Strong at the Broken Places
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Summary

“So what’s it gonna be, Stiles?”
An hour wasn’t enough time for a miracle. Not enough for him and Derek both.
“Salvation for you, or the world?”

Stiles confronts an enemy warlock too powerful for him to defeat, and he's given an ultimatum: He must kill Derek, or Derek will be killed anyway along with everyone else in Beacon Hills. Trapped in a magically-reinforced cell with Derek, he has only an hour to make his choice.

In the tragic aftermath of the confrontation, Stiles spirals into a delusional, suicidal race against time for the lives of his remaining loved ones and the rest of the world. A spectral companion is all that keeps him from going totally insane on the hunt for the enemy warlock.

But Stiles's spectral companion isn't what it seems to be. Neither is the enemy warlock, who will forever change Stiles's universe beyond all of Stiles's imaginings …

(The story is complete (chapters 1 to 10), but I'll update it from time to time with coda chapters.)

Notes

Technically, this is a future fic that cherry-picks various events and plots from seasons 1 to 3, and totally diverges from canon there. In fact, the Nogitsune arc is all you need to be familiar with in general to read this story. Everything else is elaborated in the story itself.

I've chosen not to use certain tags because I think they'll really spoil events in the story. But! See that "angst with a happy ending" tag? Yeah. Hold onto that. Hold onto that with all ya got, babe, I won't lie to you about that. And all titles are taken from Hemingway quotes.

Soundtrack: Broken, from the Broadchurch OST.
The World Breaks Everyone

The beginning of the end of everything that was Stiles Stilinski arrived with the offering of a carving knife.

“What if I don’t play your sick game, huh?” he snarled at the faceless warlock, the coward presenting said knife to him. “What are you gonna do?”

He tried to glare past the blurred, pitch-black fumes that hovered around the warlock’s head and concealed it from his sight. He had to see the face behind them. Just once. That was all he needed to lock onto the fucker, to find him no matter where he fled to in this world.

The knife floated and twirled in the cold air between bony, long fingers.

“The kids. I’ll kick things off with the kids.”

The warlock had a voice that grated as though rotten talons were scratching flayed bones. White light glinted off the narrow, nine-inch-long blade and struck Stiles in his stinging eyes. His blood-spattered, empty hands trembled at his sides, but he didn’t care that he was exposing weakness.

There were worse things he and this warlock had witnessed. Far worse things they’d done, to themselves and to others, with their choices. Their magic. Their cruelty and selfishness.

“You’ll kneel on the ground next to me in the town square. You’ll get a front row seat, man. Right up at the stage like the VIP you are. Watch their little bodies rip open from chin to groin. Listen to their parents crying and screaming, while you bathe in the blood of their dying children.”

A muscle jumped in his gritted lower jaw. Fresh pain zigzagged its way to the frail flesh under his ear and balled into a throbbing ache there. His breaths were shallow and stuttered. He ignored the hot bubbling in what remained of his left lung. More blood trickled down his torso, soaking his clothes. The remnants of his magic were stapling the hole in his chest as closed as possible. It was the least of his concerns right now.

“Then I’ll move on to the mothers. The young ones first. The ones who had sons.” The knife dangled blade down and swayed like a pendulum in the air, like it was a mere toy, and not the thing that was going to kill Derek Hale. “How old was your mom when she died, Stiles? We can go from there.”

Stiles pictured himself lunging at this fucker’s—this abomination’s—neck, digging his nails into sallow flesh. Tearing through it to the pumping arteries, to the whistling windpipe, and yanking it all out like Derek would with those gunmetal-gray, honed claws.

Derek.

Why did it always come to this ultimatum? Why did he always have to choose between Derek and the world?

I would always choose you. Always.

“Then, the fathers.” He could tell the fucker was smiling at him. Slash of teeth from ear to ear. “I’ll save dear old Daddy for last. He’s gotta see his whole town go first. That’s what a good sheriff would do. Stay at his station and wallow in the innards and dead dreams of his people.”
“You hurt him—you *hurt* him, and I’ll hunt you wherever you go. You skip worlds, and I’ll follow you. Universes won’t stop me from finding you and ending you.”

He meant every word. He wasn’t the most powerful warlock in the world, not yet, nowhere close to being as powerful as the one he faced now. He was a fly bumbling in the fiery breath of a dragon, but he’d find a way. He—he always found a way. He had to, if it meant that someone he loved didn’t die. Not again.

Jesus, *Derek*.

“Hm.” The warlock tilted his obscured head in an approximation of curiosity. “There was one who said something similar to me.” He straightened his head with a sickening creak. “I made his father’s head implode into a bloody mist two hours later. And then he blew himself apart from the inside out because he’d already killed everyone else he ever loved. Loser.”

No, universes wouldn’t stop Stiles from ending this grotesque perversion of a person, one way or another, sooner or later. Not even gods would. Not unless—

“You gonna go the same way, Stiles? Gonna join your werewolf in hell?”

In another time, another world, he would have growled that he was already on its doorstep. But he wasn’t a big-mouthed teenager anymore. He knew better than to lure fate and be hauled kicking and screaming to an even worse hell because he asked for it. Been there, done that, and no, thanks, he never wanted to get on that carnival ride again.

Hell wasn’t where Derek was going to go. Never there, not if he could help it.

That was where *he* was going to be, after all this was over.

“I’m not playing your game.” He sucked warm, wet iron off his teeth. He was tempted to spit it, see if it would eat away those pitch-black fumes like acid and give him what he needed. “You’re not gonna kill anyone.”

The knife now floated horizontal with its sharpened edge down. A death sentence masquerading as a choice.

One thrust of the blade into Derek’s heart, and the wolfsbane on it would ensure that breathtaking, irreplaceable thing in Derek’s broad chest no longer thundered, no matter how swift his supernatural healing abilities were.

“Yeah, you’re right, I’m not gonna kill anyone. You are.”

Stiles saw his face reflected on the polished blade. Dull, heavy-lidded eyes ringed by dark purple stared back at him. Old blood painted his nostrils and his mouth. His lower lip quivered and he couldn’t stop it. He didn’t look like a powerful warlock at all. He looked like the lost boy he was after he and Dad buried his mom six feet under a slab of granite and a weeping angel. He looked like a loser who’d already given up, already lost all hope and his last resort.

The fucking knife refused to disappear from existence.

“I could hurt you some more. I’m all for that. That’s the whole point, you know?”

Stiles didn’t know that. He didn’t need to know that he was the reason this clusterfuck happened.

*Nothing new there, Stilinski. Wouldn’t be the first time a good soul dies because of you.*
“Thing is, you’ll be dead in an hour, tops.” The fucking knife floated toward him, crossing that impassable space between them. “That’s how much time you got to kill Derek. Or I’ll kill him and everyone in Beacon Hills anyway. Then maybe I’ll move on to the rest of this world. Billions of souls, man. Talk about a buffet!”

The fucking knife was going to end Derek. End him too.

“So what’s it gonna be, Stiles?”

An hour wasn’t enough time for a miracle. Not enough for him and Derek both.

“Salvation for you, or the world?”

He dragged his head up. Clenched his hands into fists that kept on shaking. Stared at those blurred, pitch-black fumes, and saw eternal darkness.

_I would always choose me. Always._

But not this time.

§§§§§§

It took Stiles ten years to acknowledge that feeling deep in his chest, much less give it a name. Ten years to the day he met Derek Hale for the first time in the Preserve, when he was a sixteen-year-old boy. An arrogant boy. A shaved-headed smartass of a boy who thought he was going to conquer the world. Conquer the glorious heart of the beautiful, perfect Lydia Martin if he just tried hard enough, long enough.

Ten years was how long he thought he had to transform her into Mrs. Stilinski. Giant diamond on her slender finger, magazine-glossy mansion in the suburbs, luxury goods by the truckloads, a Porsche much more expensive than Jackson’s, all that jazz. Ten years was how long he thought he had to become a real man, a strong man. A _feared_ man, who would never be pushed around again by anyone, never slammed onto walls or threatened to have his throat torn out by fangs or bruised blue black by old, psychotic men.

Ten years was instead the time it took for him to become a twenty-six-year-old warlock under the guidance of Deaton, with numerous scars he had to hide under long-sleeved shirts and jeans from the rest of a world that didn’t understand his world. A boy grown into a man who was only as real as his counting of trembling fingers—_one, two, three, four, five, there you go, you didn’t let it in again, good boy_—on mornings when he still felt those rot-soaked bandages strangling him into nothing.

A man, who believed he might be real when he was surrounded by Scott—his lifelong best friend, his brother in every way that mattered—and their small, trusted pack: Kira, who married Scott a year ago, whose kitsune tails shone like the moon for her besotted Alpha; Isaac, another boy bruised blue black, grown into a werewolf no longer afraid of basements and freezers; Lydia, banshee and all-around genius, transformed from an unattainable mirage into one of his dearest friends; Jackson, who for all of his past douchebaggery, knew to the bone what it cost to be a demon’s plaything like Stiles did; and Derek.

Derek, who showed him what a survivor looked like and needed to do, to be. Derek, who made him wear every scar earned in battle against their enemies with pride because they were reminders that he
survived. That they all did, for another day, another year.

Ten years. A decade. More than a third of his fleeting existence in this godforsaken world. All those years, all that time, for him to finally look at that enduring, terrifying feeling nestled in the guarded cave of his heart, and know what it was. All that time, to know why his pulse spiked and that traitorous thing in his chest hammered and his face heated up whenever a certain bearded, hazel-eyed werewolf gazed at him and saw him.

All that precious time, to know how much of said time he’d wasted, when he could have opened his mouth and used his words to cross that impassable space between him and Derek. When he could have, maybe, listened to Derek use his words too, and know that he wasn’t alone, that he never would be again. Maybe, maybe, he could have woken up on bad mornings and made them good by seeing Derek next to him under the sheets. Feeling Derek’s five-fingered hands on him, holding him in one mended piece.

Why did it always come to this ultimatum, where he had to choose between love and loneliness, between life and death?

Why couldn’t Stiles Stilinski, for once in his goddamn existence, get even the illusion of something he yearned for without it costing him everything else?

“Tick tock, tick tock, Stiles. Time isn’t infinite, man. There’s no going back once it’s gone.”

No, once he named that feeling in him, and brought it into the light, there really was no going back. There was no denying his unspoken fantasies of Derek, be they of the werewolf in that prized leather jacket, or in that cream-colored, v-neck sweater and jeans. Sitting barefoot on a stool at their kitchen counter, nursing a hot mug of coffee and waiting for him so they could eat breakfast together. Waiting for him to sit next to Derek and kiss the handsome asshole on the corner of those quirked lips.

We would have been happy. I would have my numerous scars and nightmares, and you would have the ashes of your family, your incinerated past infused in your marrow. But we would have woken up side by side. Your hands would have made me real and strong, and I would have blown away the smoke and ashes until all you smelled was spring and that carrot cake you adored and us. Just us. Just you and me against the world, Big Guy.

It took Stiles ten years to know without a doubt that he loved and was in love with Derek, with every cell of his body, every beat of his darkness-bound heart.

It took him ten seconds to raise a shaking, weak hand and clutch the curved marble handle of that carving knife.

“There you go. You know what you have to do now, don’t you?”

Yeah, he knew what he had to do. He knew what he had to do after that, if it meant more people he loved didn’t die. If it meant the whole world didn’t drown in its own innards and overflowing blood because of him. It wouldn’t take him ten years, that much he was sure.

A wolfsbane-laced knife across his own throat?

Five seconds at most.

§§§§§§
“There has to be a way,” Derek growled.

Derek had spent all his time in the sealed prison cell clawing and slamming himself against its flat, white walls. Noble attempts, yeah, but futile ones. Stiles could sense the immense power that reinforced those walls, buzzing like legions of flies in a gargantuan god’s carcass. Stiles took in the claw marks and the impact-cracks of Derek’s so very real and strong body, and he didn’t reply.

The thick blood spilling over his hand pressed to the hole in his chest was a response in itself. He knew Derek could smell it, see it smeared across the white floor like a stark banner of surrender. They both knew there was only so much blood in an adult man’s body. Only so much time until it was all outside instead of inside where it should be, magic pinch or not.

He had an hour, tops, when the warlock teleported him into the cell to join Derek. Less than that now.

“There has to be—We—”

Derek was gripping the carving knife. Pacing the length of the cell as the cornered wolf he had no other choice to be. Somewhere along the way of Stiles being gently carried and propped sitting up against a wall, Derek had removed the knife from him. Took one look at it, sniffed it, and knew in a heartbeat who it was meant for.

The asshole—the stupid, self-sacrificing asshole—had stared at it with eyes full of relief after Stiles told him what he had to do with it, what the cost was if he didn’t.

Well, until Stiles looked him in the eye and said, “Knife’s still sharp after one use.”

All the relief had vanished, swamped by naked horror and anger. Stiles had turned his head aside and stayed silent as Derek yelled at him, demanding that he explain what the hell precisely it was he intended to do after—after. The knife must have felt as heavy as a bloated corpse in Derek’s hand then. But Stiles knew how heavy the knife felt in his hand too. How much heavier it was going to be, slathered in Derek’s blood.

He was the one who had to finish the job, not Derek. He was the one with the blood-drenched hands. Derek cleansed his years ago. Did his penance for past failures by saving the good folks of Beacon Hills from fires and monsters and more monsters, adding incalculable credit to his upcoming ticket to heaven, whatever place it might be. It probably looked like his family home before The Fire. His entire family was probably waiting there for him. Missing him, making sure his room was ready, and that he had his seat at the dinner table, surrounded by hugs and laughter as he should be. As he should always be.

But, no—no, if Stiles didn’t finish the job, all those horrific scenarios of massacre would become reality. The earth would become a kingdom of torment and torture with a mere snap of fingers, a thought. One point of a skinny forefinger at his chest was all it took for an invisible spear to skewer him and collapse his lung. A low snicker was all it took for something else inside his torso to rupture like a burst balloon, to make him plow his face into asphalt and flop like a gutted fish.

Derek had howled his name so loud that it overwhelmed his deafening shriek of pain.

He never had a chance. Neither did Derek, or Scott, or Dad. When he shut his eyes, he could see Scott, all Alpha’ed out, roaring, charging on all fours at the crackling dome of bluish energy that enveloped him and Derek and then teleported them away from the street in front of his childhood
home. He could still see Dad on the front porch, sprawled on his back and knocked out cold from an invisible blast of force, his loaded gun a melted, metal pretzel by his open hand.

It was a tiny consolation to him that Dad was still alive. Dad lost the love of his life when their son was a child. In less than an hour, Dad was going to lose all he had left of her.

And it would be by their son’s own hand.

“We always find some way out. You—You always do, Stiles.”

Derek wasn’t wearing his leather jacket, or that cream-colored, v-neck sweater. He was wearing a white t-shirt that was now brown, red and shredded. Polluted with Stiles’s blood. He was wearing those faded jeans with the thin knees, and those black boots that clomped noisily across the lumber floor of his woodworking shop downtown. Stiles bought those boots for Derek five years ago, for no reason other than he’d wanted to. Derek had looked at him with crinkled eyes after opening the gift box. Derek’s eyes had been sun-bright and just as warm.

Derek was going to die in those boots. Derek was going to die in his favorite boots.

“I got nothing, Big Guy. No loopholes. No deus ex machina. Looked inside myself, and I’m all tapped out.”

His voice was a pathetic, wavering thing that made Derek’s sound edged with unbreakable steel in comparison. He wasn’t going to sound any better as the clock counted down the minutes. He wasn’t going to get any better from his wounds, and that was—that was okay. He’d do what he had to, and then maybe his goddamn body would step up to the plate and keel over without him having to bleed it dry.

Maybe the Hales would save him a seat at that dinner table, if they accepted him as one of their own. If Derek wanted him there. If Derek saw a place for him there, at his side.

“Then.” Derek sucked in a shuddering breath. Crushed that large hand around the knife’s handle until his knuckles went bone-white. Raised his head high and squared those broad shoulders, steel down to the toes. Every bit the Alpha in soul that he no longer was in flesh. “Then I’ll do it myself. End result’s the same.”

Searing tears sprung to Stiles’s sore eyes. That traitorous thing in his chest balled up into a mass of slicing shards that lodged itself in his throat.

“Fuck you, no. This is on me. I’ll do it. I have to.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. I—” Stiles sunk his teeth into his lower lip until he tasted more iron, until his lower jaw stopped its tremors. “You think I’m just gonna sit here and watch you? You think I can just sit here and let you go—”

Fresh or stale, the blood in his mouth tasted the same. He hadn’t cried in ages. Not since they buried Allison on that rainy Sunday in Beacon Hills Cemetery a lifetime ago and Scott had embraced him and said in his ear, *It wasn’t you, Stiles. It wasn’t you who killed her and there’s nothing to forgive.* He hadn’t cried in ages and he wasn’t about to begin now.

“Stiles.”

Derek went on his knees beside him. The knife dropped onto the floor and bounced away and it still
refused to disappear from existence, no matter how much Stiles wished that. Derek was—god, Derek was stripping off that ruined t-shirt, and there wasn’t a single mark on that hirsute chest or on those still so very sculpted abs. The gashes the warlock had inflicted on them were gone, as if they were never there. That was werewolf healing for you.

Maybe Derek was tough enough now to survive wolfsbane straight to the heart.

Maybe.

Stiles made no sound as Derek moved his hand away and pressed the wadded-up t-shirt on his chest wound in its place. He’d lost all sensation in his legs a while ago. His own t-shirt—the black one with that cartoon, lush-haired unicorn that Lydia bought for his twenty-second birthday—was hardened from layers of drying blood. The white skin of the unicorn was now a gory pink.

“Stiles. Maybe if I do it now, he’ll let you go after I—After. And you can go to the hospital, and you’ll be okay.”

It was kind of fitting that he was wearing a t-shirt with a unicorn on it. Unicorns weren’t the friendly defenders of virgins that people assumed they were. They were actually hideous beasts who enjoyed murdering virgins by goring them through the heart with their horns.

Here he was, a murderer with a murderer on his t-shirt. It was fitting.

And how the hell was he going to be okay in any way? If Derek was dead and he would never see Derek again? If they never had those good mornings where they woke up side by side, where they sat together with hot mugs of coffee and a shared plate of carrot cake, kissing each other under sunshine?

How fucking stupid was he, to ever hope that he would have any of that?

“How the hell was he going to be okay in any way? If Derek was dead and he would never see Derek again? If they never had those good mornings where they woke up side by side, where they sat together with hot mugs of coffee and a shared plate of carrot cake, kissing each other under sunshine?”

Stiles stared into those sun-bright eyes and his own burned.

“I never had a chance with you, did I,” he whispered, and it wasn’t a question. “Probably used up all the luck I had surviving my teenage years.”

Derek stared back. His face was inches away and it appeared a blank slate, but Stiles knew him now, as an ally, as a friend, such a good one. He saw it for the frail veneer it was. He saw the fissures in it. He stared into those sun-bright eyes that glistened, and he saw how close Derek was to his own share of waterworks.

Derek had cried enough for a dozen lifetimes. The last person he should cry for was Stiles.

“You steal my sweaters. My socks. My coffee and my pop tarts. My Camaro when I’m stuck at the workshop and you think I don’t know. Now you have to steal my words too?”

Stiles gasped. Shoved his hand over Derek’s on his palpitating chest. Derek didn’t pull away. Didn’t vanish into thin air like he would every time Stiles woke up from a possible dream of their impossible future and thought, for those few precious seconds in his bed, that it was reality.

Their hands were trembling. Maybe it was his hand making Derek’s tremble.

Maybe Derek’s hand was trembling like his for the same reasons that had nothing to do with blood loss and suffering.
“What?” he croaked.

Derek closed those glistening eyes.

“Christ. Seriously.” Derek opened his eyes, and they didn’t glisten any less, didn’t seem any less red. “You think I would let just anyone take my coffee? My car?” Derek’s lips quirked up into that small smirk he knew so well, the one he sometimes dared to believe was for him alone. “And my leather jacket stinks of you way more than it should. I oughta send you the cleaning bill next time.”

It hurt more than Stiles thought it would to let out an astonished, iron-wet laugh. His chin wobbled, and his lower lip was probably doing that silly quiver again.

Derek—of course Derek knew he’d sneak that leather jacket over his shoulders and wrap it around himself when Derek wasn’t looking. Derek was a werewolf, with the sensitive nose of one. But then Derek wore that Stiles’s-scent-laden leather jacket anyway. Derek never sent that leather jacket out for cleaning.

It would have been nice to wear it one more time. Just one more time.

“Figured maybe you got tired of trying to stop me,” Stiles rasped.

“Nobody can stop you,” Derek said, as if Stiles was invincible and everything was going to be all right.

But Stiles was just a dying man. A dying loser. And nothing was going to be all right after Derek was gone, nothing—

That dam inside him that he’d shored up for years and years crumbled like Mom’s homemade chocolate cookies. He remembered their coarse heat in his pudgy fingers. He remembered how sweet they were, how sweet Mom’s kisses were on his forehead, how happy she looked when he hugged her and told her he loved her, and then she was sick and she was dead and he saw Dad cry for the first time and he—he learned that even the toughest men could cry until their knees buckled when they lost the love of their life. Could break, and never quite mend themselves again.

“I gotta do this, Derek. It’s gotta be me because you—your hands are clean now, you’ve earned your ticket and nobody’s gonna take that from you, least of all me.”

It figured, really, that when the time came for him to use his words, the words he’d yearned to say to Derek for ten years—forever—they would instead drown under words he never imagined he had to say. Words he never ought to say, not when he and Derek were supposed to live for a century, to see their hair turn gray then white. To never, ever know what it felt like to murder the love of his life.

“What are you saying?”

Derek’s glistening, red eyes were so wide.

“They’re waiting for you there, don’t you get it?” Stiles blinked, and blinked, and his burning eyes refused to cease their torrent of tears. “They’ve been waiting for you and if you do it instead of me, you’re gonna lose your ticket and go the other way, to hell, and that’s not the happy ending you deserve to have—”

“Goddamnit, Stiles, who—”

“Your family! Your mom and dad. Laura. Your other sisters, your brothers,” he choked out between gut-wrenching sobs that he couldn’t have reined in even if he tried. “Your cousins, your aunts and
unceles—they’re all there in heaven, and you’ll be happy and nobody will ever hurt you again—I need you to have that, don’t you get it?"

Derek had snapped in two before, after Kate Argent reduced his whole family to ashes and scars and a body rent apart, after he had to kill Boyd with his bare hands. But, to Stiles’s shock, it seemed what it took to completely shatter the steel in Derek’s body, soul and voice were mere words. The wrong words that were somehow also the right ones from a dying, lost loser with no miracle left.

Derek hunched forward and let out a gut-wrenching sob of his own, as if it was wrested out of his very soul with claws. Stiles’s face crumpled, and his eyes kept burning and spilling like the hole in his chest. Derek’s face crumpled and his body crumpled, wrapped around Stiles soft and warm like that prized leather jacket and maybe, maybe, Derek prized him even more than that jacket, more than any other material thing he had.

Derek pressed their foreheads together. Pressed their cheeks together, and it didn’t matter where all those searing rivulets of salt were rolling from. They all tasted the same on Stiles’s lips and tongue.

“And what if all the blood on your hands is there because of me?” Derek said an eon later, still holding him in one breakable piece. “Everything started with you stepping onto my land and into my life.”

Stiles knew it couldn’t be an eon, or he would have bitten the big one long ago. An eon was what he wished he had with Derek. But all he had were waning fantasies and passing minutes.

“I think everything started with you,” he rasped into Derek’s bristly, damp cheek. “Everything.” That was the absolute truth. He believed that. Derek was his everything, and it seemed he was also Derek’s everything, if Derek had shattered into a million pieces because he would be with his family but never see Stiles again.

“Why do you keep saving me?” Derek whispered into his ear. “How many more times are you gonna be my savior?”

Stiles melted in Derek’s solid, sturdy arms. He slid shivering arms around Derek’s bare torso, clung onto Derek’s heaving back. He turned his head, nudged his forehead to Derek’s, rubbed his nose against Derek’s. Brushed his lips on the corner of Derek’s downturned lips.

“You’re worth suffering for,” he whispered back. “Always.”

That was the absolute truth too.

§§§§§§

Stiles could feel his heart slowing down. Grinding itself into a congealed lump of bloody molasses with a plain expiration date. His magic was drained dry fighting that faceless fucker, most of it on the street he grew up on and then the rest in that dim, featureless place where he was offered that fucking knife. The hole in his chest gaped and continued to weep in solidarity with his eyes, turning the lush-haired murderer on his t-shirt red. He’d lost all feeling from the sternum down some time after Derek slipped down to lay that head of dark, profuse hair and sticking-out ears on his shoulder.

He slumped against the wall and kept his arms secure around Derek. He combed the trembling fingers of his right hand through the short hair at Derek’s nape. He rubbed circles into the
unblemished skin of Derek’s flank with his other hand. He memorized the sun-warmth of Derek’s body, the comforting weight of it against his.

He didn’t have much time left. Neither of them did. He needed an eon, an eternity to memorize everything about Derek Hale and infuse it all into the marrow of his bones so he’d never forget, even in hell.

“Tell me what our day would be like,” Derek murmured.

_Tell me what our life would be like, if we had that chance._

The hole in Stiles’s chest went on weeping. It couldn’t hurt more than it already did.

He bowed his head and settled his lips on Derek’s hairline. He could see strands of gray and white along the temple, and he ached so badly to know what Derek would look like with a head of salt-and-pepper hair, or pure white hair like jolly, old Kris Kringle in those quaint Christmas oil paintings. It would be just like Derek to have hair worthy of a high-definition shampoo commercial at the age of eighty.

“We’ll have a king-sized bed in the master bedroom. On the second floor of our new house in the Preserve,” he said, his voice as devout as it would ever be to giving what Derek implored him. “You’ll sleep on the left, me on the right. But we’ll just end up in the middle, your chest to my back, your arm around me, especially on winter nights because you’re hot as an oven at full temp.”

“I think this is the first time you called me hot.”

“Not in my head, no.”

“When was the first time you thought that about me?”

“Guess.”

“That long ago, huh?”

“Never thought somebody saying, ‘This is private property,’ could sound so scary and sexy at the same time.”

He could tell Derek was smiling without gazing upon that perfectly imperfect face.

“Never thought a shaved head could look so jaw-dropping, but you always did know how to up the ante on awful haircuts.”

Derek’s cheek bunched against his shoulder as he tugged at the hair on Derek’s nape in retaliation.

“Excuse you, Mr. I Have More Gel On My Head Than Hair! I grew it out eventually! Now my hair makes boyband lead singers weep at its coiffed and incomparable beauty.”

He felt Derek’s chest expand with a tremulous breath. He felt those slicing shards in his throat again, devouring his scant mirth.


Derek was using his words, and each one pummeled Stiles in an already wounded chest like fired arrows. He squeezed his eyes shut, squeezed out more searing rivulets from them. They trailed down
his cheeks into Derek’s hair. Derek didn’t complain.

Blood, pain and tears were trivial now when all they had were precious moments and a wolfsbane-laced carving knife to end everything.

“We’ll wake up in our king-sized bed at dawn,” he rasped, “because you’re a dumbass who’s gotta run and work out for hours.”

He was grateful Derek didn’t point out his use of future tense. It was too much agony for them both.

“Are you a dumbass too for running with me every morning?”

“Yeah, but that’s beside the point.” He concealed a watery smile in Derek’s smooth forehead. “Then, breakfast. We gotta have waffles. Scrambled eggs and bacon. A pop tart or two. Coffee. The good shit you always buy online from that island that’s who knows where.”

“St. Helena, Stiles. You know exactly where it is. Point it out on the world map like the nerd you are.”

“Only you would fall in love with a magical nerd instead of a werewolf supermodel like yourself.”

“Supermodels are seriously overrated. I prefer a clumsy, lanky guy with boyband hair and tons of moles, who thinks curly fries is manna, uses his magic to heal a puppy’s fractured leg, and makes babies laugh with his silly faces.”

Somehow Stiles’s failing body found the strength to let out an amused chuckle. Human bodies were crazy like that sometimes. Human hearts were even crazier, with their tendencies to make somebody fall madly in love with someone who had, against all the odds, fallen madly in love with them too.

“I thought my faces were beautiful, you asshole.”

“Silly and beautiful can be synonymous,” Derek murmured, and once more, that jagged mass was in Stiles’s throat, choking him.

“Yeah. That’s you. Silly-beautiful. Crazy, stupid beautiful with a heaping dose of funny asshole and brooding artist and badass firefighter on the side.”

“Tell me what we do after breakfast.”

Stiles breathed in as deep as he could. He was beginning to go numb in the chest as well, and that was probably for the best. Derek curled up against his dying body. Derek fitted in his embrace as if his arms were made to hold Derek and no one else.

“We’ll go somewhere quiet, far away from town. We’ll bicker over who gets behind the wheel of the Camaro—”

“Me, of course—”

“But I do, of course, and I’ll take us for a drive and—” Stiles leaned his cheek on Derek’s head. “There’s this small lake about ten miles northwest of Beacon Hills. It’s in this really secluded forest area that you gotta hike to for about twenty minutes. Mom—” His breath this time was hitched. “It was Mom’s favorite place for picnics and a swim in the bluest waters I’d ever seen. When we were there, it was like the rest of the world didn’t exist. Like all our problems went away.”

“I’m there,” Derek murmured, and Stiles could see Derek there, in a pair of swim shorts—
Spongebob Squarepants print because Stiles had good taste—lounging on a blanket under the sun. Watching him stomp across pale sand from the cool water to the blanket with a contented quirk of lips.

“We’ll go for a swim. Have a picnic. Then we’ll go back home. Back into our bedroom and we’ll—”

“Watch movies on your laptop? Gorge on curly fries and soda until we puke?”

Stiles snorted. “I dunno, I was thinking a marathon of fantastic sex all night long, but hey, I’m not gonna stop you if you prefer movies and junk food.”

“We’d be good together. Amazing. I know it.” Derek rubbed a bristly cheek against the skin between his neck and shoulder. “The number of times I imagined kissing you. Feeling your body under or over mine, your arms around me, your legs sliding with mine. Me in you. You in me. You don’t even know.”

Stiles’s chest was numb, but that maimed, wailing thing in it was anything but. He didn’t point out Derek’s use of past tense. It would have been beyond agony to do that.

I could hurt you some more. I’m all for that. That’s the whole point, you know?

“I know,” he whispered into Derek’s creased forehead. “I do know.”

He was the reason Derek was going to die. He was the reason Derek was going to die never knowing what he’d look like with salt-and-pepper hair, or how clear the water of that lake was, or what it’d feel like to push inside Stiles and fill all those empty places in them until they were one.

Derek was going to die, but so was he, and he had to die. When he died, that faceless fucker of a warlock would move on from the pack, from Beacon Hills. When he died, there was no more reason for this clusterfuck to go on.

“That was an awesome day,” Derek said. “That was our day today.”

Derek’s cheek was damp again on his shoulder. He closed his eyes as Derek nuzzled his neck and lower jaw, sniffed his skin and breathed him in, as if Derek wanted to memorize his scent. As if Derek hadn’t already done that years and years ago.

“Yeah. It was a perfect day,” Stiles choked out.

He could feel his maimed, wailing heart slowing down. Derek could hear it.

Ice deluged his veins when Derek peeled himself away and sat up. Derek crawled over to that fucking knife on the floor and picked it up, like it was a mere toy, as if it wasn’t going to kill him soon, him and Stiles both. Stiles’s eyes widened and his breath snagged deep in his lung. Then it surged out his nose and mouth, and his lung wouldn’t draw in any air again as Derek crawled back with the knife.

He had no idea what his face was showing right now. It had to be appalling. Derek’s face was pallid, like it was when he was dying from wolfsbane poisoning and asked Stiles to cut his goddamn arm off in Deaton’s clinic. Derek’s expression was one he last saw on Dad’s face while Mom’s coffin was lowered into its freshly dug grave.

He squeezed his eyes shut. His upper body convulsed in a desperate attempt to suck in oxygen he didn’t want.
“Stiles. Look at me.”

Derek’s warm hand grasped the back of his neck. He grabbed Derek’s hunched shoulders and he opened his mouth and tried to breathe, but then that fucking knife touched his arm. That fucking knife that Derek was gripping and pointing its razor-sharp tip at his bare chest, his beating heart.

Stiles’s eyes popped open.

“No—no, Derek—”

He couldn’t see a damn thing past the hot, stinging film over them. He grabbed for the knife instead. Forced it down and away from Derek’s chest. Derek was letting him do it, he knew that. It was nothing more than a slight reprieve.

“It’s gotta be me who does it, give it to me, give it—”

“Hey. Hey, it’s okay, Stiles. It’s okay.”

Derek pressed their foreheads together. Held his head in place when he tried to bang it into the wall behind him, bang it again and again until something broke and released salvation for them both. It was hilarious how Derek thought he was the savior between the two of them. Derek was always the one saving him from himself. Didn’t Derek know that?

“Everything’s gonna be okay, babe. And you know why?”

Stiles tasted wet salt on his lips again. Derek’s hazel, red-rimmed eyes filled his entire universe.

“Why?” he whimpered.

“Because you’ll swear to me that you’ll avenge my death. No matter how long it takes you.”

Derek’s almighty hand refused to let him go. He had both hands around Derek’s other hand around the carving knife’s handle. He had to hold onto it, but he was also this close to slamming his fist into Derek’s cheek.

“You goddamn piece of shit, you bastard—you fucking—”

“Swear to me, Stiles!”

“I’m gonna die too, you stupid asshole—”

“No, you won’t. You’ll make it. Do you hear me? You’ll get outta here and you’ll live, Stiles.” Derek glowered at him. Shook him by his nape. “Swear to me you’ll live and avenge my death! Swear it!”

Stiles felt something in him break anyway. Shatter like Derek did, into a billion, irretrievable pieces that no one could glue together again. His streaked face crumpled and his spilling eyes scrunched shut and his blood-wet mouth gaped open in an anguished, resonant howl. It cracked the walls around them. Scattered the billions of pieces of him into eternal darkness.

Derek refused to let him go. Derek refused to let him die.

“How am—I gonna go on after this?” he choked out between quavering breaths. “Derek, tell me how.”

“You’ll find a way,” Derek said, wet eyes more red than hazel but no less beautiful. “You always
do. You’re the smartest, strongest man I’ve ever known.”

Derek raised the tip of the carving knife again. Pointed it at his breathtaking, irreplaceable, vulnerable heart. Derek’s hands didn’t shake like Stiles’s.

“Took me a long time to figure out what I felt for you, after I saw you for the first time. Walking onto my private property like it was already yours. You looked me in the eye, and it was like I knew you. Like I already, really knew you.”

Stiles gulped in a scratchy breath that ended on a whine. Derek gave his nape a tender squeeze. Rubbed their foreheads harder.

“By the fifth time, it felt like I already, really knew you my whole life. By the tenth time, I knew we were fated to be thrown together, no matter how far apart the world moved us. By the hundredth time, I knew you were a place I could call home.”

“Derek,” Stiles sobbed.

He had to move Derek’s hand away from the knife. He had to be the only one holding the knife to finish the job. But he was so weak, too weak. All his remaining strength was flowing from his eyes, down his face and Derek’s.

“By the thousandth time I saw you, looked at you smile, listened to you laugh, smelled your perfect scent on my clothes and my skin,” Derek rasped, “I knew there was no one else for me but you. You’re it, babe. You’re my mate. I’ve never loved anyone like I love you, and I will never love anyone else like I will always love you. Don’t you get it? You’re the reason I’m happy, Stiles. You’re the only happy ending I need.”

Derek pressed soft lips to Stiles’s quivering ones. It was far from Stiles’s first kiss, far from the nicest kiss. It was stained with tears and blood that should never have defiled his first kiss with Derek. But it was his first kiss with Derek. The only one. The one that counted more than any other. The one he’d dreamed of for a decade, for an eon, and finally got in reality. The one he was going to remember for an infinity, even in the bowels of hell.

“I’ll never die, Stiles,” Derek whispered. “You think of me, you remember me, and I’m alive. You look inside your heart for me, and I’ll be there, always. Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” Stiles whispered back.

There was no other answer he could give. He was completely numb. He shivered and pictured himself pulling the carving knife out of Derek, slitting his own throat. Slash of a grisly smile from ear to ear.

He knew Derek didn’t hear his heart skip.

“Good boy,” Derek said, smiling at him for the last time.

Derek yanked the carving knife out of Stiles’s grip. It pierced Derek’s chest without a sound.
Grace Under Pressure

Derek’s eyes were gray. They were a horrible, rancid gray that should never be the color of Derek’s eyes. Derek’s eyes were supposed to be green, blue, brown and every other color under the sky that meant alive and gorgeous and forever.

“Derek?” Stiles mumbled.

He stared down at Derek’s head on his lap. Derek was lying on his back, those muscular arms straight at his sides. Gazing at the white ceiling with those horrible, vacant eyes that weren’t his. Derek didn’t reply.

The curved marble handle of that carving knife stood at attention from Derek’s chest. A thin pillar of bone jutting out of silent blood and still flesh. Black veins had crept serpentine paths across colorless skin from the root of the blade, halting in their tracks when—when Derek’s heart—

Stiles pressed blood-drenched, trembling fingers to Derek’s lips. They weren’t soft and warm like they were when Derek kissed him. They were cold. They were gray just like Derek’s eyes that shouldn’t be gray, but now they were also red with Stiles’s blood.

Maybe if he gave enough of his blood to Derek, Derek would be okay again. Maybe if he waited for a while, Derek would breathe and move again, blink those hazel eyes up at him and call him an idiot for not believing in him.

“Derek?”

Derek didn’t move. Didn’t say a word. Derek was out of words now. Derek was—

Stiles skimmed his fingers down from Derek’s lips to that hirsute chest. A motionless chest.

Derek, you stupid asshole. Don’t you know you have to breathe to stay alive?

He stared down at the crimson smears on Derek’s chin and collarbones. Maybe, if he waited for a while, just a while, everything was going to be okay again. Wasn’t that what Derek said? That everything was going to be okay, because Stiles promised to live?

“Derek. I lied.”

The hole in his chest was no longer weeping. There was next to no blood inside him. It was all outside, on his t-shirt, his hands. Soaking his jeans. Pooling on the floor together with Derek’s cooling blood.

Didn’t Derek need it? How was he going to put it back inside Derek when he didn’t know how to put his own blood back inside himself? How was—

Something bright and golden—a spark—fired up inside him. It lasted for a second.

Stiles’s eyes widened, unseeing. His head whipped up. His breath hiccuped in his concave chest.

No.

Oh, no.

No, he was supposed to be all tapped out. His magic was—
Stiles scrunched his eyes shut and grimaced. His fingernails dug into his palms.

“No. No—fuck you, you’re not supposed to—”

It jumpstarted, and this time, it hurt Stiles enough that his upper body convulsed from the fiery, rippling pain. He cried out to ears that heard nothing. His head banged against the wall, then again from another convulsion, another flare of pain and golden light. Too little, too late, for that miracle.

He’d assumed his magic was all gone when he’d opened his third-eye to gaze within himself and saw no tiny spark, nothing. But he was—he was wrong. It was there, and it was coming back, one agonizing blaze at a time. Maybe he hadn’t gazed deep enough. Maybe he hadn’t dared to gaze deep enough, so he wouldn’t discover that his magic was permanently gone, snacked on by the other warlock.

His magic was trying to revive itself from its hibernation, dredge itself up from his innermost core to heal his damaged body. Whenever it got drained, his magic needed time to replenish itself, more so if it was drained swiftly while he was wounded. Given enough time, enough energy, his magic would restore itself as long as that tiny spark still burned somewhere in him. His magic would heal him. Save him.

This was what he’d feared.

This was why he had to cut his throat, why he had to bleed himself out as fast as possible. His goddamn body was stepping up to the plate, all right, but it wasn’t going to keel over. It was starting to fight for itself whether Stiles wanted that or not.

And Derek knew this was going to happen.

Stiles shut his eyes. Banged his head on the wall again.

Had Derek seen the spark still in him when he hadn’t? Had Derek dragged things out to the very last moment so the spark revived before Stiles could do anything about it?

Of course Derek did. Of course the stupid, self-sacrificing asshole bastard did.

It wouldn’t be the first time Derek had seen him in battle with his magic drained. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d fought his way back from what seemed like certain death in such a situation: a clan of trolls had infiltrated Beacon Hills four years ago, when Scott was still learning about his True Alpha abilities and Derek was still an Alpha who’d pledged himself to Scott’s pack. The trolls were dim-witted, lumbering giants encrusted in moss and the bloody bits of humans they’d eaten. It was the latter that prompted Scott and the pack to slay them all.

The leader of the clan, a truly stinky and ugly specimen, had swung a massive fist into Stiles’s torso and broken every rib on impact. Sent him soaring through the air. He smashed against a tree and plummeted to the ground a human bag of fragmented bones. The meager amount of magic he had left stopped him from perishing on the spot.

Derek’s Alpha spark was what brought his magic, and him, back to stubborn life.

He didn’t quite recall how that went down, even after Scott had explained to him that Derek had propelled his Alpha spark straight into Stiles’s destroyed body by sheer faith and touch, by pressing both hands on his bare chest, over his struggling heart. He remembered Derek’s frantic hands on him, yes. He remembered Derek talking into his ear, telling him he was going to be okay, everything was going to be okay.
You're okay, Stiles. You’re gonna be okay. I’m here, I won’t let you go, I promise.

When he’d opened his eyes again, he was healed with nary a bruise, lying in Derek’s bed while the pack anxiously waited in the living room and kitchen for him to wake up. Derek had said nothing about losing his Alpha spark, about becoming Scott’s Beta. Derek had simply looked at him with those sun-bright, sun-warm eyes after he hugged and thanked Derek. As if he was the damn sun instead. As if the whole world revolved around him and there was no world without him.

Why hadn’t he seen the truth then? Why hadn’t he recognized the light in Derek’s eyes for the same enduring, terrifying feeling deep in his own chest?

“You promised me.” He gritted his lower jaw from those returning tremors. “You promised you wouldn’t let me go.”

Derek’s head had slipped closer to his belly, face turned toward him. Now Derek stared with those gray, vacant eyes at the blood-red murderer on his t-shirt. Derek said nothing.

Derek was dead.

Derek was the love of his life, his mate, his everything, but Derek was dead while he was still alive, and that—that just wasn’t right.

It was time to fix that.

He gritted his teeth harder as another jolt of pain rippled through his chest, then through his abdomen. The spark of magic was already attempting to heal his lung and the hole in his chest, to save its host—and itself—from imminent demise. He didn’t know what else had ruptured in his body. His appendix, maybe. Or spleen. Something that wouldn’t be instantly fatal but hurt him.

He had to get the knife. Get it out now and do what he had to do.

His hands shook as he raised them. His breath burst from his mouth when he seized the carving knife’s handle with both hands. He sucked in a jittery breath, another, then another. He felt like throwing up, like opening his mouth and screaming. He had to swallow one down before it poured out of him and flooded the world.

Derek had wrenched the knife away from him. Shoved the blade in all by himself. He’d failed to protect Derek, to stop Derek from losing his ticket to heaven.

Where was Derek now?

He couldn’t bear to think about it. He’d go fucking insane if he did, if Derek was in hell, burning and burning for perpetuity because of him. Hadn’t Derek suffered enough? Hadn’t Derek earned his place in heaven, regardless of whose hands had been on the knife?

The knife. He had to get the knife out and finish the job.

“It’s okay, Derek. I forgive you,” he rasped, blinking fresh rivulets of salt down his cheeks. “Wait for me.”

A strangled, terrible sound escaped him at the first wrench of the carving knife’s handle. The knife didn’t yield an inch. It was stuck deep in Derek’s chest, caught on ribs. He yanked it again even as he desperately shunned the image of Derek’s face after the blade pierced home. There was so much blood, so much of Derek’s blood, and it was staining his forearms, his hands, his jeans and—
And the knife wouldn’t move. It was utterly stuck. Derek shoved it in so hard that it would take the full strength of a werewolf to pull it out. Superhuman strength that Stiles didn’t have.

Hot tears sprinkled Derek’s colorless cheeks.

“Goddamn you, you fucking asshole,” Stiles yelled. “You stupid, noble fucker—Derek—”

He yanked a third time on the carving knife with every ounce of strength he had, his bloody teeth bared, his arms shuddering with effort.

It budged an inch.

He yanked it a fourth time with a high-pitched shout, ignoring the revolting noises of metal scraping bone and flesh. It budged another inch, come on, give me another—

The next flare of golden light was blinding, accompanied by agony that surpassed anything Stiles had ever experienced before. The troll’s fist breaking all his ribs was a mere tap compared to the abrupt eruption that tore through his writhing body and limbs like rampant electricity at a thousand amps through every vein he owned. Devastating flames consumed him whole. Something inside him was swelling like lava up a volcano’s throat and something was lacerating every inch of his skin, clawing its way into him and all of it hurt, it hurt so fucking bad, Derek, Derek—

He keeled forward like a tattered rag doll onto Derek’s sprawled body. He tried to scream but no sound emerged from his gaping mouth. He convulsed yet again, his limbs smacking the wall and floor. A supernova of magical power had triggered itself in his chest, and its shockwaves were expanding and ramming his ribs, his mortal flesh and skin, and he was—he was dying. He had to be. He didn’t know what the hell else could be happening to him.

Another explosion of golden light rendered him sightless and senseless.

He floated in the moonless, starless sky.

Feeling returned to him in iotas. Something in the darkness brushed against his neck, his side. Something soft and warm. Something alive and fierce. He tried to reach for it, to touch it. It eluded his hands, a slippery shadow that darted away from him. Then it was back, nearer than before, grazing his face. Wrapping itself around him like a downy mantle.

He calmed in its snug and steadfast embrace. He was safe here. Nothing could hurt him here.

Derek?

No one answered him.

He opened his eyes, and he wasn’t floating anymore. He was curled up across Derek’s abdomen, his head hanging over the side, his temple almost touching the floor. His arms were folded close to his chest. His long legs were squashed between his body and the wall.

He blinked. Blinked again, then pressed a palm to the floor to push himself upright. He didn’t feel any pain at all as he did so. He breathed easy. Both lungs were functional. He tugged his blood-hardened t-shirt up to the collarbones, and yeah, the hole in his blood-stained chest was gone. No scar to even prove it’d been there.

What the fuck? How did that happen?

In all his years of practicing magic, he’d never healed this fast from severe injuries. When Derek had
used his Alpha spark to heal him, he’d still required fifteen consecutive days of a heavy coma to process the power and allow his magic to refill to maximum capacity.

He’d just healed from a collapsed lung, a punctured chest, a ruptured internal organ, a bashed-up face and numerous contusions in minutes.

What the ever loving fuck?

He received a reality check when he sat up and almost fell back down from intense dizziness and nausea. Okay. Okay, he wasn’t totally recovered. His wounds were gone, but he was still physically weakened. His magic was still a paltry spark within him. That made sense, considering what just occurred—except even at full power, his magic was never capable of such intense, rapid healing. That level of potent magic, according to Deaton, required decades of training to control the accumulation and release of power inside the practitioner.

No way in hell did his recovering spark do this.

So what did?

That fucker of a warlock? No, no, why would he, when Stiles’s suffering was his goal? If anything, the warlock would have worsened his injuries. Prolonged his life until he begged to be exterminated like a rabid dog to join his werewolf in—

He slapped a shaking hand over his shut eyes. Gulped in a deep, painless breath. Swallowed bile. Waited for the dizzy spell to pass.

He let his hand fall from his face. He kept his eyes shut as he gulped in another deep breath. Then he opened them. Rolled onto his knees and crawled meager inches to kneel next to Derek’s head.

