-sided, I swear. And I was working because I was there as a representative of the firehouse, to promote the calendar. Chris usually goes, but something came up and he asked me to fill in.”

“So if you’d known that’s where I was asking you to go with me, would you have said yes?” Stiles asks, something cautious, but hopeful in his eyes.

Derek silently curses himself because he knows he can’t lie to Stiles. “No.”

Stiles nods, pursing his lips. “I gotta say, man, I am really confused right now.”

“I was scared,” Derek explains. “I had just realized how much I care about you, how much I...want you, and I was freaking out. I don’t, I haven’t,” he pauses and takes a breath, looking back at Stiles. “I haven’t wanted to be in love for a very long time, Stiles, and you kind of caught me off guard because the way I feel about you came on so quick and so easy that I didn’t realize it until I was so deep in love with you that I couldn’t even think of not having you beside me. And then I fucking scented you,” Derek laughs weakly. “God, I am so sorry about that, I just...you did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

Stiles’ cheeks are red, and he looks away. “That was Scott’s fault.”

Derek smiles at the skip in Stiles’ heartbeat and reaches for his hand. “It was a lot to process all at
once, and I was out of my comfort zone. I’m sorry that I hurt you and that it seemed like I’d lied, but Stiles, I love you. I love you more than anything.”

Stiles’ hand squeezes his. “Say it again.”

“I love you,” Derek swears. “I love you, I love you, I love y—”

Stiles’ kiss cuts him off, his lips softening with each meeting of their mouths. The movement jostles Arlo and Edith, who mewl loudly in protest and jump off the bed, slinking out the door in search of somewhere less emotionally charged. Derek can feel the warm glow surrounding himself and Stiles, their power feeding off each other until it’s a steady loop of give and take, and it’s glorious. Nothing has ever felt as right as this.

“I love you,” Stiles’ promises, grinning down at him. “I think I’ve loved you since the supermarket.”

“It was absolutely the cat diarrhea,” Derek says, solemnly.

Stiles’s laughter is loud and bright, and Derek’s wolf preens.

“I’ve never been more charming in my life.”

“How could I resist?” Derek asks, pulling him down for another kiss, and Stiles’ mouth is wide and welcoming, and he loses himself for a while. He’s just sneaking his hand beneath the hem of Stiles’ shirt, desperately needing to feel the smooth skin he knows is hiding there, when Stiles pulls back. Derek whimpers, but lets Stiles keep him in place with a hand in the center of his chest.

“You know you have to meet Lydia now, right? There’s no getting around that.”

Derek grins, tapping his fingers again the back of Stiles’ hand. “We’ll have a housewarming party to celebrate you moving back in. I’ll meet her then.”

“You want me to come back?” Stiles asks, and from the look on his face, it was the last thing he was expecting.
“I never wanted you to leave,” Derek reminds him, keeping his tone gentle so Stiles’ doesn’t get defensive. “In fact, you stay here and I’ll go get your stuff. I want you here, in my bed, where you belong.”

Stiles’ eyebrows jump to his hairline. “Hold on there, caveman, we should talk about this. I mean, maybe we should slow down a bit, do it right this time?”

“What’s ‘right’? We fell in love, moved in together, faced death, now we’re boyfriends. You living here again seems in line with how we do things.”

“Boyfriends?” Stiles grins, his nose wrinkling as he throws a leg over Derek’s lap, careful not to press anywhere near the healing wound.

“Boyfriends, partners, mates, whatever you want to call us is fine, as long and we’re together,” Derek tells him, slipping his hands over Stiles’ hips.

“So you believe in mates now, do you?” Stiles asks, speculatively.

Derek rolls his eyes. “Stiles.”

“It’s just that you didn’t ask me if I wanted to be your boyfriend. Or your mate, since that’s apparently on the table now.”

“Do I need to?” he asks, trying to decipher if this is Stiles teasing him, or if it’s something he actually needs.