The carving knife still protruded from Derek’s motionless chest.

Stiles stared at it. Stared at the black veins on Derek’s chest. At the dried blood on Derek’s lips, chin and collarbones, at the drying pool of blood under Derek’s torso. At Derek’s eyes that were still gray, still horrible. Still vacant.

“Derek?” he whispered.

Derek’s eyes didn’t blink. Derek’s lips didn’t move.

Derek was—Derek was still dead.

Stiles was still alive, but Derek was still dead and the fucking knife was still stuck in Derek’s chest and his spark could scarcely be harnessed, and he—he was—

He was defeated. He didn’t know how to fix Derek, how to fix any of this.

He was broken.

That faceless fucker of a warlock had won the game that Stiles hadn’t even wished to play. Hadn’t even needed to be here in person to hurt Stiles beyond all repair.

Stiles yanked at his hair with both hands and hyperventilated. He swallowed a scream. Then another. He choked on a sob, let out the next one with a fresh wave of searing tears. He bent down, carding his fingers through Derek’s hair, stroking one of those dark, thick eyebrows that would never again arch up in amusement or contempt or surprise.
He forced himself upright once more. He dragged Derek into his arms, between his legs and tucked Derek’s head under his chin. He rocked them both from side to side, hating how cold and lighter Derek’s body felt now. Derek’s body was here but Derek’s soul wasn’t anymore, and that made all the difference. He shut his burning, spilling eyes. He opened his third-eye and gazed deep into himself, as deep as he could go, seeking the blooming flame of his magic.

There. There it was, growing and growing in the darkness, swifter than it ever had before.

He couldn’t fix things. But he could still finish the job, if he tried hard enough, long enough.

“I’m sorry,” he said into Derek’s hair, still rocking them.

He fed the flame his grief, his rage. Fed it all the love he had for the dead werewolf in his embrace. He fed it with everything he had, and it all stoked the flame until it became a golden, immeasurable inferno buffeting his ribs, his flesh and skin yet again. He was prepared for the eruption of power from within him this time. He clutched Derek tight to him as the inferno flared and exploded out of him, a head-rearing and world-sundering roar, a violent shockwave of scorching light and sound.

It splintered all the walls surrounding them, crushing their prison to dust.

It rippled across the land under a half moon. It steamrolled over abandoned warehouses and dense forests and the spread-out homes of Beacon Hills folks and the town itself, blowing out electricity generators and transformers for miles and miles around. Countless windows shattered in their frames. Bikes, cars and traffic lights died on the streets without so much as a sputter. Computers and phones suffered an equally rapid death.

Scott’s SUV, bearing Scott, Kira and Isaac, careened across Kingston Street with a screech and almost crashed into the closed Starbucks on the corner. Jackson’s Porsche, with Jackson at the wheel and Lydia sitting next to him, stalled at a dead traffic light, just minutes behind Scott.

Dad was at home, pacing the narrow space between that familiar, old couch and that low, rickety coffee table that Mom bought at a flea market, when the shockwave struck. A half-full glass of whiskey stood sentinel on the coffee table. Dad’s haggard face was bristly, pasty in the dim illumination of the lamp on the side table. Dad held his phone to his ear, and it expired along with the lamp as he snarled in the shadows, “My boy’s still out there, do you understand that?! So are you gonna help me or not, Argent?”

All of Beacon County was plunged into darkness within minutes.

Scott, Kira and Isaac leaped out of the SUV onto the dark street, unscathed, dumbfounded, their eyes glowing under the moonlight.

Dad stood in the shadows of the living room, mouth agape while he held onto his dead phone.

Jackson, his wide eyes also glowing, gripped the steering wheel so hard that it was distorting in his hands. Lydia gripped her temples, crying, and screaming and screaming with Stiles.

He saw all this, somehow, before the savage storm of his magic blinded his eyes and boiled his innards and severed his voice. He didn’t feel any pain at all. He was calm and safe and warm, wrapped in that downy mantle again, and he was so very sure that nothing could hurt him.

I’m so sorry. I love you, babe. I love you.

He nuzzled his face in Derek’s hair and smelled the sun.
His eyes fluttered shut.

Stiles opened his eyes, and was perplexed to discover that hell was a very cold and colorless place. He stared at the white ceiling above him. He—he knew that ceiling. If this was hell, then hell had a ceiling that looked identical to the ceiling above his bed, down to the subtle water stain near the left corner.

“Stiles?”

Oh, he was lying in his bed. His bed in his apartment a ten minutes’ drive away from his childhood home.

He wasn’t in hell. He thought he—he was supposed to die, wasn’t he? But he didn’t. He didn’t die after—after—

After what?

He let his eyelids flutter down. He kept his eyes closed for a while, then opened them to slits. Nope, his bedroom ceiling was still there, but not the answer to his question. He was swathed in at least two blankets, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and sweatpants. The room was murky, beige curtains drawn over windows that bled feeble sunlight along their straight edges.

“Stiles? Can you hear me?”

Someone was sitting on the side of his bed, next to his hip. Grasping his right hand. Squeezing it with callused fingers.

Oh. It was Dad.

Dad.

He tried to part his lips. They felt cemented together. His mouth was an arid desert, and his throat was filled with thorns. How long had he been asleep?

“You’re okay. You’re safe now, son. You’re home.”

He swiveled his eyes away from the ceiling. His gaze landed on his father, on the new lines of stress and worry creasing it. He couldn’t begin to count how many of them were the direct results of his actions throughout the decades. He couldn’t take credit for the deepest ones that carved into Dad down to the marrow, though. The brownie points for those went to the disease that ravaged Mom’s brain and murdered her long before the rest of her body disintegrated.

“Dad, are you—are you okay? How long—”

He sounded as if churning gravel had replaced his voice box. His voice was usually higher in pitch. He left the gravelly, growly talk to the wolves in the pack.

“I’m okay, son, now that you’re awake.” Stiles felt those callused, fond fingers skim through his hair in a soothing gesture. “You’ve been in a coma for twenty-four days.”
Dad was wearing, of all things, a fugly Christmas sweater that had dancing reindeers and Darth Vader masks all over it. It was—oh, it was the sweater Stiles bought for him six Christmases back. He’d seen it online for sale, thought it would make for a funny gift on top of the new coffee maker to replace the ancient one Dad refused to relinquish. Why was Dad wearing that of all—

Wait.

Twenty-four days?

“What?” he croaked, and his voice upgraded from churning gravel to Christian Bale-Batman gruff. “Twen—are you kidding me?”

He tried to sit up. Tried to use his forearms and abs to get up, and holy shit, he couldn’t lift his head without Dad’s hand gripping the back of it, tipping his head forward so he could suck on the straw leading down to a cup of water. He almost moaned at the soothing sensation of the cool water flowing over his parched tongue and down his throat.

Dad helped him to sit up and lie back on a stack of fluffed pillows. It was bad that just sipping some water had taken so much out of him. The kind of bad that had him at death’s door and carved more lines on Dad’s face.

“You were—you were in really rough shape when Scott brought you home.”

Dad was grasping his hand again. Stroking the back of his fingers with a thumb. Dad used to do that when he was a kid, after—after Mom died and he had nightmares about running the never-ending hallways of the hospital seeking her, screaming for her but never finding her.

He didn’t pull his hand away. Dad’s hand was all that tethered him to the waking world.

“Do you remember what happened?”

He stared up at his father’s face. At those beloved, familiar features he’d known from the moment Dad held him in those burly arms for the very first time. There was that little wrinkle between Dad’s eyebrows. That little wrinkle that appeared whenever painful words were percolating inside and they had to work themselves out as bad news to their intended recipient. Or condolences.

Stiles’s chapped lips pursed, then opened. No sound rolled off them for lengthy seconds. He pressed them into a thin line.

He—he remembered Dad sprawled on the front porch, unconscious. Dad’s gun had become a mound of metal goo on the wooden floor, but minutes before that, it was a loaded gun and Dad had been shouting and pointing it at—

The faceless warlock.

The faceless fucker who popped out of the blue—literally, in a blaze of bluish light—and kidnapped him and Derek from under Dad’s and Scott’s noses.

Derek.

“Stiles?” Dad squeezed his hand again. “Do you remember what happened? After you were—taken away?”

He did remember. He remembered slamming into what felt like a cement floor once the warlock’s teleportation spell spat him out. Derek had disappeared without a trace, and Stiles had mere seconds
to realize that before the warlock walloped him in the face with an invisible fist. Hard enough to send him spinning through the air. He hurled a bolt of golden lightning at the warlock before he landed on the floor.

The warlock neutralized the lightning bolt to harmless air with the wave of a hand. A bigger fist rammed into Stiles’s head. The impact robbed him of what little breath he had. Made black stars explode in his eyes and his teeth cut the insides of his lips. Made every source of pain in his body flare into paralyzing agony. Those few seconds of inaction cost him more bruises and streaming blood as the warlock crushed him to the floor under what felt like an invisible slab of stone with the weight of the earth upon it.

Throughout the one-sided battle, the warlock had stood in place, like he was a spectator at the circus ring and Stiles was the chained, collared animal being whipped into its role. Lifting a hand to casually swat at the air, each gesture a brutal strike upon Stiles’s body. The warlock laughed at him when he couldn’t even get within six feet of the fucker.

Yes, he remembered how inferior he’d been. A hopeless fly hinging on the mercy of gods he didn’t believe in.

He remembered the warlock jerking him up to his feet with invisible hands. Letting him wobble like the worm he was, his eyes dull and ringed by darkness, his hands blood-spattered and empty. Saying those goddamn words that altered his universe forever.

*Let’s play a game, shall we? You, Stiles Stilinski, will stab Derek Hale in the heart with this wolfsbane-laced knife.*

“He was—” Stiles swallowed hard, staring at the ceiling again. “He was too powerful. I couldn’t—I tried, Dad. But I couldn’t win. He was just too strong.”

“Oh, Stiles.”

Dad tightened the hand around his. He could feel Dad gazing at him with what had to be pity.

*Hey, there goes that loser spastic Stilinski again, failing at everything like he always does.*

“There was a—a knife and we were trapped in some kinda room with no windows or doors—and Derek—”

Derek.

*Derek.*

What happened to Derek?

Did he—did he actually play that sick game and—

Stiles glanced at his father, and said, “Dad. Where’s Derek?”

Dad’s hand remained tight around his. If it was any tighter, small bones were going to crack. But Stiles still didn’t pull away his hand. It was shivering in Dad’s grip.

That little wrinkle between Dad’s furrowed eyebrows meant something. Something very bad.

“Dad,” he said louder, firmer. “Where’s Derek?”

His bedroom door swung open, letting in warm light from the ceiling lamp of the hallway.
“Hey, Stiles. Welcome back.”

Scott stood in the doorway, attired in a black-and-white raglan shirt and jeans. Dark bags weighed down large brown eyes gleaming with evident relief. Scott’s wavy hair was tousled. Scott had some major stubble action going on, as if he hadn’t shaved in days. It was an attractive look on his friend. But it couldn’t compete with Derek’s stubble.

“Scott,” Stiles murmured, sinking into the bed, a flicker of warmth igniting in his chest.

Scott was here. Scott must have heard his question. If Dad wouldn’t answer him, Scott would answer him.

Scott walked to the bed and stood beside Dad. Dad drew in an unsteady breath when Scott placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. Dad suddenly looked so small, so fragile. Dad glanced up at Scott who gazed down at him with those compassionate eyes, then glanced at Stiles.

Dad’s expression was the same one Stiles saw the night Dad sat him on the couch and told him Mom was very ill and needed to stay in the hospital for a while.

Can we go see her?

Of course we can. She misses you so much, buddy.

When is she coming back home, Daddy?

She’ll come back soon, okay, son? I promise.

“I’m gonna heat up some soup, okay, son? That chicken one with the alphabet pasta you like.”

“Okay, Dad,” he murmured. “Thanks.”

There was no other reply he could give. Dad looked as if he was inches away from fracturing inside, and he didn’t have enough magic yet to fix that. He didn’t want Dad to fracture. He didn’t want Dad to ever hurt.

He watched Dad shuffle to the door and leave the room. Scott sat in Dad’s place on the side of the bed, turned toward him. There was more light in the room due to the open door. More light to see the fine lines at the corner of Scott’s eyes, around his mouth. They weren’t laugh lines. Scott seemed to have aged a decade since Stiles last saw him.

“How’re you feeling?”

Stiles took his time to respond. He didn’t quite know what an honest answer would be to that.

“Tired. Numb.” He rested his clenched hands on his belly on top of the blankets. “Confused.”

Scott’s caring expression didn’t change.

“Confused about what?”

“Well, see.” Stiles’s hands clenched tighter. “I remember—the knife, right? I remember it, and Derek. The two of us in a room. But—I don’t know what happened next.”

Scott continued to gaze at him. Scott’s eyes were as compassionate as ever. Scott laid a large, warm hand on his forearm, an inch above his right wrist.
It was Stiles’s own fault, really, for forgetting that the ultimate cruelty could be enfolded in the most genuine kindness.

“Stiles.” The Adam’s apple in Scott’s throat bobbed once. “Derek’s dead.”

Stiles stared up at his lifelong best friend. He had no idea what his face was showing right now, none. It had to be fucking appalling, for Scott’s eyes to well up like that and his lips to press into that colorless, stiff line.

_No. No, Scott. I’m the one who should be dead. Not Derek._

Right?

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Stiles. I heard Lydia scream, and we didn’t think she screamed because of—” Scott rubbed his free hand across his mouth. Pressed its palm over it for a moment. “We—we thought we’d reach you in time, after Deaton kept casting that location spell and finally found you and Derek in that old warehouse in the Warehouse District. But—the whole town was in chaos. There was no electricity, no phones or computers working. Mom told me later that the only generators that still ran were the ones at the hospital. The roads were blocked, and vehicles started working again only after a couple of hours—”

Scott was silent for what felt like a tense century. Scott lowered his eyes to the vicinity of Stiles’s frozen chest.

“I didn’t wanna believe it. But, when the black out happened, I felt Derek’s bond to me break.” Scott removed his hand from Stiles’s forearm and balled it into a fist that he pressed to his chest, over his heart. “Here.”

Stiles stared up at Scott and didn’t say anything. He knew what the breaking of a pack bond meant, particularly when it was the Alpha feeling the loss of a Beta’s bond: either the Beta had renounced the bond to become an Omega doomed to go mad and die alone, or the Beta died. There was no deceiving the Alpha in either situation, and a True Alpha like Scott was able to sense and cultivate pack bonds to greater degrees than regular Alphas.

Derek taught Scott all that.

Derek was—Derek was really dead.

Stiles was supposed to—no, not die, not at first. Stiles was supposed to use that knife. To stab—to kill Derek with it. To save the town, the world.

Stiles hadn’t dreamed the clusterfuck of a nightmare. It hadn’t been some morbid hallucination. He had five fingers on each hand the entire time, and so did Derek. Derek was really _dead_. And, failure on two legs that he was, he couldn’t even end his own life properly after—after _Derek’s heart stopped from the wolfsbane on that fucking carving knife._

“Oh,” Stiles mumbled.

“The warehouse had collapsed on itself. You and Derek were inside, and there was—so much blood. All over the walls and floor. All over you. You were hunched over Derek and holding him, so we—we didn’t see the knife in his chest at first.”

Again, Scott fell silent. Again, Scott laid a hand on Stiles’s forearm, and gave it a squeeze.

“You heard one heartbeat,” Stiles whispered. “Mine.”
Scott nodded. “Yeah. That’s when—I couldn’t deny it anymore. That Derek was dead. And I smelled the wolfsbane on the knife.” Scott sucked in a noisy breath, then said, “I’m so sorry, Stiles. I am. I know you must have done everything you could to stop that monster from stabbing Derek. You were—I could hear your heartbeat, but you really looked like you were dead.” Scott ran a hand down his wan face. “I dunno what happened to you. I don’t know enough about magic to know. But you were hurt really bad. Blood was coming out from your nose, your mouth and ears. Even your eyes, Stiles. Deaton used some spell to examine you, and he said most of your insides turned to sludge. Like you melted inside from some extreme magical heat. He said you should have been dead too.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Stiles didn’t know what else to say. He should be dead. He should be dead, but he wasn’t. And he didn’t understand why. Was he that much of a loser that he couldn’t even off himself with his own magic?

Scott stared at him. Blinded hard until those brown, compassionate eyes didn’t glisten anymore.

“But—” Scott squeezed his forearm another time. “You were still alive. You were still breathing. You started to heal. Deaton couldn’t explain it.” Scott’s eyes were still sorrowful and weary, and so was Scott’s small smile. “You went into a coma like that time with the trolls, and we trusted your magic to do its work. And now you’re back.” Scott shook his head in awe. “It’s incredible. You’re incredible.”

Stiles stared, and he didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t make Scott hate his guts on the spot.

I’m not incredible. I’m a failure. A murderer.

I’m the one who killed the last Hale of Beacon Hills. I’m the one who accepted that knife and gave it to Derek because I was too fucking weak to fix anything. I’m the one who killed Derek.

“Deaton set up tons of new protection wards all over town. Your dad’s house was the first to be warded. Then the pack’s homes, including your apartment. He’s been doing his best to track the guy, but—” Scott’s features twisted into a frustrated frown. “No results. So far. Deaton thinks the guy’s using some kind of spell to mess with us, to stop us from locating him.”

Stiles stared on. His head was cold and empty like his hands, his heart.

“Every time Deaton tried a location spell on him, the spell pointed here.”

“What?” Stiles whispered.

“Yeah. That’s what I meant about him messing with us. After the first spell, Isaac and I camped out here with your dad while you recovered. We thought the guy was planning to kidnap you again and was lurking around. Deaton cast the spell a second and third time, and every time, the spell pointed here. Your apartment.” Scott flung his hands up in the air. “He tried the spell again two days ago. Same result. The guy’s obviously not here, or the wards would have gone nuts. There was always someone in here watching over you.”

Stiles’s brain, sluggish as it was after a twenty-four-day coma, rustled in his skull and poked at the tidbits of information Scott just gave him. They were important. That much Stiles knew. But he didn’t know why they were important. He didn’t really care.

Derek was dead. Derek was dead because he killed him, not the faceless warlock.
And Scott didn’t know that.

“Stiles, I—I don’t think I’m strong enough to beat him.” Scott ran a hand down his stubbly face again. Scott’s one-sided smile was mirthless. “Deaton can sense how damn powerful he is. Just from magic residue or something and—and what he did to you and Derek. He said the guy could flatten me like a pancake and rip me to bits before I move a muscle.”

Stiles stared at Scott again. Swallowed down a suffocating lump.

“Yeah,” he rasped. “That sounds about right.”

The chuckle that tumbled from Scott’s mouth was also mirthless.

“Fuck.” Scott rubbed at his eyes, then looked Stiles in the eye and asked, “What did he want, Stiles?”

_For me to kill Derek. For me to suffer._

_And the fucker’s getting exactly what he wants._

Stiles swallowed hard. The lump in his throat refused to go down this time.

“For Derek to die.” He swallowed hard again. “If—if I didn’t—if Derek didn’t die, he said he’d kill Derek anyway and everyone in town. And I mean everyone. Even—even kids. Especially the kids.”

Scott didn’t break eye contact. He stared back at Scott, sensing the moment Dad stepped back into the room with the bowl of soup. Dad stood in the doorway, speechless.

“Is he—is he really _that_ powerful?” Scott asked. “The whole town? By himself?”

_You’ll kneel on the ground next to me in the town square. You’ll get a front row seat, man. Right up at the stage like the VIP you are. Watch their little bodies rip open from chin to groin. Listen to their parents crying and screaming, while you bathe in the blood of their dying children._

Stiles shut his eyes and bowed his head. He could sense Dad’s unwavering gaze on him. He could tell Dad had that heart-wrenching, stricken expression, the one he bore every time an innocent child was harmed or killed on his watch.

“Yes. He is.”

He heard Scott inhale long and deep, breath shuddering at the very end. He listened to Dad approach the bed and place the bowl of soup on the bedside table with a clink. He felt Dad’s weight dipping the other side of the bed. He was now flanked by two of the most important men in his life. The ones who still lived.

_Why do you keep saving me? How many more times are you gonna be my savior?_

He would always be haunted by Derek’s face when the knife slid into that thundering heart that Stiles had thought could never be silenced.

_I’m sorry, Big Guy. I’m really all tapped outta miracles now._

“Stiles.” Dad’s hand weighed a ton on his knee. “What did he want with you?”

Stiles sank his teeth into his lower lip. It threatened to quiver again, and he had to stop it before it began. The tremors in his lower jaw were bound to follow. Then the tears. Then the screams. And he
was never going to stop screaming.

Dad wasn’t the sheriff of Beacon County—elected repeatedly by its people, respected by his peers and subordinates alike—for nothing. Dad liked to joke that Stiles got the brains from Mom and the hunky, rugged looks from him because said looks were all he got. But they both knew Dad was as astute and intelligent as Mom was.

Dad was already piecing together the horrifying puzzle.

“What did he want you to do?” Dad asked, and his voice was tender but merciless.

Stiles sucked in a breath through his nose that snagged in his throat. He raised a head that was as heavy as blood-soaked earth, and he tugged his teeth out of his lower lip, tasting a hint of iron. He peeled open sore eyes. Glanced in Dad’s direction and—

There was someone standing behind Dad. In the shadowed corner of the room.

Someone in a white t-shirt. Faded jeans with thin knees. And five-year-old black boots that clomped so noisily across lumber floors.

“Stiles?”

He felt Dad’s hand squeeze his knee.

He stared over Dad’s shoulder. He said nothing, his dry lips parted.

Scott clambered onto the bed and wrapped an arm around his hunched shoulders, pulling him tight to a werewolf-warm body. It wasn’t sun-warm like Derek’s body.

“Stiles,” Scott growled, his eyes glowing Alpha red. “Is he here? Is that bastard here? I can’t see him.”

Dad glanced around the room in a panic. Hopped to his feet, placing himself between Stiles and the invisible threat to his son.

But there was no threat. Not when Stiles was staring at that cherished, familiar form again, when those sun-bright eyes stared back at him instead of gray, vacant ones.

See, he was astute and intelligent like his parents: he knew better than to point out something in the room that no one else could see. That path led to being unmasked as the hallucinatory, loopy guy he’d become. No, sir, he was no big-mouthed teenager anymore. No one-way ticket to Eichen House for him, thank you very much.

“No,” he rasped, shaking his head from side to side. “Nobody’s here. Nobody but you, you, and me.”

Dad and Scott glanced at each other across the bed. A wealth of unspoken words passed between the two men, but Stiles didn’t have the energy to decipher any of them. He was—he was feeling warmer. There was a toasty warmth in his chest, the kind he’d feel after a refreshing gulp of flavorful, hot coffee. Like the coffee from the volcanic tropical island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic Ocean that Derek savored so much.

He should go over to Derek’s apartment, once all this was over. Brew some of that coffee and sit on Derek’s black leather couch and just—take a deep breath, relax. Just forget about the world. About everything. Just shut his eyes. Pick up that carving knife. Sink it into his neck, sink into the eternal
darkness, and slumber forever.

Derek would like that.

Derek was waiting for him, after all.

It took all his resolve to shift his gaze down and to the side, to the bowl of chicken soup and its drifting chunks of alphabet pasta.

“Dad, can you help me with—”

Dad stared at him with concerned, wide eyes. Dad exchanged a gravid glance with Scott again, and Stiles went back to staring at the chicken soup, his fingers clenched around the blankets that had skimmed down to his waist.

_Sshh, it's okay, Dad. There’s nothing in the corner of the room. Just a figment of hyperactive imagination._

Dad sat back down on the side of the bed without saying anything to Scott.

“Of course, son. Here you go. Careful now.”

Dad held the plastic bowl in one hand while Stiles grasped the metal spoon with a hand that bordered on skeletal. Jesus, the skinny guys that were his fingers might as well be skin on bones. A magical, twenty-four-day coma was not forgiving on the human body.

Well, neither was murdering the love of your life and watching him bleed to death all over you, but Stiles suspected that was also a given.

Scott remained on high alert, seated beside him, their thighs pressed together. Scott glanced around the room at random intervals, as if he was swift enough, he’d be able to catch the spook in the room from the corner of his eye.

“Dad?”

“Yes, son?”

“Why are you wearing that super-fugly Christmas sweater?”

A glint of mirth surfaced in Dad’s creased, vigilant eyes.

“It was the first thing I grabbed from my closet, okay?” Dad said. “You bought this for me, you know.”

Stiles nodded as he chewed on tasteless pasta that crumbled into ashes on his tongue.

“Yes, I did, and I was gonna say, it really compliments your eyes. Brings out that youthful sparkle in you.”

He sounded better now, a little more like the man he was. A little more like the facetious, wired man he was before that blaze of bluish light on the street outside his childhood home brought with it a demon that ended everything that he was.

He had to keep up the act. Convince Dad, and Scott, and everyone else that he was going to be the Stiles they knew once more. Until his magic replenished. Until he got the opportunity to make his getaway. To hunt. To kill.
He was still alive, and he still had a job to finish. A vow to honor.

“You say that like I’m *not* youthful or sparkly,” Dad groused.

Stiles tugged the ends of his lips up in a facsimile of a smile. He spooned more tasteless ash into his mouth, one morsel at a time, under the unblinking stare of Derek’s ghost in the shadowed corner of his room.
No Lonelier Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scott submitted to him after his eighth attempt to demand release from his own goddamn apartment. Okay, it was more begging than demanding, but the point was, Scott capitulated. Scott could never resist his big puppy eyes.

They weren’t what clinched the deal this time.

“Stiles, the warlock’s still out there.”

Yep, that gravelly, growly werewolf voice was out in full force. Too bad it never worked on Stiles. There was only one werewolf whose voice could put the unfeigned fear of gods in him, whenever it erupted as a tremendous roar of fury.

He was never going to hear that voice again.

“I can’t just stay in here for the rest of my life, Scott! That’s nuts! You get that, right?” Stiles slapped his hands to his temples. Flung his arms out in exasperation. “I have to leave sooner or later! And it’s not like I can’t protect myself now. My magic’s almost restored. C’mon, man, let me out!”

Scott folded muscular arms over a broad, firm chest. For one prolonged moment, despite having shaved off the stubble, Scott resembled Derek in that pose so much that Stiles’s stomach flipped and threatened to evacuate itself all over Scott’s shoes.

“Okay, how about this: you can’t even walk straight without leaning on a wall.”

Stiles heaved a sigh. Ran both hands down his face that was still too ashen and gaunt for anyone’s liking, including his own. One glance in the bathroom mirror enlightened him about his dreadful appearance. He looked as rotten as he felt. He still needed time to heal, yes. But his body was healing. It was.

It was a blessing that he couldn’t see in the mirror what his soul looked like now. He imagined it was something putrid, festering with buzzing flies and maggots. He sure as fuck wasn’t going to gaze within himself to verify that. Ever.

“That’s what I got you for, don’t I? To lean on, wherever we go.”

Immediately, Scott’s face softened at his sincere declaration: eyebrows smoothening out, lips loosening from that rigid line and curling up at the tips. Scott was a sap like that—and Stiles wouldn’t want him any other way. Scott was no doubt singing in his brain, *he ain’t heavy, he’s my brother*, even as they argued.

“Okay?” Stiles rolled his eyes. “Can I go out, *Dad*?”

When Scott’s arms stayed crossed over that unyielding chest, Stiles pulled out the big guns: the naked truth, and all his emotions attached to it.

“I just——” Stiles shut his eyes. Pressed his hands to his temples again. Cursed the searing wetness that built up behind his eyelids, that kept battering his eyes in uncontrollable waves since he awakened from his coma nine days ago. “I just wanna see him.”
Scott didn’t say a word, but Scott knew precisely who he was talking about.

“Please, Scott. I have to see him. Just once,” he rasped. He lowered his hands. Opened eyes that he had to blink multiple times to clear them. “I wasn’t there for his funeral.”

*I didn’t even get to say goodbye to him.*

Scott’s arms were still crossed over his chest. Scott’s eyes glistened under the living room lights. Stiles stared into them, and he blinked again.

Of all the people in this truly godforsaken world, Scott understood in every respect what it felt like to be in his skin, even if Scott was unaware of his feelings for Derek. Scott had buried one of the loves of his life in Beacon Hills Cemetery. Scott never had the chance to truly say goodbye to her.

That was also Stiles’s fault, murderer multiple times that he was.

“Oh, Stiles. Okay.”

The entire pack accompanied him to Derek’s grave the next day. The pack met up at Stiles’s apartment before heading out, and Stiles had to endure hugs from everyone, his hands in taut fists to maintain his composure, nodding at the appropriate times to words of comfort that he didn’t deserve.

Lydia’s crushing hug and tender kiss to his cheek almost snapped him in two, in all ways. Lydia was the one person in the pack he’d confessed to about his feelings for Derek—was it just two months ago? Mere weeks before he and Derek were kidnapped? It felt like an entire lifetime ago, a life belonging to some other guy who wasn’t him, not anymore. She knew how much he was hurting. She knew, and she didn’t spill his guts out for the world to gawk at, and he loved her all the more.

Jackson’s gesture was ironically the one he tolerated best: Jackson said nothing and looked him in the eye, giving his shoulder a single squeeze.

Yeah, they both knew what it cost their souls to be a demon’s plaything. The price you paid and kept on paying didn’t go away because the enslavement was over. You were as good as chained and collared as long as you felt those chains and collar around your body and neck, and believed they were still there.

Stiles sat shotgun in Scott’s SUV with Scott at the wheel, Kira and Isaac sitting behind them. Jackson and Lydia followed them in Jackson’s second Porsche, a newer model than the one with the damaged steering wheel. Stiles stared at the dashboard. He wanted to crack up, thinking about how he’d once plotted to buy a Porsche like that to woo Lydia and win her hand in marriage.

What was an expensive car compared to sincere love? What was a mirage compared to a real and strong person, a person who’d looked at him and seen him, and loved every face of him?

Derek’s ghost wasn’t around today to answer those questions for him.

The walk to Derek’s grave was a haze in his mind. Scott led the way, with him trailing after his best friend, placing one leaden foot in front of the other along the narrow paths between rows of gravestones. The rest of the pack followed behind him, forlorn, silent. They’d walked these paths a month ago without him.

Stiles stared down at the ground. He couldn’t bear to look at any of the gravestones. He didn’t know what it’d do to him if he laid eyes on the weeping angel safeguarding Mom’s grave. He wasn’t tough enough, not today.
I’m sorry, Mom.

I’m so sorry I couldn’t save you. I miss you so much.

Stiles wanted to blot out the cheerful afternoon sun with a wall of blood as red as the hoodie that swaddled his emaciated torso. He wanted to plunge the whole world into icy darkness so he didn’t have to look at Derek’s bouquet-laden grave and acknowledge its existence. It shouldn’t be here, next to Laura’s grave, not for another seventy years.

“Kira and I picked the pink carnations. Lydia picked the deep purple heliotropes.”

Stiles stared at the bouquet of fresh flowers that Kira placed on the granite slab, in front of a small statue of a curled up, slumbering wolf. Those particular flowers conveyed specific meanings. Said words that Stiles couldn’t right now, not unless he wanted that delicate dam within him to be reduced to an overflowing wreck again.

I will always remember you. I will always love you.

“You okay with them, Stiles?” Scott murmured.

Stiles nodded. Stiles didn’t cry, but his knees buckled, and he slid down against Scott’s left leg to kneel on the grass in front of Derek’s grave. Scott helped lower him down with a hand on shoulder. Scott’s hand stayed on his shoulder. The rest of their pack surrounded them in a semi-circle behind them. Jackson and Lydia stood to Stiles’s left. Kira and Issac stood to Scott’s right.

Stiles sensed the bone-deep tingle of magic surrounding the grave. Benevolent, familiar magic. He’d see the invisible wards of protection Deaton set if he bothered to open his third-eye. He could also sense the mountain ash encircling the coffin. Derek was—dead, but that wouldn’t stop enemies from their past from potentially snatching the body, or worse: Stiles knew enough about dark sorcery that werewolf body parts were an essential ingredient in some abhorrent spells.

And who knew what that faceless fucker of a warlock intended to do next.

Stiles knew this, though: the fucker wouldn’t be able to resist popping up to gloat in Stiles’s face. Gloat and twist that knife in his chest a little more, as if the sight of Derek’s grave wasn’t enough of a cross to bear.

Stiles stared at the statue of the wolf. It looked like something Derek might have carved out in wood. It probably was, and chosen to make a cast for the statue. It was a good choice. Derek had produced such elegant wood sculptures, using his adroit hands and his dependable—come on, Stilinski, it’s just two words, say them—carving knife.

“We, uh—we dressed him in that Zegna suit,” Isaac said.

Stiles stared on at the statue of the wolf. His mouth was devoid of words. His hands were white-knuckled fists on his lap.

“He looked spectacular in it,” Lydia said.

“Yeah,” Scott said. “He wore it to my wedding, right? Totally outshone the groom, man.”

Jackson snorted. Isaac let out a low, wet chuckle.

Stiles lifted his eyes and stared at the portrait photo of Derek on the gravestone. It was the same one that graced Derek’s woodworking shop website, on the profile page that recounted Derek’s
prospering career and a very brief section about his father, who’d also been in the same industry. Derek didn’t smile in the photo. Instead, it was a three-quarter profile shot of Derek in vivid sunlight, with a backdrop of trees flaunting the vibrant colors of autumn. Derek’s hazel eyes were a brilliant green in it. They were the color of thriving life.

They were the perfect color to compliment the custom-made, dark burgundy Zegna suit and tonal floral tie that Derek had worn to Scott’s wedding dinner. Stiles had prepared himself for a sensational sight. But not one that slammed the breath out of him in a soundless gasp when Derek strode through the restaurant’s entrance, as if Stiles was the trashy romance novel heroine in need of bodice-ripping lest he fainted.

Stiles had rocked a dark gray, off-the-rack, tailored suit, and no, he wasn’t ashamed that he couldn’t afford a branded, custom-made suit like Derek could. Derek had implied he looked good. Derek had stared him in the eye and said, “Thank god you have enough fluffy hair to offset that eye-watering paisley tie.”

He’d punched Derek on the arm. Secretly reveled in Derek’s smirk, in the way Derek’s eyes crinkled with glee, while calling the handsome werewolf a pretentious asshole. He knew now that it was Derek’s way of complimenting him without revealing his true feelings. They’d both pulled the same shit for years—over a decade—taunting each other, veiling the love they had for each other with insults, benign punches and shoves, the manly versions of pigtail-yanking.

One such taunting session at the dinner resulted in That Fake Wedding Photo. Stiles’s brain insisted it had to be capitalized, because that was how mortifying—and magnificent—it was. One minute, he was ribbing Derek about being too chicken to wear paisley. The next minute, Scott, Kira and Lydia hauled him and Derek to the shimmering wall of flowers that the photography team was using as a backdrop to snap photos of guests. They were set in front of the backdrop. Glowered at by multiple pairs of twinkling eyes, and it was made very clear that astronomical pain would be in store if either Derek or Stiles dared to flee.

Stiles still had no clue whatsoever where he shoveled up the bravery to do what he did next: he draped his long arm around Derek’s broad shoulders, tugged Derek close to his body, then pressed his clean-shaven cheek to Derek’s bristly one. Smiled like a total dumbass at the camera. Felt Derek’s chest expand with a hitched breath, and he’d been so sure that Derek was going to lob him across the restaurant like a baseball into the multi-tiered wedding cake on stage.

In the photo Scott, Isaac and Jackson later blew up, framed and hung up in Derek’s office at the woodworking shop, Derek had wrapped an arm around his lower back. Derek’s hand clutched his hip. Derek was also gazing at the camera, and if Stiles’s smile was humongous, Derek’s was—radiant. The noon sun was a microscopic firefly in comparison to it. Stiles had assumed that it was an exaggerated smile, like the one Derek flicked out at the station’s reception desk so many years ago. But in the photo, Derek’s eyes were so crinkled, they were hazel slits. Derek’s cheeks were bunched and rosy.

Knowing what he knew now, what Derek looked like in the photo was the happiest werewolf on the planet who couldn’t contain himself.

So why was it that Stiles hadn’t seen the truth even then?

Scott, Isaac and Jackson—the shitheads—had chosen a frame that stated in ornate, red letters: “JUST MARRIED! MR. & MR. HALE!” Adorned with cartoon hearts. And two cartoon teddy bears in bow ties that hugged each other on the bottom right corner.

When he and Derek had stepped into the office, he’d let out what he hoped was a masculine shriek,
slapping his hands to scorching cheeks and wishing the ground split open beneath him. Derek was rooted to the spot, staring at the framed photo without any expression. Stiles had been so sure that Derek was going to thrash it. Maybe bash it over the other werewolves’ heads first.

A month later, when he set foot in the office to grab a folder of drawings for Derek, he was stunned to see the photo still in there. Only, instead of being on the wall behind the desk, it was propped up on the shelf perpendicular to the desk. Angled to face the desk. Stiles had recited to himself for weeks afterward that it was a coincidence, that Derek must have cleaned the shelf one day and forgot to turn it toward the wall, never mind that Derek didn’t throw it away.

God, they had been such blind idiots.

All that time, all that precious time wasted.

“We tried to keep the news of his death from the public,” Scott said. “No obituary in the newspapers. No announcement to other packs. We organized a private funeral just for our pack. Your dad, my mom. Deaton, too. It was too dangerous to have a public wake.”

Isaac cleared his throat. No one else said a word. A warm breeze undulated across Stiles’s dry cheeks.

“We brought Derek’s body to your apartment for the funeral. After we cleaned him up at his place. Isaac picked this jet-black coffin with silver trims. Like his Camaro. We thought he might like that.”

Scott’s hand was a bolstering warmth on his hunched shoulder.

“We thought all the chaos in town would distract people. For a few weeks, maybe. We put a sign up at his shop that said he was—away on an emergency in NYC and wouldn’t be back for a month. We went three towns over to get a gravestone, but there’s—there was only one Derek Hale in Beacon Hills. And because of his past, people across the county knew about him, about his family. It was just a matter of time after that.”

Scott squeezed his shoulder, but he didn’t look up.

“Deaton set some kinda magical alarm system if anyone other than the pack came here. A lotta people paid their respects. His local customers. The firefighters he volunteered with. Deputies from the station. Many of them remember what happened to the Hales. Some of them—they’d taken the call. They’d been there, like your dad was. Your dad really helped with damage control and red tape. None of us knew where to start explaining how Derek died without exposing all the supernatural stuff. People kinda accepted that the county-wide blackout had something to do it, and that a truck had—well, struck him head-on. That helped explained why there was no public wake.”

Scott paused for a minute. Took a deep, steady breath and exhaled it slowly.

“A lotta people remember him, Stiles. A lotta people love him.” Scott squeezed his shoulder again, longer and tighter. “Some of us, much more than the others. Much, much more.”

It would have been easy for Stiles to lash out. To say, I love him like none of you do and ever will. It would have been the truth. But he heard the message between Scott’s heartfelt lines, and he didn’t think it was possible for him to shatter even more inside than he already had. Scott knew, and didn’t judge him for being in love with another man, another werewolf. One Scott had once been at such loggerheads with that Stiles believed they would slaughter each other.

Stiles swallowed hard. His hands were still clenched on his lap. His eyes were dry when they weren’t supposed to be, when it was the most acceptable time for them to burn and spill more rivers
of salt down his face.

*How am I gonna go on after this? Derek, tell me how.*

Derek was a dapper corpse in a black-and-silver coffin six feet underground.

*Wolves mate for life, don’t they? So tell me, Derek. Tell me how to go on when my mate is dead.*

Derek certainly wasn’t going to answer him this time, if Derek hadn’t uttered a word to him since that carving knife pierced that irreplaceable thing in Derek’s chest. Only insane people did the same thing over and over and expected a different outcome every time. He supposed seeing the ghost of the love of your life lurking around counted as something only insane people did, too.

He peeled apart chapped lips. He stared at Derek’s portrait photo on the gravestone.

He tried to say goodbye.

“Derek,” he whispered.

The word, and all its incarnations, was denied to his mouth. His mouth recognized his mate’s name and nothing else. His mate’s name didn’t mean *goodbye* to him. It meant *what*, and *I’ll rip your throat out with my teeth*, and *I don’t trust you*. It meant *it’s me I don’t actually trust*, and *yeah, you are*, *you’re my friend, Stiles, and come over, your babbling is my insomnia cure*, and *stop stealing my pop tarts, goddamnit, now I have to buy every kind*. It also meant *beautiful, yeah, that’s what you are*, and *I’ve never loved anyone like I love you, and I will never love anyone else like I will always love you*.

*You’re the reason I’m happy, Stiles.*

*You’re the only happy ending I need.*

“Derek,” he whispered again, his voice splintering. “I’m sorry. I can’t—”

*I can’t let you go. I’m too weak.*

*I won’t let you go, I promise. I’ll be with you soon. Wait for me.*

The protection wards on the ground at Stiles’s knees smoldered into visible gold.

A blaze of bluish light manifested with a crackling, ear-piercing noise fifteen feet behind Derek’s gravestone, on a strip of verdant grass. The grass withered in a three-feet radius around the gangly, sinister figure that stood in place of the bluish light, turning colorless and shriveled.

Jackson began snarling, and so did Isaac, their eyes glowing, their claws and fangs dropping fast, fur sprouting down the sides of their contorted faces. Scott’s hand tightened around Stiles’s shoulder, its nails human-blunt. Stiles didn’t have to glance up to know that Scott’s wide eyes had gone a fiery Alpha red, that Scott’s claws and fangs were damn close to popping out too. Kira’s katana, unsheathed in one swift movement from its scabbard on her back, gleamed in the sunlight.

Stiles’s clenched hands shook.

*Don’t scream, Lydia. Not here, not now. Please, please don’t.*

Stiles staggered up to his feet. Scott kept a hand on his shoulder, and it stabilized him. Fortified him like a bulwark of indestructible rock. Made him tough enough to lay his eyes on the faceless fucker who’d robbed them—*him*—of Derek.
The warlock was still garbed in that high-collared, leather long coat with its peculiar curlicue designs that resembled intertwined runes. It cloaked what seemed to be a maroon t-shirt and black jeans. In other circumstances, in which Derek wasn’t murdered and the enemy warlock wasn’t frighteningly formidable, Stiles would have snickered at the plain white sneakers the fucker wore. But he didn’t. The dark brown and red splatters all over them were unambiguous.

Stiles almost retched just wondering if the blood had belonged to little, screaming children whose parents had to witness their barbaric deaths.

“Mmm, that’s some delicious agony you got, Stiles. Maybe you’re all the buffet I need here.”

Those blurred, pitch-black fumes still hovered around the warlock’s head and obscured it. But—they were flickering. Phasing in and out at the edges like a prehistoric television screen being tampered with enormous magnets. As if the fucker didn’t have the energy to maintain the mask.

“I didn’t think you had it in you, man. Choosing the world over your werewolf.” The warlock wagged a bony forefinger in the air. “Then again, what was it Spock said in The Fury of Khan? ‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of one.’ Heh.”

Had Stiles somehow hurt him, when he fed his flame of magic and detonated it like fifty megatons of TNT in that magically reinforced prison cell? Had the demolition of those walls somehow also temporarily crippled the other warlock?

“Your adorable, little pack—they have no idea what you did. Do they?” The warlock clicked a tongue. “Naughty boy. You shouldn’t keep secrets from your family. Or your mate.” The warlock tilted his head with that sickening creak. “Oops. I forgot, he’s just rotting meat in the wooden box under your feet now, huh?”

Stiles saw from the corner of his eye Scott glancing at him with wide eyes of surprise. He felt his magic aflame in his chest. He calmed in the steadfast heat that emanated from it. He calmed in the memory of Derek’s solid, sturdy arms embracing him, keeping him safe from himself.

Stiles raised his head high and squared his shoulders. Steeled himself down to the toes.

His hands at his sides were no longer shaking.

“I swore to my mate that I’ll avenge his death. And I will. I won’t kill you straightaway,” Stiles said, staring at those flickering fumes over the warlock’s face. “I told you, I’ll hunt you wherever you go. I’ll find you, and I will hurt you for a very long time before I end you.”

He predicted the eerie, raucous guffaw that erupted from the fucker: the villain always laughed in derision at the protagonist’s vow of vengeance. What he didn’t predict—what he’d hoped for was the fumes flickering out thoroughly, for a thousandth of a second.

“You know—that’s what all the others said.”

The valiant wolves of his pack snarled, brandished their claws and fangs as the imperious warlock lifted lean, long arms high into the air in a conceited, grand gesture—Look at me, here I am.

Stiles looked. He looked, and he saw that monstrous slash of a smile from ear to ear. He saw tendrils of rot-soaked bandages. He heard the buzzing of a billion flies.

“I’ll see you again, Stiles. We got a date in the town square lined up, don’t we?”

Stiles laid a firm hand on Scott’s on his shoulder. He stared forward at the blaze of bluish light that
enveloped and whisked away the warlock. He was calm. He was primed. He was all steel now, locked and loaded.

That flicker of the fumes—it was enough. It was enough for his magic to see the fucker’s face, to commit it to his subconscious mind. To lock onto it. To find the fucker no matter where he fled to in this universe.

*I see you. I see you, you abomination.*

§§§§§§

Derek’s leather jacket was draped on a stainless steel hanger over the door of his closet. Stiles stared at it from his vantage point at the foot of Derek’s bed, and he couldn’t decide whether to stay seated in silence or seize the jacket with both hands and scream into it and never stop. He was all for dramas now that there was no one to watch him come apart. No one alive, anyway.

Derek wouldn’t appreciate snot and tears on it. Would probably—no, really rip his throat out with those fangs if he contaminated it with all that crap.

“Would you do that?” he asked Derek’s ghost that stood in the corner of the room and stared at him. “After telling me you love me?”

As usual, Derek’s ghost remained silent. Stiles was fascinated that his screwed-up brain had conjured up such a realistically detailed apparition. If it wasn’t for the fact he could see the wall behind the ghost, he would have believed he was gazing at Derek in the flesh. That white t-shirt was pristine, like it was the night he, Derek and Scott were at his childhood home to have dinner with Dad and update Dad on any supernatural incidents in town. The jeans and boots also looked like they did that same night.

Better that Derek’s ghost materialized this way, than as a blood-coated, stabbed corpse with those gray, vacant eyes. Stiles needed whatever sanity he had left just to exist. To keep on going. Until he found that faceless fucker who now had a face in his subconscious.

“I did a bad thing earlier this evening,” Stiles said, staring at that leather jacket again. “I promised Dad and Scott that I would stay put. Wait till the pack got together for a meeting so we can plan our next moves.”

Derek’s ghost continued to stare at him. It should have been creepy as hell, but all Stiles felt was—reassurance. He felt safe. Warmed inside out, as if he was sitting in morning sunshine and not on Derek’s cold, empty bed in the semi-darkness.

“But see, patience’s never been my thing. I gotta keep moving, keep thinking. Gotta get things done the instant I have the means. The good ol’ leftovers of my ADHD. Lucky me and my magic, removing Adderall from my regular diet just like that, huh?” Stiles made a popping noise with his lips. “But you know all that. And you know Dad and Scott would have never let me go. Not alone. Not when they think I’ve turned into a suicidal nutcase and they’re just too polite to say so.”

He clenched his fingers around the edge of the mattress, its navy blue bottom sheet wrinkling. He glanced at Derek’s ghost and gave it a sideways smile topped by bleak eyes.

“They’re right. And technically, I’m not alone, am I?”
A dense yet comfortable silence reigned over the room. Stiles lowered his gaze to his knees. Picked at a loose thread on his jeans.