“Well, I did just kill a druid to save y—”

“Stiles, will you be my mate?” he cuts in, gripping Stiles’ face in his hands. “Be my now and my forever. Be my always. Because you’re it for me, and I will do everything in my power to be the man you need me to be until my dying breath. I will cherish and protect you, I will honour and counsel you, I will be your guiding light and give you everything that is mine. By the light of the blood moon, I will be yours if you will be mine.”
Stiles’ eyes are wide with shock, whiskey coloured pools of what the fuck, and his voice is slow and tight when he speaks. “You know that I know that those are basically the words of a traditional werewolf bonding ceremony, right?”

“I was hoping you did, yeah,” Derek admits. “Seemed best to make sure you know how serious I am about us.”

“Fuck, dude, you could have given me some warning!”

Derek squints. “That’s not a no.”

Stiles laughs and swats his his shoulder. “Of course it’s not! I fucking love you and yes, I will be your werewolf bride!”

“You’re not a—” Derek is cut off once again by Stiles’ mouth, but he can’t complain when Stiles tastes of happiness and joy.

“Wait,” Stiles pulls back again and Derek groans. “Why would we have a housewarming party right before you sell the house?”

“Stiles, I’m not selling the house,” Derek tells him, pressing quick kisses to his jaw. “This is our home.”

“I knew it!” Stiles crows, laughing. “That first night, when I painted? I sat and talked to the house and there was something there from you I couldn’t put my finger on, but as we worked together to fix everything, I figured it out. You wanted to stay. Before me, before us, you wanted to keep this house. Why? Why this one?”

Derek ducks his head, embarrassed and caught out, but Stiles runs a hand through his hair, soothing his pride. “It just felt right. As soon as I saw it, something clicked. I made an offer before I ever stepped inside,” he admits, shyly. “Boyd thought I was going crazy, but then Arlo showed up. And then you, and Edith. One morning I woke up and we were all together and I felt more content than I ever have. I felt like I was home.”
“That’s beautiful,” Stiles tells him, staring at Derek like he can’t believe his luck. “I kinda want to bone you right now.”

Derek snorts. “You’re such a romantic.”

“Hey, broke the tension, didn’t it?” Stiles waggles his eyebrows and laughs.

“Let’s do it.”

“What? Really? No, Derek, we can’t,” Stiles squawks. “Four hours ago you had a three-inch wide tree limb through your torso. You need to take it easy.”

“Then you do all the work,” he says, pulling Stiles’ shirt off over his head.

“Dude, you can’t be serious,” Stiles laughs, crossing his arms over his bare chest.

“Stiles, we have waited long enough to be together. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

“We met like, three and a half weeks ago,” Stiles points out.

“And I’ve wanted to claim you every second, since the moment I laid eyes on you,” Derek tells him seriously, slipping his fingers in the waistband of Stiles’ sweatpants. Well, they’re Derek’s sweatpants, really, but that doesn’t matter because soon they’re going to belong to the floor.

“So what came first, loving me or lusting me?” Stiles asks, lifting himself up so Derek can work the pants down over his hips.

Derek grins. “I honestly cannot answer that.”

It takes some maneuvering, but they manage to strip without jostling Derek too much. He asks Stiles to kneel beside him so he can look his fill, sliding his hand over the flushed skin of Stiles’ chest, moving from mole to mole, committing them to memory. He thumbs at Stiles’ nipple and watches in fascination as his cock twitches, a pulse of silky precome jetting from his slit and sliding over the
head of his cock.

“You’re so beautiful,” Derek tells him, urging him closer with a hand on the back of Stiles’ neck.

Stiles’ flush deepens, but he smiles. “Thank you. You’re no slump yourself.”

“I work out,” Derek tells him, fighting a grin, and when Stiles laughs and kisses him, his swears the neighbours should be able to hear how loud his heart is beating. “You make me happy,” Derek tells him, still a bit in awe of the fact.

Stiles’ smile turns soft and sweet, and he brushes a kiss over Derek’s lips. “Good.”

Stiles seems hesitant to touch Derek, most like not wanting to cause him any pain, so Derek takes hold of his hands and does it for him, kneading Stiles’ long fingers into the swell of Derek’s thighs and trailing the pads of his fingers over the vee of his hips.

“You’re very smooth,” Stiles comments.

Derek bites his lip and shifts, his fangs dropping and hair sprouting all over his body.

Stiles laughs nervously. “I kinda meant you could skip your next waxing, but that works, too.” He runs a finger over Derek’s brow, a delighted smile on his face. “You’re beautiful, too, you know.”

Derek leans closer, giving Stiles time to back away, carefully pressing their lips together when he doesn’t. Stiles giggles into the kiss, then runs his tongue over Derek’s fangs. Derek shudders and groans at the feeling, shifting back so he can claim Stiles’ mouth properly. No one has ever wanted all of Derek before. The man, the wolf, the whole package, but Stiles makes him feel like they’re one in the same. Like he truly doesn’t care where Derek ends and the wolf beings. Like he just simply loves Derek, and it’s that easy to accept them both.

Stiles hands grip Derek’s biceps and a shock goes through him, making him grunt.

“Shit, sorry, sorry!” Stiles says, eyes wide and worried. “That, um, happens sometimes, when I get riled up. Like, not all the time, but when there’s stress, and adrenaline, and... erections.”
Derek licks his lips and tastes blood. He’s not sure if Stiles bit him or he did it himself, but it sets his nerves on fire and he needs to be deep inside Stiles, right now.

“Lube is in the drawer,” he rasps, shimmying lower on the bed. Stiles lunges for the nightstand, nearly pulling the drawer completely out in his haste. Derek takes the bottle from him and urges Stiles higher, until he’s straddling Derek’s chest and bracing himself on the headboard.

“Holy shit,” Stiles breathes, keening when Derek licks at the head of his cock.

“Is this okay?” Derek asks, sucking gently while he strokes a slick finger over Stiles’ hole.


Derek moans around Stiles cock and sinks his finger in, feeling the phantom of the strain inside himself. Stiles gasps and pushes back into it, already working himself between Derek’s finger and his mouth.

“More,” he demands, and Derek obeys, adding a second finger while swirling his tongue along Stiles’ shaft. Derek zones out for a minute, laying back and enjoying the push and pull of Stiles’ grip on him. He’s using Derek, and maybe most alphas wouldn’t be into that, but Derek isn’t most alphas. He wants Stiles to take from him. Needs him to seek pleasure from Derek’s body and not stop until he’s sated and weak. And then, when Stiles is messy and spent, Derek will take his.

“God, I’m going to come,” Stiles pants and Derek slips in the tip of another finger, letting Stiles press into it at his own pace. As soon as he’s in and Stiles is rocking back and forth, Derek curls his fingers, pressing against Stiles’ prostate and making him jerk forward until he’s choking Derek with his cock. Before Stiles can apologize or pull back, Derek takes hold of his hip, keeping him close so that he only has a few scant inches to grind his hips back and forth.

“Fuck, Derek, fuck, I’m gonna come, baby.”

Derek hums his approval and holds Stiles above him until the first salty tang spurts across his tongue. It’s tart, and warm, and all Stiles, and Derek swallows greedily, wanting every last drop. His fingers are cramping, but Stiles is still coming, so he leaves them where they are, barely able to imagine the gorgeous clench of Stiles’ ass that will soon be around his cock.
“Jesus,” Stiles gasps, slumping against the headboard. He’s sweaty and pink, and Derek wants to devour him whole. A whine slips out along with Stiles cock, and the next thing he knows, his fingers are free and Stiles is all around him.

He cries out in shock at the impossible heat of Stiles’ body, the vise grip that holds him, deep and secure. He has no words for how perfect it feels, and all he can do is squeeze his eyes against the tears and cling to any part of Stiles he can reach.

“Shh, shh, I got you,” Stiles soothes, rocking on top of him. “I’m going to take care of you.”

“Stiles,” he whimpers, and his voice is slurred, but Stiles tightens around him, his hands rubbing circles over his heart.