“I’ve been trying to remember whether I ever promised them to not use my magic on them, on the pack. Did I, Derek? I can’t remember. I don’t think I did.” He pinched the loose thread between his thumb and forefinger. “Did you know all it takes to put someone into a really deep sleep is some tea and a little zap of magic from yours truly?”

The thread between his fingers fizzled and burned away to nothing.

“They won’t wake up until late tomorrow morning. But I dunno how my magic affects a True Alpha. Guess I’ll find out, huh?”

When Stiles raised his head and glanced at the corner of the room, there was nothing there.

There was never anything there. Stiles had to remember that.

_You can go full-throttle loco later, Stilinski, when it won’t matter anymore. Now get off your ass and do what you gotta do._

Stiles stood up. Stomped his right foot on the floor to rid it of pins-and-needles. His black boots had robust soles that left stark impressions on the carpet as he walked to the closet to stand in front of the leather jacket.

He reached up and unhooked the jacket from its hanger. Stared down at its epaulettes and notch collar with snaps, at its asymmetrical-zip placket, zippered cuffs and pockets. It wasn’t the one Derek owned when Stiles was a teenager. That one had gone the way of the dodo years ago, and Derek had replaced it with this one. After Stiles had mentioned how weird it was to see Derek without one.

_Derek Hale without a leather jacket is like Derek Hale without those murder brows. It just isn’t natural, man._

Derek had aimed aforementioned murder brows at him as the rest of the pack burst into chuckles and snickers—and once again, Derek’s apartment had been filled with laughter. Because of Stiles.

Six days later, Derek had shown up at what was once Deaton’s veterinarian clinic but was now Scott’s, and Scott had to kick his shin to wrestle back his attention from Derek. Derek hadn’t said anything to Stiles about the jacket. Just stood there with those incredible, muscular arms folded across that broad, hirsute chest in Scott’s office, glancing at Stiles with that deceptively impassive face. Concealing years of thriving love for his mate behind it. His mate—Stiles freaking Stilinski, of all the billions of people in this world—whose face concealed the same deep feeling that thrived even in a darkness-bound heart.

“Jesus,” Stiles whispered, stroking his thumb across the jacket’s silver chest zip. “Scott knew even then, didn’t he? They all knew.”

Derek’s ghost didn’t return.

“And there was you and me.” Stiles swallowed down that jagged ball of pain in his throat. “Two blind, scared idiots who were so afraid of losing each other that we—we ended up never having each other.”

In another time, another world where Derek wasn’t dead, Stiles would have gladly ridiculed himself for pretty much reenacting that scene from Brokeback Mountain—the one that made him bawl his fucking eyes out, made him so relieved he watched it alone in his locked room while Dad was at the
station. He would have laughed at himself. Rolled his eyes. Took a photo of it and sent it to Lydia for extra laughs.

But that version of himself wouldn’t have known what a world without Derek Hale felt like. A Derek Hale who’d seen him at his very worst, at his very best, in the light and in the shadows. Seen a beautiful, lifelong future with him, and wanted it to be real too.

The leather jacket still smelled like Derek.

Stiles hugged it with both arms, with care to his face. He pressed his nose to its collar, where Derek’s nape would have touched it. Derek never wore cologne, said most of them stank too much for his sensitive nose to tolerate, and so what he smelled was pure Derek: the teeming forest, the sun-beaten earth after a downpour, moonlight on unclothed skin.

He hadn’t been able to smell Derek’s scent in that prison cell. All that blood, all those tears had buried it. This leather jacket was all he had of it.

This leather jacket, and the Camaro parked in its resident space in the apartment building’s parking lot, were all Stiles had left of Derek.

“I’m sorry,” Stiles choked out into the collar, squeezing his eyes shut, and he told himself that he was only apologizing for the fresh rivulets of hot salt that stained the jacket now. Some things could never be apologized for. Some things could never be forgiven.

After an eon, he held the leather jacket away from him. Slipped his right arm into its sleeve, then his left arm into the other sleeve. He tugged at the asymmetrical lapels. Flattened his palms over them. The jacket’s chest and shoulders were a bit too wide for him. Yeah, he’d gained quite a lot of toned muscle and weight since he was a sixteen-year-old boy, but Derek was—had been bulkier than him. Add the physical trauma and weight loss he’d recently endured, and it was remarkable that he wasn’t swimming in it instead.

Wearing the leather jacket felt like coming home. Like he was wrapped once more in Derek’s solid, sturdy arms. He was going to need that feeling in his heart, where he was headed, where he had to be, to kill or be killed.

He passed a full-length mirror on the wall of the hallway outside Derek’s bedroom. He saw himself and no one else in it. His white t-shirt was pristine, a crisp contrast to the obsidian black of the leather jacket. His jeans were his favorite pair, the ones with that small stain on the thigh from helping Derek paint one of his wood sculptures. His boots were of the same brand as Derek’s, purchased at the same time.

His red-rimmed eyes were still ringed by dark purple. His hair was a disheveled mess, and he hadn’t shaved in—what, three days? On him, stubble was sparse. It would take more days before he actually looked as if he had stubble on his cheeks and jaw.

He’d be dead by then. He’d make sure of it.

He left the key to his secondhand sedan on the side table next to the front door. Whoever came around later to claim the car from the parking lot wouldn’t have to resort to hot-wiring it or something. Isaac would probably inherit it, since he was the sole pack member without a vehicle of his own. Stiles didn’t need it any longer, not when he had the Camaro.

He secured the apartment’s door out of habit—Derek always got annoyed when the pack came over in his absence and then forgot to lock up. He held the Camaro’s keys tight in his right hand while he
took the elevator down and strode out to the parking lot. Five feet away from the car, he had to halt in his tracks and suck in a shuddering breath, then another.

The Camaro looked like it did before the whole clusterfuck happened: lustrous and sleek, as exquisite as the day it rolled off the factory line. Derek had taken care of it with a zeal that Stiles had often teased the werewolf about.

"Oh my god, why don't you just put a ring on it and call it Mrs. Hale?"

Derek had given him such an unimpressed look—lowered murder brows, downturned lips, crossed arms, and all—that he'd thrown his head back and guffawed like a human donkey.

He stared at the Camaro, and he wondered what it felt like to laugh again. He couldn’t remember how.

The Camaro unlocked with a beep. Stiles slid onto the driver’s seat, as he had so many times in the past, and his hands instinctively knew where to land on the black steering wheel, his long legs where to extend into the footwell. Handling the Camaro was a whole other experience than his darling jeep that he had to retire due to a busted engine after graduating from Stanford. The Camaro was nothing like his sedan either: the sedan was decent enough to get him to his part-time job at the local bookstore and back home between all the supernatural shit, and that was about it.

Well, former part-time job now.

“At least Mrs. Donahue won’t gimme the stink eye anymore every time I’m late,” he muttered, sticking the key in the ignition. “Not like I can help it when goblins try to eat me alive or fairies zap me an extra set of appendages or anything.”

If wearing Derek’s leather jacket made him feel as if Derek’s arms were around him, being in the Camaro made him feel as if Derek was surrounding him completely. As if nothing could hurt him as long as he was in its intimate refuge. As if Derek was _here_ with him.

Stiles turned the key, bringing the Camaro to life with a reverberating roar. He swiveled his head to the right.

“Let’s see how fast this baby can fly,” he said to Derek’s ghost in the passenger seat, arching an eyebrow the way Derek would.

Derek’s ghost stared at him in silence, that handsome face inscrutable.

But those eyes that captured his own were hazel. They were sun-bright, stunning as they’d always been, and Stiles couldn’t ask for more than that.

§§§§§

Stiles was clambering out of the Camaro parked next to Beacon Hills’ faded welcome sign when he heard Scott’s unmistakable howl echoing across the forest. Scott was near. If Scott was driving the SUV instead of loping on all fours, Stiles had a matter of minutes before Scott found him.

He was grateful that he was human. That he didn’t have a pack bond to the Alpha werewolf that could be used to reel him in like it was a fishing line. His escape plan would never have worked
otherwise.

I’m sorry, bro. I’m sorry it’s gotta be this way.

Stiles strode to the middle of the lone road that meandered its way to Beacon Hills and through it. Kneeled and reached down with his right hand for the containment circle that he’d spent two days delineating around the town and the Preserve. All it took was his magic and a direct, physical connection to the land. Namely, pressing his hands on the soil of his childhood home’s backyard for hours on end.

No one had grilled him about his request to stay with his father, least of all Dad. He let everyone assume that he’d been spooked by the latest confrontation with the warlock at the cemetery—he was, make no mistake about that—and Dad had started packing a duffle bag for him before he could even say, Can I come home for a while?

He’d thought the attempt to communicate with the land itself with his magic, to obtain its cooperation would be too much, too fast for his recuperating body. He had sat on the grass with his legs folded up under him, pressing his hands flat to the ground at his sides, keeping his head bowed and eyes shut while the pack took turns watching him, unaware of what he was doing. Even Lydia seemed oblivious, respecting his need for space, staying silent when she would usually bombard him with questions. And thank fuck Deaton was being his typical enigmatic self who’d gone incognito again, much to Scott’s chagrin. Stiles wasn’t going to push his luck on that front: Deaton would have known in three seconds flat what he was up to, being his mentor and all.

He hadn’t lied about wanting to bask in more sunlight after a month of being cooped up like a mummy in a sarcophagus. He just hadn’t told them about the other thing he’d intended to do: confine his loved ones inside the town and the Preserve with said containment circle, and keep the warlock out once the fucker left.

Stiles felt that happen last night: a bone-deep chill receding from Beacon Hills like a tsunami of death and ice from the shore. He’d shivered under the blankets in his childhood bedroom in relief. He hadn’t realized the chill wasn’t just in his body, his head until it was gone. Then he knew. He knew he’d hurt the fucker. For all the taunting, the fucker was running away to recover, and Stiles had to hunt him down before he powered up again, before he could keep that sick promise of their date in the town square.

Stiles had to leave now. Get a head start and go on the offensive while he had the meager advantage.

He tapped a forefinger to the containment circle. Murmured a word of an ancient, inhuman language. The line on the ground flared gold upon his touch, signifying the success of the seal.

Scott, zooming down the road in that SUV, was seven seconds too late to stop him. It screeched to a halt twenty feet away from the welcome sign.

“Stiles! What the hell, dude!”

Stiles blinked from the blinding glare of the vehicle’s front lights. He stepped back from the circle that’d gone dim, shoving his icy hands into the side pockets of Derek’s leather jacket. He took two more steps back when Scott dashed up to the boundary and slammed into its invisible barrier with a grunt—if Scott had driven the SUV across the circle, he would have simply reappeared on the road within its boundary, safe and sound.

Stiles wished Scott had done that instead. Wished Scott had been seven minutes slower, hadn’t woken up until late morning when Stiles was long gone from Beacon Hills. He had no doubt that
their ensuing conversation was going to wreck him as agonizingly as the SUV colliding into him at top speed.

“Stiles!” Scott pounded his fist on the barrier. Each strike gave birth to a golden ripple of light across the barrier. “Break the circle. Now!”

Scott was lit from behind by the SUV’s lights. Scott’s glowing, Alpha red eyes were terrifying under the unwinking regard of the waxing gibbous moon above them. It should have been amusing seeing Scott in a threadbare t-shirt, flannel pajama pants, and untied sneakers in combination with those eyes. Instead, the juxtaposition made Stiles even more aware of Scott’s distress: Scott must have panicked the instant he woke up and realized he couldn’t hear Stiles’s heartbeat nearby, couldn’t find Stiles anywhere in the house. Probably tried to wake Dad up, freaked out when Dad wouldn’t. Probably figured out it was the tea, and Stiles, once he noticed the missing sedan.

“Stiles! Break it!”

Stiles stood where he was. He shrugged, twisting his lips into an expression of regret, hating his own guts.

“I’m sorry, Scott. I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

Scott gaped at him. “Seriously? You’re quoting HAL 9000 at me? Now?”

The twist of Stiles’s lips almost turned into a genuine smile. Scott rarely got his pop culture references until he explained them in detail, and he was proud that Scott got one on the spot from such a classic sci-fi film. All those movie marathon nights with the pack at Scott’s house in the suburbs paid off.

And he was never going to be there again for those nights.

After tonight, he was never going to see Scott—his lifelong best friend, his brother in every way that mattered, who looked at him and saw him and loved him without a second thought—again.

*Hi, I’m Scott. What’s your name?*

*I, uhm, dunno how to say it. It starts with an ‘M’. I—I don’t really like it.*

*That’s okay. What name do you like?*

*Uhm, a name I like? For me? Uh—Stiles. I guess.*

*Cool. We’re best friends forever from now on, okay?*

“Stiles. Break the circle. Please.” Scott pressed both hands to the invisible barrier, as if he was trying to push through, to reach for Stiles across the impassable space. “Please don’t do this.”

Scott’s eyes were still Alpha red. They were also glistening, and when a wet trail rolled down Scott’s cheek from one of them, Stiles’s eyes brimmed and burned too.

“I have to,” he forced out, swallowing hard. “Do you understand that?”

“Stiles, I do.” Scott nodded, and a twin trail of wetness rolled down from his other eye even as he smiled softly. “I know. Believe me, I do know.”

Stiles refused to break eye contact, even as his own eyes began to spill the same searing trails.
“You think—you feel like you gotta make things right again, I know.” Scott nodded again. Pressed his hands harder to the barrier, to no avail. “You feel like—like you’re the only one who can make things right again. You keep blaming yourself for not doing more, for not being stronger, faster, better, because maybe then, the one you love wouldn’t be dead and everything would have been okay. You tell yourself you deserve the worst for letting it happen, but Stiles, it’s not your fault. You didn’t ask for any of this. You did your best. I know you did. You did everything you could to save Derek, and I’m sure he knew that too. It’s not your fault.”

Scott shook his head. That devastating, soft smile still graced his streaked face.

“It’s not your fault. It never was. And you’re not alone. You’ve got us, your pack, your family. We’re here for you, and as long as we stick together and watch each other’s backs, we’re strong. We were doing that long before we got superpowers, right? We were doing that since the day we met each other. Remember that day, huh? I do. I still do. We’re brothers, man. Best friends forever. We take care of each other. We lean on each other, wherever we go—isn’t that what you said? That’s what we got each other for. And—and we’re gonna keep doing that, okay? We can face anything together.”

Scott balled his right hand into a fist and smacked it a few times over that generous, great heart.

“You taught me that, Stiles. You did.” Scott slapped both hands on the invisible barrier again, and stepped closer. “You don’t have to do this alone. You don’t. So, please. Break the circle. Come home with me. We’ll get the pack together right now, and we’ll come up with a plan like we always do, and we’ll take the warlock down. Together.”

Stiles swiped a trembling hand over his damp face. He turned his head away. Hugged himself and clutched at the sleeves of Derek’s leather jacket, then looked Scott in the eye once more.

“I—Scott, I gotta find him on my own. I have to kill him by myself.” He drew in a shaky breath. “I swore to Derek that I would avenge him, no matter how long and what it takes. And I can’t—I can’t risk any of you. You’ll be safer here now, and I need to know that. To have that. Do you understand that?”

Scott stared at him with unblinking eyes that continued to glisten. That soft smile was gone, replaced by lips in a rigid, thin line.

“And what if you fail?” Scott murmured.

Stiles pulled his wavering lips up in a semblance of an accepting smile.

“Then he gets what he wants. And nobody else has to die.”

They stared at each other across the boundary of the containment circle. If Stiles stretched his arms forward, he could have also pressed his hands to the barrier. Pressed them against Scott’s. Given Scott that final illusion of hope.

“I can’t accept that, Stiles. I won’t. That’s a price I’m not willing to pay.” Scott shook his head. Scott’s hands clenched into fists. “Do you know how much you mean to me?”

From the day they met, Scott knew how to use his words with Stiles. Stiles often used too many, far too many, but when it mattered, Scott knew precisely which words to use. Words to make Stiles grin like a dumbass when he was morose. Words to raise Stiles up again after he fell. Words to rip apart Stiles’s armed defenses like claws through rice paper.

Stiles gritted his lower jaw and clenched his fingers in buttery, obsidian leather.
Of course he knew. It was why they were there at all, trying to hold on to each other while they still could.

“What about your dad, Stiles? Do you know what this is gonna do to him?” Scott growled. “Do you know how much you mean to him?”

Yeah, Scott always knew which words to use to hit him the hardest where it hurt most.

Those damn tremors attacked his lower jaw, and despite sucking in his quivering lower lip, he felt his face crumple against his will. Fuck, of course he knew how much he meant to Dad. He didn’t need his hyperactive imagination to show him the aftermath of his impending demise: Dad, in the morgue. Standing next to the steel table that bore his corpse, staring down at his bloodless face, at the grisly slash across his neck. Dad, knees buckling like they did at Mom’s deathbed in the hospital. Clinging to his shoulders, carding those callused fingers through his hair, one last time.

But Dad would be alive. Dad would be safe.

Dad would find a way to go on, because he was the kindest, smartest, strongest man Stiles had ever known.

“I know you—you and the pack—you’ll take care of him. He’ll understand one day,” Stiles rasped, and now, that devastating, soft smile belonged to him. “See, I always chose me. But I gotta choose the world this time, okay, Scott? I gotta make sure that fucker never hurts anyone else, like he hurt me.”

Scott’s face was a hazy blob of colors. Stiles blinked, and for the few seconds that his burning, spilling eyes were clear, he saw that Scott was crying again, slamming those steel-strong fists on the barrier, and he knew exactly how deep the wounds went in his best friend’s heart.

“Stiles. Stiles.”

He took a step back. Then another step, and another.

“Goodbye,” he whispered, and the word also said you’ll always be family, and you’ll always be my brother. It also said thank you, for everything, and I love you.

Scott shouted his name as he swiveled and bolted to the Camaro. Scott yelled for him again as the Camaro roared, and he didn’t look in the rearview mirror when he swiped his hand over his burning eyes and stomped on the accelerator.

Scott’s resonating howl of despair hounded him through the solitary night.

Chapter End Notes

(Before anyone comments on that supposedly inaccurate movie title and quote—nope, it's not a mistake. And that's all I'm gonna say about it. *grin*)
It Must Be Won

Chapter Notes

Soundtrack for the last section: Agent of Chaos, from The Dark Knight OST.

The following days merged into a nightmare-fueled strip of perpetual asphalt, rural towns and overshadowing forests. Stiles stopped the Camaro for three reasons: to piss, to sleep when his body couldn’t take it anymore, or to summon his magic to lock onto the fleeing fucker and guide him on the ongoing pursuit. It didn’t get any easier with each summoning: the turbulent, vivid flashes of imagery assailed his mind like a hammer to his frontal lobes and made his nose bleed, made him puke bile.

But his magic hadn’t failed him. The suffering was worth it, if it meant being able to see through the fucker’s eyes for a couple of seconds. Every glimpse gave him clues about the fucker’s current location. Every glimpse got him closer to his prey. To fulfilling his vow to his mate.

Derek was worth suffering for, always.

“Where are you going, you piece of shit?” Stiles muttered, his eyes shut, leaning his head against the seat’s headrest. “Where are you trying to run and hide, huh?”

The first image was, of all the damn things, a red-and-white Bi-Mart sign on a poop-brown wall. The second was of—kids. A little boy, and a little girl. Siblings with their mother, standing next to a gray hatchback car in a parking lot.

“You stay the fuck away from them,” Stiles snarled. He dug his fingers into his thighs and felt warm blood trickle from his nostrils down to his upper lip. “Fuck you, you leave them—”

The next three images struck him in succession like heavyweight punches to his head: a beige bungalow in the woods. A red, rustic barn, with piles of hay blocking its doors. A town’s welcome sign, painted in dark brown with rounded, white text on three long pieces of wood.

The center plank spelled out the town’s name.

Gotcha.

Stiles barely flung the driver’s door open before he hunched over and vomited sour liquid onto the cement ground of the rest stop. He hadn’t eaten anything since leaving Beacon Hills, and his roiling stomach had nothing left to surrender to the earth. He spat once. Sat back in the car and closed the door. Wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Coughed a few times and gripped his thumping head with both hands, grimacing. Wiped at his lower face again when he noticed the blood stains on his hand.

Derek’s ghost sat in the passenger seat and didn’t lift a finger to help him retrieve the folded map from the open glove compartment. It didn’t bother him. Ghosts weren’t the corporeal, hands-on type of friends to have. They were more the kind of friends to have when you were on a one-way road trip to murder a murderer, and you didn’t have anyone else to talk to. Not that Derek’s ghost was the last choice on his list or anything like that. He’d take Derek’s ghost cooked up by his insane brain
anytime over being on his own.

Stiles spread the extensive map of the West Coast over the steering wheel. It was an old one, creased and stained with droplets of coffee, but it was adequate. Stiles pressed the tip of his forefinger on Beacon Hills in NorCal, then traced the path he’d taken since leaving town.

“Oregon.” Stiles tapped his finger on the black spot that indicated the tiny town he saw. “Fucker’s in Oregon now. And he’s still moving north.” He squinted at the map. “Where do you think he’s going, Derek?”

Derek’s ghost was doing a bang-up job at emulating his real counterpart’s reticent nature. Stiles still hadn’t heard a peep out of the ghost. He really missed hearing Derek’s voice. If his brain could conjure Derek’s physical appearance with such accuracy, why not his voice too? Might as well go all the way and do an A+ job, right?

“He coulda gone east to Nevada. Or south, all the way to Mexico. But no, he goes for Oregon. Why? Maybe his home base’s in Oregon and he needs to go back to recharge or whatever.” He tapped his knuckles on the map. “There was that witch we had to deal with—seven years ago now? The one from Caaguazú, who went after Isaac for his hair. Remember her? She had that box of soil from her homeland in her apartment. Slept in it to restore her powers. Maybe this is something similar.” He frowned down at the map. Shook his head. “But he wouldn’t be so stupid, not this fucker. He wouldn’t leave his power source lying around in the open. He’d hide it. Make sure nobody can find it except him. He glanced at his spectral companion. “He’s paranoid enough to keep using his magic to travel despite running low. Which means—wherever it is he’s going? We gotta get there first, Big Guy.”

Derek’s ghost stared at him and said nothing. There was something different about his expression today: those thick eyebrows were furrowed in a frown of frustration. Stiles was amused and puzzled at the same time by that. What did a ghost have to be frustrated about? It wasn’t like the ghost had to eat or sleep or go to the toilet.

Stiles folded up the map and stuffed it back in the glove compartment. He ignored his switched-off phone that he’d chucked in there. He also ignored the seventeen-inch-long, sharp object wrapped in black cloth that jutted out of it, hindering him from closing the compartment.

“Still playing the mime game, huh?”

Derek’s ghost continued to frown at him. Those murder brows were getting a workout today.

“That’s okay, Mime-wolf. I got enough words for both of us.”

Stiles sat back in the driver’s seat with a low sigh. Rubbed at his chest with the palm of his right hand. That hot ache was back, throbbing behind his sternum like a demented subwoofer. He’d felt it time and again since awakening from his coma: at first as a spreading warmth in his body, then gradually into the hot ache it was nowadays. It would worsen whenever he was alone, when the memories of his final moments with Derek overwhelmed him all over again.

He’d thought it was his magic, evolved into something new. Something stronger. Something that responded to his emotions. Deaton once told him that extreme physical and / or psychological trauma could transform magic that way, and what he’d experienced was—well, it was _something_. Trauma seemed too minuscule a word to encapsulate it.

Then he’d attempted his first glimpse through the other warlock’s eyes, and he felt his magic swirl inside him while that hot ache remained rooted in his core. He had no explanation for it. Maybe it
was some kind of lingering psychic damage from what he’d done to himself in that prison cell. Maybe it was the psychic echo of his injuries inflicted by the warlock.

Maybe it was just his hyperactive imagination messing with him again. Just another hallucination to keep him going for a little longer. That made an equal amount of sense, considering his current state of being. Still—when he concentrated on the ache, he was almost convinced that it reacted in some way, unfurling in his chest and under his palm like a living thing. He definitely appreciated it when he had to sleep with the Camaro’s windows half-rolled down and cold winds licked his face and neck.

“Maybe you’re my inner space heater,” he mumbled, still rubbing at his throbbing chest. “Maybe I should dig you out and bottle you up. Give that good shit from St. Helena a run for its money.”

He turned his head to the right. Arched an eyebrow at Derek’s ghost.

“What?”

The ghost’s expression had changed once more. Those gorgeous hazel eyes were wide as they stared at him, as if he’d just said something momentous.

“What?” he said, frowning, his hand going motionless on his chest. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Yeah, he was well aware of how crazy he was that he was even seeing the ghost of his dead werewolf mate, much less chitchatting with the guy. But, for the first time, those dark pink, soft lips were—moving. They were trying to say something to Stiles.

“What?” Stiles’s own eyes widened. “What are you—”

At that instant, a cherry-red, full-size pickup hurtled past the parked Camaro. Its asshole driver honked loudly at him, enough that he jumped in his seat and smacked his arm against the door. He yelped and grabbed his tingling elbow with a wince. He swore under his breath. Turned his head to look at Derek’s ghost again—

And swore at the vacant passenger seat.

He faced the windshield. Slapped both hands over his face. Sucked in a breath, then another, and tried not to vomit a second time today.

“There was never anything there, you fucking moron,” he said to his palms. “Never. Anything. There.”

That was probably the hundredth time he’d told himself that. Maybe he’d believe it after the thousandth time. If he lived long enough for that.

He lowered his hands to the steering wheel. Sucked in yet another breath. Shut his eyes and shook his sore head from side to side. Turned the key hard in the ignition, and stared even harder through the windshield as he sped away from the rest stop and maneuvered the Camaro back onto the highway.

Derek’s ghost didn’t return that day.

Neither did the hot ache in Stiles’s chest.
A remnant of Derek’s blood lingered on the bolster of the carving knife, staining the seam that joined with the spine of the blade. Scott, or Deaton, must have missed it while scrubbing the knife at the clinic. If they’d discovered anything malevolent about the knife, they hadn’t shared the information with Stiles. But Scott wouldn’t have stored it in the office safe if it was so dangerous. Deaton would have taken it with him for further research.

It was just a knife. Just one carving knife in a world of millions of them.

Stiles lifted it from the unrolled black cloth on his lap. He stared at it as he turned it this way and that, enthralled by the glint of afternoon sunlight that traveled its honed edge. He stared at his reflection on the side of the blade and watched himself wince. Jesus, he looked rough. Keith Richards would probably tell him to lay off the hard stuff and take a break, life’s too short, lad.

Wait, no—Keith Richards would probably hustle him to another line of the hardest stuff, and make him snort it off a nun’s bare backside while hanging upside down in Kinbaku-style rope bondage. Looking rough would be the least of his worries then.

“You rock the stubble way better than I do, I admit. I’m honest and self-assured like that.”

Derek’s ghost was back in the passenger seat. This time, the ghost stared at him with stark eyes full of dread. They flitted between his face and the carving knife. Yeah, this ghost was smart. It might be see-through, unable to touch anything, but it knew what a carving knife could do to tangible flesh.

Huh, did ghosts snort coke? Or did they get high on the fumes of the afterlife? Like, ghostly weed out of the big bong of death?

Nope, he wasn’t getting answers out of his ghost today either, it seemed.

“I keep telling Scott to stop using that safe, to change the freaking code at least once a month if he had to. But no, does he listen to me? No.” He spoke on in a squeaky voice, “‘It’s okay, Stiles, it’s cool, your magic will protect the safe, no problema.’ Psh, yeah, it’d stop other people from stealing its contents, but not me.”

The marble handle felt ice-cold in his grasp. Smooth like polished bone after the bloody meat was stripped from it. It was sickening how it slotted between his fingers and palm as if it’d been designed for him. It’d slotted just as nicely into Derek’s hand.

To be fair, if he had seen the carving knife on sale at the mall, he would have thought it an artistic item that would suit Derek’s dark brown-and-stainless steel kitchen. He would have purchased it on a whim and given it to Derek just because, like he did those black boots, and that vase of baby cacti with the magenta flowers, and that Masters of Wood Sculptures book with a handwritten note that said, They forgot to add you. He could visualize Derek using it to carve slices of ham, or the turkey on Thanksgiving.

But this fucking thing had pierced Derek’s breathtaking, irreplaceable, treasured heart instead. Killed his mate in one excruciating minute, and all he could do in that minute was cry and cling onto Derek’s convulsing body until it no longer twitched.

“Five seconds,” Stiles murmured, staring at the gleaming blade. “I bet five seconds feels like a long time when you’re dragging this across your neck.”
He felt the acute stare from Derek’s ghost as he held the blade to the left side of his neck. He was a hair’s breadth away from slicing open his skin and letting his carotid artery shriek a crimson hymn across the driver’s side window.

“Not such a bad way to go. Already tried the self-kaboom method and failed that. So I’m thinking, let’s stick with the old school. What do you think?”

He pivoted his head to the right. He felt the blade bite into his skin, and he wasn’t afraid. He could stem the spurt of blood with his magic if it came to that. The real question was whether he wanted to or not. He was veering toward the latter.

Derek’s ghost clearly had the opinion that sharp knife on vulnerable neck was bad, very bad. Those hazel eyes were so round that Stiles could see the whites around those kaleidoscopic irises. Those dark pink lips were moving, and Stiles didn’t need to be a lip reader to know what they said: No.

Stiles stared at the alarmed ghost of his dead werewolf mate. He held the carving knife against his neck, and said, “Use your words, Derek.”

Oh, there it was, that murderous scowl only Derek Hale and his legendary murder brows could master. Stiles had missed that as much as Derek’s voice. Damn, his insane mind deserved a top-tier award for recreating such a believable ghost of Derek. Hollywood SFX companies wished they had his brain and imagination to do their dirty work and rake in all that dough—

Oh, oh shit, that hot ache was back behind his sternum.

And it hurt.

Stiles winced. He lowered the carving knife from his neck and shoved his left palm against his palpitating chest, sitting back in his seat with a grunt. The ache was like a shockwave this round, swelling in his ribcage and jostling against his bones, shrinking his world down to the battering pain. It was a constant, wretched sensation that made his stomach churn and his lungs lose their air. It was also—déjà vu.

He’d experienced this before. In that prison cell. When he thought his magic was killing him.

“What the fuck?”

Derek’s ghost was still sitting next to him. Scowling at him with intense, unblinking eyes and lips pressed together in—concentration? Concentration on what?

He winced again. Pressed his left hand hard on his sternum and slumped in his seat. His right hand, and the knife it gripped, dropped to his lap.

“Ugh,” he choked out, scrunching his eyes shut. “Stop it. It hurts.”

To his astonishment, the ache subsided, as if it’d heard his plea. His shoulders drooped. He dipped his head. Breathed shallow and slow. Rubbed at his chest until the ache was gone, and peeled open his eyes.

The Camaro was still parked on the shoulder lane of an empty road. He was alone.

“Derek?” he whispered.

He stared down at the carving knife, at the delicate line of red glazing the edge of the blade. He folded the black cloth around the carving knife. Tossed it back into the glove compartment.
“Okay,” he rasped. “You’re not a fan of the old school ways. That’s fine. I’ll think of something else.”

Derek’s ghost didn’t reappear.

Neither did the hot ache in his chest, but Stiles had the hunch that it hadn’t gone anywhere either.

§§§§§§

Stiles didn’t know the day and time he crossed the border between California and Oregon, and he didn’t give a damn. He knew it was night, and the full moon in the clear, star-strewn sky above was the same one watching over his pack hundreds of miles away.

What was Scott doing right now with the other werewolves? Patrolling the borders of pack territory in the Preserve, for one. Scott never skimped on that unless he was incapacitated. Like, squashed-pancake-flat levels of incapacitated, and it was not so simple a thing to do to a True Alpha like Scott: he’d witnessed Scott healing in minutes from an enormous boulder falling off a cliff onto him. Sometimes Kira would join Scott in her kitsune form. Most times, she would stick with Lydia in either the SUV or in the Porsche, not as governed by the full moon as her husband was.

If Stiles was there, he would run with the wolves, testing out his magic. Give himself night vision, temporarily enhance his physical strength and speed. He delighted in running with Derek, who would grin at him with a mouth full of fangs, then fall back into the shadows to stalk and chase him. The rest of the world would disappear, then. All his senses would taper down to focus on Derek, on the apex predator biting at his heels. He knew he was safe with his pack surrounding him. He knew he was safe as long as Derek was with him, even as the werewolf gnashed those fangs at him, pounced on him, and flattened him on the ground under pounds of hot, robust muscle.

There were so many moments, so many, when he almost pulled Derek down to kiss the supremely handsome asshole until they were breathless.

He could have, in the shelter of the forest and the night, with the blessing of the full moon.

He should have.

“Thirty-three calls from Scott. Twenty-nine calls from Dad. I see Lydia went with capslock rage for her bajillion messages.”

His phone’s battery was at sixty-one percent despite his phone being switched off all these—days? He didn’t know how long he’d been on the road. The date and time on the phone screen was meaningless to him.

“Wow. Jackson called a few times. Hm.”

He felt a deep-seated twinge of remorse when he swiped away the notifications for messages from his father. The notifications showed truncated previews of said messages, and what he glimpsed were enough to make his throat seize and his eyes sting.

Stiles, answer me.

Come home, son. Please.
You’re all I have.

“I gotta do this, Dad,” he whispered, staring down at the screen and seeing nothing but a bright blur. “I’m doing this for you, okay?”

One day, Dad would understand. He would. It’d take some time, yeah, maybe years after burying his son in the town’s cemetery next to his wife, but he would. Stiles was sure of it.

“I’m doing this for you,” he whispered again, although Derek’s ghost wasn’t there in the passenger seat. Stiles didn’t care. He assumed the guy was lurking around and listening anyway. Where else was a ghost going to go? To McDonald’s for a shitty burger with other hungry ghosts? Maybe he should have asked Derek’s ghost to grab him some fries and a coke. The soda, not the white stuff. He’d leave that to Mr. Richards and the other Stones to handle. Snort, whatever. Hey, they would adore Derek’s ghost, give the guy a modeling gig for their music videos, never mind that he was transparent and allergic to verbal communication—

Stiles blinked hard. Curled his lips up until his teeth were bared, the skin around his sore eyes smooth and dark purple.

Oh yeah, Stiles Stilinski was cray-cray-crazy, all right. But that didn’t bother him. What he was curious about was how crazy he’d become. There was one man he could think of who could give him a half-way reliable answer to that. The man he should have called the night he left Beacon Hills.

He scrolled through his contact list. His thumb hovered over Deaton’s name, then pressed down on the screen. Deaton picked up after three rings. Stiles was impressed: he’d expected Deaton to not pick up and stay incognito.

“Stiles.”

Stiles couldn’t help the mild fondness he felt. Deaton sounded as if Stiles was just calling up to say hi and irritate the crap out of him. Same old, same old Deaton. Unchanging in Stiles’s world that had gone utterly fucking cuckoo out the clock.

“Yo, Deaton.” He prided himself on the steadiness of his voice as he asked, “Is the Nogitsune still in the box?”

He knew Deaton was surprised, from the three-second-long pause before replying him.

“Yes, Stiles. The Council of Emissaries would immediately know should the Nogitsune escape from its prison. You would have been the first person I contacted, if that happened.”

Stiles leaned his head back against the headrest. He stared up at the black interior roof of the Camaro.

“You’re, like, a hundred-and-ten percent certain.”

“There is no such thing as a hundred-and-ten percent.”

Stiles ran his tongue over his lower lip. It was so chapped that a piece of skin was peeling off at the corner.

“Have I told you what a funny guy you are?”

“Stiles.” Deaton sounded as unruffled as ever. “You suspected the warlock was possessed by the Nogitsune?”
Stiles continued to stare upward. He stared, and he saw those blurred, pitch-black fumes again. He saw that monstrous slash of a smile from ear to ear. Saw tendrils of rot-soaked bandages. His ears rang with the strident buzzing of a billion flies, and he didn’t know if it was all in his head or if it was the earth screaming at him.

“I don’t—” He licked his lips again. Inhaled sharply. “I thought I—for a split second, when his mask dropped, I thought I saw—those bandages again.”

Deaton said nothing. Stiles didn’t speak either, but they might as well be yelling at each other with their unspoken thoughts riddling the weighty silence.

You watched Derek Hale die before your eyes.

You watched Derek Hale—the love of your life, your mate, your everything—die by your hand, and maybe you died with him but you didn’t know. Maybe all the best things about you died with him, and now all you’ve got is a fucked-up brain that’s hallucinating him and a demon that possessed you and became more real than you.

It’s so much easier to confront a monster you know than a monster you don’t know at all, isn’t it?

Tell me, Stiles, have you counted your fingers today?

“The Nogitsune did not escape, I assure you.”

Stiles covered his eyes with his left hand. He held his phone to his ear with his right. His lips were curled up again, baring both rows of teeth. His entire face ached.

“Whoop-dee-do for me then, huh? Eichen House, here I come.”

He heard a rustling noise through the line, as if Deaton just sat on a leather chair and leaned back. Deaton let out a low sigh.

“The fact that the Nogitsune is still imprisoned does not invalidate what you saw. All we know for certain is that what you saw was not the Nogitsune that had possessed you.”

“You gonna help me out and tell me what it was I saw?”

“If I knew what it was, of course I would. But I don’t.” Deaton paused, then said, “I haven’t been able to find out anything about this warlock, which is peculiar in itself. No one attains such a level of magical power without a known history of development and training, of apprenticeship with specific warlocks or witches. We all had to begin somewhere in our learning of magic.”

“So maybe he killed everyone who knew him in the past.”

“Possible. But that would have ensured the scrutiny of the Council, and they have heard nothing.” Deaton paused again. “It is as if—he came into being in this world as he is.”

“What, poof, just like that? One order of homicidal psycho warlock, coming right up!”

Deaton let out a huff of air that could have been a slight chuckle.

“We all have our histories. We have simply not learned his, yet.”

Stiles lowered his hand from his shut eyes. He breathed, and he kept his eyes shut.

“Hey, Deaton. Tell me what you’ve been up to. Where you are.” When Deaton stayed silent, Stiles
said, “C’mon, indulge a walking dead man his last wish.”

Deaton stayed silent for another minute.

“I was in Oregon.”

Stiles’s eyes snapped open.

“Yeah? What for?”

He heard that rustling noise through the line again.

“Some colleagues requested my aid to locate what they described as ‘a massive disturbance’ in the electromagnetic fields and ley lines there. They couldn’t identify what it was, nor pinpoint its precise location in the state. But it’s severe enough to—warp pockets of reality throughout the state, so to speak.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I saw a black bear fused to a rock wall. And it was still alive.”

“Are you messing with me?”

“Oh, no. The poor bear was in a merciful state compared to the poor bastard who was bisected vertically—and was still alive when I questioned him.”

Stiles’s fingers tightened around his phone. He stared sightlessly out the windshield into the night.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Stiles said, his voice stable, “but wacky shit like that? That would take a humongous source of power to pull off. Like, fucking humongous.”

“Yes.”

“So. You don’t know what it is. But—you figured out where it is.”

He could sense that Deaton’s lips were curved up in that mysterious, small smile. It used to drive Derek up the wall, particularly when Deaton was unforthcoming about Hale history in connection with the Council of Emissaries. There were many secrets Deaton would lug to the grave with him, even with the threat of brutal torture, and Stiles had to respect that kind of loyalty.

It was loyalty that was encouraging Deaton to speak at all to him. To give him one final boost before he flew over the edge and plummeted to his inevitable fate.

“Only the city. Not a specific location within it.”

Stiles’s fingers tightened even more around his phone.

“Which city?”

The taut seconds of silence that ticked by gnawed at his dwindling patience.

“Salem.”

The name itself didn’t mean a thing to Stiles. But the immense, invasive source of power the city harbored in its recesses did.
I found you, you fucker. You can’t hide from me. I’m coming for you.

“Thank you,” he said, and he knew Deaton understood what he was truly being thanked for.

Deaton let out another low sigh, then said, “Scott called me. Fifteen times. And left just as many messages. It—has been a very long time since I heard him so distraught.”

Stiles closed his eyes. Pressed his lips tight, and held onto his phone with numb fingers.

“You gonna order me to go back to Beacon Hills, sensei?”

“If there is anything I have learned from my time as your mentor, it is that no one can order you around.” Stiles didn’t need to see Deaton in the flesh to know the guy was quirking an eyebrow in mild amusement. “Unless they bribed you with a lifetime supply of curly fries. Which is a perturbing thought.”

Stiles snorted. He opened stinging eyes to half-mast.

“I’m easy like that,” he said, and Deaton actually chuckled, a charmed and melancholic sound that Stiles never thought he’d hear from the reserved man.

“Stiles.”

“Yeah?”

“May the gods always stand between you and harm in all the empty places you must walk.”

Stiles almost smiled at the chosen pop culture line. What a time to learn that his sphinx-like mentor had watched Babylon 5 and could quote from it.

“Bye, Deaton.”

He lowered the phone from his ear and ended the call with a press of his thumb. He switched it off and tossed it back into the glove compartment.

The Camaro roared and charged forward with exhilaration under his foot. He stared ahead through the windshield with intent, his hands tight on the steering wheel. He didn’t glance to his right, but he knew he wasn’t alone, and he knew he wasn’t going to be alone when his time to die arrived. And he couldn’t ask for more than that, not anymore.

§§§§§§

If Stiles had a perverse sense of humor, the universe had one that raced past screwed-up into Monty Python-levels of hysterical.

“Fucking seriously?” Stiles muttered, standing next to the Camaro. He gaped at the rusty sign lit by two lamps above the isolated warehouse’s entrance. “You’re hiding between bags of frozen curly fries?”

The cartoon curly fry that embellished the sign seemed to mock Stiles with its manic grin and googly eyes. If hell had a welcome sign, it would have an identical mascot on it: horns and red skin were so passé. When he summoned his magic to glimpse through the other warlock’s eyes one last time, this
location was not what he was anticipating as the battlefield for their ultimate showdown.

“I’m gonna die in a warehouse full of curly fries. Curly fries, Derek. Curly fries.”

Derek’s ghost stood to his right. To Stiles’s total lack of surprise, the ghost said nothing. The ghost stared at the shut metal doors of the warehouse with wide eyes full of fear. Pure fear that Stiles had never seen in those hazel eyes when Derek was alive. Whatever it was the ghost could see beyond those doors, it was something that terrified even the dead.

What could possibly scare the dead—the imaginary dead, no less—when death was supposed to be the most frightening thing of all?

Stiles counted his breaths to five. On the sixth, he strode toward those metal doors and didn’t look back. He didn’t hear a word or any footsteps behind him, but he knew Derek’s ghost was following him in. The doors were unlocked. Stiles raised his right hand, gestured with it, and the doors split in the middle and slid open with a shrill screech.

He stood in the doorway, his hands loose at his sides. From the corner of his eye, he saw Derek’s ghost stand at his right again. His own eyes were as wide as the ghost’s, as he also stared forward at the massive thing floating in the center of the dark, spacious warehouse that his brain couldn’t comprehend.

Ridiculous as it was, Stiles’s brain perceived the thing as a floating, giant, multi-layered donut that glowed a brilliant blue and was partially transparent. The donut itself seemed to refract light, warping the warehouse interior behind it in clockwise swirls around its center. It radiated monumental power that Stiles could feel as vibrations reverberating through his very bones. A circle of blue, glowing wards of concealment on the dusty floor girdled it.

Stiles took cautious steps toward the floating, glowing donut. He stared at its center, and he couldn’t comprehend what he was seeing. His brain felt like short-circuiting the longer he stared at it.

The hole of the donut didn’t seem to be a hole. It seemed more like—a tunnel. What appeared to be a flickering globe floated at the end of the tunnel, almost filling it to the rim. Inside the globe was a scene of complete ruin: a blood-red sky, buildings collapsed into rubble, vehicles crumpled like stomped tin cans, trees charred into black husks, and—corpses. Heaps of human corpses piled in lakes of their own blood.

Stiles staggered back, his hands clenched, his breaths rushing in and out of his lungs. He shook his head as he stared on at the horrifying spectacle. His brain was frying in its frantic attempts to deny what he saw, but his magic already recognized what he was really perceiving.

No, he wasn’t looking at some goddamn magical donut. He wasn’t looking at some immense source of magical power, not the kind Deaton and his colleagues suspected it was. He was looking at something that he’d only seen in sci-fi movies and TV shows, something that hard science was adamant was an impossibility despite being consistent with Einstein’s general theory of relativity.

He was looking at a traversable wormhole.

He slapped a shaking hand over his panting mouth. Staggered back a few more steps, staving off his panic attack. The last time he’d read up on wormholes, browsing through Wikipedia like he was wont to do when he was bored, the theory was that a wormhole could only be created with the energy of an exploding star.

How powerful must a warlock be, to be able to create a traversable wormhole and keep it open?
Who the fuck was Stiles dealing with here?

The warlock lurched into sight from behind the wormhole.

Those blurred, pitch-black fumes that hovered around the warlock’s head were gone. For the first time, Stiles saw the other warlock without his magical mask, and Stiles’s brain was still frying from incomprehension and terror as he laid saucer-round eyes on the soiled bandages wrapped around the warlock’s head. The bandages shrouded everything except large eyes that were wholly black and that smile, that ghastly slash of a smile of black teeth from ear to ear.

No—no, no, no, Deaton said the Nogitsune was still imprisoned in the box, it couldn’t be the Nogitsune, it couldn’t be—

The warlock swiveled to confront him. The warlock was—shuddering violently. Long arms thrashed in the air like tentacles that had minds of their own. That bandaged head twisted from side to side at neck-breaking angles. The warlock wasn’t smiling. The warlock was grimacing. Screaming with a voice that didn’t sound as if rotten talons were scratching flayed bones. Screaming with a human voice.

Stiles couldn’t comprehend what the hell was happening. He stood his ground. He was hyperventilating, shivering, but he refused to retreat, and he opened his hands wide at his sides. He hadn’t been prepared when he and this warlock fought the last time. He’d been cowardly ambushed and grievously injured.

This time, he was prepared.

This time, only one of them was going to leave this warehouse alive.

And a split second of advantage was all he needed.

He reached deep within himself for the spiraling flame of his magic. It reached back for him. He seized it, rejoicing as it whipped up into an eager inferno ready to serve its master. He fed his magic his persisting grief, his rocketing rage. Fed it all the everlasting love he had for Derek, fed it with everything he had in him. He reached in further—and something else in his core reached for him, wrapped itself around him in its downy mantle. Something soft and warm. Something alive and fierce. Something with the energy of a thousand blazing stars.

Stiles’s entire being lit up like the sun.

With a piercing roar, with wide eyes glowing gold, he aimed his hands that also glowed gold with his magic at the warlock. The writhing warlock sailed backward through the air, crashing through tall stacks of packed brown cartons to slam against a plain white wall. The wall cracked in cobweb patterns from the impact. The warlock was still screaming, convulsing on the wall like a pinned insect, those long arms and legs spread far apart.

With glowing hands still raised, Stiles stormed through the cleared path to stand in front of the restrained warlock. He gazed up at that bandaged face. Bared his teeth in a snarl worthy of an enraged werewolf. He clenched his hands into fists, then turned them inward to his chest.

The warlock’s arms shattered in multiple places at the same time.

Another rough gesture of Stiles’s fists, and the warlock’s legs shattered as savagely.

“I told you,” Stiles growled, as the warlock screamed and screamed, “I would hurt you for a long, long time. Bet you wished you never fucked with me now, don’t you?”
The warlock’s head continued to twist from side to side with jerky movements. Stiles caught the moment that black-toothed grimace became a smile again, when the warlock abruptly stopped screaming and angled that bandaged head down to gaze at him with those black eyes.

“Stupid boy,” the warlock said, with that diabolical voice that had haunted Stiles’s nightmares since he lost Derek. “You can’t kill me. I am a god.”

Stiles flung up a protective shield in front of him a tenth of a second too late. Despite those shattered limbs, the pinioned warlock pointed bony fingers in a finger-gun gesture at him. Stiles cried out as an invisible spear tore through his left flank from front to back, striking and chipping the cement floor behind him. He staggered back but stayed on his feet. Clutched at his bleeding, punctured flesh with his right hand.

Derek’s leather jacket now had a hole in it, contaminated by his blood.

Stiles snarled wordlessly. He straightened up. Squared his shoulders. Lowered his hand from his side. He bared his teeth once more, his eyes and hands glowing again.

“Too bad for you, pal: I don’t believe in gods.”

Another piercing roar erupted from his mouth as he raised his open hands toward the warlock. The warlock’s high-collared, leather long coat was sliced to strips by invisible blades, exposing the warlock’s body and limbs in that maroon t-shirt and those black jeans. He pinned the warlock’s shattered limbs to the wall. He curled his fingers into claws, and the pale flesh of the warlock’s arms and legs split open along their numerous arteries and veins, splattering the wall and floor with blood. He forced his fiery, golden magic through every other vein in the warlock’s shuddering body, scorching the screaming fucker from the inside out.

It was the most gruesome act of violence Stiles had ever committed upon another person. A substantial part of him recoiled at the savagery even as the rest of him reveled in the meting of justice. He wasn’t hurting some random guy. He was hurting the monster who’d threatened to torture and kill everyone in his home town, including children. He was ridding the world of the abomination who’d already murdered other warlocks like himself and their loved ones, who’d robbed him of Derek, his beloved mate, his everything——

“Stiles. Stop.”

Stiles went stock-still, his eyes wide and unseeing. The warlock’s screams faded into the background. Slowly, Stiles lowered his arms. He turned his head to his left, and his gaze landed on Derek’s ghost standing beside him. The ghost’s wide eyes were still such a gorgeous hazel. They were also glistening and red.

For the first time, Derek’s ghost spoke to him. Derek’s ghost sounded just like his real counterpart. Stiles stared back at the ghost, at this beautiful ghost that seemed so real and strong, and his own eyes brimmed hot and wet.

“I’m doing this for you,” Stiles rasped. “Don’t you get it, Derek?”

Derek’s ghost stared at him. A tear rolled down from one of those hazel eyes, then from the other.

“Stiles. Stop. Please,” the ghost pleaded, and he sounded as if he was speaking through a tunnel, his words echoing within Stiles’s chest, within Stiles’s heart.

Stiles shivered. He blinked his eyes clear, but they flooded again. He blinked them a second time as he turned his head back to look at the other warlock. The warlock was no longer screaming or
thrashing. The warlock now hung from the wall like a broken, crucified doll, draped in strips of black leather, drenched in blood.

Stiles stared at the warlock’s maroon t-shirt. At the cartoon muffin printed on it. The cartoon muffin had tiny muscular arms attached to it. Underneath the muffin were two cursive words in white: *Stud Muffin*.

Stiles had a t-shirt like that, except his was white and the cursive words were in black. It had been a custom online order. A limited edition item by an indie artist who sold a mere twenty of them.

Stiles stared, and he couldn’t comprehend why this warlock, of all the people in the universe, had a t-shirt just like his.

*Who are you?*

He staggered forward as blood and some kind of black, rotten liquid mingled with it cascaded down the warlock’s flaccid, torn open limbs. It also trickled from the warlock’s eyes and mouth. The black liquid sizzled then vanished when it struck the floor, leaving behind only blood. He stood before the dying warlock. Stared up as those soiled bandages began to melt away from the warlock’s bowed head. They turned black as they descended, also sizzling and vanishing after striking the floor.

Stiles stared at the warlock’s revealed head. He stared at the dark hair shaved close to the scalp. He stared at the moles that dotted ashen, blood-streaked skin. At the half-shut, whisky-brown eyes, and the blood-coated upper lip with that distinctive bow. At that nose he saw every time he glanced in a mirror.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

Stiles stared at the dying warlock’s face, and it was his own face.

“WHO ARE YOU?!” he screamed, grabbing the other warlock’s head with both hands.

The warlock dropped from the wall to the cement floor in a heap of shattered limbs and gushing blood. Stiles sagged to his knees. He gripped onto the other warlock’s head, his knuckles bone-white, his breaths seesawing. He shook with a chill that seeped into his very soul. His eyes burned and flooded and spilled over.

His third-eye opened on its own volition.

He plunged into the other warlock’s mind.

It was a ruthless violation of another being, an act deemed most heinous by many members of the magic community. Even as Stiles, horrified at himself, tried to withdraw, he was—he was being dragged in by the other warlock.

He plunged into eternal darkness.

He drifted through a moonless, starless sky. He felt, heard and saw nothing. He was alone.

But not for long.

Stiles opened his eyes, and was greeted by a scene of complete ruin that stretched to the horizon of a blood-red, smoke-choked sky. What was once a town was now rubble and black, burned husks of cars and trees and—corpses, with their throats slit or their torsos split open. So many corpses of men, women and children. Heaps and heaps of them, piled up in the town square, immersed in lakes of
their own blood.

A whole town, massacred in cold blood. Sacrificed for the pleasure of a demon of chaos. A demon Stiles knew far too well.

Hello, Stiles. Back with us now, are you?

Stiles began to hyperventilate, to shudder from head to toe. He knew that voice. He’d endured its revolting presence in his head for what seemed an eternity, as its owner controlled his body, and wreaked havoc and tribulation upon the people he loved.

The Nogitsune. The fucking Nogitsune was possessing him again—

Look upon your home, little warlock. This is what happens when a foolish human like you, Przemysław “Stiles” Stilinski, tries to enslave a god like me.

Stiles’s breath snagged in his throat. It halted his panting, helped him to catch his breath. He blinked. He frowned in bewilderment, and he calmed while he was once again wrapped in that living downy mantle that he couldn’t see but could feel against his skin, his soul.

His name wasn’t Przemysław. Mom had named him Mieczysław.

And this town—it wasn’t his town. It wasn’t Beacon Hills. This wasn’t the future of his town, either. This wasn’t his world.

Did you think you could use me for your own games? Did you really think that I would obey your every command, and end your exquisite war with the Argents when I can feed from it to become a god of gods?

This was the damned world of another Stiles Stilinski in another universe. Another Stiles Stilinski also cursed to be possessed by the Nogitsune. He could hear the other warlock screaming and screaming in vain even now, trapped in his own body, his own mind with magic too powerful for its own good. Magic ripe for the reaping by the Nogitsune of this annihilated world.

Look, there’s your mate. Walking to you. Walking to his death.

The other warlock, his other self—Przemysław—was showing him what had happened to his home, his life.

Przemysław was showing him the demise of his own Derek.

Przemysław’s Derek appeared identical to his Derek, apart from the short hair shaved at the sides. He was attired in a black, sleeveless tunic, black tactical pants, and boots. An empty knife sheath hung from a brown leather belt. He trudged toward Stiles—toward Przemysław—across bloody soil and wreckage with hobbling steps. His face was colorless from blood loss. His lips were stained crimson. Large, ragged holes penetrated clean through his heaving chest and belly. Fatal wounds even for a werewolf.

Przemysław was crying and screaming at his Derek to run, to save himself. Stiles looked at this other Derek, and he saw a Derek who had lost all hope and his very last resort. He saw a Derek who’d come to say goodbye to the love of his life.

The Nogitsune heard and felt Przemysław’s pain, and guffawed.

“So you miss your family, Derek?” the Nogitsune said with Przemysław’s voice, with unadulterated
Derek swayed on his feet. He stared at Stiles—at Przemysław. His hazel eyes were sun-bright and sun-warm with stubborn life, with abiding love. His blood-stained lips quirked up in one last smile. They moved soundlessly, and Stiles didn’t need to be a lip reader to know the final words this Derek was saying to his Stiles.

“Do you think they’re having a grand time in hell? Yes? Then *join them.*”

Przemysław was screaming and screaming in agony, and Stiles knew exactly how much his other self was suffering. His own eyes welled and spilled rivulets of hot salt, but he refused to look away, to shut his eyes when the pillars of blistering, blue flames exploded from the earth under Derek’s feet. They engulfed Derek whole. Reduced the werewolf to ashes that blew away with the wind.

The Nogitsune laughed and laughed with Przemysław’s voice while Przemysław wailed inside his own head for his murdered mate. It was one of the most horrendous and gut-wrenching combination of sounds Stiles had ever heard, and would ever hear.

Stiles felt the frenzied whipping up of magic within Przemysław’s core like it was his own. It burgeoned into a brilliant blue inferno, and Stiles hunched into a fetal ball, squeezed his eyes shut and clapped his hands over his ears as a series of massive explosions of blinding light and deafening sound shook the whole world. That downy mantle wrapped itself tighter around him, keeping him safe in its snug and steadfast embrace. He heard the earth seething and screaming with a million voices, but he wasn’t afraid. He knew nothing could hurt him here.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw numerous traversable wormholes stippling the decaying landscape, all of them glowing brilliant blue. One of them would lead to his universe, to the dark interior of a warehouse in Salem, Oregon.

*Find help need to find others find them find the stronger ones save Derek save him save him please help me—*

The Nogitsune—the fucker, the monster, the true abomination—silenced Przemysław and robbed him of his voice too.

“Sshh. It’s just you and me, Stiles. Remember, you wanted this. We’re bound to each other now. Forever. Just like you wanted.”

Stiles was powerless to do anything to help his other self. He could merely watch the memory play itself out, watch as the Nogitsune forced itself into every artery and vein of Przemysław’s thrashing body, binding itself permanently to its tormented host. Przemysław’s mouth gaped open in a silent scream. The veins of Przemysław’s torso and limbs bulged black and rotten. The same black, rotten darkness pervaded Przemysław’s weeping, wide eyes until nothing human remained in them.

Stiles cried for his other self. He cried for the other Derek, who was equally precious to his own. He cried for his own Derek, who should have never known the lethal thrust of a carving knife into his heart, who should have lived for a hundred years more. He cried for all the people who’d perished at the hands of this fucking Nogitsune, this fucking demon that was binding those rot-soaked bandages around Przemysław’s head.

“How many universes are out there, Stiles, hm? How many Stiles Stilinskis and Derek Hales are there for me to hurt and kill and feed on their suffering?” The Nogitsune grinned with those black, foul teeth as blurred, pitch-black fumes rose up to veil its wretched face. “Let’s find out.”
The blood-soaked earth ruptured under Stiles and swallowed him up.

He fell and fell, and then he landed hard on a cement floor, hurled out of the other warlock’s mind. He curled up on his side, clawing at the sides of his aching head, his face contorted as more tears ran down his cheeks and temple. His mouth gaped open in a silent scream that had no end.

“Derek—k-kochanie.”

Stiles sobbed and rolled on the floor. Rolled onto his hands and knees. Dipped his head and rested his forehead on his clenched hands as another sob wracked his body. Warm blood saturated his t-shirt along his left flank, but he didn’t care about his wound. It was nothing compared to what the other warlock was undergoing.

The other warlock—Przemysław was slumped against the blood-smeared wall with his shattered arms spread out, his shattered legs flung out at odd angles across the floor. There was no vestige of black, rotten liquid on him, nor of those rot-soaked bandages. Full-body spasms shook him. His breaths were erratic and hoarse. He was suffocating to death from the blood in his obliterated lungs. Bleeding out from the innumerable gashes in his flesh.

There was too much damage for Stiles to heal.

Stiles was going to watch his other self die.

“D-Derek.”

Przemysław’s half-shut, whisky-brown eyes stared not at Stiles, but at Derek’s ghost, kneeling on the floor near Przemysław’s right knee. Przemysław could see Derek’s ghost. Stiles couldn’t comprehend how that was possible, when Derek’s ghost was just a figment of his hyperactive imagination.

“Kochanie, fo-forgive me.” Przemysław coughed. Fresh blood flecked his lips. “I thought—I c-could control it. I thought, it would h-help us—end the war.”

Stiles sat on his heels on the floor at Przemysław’s feet. He stared with eyes that kept on stinging and spilling at the tender smile that curved up Przemysław’s lips, that was directed at Derek’s ghost. The dying warlock thought he was seeing his own Derek again.

“Derek—my ha-handsome werewolf.” Przemysław’s smile widened as two clear rivulets rolled down from his human eyes. “You understand, don’t you? They killed Dad, and then t-they killed Mom and they hunted S-Scott down and—I just wanted—no one else to hurt like me, anymore.”

“I understand,” Derek’s ghost said. He, too, smiled that tender smile while his hazel eyes glistened. “It’s okay. I know. There’s nothing to forgive.”

Przemysław’s smile faltered. More tears rolled down his blood-streaked, wan face.

“It’s n-not okay. You died, and nothing’s okay—” The dying warlock’s chest seized, and he convulsed against the wall, a low whine lodging itself in his throat. “You—you promised me, Derek —”

“Yes. I did. I told you, didn’t I? I’m here. I won’t let you go.” Those dark pink lips that had felt so soft and warm on Stiles’s moved again, uttering the same words that the other Derek had before he burned to death. “I love you, Stiles. I will always love you. To the very end.”

For a few seconds, Przemysław’s face lit up with a quivering yet elated grin. For a few precious
seconds, he was absolutely human and happy and free, and Stiles could lie to himself for those few precious seconds that his other self was going to be all right.

“Yes—yes. Kocham cię, Derek. To the v-very end.”

A glut of blood surged from Przemysław’s mouth when he coughed again and clutched at his heaving chest with his shattered hands. He kept coughing, unable to regain his breath. Stiles refused to look away, to shut his eyes when Przemysław gazed at him and gave him the same tender smile.

“Dziękuję b-bardzo, Mieczysław,” his other self choked out.

They were Przemysław’s last words, and Stiles had never hated himself more, knowing that the man he’d tortured and murdered had thanked him for doing so. More rivulets of hot salt flowed down his cheeks as another agonizing paroxysm wracked Przemysław, then another. He listened to Przemysław try to suck in another breath, listened to that breath hitch in his chest. Stiles crawled on his hands and knees to sit at Przemysław’s side. He pressed a trembling hand to the other warlock’s slack lower jaw.

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

Przemysław gazed up at him. That tender smile returned for one last time, and he didn’t deserve it, not at all. Another spasm quaked through Przemysław’s destroyed body. His shaved head smacked against the wall. Stiles grasped Przemysław’s nape, tilted Przemysław’s head away from the wall. Felt the other warlock’s torso spasm one more time.

Przemysław gasped. His entire body stiffened, then went limp against Stiles’s hand.

Przemysław’s chest did not move again.

Stiles stared into his other self’s dimming eyes until they became a horrible, rancid gray. He wrapped his arms around broad shoulders that were just like his. Leaned his damp cheek on a shaved head just like his when he was a teenage boy, when he believed he could conquer the world and not pay a price far too hefty for his soul.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered wetly, rocking them back and forth, clutching to him what was once the most powerful warlock in existence. “You never asked for any of this. It wasn’t your fault. It never was.”

And for a while, he believed that the solid, sturdy arms wrapped around them both were real, that those arms were holding what was left of him together in one fragile, irreparable piece. For a long while, he allowed himself to believe that Derek’s ghost wasn’t a ghost at all.
Kneeling on the cement floor, Stiles restored Przemysław’s broken corpse with his magic, one bone, one gash at a time under the brilliant blue illumination of the traversable wormhole. He started with Przemysław’s legs, straightening them and repairing the shattered bones, then the ripped flesh. He moved onto Przemysław’s arms, doing the same to them. His magic left behind scars as golden tattoos of veins in place of the lacerations. He moved onto Przemysław’s torso, and he had to press the heels of his trembling hands to his burning eyes, unable to look at the cartoon muffin on that blood-drenched, maroon shirt.

Would he have stopped mutilating Przemysław if he’d seen and recognized the cartoon print before it was too late, like Derek’s ghost had? Would his other self have survived then?

He would never know. The doubt would plague him for the rest of his life.

But that was fine. He wasn’t going to live much longer. A marble-handled carving knife was waiting for him in the Camaro’s glove compartment. If Derek’s ghost still didn’t like that method of execution—well, there were many other ways to end a miserable human’s life. Stiles was an imaginative guy. Something excruciating and innovative would come to him later.

Derek’s ghost kneeled beside him and observed as he restored that high-collared, long leather coat next, strip by strip, around Przemysław’s sprawled corpse. He considered shrouding Przemysław’s blood-streaked, gray face with some of the coat for all of a microsecond before feeling sick to his stomach: the Nogitsune had deprived Przemysław of his face by swathing his head in those soiled bandages and those blurred, pitch-black fumes. Stiles couldn’t bear to inflict any more desecration upon his other self.

With his hands, he gently wrapped the restored leather long coat around Przemysław’s neck, arms and body. He left Przemysław’s head bare.

Derek’s ghost stood with him as he levitated Przemysław’s corpse off the floor and up to their waist level. He stared at Przemysław’s closed eyes that would never open again, at Przemysław’s tranquil expression. His lips parted, but his mouth was devoid of words.

What could he possibly say, that would justify as a sincere eulogy? What could he possibly do, that would bring the dead warlock back to life? That would pardon him for torturing and murdering the man who was him from another universe?

Nothing. There was nothing he could do or say. Some things could never be apologized for. Some things could never, ever be forgiven.

Stiles pressed his lips shut. He swiped a hand across his damp, sore eyes. He stepped back and
guided the levitated body head first toward the traversable wormhole. Przemyslaw’s town was in utter ruins, but it was his home. It was where he was born, where he grew up with his parents and his Scott, where he became the man he was. It was where he met his Derek, his werewolf, his mate. It was where his Derek died.

Home was where he belonged.

The glowing wards on the floor blinked out one by one as Przemyslaw’s corpse passed over them. Brilliant blue tendrils stretched out from within the tunnel of the wormhole for the body, enveloping it in their incandescence, towing it through the wormhole. A gale stirred within the warehouse as the wormhole began to shrink, swirling faster and faster in an anti-clockwise direction.

Stiles took a few more steps back. He lifted a hand to shield his eyes when the wormhole glowed brighter and brighter the more it shrunk. The gale lashed at his face and body. He squinted his eyes, trying to see if Przemyslaw’s body made it through the wormhole. He moved his hand aside and—

An explosion of blinding light and deafening sound swept him off his feet. Sent him flying into a jumbled stack of brown cartons. They cushioned his landing, but they didn’t insulate him from the bone-deep shockwave that billowed over him, buffeted the warehouse’s walls, and smashed all the warehouse’s windows. He curled up into a ball and protected his head with his arms as fragmented panes of glass showered down around and on him.

“Stiles!”

He jolted upright, his eyes wide. The wormhole was gone. There was nothing to prove it had existed—not a speck of blue light anywhere—apart from Przemyslaw’s blood on the wall and floor, the cracks in the warehouse’s walls, the busted windows, and the stacks of cartons in disarray all over the place. Cartons of curly fries packaging bags.

Heh, he wasn’t going to die surrounded by curly fries after all. There had to be some kind of joke or sign to be gleaned from that, but he couldn’t find it.

He staggered to his feet. Shook off the shards of glass from Derek’s leather jacket. His gaze zoomed in on Derek’s ghost that stood five feet away under artificial warm light streaming in from beyond the open doors of the warehouse. For one agonizing moment, he believed that it was Derek standing there, reaching for him with those solid, sturdy arms, staring at him with such sun-warm eyes.

But the light streamed through Derek’s see-through ghost.

Derek was dead.

Derek was a rotting corpse in a burgundy Zegna suit, entombed in a black-and-silver coffin in Beacon Hills Cemetery.

“Stiles, you can hear me,” Derek’s ghost said, and all of a sudden, Stiles wanted to run out of the warehouse, as far away from the ghost as he could. He wanted to run and run, run until he could turn back all the clocks of this universe, until he was back in that accursed moment when the other warlock—the Nogitsune popped out of the blue on the street outside his childhood home and also robbed him of everything.

Maybe if he ran fast enough, he could kill the Nogitsune then. Maybe if he was fast enough, the Nogitsune would never have kidnapped him and Derek, and Derek would still be alive. Maybe, maybe if he was fast enough, strong enough—if he was better, he could have saved Przemyslaw.

Maybe he could have saved himself too.
He swiped a hand over his wet face. He gritted his lower jaw and didn’t reply Derek’s ghost. He strode toward the ghost. Through the ghost. It was akin to walking through a column of warm morning sunshine that thawed the winter ice and revived the seeming dead.

He wanted to inhabit that warmth for an eternity. That sun-warmth that was just like Derek’s body against his, and in his arms.

But Derek was dead, and he was going to join his werewolf mate soon. Derek was waiting for him in hell. The perpetual fires of hell, where he sent him. He had to remember that.

As he stormed out of the warehouse to the Camaro, that hot ache behind his sternum throbbed back to life. He ignored it, even when it started to hurt, when he had to force himself to grip the steering wheel and not press a hand to his aching chest.

“Stiles. Listen to me.”

Oh, now that Derek’s ghost could speak, he wanted to use his words. That was—cute.

“Stiles—”

The Camaro roared in response to the ghost of its owner. Stiles stomped on the accelerator, sped away from the warehouse and back onto the road, and he didn’t give a fuck where he was going. At this time of the night, late enough that the sky was a blanket of ebony and the road was deserted, any seedy motel would do the trick. Nobody would ask questions at the reception desk if he flashed enough money. Nobody would notice the blood on his clothes, or what a stinking mess he must be from days of not shaving and showering. Nobody would check on him if he paid for enough nights.

Most importantly, nobody would report the sighting of a certain California sheriff’s missing son to said sheriff.

Not until after the motel staff discovered his corpse in the bathtub.

“Dad used to bring home case files so he could keep working on them,” he said, staring out the windshield, grasping the steering wheel with both hands. The wound puncturing his left flank bled freely. “He thought I didn’t know about them. He’d leave them in a drawer in the desk in his study downstairs. And he never locked the door.”

Sitting in the passenger seat, Derek’s ghost said nothing to that. When Stiles glanced at the ghost, he saw the apprehensive expression on that familiar, gorgeous face, and he was torn between extending a hand to caress that bearded jaw and swerving the Camaro at full speed into a street light.

“I was—what, nine years old? I think I was nine, or ten, when I looked at some of those files for the first time, while Dad was on a shift. Mom was taking a nap upstairs, so I thought, ‘Hey, here’s my chance to see what Dad does at work.’ What was the worst that I was gonna see, right?” Stiles shrugged. Bit his lower lip, then said, “The first file I opened had eight photos in it. A suicide at home, in the master bedroom. Single gunshot to the head. This lady took her husband’s nine millimeter and stuck it under her jaw. Boom! Blew the top of her head right off.”

“Stiles. No.”

Stiles stared out the windshield. His knuckles whitened as his hands tightened on the steering wheel.

“Too bad I didn’t grab a gun from the safe in the study before I left.” He shook his head. Made a self-deprecating noise through his pursed lips. “It would have been messier, though. Now, a knife—a knife, I can control. I can choose where the blood’s gonna go. Choose whether to do it fast or slow.
See, I looked through a lotta those files over the years. It took Dad a long time to figure out I knew about them, much less how many photos of dead people I’d seen.”

“Stiles. No.”

Stiles forced himself to keep staring out the windshield at the ceaseless spooling of asphalt in front of the Camaro. His hands twinged.

“There was this case of a guy who’d killed himself in the bathroom. He stood out to me from all the other suicides because he’d used a hunting knife. Takes some guts to do that, you know? He slit his own throat from ear to ear while sitting in the bathtub. He even left the tap on so his blood washed down the drain and the people who had to deal with his corpse later didn’t have to clean so much. That was considerate of him, don’t you think?”

“No,” Derek’s ghost snarled. “I won’t let you.”

The ghost still sounded as if he was talking through a tunnel. Stiles still felt every word echoing in his chest. The hot ache in there was worse than a demented subwoofer now: it was more like an entire club of drugged-up dancers were trying to mosh their way out of his ribcage.

“Still anti-old school, huh?” Stiles made a face and shrugged again. “That’s fine, that’s cool. I’m all for creativity. If you think a carving knife to the neck’s too boring, I can always go for another classic: immolation. But!” Stiles raised his right forefinger and his eyebrows. “With a twist! The only thing that burns is Stiles Stilinski, but amazingly, his clothes are intact. Spontaneous combustion! Mysterious.”

Wow, Derek’s ghost was pulling off that murderous scowl on an epic scale tonight. This wasn’t the typical murderous scowl Derek had when he was irritated and wanted to claw somebody’s face off. This was a murderous scowl maximized to the nth degree, the kind Derek had when he wanted to shred somebody to bloody chunks, piss on said chunks, hurl said chunks into a rabid pig pen, and watch the pigs feast on them as the grand finale.

Yeah, Stiles deserved that expression for what he said, knowing the horrendous tragedy that had befallen Derek’s family. But, fuck it, this was a ghost, an illusion he was yakking with here. Just a freaking figment of his hyperactive imagination so who cared if—

“Stiles. Listen to me. I’m here.”

Stiles grabbed the steering wheel with both hands once more. His lips quivered. They couldn’t seem to decide whether to spread into a deranged grin or crook downward to play along with those goddamn tremors in his lower jaw.

“Stiles, I’m here. With you. I’m really here.”

Great, just fucking great—Derek’s ghost had to go and start believing that he was Derek. Now Stiles was going to have to handle a delusional apparition on top of figuring out an innovative method of suicide. Jesus, the things a guy had to cope with sometimes was unbelievable.

“You know what? Let’s go like Thelma and Louise, huh? Let’s find a cliff and soar to the stars, man, give the Camaro some wings—”

“I want to go to that lake, Stiles. I want to be there with you.”

Oh, now that Derek’s ghost could speak, he was using his words like they were fangs in Stiles’s flesh, in Stiles’s soul.
“I want to live in our house in the Preserve. To hold you under the blankets in our bed. To watch movies on our laptop and listen to you babble until I fall asleep on your shoulder.”

Stiles’s lips finally decided to split and spread into a crazed smile. His eyes decided to burn and brim and spill over yet again, and boy, it was a good thing this road was straight and only one car had passed the Camaro so far. He couldn’t see a damn thing.

“Yeah,” he rasped. “I want all those things with you too.”

“Then listen to me, Stiles. We’re gonna have those lazy mornings together. We’re gonna grow old together. And you know why, babe?”

“Why?” he whimpered.

“Because I’m here with you. I’ve been trying to get through to you, to tell you that for weeks. I’m here. I’m inside you.”

Stiles snapped like a twig underfoot. The guffaws that burst from his gaping mouth didn’t sound human to his ears. They sounded like the mindless howls of a dying animal. They sounded like the wails of anguish poured from the fractured hearts of people who’d forever lost the other half of themselves.

Oh man, oh yeah, he was absolutely, completely cray-cray-fucking-craaaaazy now. This was how desperate his insane mind was to cling onto Derek in the final hours of his life. Derek, inside him for weeks. What the ever loving, fluffing fuck? What did the ghost even mean by that?

“That’s—that is some—” Stiles gasped for air between cackles and words. “That is s-some funny shit, Derek.” He tried to blink his sore, spilling eyes clear, but it was a futile endeavor. “Woulda been even funnier if your dick was inside me when you said that—”

The hot ache behind his sternum detonated like a nuclear bomb. Stiles shrieked at the pain and convulsed, clutching at his chest with his right hand. His left arm whacked the driver’s door and window. His foot treaded down on the accelerator on reflex, and the Camaro skidded on the road. He gasped for oxygen. Seized the whirling steering wheel with his left hand, and the sleek car swerved and spun onto the opposite lane, and thank god it was empty, he didn’t want to kill anyone else tonight, or any other night, no, no more, no more—

He stomped on the brakes. The Camaro slammed to a halt in the middle of the road at a skewed angle. Despite the fastened seatbelt, his upper body lunged forward with the momentum. His forehead narrowly missed smacking the steering wheel. He yanked up the hand brake. Panted for more breath, slumped in his seat, pressing both palms to his throbbing chest. The pain was ebbing, but he could still feel something in there.

Something that was—soft and warm. Something alive and fierce. Something with the energy of a thousand blazing stars. Something unfurling under his palms like a livid, living thing.

Stiles sucked in a noisy, shuddering breath. His clearing eyes went saucer-round as he swiveled his head to stare at Derek’s—at the visual projection of Derek? A projection of what? What was he looking at?

“Stiles.” The expression on that bristly, frowning face was an amalgam of exasperation, guilt and worry. “What is a body, Stiles? You, a warlock, should know the answer to this. What’s a body?”

Stiles stared at Derek’s—at the visual projection of Derek? A projection of what? What was he looking at?
He stared. He licked his chapped lips. He frowned, then opened his mouth.

“A body—” He blinked several times. “It’s—it’s a vessel for magic.”

Intense, unblinking hazel eyes stared back at him.

Stiles licked his lips again, then said, “It’s—a vessel that can be possessed by a demon.”

Those hazel eyes kept staring at him. That hot ache behind his sternum stretched itself out the way a gigantic, graceful creature would after a long, pleasant nap, its dense fur a downy mantle that carried within its core the heat of a thousand suns.

Stiles’s frown slipped away. His lips began to quiver again. A lump lodged itself in his throat, but it didn’t gag him. His eyes stung. His chest swelled, and this time, it was with a very different kind of pain. The good kind. The best kind.

“It’s a vessel for the soul,” Stiles whispered.

Those hazel eyes softened although they continued to pin him in place with the determination in them, with a tenderness that he thought he’d never be bestowed with again. Derek—Derek arched one of those dark, thick eyebrows.

“Just one?”

Stiles’s lips kept quivering, but he didn’t suck them into his mouth or bite them. He swallowed hard past that lump in his throat. Rubbed his palms on his chest, over that hot, fierce living thing in him that responded to his touch, that had always responded to him.

“But—Deaton said it was—” Stiles shook his head from side to side. “Impossible.”

Derek’s eyes softened more. His lips quirked up in a small smile, in that heart-wrenching smile that Stiles had thought was the very last one he would see from Derek. But it wasn’t the last. It wasn’t.

“One of the things I love most about you, Stiles? You find ways to make the impossible possible. You always do.”

A low, wet laugh burst from Stiles’s mouth, and this time, it was a very human sound. It was the sound of a spark of hope twinkling into existence. It was the sound of a beautiful, lifelong future being born.

“Now—you’re gonna look for a place to rest. Then we’re gonna figure out what to do about me. And you can shove all that suicide bullshit into the fire, because I’ll stop you from ever doing that to yourself.” Derek gave him a pointed glower. “Even death can’t stop me.”

Stiles swallowed hard again. His lips quivered up into a heart-wrenching, small smile of their own. There was nothing he could say in rebuttal, not when he had experienced the undeniable proof of Derek’s fervent declaration.

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“No. But I’m your mate. And you’re mine.”

There was nothing Stiles could say in rebuttal to that either. There was nothing Stiles ever wanted to say in rebuttal to such a simple yet affirming vow.

He turned to face the windshield. He blew out a shaky breath. He pushed down the hand brake and
maneuvered the Camaro back onto its lane. He glanced repeatedly to his right at Derek, but Derek didn’t vanish. Derek—Derek, his werewolf, his mate, his everything, his future—sat in the passenger seat, staring at him with those sun-bright, sun-warm eyes, and it was more than anything he could have asked for. More than anything he deserved in this lifetime or the next.

§§§§§§

The middle-aged, pink-haired lady manning the reception desk at the first motel Stiles came across didn’t look at him once. She was dressed in a floral, long-sleeved blouse paired with white sweatpants. Half-asleep and engrossed in the movie she was watching on a TV that was probably older than Stiles and Derek’s ages combined.

He pulled out a wallet from one of the inner pockets of Derek’s leather jacket. He handed the lady two bills without checking them. She raised a pencil-drawn eyebrow at them, but didn’t comment. She handed him a silver key with a red tag in the shape of a four-leaf clover. Printed in black on the tag was the number seven.

“Nicest room we have. On the second floor,” she muttered, already staring once more at the TV, munching on pretzels from a giant package on her lap. “You got it for a week.”

Stiles nodded and thanked her, but she didn’t respond. He didn’t mind. He was far more captivated by the vision of Derek sauntering beside him across faded brown carpet. Still see-through, still invisible to everyone else except Stiles. He didn’t mind that either.

He was going to find out, once and for all, whether he was a hallucinatory, loopy guy with a one-way ticket to Eichen House, or whether the gods judged him worthy of a second chance. A chance to do things right with Derek.

They sauntered up the flights of wooden stairs in an easy silence. They didn’t encounter anyone else, and Stiles was thankful for that. He was also thankful for the absence of security cameras, for the privacy and time he now had to do what he should have when he awakened from his twenty-four-day coma.

The carving knife was still bundled in its black cloth in the Camaro’s glove compartment.

And it was staying there.

Room number seven truly was a nice room, for a budget motel: the king-sized bed was covered with beige sheets and a navy blue quilt. Two bedside tables with cone-shaped lamps flanked the bed. A flat TV sat on one side of a wooden dressing table that faced the bed. A rectangular mirror was affixed to the wall above the dressing table. The curtains were dark brown like the carpet. A lime-green, squat fridge buzzed under the dressing table. The open door to the en suite bathroom was perpendicular to the room’s door, but Stiles didn’t glance into the bathroom as he sauntered farther into the room.

Stiles froze and stared at the framed print of Gustav Klimt’s The Kiss that hung above the bed. It was one of Mom’s favorite paintings. She had a print much bigger in size that she bought when she was in her last year of college, when she met Dad. It’d hung in his parents’ bedroom for as long as he could remember. Then she died, and Dad had removed it, and left the wall bare ever since.

Stiles had no idea what to feel, seeing this painting that Mom had admired, here in this room in this
random motel in Salem, Oregon. Was it an omen? An omen from beyond the grave, from his mother? An omen of assurance, of hope?

Anything was possible now.

“My jacket,” Derek murmured. “It looks good on you.”

Derek was sitting at the foot of the bed, his hands laid on his thighs. It was surreal to glance at the mirror and not see Derek’s reflection, to see through Derek at the quilt of the bed under him. The bed didn’t sink under Derek: there was no physical weight to make the mattress sink or wrinkle the quilt.

“It really stinks of me now,” Stiles said. He patted the asymmetrical-zip placket of the leather jacket. Patted his lower back with his left hand. “And it’s got a hole, and my blood on it.”

Derek shrugged.

“You gonna throw it away?”

“No. Like I said, it looks good on you.”

Derek’s eyes were crinkled. Derek gazed at him as if he was all that existed in the werewolf’s world. He gazed back with his lips quirked up, his cheeks warm. Ten years he’d fantasized about Derek looking at him that way. Ten long years—but maybe, maybe, he would now have ten years of Derek looking at him that way in reality. Another ten after that. And if they were lucky, really lucky, they would have decades more after that. Decades together.

He carefully slid his arms out of the leather jacket, gazing into Derek’s rapt eyes. He held the jacket at chest level. Reluctantly lowered his eyes to inspect the hole on its lower left back. Yep, there it was, a flawless circle near the hem. His blood had dried around its rim.

His blood that had seeped from—his wound?

Eyes wide, he lifted the hem of his blood-stained t-shirt with his left hand. His left flank was also blood-stained, but the wound there was—gone. It was gone. He rubbed skin that was unscathed with his fingers.

When did his injury disappear? How did that happen?

His magic was quite depleted after everything that went down in the warehouse tonight. Even at full levels, his magic would require hours to heal a wound as serious as the one he had.

Unless his magic had one hell of a boost.

A boost from a power source equivalent to a thousand blazing suns inside him.

Stiles gave Derek a sharp glance. Derek continued to gaze at him with that serene expression, but those crinkled hazel eyes also had a meaningful gleam in them.

“Did you—did you heal me?”

Derek’s forehead furrowed. “I’m not sure. I guess? I could feel your injury, and I—focused on it? Your magic focused on it too. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s pretty weird being inside you and being—” Derek gestured at himself with both hands. “Out here at the same time? This is way outta my league. This is your turf, babe.” Derek’s forehead smoothened, and Derek gazed at him again with soft eyes. “But I think I did help to heal you, when we were trapped in that cell. I don’t know
how I did it. Maybe—maybe it was like how I gave you my Alpha spark.”

Stiles stared at Derek in awe. He was never, ever going to tire of hearing Derek call him by that endearment. It surprised him every time. Sent a frisson of joy through him.

And Derek thought he was the one who made the impossible possible?

“You—” Stiles lowered the hem of his t-shirt back down to his waist. He clutched onto Derek’s leather jacket with both hands. “You were still in there? With me? After—”

Derek nodded, his lips curved up in a small, winsome smile.

“I couldn’t leave, actually. But even if I could, I wouldn’t have.”

Stiles bit his lower lip. His chest swelled with that wonderful pain once more, and it felt good. It felt right. He felt that hot, fierce living thing—Derek within him, curling up in his core, safeguarded by his magic.

He laid Derek’s leather jacket on the dressing table. He avoided glancing into the mirror at himself. He sat next to Derek at the foot of the bed, unlacing and toeing off his boots. He climbed onto the bed, crawled to its head, collapsed face down on the pillows with a groan of exhaustion.

He jolted when something seared his forearm. He rolled onto his right side, and saw that Derek was also lying on his side on the bed, touching his forearm with a hand. Derek’s hand went through his arm, but it didn’t hurt him at all. It was like being caressed without and within by sunshine. It was a sublime sensation.

Derek had always been sublime. Derek still was.

“Take off your jeans. You’ll sleep better.”

Stiles almost blurted out a quip about Derek wanting to sleep with him right now. Instead, he let out a quiet huff of a chuckle, and stripped off his jeans without protest, now clothed in only his t-shirt and boxer-briefs. He kicked his jeans to the foot of the bed. Then he tugged the quilt over his body, up to his chest. He let his heavy head sink into the pillow with a sigh.

Derek stared at him across the bed with those tender eyes. He slid his right arm across the beige sheet and brushed his hand against Derek’s. His fingers went through Derek’s, but he was settled down by their tingling warmth.

“I have to see,” he whispered. “I have to know for sure.”

“Okay,” Derek whispered back.

Stiles’s lips twitched in a fleeting smile. His eyes fluttered shut. His whole body relaxed. His breaths slowed down, and so did his heartbeat, and he did what he should have done weeks ago.

He opened his third-eye. He gazed deep into himself, deep into his core.

He’d expected to see something putrid lurking there, festering with buzzing flies and maggots. Something hideous and rotten. Something that deserved to be executed for unforgivable crimes.

His eyelids fluttered.

He felt a cool breeze stroke his left cheek. He smelled the crisp, sweet scent of fir and pine. Under his right cheek was—black, dense fur, that rose and fell with constant breaths. Under his right ear, he
heard the steady thundering of an ample heart.

He gradually opened his eyes. He frowned in mystification. He was—in the verdant backyard of a splendid two-story brick house with walls of glass and white-trimmed windows, surrounded by towering trees and leafy shrub. He gaped at the house, at the beamed ceilings and burnished wood paneling he could see through the windows from his vantage point near the ground. His eyes roamed over the expansive brick patio with its woven wicker furniture and teal cushions. An oval infinity pool was nearby, filled with clear water. Water lilies floated on its placid surface.

Where was he? Whose house was this?

He stared at the house, at the forest surrounding it.

Then, with an abrupt inhalation—he knew where he was.

He was in the Preserve. He was in the verdant backyard of his house in the Preserve. His and Derek’s house. It would have a king-sized bed in the master bedroom on the second floor. A bed upon which he and Derek slept together in the middle, his back to Derek’s chest, with Derek’s arms around him. It would have an airy kitchen filled with early morning sunshine, where he and Derek would cook a breakfast of waffles with butter and honey, scrambled eggs and bacon. Pop tarts for him, and that excellent coffee from St. Helena for both of them.

This was their future home.

This was a magical projection of their future home. Just like the see-through Derek he saw in reality was a magical projection of—

The black, dense fur under his cheek and body undulated as brawny muscles beneath it contracted and stretched in agile movement. Stiles realized he was curled up in a fetal position. Wrapped in a downy mantle that belonged to an enormous, ferocious creature.

But he knew, without an atom of doubt, that nothing would ever hurt him here.

The enormous, ferocious creature that embraced him in its four sinewy limbs, in the coil of its bushy tail against its solid, sturdy body would never, ever hurt him.

Stiles pushed himself upright with his hands on its furry body as a huge head ascended from the grassy ground. It had a wide forehead, rounded ears that pointed upward, and a long, blunt muzzle. Fluffy tufts of black fur sprouted from its cheeks.

Large hazel eyes gazed serenely at him.

_Idiot. What did I tell you?_

The jaws of the wolf—truly, the most magnificent wolf Stiles had laid eyes on in his life—didn’t move, but Stiles heard Derek’s voice loud and clear. It reverberated around him. It reverberated through him, and it was what drew the quivering smile to his face, the stinging wetness to his eyes. He stared back into the wolf’s—into Derek’s eyes.

“Think of you, remember you, and—and you’re alive,” Stiles rasped. “Look inside my heart for you, and you’ll be there. Always.”

Those large hazel eyes softened with affection, the same way their human counterparts did. Derek snorted through a broad snout. The gust of air swept over Stiles’s face.
Idiot, Derek said again.

Derek licked the side of his face with a long, pink tongue, and buoyant laughter burst from Stiles’s grinning mouth even as his eyes spilled anew. He flung himself at Derek. Crushed his arms around Derek’s neck and buried his face in the black, downy fur there. He felt Derek curl up around him again, coiling that bushy tail over his back like a shield. He felt Derek’s enormous body vibrate. He heard a resonant, rumbling sound emanate from Derek’s chest, and he laughed, and laughed some more. Derek was purring.

“Derek,” he said into the most velvety fur he’d ever felt against his skin. “Derek. It’s really you.”

The vibrations of Derek’s body and that resonant rumble intensified. Stiles laughed again. He loosened his hug, just enough to run his hands through Derek’s fur, to savor Derek’s contentment and enjoyment of their intimacy.

Derek was here with him. Derek was anchoring him. Saving him from himself, over and over.

I’m real, my beloved mate. I’m here.

Stiles flopped back onto Derek’s furry, sun-warm body. He hugged Derek’s tail to his chest and face. He curled up and snuggled against Derek’s chest. He pressed his ear to it, and listened to Derek’s breathtaking, irreplaceable, treasured heart beat with the unwavering rhythm of the universe as it expanded on and on.

His eyelids fluttered.

He felt sunshine kissing his lips and making them tingle. He felt clean cotton against the side of his face. He opened his eyes to half-mast, and he saw the magical projection of Derek’s enduring, vibrant soul lying on the bed facing him, touching his lips with those adroit fingers.

“Derek,” he whispered.

And Derek didn’t vanish into thin air. Derek smiled at him. Derek stayed.

§§§§§§

Stiles remembered the conversation in the clinic’s office again. Remembered it as if it occurred yesterday, although it’d occurred almost eight years ago, when he was nineteen.

“I’m just saying, Deaton,” Stiles had said, gesticulating with both hands. “If a demon can do it, if an angel can do it, why can’t a soul possess another person’s body?”

Deaton had sat behind the oak desk in a black swivel chair while Stiles and Scott sat in blue vinyl armchairs facing Deaton. The desk was cluttered with tomes that were bound in animal leather of various colors and—Stiles was tempted to ask Deaton if the closed book in front of his mentor was bound with human skin, because he was pretty sure that book covers shouldn’t have pores and wrinkles like babcia had, may she rest in peace, amen.

Scott was cuddling a sleeping Corgi puppy to his chest. The puppy had a cast around its left hind leg. Scott stroked its furry ears while listening to the conversation, his gaze darting between Stiles and Deaton.
Deaton steepled his fingers and leaned his forearms on the desk.

“Demons and angels are spiritual beings. They do not have souls,” Deaton replied. “Consider the human being as—a—vehicle. Like a car, for example, with a chassis, an engine, and a fuel supply system. The soul is—”

“Oh!” Scott raised a hand and pointed a forefinger skyward. “The body is the car, and the soul is the gas that makes it run!”

Deaton’s lips quirked up in a slight smile at Scott. Stiles arched both eyebrows at his best friend who grinned like the goofball he was. The Corgi puppy remained in blissful slumber, twitching its front leg while it dreamed.

“Yes, Scott. But a more apt analogy is, if the body is the car, the soul that powers it is the equivalent of a thousand blazing stars generating energy for it from birth till death.”

“Whoa,” Scott mumbled with wide eyes of wonder.

Stiles arched his eyebrows at Deaton, and Deaton said, “Therefore, a soul entering the body of another is the equivalent of a thousand blazing stars crashing into another thousand blazing stars.”

Scott and Stiles glanced at each other. Then they looked back at Deaton.

“Kaboom?” Scott asked.

“Kaboom,” Deaton replied, his composed expression as inscrutable as ever.

Scott and Stiles grimaced at each other.

“Bro,” Scott said, “what would a thousand stars crashing into another thousand stars feel like?”

Stiles shook his head. He slumped in his seat. Nibbled at his right thumbnail, his brow furrowed.

“I dunno, man. Probably like—being electrocuted with a thousand amps of electricity. Or like, burning up in fire, or lava.”

“Whoa.”

Stiles pinched the skin between his eyes. He leaned forward to prop his arms on the desk.

“Okay, hold up.” Stiles gesticulated with his hands again, frowning at Deaton. “Isn’t this just a matter of someone being strong enough to withstand the addition of that much energy inside them? I mean, yeah, you haven’t heard of or read about any cases in which a person successfully held multiple souls in their body. But, that doesn’t mean it’s absolutely impossible! It just means that someone has yet to succeed at it.”

Deaton and Scott stared at him. Scott stared with fond eyes. Deaton stared with gauging eyes.

“What if there is someone out there with that kinda strength? Someone powerful enough to withstand the crashing of thousands of stars inside them?” Stiles slapped his hands on the lacquered surface of the desk. “Then it’s possible, right?”

Scott dipped his head to coo at the Corgi puppy as it woke up and whined, stroking its head and body with languid sweeps of his hand. Deaton stared on at Stiles, and Stiles had the strange feeling that Deaton was gazing past his face, gazing into him, into his very core.
“If there is someone strong enough to endure and survive such an experience—for example, a warlock—the second soul in his body would become a source of untold power.” Deaton spread his hands in a wide gesture. “At that point? Anything would be possible, if said warlock possessed the necessary knowledge and magic to harness it, and didn’t eventually—and inevitably—burn up from the inside out by the excess power.”

Stiles sat back in his seat. He chewed on his lower lip, tapped his foot on the laminated floor.

“Hey, Stiles.”

Stiles glanced at Scott who gazed at him with those fond, loyal eyes. The puppy also gazed at him with endearing brown eyes, its jaws parted and its tongue lolling out.

“If there’s anybody who can do it,” Scott said, sheer faith in every word, “I know it’s you.”

§§§§§§

Derek was closer now to him on the bed. Close enough that the tips of their noses almost grazed. It was surreal, being in bed with Derek for the first time, and knowing Derek loved him not only as a friend but as a lover, a mate. The big M-word in werewolf culture. The biggest word in werewolf culture, really, so much more than the big L-word.

When a werewolf told someone that he loved them, it could be a major deal, depending on who he said that to and why. When a werewolf told someone that they were his mate, calling it a major deal was like saying the sun imploding on itself and eliminating the Earth and all life on it was a minor distraction to Netflix binge-watching.

Yeah, it was the kind of deal where a werewolf, upon having his soul ejected from his body, promptly flipped the bird at death and the impossible, and did whatever he could to to save his human mate.