“I know, baby. It’s okay. You don’t have to talk, I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Derek frowns and chances opening his eyes. At the sight of Stiles on top of him, working his hips in a gentle, but deep-seated rhythm, he swears and nearly comes. That’s when he notices that his claws are cradling Stiles’ hips. His grip is tight enough to bruise, but he hasn’t broken the skin. He looks up at Stiles, confused, and Stiles laughs.

“Symbiotic healing,” he reminds him. “Think you can hang in there until I come again?”

Derek’s eyes snap to Stiles’ cock, stiff and swaying as he moves. His mouth waters, but his fangs won’t retract and he can’t reach it at this angle anyway, so he carefully closes his hand around it and lets Stiles’ thrust into it.

“That’s so fucking hot, Derek.”

Derek growls from deep in his chest, the vibration going up through Stiles’ body, building and spreading until Stiles throws his head back and cries out, coming in messy stripes all over both of them. Derek smears it over his now closed wound, some deeply primal part of him grunting in satisfaction, then he takes hold of Stiles once more and pulls almost all the way out, slamming back into him. It strains his wound, and he can’t hide his wince, but Stiles doesn’t stop him, just puts his hands over Derek’s and raises himself up on shaking legs and lets himself drop, over and over, until Derek feels like he’s being turned inside out.
He lays there, hands possessive and claiming on his mate’s body, urging Stiles on while he whispers his own secret, needy fantasies into the air between them, warning Stiles about what to expect. When Derek comes it feels like a declaration. Like he’s marking Stiles as his own, handing over a portion of his soul in exchange for the care that Stiles has taken with him. His knot swells and Stiles shouts out Derek’s name like a benediction, stretching around him beautifully. It feels like an end, and a beginning, and like every happy ending he never thought he deserved. It feels like forever.
Epilogue

Derek

Derek’s first thought is that they didn’t train him for this. His second thought is that if Erica and Isaac ever find out, he’ll never live it down. And considering how close Stiles and Erica have become, she probably already knows. But, a promise is a promise, and he’d no sooner deny his mate than cut off his own arm.

He steps off the back porch, in the bottom half of his turnout gear, red suspenders holding up his yellow pants and running the length of his newly hairy chest. He’s still not sure if he likes it, but the way Stiles reacts to it is worth the extra discomfort when he’s working.

He accidentally smacks his helmet off with the ladder that’s been left leaning against the house, and he has to stop to pick it up. The helmet was very important, Stiles had stressed, and forgoing it was not an option. Derek sighs and heads towards the trees with the fairy lights, his chagrin quickly turning to anticipation when he spots Stiles, curled up and lounging on one of the sturdier branches.

He braces the ladder against the tree, forcing down the voice in his head that screams it’s not stable, and looks up. “Hey there, sweetheart,” he calls, wrinkling his nose at how foolish he sounds. “You’re up awfully high. You could fall and get hurt.”

Stiles gives him an unimpressed look and shifts away, his haughty veneer slipping a little when he over balances and has to grab the next branch to steady himself. Derek grinds his teeth and looks around. He knows Stiles’ charm keeps the neighbours from hearing or seeing them, but he can’t help the feeling like anyone could glance over the fence and notice them.

“Am I going to have to come up there and get you?” he asks, shaking off his discomfort and stepping onto the ladder.

“You’re much too big to come up here,” Stiles responds, turning to glare at him. It’s then that Derek realizes Stiles hasn’t fashioned himself after a cat, but a fox. His pulse speeds up because somehow
that’s more exciting to him. Stiles would probably tell him it’s a predator/prey thing, which now that Derek thinks about it, is what this game is all about in the first place.

“Did you give yourself fox ears?” He admires the sharp curve of them, where red fur gives way to black, and silky white lines the inside. They’re incredibly lifelike, and Derek can admit he appreciates the effort.

“I take this very seriously, Derek,” Stiles tells him, clearly offended.

Derek nods and climbs another rung. “I know, I’m sorry, I was just surprised. Does the little fox want to come down?”