“Technically, when your soul entered my body?” Stiles’s grimace was half-hidden by his pillow. “It should have killed me on the spot. Like, kaboom.”

Derek’s facial features contorted into an expression of contrition. Stiles brushed his fingers down Derek’s bristly cheek. He marveled at the living warmth that enveloped his fingers as they passed through Derek’s cheek and jaw. Derek’s expression smoothened out after a while, and once again, Derek gazed at him with such tender eyes.

“Told you,” Derek said, grasping his hand to that handsome face, “you make the impossible possible.”

Stiles kept his hand in place. It tingled at the contact. Stiles stared at Derek with half-shut eyes.

“Nah. Pretty sure that’s you.”

Stiles arched an eyebrow and gave a pointed glance at Derek’s see-through forearm that seemed to meld with his. Derek snorted, but his expression and eyes were still gentle.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Stiles murmured. “To push your soul into my body.”
“I didn’t learn it. I just—I just knew I had to stop you, to save you.” Derek’s forehead creased in a contemplative frown. “I didn’t know what was happening to me. I knew I was dead. That my soul was outside my body. But—I couldn’t leave the cell even if I wanted to. The walls stopped me.”

Stiles sucked his lower lip into his mouth. His hand dropped from Derek’s face to the bed, and it was so surreal to see his hand and wrist going through Derek’s chest.

“What do you mean by that? They were—hurting you?”

“No.” Derek shook his head. The pillow under his head didn’t move or wrinkle. “No. They—I could see these black cobwebs holding the walls together. But they didn’t hurt me. Some of the cobwebs were glowing bright blue, and I was—calmed by them.” Derek paused, then murmured, “It was almost like—I knew the blue light. Like the blue light spoke to me, but not with words.”

Stiles drew his arm back. Rested his hand palm down between them on the bed. Derek laid a sun-warm hand on it, and their hands occupied the same space.

“What did it say to you?”

Derek stared at him, and said, “‘Stay. Stay here. Stay with him.’”

Stiles stared back at Derek, then murmured, “Przemysław.”

Derek’s expression altered into one of commiseration.

The image of Przemysław without those rot-soaked bandages, without all that blood on his pale skin and those fatal lacerations, rushed to the forefront of Stiles’s mind. Przemysław’s open eyes were crinkled and whisky-brown. His lips curled up into a small, impish smile, identical to his own.

Przemysław, his other self from another universe. The most powerful warlock Stiles had ever encountered, who had stopped Derek’s soul from leaving the prison cell, who’d bought the both of them time and a chance to save Derek from irrevocable death. Who had, in a one-in-a-trillion chance, enabled Stiles to augment his magic by tapping into the phenomenal power of Derek’s soul inside him.

Had Przemysław fought the Nogitsune, even as he was enslaved by the demon in body and mind? Had Przemysław done anything and everything he could to help other versions of themselves, other Dereks of other universes? To buy them time and a chance to save each other?

Of course he had. Of course he had to.

There was no other alternative than to fight, fight, and fight to the very end. That was what Przemysław had done in that warehouse full of curly fries packaging bags, while the Nogitsune was still weakened by Stiles’s unleashing of magical power back in Beacon Hills. When Przemysław, still possessed by the Nogitsune, had lurched into sight from behind the wormhole, Stiles had been witnessing Przemysław retaliating with everything he had to buy Stiles a precious chance at victory. He’d been listening to Przemysław screaming with rage and resolve, releasing a battle cry for himself and Stiles.

Przemysław saved him and Derek again, earlier tonight. With his sacrifice, Przemysław helped him and Derek to save their loved ones and their world.

“I could see you and my body on the floor. I tried to talk to you. But you couldn’t see me, or hear me.” Derek scowled at Stiles, and it was that murderous scowl maximized to the nth degree. “Then you started pulling out the knife. What were you thinking?”
The image of Przemyslaw waned until all Stiles saw was Derek. He saw the tip of the carving knife pointed at Derek’s heart. He felt Derek’s hand around his nape, and how Derek’s hand around the carving knife’s marble handle didn’t shake.

“The guy I’ve been crazy in love with for a third of my life told me he felt the same way for me,” Stiles replied, his face impassive, his throat a constricted pinhole. “He told me I was the one for him. That I was his mate, and that he would never love anyone else like he loves me.” Stiles fell silent for a long, strained moment, then rasped, “Then he stabbed a carving knife through his heart, and I watched him die and I couldn’t do a thing to save him. And I just wanted to be with him again. What do you think I was thinking, Derek?”

Derek shut those gorgeous hazel eyes. Pressed those dark pink, soft lips into an ashen line.

“I’m sorry it hurt you so much, when I pushed my soul into your body.” Derek opened his eyes, and they glistened with devotion. “But I’m not sorry I stopped you from killing yourself. I will never be sorry for that.” Those murder brows—and they were adorable, but he wasn’t going to tell Derek that anytime soon—lowered in an admonishing glower. “And if you ever try that shit again, I really will rip your throat out with my teeth.”

“You realize that results in my death too, right?”

Stiles’s lips twitched as Derek’s glower changed into a chagrined frown.

“The point is,” Derek growled, aiming those lowered murder brows at him again, “I won’t let you hurt yourself again. Idiot.”

“I know, Sweet-wolf. I know.”

Derek’s eyes widened at the new term of endearment.

“Don’t even try to pretend that isn’t what you really are,” Stiles murmured. “I know you now. You’re my mate.”

Derek didn’t deny any of those statements. His hazel eyes softened all over again, luminous like the first dawn of spring after a dismal winter.

Derek’s hand over Stiles’s soothed him as much as Derek’s soul pulsating within him did. He stared at his werewolf mate with stinging eyes, with a chest swollen with gratitude and pride, and he knew that there was no else for him but Derek, that Derek was it for him. That he’d never loved anyone like he loved Derek, and would never love anyone else like he loved Derek. That was the absolute truth. He knew it with every cell of his body, every beat of his darkness-bound heart that was breaking free of that darkness, at last.

“Are you really here?” he whispered.

“I’m right here, babe. I never left you,” Derek said, and that was the absolute truth too.

Chapter End Notes

In softest air, a stutter
steers the heart away from the bane,
leaves the lasting sorrow, and carries me anew.
(Told ya to hold onto that "angst with a happy ending" tag, didn't I? *grin* I honestly didn't plan this chapter to be posted in time for Valentine's Day, but sometimes, things just work out that way.)
Stiles opened his eyes, and was astonished to discover that he was still alive. He stared at the plaster ceiling above him. It was an acceptable ceiling that didn’t have cracks or stains. It wasn’t the ceiling of his apartment.

“Stiles.”

Oh, he was lying in a bed. A king-sized bed in a budget motel room in Salem, Oregon, hundreds of miles away from his hometown.

He wasn’t in hell, or heaven. He was still alive. He thought he would be dead by now, exsanguinated in the tub in the bathroom with a grisly smile from ear to ear and a carving knife in hand—but he wasn’t.

He stared up at the ceiling with eyes in slits, and it didn’t vanish like he thought it would. He was cozy and warm under the navy blue quilt. The room was illuminated by the bedside lamps, but vivid sunlight also bled along the edges of windows covered by dark brown curtains.

“Stiles. Wake up. Please.”

Someone was lying on the bed next to him. Sunlight was skimming down his right cheek, the side of his jaw, his neck despite the drawn curtains. He tried to part his lips. They felt bone dry, and they separated easily. His mouth was an arid desert, and so was his throat. How long had he been asleep here?

“You’ve been sleeping for five days. I think that pink-haired lady knocked on the door yesterday.”

Wait.

*Five* days?

Stiles’s eyes snapped wide open. He swiveled his gaze away from the ceiling, and it landed on—Derek. Derek, lying on the bed next to him, caressing his face and neck, glowing from the warm light of the bedside lamps pouring through him. Derek, still here in the morning, after he’d awakened.

Derek.

“Derek, are you—”

That hot ache, that hot, fierce living thing inside him—*Derek’s soul* unfurled the way a gigantic,
graceful wolf would after a night of slumber, with a back-creaking stretch and a yawn full of fangs. Stiles pressed a palm to his sternum, over the quilt. His chapped lips spread into a gratified smile.

“Morning,” Derek said, also smiling, and Stiles smiled even wider, his eyes crinkling, his face aching in the best way.

“Hey, Fluff-ball,” he replied, like the suave flirt he was.

He let out an uncouth snort at Derek’s murder brows getting their first workout of the day.

“Call me that again, and—”

“What? You’ll rip my throat out with your teeth?”

“No.” Derek widened his eyes and pasted on an expression of innocence that wouldn’t fool a blind man. “I’ll get Deaton to put a spell on you. A spell that makes curly fries taste like sewage. After it’s been stewing in the drains for a year.”

Stiles gasped and pressed his hand harder to his chest. “Evil! Pure evil in fluff-ball form!”

Derek’s lips twitched in an effort to not smile even as those murder brows lowered in a glower.

“Be very grateful I can’t wrap my hands around your neck right now.”

Derek didn’t mean to cause it, Stiles was certain, but the implication of that playful comment slew Stiles’s mirth. Stiles’s smile wavered, then dissolved into an anxious frown.

Derek was right: Derek couldn’t really touch him, couldn’t touch anything. All Stiles felt was a concentrated heat whenever any part of Derek grazed and went through him. He had to remember that what he was looking at was a magical projection of Derek’s soul that was inside his body. Derek was confined inside him, until he figured something out, and fast.

But how was he going to transfer Derek’s soul back into his body? A body that had lain in a black-and-silver coffin six feet underground for weeks?

He didn’t have a clue. Not one.

Deaton had been adamant that it was impossible for a human body to hold more than one soul—its own. Adamant that even if someone was strong enough to do so, they needed the necessary knowledge and magic to tackle the situation and not die. There was no data, no research or statistics for Stiles to unearth and examine. There was no precedent for what he and Derek had achieved. Which meant he was going to have to wing it. Fly by the seat of his pants, and hopefully not send them both crashing and burning with his mistakes.

He couldn’t go through losing Derek again. He just couldn’t—

“Hey.”

Derek was touching his cheek again, warming it in the cup of that broad palm. Derek was here. Derek never left him.

“Hey,” he replied, and he was smiling once more, a softer, toothless smile. “I am, like, so thirsty and hungry I could eat an adult tauntaun.”

“I’m gonna assume that’s some giant animal from one of your movies.”
“Derek, you know what a tauntaun is. We watched episodes four to six of Star Wars at Scott’s.” Stiles’s eyes went round with mock outrage when Derek’s mouth opened. “And we do not ever speak about episodes one to three. Nuh uh. You swore.”

Derek’s mouth closed. Then it opened again, and Derek said, “I kinda thought episode three was okay. When Obi-Wan was yelling at Anakin, you could see his heart brea—”

“See, this is why I choose the movies, and you don’t—”

“I picked The Dark Knight after that, and you said, and I quote, ‘Derek, this fine choice has erased all your past sins in movie-choosing.’ No takebacks.”

Derek’s impression of him was—abysmal. He didn’t sound anywhere as squeaky as that. Yeah, okay, he didn’t own a gravely, growly voice like the werewolves did, but he thought he had a rather manly voice. He did. He so did. Samuel L. Jackson would be proud to cuss like a muthafucking sailor with his voice.

“I do not sound like that.”

“Yeah, you do. When you laugh so hard that you wheeze like a geezer and try to talk anyway—”

“I do not sound like that—”

“And when you stub your toe on a table leg, and—and that time when you found a giant spider on your bed, and you panicked and called me and screamed at me to come over to claw it to death at three in the morning—”

“And you came,” Stiles said, cracking up into chortles, rolling onto his side to face a grinning Derek. “You actually came, and you—you made that hilarious noise when you saw how humongous it was. Like you were a whoopee cushion somebody stepped on, oh my god! And then—and then, you threw a chair at it and it was, like, crawling up the wall all calm and cool, and you bared your fangs at it and yelled at it to go away—”

Derek started to chortle too, and that was it, that echoing, satisfying sound of Derek laughing—Derek, here at all to laugh with him—was all it took for Stiles to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of his inverted fortunes. His face ached, and so did his chest, his eyes. They burned in their sockets. His chortles petered out, although he was still smiling. He swiped a hand across his eyes, and Derek didn’t laugh at him, didn’t mock him.

Derek gazed at him with those devastating, tender eyes. Derek’s lips were quirked up in a beguiling smile.

“I love you, Stiles.”

It was funny how a mere three words from Derek could make Stiles feel like he could face the whole world, the whole universe, and win. Maybe it was never a matter of finding anyone willing to say them to him, whether they meant it or not—like the few women he’d dated in college, who’d ended things knowing his heart was already in the care of someone they could never compare to, long before he himself knew. Maybe it was always a matter of finding the right person who said them no matter how happy or angry or sad they felt at the time, who said them because they meant it, every time.

What did he do in this life, that he was blessed enough for his right person to be Derek Hale?

He didn’t have a goddamn clue. Not one.
But he was going to wake up each and every day from today onward a thankful man. A man who knew what it meant to love, and be loved by his werewolf mate.

“It’s too early in the morning for emotional declarations, okay,” he said, and he didn’t care that his voice was hoarse, laden with feeling.

“It’s never too early,” Derek said, and he might as well have reached into Stiles’s chest and compressed his throbbing heart with one of those large hands.

Derek was right, again: It could always be too late. They were almost too late in revealing how much they loved and were in love with each other.

Derek had said those three words, in that cell, while he had the opportunity.

Stiles hadn’t.

There was no specific time to say the words anymore, not when they both knew the cost of being robbed of their time to live, of not using their words when they could. It wasn’t a matter of finding the right place to say the words, either. What had always and only mattered was whether he truly meant them.

Stiles stretched out his left hand toward Derek’s face. He cupped Derek’s cheek, stroked his thumb across that high cheekbone, and felt vital heat against and under his skin. He looked Derek in those gorgeous eyes with their kaleidoscopic irises.

“I love you, Derek Hale,” Stiles rasped, meaning every single word with everything he had. “I love you so damn much.”

Once upon a time, when he was a teenager, he’d believed that his world would implode the instant he said those words to someone who wasn’t family. He’d believed that saying the words to someone he was attracted to was akin to handing them a knife and exposing his chest to be stabbed with said knife. He’d certainly thought that about Lydia, despite how obsessed he’d been with turning her into Mrs. Stilinski.

He would have been right, if that person didn’t return his feelings and threw his pitiful ones back in his face. He had been right, when he’d said the words and thought he meant them to his last girlfriend during his final year in Stanford—she’d looked at him with banked horror. Turned her face away and told him he fell in love too easily.

She had no idea how wrong she’d been about that. So many people had no idea how wrong they were about him, assuming he would settle for whatever came his way because he wasn’t some hot, muscular stud with a GQ-worthy face—he wanted only the very best for himself. Before he turned sixteen, he’d thought the very best was Lydia Martin, the most beautiful, ingenious girl in the world.

Then he hiked into the Preserve with Scott, searching for Scott’s inhaler, and he found the Real Deal in a hazel-eyed, stubbled werewolf who plucked his heart out of his young chest and never returned it. The problem was that he’d immediately assumed someone as handsome as Derek would never desire him, never love him, never see him. He had buried whatever frail hope he had, so deep that, in time, he couldn’t recognize what that feeling was that abided within him, until it was too late. Almost too late.

He had no idea how wrong his assumptions about Derek would be. It was a one-in-a-trillion chance, and against all the odds in this limitless universe, he—Mieczysław “Stiles” Stilinski, who was voted “most likely to sext himself and die a virgin” in high school—had won it: Derek Hale desired him.
Derek Hale was in love with him. Derek Hale loved him.

And now, Derek had those words from him to treasure, too, along with everything else that he had, that he was, that he could give.

Stiles felt Derek’s soul surge in his core, like a wolf romping through the vast forests that was its territory, its home, king of its domain. He withdrew his hand from Derek’s face to rub his chest, over Derek’s soul that spiraled under his hand. He felt Derek’s euphoria like it was his own.

“I know,” Derek said, his face and voice deadpan.

A tremor ran through Stiles’s lips. He gave Derek a mock glower.

“You did not just Hans Solo me, man.”

“I did not just Hans Solo you.” Derek paused dramatically, and it was with that flimsy expression of innocence that Stiles would never in a million years tell Derek was cute. “Those Princess Leia hair buns will improve your hairstyle a lot, though—”

Derek erupted into hearty laughter when Stiles scrambled to his knees, seized a pillow and did his best to clobber the werewolf with it. Derek rolled onto his back and laughed harder, kicking at the bed as the pillow struck the bed instead, going through him, not hurting him one bit.

Stiles smacked the pillow onto Derek’s grinning, silly-beautiful face, and he also laughed, his face aching so good from his eye-crinkling grin. He laughed with jubilation. He remembered how to do so again.

§§§§§§

Later, Stiles didn’t have much of a choice about glancing at himself in the bathroom mirror. He slapped his hands over his abominable face, and groaned like the geezer Derek claimed he was.

“You could probably squeeze a gallon of oil from your hair,” Derek, standing in the bathroom doorway, said as such encouragement for his self-esteem. “And your t-shirt could probably stand upright on its own. If you can peel it off.”

Stiles removed his right hand from his face to flip Derek the bird. Derek snickered.

It was still surreal to not see Derek’s reflection in the mirror. It was a solemn reminder that the situation was still dire, that Derek’s soul was somewhere it wasn’t intended to be. There was also that tiny detail about Stiles potentially going kaboom with the force of two thousand exploding stars in due time, but yeah, he was going to keep that to himself. For now.

He was thirsty. He was starving. And whoa, he was filthy.

He grimaced while stripping off his soiled white t-shirt. It reeked of old blood and sweat. He laid it flat on the laminated counter next to the lime-green, oval sink. He fingered the two frayed holes going through the left flank.

“So, I’ve never tried this before,” Stiles said, staring down at his t-shirt. “I may end up without a shirt if my magic gets too, uh, eager.”
Derek didn’t say anything, but Stiles knew he was present. Derek could inspect his nude upper body now. He didn’t want to know what Derek’s expression was, seeing that his human mate had become this scrawny, unattractive thing peppered with old battle scars. At least he had some bulk and muscle definition before his twenty-four-day coma. He was already gangly in comparison to Derek then.

He touched two fingers to his t-shirt. He squinted at it. His magic flowed from his fingers and swept through his t-shirt like an ocean wave, making the t-shirt glow gold for a few seconds. After the glow waned, his t-shirt was—totally clean and intact. It looked as if he’d just removed it from the washing machine.

He lifted the t-shirt off the counter by its shoulders. He smirked at its pristine condition.

“Holy shit, Derek, look at it!”

He turned toward Derek. Derek was staring at his face with amused eyes, leaning against the counter with those brawny arms crossed over that firm, hirsute chest. Dark curls peeked above the collar of Derek’s t-shirt.

Oh. Derek was staring at his face, and pointedly not looking at the rest of him.

Embarrassment flushed Stiles’s face and bare chest. He pivoted his head away from Derek to confront the mirror again. He kept his eyes lowered as he folded his t-shirt. His face was no better than his body, from what he’d glimpsed from his reflection earlier: those dark purple rings still circled his eyes, although they were lighter after his five-day-long slumber. His cheekbones were sharp enough to slice. His stubble was visible on his cheeks down to his jaws, and unlike Derek, it wasn’t such a pleasing appearance on him. It made him look like a grubby vagrant that people sped past on the road or gave the stink eye if he dared slink past some highfalutin’ place.

That was what his second girlfriend said to him, good-natured though it’d been. He’d been far more dismayed by the way her eyes constantly roved over other guys while they sat in that Italian restaurant, while he spoke to her, dressed up in a pricey shirt and trousers he would rather liquefy in acid. Roved all over before settling on him. Before settling for him.

No surprise they broke up days after that. He did that the hard way by visiting her dorm room and finding her screwing a blond, hulking guy who had muscles on top of his muscles.

It should have told him something about himself then, that he just walked away and felt glad that it was over with her. That all he could think about in the hours afterward was calling Derek, to talk with him, to listen to his voice while the werewolf grumbled and muttered about this and that. Derek had a pleasant voice. A pleasant laugh. Derek had a pleasant everything, really, unlike—

“Stiles. Stop it.”

Stiles spun to face Derek, his eyes round at Derek’s stern tone.

“What?” he blurted, gripping his folded t-shirt to his chest like armor. “Stop what?”

Oh boy, Derek had that murderous scowl on at full blast. But it was different from any of the previous scowls Stiles had seen. This was one that subdued him and yet made him feel—so very much cared for. So very loved.

“Stop beating yourself up over how you look."

Stiles’s mouth gaped open in readiness to retort, to deny that he was.
“Don’t even try to pretend that wasn’t what you were doing.” Derek arched one of those dark, thick eyebrows that Stiles wanted to stroke, to feel again. “I know you now. You’re my mate. And your wellbeing is and will always be my priority.”

Stiles’s mouth clapped shut. In his chest, Derek’s soul unfurled and nudged him, like a gentle albeit chiding punch. The sensation was so peculiar, so extraordinary. It brought a small smile to his lips as he bowed his head and pressed a palm to his sternum, over his folded t-shirt.

“You went through severe trauma, babe. Severe emotional and physical trauma that would have destroyed most people. We both did.”

Stiles raised his head. Derek’s expression softened as they gazed at each other.

“You’re gonna recover. We’ll find a way to reunite my soul with my body. And then we’re gonna have the nicest picnic by that lake, and we’re gonna have a fucking great time.”

Stiles’s smile expanded, and Derek’s eyes crinkled.

“Is it gonna be a literal kind of fucking?”

“Well, if you want that?” Derek raised his eyebrows. “We definitely have to find a way to reunite my soul with my body, don’t we?”

Stiles’s smile stayed. He gazed at the most magnificent man he’d laid eyes on in his life, and he remembered the words Derek had said to him in that prison cell, words he’d sealed in his heart from the moment he heard them. Words he’d desperately sought to believe in a world where Derek had no longer existed.

Beautiful. Yeah. That’s what you are. That’s what you’ve always been.

Beautiful, every face of you, in light and shadow.

It was easy, so easy, to be attracted to someone when they were good-looking on the outside and made him feel good on the inside, even if it was for a little while. It was easy to turn a blind eye to the fact that feeling good wasn’t synonymous with being loved. Easy to lie to himself that if he just behaved better, dressed better, faked his way to being better than who he truly was, maybe someone might accept him one day.

But Derek didn’t expect him to change into someone else. Derek teased him about his babbling, his clumsiness, his hair, his fashion sense or lack thereof, his nerdiness, because Derek noticed those things about him, and accepted them. Derek didn’t only love him when he was dressed to the nines and had a trendy haircut, whatever the hell that was. Derek didn’t only love him when he looked attractive to Derek, or made Derek feel good.

Derek strove to accept and love him exactly as he was, right here, right now, no matter how he appeared or felt.

What was a mirage compared to a real and strong person, a person who looked at him and saw him, and loved every face of him, even beyond death?

“I will find a way,” Stiles said, his voice steadfast. “We’ll find a way.”

“I know,” Derek replied, and there was nothing deadpan about his adoring tone and unguarded eyes.

Stiles placed his folded t-shirt on the counter next to the sink. He locked his eyes with Derek’s as he
slid his thumbs under the waistband of his boxer-briefs. Derek’s eyes widened when he pushed them down, and he didn’t stop until they glided down his thighs and they dropped to the tiled floor on their own.

Derek swiveled his head away. Derek’s whole face and neck turned strawberry-red. The blush was obvious despite Derek being a magical, see-through projection.

Minutes ago, Stiles would have been distressed by that reaction. He would have kicked himself for exposing his scrawny body instead of putting on his lost weight and rebuilding his muscle mass first. Instead, an affectionate smile spread across his face that was equally flushed.

Derek wasn’t averting his head because he didn’t want to look. Derek was doing that because Stiles hadn’t given explicit permission for him to look.

“Hey. Ogle all you want, Gentleman-wolf.” Stiles gestured with both hands down the length of his lanky body. “This is all yours.”

Derek swiveled that full head of dark, lush hair toward him. Derek looked him in the eye first, to double-check, and Stiles also learned the answer to another question that had plagued him for half his life: was it possible to fall in love over and over again with the same person, for the littlest of things? With Derek, it seemed anything really was possible.

Stiles bit his lower lip and held his arms at his sides as Derek’s heavy-lidded, gleaming eyes scrutinized his body from head to toe, inch by inch. He felt Derek’s stare like a shaft of sunshine heating up his skin and his insides. His chest flushed along with his face and neck when Derek’s gaze lingered on his perked nipples. It wasn’t the first time Derek had seen them; he’d gone topless around Derek numerous times, and most of those times had involved him being injured in some way that necessitated removal of his shirts to treat said injury. Derek was studying them with thoughts so loud that Stiles could feel Derek’s tongue on them. Feel Derek’s fangs on them.

A thrilled shiver zigzagged down his straight spine. He pressed his hands flat on his thighs when Derek’s gaze skimmed down his flat belly to his groin. His face heated up even more, and it was his turn to avert his head, nibbling on his lower lip. He was of average girth and length. He wasn’t ashamed of that.

But compared to Derek? He’d surreptitiously checked out Derek’s package more than a few times—okay, fine, thousands of times throughout the decade—and he could tell that Derek was big. The kind of big that Stiles would hunt for in gay porn, jerk off to and fuck himself with a similar-sized dildo until he came all over himself, crying out Derek’s name in the seclusion of his bedroom.

Being fucked by Derek—plowed with werewolf vigor into the bed, his legs on Derek’s shoulders, his wrists pinned above his head by one of Derek’s hands, filled and split by Derek’s cock, coming untouched with a silent scream—was his ultimate fantasy. No dildo could compare to Derek’s cock that would fatten inside him and fill him with copious come till his belly distended, and knot him—

Goosebumps broke out all over his fiery skin. His hands clenched into fists as his cock hardened under Derek’s avid stare. He sucked in a shuddery breath, then glanced at Derek from under his eyelashes. Derek was running his tongue across his lower lip. The tips of Derek’s canines showed. In Stiles’s chest, Derek’s soul was gyrating with a feverishness, and it almost felt like pain. The kind of pain where he’d keep himself hard and ready to blow for ages, deny himself the orgasm so he could teeter on the precipice between pleasure and torment.

The abundant lust and love in Derek’s eyes for him, for him, made him feel like a glorious god.
“You really have no idea, do you?” Derek murmured. “How beautiful you are.”

Derek dragged his eyes back up to Stiles’s face. They stared at each other, their faces still flushed, their expressions tender. Stiles’s hands loosened at his sides. He refused to touch himself: he didn’t want to come until it was with Derek, until they could touch each other again.

“I think I have an inkling now,” he murmured back.

Seconds later, a sonorous growl worthy of a ravenous werewolf resounded from Stiles’s hollow stomach. Stiles gaped down at his abdomen, then at a straight-faced Derek. They broke into chuckles in unison, Stiles bending forward at the waist with his hands on his knees, Derek covering his scrunched-shut eyes with a hand.

“Oh my god, Stiles,” Derek said when he could, “go shower.”

“You are not the boss of me,” Stiles retorted, pointing a forefinger at Derek, his traitorous mouth set in a contented grin.

“Go shower so you can eat something,” Derek growled.

Stiles rolled his eyes. Scooped up his boxer-briefs from the tiled floor and zapped them with his magic too. Man, this was a convenient and nifty trick. His huge laundry days were over.

“Wish I could eat you,” Stiles whispered.

When he glanced to the right, he saw that the magical projection of Derek’s soul was gone. But in the sanctuary of his ribcage, enfolded by his golden magic, Derek’s soul curled up in gratification. Derek was giving him as much privacy as he could to shower. It brought yet another small, sweet smile to his lips.

Stiles turned the knob for hot water. He climbed into the bathtub—where he might have died, should have died, but didn’t. He stood under the revitalizing torrent of clean water. He tapped his fingers against the sides of his thighs. Counted five fingers on each hand, tapping them again and again to the pulsing rhythm of his werewolf mate’s soul.

§§§§§§

“Jumping Jesus freaking Christ on a bloated banana canoe rowing down the Santiam River, I thought you were dead, kid.”

Stiles halted in his tracks in front of the reception desk. He grimaced at the pink-haired lady who stood behind it, shaking her head at him. She was wearing a different floral blouse today, paired with black sweatpants, and a ton of beaded jewelry.

“If it wasn’t for you snoring like a hog through the door, I would have called the cops.”

Stiles’s grimace became a wince. He hunched his shoulders.

“Yeeeeeah, it’s been—” He raised both hands. Rotated them as he foraged for a polite description of his life since encountering the Nogitsune from another universe. “A couple of—” He made a face. Lowered his hands, and shrugged. “Bad weeks.”
He was about ninety-nine percent sure that his attempt at a genial grin appeared more like the ghastly grin of a skull picked clean by vultures.

She stared at him, expressionless.

“No shit. Are you sure you should be walking around? Do I need to call an ambulance?”

Stiles’s grin morphed into yet another wince. Wow, he looked that awful, huh? And this was him after a nice, long shower, dressed in magically clean clothes. He even zapped Derek’s leather jacket!

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Really!” He pumped both fists, making a face that he hoped showed how badass he was instead of how nuts he must look to everyone who couldn’t see Derek. “Fit as a fiddle, hungry as a horse, insert your favorite simile here to describe a healthy, good-looking dude!”

The pink-haired lady stared at him again, still expressionless. Then she shrugged, turned away from him.

“Wait!”

She turned back and stared at him again, her pencil-drawn eyebrows shooting up her forehead to disappear under pink bangs.

“Who, uh—” Stiles pointed toward the ceiling with his right forefinger. “Who hung that Klimt painting in the room?”

She stared on at him, frowning in bafflement.

“The who what now?”

“You know, The Kiss by Gustav Klimt. The framed print hanging in the room I stayed in? The one above the bed?”

Her frown deepened, and she said, “I got no idea what you’re talking about, kid. There’s no framed painting in there. We removed all the framed pictures from the rooms last year.” Her lips twisted into a sneer. Her eyes went round in a theatrical way. “One of our esteemed guests was high on LSD. Decided that slamming one of them against his head until his skull split open and his brains fell out was fun. Because the devil told him so.”

Stiles reeled from her answer. His mouth worked noiselessly, then blurted out a low, “Wow.”

“Uh hm.” She was squinting at him with suspicion now. “Are you thinking about doing the same thing?”

Stiles flung his hands up and shook his head frantically. “Oh no, no, ma’am. I like my head in one piece, and my framed art hung on the wall and far, far away from pulverizing my brain to a pulp.”

She continued to squint at him.

“Also, I’m, uh, checking out.”

“You still got two days.”


She squinted at him for several more seconds. Then she shrugged again, muttered, “Your loss,” and
turned around. She shuffled through an open door behind the desk that lead to a small office. He heard a TV switch on inside. He heard teeth crunching on junk food. There was probably a nicer TV in there than the antediluvian one behind the reception desk.

“Yeah.” He nodded to himself. “My loss, all right.”

He knocked his knuckles twice on the wooden reception desk, then strode to the main entrance of the motel, sliding his hands into the leather jacket’s side pockets. He liked her don’t-give-a-shit attitude: if more people adopted it, the world would be a much better place. Really, it would.

His composure persevered until he reached the Camaro in the parking lot in front of the motel. He blew out a long, quavering breath. Propped his folded arms on the car’s black roof and rested his chin on them. He stared at the squat building that was the motel, at the rays of morning sunlight striping it.

Okay. Okay, so Mdm. Pink Hair didn’t know about the Klimt print in his room. Claimed that none of the motel rooms had any framed pictures. It was possible some random person, be they a guest or staff, had hung it up without her knowing. It was possible that she did know about it and was messing with his head. It was just as possible that the framed print manifested itself due to his magic that extracted the image from his head. Just as possible that it was a hallucination: Derek hadn’t commented on it or pointed it out at any time during this stopover.

Derek, his werewolf mate whose soul was trapped in his chest.

Was Stiles going insane? For real this time?

Or was it some symptom of Derek’s soul being confined in his body? A symptom of his magic increasing in potency due to the powerhouse that was Derek’s soul, gradually going out of his control?

Or, was it somehow a genuine sign from his mother, from the afterlife?

The image of Mom, with her waves of dark brown, long hair, her darker brown eyes that crinkled at the sides, rushed to the forefront of Stiles’s mind. This was her before that goddamn brain disease snatched her away from him and Dad, before her hair grayed and her plump, robust body languished in a hospital bed. This was her when she still smiled so wide, when she still laughed exactly like he did, when she could still bear-hug him and bop him on his nose that was exactly like hers.

Mieczysław. My sweet baby boy, my hope. Moje słoneczko.

He loved her so much. He missed her so much. He knew Dad missed her just as much, perhaps even more. She was his mother, but she was also Dad’s other half. It took Dad years to not drink himself to sleep with glass after glass of whisky, years more to be able to look at photos of Mom again and not break into even smaller pieces.

Dad had met her in Beacon Hills’ sole bookstore at the time, in the stationery section where rolls of art posters were on sale.

She was holding that poster of The Kiss by Klimt, Dad had said to him one evening, while they were lounging on the couch, browsing through their family photo albums. She turned her head to look at me. I looked at her, and I swear, son: I saw her soul, like an aura around her, and it was golden like the sun.

Dad hadn’t drunk a droplet of alcohol that night. Stiles had thought that Dad was just being sappy, describing Mom’s soul that way—although, despite being a fourteen-year-old teenager then, he also
thought it was heart-wrenchingly romantic. It’d made something in his chest twinge with envy and longing for the same kind of eternal, true love his parents had.

Then Stiles discovered his spark, his magic. It glowed gold. Like the sun. Like Mom.

He always did wonder why Mom called him her sunshine in Polish.

He always did wonder whether Mom had magic of her own. Whether he’d inherited it from her. If she had, it hadn’t been powerful enough to cure her, to save her. She had no family left except him and Dad, after babcia passed away in Warsaw when he was six. Deaton had found nothing via inquiries about her to the Council of Emissaries, and didn’t have trusted contacts in Poland where magic practitioners were notoriously secretive even by his standards.

Stiles would never know.

“Mom,” he whispered, and he felt that hot, fierce living soul within him unfurl and give him a delicate nudge. He felt sunlight skimming his temple, his cheek. The tension melted away from his neck and shoulders. His lips curled up in a fond smile. He pushed away from the Camaro, turned his head to his left, and gazed into empathetic, hazel eyes.

“Your mom had good taste in art,” Derek murmured.

Stiles blinked. Oh, right. He’d told Derek about his parents and their attachment to the Klimt painting, when he was—twenty? Yeah, when he was twenty, on Derek’s couch after everyone else had left the birthday bash for Derek. Derek remembered. Of course he did.

Stiles heaved a sigh of relief. “You saw the framed print too?”

“Yes. It was—glowing. Gold, like your magic.” Derek frowned in puzzlement. “At least to me.”

Stiles blinked again. “Huh. I didn’t see that. Did anything else in the room glow like that?”

“Just the print. I thought—when I saw you staring at it, I thought that was you doing something with your magic.”

Stiles shook his head. He rubbed the fingers of his right hand across his mouth, frowning to himself. Okay. So the print was of magical origin. But whose magic?

It was golden, so it had to be his own. It had to be.

It was too much for Stiles to consider the unbelievable possibility that Derek’s soul had powered him up enough for his magic to somehow cross the outright impassable space between the living world and the afterlife. For Mom to be able to connect with him in any way.

Mom.

Mamo, tęsknię za tobą.

“Stiles?”

Stiles pressed both hands over his mouth. He paced the asphalt next to the Camaro. Then he walked back to Derek. He grimaced, and said, “You were staring at it for days, weren’t you? While I was snoring like a hog.”

Derek’s lips trembled with mirth for a few seconds.
“No offense to Klimt, but I had something far more beautiful to stare at.”

It took Stiles far longer than it should for him to figure out what that something—or someone—was. Derek was utterly straight-faced. Derek meant what he said.

“Need I remind you that the bathroom had a mirror, Sappy-wolf?” Stiles said, his cheeks heated.

“And? I liked what I saw.” Derek dragged his heavy-lidded gaze down Stiles’s body, all the way down to his boots, then back up to his face. “Very much.”

Stiles’s cheeks felt like they were on fire. His lips twitched. He rolled his eyes and got behind the wheel of the Camaro, waking the sleek beast up with a turn of the key. He pointedly ignored Derek’s satisfied smirk.

After ten minutes of cruising through light traffic, he parked the Camaro in front of a homey diner whose glass windows were covered by white Venetian blinds. It was painted all white on the outside. It was all white inside as well, except for the retro diner booths that were bright red, and laminated floor that was a dark brown.

Stiles felt like he’d hurtled back in time to the 1950s as he sauntered to one of those booths, even more so when the waitress—whose white name tag displayed “Matilda” in black capital letters—approached his table in a baby pink uniform with black trims and a black apron. A baby pink cap sat atop a towering beehive of dyed red hair that crowned a weary, weathered face of indigo eyeshadow and dark red, thin lips.

To Stiles’s famished stomach, Matilda was a dazzling vision to behold.

“Morning.” Matilda whipped out a notepad and pen from the pocket of her apron. “What’s your poison today?”

Stiles was starting to like the ladies of Salem. He gazed up at Matilda and her lofty cap, and said, “Yeah, uh, I’ll have ten cheeseburgers. Side of curly fries for all of them. And maybe—” Stiles made a face. Scratched the side of his neck above the collar of Derek’s leather jacket. “Five vanilla milkshakes. Yeah, and a whole pot of coffee. Caffeinated. Very caffeinated.”

Matilda arched a faultlessly groomed eyebrow at him.

“You got friends coming by soon?”

“Nah.” Stiles gestured at himself and at Derek who sat opposite him, staring up at Matilda’s sensational hair with round eyes. “Just me and my boyfriend.”

Derek’s round eyes zeroed in on his face. Matilda slowly turned her head to stare at Derek—but all she saw was a vacant seat, because no one else could see Derek apart from Stiles. Gah. Stiles squeezed his eyes shut. Stopped himself from smacking his forehead on the white table top.

Matilda glanced back at her notepad. Jotting down his order, calm and cool as a humongous spider crawling up Stiles’s bedroom wall, she said, “Okay, honey.”

Those two words also sounded a lot like oh boy, he’s one of those guys, and how much has he shot up his arm this morning?

Stiles grimaced, glad that he had Derek’s leather jacket on and that it covered his arms. What would Matilda think if she also saw the scars marking them? She’d probably assume he was an abuse victim on top of being a delirious drug addict on a food binge.
Derek said, “Did you just call me your boyfriend? In public?”

Derek’s eyes glinted with a heat that spread into Stiles’s curbed smile, into Stiles’s puffed chest. Stiles shrugged.

“Uh, yeah, that’s what you are. I can’t go around calling you my werewolf mate!”

Matilda glanced at him with both eyebrows raised high. Stiles glanced at her and gave her a huge, toothy smile.

“I’m, uhm—I’m an actor!” He poked himself in the chest with a thumb. “Yeah, I’m an actor, and I’m just practicing my lines here.” He lifted his chin high and nodded. “See, they’re for this bodacious movie about a warlock—that’s, like, a male witch but cooler—who falls in love with a super-hot werewolf, but is a dumbass who takes ten years to figure it out and do something about it.”

“Sounds like an Oscar winner to me,” Matilda said, poker-faced.

Derek let out a snort that rivaled Stiles’s most obnoxious ones. Stiles ignored him and took out Derek’s wallet from inside the jacket. He handed Matilda a bill without checking it. Whatever it was, it was more than enough to pay for his substantial order and give her a hefty tip, the way her blue eyes lit up. She snatched it from his fingers and smiled at him.

“Thanks, honey. Your breakfast’s coming right up.”

Stiles winked at her. “Much appreciated, doll.”

Derek, the gentleman that he was, waited until Matilda walked away to snicker at him.

“‘Bodacious’? ‘Doll’? Really, Stiles? Really?”

“I’m just playing along! Going with the vibes here, playing my part as the cool actor dude in the leather jacket with the sexy stubble!” Stiles went rigid, his eyes widening. His lower jaw sagged. “Oh my god. Oh my god, I have become you.”

Derek rested his right elbow on the table, then propped his chin on his palm. Derek gazed at him with crinkled, twinkling eyes that narrowed in scrutiny.

“Need moar beard,” Derek said, deadpan. “And, like, where are the scary fangs? Where’s the debonair hair that doesn’t look like an electrified raccoon tail—”

“Did you just describe your hair as freaking debonair—”

“Okay, you got the clothes right—”

“And I do not have hair that looks like electrified raccoon tail, pal—”

“But you need to amp up the assholish attitude by about two thousand percent, and really work on that sexy scowl—”

“My hair makes angels sing about its coiffed and incomparable beauty! Lydia was jealous of me when I grew it long three years ago!”

Derek’s open mouth went silent. Derek closed it, then opened it again to say, “You mean when you grew it out to your shoulders and did that middle parting thing?”

“Yes!” Stiles ran his fingers through his clean and—okay, yes, goddamnit, fluffy hair. “She kept
demanding me to tell her what shampoos and conditioners I was using, because she couldn’t believe my hair was real.” He gesticulated at his head with both hands. “That’s how awesome my hair was! I coulda made a fortune doing TRESemmé shampoo ads!”

Derek was now leaning both forearms on the table top. Stiles was fascinated by how he could see through Derek at the bright red booth and the white table top. Fascinated that Derek’s arms didn’t go through the table.

“You looked like a giant Pekingese dog. Your hair was so puffy that you needed to wear that boho chic hairband just to see where you were going—”

“Okay, I admit that hairband was not my finest decision in the cultivation of my fine fashion sense —”

“And you would complain to me all the time that you needed to wash so much hair, and you wanted to shave it all off again—”

“And I didn’t! I wisely trimmed it down to the boyband-lead-singer splendor that it is today.” Stiles gestured again at his head with both hands. “Behold! My majestic coiffure!”

“Stiles. You look like a porcupine. A porcupine that glued itself to an electrostatic generator.”

Stiles’s hands slapped the table’s laminated surface palms down. Stiles stared back at Derek with an equally deadpan expression.

“A boyfriend is supposed to tell his man that he is beautiful no matter how Pekingesey or porcupiney he looks, Derek. Were you not taught that when you went through puppy training? You need more training.”

Derek squinted at him. Pressed two fingers to his lips, then pointed those fingers at Stiles and said, “When the dog jokes come out? Babe, that’s when I know I’ve won.”

Stiles’s deadpan expression cracked into a scarcely restrained smile for a moment.

“Highly illogical!”

“No point in repeating that it’s illogical, Stiles,” Derek replied with a voice gone bass-low. He arched an eyebrow the way a certain Vulcan from a certain classic sci-fi TV show would. “I’m quite aware of it.”

And all over again, Stiles fell head over heels in love with this handsome, noble, selfless asshole of a werewolf. His throat constricted. He sucked in his lower lip and inhaled through his nose. His chest ached, but it was in the very best way, in the knowledge that the little things in life were what made the big things worthwhile, and he and Derek were so very good with the little things.

“It was Kirk who said that in The Omega Glory,” he rasped. “Not Spock.”

“Point remains: I win.”

There were few people in this world who could pull off such a smug expression and yet carry on being so charming, so endearing. Stiles was biased when it came to many things Derek, yes, but he was about a hundred percent certain that the number of those people was one.

Well, okay, two, if he counted Lydia.
“Here you go, Mr. Hollywood.”

Matilda set down four plates piled on with cheeseburgers and curly fries. She walked in and out of the kitchen—that had white saloon doors straight out of a cowboy movie—three more times, serving him the rest of his order. All five milkshakes came on a plastic tray. The pot of boiling-hot coffee came with a white mug that had a photograph of an American beaver printed on it.

Stiles’s stomach growled so loud that Matilda aimed a raised eyebrow at him yet again.

Stiles cleared his throat. “I, uh. Haven’t eaten in a few weeks.”

Matilda’s wide eyes scanned him from his hair down to his chest. “You look it.”

Stiles had to bite his lower lip to not laugh at Derek glowering at the oblivious waitress, those murder brows doing their best to transform into a furry caterpillar above Derek’s eyes. His werewolf boyfriend was getting mighty protective there—and he’d be lying to himself if he said he disliked it.

Stiles attacked the first cheeseburger with a gusto he didn’t think he had in him: he stuffed the tasty layers of bun, cheddar cheese, grilled ground beef patty, lettuce, onions, tomato and Worcestershire sauce into his gaping mouth and devoured it in four bites. He shut his eyes and let out a pornographic moan, licking his lips. When he peeled open his eyes, he saw that Derek was staring at him with round eyes. Derek’s face was beet-red.

Stiles smirked. He kept his eyes at half-mast. He opened his mouth wide. Dragged his tongue over lower lip. Stuck the tip of his tongue inside his right cheek, making it bulge.

Derek’s face became even redder, but he didn’t avert his gaze.

Then, for the first time since stepping into the diner, Stiles noticed its other customers. A colossus of a man in a flannel shirt, jeans and boots—a trucker on a break, maybe—sat one booth down in the row parallel to Stiles’s. In the booth behind Mr. Colossus was a couple with a baby and a young boy. All of them gawked at him in stupefied silence. The Worcestershire sauce from Mr. Colossus’s also colossal burger dripped from it while he gripped it in a huge fist near his mouth. The baby, chubby and rosy-cheeked, sucked on a fist. The baby’s brother stood on the booth, pointed at Stiles and hollered, “Mom! Who is that man talking to? Why is he eating so much?!"

The boy’s flustered mother hauled him down and out of Stiles’s sight.

“Don’t stare at the crazy man!”

“But you were staring at him!”

“Don’t look at him! He’s looking at us!”

As if on cue, the boy’s family and Mr. Colossus tore their eyes away from Stiles and returned to their meals. For about a millisecond, Stiles thought about saying an apology for disturbing them with his behavior. Then he looked at Derek, who was pressing a hand to his mouth, broad shoulders shaking, and Stiles shrugged and returned to his own meal. He picked up a milkshake. Took out the straw, and drank from the glass, guzzling it down without stopping for breath.

Yeah, he was so going to adopt Mdm. Pink Hair’s don’t-give-a-shit attitude. His world would be a much better place from today onward. It really would, yessiree.

“I can’t believe you’re eating all that junk,” Derek said as Stiles devoured his fifth cheeseburger and side of curly fries without so much as a burp. His body always required massive amounts of food
after he used up his magic. After the troll attack and the long coma, he’d spent a week lazing around Derek’s apartment and eating pounds of food that the pack brought to him. After his first confrontation with the Nogitsune from an alternate universe, he’d forced himself to eat despite having zero appetite: his body needed the nourishment, regardless of whether it tasted like ashes or not. It all went to replenishing his magic first, then his body.

“Don’t judge me and my sacred curly fries, Judgey McJudgerson.” Stiles pointed a finger at Derek’s face. “I have seen you wolf down four large pizzas in one go!”

Derek gave him an unimpressed look, and not just for the pun.

“I was talking about the shitty beef patties.”

“What would you know about shitty beef patties?” Stiles stuffed more curly fries into his mouth, chewed them and swallowed them. “I have seen you eat soybean patties, okay?”

“Stiles. You make your dad eat them. The reason I even knew about them is because you bought them for your dad first.”

“And they’re good! For his health!”

Stiles started on the next cheeseburger. Man, these were pretty damn good. Almost as good as Dad’s homemade burger patties. He missed them. He missed Dad.

“So they’re good for him but bad for me?”

“Derek, you’re a werewolf. It’s your natural state to eat raw, red meat all the time!”

Derek’s eyebrows shot up his forehead.

“Well. This is the first time I’ve heard that. By all means, please educate this natural-born werewolf on what a werewolf is supposed to eat.”

Stiles opened his mouth to respond, but his attention shifted to the other customers who were gawking at him again. Stiles set down his seventh burger. Frowned at them, and said, “Excuse me, I know I’m incredibly hunky and irresistible, but I’m having a private conversation with my boyfriend here. Do you all mind?”

Derek covered those stunning hazel eyes with both hands.

“Stiles, they can’t see me,” he said, his voice wavering with mirth.

Stiles waited until Derek lowered his hands so he could look his werewolf mate in the eye.

“There’s loss, Gorgeous-wolf. Big time,” Stiles said, and yeah, there it was, that bashful grin that Stiles had seen only a handful of times on Derek in all their years of acquaintance. Stiles had suspected for a long time that those bunny front teeth were the reason Derek was often hesitant to grin. Some silly reason about them making him look like a dork.

But Derek was Stiles’s dork now. And anyone who dared talk crap about those lovable bunny teeth was going to find out the hard way what living as a sentient earthworm was like.

Stiles was powerless to stop himself from grinning back at Derek like a besotted dumbass. Still grinning and gazing at Stiles, Derek rested his elbow on the table again, and leaned his head on his right hand.
“You have shitty beef stuck between your front teeth.”

Derek cackled at him when he tossed a fistful of curly fries at Derek, only for them to go through the werewolf and scatter on the booth and the floor. Derek made a face at him after he picked at his teeth and found no shitty beef whatsoever stuck between them.

It was while he was consuming the last cheeseburger, the last glass of milkshake, and the fourth mug of coffee that Stiles asked, “Why didn’t you try to talk to me? When you showed up in my bedroom?”

Derek had been patiently sitting opposite him, his hands and forearms resting on the table, observing him eat like it was the most mesmerizing phenomenon in modern history. Derek gave him a sharp glance.

“But—I did.” Derek’s brow furrowed. “I kept calling your name. You were staring at me, and—I thought you did hear me.”

Stiles shook his head. He took a slow bite of his burger. Derek’s brow furrowed even more.

“I was talking to you. The whole time. Then I saw Scott jump on your bed and grab you, and your dad jumped up too and looked so scared. They were talking, but I couldn’t tell what they were saying.” Derek’s brow smoothened. “I heard you, though. You told them there was only—’you, you, and me’?”

Stiles gazed at Derek. He swallowed, then said, “Yeah. So—you could hear only me? You were just—standing there. Staring at me.” Stiles angled his head and raised his eyebrows. “Which, come to think of it, is par for the course for you where I’m concerned.”

Oh yeah, there went those murder brows, over those twinkling hazel eyes.

“Are you ever gonna let that go?” Derek growled.

“What?” Stiles picked up the milkshake and sucked hard on the straw. “That you stalked underaged boys and spied on them playing lacrosse?” He made his voice breathy and husky as he said, “Watching them all getting flushed and sweaty? Listening to their panting breaths, their rocketing heartbeats in their heaving chests?”

Stiles sucked on the straw again, wrapping his lips around it. Stuck his tongue out and licked at the straw.

“Were you watching everyone, or just me, Stalker-wolf?” Stiles dragged his tongue up the length of the straw above the cup’s rim. “Did you like what you saw?”

“Yeah,” Derek said, deadpan, his cheeks pink. “I especially enjoyed it when you tripped on your own foot, rolled like a tumbleweed across the field and face-planted on the grass. And then got brained by your own lacrosse stick.”

Stiles slammed the milkshake down on the table and flung his hands up.

“That happened one time!”

Derek blinked multiple times. Wiped the skin under his right eye with a forefinger, sniffing exaggeratedly. “It was beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. You were a drunk, six-legged doe tumbling all over the grass and smushing your face—”
Derek erupted into laughter once more while Stiles lobbed more curly fries at him.

Stiles ignored everyone in the diner but Matilda as he stood up and brushed himself off. Every cup, plate and pot on his table were empty. As far as post-magic depletion buffets went, this was one of the surprisingly sating ones. He gave Matilda another wink when he swaggered past her and headed for the exit. He felt her eyes checking his lanky body from head to toe.

“Where in damnation did all that food go?” he heard her mutter before the white door shut behind him.

Inside the Camaro, Stiles’s mood shifted from amusement to solemnity. Inside the Camaro, with that marble-handled carving knife in the glove compartment, there was no more dodging of reality or of the actions he had to take now.

He’d done what he’d set out to do. He’d finished the job of defeating the enemy who’d threatened his loved ones, his hometown. But he hadn’t mapped things out beyond that, beyond going to the nearest motel to slash his throat open from ear to ear and die.

Now—it was time to go home. Home, where Dad, and Scott, and their pack were. Home, where Derek’s body lied waiting for them to restore it with Derek’s soul.

Home, where he belonged. Where he and Derek belonged.

“You couldn’t hear me, until—until that night.”

Stiles glanced at Derek in the passenger seat. Derek gazed back at him, and it was obvious that Derek understood how critical the next few days were going to be for them. Whatever mirth Derek felt in the diner was gone from Derek’s eyes and face.

“Yeah,” Stiles replied. “I think—when I tapped into your soul’s power, I guess our—” Stiles rolled his shoulders. Frowned in contemplation. “Our souls? I guess they connected when they hadn’t before, through my magic. Enough for us to finally be able to talk to each other like this.”

“It’s easier to be—” Derek waved a hand at his own torso. “Like this, now. To be in your body and out here, to talk with you.”

Stiles bit his lower lip, his forehead creased. Was this another symptom of Derek’s soul influencing his magic? Of his magic increasing in power, ballooning until it was too much for him to contain?

There was no precedent for their situation.

And Deaton had said that it was inevitable that the person with multiple souls in them would burn from the inside out from the excess power.

“So, uhm.”

In an instant, Derek was directing that murderous scowl at him. Oh, his werewolf knew him well.

“What.”

“So, uhm, I—may have conveniently forgotten to mention something to you,” he said with a wide grimace. “Deaton kinda said something about—” His grimace transformed into a wince. “Me possibly going kaboom from the excess power of your soul inside me. If your soul, uh, stayed inside me for too long.”
If Derek’s scowls could kill, Stiles would be deader than a frozen human lollipop in the murky depths of an Antarctic lake.

“Stiles.”

“Okay, my body needed nourishment. It really did. I know it and you know it, you’ve seen how much I had to eat in the past—”

“Do you know what *setting your priorities straight* even means?!”

Oh fuck, Derek was actually raising his voice and baring his teeth. This wasn’t an annoyed Derek. This was an angry Derek, and his soul was joining the fun by seething inside Stiles’s chest like a lightning storm. Stiles pressed a hand to his sternum, scowling back at his werewolf mate.

“I *was* setting my priorities straight! I told you, I needed to eat to replenish my magic and my body, and I can’t do jack shit until I do that! I’m fine—”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not already at risk of—”

“I think I would know if I was melting like the Wicked Witch of the West—”

“I DON’T WANT YOU TO DIE!”

The silence in the wake of Derek’s furious roar was crushing in the shell of the Camaro. Derek looked stricken. Derek’s soul in Stiles’s chest had gone as motionless as its magical projection sitting in the passenger seat, curled into a tight ball.

Stiles exhaled the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. He swallowed hard. Stared at Derek who stared back with glistening eyes, and all at once, Stiles realized that until this moment, he hadn’t considered Derek’s perspective of this entire clusterfuck. He couldn’t be blamed for that, though, since he had no freaking clue Derek was *alive* until—what was it, five nights? Six nights ago? And he’d been in a healing slumber for the past five days.

But now that he did know—what had the situation looked like through Derek’s eyes? When Derek was an untethered soul in that prison cell, watching Stiles who was drenched in blood, grievously wounded, inches from death, crying and yanking at that carving knife in his corpse’s chest? Watching, knowing Stiles intended to kill himself with it—and helpless to stop his human mate?

What must it have been like for Derek, to be screaming at Stiles to stop, to be unheard, on the cusp of experiencing the nightmare that Stiles was already in? For Derek to remain unheard for weeks afterward, watching his human mate cry and mourn for him, wishing to die, while his living soul was right there inside Stiles’s chest?

Hell. It must have been utter hell. A hell whose agony was scorched into the very core of Stiles’s soul. And into Derek’s.

Stiles stared at Derek, and his eyes burned wet. He pressed his hand hard to his sternum. He felt Derek’s soul unfurl, just a little, and nudge him. It was a gentle nudge. A contrite nudge.

“I’m not gonna die, Derek,” he said, his voice hoarse yet firm. “You’ll make sure of that.”

Derek heard his apology, his conviction in Derek’s resilience between the lines. Derek’s expression softened. Derek pressed his lips together, then gave Stiles a resolute nod.

“Damn right I am,” Derek vowed, and Stiles was reminded again how much he loved this man, this
werewolf.

He extended his right hand palm up between them. Derek overlaid a see-through, sun-warm hand on his, and it sank down until their hands occupied the same space. It seemed to Stiles to be some kind of visual metaphor for the sum total of their relationship: they were beings from different worlds, in such different bodies, with such different life experiences, but they dwelled in the same spaces, the same yearnings. They were fated to be. They were one.

“They’re gonna be so mad at me, aren’t they?”

“Yep. Be glad your dad’s gun is a pile of metal goo.”

“Derek. My dad is the sheriff. Who has an arsenal of weapons at the station. And in his study. And in the gap behind his bed’s headboard.”

He glanced at Derek, at Derek’s wide eyes and taut smile.

“Yep. Scott and your dad are gonna be so mad at you.”

He snorted. Caressed Derek’s hand by sliding his through the werewolf’s, then drew back his hand to start the Camaro. The Camaro rumbled in greeting. Stiles had to refill the tank soon. The drive back to Beacon Hills was going to be one long journey if he skipped breaks.

“Heh.” Stiles smirked, gripping the steering wheel with both hands. “Let’s go home and face the firing squad.”
At Derek’s behest, Stiles took at least three breaks on the journey back to their hometown so far. Non-stop and at a fast speed, the drive was eleven hours at most, but no, Extra-Protective-wolf insisted he had to stop for food, sleep and the toilet. Stiles drew the line at Derek wanting him to check into a motel just to nap. He’d already slept in the Camaro plenty of times, and he was in much better physical health after the five days of slumber and the breakfast feast. He didn’t fear robbers, or being attacked and butchered because hello, powerful warlock smart enough to ward the Camaro and could sauté someone to a crisp with his magic, here!

That, and he didn’t want to walk into another motel room to also see a framed print of Klimt’s *The Kiss* on its wall. That was just too much for his brain, and his heart, right now.

As the sun began to set, daubing the sky with sublime shades of gold and red, they sat in the Camaro at a rest stop half-way into the journey—the same one he’d stopped at on his meandering drive to Salem, near the border between Oregon and California. Stiles sank his teeth into his lower lip. He jiggled his left leg.

He opened his big mouth and asked, “Would you—would you have said all that stuff to me? If we weren’t gonna die?”

Derek turned his head slowly, so very slowly, to stare at him with wide eyes.

“I mean, did you, like, mean *everything* you said to me at the time? Or was it one of those situations where you were just trying to console me because we were gonna die, and maybe if none of that happened, you were never gonna say anything to me?”

Stiles blamed the four large bars of Snickers he ate for his big mouth running like Usain Bolt from a voracious cheetah. His condemnation of yummy chocolate didn’t help him, as Derek’s glaring eyes fired up their murderous lasers and lined them up at his grimacing face.

“No, Stiles,” Derek replied, and oh boy, that was Derek’s patronizing voice at level nine thousand. “I just poured my damn heart out to you before stabbing myself in said heart with a knife because I thought it would be a side-splitting comedy act.”

Stiles felt like laughing and crying and punching himself in the face at the same time. He still felt like the whole world was off-kilter, like he was teetering on a steep slope, seconds away from losing his balance and tumbling down until he hit rock bottom. Was it only this morning that he was in Salem, bantering with Derek in that diner? Only six nights ago that he was in that warehouse of curly fries packaging bags, standing in front of a traversable wormhole that connected to another universe? Only six nights ago, that he was torturing and killing his other self from that universe?
Only two months ago, that Derek’s hand was on his nape and Derek’s forehead was pressed to his, before Derek thrust that carving knife into his own chest?

Everything felt like a hazy dream after a never-ending nightmare. Everything felt unreal. The one thing that prevented him from taking a long, painful spill down that slippery slope was Derek’s soul in his chest, unfurling and spiraling behind his sternum. Giving him a hard nudge that clearly said idiot in neon capital letters as tall as the Burj Khalifa.

Stiles pressed his palms to his scrunched eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m just—I’m in a—a fragile state of mind, okay? I’ve been feeling fucking crazy since leaving Beacon Hills. Like, emotional whiplash to the extreme.” Stiles dragged his hands down his stubbled face, then leaned forward to rest his forehead on the steering wheel, his eyes shut. “If it wasn’t for the carving knife, and you being a freaking soul in my body, I—I almost think that none of the fucked up shit happened. Like it was just a nightmare. And then I think, what if all this is just a nightmare?”

“Stiles.”

“What if I’m just imagining all this—getting out of that cell, out of Beacon Hills, fighting the Nogitsune from another universe, holy freaking shit, and finding out you’re alive and then sleeping in that motel with that Klimt print—”

“Stiles.”

His shallow breaths began to rush in and out of his lungs. His throat spasmed. He grabbed the steering wheel with both hands, clenching his fingers until his knuckles whitened. Derek’s soul writhed hot inside his chest, nudging him hard, then another time.

“What if—what if I’m still in that cell? What if we’re still in there, Derek, and all this is just an illusion, a lie, and we’re actually dead and this is hell giving us hope before taking it all away from us, over and over and over—”

A raucous snore, one that Stiles’s father would tip his sheriff hat at in admiration, exploded from the vicinity of the passenger seat. Stiles bounced upright in his seat. His harsh breath snagged in his throat. His head whipped to the right, and—

Stiles’s lower jaw sagged at the sight of a reclined Derek pretending to be asleep, eyes closed, open mouth belching out those fake snores more apt for a feral elephant seal. He sputtered with indignation. Sucked in a deep breath, his shoulders squaring.

Then he remembered something Derek had said to him during a 2 a.m. call, on the first night he’d been back in town during spring break. It’d been his first year at Stanford. His first year away from Dad, from Scott and the pack. From Derek.

Come over, your babbling is my insomnia cure. You’re my human melatonin pill.

In hindsight, Derek might as well have said, I trust you enough to sleep in your presence. Derek might as well have said, I miss you, and I need you.

And Stiles had leaped out of bed, grabbed his jacket and keys, zipped over to Derek’s apartment in his jeep. Sprawled on Derek’s couch with the werewolf in the comfy semi-darkness, blathering about this and that and whatever, gesticulating with his hands. Derek had lounged in silence, staring at him with heavy-lidded, warm eyes. Derek hadn’t fallen asleep. Derek watched him, listened to him. Derek memorized him.
Come over, I miss you. I need you.

I love you.

Stiles’s lips quivered. He bit his lower lip hard. Twisted in his seat, smacked his fisted left hand on Derek’s chest. His fist went through Derek and struck the seat. Derek’s eyes were still closed. Derek’s lips curved into an amused smirk as Stiles kept on smacking his fist through Derek. It felt like he was plunging his hand and forearm into warm sunlight that made washed clothes smell so fresh, that made all the colors in existence shine brighter and lovelier.

“You asshole,” he said, and his own lips were curved in a smile, his eyes stinging.

Derek opened those familiar, gorgeous eyes and gazed at him. Derek’s smirk eased into a tender smile. Derek’s soul settled down, and curled up into a triumphant mass of comforting heat.

“Stopped your panic attack, though,” Derek murmured. “You haven’t had one in ages, and I—I can’t hug you. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah—I will be. I think.”

It should have been ridiculous, really, that Stiles would fall in love with this werewolf yet again in such a short time. But hey, he was already an expert at falling head over heels in the literal sense in front of Derek. He might as well become an expert at falling head over heels in the figurative sense for Derek too. He had a decade of it to catch up on. Decades more to practice.

If they were lucky. If the universe and its gods deemed them fit to have their second chance, their future together.

“Stiles.” The back of Derek’s fingers caressed his cheek. “Everything’s gonna be okay, babe.”

He tilted his head, and he felt sunshine in him.

“Says the guy who freaked out hours ago.”

“I didn’t freak out. I was—” Derek’s eyebrows arched up in exaggeration. “Appropriately concerned.”

Stiles chuckled. It was the reaction Derek hoped for, from the way Derek’s expression softened once more.

“Stiles, of course I meant everything I said to you then. Never doubt that.” Stiles nodded with a tiny smile, and Derek said, “But, would I have said anything about my feelings for you, if we hadn’t been kidnapped and—all that?” Derek let out a quiet sigh. “I would have, eventually. When the—” Derek frowned, then showed a wry smile. “Man, this sounds so stupid now. I was gonna say, ‘when the time was right.’”

Stiles’s smile also turned wry.

“I—” Derek turned in his seat to face Stiles. “After you left for Stanford, I, uhm, I heard rumors that you’re bisexual.” Stiles blinked at that. “I asked Scott about it, and he told me that you once asked some gay guy called Danny in high school whether he found you attractive. Something like that.”

Stiles smirked. “Yeah. Danny. You know, the tech guy? The one you stripped your shirt for in my room, so he’d help us? Remember him, cousin Miguel?”
Derek’s eyes widened. “That Danny?”

“Yeah.” Stiles narrowed his eyes and glanced to the side in rumination. “I think—” Stiles glanced back at Derek. “Yeah, I think Danny’s in San Francisco. He’s supposedly engaged to a guy who’s a were-coyote and is in the IT industry like him.”

“Supposedly?”

“I dunno for sure. Haven’t talked to him in a few years. He’s not on social media, which is smart of him. Jackson’s the one who keeps in regular contact with him.”

Yep, Stiles was not imagining the relief in those hazel eyes. Derek’s possessiveness of him was—okay, he’d be a total liar if he said he didn’t find it arousing. He would be a total liar, too, if he said he wasn’t possessive of Derek in return. Sentient earthworm was the least frightening option of what he could transform someone into, if they dared mess with him and Derek now.

“So, yeah.” Derek rubbed the back of his own nape with a hand. “You—you never confirmed anything to Scott. So at the time, Scott said he didn’t know for sure, and he figured you’d tell me. If you really were, and you wanted to.” Derek shrugged. “Later on, Scott mentioned you having girlfriends at Stanford. And you had that obsession with Lydia for years. You even had that decade-long plan to make her your wife. So—” Derek lowered his eyes. “I came to the conclusion that you were straight after all. That you saw me as a good friend, and nothing more.” Derek’s voice subsided to a murmur. “But—I hoped I was wrong. I hoped.”

Stiles stared at his werewolf mate gone shy. He felt a deep pang of regret, but he also understood that Derek had no blame for making those assumptions: Stiles, blind idiot that he was, had denied himself from the beginning. Denied the possibility that Derek—werewolf lord of six-pack abs, pretty eyes and debonair hair—would even look at him—teenage klutz of lean meat who resembled a shaved porcupine—without contempt. Denied the sheer possibility that he would have any chance with Derek, and subconsciously chose women who wouldn’t love him, chose relationships that were doomed to fail.

In fact, in retrospect, he might have been so obsessed with Lydia precisely because, subconsciously, he knew he would never be with her. It’d been safe for him to be fixated on her: she would never be interested in him as a romantic and sexual partner, and she was obsessed with Jackson, who was indeed a GQ-worthy guy that the other students of Beacon Hills High drooled over.

And after Stiles met Derek in the Preserve, Lydia became the perfect camouflage to hide behind for years, until he left for college and upped the game of denial.

From Derek’s perspective, Stiles would have appeared to be a guy who was kind of confused about his sexuality for a while in high school, and then settled on heterosexuality. It would have been unavoidable for Stiles to meet women in college, to date them, and go steady with some of them. He might have even invited one or two back to Beacon Hills during a break. Introduced her to the pack, to Dad. To Derek.

But he never did. He’d very reluctantly told Scott and Lydia that he was even dating in college. He knew Lydia would keep that under wraps—because he’d begged her to, especially from Derek, by giving the excuse that it was “boring shit someone like Derek wouldn’t care about.” He’d been so sure that Scott would do the same. Then again, chances were, Scott never anticipated Derek asking about Stiles’s sexuality. What a doozy of a question that must have been for Scott, coming from Derek.

Stiles hadn’t wanted Derek to know about his girlfriends. Even after things were through with them.
Even then, his heart knew, deep within its guarded cave, what his mind refused to acknowledge.

Yeah, to call him a blind, scared idiot who’d been drowning in the subterranean depths of denial was the understatement of the millennia.

“So.” Stiles shifted until he sat perpendicular to the seat, his right leg folded up to his chest, his wrists crossed over his ankle. “You were gonna tell me sooner or later, how you felt for me. Although you thought I was straight.”

“Yeah.” Derek’s eyes were still lowered. He shrugged. “I would have asked you whether you’re straight or bisexual first.”

“Why didn’t you ask me earlier? Like, years earlier?”

Derek raised his head. Derek gazed at him with solemn eyes.

“Why didn’t you ask me, Stiles?”

The murmured question dumbfounded Stiles. He opened his mouth, closed it. He sucked in his lips. Okay, he had the excuse of being submerged from head to toe in denial of his feelings for Derek for a decade of his life. But—after he acknowledged his feelings? After he told Lydia about them? What was his excuse for not approaching Derek after that?

Well, Derek had numerous girlfriends, after he and Stiles met for the first time. Keyword being girlfriend, aka a woman, not a man. Derek had the crappiest of luck with his choices until after the Nogitsune of this world—god, how mad was his existence that he could now claim to have battled the same demon in different incarnations?—caused the chaos and suffering it did.

There was that oil painter from a neighboring town Derek had met during some art festival in Los Angeles, which Stiles couldn’t attend because of classes and being a six hours’ drive away. There was that barista who gave Derek her number while he and Stiles were having coffee and chatting, slipping the piece of paper into Derek’s shirt pocket with a wink. There was that mysterious book editor that none of the pack met, who Derek broke up with days after Stiles returned to Beacon Hills from Stanford and announced to everyone that he was there to stay.

The oil painter lasted two months. The barista lasted a week. The book editor, interestingly, lasted the longest at over a year—despite the relationship being a long-distance one. Lydia had confided in him that she would bet a million bucks the book editor never existed, that Derek had made her up to get the town off his back about being in a relationship, successful and handsome wood sculptor that he was.

And ever since Stiles returned to stay, Derek never dated anyone, woman or man. Stiles knew that because—Derek was always spending time with him. If Derek was home on the weekend, Stiles would go over and hang out with the werewolf all day. If Derek was at the workshop grinding on a project, Stiles would go over and help out with the little things, like painting wooden pieces, or sweeping the floor, or getting coffee for Derek and his assistants. If Derek called him and said, “I’m bored and I know you are, come stuff your silly face with pop tarts,” he’d fly, man. He would fly fast as a peregrine falcon to Derek, and Derek would be there, his door open, his couch welcoming.

He would get whatever he could of Derek, if he couldn’t have all of Derek.

“I was so scared of losing you,” Stiles whispered. “I’d rather have some of you, than none at all.”

Derek, ethereal in the dimming light of the setting sun, gazed on at him with those stunning hazel eyes. Eyes that told him that Derek knew exactly what he meant.
Stiles’s throat bobbed, and he said, “But—here we are.” He pumped his fists. Made what he hoped was an expression of victory and not of him being afflicted with acute constipation. “We’re both bisexuals! Fuck yeah! Bisexuals rule!”

Derek let out an amused chuckle at that. Stiles smiled at the cheerful sound, and leaned his head against the headrest. He rested his hands on his raised knee.

“Derek?” he murmured. “What would have happened, if I really was straight?”

Derek mirrored Stiles’s pose by leaning his head against his own headrest. Stiles still couldn’t figure out how a magical projection of a soul could behave as if it was physical with some inanimate objects, yet let Stiles move through it as if it was—eh, a ghost.

“After you confirmed that? I would have said, ‘Okay.’ And left it at that.”

Stiles stared at his werewolf mate. His mate. It was the big M-word in werewolf culture for a damn significant reason: once a werewolf recognized and acknowledged someone as their mate, that bond was for life. Werewolves mated for life. Even if they had the misfortune of their mate rejecting them, even if they moved on to someone else, no one else would compare to their mate. No one else could fill the void in them.

“Derek. We’re mates. You said so.” Stiles’s mouth worked soundlessly. “You—you would have just—what, stayed single? While I—ended up with someone else?”

“Yes.”

Stiles sat up and gaped at Derek, stunned into silence. It took him eleven seconds to rediscover his voice, to sputter, “And—and you have been okay with that? With me having a girlfriend, a wife? With—” His throat bobbed again. “Letting me go? Just like that?”

Derek also sat up.

“Like I said, your wellbeing is and will always be my priority.” The small, loving smile Derek wore was a truly devastating one. “I told you, Stiles: you’re it. There’s no one else for me but you. You’re the reason I’m happy, and I don’t want anyone else but you. So whatever you were willing to give me of yourself? I would have been happy to have that.”

There Derek went, using his words again, making Stiles crumble like a home-baked cookie. His eyes brimmed full and hot, and he didn’t care that they did. Through the stinging film over his eyes, Derek seemed to have a golden aura. Derek glowed like he was the sun itself.

“The answer to that is everything of me, Derek,” he choked out. “I love you so goddamn much. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” Derek said, and his smile transformed into an assured, radiant grin. “I know.”

Stiles knew, even then, that he would never tire of saying those three words to Derek. That he would always say them, every chance he had, because each one could be the last.

They stretched out their arms—Stiles’s right, Derek’s left—toward each other in unison. Their hands and forearms met and melded in the space between them, Derek’s hand and forearm on top of Stiles’s. Stiles rotated his hand from side to side, riveted by Derek’s glowing, see-through hand enveloping his.

“How were you gonna do it?” Stiles murmured, when the sky was black velvet strewn with blazing
stars trillions of miles away. “How were you gonna tell me about your feelings for me?”

Warm light from the stocky restroom building and the cool light from its vending machines delineated the sleek chassis of the Camaro. The light allowed Stiles to continue to observe Derek. Derek gazed at him with a small, enigmatic smile that Deaton would have approved.

“I can’t tell you.”

Stiles made a face at him. “Wha? Why not?”

Derek glanced down. His enigmatic smile widened. “I just can’t.”

Stiles poked Derek in the bicep, only for his forefinger to go through Derek’s arm.

“C’mon! Gimme a clue or something, at least.”

Derek gazed at him again. Stiles gazed back with bated breath, giving the werewolf an eager, tight-lipped smile.

“In spite of what I said to you at the time about the tie, you looked really photogenic in the suit that came with it.”

Stiles’s brow furrowed even as he smiled on. “Uhm. Okay—which suit are we talking about here? We have over ten years of history, and I’ve worn multiple suits and ties.”

Oh, that small, enigmatic smile was back. It would definitely make Deaton run for his money.

“You asked for a clue. You got it.”

Stiles huffed in frustration and frowned at Derek but nope, Derek was refusing to buckle. Derek reclined on the passenger seat. Shut those hazel eyes, and said, “Get some sleep, Stiles. I’ll wake you up in a few hours.”

“You’re not getting away that easy, you know.”

“Uh hm.”

“I’m gonna find out.”

“Uh hmm.”

Stiles stared at his werewolf mate’s beloved, gorgeous face, and whispered, “Derek, I’m scared.”

Derek opened his eyes to half-mast and turned that head of dark, so-not-debonair hair toward him.

“So am I,” Derek murmured. “But we got each other.”

In Stiles’s chest, Derek’s soul gave him a gentle nudge. It felt more like a languid caress. Like a large hand stroking his chest to rest over his heart, sheltering it.

“Just you and me, huh, Big Guy?”

Derek returned his fond smile.

“Yeah. Just you and me against the world, babe.”
The next day, at 2:14 p.m., Stiles arrived at Beacon Hills’ faded welcome sign. His hands clenched around the steering wheel as the Camaro charged past the sign, past the very spot where he’d last seen and spoken to Scott.

What did Scott do after he hightailed it in the Camaro? Knowing his best friend for as long as he had, Scott would have hurried back to his childhood home to check on Dad again. Called the rest of the pack for an emergency meeting, to warn them about Stiles’s actions present and future, to brainstorm what to do next. Called Deaton after that.

“The circle’s gone,” Stiles muttered. “Must have been Deaton.”

“Yep,” Derek said from the passenger seat. “They are all gonna be so mad at you.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant Columbo. I hadn’t figured that out, like, days ago.”

“No, thank you very much, sir.”

Stiles’s lips quirked up against his will. This was what he got for lugging all those DVD sets of his favorite TV shows over to Derek’s apartment last year: a werewolf boyfriend who could quote Star Trek and Columbo, with impressions to match.

He stared through the windshield, and stepped down on the accelerator. The Camaro growled in enjoyment, glad to be on its own turf again. He steered clear of any routes that went past the station or the clinic. He didn’t encounter any cruisers on the way to his childhood home, but at this point, it didn’t matter anymore: in minutes, if Dad was home, he was going to face Dad and his very justified rage. There was a rather good chance the handcuffs and the chains were going to be whipped out.

Not that he couldn’t remove them with a single zap of magic, but the point was, Dad was going to strangle him.

When he parked the Camaro in front of his childhood home, behind Scott’s SUV and Dad’s cruiser, something else was strangling him instead. Something that made his whole throat seize, and his eyes sting. Something that made him glance at the ten-feet-tall ceanothus shrubs bordering the property, and recall Mom standing in front of them like she was still here, smiling at their racemes of lilac and pink flowers. Eight feet away was the spot on the front yard where Mom and Dad would set up a kiddy pool so he could play in cool water while basking in summer sunshine. And there on the driveway, with Dad gripping the handlebars to steady him, with Mom cheering him on at the end of the driveway, was where he rode his first bicycle, cackling like a little nut.

This Victorian-era house with its steep, gabled roofs, stained glass, and asymmetrical, full-width front porch was where he’d grown up, where he’d lived for the first eighteen years of his life. This was the house in which Mom had danced with Dad down its hallways, and filled it with her exuberant laughter. This was the house in which he and Scott would play video games in the living room, while Mom made ham-and-cheese sandwiches and Dad cooked spaghetti bolognese in the kitchen for everyone.

This was the house into which Derek would climb through his bedroom window—in that black leather jacket, with that sexy stubble, and those legendary murder brows—as if Stiles’s home was already his. As if Stiles was already his, from the very beginning.

This was home.
Stiles never thought he would come home again.

“They’re in there. Scott and your dad.”

Stiles blinked multiple times. He turned his head to glance at Derek.

“Just them?”

“Yeah.”

Stiles snorted. He glanced back at his childhood home.

“I’m kinda shocked Scott hasn’t already run out to hug the Camaro. Or kill me.”

Tension built in his neck and shoulders as he strode up the driveway then up the short flight of stairs to the front porch. Deaton’s wards of protection didn’t react to him as he passed them. No one opened the front door when he reached it. He didn’t hear anyone approaching it from the other side.

He tapped the bronze knob with a forefinger and a spark of gold from its tip. The door glided open on its own.

He walked in with noiseless steps.

He swiftly learned why Scott and Dad didn’t react to the Camaro arriving, or to him entering the house: they were both in the study, and for some reason, Dad was sitting on the side facing the window, propping his left elbow on the table and pinching the skin between his eyes with the fingers of his left hand. Scott stood to Dad’s left, also facing the window. Their backs faced the open doorway in which Stiles stood. Dad was attired in an olive t-shirt and jeans, his short hair tousled. Scott was attired in a white dress shirt and dark gray pants, sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

They were listening to a call on loud speaker through Dad’s phone on the table.

Stiles’s eyes burned and brimmed again at the sight of them safe and sound. He thought he would never see them again. He thought he would never, ever see them again, not when he was headed for hell while they were headed for heaven, in time.

“Jerome, the body your men fished out of the Willamette—just tell me.”

The tremors hit his lower jaw at the sound of Dad’s familiar, soothing voice. He remembered the last thing Dad had said to him with that voice, the night he fled from town and plunged into his deadly chase.

I’m so proud of you, son. You’re amazing and tough. Just like your mom.

“Noah,” Jerome, whoever he was in law enforcement, said with a baritone voice through the phone. “It’s not him—it’s not your boy. Matched the general physical appearance and age, but it’s not him. The family’s ID’ed the body.”

He pinpointed the moment Scott noticed his heartbeat in the stiffening of Scott’s spine, in the way the werewolf’s bowed head snapped up in attention. He stood in place as Scott slowly turned around to face him.

Dad was gripping the phone to his right ear, preoccupied with another call as Stiles locked eyes with Scott across the empty space between them. Scott’s desolate expression receded. Scott’s wide eyes welled up as his lips wavered into an elated, small smile that mirrored Stiles’s. Scott became a mass
of colorful blobs lit by sunlight from behind, and Stiles blinked, then blinked again. He gritted his lower jaw hard, but there was no stopping the tremors in it as Scott reached over to grasp Dad’s left shoulder and squeeze it.

“Jordan?” Dad said, still preoccupied with the call. “Yeah.”

Scott gave Dad’s shoulder a harder squeeze, and it was enough to make Dad raise and turn his head to glance at Scott. Dad followed the trajectory of Scott’s exultant gaze and—no, there really was no stopping the tremors in Stiles’s jaw, or the tears from spilling down his cheeks when Dad finally laid eyes on him. Dad slowly stood up, still gripping his phone to his ear, staring at Stiles with glistening eyes.

“Jordan, change of plans. In fact, drop them all,” Dad croaked to Deputy Parrish. “My son just came home.”

Dad dropped the phone on the table without ending the call.

Stiles felt like the little boy he’d been so many years ago when Dad dashed to him and enfolded him in a bear hug that crushed the air out of his lungs. He flung his arms around Dad’s shoulders. Buried his crumpled, streaked face in Dad’s right shoulder, and he smiled even as his eyes spilled more rivulets of hot salt.

He was home. He was safe, here in his father’s burly arms that would always fit around him, always hold him and shield him.

It seemed too short a time before Dad was releasing him from the hug and taking a few steps back to scrutinize him from head to toe. Still smiling, Stiles swiped a hand over his wet cheeks. Behind Dad, leaning against the desk, Scott was doing the same. Derek, invisible to the other two men, stood to Scott’s right, observing the emotional reunion with crinkled, sun-warm eyes.

Dad used a thumb to wipe at his own damp eyes. Dad sucked in a deep, noisy breath. Held his fists at his sides, and bellowed, “You are grounded for life!”

Stiles burst into a shaky, delighted laugh, blinking a few times. He widened his sore eyes in mock outrage, and flung his arms up.

“Dad! You can’t ground me! I have my own place, and I’m almost twenty-seven—”

“You are grounded for LIFE, mister!” Dad jabbed a forefinger at his ankles. “I’m sticking an ankle monitor on you! No, two of them!”

“Okay, Dad,” Stiles said between quiet chuckles, rubbing at his wet eyes with his knuckles, grinning like a complete dumbass.

“GPS tracking twenty-four seven!”

“Okay, Dad.”

“Stingray tracking on all your phones!”

“O—hey, wait, you can’t do that to me, that’s unethical—”

“Two deputy chaperones at all times—”

“What?! Daaaadaaad!”
“And you will personally report to me every day at the station at the designated time!” Dad glowered at him with twinkling, wide eyes. “Or believe you me, son, I will sic Theresa on you. And I will make you eat all of her terrible prune muffins. In front of her.”

Stiles burst into laughter again, covering his eyes with one hand.

“Okay, Dad. Whatever you want.”

Dad’s arms enfolded him in their enduring strength and warmth once more. He hugged Dad back as tightly, leaning his head against his father’s.

“You are everything to me. Don’t you know that?”

Stiles squeezed his burning eyes shut. “I know, Dad,” he rasped. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Dad drew back. Cupped his bristly, smiling, tear-streaked face with both hands. Dad smiled softly back at him, and he knew Dad had already forgiven him the moment Dad saw him in the doorway. He glanced at Scott, and he knew his lifelong best friend, his brother in every way that mattered—who looked at him and saw him and loved him without a second thought, and still loved him—had forgiven him even before he jumped into the Camaro and bolted.

He threw himself at Scott who caught him with both arms, wrapping them tight around his torso. His face crumpled again, and he was totally getting snot and tears onto Scott’s work shirt, but Scott was sniffing too, compressing the breath out of him with werewolf brawn. He didn’t complain when Scott shoved his nose into his neck and took a deep, long sniff of his scent. Scott’s wolf needed that primal reassurance that sight, speech and even touch couldn’t give.

Man, was he glad he’d taken that shower in the motel. He might have slain Scott’s werewolf nose with his stench.

So glad, that he’d been proven so wrong about never seeing Scott again.

Scott grabbed the sides of his lower jaw and neck, and shook him playfully. They chuckled, and grinned at each other as they blinked more tears out of their crinkled eyes. Then Stiles took a big step back, rubbing his eyes with a knuckle. Scott crossed muscular arms that made the sleeves of his shirt bulge. Scott glared at him with pursed lips and twinkling eyes.

“You are grounded for life, asshole!”

Stiles choked on his laughter. He slapped his hands over his eyes, then flung his arms out in more mock outrage.

“You can’t ground me, Scott! You’re not my dad!” Stiles swiveled and pointed at his softly smiling father who sauntered from behind him to stand next to Scott. “He is!”

Scott jabbed a forefinger at his face. “You are cleaning the cages at the clinic for a year!”

“Whaaaaat—”

“When Kira and I have kids? You are gonna babysit them every weekend! For eighteen YEARS!”

Stiles flung his arms up, and yelled, “We did not state that in our Best Friends Forever Contract! There was absolutely no mention of me babysitting kids in any way, shape and form! I object to your unfair scheme to entrap me into becoming your nanny!”
Dad sucked in his lower lip and wisely said nothing, his eyes crinkled in amusement.

“We wrote that up when we were five! We thought girls had icky cooties, and vegetables were yucky!”

“It’s still applicable!”

“Oh, really?” Scott crossed his arms again, gazing at Stiles with round eyes, his lips trembling in the effort to not smile. “Including the part that said you would do anything for me if you hurt my feelings and made me cry my eyes out?”

Stiles’s mouth gaped open in the beginnings of a rant about transparent employment policies and the value of hiring professionals instead of blackmailing inexperienced best friends. It stayed open and silent when he recalled the precise line Scott was referring to in the contract—that Mom had framed for him and hung on his bedroom wall for years before he took it down at the extremely young age of twelve.

“Yeah-huh, you remember it now, don’t you?” Scott nodded, his lips trembling even more. “And do you remember what the specific punishment was if you did that to me on top of scaring me too?”

Stiles raised a forefinger up in the air. After a few seconds, he shut his mouth and lowered his hand, his eyes squinted.

“Yes, Stiles, you swore you wouldn’t eat a single curly fry. For ten years.”

Dad’s eyebrows shot up his forehead in astonishment. In the corner of Stiles’s eye, Derek stood with his lips sucked in, his hazel eyes crinkled with mirth.

Stiles’s face scrunched up in distress. He pointed his right forefinger at Scott who was now biting his lower lip, and squealed, “That is cruel and unusual punishment. That is unadulterated evil. That is unacceptable, and I refuse to bow to your wicked machinations of depriving me of my sacred curly fries!”

Scott schooled his features into a deadpan expression. “So does that mean the contract doesn’t apply and you’ll babysit my kids?”

Stiles sputtered and gesticulated wildly with both hands. “We will—we will sit down at a future appointed time and location, and come to a mature agreement after a lengthy, vigorous discussion!”

Stiles glared at Scott with the widest eyes possible, and squeaked, “You leave my curly fries alone.”

Scott erupted into joyful laughter, embracing Stiles again with both arms. Stiles also laughed. He patted Scott on the upper back.

“I really missed you, bro. I’m so happy you’re back and you’re okay.”

Stiles glanced to the left, to where Derek stood silent. Derek’s eyes were still crinkled and sun-warm. They gazed at Stiles, and Stiles gazed back, giving Derek a small smile even as his mirth ebbed. He gave Scott another pat, then stepped back until there was four feet of space between them. Scott felt the shift in mood, and so did Dad. Scott stood straight, his shoulders broad, his hands loose at his side, his eyes fierce yet kind, and Stiles was gazing not just at his best friend, but the True Alpha of Beacon Hills.

Stiles also straightened and squared his shoulders, and said, “I chased him to Salem, Oregon. We fought in a warehouse there and I—” Stiles swallowed past the jagged ball in his throat. “I killed him. He’ll—” Stiles swallowed again. “He’ll never hurt anyone. Ever again.”
His summarized report didn’t come anywhere close to the entire truth. He wasn’t ready to tell Scott and Dad yet. He was still reeling from the whole clusterfuck himself, still trying to process everything without going full-throttle loco anyway.

What the hell would Dad, Scott, and the rest of the pack think if they knew that he’d battled with a Nogitsune from another universe? That he’d tortured and murdered another version of himself from another universe? What would Dad think of him after knowing something as horrifying as that about his own son?

He was terrified as it was of looking at Dad now, of seeing Dad’s reaction to his report and its bleak implications.

Scott’s expression was grim, but those big, brown eyes that examined his face were compassionate. Scott was no longer the teenage boy with the rigid black-and-white mindset he once had. Scott had seen and done some pretty dreadful things since then, as the Alpha werewolf of this town, for the sake of saving lives. But what Stiles did to Przemyslaw? There was no way that Scott would judge that as forgivable.

“Okay,” Scott said. “When did the fight happen?”

“Uhm.” Stiles bit the corner of his lips. “About a week ago.”

“How were you doing since then?” Dad asked, his forehead creasing.

Stiles glanced to the left, at Derek, then back at Scott and Dad.

“Uh. I was asleep in a motel for about five days, recovering. Then I drove back from Salem.”

Scott and Dad stared at him.

Then Dad said, “Stiles, didn’t you have your phone with you? It wasn’t in your room.”

Stiles winced. Ah, right—he’d left it in the glove compartment of the Camaro all this time. Its battery had to be kaput. And no, he didn’t miss the accusing tone of Dad’s voice.

“I, uhm. Yes?”

“So—why didn’t you call us?” Scott asked.

Before Stiles could reply, Scott’s eyes widened with realization. Scott stared at Stiles with those disconcerted, stark eyes, and he knew Scott was recalling their conversation at the town’s welcome sign.

I know you—you and the pack—you’ll take care of him. He’ll understand one day.

See, I always chose me. But I gotta choose the world this time, okay, Scott? I gotta make sure that fucker never hurts anyone else, like he hurt me.

Goodbye.

Stiles stared back with eyes equally stark that begged Scott to not bring it up here and now, not in front of Dad. Dad, who had no idea he’d intended to commit suicide after it was all over. Dad, who was squinting at them, studying their body language. His, in particular.

Stiles had to lock his knees from buckling with relief when Scott exclaimed, “You didn’t want to call us. Even when you were okay!”
Thank you, bro. Thank you so much.

Grimacing, Stiles raised his hands palms out as Scott crossed his arms high over his chest. Scott’s wide-eyed glare was certainly genuine now.

“Look, I have a really, really valid reason for that—”

“Let’s hear it then,” Dad said, and oh shit, Dad was also crossing his arms and glaring at him, and probably concocting a thousand ways to keep him housebound for life.

Derek, the traitorous asshole, just stood there and smirked at his predicament.

“I—I was rushing back, okay? Really! I was!” Stiles contorted his features. “And Deaton said something about me possibly—” He hunched his shoulders. Grimaced with one eye squeezed shut. “Going kaboom dead if Derek’s soul stayed inside me for too long.”

Scott and Dad glowered at him in silence for a few more seconds. Then Dad, pointing a finger at Stiles’s chest, glanced at Scott and asked, “Did I hear a kaboom and dead in there somewhere?”

Scott’s glower became a perplexed frown.

“Did I hear something about Derek’s soul inside you?”

Dad glanced at Stiles with raised eyebrows. Derek stood nearer to Scott, and crossed his arms over his chest as well. Stiles frowned at his werewolf mate, also crossing his arms over his chest.

“Don’t aim those murder brows at me! I wasn’t the one who wanted to take so many breaks, Extra Protective-wolf!”

Scott pivoted his head to his left where Derek stood. Then, slowly, Scott and Dad turned their heads to look at each other with eyes of bewilderment. They turned their heads back as slowly to stare at Stiles.

“Uhm, Stiles?” Scott said, forehead as creased as Dad’s. “Who are you talking to?”

Stiles rolled his eyes. Let out a strident huff.

“I mean—” Stiles carded his fingers through his hair and grabbed locks of it in a frenzy. He flung his arms out, and exclaimed, “He’s alive! He’s inside me!”

The stricken, sympathetic expression on Scott’s face clouted him like a troll’s fist to the solar plexus.

“No! No, Scott. Don’t gimme that look. I’m not crazy! Not about this, okay?” Scott immediately appeared penitent, and Stiles ran his hands down his stubbled face. “Derek’s soul really is inside me. When he and I were in that cell, his soul was trapped in there even after he—he died, and when he saw me trying to pull the knife out of his chest, he wanted to stop me so—” Stiles slapped his palms to his temples. “He pushed his soul inside me, somehow. Like, when he pushed his Alpha spark into me! And he’s been in my chest the whole time!”
Scott and Dad shared another gravid glance.

“Derek! Say something!”

“Stiles, I don’t think they can hear me.”

Neither Scott or Dad reacted to Derek’s comment. Stiles let out another strident huff of exasperation. He rubbed his face with both hands while pacing the floor between the doorway and the other occupants of the study.

“Okay, Stiles. I have an idea.” Stiles halted and swiveled to face Scott, and Scott said, “The night of Jackson and Lydia’s latest wedding anniversary dinner.”

Stiles’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. “Oh-kay? That was, like, months ago.”

“Yeah. That night, Derek and I had a private conversation about—a certain person. About a certain purchase he made for said person.” Scott arched his right eyebrow. “If Derek really is here? Tell him to say, word for word, what he said to me about this purchase. He’ll know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Stiles felt like kicking himself in the ass. Or blasting amps of electricity through his imbecilic brain. Why hadn’t he thought of such a simple test for the problem of Derek’s invisibility? Damnit!

Stiles glanced at Derek to find his werewolf mate firing up those murderous lasers of doom at an unsuspecting Scott.

“That was supposed to be a secret, you jackass,” Derek snarled at Scott.

“Uhm.” Stiles glanced at Scott with wide eyes. “He’s giving you the murder brows. Big time. He said that was supposed to be a secret or something.”

Scott blinked. Then, Scott’s lips started to curl up. Scott stayed silent, arms still crossed over his chest, waiting for a response to his demand. Dad was also waiting, leaning back against the desk, curious and patient.

“Tell him I said—” Derek kept glaring at Scott, his arms also still crossed. “I said, ‘The rings I bought were platinum.’” Stiles saw the Adam’s apple in Derek’s throat bob once. “And I said, ’Only the best, for the one I love.’”

Stiles stared at Derek, and realized that Derek’s cheeks were reddening. That Derek was pointedly not looking in his direction.

“Platinum rings?” Stiles murmured. “For the one you—”

And that was when he remembered That Fake Wedding Photo, with its frame that stated in ornate, red letters: “JUST MARRIED! MR. & MR. HALE!” That photo that remained on the shelf in Derek’s workshop office. That photo of Derek in that splendid burgundy suit, and him in that dark gray suit with that eye-watering paisley tie. Embracing each other, their cheeks pressed together. Smiling like total dumbasses at the camera. Looking like the happily married couple they wished they actually were.

There was only one reason Stiles could think of, that a man would buy a ring for someone else—a platinum one, at that, the most expensive and prestigious option—for someone he loved.