“Why would I want to do that? I’m perfectly comfortable where I am,” Stiles sniffs, and if it weren’t for the half chub Derek can make out through the thin material of his booty shorts, Derek would believe him.

“Are you hungry?” he tempts, now close enough to touch. “Thirsty?”

Stiles tilts his head. “What’ve you got?”

Derek grins, curling his fingers around Stile’s ankle. “I’ve got something thick to fill you up, little kit. Something better than milk for your parched throat.”

“I don’t believe you,” Stiles spits, clinging to his branch and trying to pull his foot from Derek’s hold. He gasps when Derek’s claws appear, scrambling to get higher and stranding himself further in the tree.

The look on his face is panic, but Stiles’ pupils are huge and he smells like lust. Derek grins, fangs pricking his lower lip as the predator inside him howls. “Come now, kit, I want to pet you.”

“Wolf,” Stiles accuses, finally breaking free of Derek’s grasp. He jumps from the tree, and for one heart-stopping moment, Derek feels true fear. But Stiles’ magic cushions his fall, and he’s up like a shot and running for the woods.
Derek howls, leaping from the ladder and giving chase. He keeps his beta shift, but goes down on all fours, kicking up grass and dirt. He catches Stiles at the treeline, pinning him under his body and laughing at Stiles’ attempts to squirm his way free. He’s hard as stone in his pants, and he presses down on Stiles, growling at the scent of arousal that spikes around them. Stiles fights some more, and because Derek knows he likes it, he lets him, only biting down low on Stiles’ neck when he’s arching his back and rubbing his ass across Derek’s erection. Stiles stills, his body going taut under the sharp teeth.

“I caught you, little kit,” Derek taunts, stroking a hand down Stiles’ side.

“What are you going to do with me?” Stiles breathes, and Derek can practically taste his excitement.

“Hmm, I was just going to pet you, see if you’re as soft as you look. But then you ran from me.”

“You scared me,” Stiles whispers, putting a little wobble in his words. “You have such big teeth and claws. You could rip me to shreds.”

“I could,” Derek agrees, rubbing his hand over the curve of Stiles’ ass. “But why ruin something as pretty as you?”

Stiles mewls and rubs his ass into Derek’s hand, making him pause.

“Is that a... Stiles, do you have a tail?”

“All foxes have tails,” Stiles tells him, still squirming. “But that one isn’t magic.”

Derek’s mouth goes dry and he tugs gently on the rust coloured fur peeking out from the leg of Stiles shorts. Stiles moans under him, his breath hitching when Derek does it again. Derek uses a claw to slice through the shorts, pulling the ruined fabric off and tossing it into the yard. There, between the cheeks of Stiles’ pert, pink ass, is a tail.

“Did you plug yourself for me?” Derek asks in awe, spreading Stiles’ cheeks to pet the rim of the plug.
“I didn’t want the big, bad wolf to hurt me,” he says, swearing when Derek twists the base.

“You gorgeous little minx.”

“Fox, Derek, focus.”

Derek grins, keeping Stiles in place with a hand between this shoulders while he slips off his suspenders and kicks off his turnouts.

“Oh, I’m focused,” he promises, hitching up Stiles’ hips. “And you, little fox, are in my territory.”

Stiles’ throat clicks when he swallows and his fingers dig into the grass. “What are you going to do?”

“You belong to me now, kit, to do with as I please,” Derek pauses to enjoy the shiver that runs through Stiles’ body at the words. “And I intend to break you in.”

Stiles lets out a sob when the plug comes out, and Derek doesn’t waste any time claiming him. He fucks him, fast and rough, right there in the place where Derek’s domestic life ends and his primal existence begins. It satisfies the wolf, to have given chase and caught its prey, to give into its nature and rut until it’s spent. When they’re done and his knot has gone down, Stiles lets him dip inside and paint them both with streaks of come, rolling around in the dirt with him until they’re covered in grass and leaves, and reeking of one another.

Derek has no idea how Stiles knew he needed this, but once again he thanks whatever it was that brought Stiles into is life.
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