“That was how you were gonna tell me?” he rasped at Derek.
Derek lowered his gaze to the floor. His glare softened into an expression of nervousness. Stiles stared at Derek until the werewolf raised his head to look at him.

“It’s not—” Derek’s whole face went strawberry-red. “It wouldn’t have been—a proposal. I would never have forced that on you, Stiles. It’s just—” Derek lowered his eyes again. “Just to prove that I mean it, about you being the one for me. Something that was—physical. That I could wear on my finger, and show the world that I belonged to you.”

Stiles’s eyes stung. His chest ached with such gratifying pain. He felt Derek’s soul nestled in the refuge of his chest, such an exquisite, priceless thing. He glowered at his werewolf mate—his, his!—even as his lips threatened to curl up with affection.

“You giant blockhead,” he ground out. “You fluffy lummox of a sap. You coulda cut a ring outta cardboard and given it to me to wear for life, and it would have meant just as much to me.”

The tiny smile of pure hope that illuminated Derek’s face made Stiles’s eyes sting even more.

“Stiles.” A broad, optimistic smile graced Scott’s face. “What did Derek say?”

Stiles blinked a couple of times, then said, “He said the ring he bought for me is a platinum one.”

Scott swiveled to his left and shouted directly into Derek’s face, “Derek, you gigantic butthead! You’ve been here all along?! Show yourself!”

Stiles exploded into amused chortles at Derek’s exaggerated eye roll and Derek flinging his arms up in disgruntlement. Derek swiped a muscular left arm at Scott’s head, and it went through Scott without so much as a blink of reaction from the younger werewolf. It seemed Stiles was the sole person who could sense the magical projection of Derek’s soul.

Dad was smiling, but he was also gazing at Stiles with concerned eyes.

“Stiles,” Dad said. “I have not forgotten the kaboom and dead.”

Scott swiveled to face Stiles once more, his expression a comical combination of confusion and exhilaration.

“Yeah! What the heck is that about?”

“Scott, remember that chat I had with Deaton in the clinic? Ages ago? Like, when we were nineteen?” Stiles rolled his hands in circles. “About souls possessing other bodies? And a body being strong enough to hold multiple souls in it?”

Scott frowned as he dredged through his memories for said conversation. Stiles could tell the instant Scott did recollect it: Scott’s entire face lit up with a grin.

“Oh yeah! I remember! Mrs. Abernathy’s Corgi puppy fractured its hind leg, and she had to attend that business meeting in Beacon City so I babysat the puppy while you were studying those spells with Deaton.” Scott’s grin softened into fond, proud smile, and he said, sheer, staunch faith in every word, “See? I knew you could do it.”

Stiles returned the smile with an equally fond one. He would never, ever know what he’d done in this life to deserve a best friend like Scott McCall.

“Stiles?” Dad said with an adamant tone. “Kaboom? Dead?”
“Yeah, well, the thing is,” Stiles said, hunching his shoulders, grimacing at his father, “if Derek’s soul stays inside me for too long, Deaton said the excess power building inside me and making my magic more and more powerful will—”

“Kaboom dead you,” Dad said, his expression stoic, his eyes filled with alarm.

“Yeah. I got no clue when it’s gonna happen. But my magic is—I think it already started to grow in power after I woke up from the long coma. And it grew even faster after I tapped into the power of Derek’s soul during the fight with—you know.” Stiles glanced at Scott, then Derek, then back at Dad. “So I gotta transfer Derek’s soul back into his body. Like, right now.”

Scott and Dad glanced at each other. They glanced back at Stiles, their expressions earnest.

“We’re taking the SUV,” Scott said, and they—all four men—hastened out of the room as one.

§§§§§

Stiles sat shotgun while Dad sat behind Scott who commandeered the wheel. At the first traffic stop, Scott sent out a group message to Kira, Isaac, Jackson and Lydia, giving them the bare-bones of the situation and urgent instructions. Stiles didn’t see the magical projection of Derek’s soul, but he felt said soul vibrating in his chest with excitement. He could relate: if he wasn’t tapping his fingers on his knees, he was jiggling his left leg, or nibbling on his lower lip, or biting on his thumbnail like his good ol’ ADHD days.

Scott fetched Kira from her workplace that was on route to Beacon Hills Cemetery, a small, specialized plant nursery. Kira sprinted out of the place while stripping off a dark green apron. She leaped into the SUV behind Stiles, greeted her husband with huge smile, hugged Dad, then clamped her arms around Stiles and the front passenger seat he sat in. He chuckled and patted her hands on his chest, and he didn’t mind at all that she hugged him for at least five minutes. She was sweet like her werewolf husband that way, and spoke far more with her actions than words.

Dad didn’t make a single comment about Scott going over the speed limit all the way.

They weren’t the first to arrive: Jackson and Lydia were already there with Isaac, who’d taken over management of the cemetery four years ago after his father died from cirrhosis—and good freaking riddance to that abusive dickbag and his penchant for stuffing his own son into freezers.

Scott parked two spaces down from Jackson’s Porsche. When Stiles hopped out, Lydia was storming down the asphalt toward him. She looked divine in the rays of the late afternoon sun: the emerald wrap dress she wore made her red, wavy tresses dazzle like agitated fire, and her towering silver platform heels added over six inches of height to her petite stature.

Those six inches were more than enough for her to slap him hard across his left cheek and make his head snap to the side. From a distance, he heard Scott let out a commiserating sound similar to a giant puppy’s sheepish whine, and Kira gasp. He heard Dad say, “Ouch.” Before he could react, before his head stopped spinning, Lydia hugged him tight around his waist and pressed her head to his chest.

In another world, another universe—one in which Derek Hale never existed—Stiles would be over the fucking moon, rejoicing in the embrace of Lydia Martin, the girl he’d been obsessed with since he was a boy. But he wasn’t a boy anymore. His world, his universe was one in which he was the
honored werewolf mate of Derek Hale—the most handsome, magnificent, one-of-a-kind man who Stiles would ever love, who loved Stiles.

“Never. Again,” Lydia snarled, poking him extra hard in the chest with each word, speaking for everyone else too. Her lustrous green eyes glistened wet with tears of anger and relief.

“Okay, Lydia,” he murmured, his throat constricted, his own eyes stinging.

“How dare you ignore my messages, Stiles Stilinski!”

“I’m sorry—”

“All two thousand of them!”

“I—oh my god, did you actually—”

“You are hereby sentenced to become my shopping bag carrier any time and place I want!”

In the background, standing with a smirking Isaac and a grimacing Scott, Jackson grinned the grin of a convict being given a reprieve from his life sentence.

“I—”

“And you will do my nails! And the laundry! And clean the pool!”

“Okay, the nails, I can do those, I did those swirly patterns you liked—”

“And change the curtains and the furniture! Every month!”

“Whoa, whoa, I don’t have that kinda dough or magic for that—”

“Do you know how much you scared me?!”

Lydia enveloped his torso in another bone-crushing hug, hiding her face with her hair. He wrapped his arms around her upper back. He swallowed hard.

“I’m sorry, Lyds,” he whispered. “I really am.”

“Then you’re going to make it up to me, aren’t you? I need a new Chanel bag. The priciest one from the latest spring-summer pre-collection range.”

Stiles chuckled, and said, “It’s, uh, gonna take me a while to earn that kinda money, even with my magic jobs. But I’ll see what I can do, okay?”

Her arms tightened around him. He hugged her back, smiling into the luxuriant hair of one of his dearest friends in life who also deemed him to be one of hers.

“As happy as I am that we’re all reunited with Stiles,” Dad said, giving everyone a benevolent smile, “I really, really don’t want my son to go kaboom and die.”

They raced to Derek’s grave, with Scott leading the group and Stiles behind him. The mere sight of Derek’s gravestone still struck Stiles like a vicious kick to his stomach. Only one bouquet was left on the three-by-seven-foot granite slab covering the grave: the one Kira had placed there weeks ago, when Stiles and the pack visited.

Stiles gaped at the flowers that appeared as fresh as the day they were plucked.
“Did you replace them?” Stiles asked Kira, who shook her head, looking as shocked as he felt.

Stiles kneeled in front of the grave. He could still sense Deaton’s wards of protection, sense the mountain ash that surrounded the coffin. Stiles scooped up the bouquet and handed it to Kira. It seemed to hum with an invisible energy. He opened his third-eye to look at it, and he saw that it was surrounded by a golden aura. A magical aura.

If he’d looked at that framed Klimt print in the motel in Salem with his third-eye, would he have seen the same magical aura around it?

“Did anyone visit the grave while I was—away?” he asked Scott who stood next to Kira.

“No. Deaton set the alarm, like, some kinda tingly wolfy-sense for me, Jackson and Isaac, and it didn’t trip. Why?”

Stiles frowned at the bouquet in Kira’s arms. “Those flowers are still alive because of magic.” Stiles glanced up at Scott. “I don’t think it’s mine. I never touched the flowers. But—I’m not sure.”

Scott also frowned at the bouquet, but said nothing. Stiles turned back to the grave, then carefully detached the small statue of the curled up, slumbering wolf with his magic, removing the gum that attached it to the slab. He clutched it close to his belly with both hands. He stood up, then stepped back at Scott’s gentle gesture. Dad stood to his right and laid a calming hand on his shoulder. Lydia and Kira stood to his left, silent as they observed the werewolves with somber expressions.

Scott glanced at Isaac and Jackson. The three werewolves flanked the granite slab: Scott on the left, Isaac and Jackson on the right. They kneeled and dug their clawed fingers under the edge of the slab. They rose in unison, effortlessly lifting the slab away and putting it aside on the ground nearby with werewolf strength.

To Stiles’s surprise, the grave hadn’t been filled with soil. Its base and sides were concreted. He glanced at Isaac, who hunched his shoulders and said with an odd grimace, “Okay, this probably sounds tame compared to all the crazy crap that’s happened, but—something kept blocking us from filling the grave. And I don’t mean the mountain ash, or Deaton’s wards. He said it definitely wasn’t him. He said he could feel some other power here, but it wasn’t evil. It was good.”

Stiles glanced at Scott, who nodded in confirmation of Isaac’s account. Stiles could imagine how things went down: the pack would have transported the coffin in the dead of night in Scott’s SUV to the cemetery, and the werewolves would have done a rapid job of lowering the coffin into the concreted grave. Deaton would have been meticulous in the laying of the mountain ash, then the wards. It must have puzzled them so much when they began shoveling the soil just for the soil to bounce right back.

“Did he say what this ‘power’ was?” Stiles asked.

Isaac shook his head. “No. He couldn’t figure out what it was. When we were able to cover the grave with the slab, we figured the soil could wait.” He shrugged, then smirked. “Hey, I run the place.”

Stiles glanced down at the now open grave. What were the chances that the power Deaton sensed was the same magic that kept that bouquet alive all these weeks?

Stiles handed the wolf statue to Lydia. He stepped forward until his toes lined up with the edge of the grave. If the sight of Derek’s grave had struck him like a vicious kick, the sight of the black-and-silver coffin crashed into him like a gargantuan meteorite at Mach 100. It really did resemble the
Camaro in its colors and sleekness. It contained Derek’s body, enclosed it on all sides. It was all that stood between Stiles and Derek’s body.

Stiles removed all the wards and the mountain ash with a single hand gesture. The wards blazed then faded away. The mountain ash sizzled gold then also faded away.

He was about to jump into the grave when Isaac seized his right shoulder. He glanced at Isaac, but Isaac didn’t release him.

“Stiles, Derek wasn’t embalmed. It’s been two months. And his body still had wolfsbane in it.”

He stared at Isaac, then stared at the shut coffin. Two months—Derek’s corpse had been in there for two months. What condition was it in? What did it look and smell like now?

Scott stood at his left side. Stiles glanced at him, and Scott gazed back with encouraging eyes, awaiting his next move. Stiles stared down again at the coffin. He gritted his teeth. Gave Isaac a resolute nod. He strode to the left side of the grave, Dad and the rest of the pack surrounded the grave: Jackson and Lydia to Stiles’s right, Kira and Scott at the foot of the grave, Dad on the opposite side and next to the gravestone.

Inside his chest, Derek’s soul was unfurled and yet immobile. It was tense. Waiting to make that pounce from one body to another.

Isaac jumped into the grave. He squeezed his way in the narrow space to what appeared to be a metal clasp on the side of the coffin. Isaac glanced up at Stiles, and Stiles nodded at him again.

Isaac lifted the metal clasp.

The coffin lid swung up without a sound.

“What the hell?” Isaac mumbled.

“Whoa,” Scott said, but Stiles didn’t glance at either werewolf.

He gaped down with everyone else at Derek’s body ensconced in the coffin’s cream-colored, padded interior. Derek’s body was indeed in that dark burgundy Zegna suit and that tonal floral tie, arms folded on his belly and crossed at the wrist. The black dress shoes were the same ones Derek had worn with the suit to Scott’s wedding dinner. Derek’s head was propped on a padded, satin pillow, and someone had styled Derek’s hair with gel into that classic spiky look that Stiles still fantasized about ten years after basking it its glory.

Derek’s skin was pale, but not deathly pale, showing no indication of decay. Derek’s eyes were shut. Derek’s features were set in a serene expression.

Derek looked like he’d lied down for a nap seconds ago.

Which should have been—impossible.

One of the things I love most about you, Stiles? You find ways to make the impossible possible. You always do.

No one prevented Stiles from jumping into the grave this time. Isaac backed away to give Stiles space, then climbed out of the grave with werewolf nimbleness to stand near Dad. Stiles sat on the rim of the open coffin with a thump, at the midriff of Derek’s body. His right hand shook as it reached down to touch Derek’s motionless chest. His next breath was a sharp one, almost a sob,
when his hand pressed down and he could feel the solidity of Derek’s body again.

The last time he’d touched Derek’s body, it was devoid of its soul and he had been so damn determined to kill himself with his magic. Derek’s ashen, half-naked body had been bathed in a mingling of their blood. Derek’s eyes had been a horrible, rancid gray that only corpses possessed. Derek’s body had certainly not glowed with a golden aura like it did now to Stiles’s third-eye.

Stiles stared at the mystifying glow of magic. Like the golden glow of the bouquet, of that framed Klimt print, he had no clue where it came from. Was it his own magic, after he unleashed all that power in that prison cell, hugging Derek’s body with both arms? Was this incredible preservation of Derek’s body the result of it being at ground zero, somehow absorbing some of his magic?

He didn’t know. He didn’t know where to even begin with transferring Derek’s soul from his chest into its own body again.

“Stiles.” Stiles raised his head and glanced back at Lydia. She was kneeling on the ground with Jackson at her right, grasping Jackson’s hand. The wolf statue rested on the ground beside her. She gazed at Stiles with solemn yet twinkling eyes. “Don’t you think Derek looks like a sleeping beauty?”

Stiles stared open-mouthed at her. When he was seventeen, she’d once commented that this facial expression of his was akin to a “high and dry blobfish trying to sing opera.” He’d thanked her for the unique compliment, and seriously considered changing his middle name to “Blobarotti”—but the point here was, six years later, when he crashed on her couch after her engagement party, she was the one who’d described him as a “sleeping beauty.” With an impressive eye-roll, of course.

No, Stiles, I will not kiss you awake. You’re speaking to me. Ergo, you are awake, you mouth-breather.

Stiles swiveled his head to gaze down at Derek again. To transfer Derek’s soul back into his body, all Stiles had to do was—kiss him?

Was it that easy?

Stiles swiveled his head again, but it was to look at Jackson instead. Jackson, who’d once been the kanima who trapped him and a venom-paralyzed Derek in that damn swimming pool for hours. Jackson, who seemed doomed to be an enslaved beast for life, until Lydia held him and kissed him, and told him that she loved him.

Jackson gave him a lopsided smirk. The werewolf’s hopeful gaze said something else entirely to him, something that made him sit straighter, gesture with both hands and say, “Everyone, back off. Far off. I dunno what’s gonna happen next and I don’t want you guys to get hurt.”

No one moved. Dad, Scott, and the rest of the pack gazed at him, staying where they were.

“Son, you think we’re going to leave you alone? Now?” Dad said, his eyes crinkled and soft, and Stiles gave his father a smile that wavered as he swallowed hard.

He bowed his head. He bent down at the waist toward Derek’s serene face, bracing himself with his hands on the rim of the coffin. His eyes fluttered shut. He didn’t smell anything except the mustiness of the coffin, the bland concrete surrounding them, and the freshness of the soil above. He didn’t feel any heat emanating from the body under him.

The touch of his lips to Derek’s was—anti-climactic. They were soft like they’d been when Derek
kissed him in the cell, but they were also ice-cold. They didn’t react in any way. Stiles felt like he was kissing a realistic mannequin that appeared identical to his werewolf mate.

Derek’s soul spiraled in his chest. Nudged him once.

Derek’s soul was still stuck.

“Uh,” Jackson said. “Did—it work?”

Ice-cold as they were, Stiles had to force himself to separate his lips from Derek’s. He sat up with a frustrated scowl. He pressed a palm to his sternum.

“No, he’s still in here. I don’t—I don’t know how to put his soul back.”

He glanced up at the others, and saw them giving each other anxious looks. He could see the doubt sprouting in Jackson’s eyes as well as Isaac’s that Derek was actually alive, that Stiles hadn’t already gone insane and was taking them all for a wacky ride. He could see the worry in Kira’s brown eyes and Lydia’s green ones as they glanced at each other. He could see the hope faltering even in Dad. In Scott, just the slightest, before Scott rallied and said, “Stiles, you can do it. You can save Derek. I know you can.”

Stiles felt like crying his fucking eyes out again, like screaming, and never stop. He turned back to face Derek, his head bowed. He scrunched his eyes shut. He pressed one hand to his sternum again, over Derek’s soul that gyrated in restlessness. He gripped the rim of the coffin with his other hand until its unyielding edges dug into his flesh.

“I dunno what to do,” he whispered to himself. “I dunno what to do, I don’t know, I don’t—”

“Yes, you do, Mieczysław.”

His head snapped up with a shocked gasp. He swiveled his head in Dad’s direction, but he didn’t stare at his frowning Dad with round eyes. He stared at the familiar, precious figure standing at Dad’s left side. A semi-transparent figure with a brilliant, golden aura that shone like the sun.

“Have you forgotten why you are my sunshine, Mieczysław?”

Mom looked exactly like she did long before she collapsed in the living room in seizures that fateful evening: happy, healthy, hearty. She was dressed in that sleeveless, white dress with the multi-colored floral print that was her favorite, that Dad bought for her as a third wedding anniversary gift. Her dark brown hair cascaded down her shoulders. Her plump cheeks were rosy and dotted with moles just like his.

She was smiling at him, like she did when she was still alive and she loved him like no one else.

“My hope, my sunshine,” she said, and she sounded exactly like she did when she laughed at Dad’s jokes, read bedtime stories to Stiles in his bed, and kissed him on the forehead and told him that she loved him. That she would always love him. “When my faith in all things good was dashed against the rocks by the evil in the world, all I had to do was to look at you, to see you—and I would believe, again.”

Stiles stared up at her, his lower lip quivering, his chest throbbing with pain, with amazement.

“Mieczysław, you have grown so much. Your magic has grown so good, so strong, like you. Why do you doubt yourself, after all you’ve already accomplished? You know what to do. You always have, even before you understood, teaching me and your father with your courage, your generosity
—your love.” Her dark brown eyes gleamed with gold flecks, with pride. “Believe, moje słoneczko. Believe in your soulmate. Believe in the future, in the life you will have with him. Believe in good triumphing over evil, no matter how near those rocks seem to dashing your hopes and dreams. Believe in love, for it is the greatest source of strength and power you will ever have.”

Mom turned her head to her right, to gaze at Dad who—was still frowning with concern at Stiles. Who didn’t know she was there. Who couldn’t see her, or feel her, because he didn’t have magic in him.

“Believe me, my sweet baby boy, I know.”

She raised her right hand to Dad’s cheek and stroked it with the back of her fingers, smiling at Dad like she used to, like he was her everything. Her hand lowered to brush Dad’s forearm and hand. Her hand went through his, and they occupied the same space.

Stiles bowed his head and covered his burning eyes with his palms.

Mom.

Mamo.

Stiles keeled over Derek’s body in the coffin, pressing his forehead to Derek’s. He carded his shaking fingers through Derek’s gelled hair. He squeezed his eyes shut, and they spilled fresh, searing rivulets onto Derek’s cold cheeks. He sucked in a shuddering breath, then another.

He opened his third-eye.

He plunged deep into his core, into the guarded cave of his persevering heart. He dove for that light brighter than a thousand blazing stars and—

There, there it was, his and Derek’s future home in the Preserve. There it was, that airy kitchen filled with early morning sunshine. There Derek was, in that cream-colored, v-neck sweater and jeans. Sitting barefoot on a stool at their kitchen counter, nursing a hot mug of coffee and waiting for him so they could eat breakfast together. Waiting for him to sit next to Derek and kiss the handsome asshole on the corner of those quirked lips.

A feast of waffles with butter and honey, scrambled eggs and bacon was spread across said counter. A glass pot of that excellent coffee from St. Helena sat on a cork coaster. A box of pop tarts stood next to the silver toaster by the stainless steel double basin sinks.

Stiles embraced his werewolf mate from behind with both arms.

This is what our home will be, Derek. This is what our future will be.

We’re gonna be happy. I’ll still have my numerous scars and nightmares, and you’ll still have the ashes of your family, your incinerated past infused in your marrow. But we’re gonna wake up side by side in that king-sized bed of ours in our master bedroom on the second floor. Your hands will always make me real and strong, and I will always blow away the smoke and ashes until all you smell is spring and that carrot cake you still adore and us.

He pressed his nose to the side of Derek’s warm neck, and smelt the teeming forest, the sun-beaten earth after a downpour, moonlight on unclad skin.

We’re gonna go to that lake. We’re gonna build our house in the Preserve. We’re gonna snuggle under the blankets in our bed, and we’re gonna watch your crappy choices of movies on our laptop,
and you’ll listen to me babble all you want until you fall asleep on my shoulder.

Stiles grasped the sides of Derek’s head. He rubbed the sides of their noses together.

You’re it, Derek Hale. You’re the one for me. You’re my mate. I’ve never loved anyone like I love you, and I will never, ever love anyone else like I will always love you. Think of me, Sweet-wolf. Think of us, and remember all that we were. Look inside your heart and mine, and see all that we can and will be.

Just us. Just you and me against the world, Big Guy, for all time.

Stiles pressed his lips to Derek’s once more.

And he believed. He believed, like he never had before.

Golden light, brighter than all the suns in existence, filled Stiles’s universe. A tornado of flames erupted within his chest, and he gasped from the agony as it surged up his throat like lava spiraling up toward the sky. He quavered from the escalating pain. He clutched onto Derek’s head. He kept his open mouth pressed to Derek’s and—

He heard Scott roar, “Get back! Get back now! Shut your eyes!”

A tremendous shockwave of blinding light and deafening sound swept him away and slammed him into the concreted side of the grave. He must have blacked out for a minute or more, because from one blink to another, he went from being a rag doll of a man to sitting at the foot of the grave, supported by Dad’s arms around him, his aching head on Dad’s shoulder.

“Wh-what’s happenin’?” he croaked, blinking his eyes, grimacing at the sensation of blood trickling down the back of his head. “What—”

Dad and the pack were surrounding the grave again, their eyes saucer-wide, their mouths open in wonderment. Mom was—gone, again. The sculpture of the slumbering wolf stayed unscathed on the ground next to the grave. Kira was still holding onto the bouquet, and all its flowers were colorless and withered.

No one was looking at him. Everyone was looking at—Derek. Derek, sitting upright in the smashed remainders of the coffin, his hair standing on end in messy tufts of spikes, his suit and tie somehow still impeccable. Coughing out clouds of golden magic dust that shimmered then disappeared in the air.

Stiles’s lower jaw sagged in unity. Dad was the only one who wasn’t gaping at Derek like a dolt: he was grinning like a dumbass instead, his eyes glistening.

“Oh my god,” Stiles gasped.

Everyone, including Derek, turned their heads to look at Stiles. Derek’s hazel eyes—hazel, the colors that meant alive and gorgeous and forever—widened when they landed on Stiles. Stiles pointed a trembling forefinger at Derek.

“Now you—you’re the one who looks like a porcupine glued to an electrostatic generator!”

Everyone stared at Stiles with varied expressions of amusement, bafflement, and lingering shock. The expressions of amusement multiplied as Stiles exploded into hysterical laughter that would make a drunk donkey proud, almost toppling over into the grave if not for Dad clinging onto his waist and dragging him back.
Scott was the first to break after that, snorting then guffawing with Stiles while Kira hopped up and down next to him, clapping her hands with unbridled joy, the withered bouquet on the ground at her feet. Isaac was grinning, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, while Jackson had tears in his eyes as he gazed down at Derek. A softly smiling Lydia was hugging Jackson from the side with both arms, her head leaning against her husband’s chest.

Derek gazed at each of them with crinkled, elated eyes. Derek gazed at Stiles last, but Stiles wasn’t upset by that.

“Stiles,” Derek said, as if his name encapsulated everything, *everything* to the werewolf.

That devastating, small smile was curving up Derek’s dark pink, soft lips, that smile that Stiles could finally touch with his fingers, could finally *touch with his lips again*—

Stiles vaulted out of his father’s arms into the grave. He threw himself at Derek whose solid, sturdy arms were already wide apart to catch him and hold him against that familiar, muscular, sun-warm body. He collapsed to his knees, sitting on Derek’s lap. His face crumpled. His guffaws throttled into body-wracking sobs, and goddamnit, he was getting snot and tears onto Derek’s Zegna suit, but Derek’s arms were vises around his torso. Derek’s hand was on his nape, and he wanted Derek to hold on to him, to never let him go again. Derek’s bearded face was wet, shoved against his neck as Derek gulped in his scent. Stiles wrapped his arms around his Derek’s broad shoulders, and he held onto his werewolf mate, and he never wanted to let him go again.

*Mom.*

*Mamo, thank you. Bardzo cię kocham.*

“Oh my god, Derek. Derek,” Stiles choked out against Derek’s warm—*warm* again!—neck. “Derek.”

“Stiles. *Stiles.* Hey, look at me, babe.”

Stiles whined as Derek pushed him back, enough that they could look each other in the eye. Derek grasped the sides of his tear-streaked face with those adroit, large hands, and they were so warm, so warm, and real and strong.

“This is the first one, Stiles,” Derek said, his gaze captivating and intense. “This one.”

“What—what do you—”

Derek drew his head forward. Planted those dark pink, *soft* lips on his quivering ones, and licked his lower lip with that hot, wicked *tongue* and—oh. Oh yes, *yes*, this was the first one, yes. This was most definitely their very first kiss. A kiss anointed with triumphant tears and not blood. A kiss that counted for being the first of a million with Derek. The one he’d dreamed of for a decade, for an eon, and received a second chance to do it over. The one he was going to remember for an infinity, no matter where he ended up at the end of his existence.

Eventually, he had to come up for air. He separated their mouths with extreme reluctance. He kissed Derek on the tip of that bold, straight nose. Kissed Derek’s bristly, flushed cheeks. Kissed Derek’s curved lips, then leaned back against Derek’s muscular forearm supporting his lower back. He gave Derek a lopsided grin as the world started tilting to one side into that slippery, steep slope he really didn’t want to tumble down. He hoped the landing was going to be merciful on his enervated body pushed too far yet again.

“Hey, uh—I think I’ll pass out now,” he mumbled. “Keep holding me, okay, Big Guy?”
Stiles’s eyes rolled up into his skull. His body went limp.

He fell backward as panicked cries of his name from far away echoed in his ears.

He fell.
Nine days after Derek returned to life in Beacon Hills Cemetery, Stiles woke up from yet another healing coma in his bed in his apartment, dressed in his favorite threadbare t-shirt and sweatpants. It was a weekday—Thursday, to be precise—which meant everyone had to be at work. Dad and Derek were the exceptions, but Dad was only stopping by to check on him before dashing back to the station to resume his many duties as the sheriff of Beacon County.

Dad had used up all his days off this year for the frantic search for Stiles. It was one of a multitude of things Stiles was remorseful for, although it was also one of the least guilt-inducing things on that list. Nothing could top his choice to slice his own throat open with that marble-handled carving knife in that department.

Dad still didn’t know about that. Dad would be bellowing like a rabid bull right now if he did.

“This shit is getting really old,” Stiles croaked to his father in uniform who sat on the side of his sun-lit bed with a wry smile. “Can I trade my comas for a holiday in Waikiki instead?”

Dad snorted, then said, “I’m not the magical guy here, son. And I for one greatly appreciate said comas for keeping you alive and well.”

Dad’s callused hand grasped his over the blankets and gave it a squeeze. Dad didn’t let it go for a few minutes after that, but Stiles didn’t mind. He was still alive, and so was Dad. So was Derek, who stood in the open doorway in a white henley and jeans, staring at him with those soft, stunning hazel eyes.

Derek, his ally. His friend, such a good friend.

Derek, his werewolf boyfriend and mate. The love of his life. His everything.

Derek.

“What are you doing all the way there, Lurker-wolf?” Stiles’s face ached with the smile that ignited it. “Get over here.”

Derek smiled back at him, and it was like watching the summer sun rise over the tree tops of the Preserve. Derek didn’t walk into the bedroom. Derek gave Dad a glance, then gazed at Stiles again, leaning sideways against the doorway. Stiles frowned at his werewolf mate in puzzlement.

“Deeereeeeeeeek, get over here!” He grabbed a pillow from the mountain of pillows propping him upright. “Don’t make me throw this at your stupid face.”

“No, I think I’ll stay here,” Derek replied. He glanced at Dad once more, his eyes twinkling. “Where
it’s safe.”

Dad let out an amused, low chuckle at that. He gave Stiles’s knee a gentle pat, then stood up.

“Wha?” Stiles said to Derek, smacking the pillow down on the bed. “What are you talking about?”

“He hasn’t gotten out of bed since he woke up this morning, has he?” Dad said to Derek.

“Nope,” Derek replied. “He was way out of it until you showed up.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Stiles muttered, squinting at his father.

Dad raised his hands palms out, his eyes twinkling like Derek’s. “Nothing, nothing.” Dad lowered his hands. “All right, I’m off to the station. I’ll come over tomorrow after my shift.”

Dad leaned down and kissed Stiles on the forehead. Stiles didn’t care that he was a full-grown man receiving a paternal kiss like a baby: life was way too short for any toxic masculinity bullshit, and he’d missed Dad the whole time he was away from Beacon Hills. He hadn’t forgotten the phone call he’d listened in on when he came home. He hadn’t forgotten the sheer anguish in Dad’s voice as Dad asked for confirmation on what he’d believed was Stiles’s corpse fished out of the Willamette River.

He was never going to forget it. He didn’t deserve to.

At the doorway, Dad gave Derek a heavy pat on a broad shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re a werewolf, son. Try not to get fried by one of his lightning bolts, okay?”

“I’ll try my best, sir.”

Stiles frowned at Dad and Derek in utter puzzlement. Then he rolled his eyes. Threw back the blankets swathing him from the waist down.

“Fine, whatever, stay all cryptic and confusing. Keep me out of the loop! I don’t care. I don’t care at all in any way. No, nope, nein, nyet—”

His rocketing tirade tripped to a halt when his gaze fell on his ankles.

“Dad. Derek,” he said, gaping down at the two black, rectangular devices strapped to his ankles with black bands. “What are those things on my ankles?”

Derek stared at him with an impassive face. Dad, in contrast, had the smuggest expression he’d ever seen on his father’s face.

“Oh, those things? They’re top of the line, kiddo, from the latest range of ankle monitors for law enforcement. They arrived at the station last month.” Dad glanced down at them with the gleaming eyes of a proud parent at a newborn. “I think they really compliment your eyes. Bring out that deferential sparkle in you.” Dad glanced at Derek. “What do you think, Derek?”

Derek pointed a forefinger to the side in some vague direction, and said, “I’m, uh. I’m gonna go to the kitchen.”

Stiles squinted at his werewolf mate who had taken one step back into the hallway.

“Derek—”
“And heat up some pop tarts now—”

“Derek, don’t you dare run away—”

“Seeyoutomorrow,sir!”

Derek fled down the hallway so fast that if Stiles’s life was a cartoon, there would have been a Derek-shaped pillar of steam left in his wake. Stiles yelled his werewolf’s name again while Dad’s shoulders shook with silent mirth.

“Daaaaaad, you can’t do this to me!”

Dad gave him a pointed look. “Anything I want, you said. Remember?”

Stiles’s open mouth went mute. He closed it. Then, he enlarged his eyes into his patented puppy eyes. Pouted his lower lip like he did when he was a toddler and everyone said he had the cutest face ever—well, everyone being Mom, Dad, Mrs. Gonzalez down the street, and babcia, may she rest in peace with her chruścikis and Kogel mogels, amen.

“Stiles.” Dad gave him an unimpressed look that Derek—that deserter—would have praised. “That stopped working when you were three years old.”

Stiles unleashed his ultimate weapon of persuasion: he stuck out his lower lip even more, and made it tremble.

“Stiles. That stopped working when you were six.” Dad arched an eyebrow. “And you didn’t have a beard then.”

Stiles sucked in his lower lip, then muttered, “It was worth a shot.”

Dad let out another low chuckle. He patted the side of the doorway twice.

“See you tomorrow, son. Oh, and—” Dad gave him another pointed look. “Don’t even think about removing the monitors. An alarm on my phone will go off if you tamper with them. Capisce?”

Stiles made a face at him, and he listened to Dad chuckle again as Dad sauntered down the hallway. He heard Dad talking to Derek but he couldn’t discern the words. He waited until he heard the front door shut before he swung his legs over the side of the bed and pushed himself up to his feet.

His legs quivered for a few seconds until they were stable enough for him to stand upright. His head spun for even longer, and he covered his eyes with his palms until the world righted itself. He’d been awake for a couple of hours, stayed bundled up in bed the whole time, and here he was, the human version of a rickety, six-legged doe one misstep away from a face-plant. Nope, he was nowhere close to being all right. Not for a while yet. What the hell must he look like now?

He shuffled out and down the hallway to the bathroom next to his bedroom. He groaned like a geezer three times his age at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Jesus, he was really not appealing with a short beard that looked like a mangy kitten glued to his lower face. He did, to his pleasant surprise, appear much better other than the nasty beard: the dark circles around his eyes were pale shadows, and his face was more filled out, his cheeks ruddy. That breakfast feast in Salem had contributed to his regained body mass, because his collarbones were no longer protruding, and his hands weren’t alarmingly skeletal anymore, back to their usual skinny selves. His ribs still showed under his skin, though, if he sucked in his belly.

Oh, well. Nothing a week-long buffet of his favorite fattening foods couldn’t fix.
He brushed his teeth. The nasty beard came off with a swift shave. He breathed a sigh of satisfaction at seeing his bare face again: shaving off the beard had felt like shaving off infected parts of himself, bit by bit. No, he wasn’t fooling himself that he could genuinely heal his mind and soul that way. No amount of physical cleansing or magic was going to achieve that. But the last time he’d been barefaced, it was before the whole clusterfuck with the Nogitsune from another universe—and holy shit, he was still bowled over by the fact that alternate universes existed, that alternate versions of himself and Derek existed. If he didn’t gaze too closely at his reflection, he could almost delude himself into thinking none of that clusterfuck had occurred.

He was very disappointed to learn that a hot shower did nothing whatsoever to the damn waterproof ankle monitors. Dad—one, Stiles—zero.

He sauntered back to his bedroom nude. Derek was hiding in the kitchen like the big scaredy wolf he was, so too bad, so sad, no hunky, irresistible, nude Stiles Stilinski with the amazing bubble-butt for him to ogle. He pulled on a navy t-shirt and jeans. He made a noble attempt to comb his fabulous, fluffy hair, then sauntered to the open plan kitchen that faced the living room.

Derek was standing barefoot with his hands behind him at the kitchen island, watching him approach with big puppy eyes that secretly melted Stiles’s heart to honeyed goo. A mug of hot coffee and a plate of warm pop tarts were on the counter waiting for him. His favorite flavors, too: brown sugar cinnamon and s’mores.

His beloved werewolf knew him so well.

He halted half a dozen feet in front of Derek, arms akimbo, his eyes narrowed in a glower. Derek hung his head, then toed the floor with his right foot. It was so freaking adorable to Stiles that he almost ditched the glower so he could scratch Derek behind the ears and coo at him.

“He’s the sheriff,” Derek murmured, glancing up at him from under thick eyelashes. “He’s your dad.”

And what he heard was, I don’t want to get on his bad side, and I want to do everything right so nothing comes between you and me.

“Come here, you magnificent asshole,” he said, still glowering, his lips quivering with mirth, with happiness.

Derek’s gorgeous face brightened with a tender smile. Stiles lost his mock glower the moment Derek swept him off his feet with both arms around his waist, and his exuberant laughter echoed across the living room as Derek swung him around in circles several times.

He didn’t have the words to describe his elation at feeling Derek’s strapping, sun-warm body pressed to his once more. A body that wasn’t cold, that wasn’t drenched in blood, or wounded. A body that was ardent and unbroken, that buoyed Stiles with its supernatural vigor and virility.

Derek was so alive. Derek made him feel so alive again. Derek was mending him, piece by piece, here in these solid, sturdy arms that raised him up.

“Oh my god, oh my god.” He grinned down at Derek who smiled back at him, their noses grazing. “The last time somebody swung me around like that, I was a kid my dad could still carry.”

“Perk of having a werewolf for a mate,” Derek replied, his chest puffed up against Stiles’s sternum.

“Oh, yeah? I can think of some other uses for your big, brute strength,” Stiles murmured, clamping his thighs around Derek’s hips.
He grasped the back of Derek’s head. He trusted Derek to hold him aloft, hold him steady and true. Their lips collided, and the impact was like a hundred megavolts of electric pleasure shooting down his spine to his cock and spreading throughout his jolted body. He moaned into Derek’s mouth, again when Derek’s hands skimmed down to grab his buttocks and squeeze them. They fit so fucking perfectly in Derek’s hands.

He clutched onto Derek’s shoulders, arching into Derek’s hands. He pressed hard, wet kisses on his werewolf’s lips as he was carried to the nearest stool at the kitchen island. Derek gave as good as he got, driving Stiles mad with that tongue that glided hot and slick against his, licking the bow of his upper lip, sucking on his lower one like it was candy. Derek set him down on the stool. Spread apart his lean thighs with muscular ones, kissing him again and again, swallowing down his constant moans that he couldn’t—didn’t want to suppress. Derek’s hands roved under his t-shirt. Seared the skin of his arched back with their heat, their desperation.

“Fuck, yes,” Stiles rasped into his werewolf mate’s mouth. “So much better. You—so much better than anything I—”

Derek tugged his hair and pulled his head back. His half-shut eyes stared up at the ceiling but he saw nothing, felt everything when Derek nuzzled his neck, scratching his exposed skin with that luscious stubble. He arched harder against Derek’s solid, sun-hot body. Fisted a hand in Derek’s hair. Moaned once more when Derek licked over his hammering pulse slow and wet, a high-pitched staccato of a sound that made Derek growl low and pleased.


Stiles’s other hand pressed flat over the triskele tattoo on Derek’s back.

“Yes, yours. Always.”

Derek growled again, and Stiles felt the deep sound reverberate from his formidable werewolf’s chest. Derek’s mouth opened over the frenzied pulsation in his throat. He felt teeth grazing his skin. He had his most vulnerable portion of his body in the maw of a werewolf, one of the most extraordinary, savage supernatural beings he’d ever encountered.

And he wasn’t afraid. He wasn’t afraid at all, not of this one who loved him so much, who defied death and the impossible for his human mate, and would do so again in a heartbeat.

“Derek,” he whispered. “I want—”

The ceiling above him whirled around and round. He gasped, a sharp, distressed noise. Nausea struck him deep in his empty gut, and he squeezed his eyes shut. Derek’s mouth slid away from his neck.

“Stiles?”

He dipped his reeling head forward to rest it on Derek’s firm shoulder. Curled in on himself, and waited for the abrupt dizziness to pass.

“Shit, fuck, I’m sorry.”

Derek’s arms wrapped around him in a snug embrace.

“Don’t be sorry—”

“Sorry, just dizzy—”
“Stiles.” Derek kissed his temple. “I’m the one who should be sorry, babe. It was too much, too fast.” Derek rubbed the length of his back with slow, soothing strokes. “I’m completely healed. But you’re not.” Derek touched the back of his head. “The bump here is gone, at least.”

“Bump? Oh. When you—when your soul went back in.”

“Yeah.” Derek caressed the back of his head. “You kinda scared us when you blacked out. Your face lost all color and you started to bleed from your nose and mouth. Your dad freaked out. He wanted to rush you to the hospital, but the pack calmed him down and reminded him about your magic.”

Stiles hid his smile in the smooth warmth of Derek’s henley.

“You freaked out too, didn’t you?”

Derek let out a huff of air that ruffled Stiles’s hair, that might as well have said, I did but I’m not going to admit it, so there.

Stiles’s smile widened. He risked opening his eyes, then lifted his head and blinked. He gazed up into hazel eyes soft with concern.

“Please tell me you didn’t carry me out of the cemetery bridal-style.”

Derek’s lips trembled for a moment. It was enough for Stiles to groan and drop his head on Derek’s shaking shoulder, to smack his forehead on it a few times when Derek chuckled in amusement.

“Stop that. Eat your pop tarts so you can go back to bed.”

“Yes, Dad.”

It was Stiles’s turn to burst into an amused chuckle at the hilarious expression of horror on Derek’s face.

“Do not ever call me that again. Please.”

“What? Not even daddy?”

Stiles chuckled again when a pink-faced Derek gripped his shoulders and turned him to face the mug of coffee and the plate of pop tarts. Derek sat with him throughout his consumption of all four pop tarts, watching him like he was the latest global hit of a reality TV show and the world was about to find out if he was interested in kinky werewolf sex—hint: yes, yes, very much so, in particular with a certain bearded, hazel-eyed werewolf whose hair was so not debonair. More like, a black, fuzzy Pomeranian deluged in hair gel.

Stiles rolled his eyes, and said, “You have watched me eat all kinds of food since we met each other, Sappy-wolf.”

Derek continued to stare with those infatuated eyes. Derek’s foot brushed his under the counter.

“That was before you told me you love me.” Derek tilted his head. “Now I’m watching my mate get the nourishment he needs, in the safety of his home.”

Stiles rolled his eyes again, but his lips betrayed him by curving up, and his foot betrayed him even more by brushing Derek’s foot in return, pinching Derek’s toes with his own.

That evening, after Stiles had a nap and then a delivered dinner of fried chicken and fries with Derek,
Scott stopped by. He’d come straight from the clinic, attired in a beige shirt and dark brown pants. He’d taken one look at the ankle monitors and laughed his ass off at them, laughing even when Stiles grabbed a book from the shelf near the couch and lobbed it at his head.

“I love your dad so much, Stiles,” Scott said once he caught his breath.

“Everybody loves my dad,” Stiles retorted, his expression thunderous, and it set Scott off again.

When Scott, Stiles and Derek were settled in the living room in front of the TV set to mute, Scott recounted what he’d seen as Derek’s soul surged back into his body from Stiles’s. Stiles sat nestled into Derek’s side with his head resting on Derek’s left shoulder. Scott sat in the armchair perpendicular to the couch.

“Man, it was awesome. You were, like, glowing gold from your eyes and your mouth!” Scott gesticulated with both hands at his own head and face, his eyes wide with awe. “Then your whole head was glowing, and then your whole body was, and then—” Scott’s mouth gaped open. “I could see this—this swirling, super-bright thing flowing out of your mouth and into the air. I swear, it looked like a wolf made of light.”

Stiles tilted his head back to give Derek a small smile. Derek gazed down at him with crinkled eyes. They glanced back at Scott who said, “And then the swirly wolf thing was flowing into Derek’s mouth, and you guys were glowing brighter and brighter, and it started to really hurt to even look at you guys. You said you might go kaboom, so I yelled at everybody to run and close their eyes. And I’m glad I did.”

Stiles’s brow furrowed with concern. “Scott, what happened?”

Scott made a face that Stiles recognized as Sheepish Face No. 37: Something bad happened to me but I won’t tell Stiles so he won’t worry about me. Scott glanced at Derek, then back at Stiles.

“Scoooott—”

“Oh, okay—my eyeballs kinda got burned.”

Stiles’s lower jaw sagged in dismay.

“Oh my god—”

“But I’m okay!” Scott gesticulated at his eyes, smiling widely far more for Stiles’s sake than his own. “I’m okay! See? They’re back to normal. They’re just fine. No damage whatsoever. They healed in, like, minutes. Hurray for True Alpha werewolf healing!”

Stiles sat upright, staring at Scott with anxious eyes.

“Did anyone else—”

“No, Stiles,” Derek said gently, and Stiles turned around to look at his werewolf mate. “No one else got hurt. Like Scott said, he yelled at everybody to run and shut their eyes. And they did.”

He turned around to look at Scott once more. Scott shrugged, then said, “I was the numbskull who wanted to see what happened. To help you guys if you needed it.”

Scott also caught him this time when he threw himself into Scott’s arms. He savored Scott’s jovial chuckle and pat on his upper back.
'Welcome back, bros. This town just isn’t the same without you two.’”

Later, in the cozy and dim privacy of his bedroom, snuggled under the blankets with Derek, Stiles murmured, “It feels weird, not having your soul inside me anymore.”

They were stripped down to their boxer-briefs. Derek was on his back, his arms around Stiles who rested his head on Derek’s hirsute chest, over that ample, thundering heart. Stiles laid an arm across Derek’s waist. Derek had held him this way every night of his nine-day coma, keeping him warm and safe, anchoring him with that stable heartbeat.

Derek tightened those muscular arms around his torso, then murmured, “Yeah. I’m—still getting used to being in my own body again. I can’t feel what’s going on inside you anymore.” Derek kissed him on the forehead. “But I can feel your legs between mine. I can feel your head on my chest, your hair touching my face. I can hear your heart beat, and your blood flowing through your veins, and the air moving in and out of your lungs. I can feel the heat of your body all along mine. The heat of your soul with every breath you exhale.”

Stiles turned his head to nuzzle Derek’s chest hair with his face. The dark, silky curls cushioned his bare cheek. They were as soft as he’d imagined them to be.

“In a week or two,” Stiles whispered, “I’ll regain the weight I lost. I’ll kiss those dark circles around my eyes goodbye. My magic will be restored. I’ll go get a haircut, maybe trim the sides and back. And I’ll—” Stiles tightened the arm around Derek’s waist. “I’ll be good as new. Everything will be good as new.”

What he didn’t say was, I can feel the void in my chest where your soul used to be, and I’m still not sure if this is reality. What he didn’t dare to say was, I think I’m still dreaming, because someone like me doesn’t deserve someone like you, and I don’t want to wake up.

He shut his eyes, and he saw rows of jagged rocks in the distance, edging nearer and nearer as black, icy waves towed him toward them.

Stiles’s hand, clenched into a fist at Derek’s side, was the first to tremble. Then his arm over Derek’s waist followed. Then his upper body and other arm followed, and he tried to stop the inexplicable shaking, to burrow closer to Derek under the blankets. He rubbed his cheek on Derek’s chest. To his surprise, the curls there became wet. He blinked, and the curls under his eye became even wetter.

“Sshh,” Derek whispered. “It’s okay.”

Derek grasped his nape and stroked the base of his skull with a thumb. Derek’s other hand caressed the slight swell of his hip.

“This is real, Stiles. It really is. This isn’t a dream or a hallucination. We’re not in that cell anymore. You defeated that Nogitsune, and it’ll never hurt anyone again.”

Okay, Stiles tried to say, but his lips quivered too much to form words with sounds. The jagged rocks edged nearer and nearer toward his frozen body in the waves smothering the eternal darkness below.

“I’m real. We’re real. We’re here.”

Derek’s fingers on his hip tapped a consistent rhythm: one, two, three, four, five.

“Count with me, okay? Let’s do it together.”

Okay.
“One, two, three, four five,” Derek said.

Derek’s five fingers tapped their committed dance upon Stiles’s skin. Stiles unclenched his trembling hand. He unfurled his long, skinny fingers, and tapped them—all five of them—on Derek’s flank in concert with his werewolf mate’s real and strong fingers.

_One, two, three, four, five._

“There you go,” Derek whispered against his forehead. “We’ll never let it in again. We got each other. Just you and me against the world, babe, for all time.”

And Stiles veered away from being dashed upon those rows of jagged rocks, carried onto sun-warmed land by his werewolf mate’s unwavering vow.

§§§§§§

Nineteen days after Derek returned to life in Beacon Hills Cemetery, after Dad finally gave in and removed those damn ankle monitors, Stiles moved into Derek’s apartment which was larger than his and had space for all his piles of spell books. The pack helped out with the move on a Sunday, mostly using Scott’s SUV and Stiles’s former sedan that Isaac had adopted with Stiles’s blessings. The Camaro was a seductive car, but it was crap when it came to transporting anything in its backseat or trunk. Stiles could foresee the day Derek had to buy a second personal vehicle that was roomier.

It was a sign of the mental recovery he still required that he hadn’t thought about Derek’s miraculous return to life until one of Derek’s neighbors passed them in the hallway and greeted Derek. With a hello and a smile. Instead of total shock at a dead man walking around.

“Deaton dealt with it. He came up with a spell that removed all memories about my death on a county-wide scale,” Derek said with contrite eyes later in the apartment, as Stiles glared at him with arms crossed over his chest. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. But that was my Alpha’s decision.”

Stiles aimed his glare at Scott who immediately grimaced at him like the giant guilty puppy he was.

“Stiles, c’mon, don’t look at me like that—”

“And you hid this from me why? Didn’t you think I’d wanna know if Derek was suddenly _not_ dead to the folks of Beacon Hills again?”

“Uhm.” Scott and Derek exchanged a glance, then gazed at him again. “Because you were still recovering? And because—you weren’t gonna like the details?”

Stiles narrowed his eyes. “Like what?”

“Like, Derek had to slice open his forearms for his blood? And I had to pull out all ten claws from my fingers?”

“What—”

“But, Stiles! The spell worked! Both of us are fine, and my claws grew back after a couple of days.” Scott popped all ten out for Stiles’s perusal. “See? They’re actually even longer and sharper now. It’s
pretty cool!”

Stiles’s mouth opened wide in the beginnings of a fervent rant about being kept in the dark about important shit like this, and it would have been epic and stupefying. But Derek stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek, and murmured, “It was worth it, to stay here with you,” and Stiles completely forgot what he was going to say.

In lieu of the rant, he punched Scott as hard as he could on the shoulder. Scott took it like a champ, crying out and staggering back to appease Stiles: a punch like that from another freaking Alpha werewolf couldn’t budge Scott an inch if Scott steeled himself against it.

It was while the entire pack was in the dark brown-and-stainless steel kitchen, gobbling down a variety of pizzas and pastas at the oval kitchen island, that Stiles blurted out, “So, by the way, Derek and I are boyfriends now.”

Everyone apart from Derek stopped eating and stared at him. Derek munched on a slice of beef pepperoni pizza in oblivious contentment next to Stiles.

“Yeah, uhm, boyfriends! Werewolf mates. Mated for life. That whole shebang.” Stiles smiled at everyone with both rows of teeth visible. He repeatedly jabbed his fork in the small portion of lasagna left on his plate. “Any questions?”

The rest of the pack continued to stare at Stiles for several more seconds.

Then, Isaac glanced at Jackson and Scott who flanked him, and said, “Didn’t they start dating after Stiles came back from Stanford?”

Jackson chewed and swallowed, then said, “I thought it was after Derek dated that barista with the huge boobs. Don’t you guys remember when Stiles was ranting about her—”

“Oh yeah,” Scott exclaimed with a bark of laughter, “that mega-rant about turning her into a scruffy cat! Because she was so nosy and cut into his quality time with Derek at the cafe!”

Stiles felt his cheeks heat up. He felt Derek’s eyes hone in on his face, but he didn’t look at his werewolf mate. He glanced at Lydia who sat to his left, who gazed at him with twinkling yet sympathetic eyes: she alone knew how torn up he’d been when he confessed his feelings about Derek to her, when he thought he never had a chance with Derek and his heart didn’t give a damn anyway.

“I could have sworn it was even before that,” Kira said, frowning and tapping her fork on her plate of spaghetti carbonara. “Like, before Stiles left for Stanford? When they went to the cinema and Stiles took that photo of them in the dark with his head on Derek’s shoulder, and posted it in the group chat—”

“That wasn’t a date date!” Stiles squealed. “I just wanted to get our heads in the frame—”

“Okay, I didn’t know about the mates thing until, uh, that visit to the cemetery.” Scott sucked tomato sauce off his thumb, and said, “But I was so sure that they were kinda sorta dating since Stiles and I were, like, sixteen—”

Stiles’s voice was an octave higher as he exclaimed, “We were not! Derek hated me then!”

“No, I did not hate you.”

Everyone fell silent at Derek’s resolute tone. Stiles swiveled his head to look at Derek, and
something in the left side of Stiles’s chest twinged at the glint of hurt in those hazel eyes that stared at him.

Stiles dropped his fork and turned on his seat to face Derek. He sputtered, then blurted out, “At—at first you did! You threatened to rip my throat out with your teeth! You slammed my head on the steering wheel!”

In the background, someone slurped loudly on their cup of soda.

“You—you broke into my room and slammed me on the wall! And you—”

“I didn’t know how to get through to you! I had to scare you to—to—” Derek let out a frustrated growl. “You refused to do what I wanted, to do what I needed you to do!”

“You should have used your words!”

“Your silly face made all the words vanish from my head!”

Stiles was bowled over into silence by Derek’s outburst. His Blobarotti impression was probably bowling over everyone else into silence.

“Your silly face! And your silly hair! Your silly voice, your silly body!” Derek flung his hands up. “Your silly everything!”

“Whoa,” Scott mumbled.

“Holy shit, Derek,” Jackson said. “You found a way to shut Stilinski up.”

Jackson cried out in pain at the same time something heavy and leathery like a luxury bag struck flesh.

“Is—is your definition of silly very different to the one in the Oxford English Dictionary, because I—”

“You were the only one who looked at me and saw past my anger, my grief,” Derek said, and Stiles was bowled over into silence again, his chest aching, his throat prickling. “You were the only one who looked at me and saw me. Someone you didn’t fear. Someone you dared to push back when I pushed you. Someone you kept saving, even when I didn’t want to be saved.”

No one else said a word this time. Stiles and Derek stared at each other, and the rest of the universe might as well have ceased to exist to them. Derek had become a master of his words, in this minute in time, in this intimate space between them. Derek’s lips curled up in that devastating, tender smile.

“I guess I really did fall in love with you,” Derek murmured, “from the moment I saw you for the first time. You and your silly everything. You.”

Stiles breathed. He stared at his beloved werewolf mate, and he finally understood what people deeply, madly, truly in love meant when they said they floated on cloud nine, when they could touch the stars and be one of them.

“Okay. Everybody out,” he decreed, still staring into Derek’s crinkled, gleaming eyes. “Or you get to watch me and Derek do the horizontal tango, whether you like it or not.”

Chair legs scraped across the kitchen floor. Plates and utensils were collected and stacked.

“Is that—an actual offer—”
“We’re going now, Isaac—”

“Ugh, no, I’m not sticking around for that—”

“Don’t you dare take this carbonara away from me—”

“Where’s my jacket—”

“Hey, is that werewolf TV show on tonight—”

“Bye, Derek and Stiles!”

Neither Derek or Stiles heard the front door click shut and lock. They lunged for each other at the same time, colliding in a tangle of clutching limbs and frenetic lips. Stiles sank his fingers into Derek’s hair and moaned into Derek’s mouth. Derek rubbed those large hands up his back under the layers of his flannel shirt and t-shirt, and already he was absorbed once more in Derek, in Derek’s sun-heat, in the friction of their slotting bodies.

“Derek, I want—”

Derek lifted him off his feet without so much as a grunt of effort, and fuck, it turned him on so much that his werewolf mate was larger and stronger than him. He clung to Derek’s shoulders and hips with his arms and legs, breathless.

“Derek, I want you to fuck me,” he gasped, and he heard Derek’s breath hitch, felt Derek’s fingers clench around his ass in unmistakable agreement.

Ten years of stubborn, thriving love imbued every brush of their lips, every latch of their open mouths. Derek sucked on his bottom lip, licked into his mouth. Stole more of his breath with such hunger for him. This was all his best wet dreams in one coming true, and he couldn’t believe how lucky he was, how he was the guy Derek fucking Hale cherished and desired for life.

Not once did Derek stumble into a wall on the swift walk to the bedroom. Their bedroom, now. Theirs. Derek’s legs hit the foot of the bed. Stiles toppled backward out of Derek’s arms onto dark red sheets, bouncing once. He was so fucking hard in his jeans. His hips pumped up in the air. He whimpered when Derek climbed on top of him and pressed that incredible, muscular body in a very hard line against his. Derek was so fucking hard in those skintight jeans too, and big, so very big.

Stiles yanked at Derek’s dark gray henley, dragging it up over those glorious abs and that broad, hirsute chest. He couldn’t get to Derek’s bare skin fast enough. He skimmed trembling hands over flat planes of flushed skin and rounded dips of firm muscles. Ran his fingers through those dark, soft curls. Derek moaned low when he thumbed at nipples surrounded by those curls, and he noted that reaction for future reference even as he rocked his hips up, rubbing their cocks together. There was still too much clothing between them.

Derek sat back to strip off the henley and throw it on the floor, then staggered back onto his feet at the foot of the bed. Stiles pushed himself up onto his elbows to watch Derek tear at his own jeans.

“Oh my god,” Stiles said in a rush when Derek shoved those skintight jeans down, and he realized Derek had gone commando. “Oh, fuck.”

He’d fantasized this moment a thousand times over, but nothing, nothing from his hyperactive imagination prepared him for the exquisite vision of a nude Derek Hale standing in front of him, like some supreme sculpted god beamed by express from nirvana to Stiles. Derek, licking a broad palm
and using it to slick up the rigid length of that long, thick, _perfect_ cock. Derek, blushing even as he smirked at Stiles.

“Do I get the Stiles Stilinski seal of approval?” Derek said, stroking his cock again from hilt to its rounded head that seeped pre-come.

Stiles had to lick his dry lips before rasping, “Mm-hmm. Oh yeah. A-plus. Five stars. Ten outta ten, Big Guy.” He felt no shame whatsoever at the needy whine that escaped his mouth. “And you _are_ a big guy.”

His breaths quickened when Derek settled in the spread of his thighs. He tugged his shirts up and over his head, and threw them over the side of the bed. He raised his hips off the bed, gasping at Derek pulling down his jeans and boxer-briefs all at once. His jeans ripped at the zip. His red boxer-briefs ripped in half, and although they were one of his favorite pairs, they were already forgotten before they landed on the far side of the bedroom. His cock was so hard that it smacked on his belly, leaving a trail of pre-come.

Derek was a werewolf, a supernatural being, an apex predator. Derek could track him from miles away using his scent alone. With the single thrust of an arm, Derek could punch his heart out of his chest and through his back. With a single swing of those gunmetal-gray claws, Derek could rip his throat open through to the spine. Derek could kill him in a myriad of ways with those hands that caressed his inner thighs, that framed his cock and drawn-up balls for Derek’s vehement scrutiny.

But Derek would rather die than let him be harmed again. Derek’s power and vitality were also his, just like his were Derek’s. Derek was his, and he was Derek’s, and there was no greater, more absolute truth to Stiles than that now.

“Do you know what you do to me?” Derek growled. His pupils dilated as he stared down at Stiles spread like a banquet for him, until those kaleidoscopic irises were thin rings. “Do you even know how _deep_ I wanna be inside you? How much I wanna make you scream with pleasure?”

A powerful tremor vibrated through Stiles’s fire-hot body. He grabbed his own cock with both hands, moaned, “_Fuck_, don’t—don’t talk like that. Don’t wanna come yet.”

Derek’s lips curved into the smirk of an enormous predator eyeing its defenseless prey. Derek gripped his flanks. Swooped down and licked at his right nipple already perked and rosy, suckled on it. Bit it, just enough to sting. His back arched off the bed and he cried out. His left hand scrambled up to Derek’s dipped head and fisted in dark, disheveled hair. His right hand squeezed tight around the base of his aching cock, but he was still a mere second away from erupting like Krakatoa in 1883. Derek’s fingers dug into his flesh. Derek laved and sucked on his tingling nipples, over and over. His toes curled in the sheets. He had no clue until now how sensitive his nipples were, how they seemed made just for Derek’s lips, teeth and tongue to torment.

“Oh fuck, don’t,” he gasped, writhing in Derek’s hands. “Don’t—I want to—come with you inside, _please_—”

Derek gave his left nipple another long lick, then rose up to kiss him. He let go of his cock, of Derek’s hair, and clutched at Derek’s shoulders. His legs fell open. His hips tilted up, and his breath stuttered against Derek’s lips when Derek’s cock dragged hot and heavy against his. It felt tremendous in girth and length, definitely bigger than his dildo. It was going to feel _phenomenal_ inside him.

Derek cupped his left cheek. Rubbed a thumb across the fragile skin under his eye.
“Tell me how, Stiles,” Derek growled, gazing into his wide eyes with intense, unblinking ones. “Tell me how you want this.”

Stiles stared back, his mind emptied of all thought except of the image of his ultimate sex fantasy featuring Derek. It was no longer a mere fantasy. It was coming true. It was happening, right here, right now. The hair on his arms stood on end. He threaded his fingers through Derek’s hair near his nape. His cock jerked, and he sucked in a hot, quick breath in thrilled anticipation.

“My—my legs. On your shoulders.”

Derek seized a nearby pillow and placed it under his lower back, tilting his hips up even more. Derek helped him to bend his legs. Propped his calves on those rippling shoulders, kissed the inner side of his left knee. They groaned together at the sensations of Derek’s cock sliding in the crevice of Stiles’s ass. Stiles’s breath went ragged when the head of Derek’s cock bumped the rim of his hole, a fleeting, rousing preview of what was to come.

Derek stared down at him once more. He stared back, raising his arms above his head on the bed. He crossed them at the wrists. His hands trembled, but he didn’t avert his eyes.

Derek’s eyes flashed and widened. Derek bared his teeth and let out a galvanizing growl, and Stiles moaned at the immovable weight of Derek’s right hand pressing down on his wrists. Yes, fuck yes, this was what he wanted, for Derek to hold him down, stretched taut and exposed. To hold him in one piece so he could let go, and not fear becoming lost in the eternal darkness again. He wanted to be lost in Derek, only in Derek.

“Tell me if you want me to let go.”

Stiles shook his head. “Want you to keep holding me.” He swallowed, then rasped, “Until you knot me.”

Derek’s hand spasmed around his wrists. Derek scrunched his eyes shut, and Stiles felt his werewolf’s hot, thick cock twitch hard between his ass cheeks. More pre-come leaked onto Stiles’s heated skin.

“Stiles—”

“I want it, Derek. Want it so bad, you dunno how fucking bad—”

“Stiles.” Derek opened his eyes. Gazed at him with such raw desire that he was breathless once more. “It’ll hurt. It won’t go down for at least twenty minutes—”

“I want it, Derek. I want you. All of you.” Stiles sucked in a harsh breath, flexing his wrists in Derek’s unrelenting grip. “And I’m a warlock, remember? You think I haven’t figured out how to use my magic for the fun stuff?”

The feeling of his magic lubing him up inside and stretching him would always be somewhat peculiar yet so pleasurable to him. He rarely did this, preferring to use his fingers to open himself up nice and slow, to stroke that mind-blowing spot with his dildo until he came seeing stars explode behind his eyelids. But once in a while, he didn’t want to use his fingers. He would shut his eyes, lie back, convince himself that Derek’s fingers were inside him instead, opening him up so good and deep.

Now, Derek’s finger really was pushing inside him, up to the major knuckle. He breathed out an amused laugh at Derek’s small smile of pleasant surprise. Before he could speak, Derek crooked his finger. It found that mind-blowing spot within seconds, drawing a delighted moan from him, making
him writhe on Derek’s finger. Derek pushed in a second finger, then a third, and they slid in deeper than his own fingers could. His breaths surged hard and fast, in time with the merciless rubbing and thrusting of Derek’s fingers. It felt so good, so fucking good, better than his magic ever did. He rocked down on them. Strained against Derek’s hand around his wrists.

“Stiles, look at you,” Derek murmured. “Look at you. So damn beautiful. And you’re mine.”

Stiles whimpered. He shook his head from side to side, and his hair stuck to his forehead from sweat. His hands became trembling fists. His cock was agonizingly hard.

“Derek, please—” His hips moved on their own volition in frantic circles. “Please—inside me now, fuck, now—”

His mouth opened in a soundless cry as Derek massaged that spot harder. His cock, still curved over his taut belly, spurted a strand of pre-come. Just when he thought he was going to go mad from the extreme pleasure, that he was really going to come, Derek withdrew his fingers. He sucked in searing, shallow breaths. He blinked damp eyes up at Derek.

Derek loomed over him, sheltered him. Derek’s blunt nails scraped up his right ass cheek. Derek gazed down between his legs and so did he, craning his head, seeing Derek position that perfect cock to his hole and oh god, oh fuck, it was big, it was so much bigger than Derek’s fingers combined. Its rounded head pressed against the slick rim. Stiles’s mouth sagged open, and an escalating moan poured from it when the head of Derek’s cock popped in, followed fast by half of its unyielding length.

“Oh, oh, yeah—fuck—yes, yes—”

He dropped his head back on the bed and gasped for air. His toes curled behind Derek’s head. Derek’s hips flexed relentlessly until he felt coarse curls crushed to his perineum, felt so full, felt stretched wider than he’d ever been by anything else. It didn’t hurt at all. He was engulfed in an ecstasy he never thought would be his to experience, to have. Derek pushed everything out of his stunned mind, everything except Derek. Derek, his handsome werewolf, his loyal mate, his everything. Derek. Derek.

Derek’s head was framed by his tense, trembling legs. Derek’s right hand around his wrists was shaking. Derek’s left hand was now pressed flat on the bed under his bent, restrained right arm, and those hazel eyes were round with a scarcely suppressed wildness.

“Stiles.”

“What?” he whispered, almost unable to utter the word from the overwhelming pleasure surging through his folded, pinned body.

“I’m inside you.”

Stiles blinked. He frowned up at his solemn-looking werewolf, parting his swollen lips. It took ages to recall the fraught conversation in the Camaro, after they left the warehouse in Salem, a conversation that seemed to have happened to different men in a different lifetime. When he did, he pursed his lips. Laughter bubbled up his throat, and it burst out of him as a brief guffaw.

“Oh my god, that—” He grinned up at Derek who grinned back. “That really is funnier with your dick inside me.”

He laughed again, but it became a high-pitched moan when his inner muscles tightened around Derek’s cock. “Oh fuck! Goddamned fucking fuck, you’re huge!” He laughed yet again, joyously, and
He tightened even more around Derek, crying out and curling his toes in at Derek’s hips thrusting forward. Derek was as deep as he could go inside him. He felt every single solid inch throbbing hot in him.

“Stiles. Stiles, I have to—”

“Yeah, yeah, Big Guy, move—fuck me, _fuck me_—”

He sank his teeth into his lower lip as Derek withdrew until the head of his cock almost popped out. He panted as Derek pushed inside in one long glide, his breaths ending in shrill, weak whines. Then Derek started to really move, to thrust in and out, and his werewolf was _not_ holding back.

Derek’s hand around his wrists stopped him from skidding up the dark red sheets. Stiles’s entire body shook with the impact and the exhilarating shock of pleasure of each mighty thrust. He cried out with each one, his arms straining against Derek’s grip, his hyperactive mind dazed out of all higher thought. He bore down hard on each thrust. All he could focus on were the aggressive sensations of Derek plunging in and out of him, the scorching, sticking areas where their skin met. He struggled to keep his eyes open: he had to look at Derek, to _see_ Derek without anything between them, to know Derek like no one else had before and ever would.

“Derek,” he moaned, like he might truly die if he couldn’t get closer to his werewolf mate than he already was. “Fuck, you’re so—so _deep_ inside me. So good I’m gonna die.”

Derek stared down at him with such ardor, such reverence. Derek’s forehead was shiny with sweat, and his dark hair coiled with it at the temples.

“I won’t let you,” Derek said. “Remember? I won’t let you die.”

He strained once more at Derek’s grip around his wrists. Derek loosened it, letting him raise his shaking right hand to clutch Derek’s nape. Derek leaned down a little more. The shift in Derek’s position caused Derek’s cock to pound that mind-blowing, sweet spot inside him with each stroke.

“Oh! Oh fuck, there—” Stiles wiggled his hips, grinding down on Derek. “Yeah, _right there_!”

Excruciating pleasure lit up the nerves of his overpowered body. His vision went fuzzy along the edges. His cock was dark red and leaking copious pre-come on his belly, untouched and yet on the cusp of spurting. He was already close, so close, but he didn’t want to come. He didn’t want this to ever end. He wanted Derek deep inside him, in the refuge of his body and his magic, for eternity.

“Stiles,” Derek growled, and god, Derek’s fangs were dropping. Instead of being frightened, Stiles quaked with even more lust and love for his werewolf mate. “My knot, it’s—”

Stiles could feel it, feel it bumping the rim of his burning, stretched hole. It felt enormous, and it was still swelling, and Stiles had to feel it inside him now, _now now now_—

“Please. Please, Derek. Give—give it to me. I _need_ you.”

His legs slipped off Derek’s shoulders. They fell wide open, allowing Derek to bend down and nuzzle his exposed throat. He scored his nails down Derek’s rippling back. He grabbed Derek’s ass to pull Derek in. Derek slammed into him again and again, driving the knot harder and harder against the sweet soreness of his hole. He dug his fingers into the bunching muscles of Derek’s ass. He met each downward thrust with a rapturous cry.

“Yeah, _yeah_, that’s it—c’mon, _give it to me_—oh! Oh yeah, _oh yeah_—”
“Stiles, fuck, fuck—”

Derek’s rhythm went erratic as his thrusts intensified. Derek’s knot slammed against him again, then another time. Then, Derek reared up onto his hands over Stiles. With a daunting roar, fangs fully out, Derek rammed his cock in to the hilt, shoving his knot past the rim of Stiles’s raw hole. It swelled even more, locking Derek deep inside Stiles.

Stiles was ready for the pain of the additional stretch. What blasted him away was the direct, immense pressure on that sweet spot, making his orgasm billow up and out of his control. His cock spurted ropes of come on his heaving belly and chest. His inner muscles clenched hard around Derek’s knot and cock. His head snapped back on the bed, and his mouth opened in a long, silent scream as molten waves of pure pleasure blazed outward from his lower belly through his convulsing body. Derek was nuzzling his neck again, pressing the blunt sides of those lethal fangs to his hammering pulse, and more tremors rocked his body.

It was, hands down, the most awesome orgasm he’d experienced in his whole fucking life. And of course, it had to be because of Derek Hale, with Derek Hale. They were fated to be, from the moment they met. They were and would always be one.

Derek was still coming inside him as he gradually returned to himself, his arms somehow still clutching Derek’s hunched torso, his legs still spread wide. Sweat rolled down his temples. He fought to regain control over his irregular breathing. Shivers still ran through his limp, sated body. He was completely, utterly, totally wrecked, and it was beyond his intoxicated mind to describe how incredible, how unique this state of being was to him. Derek’s weight rested on the back of his thighs. Derek whined into the side of his neck, jerked with each forceful spurt of come inside him.

“Derek.”

He wrapped arms that still trembled around Derek and tugged him closer. He didn’t need werewolf senses to feel Derek’s thundering heartbeat against his. He kissed Derek’s stubbly cheek. Smiled and moaned low with gratification into it. Derek’s knot was still pressed against his prostate.

“Derek,” he rasped again, and his voice quavered with all the feelings he had in him for this gorgeous man in his embrace.

Derek collapsed on him after one final spurt, crashing their mouths together in a passionate kiss. Those solid, sturdy arms slid under his arms, his back and crushed him in a hug. He clung back, caressing the triskele on Derek’s back, tracing it with his fingertips.

“Are you in pain?” Derek said into his lips, voice hoarse.

Stiles kissed him again, so slow and wet. He luxuriated in the pull in his muscles, in the throbbing heat of Derek’s cock and knot, in the fullness from Derek’s abundant come. They were going to be tied for many more minutes, and he intended to indulge in every second of it.


Derek’s shoulders shook with mirth. Derek shifted up onto his elbows and gazed down at him. He brushed his fingers along Derek’s bearded jaw. If he’d been with anyone else, he would have felt self-conscious under that fierce stare that studied his face from forehead to chin. He would have wondered whether the other person thought his moles were unattractive, or whether his nose was too big. He would have begun doubting himself again. Doubting that he was good enough for anyone.

But Derek wasn’t just anyone else. Derek loved his face. Derek loved all his faces.
“You had girlfriends in college,” Derek said. “Were there other men?”

Stiles should have felt some surprise at the question, but he didn’t. Not a modicum of it. Some part of him had been waiting for it since they talked in the Camaro on the journey back to Beacon Hills.

He stared up at Derek with soft, unguarded eyes, and replied, “No. You’re the only guy I’ve ever been with.” His throat worked in a long swallow. “You’re—you’re the only person I’ve really been in love with. Ever.”

This up-close, it was impossible for Derek to mask the blatant pride, the jubilation, the possessiveness in those hazel eyes. Stiles understood that this was a werewolf thing, to desire their mate to be theirs alone for all their life together. He didn’t fear Derek’s possessiveness. He rejoiced in it. He treasured it. He was equally possessive of Derek.

“It was easy to lie to myself, with my exes,” he murmured. “My brain didn’t—compare their bodies to you. They were all women. They were all so different from you, and sometimes, I—I almost managed to not see you instead of them in my mind. But then the little things got me—” He rolled his eyes in self-deprecation. “And the kinda big things.”

“Like what?” Derek asked, and oh, there went those murder brows, already anticipating his answer.

Stiles sighed, then muttered, “Like, finding your girlfriend in bed with another guy. After she texted you to say that she really cared about you.” When Derek let out a displeased, reverberating growl at that, he hastily said, “But it was a good thing it happened! Although, yeah, it didn’t feel like it at the time.”

He carded his fingers through the hair above Derek’s left ear.

“The truth was, they didn’t love me, but I didn’t love them either. They knew that. They did me a favor by leaving. By giving me the chance and time to know what I really wanted.” He gave his werewolf a fond smile. “I never went after another guy. It didn’t even occur to me. And why would it?” His voice went husky. “I would know he wasn’t you. How can anyone compare to you?”

Derek’s glower waned into an intense stare with glistening eyes. Derek pressed the pad of a thumb on Stiles’s lower lip. Stroked it from one end of his mouth to the other.

“There you go, stealing the words from my mouth again.”

Stiles’s throat worked a second time in a long, prickling swallow. “I’m your first guy?”

“My first man. And the only person I’ve really been in love with. Ever.”

This up-close, he knew it was impossible to conceal the way his eyes burned and brimmed. His oxytocin-addled brain couldn’t process the magnitude of Derek’s quiet declaration, not yet, but his soaring heart already did. Derek didn’t point out the wetness over his eyes, or his wavering smile that was no less sincere for it.

Derek stroked his warm cheek with the back of his fingers, and said, “Hi.”

It was the last thing Stiles expected Derek to say, and his smile fortified, his eyes blinked clear and crinkled.

“Hi,” he rasped. “You come here often?”

Derek glanced upward in an exaggerated expression of serious contemplation.
“Mm, most nights, yes. Alone. Although—” Derek gazed down at him again, deadpan. “I got a good feeling that’s no longer the case. Don’t you?”

Stiles arranged his features into a deadpan expression as well. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure I’ll be coming here with you often, from now on.”

Derek was the first to crack up into a chortle, leaning down to touch his forehead to Stiles’s. Stiles joined him, but his laughter was interspersed with moans whenever his inner muscles instinctively clenched around Derek’s still hard cock and bulging knot.

“Oh my god, stop laughing,” he begged, and Derek shook even more with mirth, burying that handsome face in the juncture between his neck and shoulder. “Stop it! It’s making you feel fucking massive inside me! Stooop iiiiiit!”

He punched Derek on the shoulder. Derek bit him with blunt teeth on his right shoulder. Their laughter resounded in their bedroom, saturating its walls and the memories of its two bonded occupants.

After Derek’s knot subsided, after they cleaned up in the en suite bathroom—which was a fun activity for Stiles who had to sit on the toilet to deal with Derek’s tons of come dribbling out of him while a red-faced Derek tried not to snicker—they snuggled under fresh sheets, facing each other in the cozy dimness.

“Stiles.”


Derek pressed their foreheads together. Grasped the back of his neck.

“Told you we’d be amazing together,” Derek whispered, and he shut his eyes, kissed Derek on those soft, dark pink lips, and smiled too.
Chapter Notes

Soundtrack: Olafur Arnalds - The Apple of My Eye.

(Hoo boy, this chapter was originally 5000+ words shorter. Apparently, the Sterek feels demanded to be written by the ship-loads, and so did pack feels, and Sheriff Stilinski feels as the cherry on top.)

Stiles hadn’t known what his first name meant until he was thirteen. Mom was dead by then, but her presence still haunted the hallways of home, of Stiles’s soul. He’d been boiling with rage and sorrow, hounded by the mocking laughter of other students after the new English teacher couldn’t pronounce his first name and spelled it out.

Freak name for a freak, right?

Is that even a real word? It’s a bunch of nonsense letters!

Betcha can’t even say it, Stilinski.

He’d said it fine. Pronounced it like Mom had. Like babcia had, like any fluent Polish speaker would, and they snickered anyway, accusing him of making it up.

Your mom must have really hated you, to give you a name like that.

Something in him had snapped like a log under the foot of a gigantic beast. The muscles in his arms and shoulders tautened. He pulsated with volatile energy snarling to be unleashed. His vision went blood-red.

That fucker’s face had been sprayed blood-red too, after Stiles smashed his fist into it and kept on pummeling the cowering, shrieking loser to the classroom floor until multiple hands hauled him away. It took the brawny, hairy arm of a security guard around his neck to make him stop fighting, stop roaring like a mad animal.

The same choking arm around his neck had dragged him all the way to the principal’s office, and boy, oh boy, did Dad have a field day in said office after that. Dad, in his first year of being sheriff, had threatened to sue the living shit out of the school for the developing bruises around Stiles’s neck. When Principal Davis told Dad that his son had beaten up another student over his first name, Dad was apoplectic. At the other student.

Even Stiles, enraged as he’d been hours earlier, was taken aback by his father’s simmering ire. When Dad was truly angry, he wasn’t the kind of guy who threw things at the wall or screamed someone deaf with vulgarities. He was the kind of guy who stood in place like the eye of a cataclysmic storm, who could hack a man down to a pathetic speck with the force of his glare. The other boy, sniffing through his bloated, bruised nose, stared at the floor, unable to look Dad in the eye when Dad very calmly said that his recently buried wife had bestowed that name upon their sole child out of love.

Ms. Patel, a nurse in the school clinic, had examined Stiles’s bruised neck and knuckles. Gave Dad some kind of arnica cream for the bruises. Stiles managed a semblance of a smile when she handed
him a strawberry-flavored lollipop.

Stiles had been suspended for a week. He hadn’t given a fuck. The other student got nothing more than a smack on the hand, and he hadn’t given a fuck about that either. Life was unfair, blah blah blah. Same old, same old. Getting thrashed by Mieczysław “Stiles” Stilinski and having the whole school know it was probably punishment in itself for the guy.

Dad escorted him out of the school with one firm hand on his shoulder. They didn’t speak on the somber drive home in Dad’s cruiser. Stiles had braced himself for a tongue-lashing of stupendous scale about the disgrace of inflicting violence on other people, and how poorly it was going to reflect on Dad’s new role as sheriff.

Instead, Dad had treated the bruises on his neck with the cream. Hugged him, told him to go to his bedroom and rest.

And Stiles had blurted out, “Why did Mom gimme that name? Everyone makes fun of me for it! I hate it!”

Dad had gazed at him with such weary, commiserative eyes. Dad grasped the sides of his head with callused, gentle hands, and said, “Do you know what your name means?”

“No,” he mumbled, gazing up at his father.

“Your mom told me that it’s a Slavic name of Polish origin. A combination of the Polish words for fame, glory and sword.” Dad stroked his head from its shaved crown to his nape. “Do you know why your mom gave you that name?”

Stiles shook his head, still gazing up at Dad. Dad’s eyes had that glimmer Stiles would see in his own in the mirror, whenever he thought about Mom, remembered all over again that she was gone forever, and was battered by a tsunami of agony.

“We were still in the hospital, after she gave birth to you. She was holding you in her arms. Looking at you. She told me that she could see your future in your eyes. That one day, you’re going to be powerful. That you’re going to be a glorious hero who saves many lives. And I believe her.” Dad smiled at him. It was a kind, small smile that wrenched down the walls of that delicate dam inside Stiles. “She wanted you to have a name that was worthy of you, son.”

Dad had hugged him again, tightly. Told him there was a pizza in the fridge for dinner, and to rest in bed, and not play games on his laptop for too long. He’d trudged up the stairs to his bedroom while Dad watched from below. He’d shut the door. Stumbled over to his bed and curled up into a fetal position around his pillow. Listened to the cruiser starting up, driving away.

He’d cried his goddamn eyes out for hours after that. No one was around to hear him sob like the baby he’d once been, the baby his mother had such infallible faith in. He’d abhorred himself like never before, sick to the core that he had hated this gift from Mom, who had loved him so much to the tragic end of her life.

He’d stayed in bed through the night and into the morning. He lost track of time after that, huddled under the blankets, his face hidden in his pillow. He stewed in a hell of his own making. At one point, he heard Dad saying his name, pressing a hand to his forehead. He tried to tell Dad to leave him alone, to let him disappear into the eternal darkness, but his mouth wouldn’t work. He was burning. Everything was burning.

He slept, maybe, for a very long time.
He blinked, then heard Dad talking on his mobile phone.

“If you can—okay. Yes, please come as soon as you can. I think he has a fever. He won’t respond to me—Yeah, not even to drink water.” Dad paused, then murmured, “Okay. Thanks, Melissa. Thank you.”

Dad’s voice grew fainter and fainter. Stiles shut his eyes. After a millennia, a smaller, softer hand touched his forehead.

“Mom, is Stiles gonna be okay?”

“He’s gonna be fine, honey. He just needs some medicine and rest.”

“Can I stay here with him? I can do my homework here.”

“Oh, Scott. You have your inhaler? Okay, I have to talk to Stiles’s dad.”

He could hear Dad and Mrs. McCall chatting outside his bedroom. A lean, growing body made the bed dip as it laid itself next to him.

“Hey, Stiles.”

Stiles peeled sore eyes open. He peered over the folds of his blankets, and saw Scott with his hands tucked under his head, facing him.

“In the canteen today? I stuck my foot out and made that loser trip on his ugly face. Now he has two black eyes.” He didn’t know what showed on his face, but it made Scott give him a small, fond smile. The smile gave way to a concerned frown. “Are you okay?”

Stiles considered the question for a while. Scott was the only person to whom he’d told his first name. The only person who hadn’t ridiculed it, who’d asked him, So, why do you not like it? And he’d said—

“I don’t know.”

Scott gave him that small, fond smile again.

“That’s okay. Things will get better. They’re all just dumbasses who dunno how to appreciate cool things.”

Stiles had stared at Scott. He’d let Scott press a consoling hand on the top of his shaved head, and thought about Mom. Thought about the way she could say his first name without her tongue tripping, about the fact that there was no one in his life who could say it fluently like her anymore, and he’d been—glad. Mom had bestowed this name upon him. Mom was the only person who he could bear to utter it.

In the thirteen years since that day, at his insistence, no one had spelled out his first name, much less uttered it. Everyone, including Dad, had called him Stiles.

Until that night in that warehouse in Salem, Oregon. That night, when he’d encountered his alternate self from an alternate universe who also had a Slavic name of Polish origin. When Przemysław had said his first name, he’d been in no state of mind to process it. When Mom—or was it the magical projection of Mom that his augmented magic had inadvertently created?—had said his first name at Derek’s graveside, he’d been in no state of mind to process it either.
So, hearing a stranger’s voice say his first name after he woke up alone in bed, with no Derek in sight? Hearing it from the en suite bathroom?

That was some kind of mindfuck to experience first thing in the morning.

He remained huddled beneath the beige sheets, maintaining his slow breathing, his steady heartbeat. Instinct stopped him from speaking, from calling for Derek. His third-eye didn’t perceive any magical threat. It sensed Derek’s presence in the en suite bathroom, and only Derek. Who was the stranger saying his first name?

Oh, there it was again, enunciated by that gravelly, male voice that sounded—kind of weird. It had a robotic, tinny aspect to it. As if it was—oh, it was a sound clip being played through a speaker. Probably through Derek’s phone. What was Derek doing listening to some random voice saying his first name?

The answer struck him like a bolt of lightning from the heavens when he heard his first name being enunciated once more.

“Mieczysław.”

It wasn’t the sound clip that said it this time. It was—Derek. Derek, saying it with accuracy, with care. Saying it like Mom and babcia had, like Przemysław had.

The sound clip played again.

“Mieczysław,” Derek enunciated in its wake.

Derek saying his name, a single word, shouldn’t have caused his eyes to well up hot and wet like a baby’s. But they did, and he had to grit his teeth, to clench his hands into fists and push one of them on his compressed lips to stay silent, to not bawl like a baby too. He didn’t know why Derek was learning to pronounce his first name. It flipped his whole world on its axis. It excised from him years of misery at being burdened with such a name, years of self-loathing after discovering the honor it actually was.

Listening to Derek saying his first name so fluently, so flawlessly, meant having the privilege of listening to his first name being said by someone who loved him, again.

He squashed his streaked face in his pillow and wiped it dry. He stretched his legs down the bed, rustling the sheets. He sucked in a noisy breath. Made sure his hand banged on the cushioned headboard of the bed.

The sound clip paused halfway through. He heard the sink turn on, heard Derek washing his hands. Then the sink shut off. The half-closed bathroom door swung open.

“Hey, sleepyhead. Sorry, did I wake you up?”

Derek was dressed in a blue-gray henley with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and light blue jeans. His hair was already gelled up, his gorgeous face flushed and tender as he gazed at Stiles. Stiles made a show of struggling onto his elbows. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. He ran the fingers of his right hand through his rumpled hair.

“Nah,” he rasped. “What were you doing in there?”

Derek walked over to the bed, and bent down to kiss him on the crown of his head.
“Nothing. Just getting ready. I gotta go down to the workshop for a while.”

Stiles sat up on the bed. The sheets skimmed down to his bare hips. He reached up with both hands for Derek who bent down again to kiss him on the lips. He didn’t call Derek out on the lie, but then again, he wasn’t certain if he could handle hearing his first name from Derek’s mouth while Derek stared at him with those stunning eyes. Those incisive eyes that saw so much of him no one else could.

“I’ll buy back lunch. Okay?”

Stiles dragged Derek’s head down by the nape to kiss his werewolf again. A month since moving in with Derek, and every kiss, every touch still felt new and thrilling: Derek’s hands roaming the arched expanse of his back. Derek’s fingers tracing his numerous scars, and embracing each one as part of his motley landscape. Derek’s parted lips brushing his, reshaping them with murmured endearments, with pleasure. Derek’s pulse under his palm, too thunderous to be denied, too obdurate to be silenced.

“Get me lotsa curly fries.”

“Nope. Chicken avocado salad for you today.” Derek smirked when he glowered and stuck out his lower lip. “Don’t even bother with the puppy eyes. You promised your dad you’d do Salad Fridays with him. This is your own fault.”

“Deereeeeeeek—”

“At least yours has meat in it—”

“I don’t want meat! I want curly fries!” Stiles gasped, then grabbed Derek’s shoulders and shook them. “I know, I know! Get me a curly fries salad.”

Derek tossed that full head of dark hair back and squeezed his eyes shut with his contagious peal of laughter. Stiles laughed with him, smacking his uncooperative werewolf hard on the arm.

“Yes!”

“No, Stiles!”

“Yes! A curly fries salad! With mustard-bbq sauce!”

“No!” Derek exclaimed, letting out another gleeful peal of laughter, grabbing Stiles’s shoulders and playfully shaking him in return. “Chicken avocado salad, Stiles! Don’t make me get you the asparagus-macaroni meatloaf from that terrible vegetarian place instead.”

Stiles made retching noises. “Uuugggh! No! I wouldn’t inflict that on Dad!” Stiles stiffened in Derek’s grip. His eyes widened, then blinked. “Actually, come to think of it, it is healthier than the mac-and-cheese from—”

Derek’s lips stole the rest of the words from his mouth. Derek’s shoulders trembled with lingering mirth, and so did his, and he smiled up at Derek after they reluctantly separated their mouths again.

“I’ll be back with lunch,” Derek murmured, stroking the apple of his cheek with a thumb. “See you later.”

“Okay,” he murmured back, already missing his werewolf mate before their hands left each other’s bodies.
After a quick breakfast of coffee and pop tarts, in a white t-shirt and jeans, Stiles sat cross-legged on a cushion on the floor in front of the coffee table, resuming paid translation work on some spell books for Deaton. He messaged Lydia from time to time for assistance with the Archaic Latin in a tome that was over six inches thick. It had a dark brown leather jacket he was quite sure had begun its existence as the tattooed skin of a man, if the four-headed dragon in faded black ink on its front was any indication. He did not want to know why Deaton seemed to have a thing for anthropodermic spell books.

True to his promise, Derek returned to the apartment before noon, carrying two black plastic storage tubes under his left arm and two white plastic bags crammed with containers. Derek usually kept his drawings in those tubes.

Stiles made a face at the chicken avocado salad in the round plastic container Derek served him. Derek—the evil, pitiless anti-curly fries despot—stared at him with an impassive face and twinkling eyes until he rolled his eyes and accepted the salad with a caveman-like grunt for a thank you.

“Good boy,” Derek said, patting the crown of his head twice while sitting down on the black leather couch with his own chicken avocado salad.

His snapping teeth missed his cackling werewolf’s fingers by an inch.

After lunch, Derek carried the two black plastic storage tubes and one of the white plastic bags to the coffee table. Derek set aside the white plastic bag and the bucket-like container in it, out of Stiles’s sight. Stiles stacked the spell books on the floor next to the coffee table, and watched Derek open the tubes to pull out what appeared to be blueprints printed in black on white paper.

“Stiles, I want you to take a look at these. Tell me what you think.”

Stiles gave Derek a curious glance, but Derek was gazing down at the spread blueprints, sitting next to him on the couch. The fingers of Derek’s hands were criss-crossing so hard that his knuckles were pale. What the hell were these blueprints about, that Derek would be this nervous?

With a furrowed brow, Stiles sat forward and scrutinized the blueprints. He pulled the top one closer to him. It was a blueprint of—the first story of a house. The essential rooms were labeled in handwritten capital letters in black ink.

There was a three-car garage, a living room facing the front yard, a kitchen in the back. A bathroom, and laundry room. A dining room attached to the kitchen via a hallway, next to the garage. In the rectangle of the dining room, Derek had written: pack size. In the square of the kitchen, Derek had written: big windows for fresh air and sunlight. Behind the house, an expansive patio. In the angular, black outline of the patio, Derek had written: red brick, herringbone. Next to the squares that represented patio furniture, Derek had written: wicker, teal cushions.

Stiles’s eyes strayed back to the interior rooms of the house. There was a sizable library, too, which was connected to the living room by a door. In its black borders, Derek had written: Stiles’s library / study.

“I’m still not sure whether to make it a two-car or three-car garage,” Derek said, pressing the tip of a forefinger on the box that represented the garage. “We got the Camaro. But I think we should get a second car. An SUV like Scott’s—hm, might be a bit too much, but who knows, we may need it.”

Stiles didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. His throat was clogged by a lump the size of a giant sequoia tree. He had to blink multiple times to clear his burning eyes.
“And—here, instead of a pool, I thought maybe you’d prefer to have a small greenhouse. To grow your herbs.” Derek traced the border of the patio next to the squares of furniture. “And maybe here, we could plant a row of ceanothus shrubs to make a wall of flowers. Like the ones your mom planted at your childhood home.”

Stiles breathed, and breathed. His hands clenched on his lap was all that prevented him from bursting into an embarrassing personification of baby-like bawls and wails.

“Stiles,” Derek murmured.

Of course, that had to be the moment Derek slid off the couch and kneeled down on one knee in front of him. Derek grasped his fists. Unfurled his trembling hands to hold them in those adroit, large ones. Kissed the top of his right hand, then his left one.

“There’s no time like now. Is there?”

And then, Stiles knew. He knew why Derek had been learning to say his first name so fluently, so flawlessly.

“I’m—everyone knows I’m—not good with words. I spent days searching the internet for the words that would be worthy of you, of this.” Derek smiled wryly at himself. Bowed his head, then raised it again to look Stiles in the eye. “Then I realized, nothing that anyone else had already said or written could ever be worthy enough of you. Not when no one else knows you like I do. When no one else has the privilege to be loved by you like I do, the privilege to love you as much as I do.”

Stiles squeezed Derek’s hands with both of his own. If they had been ordinary hands, they would be crackling with pain. But Derek didn’t draw away. He held onto Stiles as much.

Derek was his anchor. He was Derek’s anchor. They had always been, from the day they met.

“You and I know the kinda guy I’d been when we first knew each other. I was—really messed up.”

Stiles blinked hard, and rasped, “It was for a justified reason, Derek. What you went through—nobody deserved to go through that. Least of all you.”

That devastating, small smile emerged on Derek’s face, and it brought more burning wetness to Stiles’s eyes. He knew Derek still blamed himself for The Fire, for giving her the opportunity to set it in the first place. He knew Derek still hated himself, long after she’d been hunted down and slaughtered by her own hunter relatives for turning into a were-jaguar in Mexico.

“Doesn’t change the fact that I was a total asshole with a cool leather jacket and debonair hair, though.” Stiles chuckled quietly with Derek. They intertwined their fingers. “I was—not kind to you, and I’m sorry for that. You were right: I should have used my words, instead of using you as a punching bag.”

Stiles gave Derek a small, wry smile of his own. This was far from the first time Derek had apologized for his past behavior, but it didn’t mean any less to Stiles.

“There was a time—after the kanima, after the Alpha pack—that I thought about leaving Beacon Hills again. Leaving everything behind. For good. I tried to imagine a life, a future without you. So I could—let you go. For your sake. So you could live your own life, free of—abominations, and assholes like me.” Stiles’s hands spasmed around Derek’s, and Derek said, “But I couldn’t. I imagined an existence without you, and all I could see was—a never-ending darkness. A cold and dark world without its sun. So I stayed. Your light reached me through the cracks between the broken pieces of me. And I lived on, because of you.”
Stiles blinked hard again. A rivulet of hot salt rolled down his left cheek. Another rolled down his right cheek. He gazed into Derek’s crinkled, hazel eyes, and they were also brimming.

“I really don’t deserve you. I don’t. But somehow, this universe had destined for me to be your mate, and for you to be mine. And I’m gonna do everything I can to be worthy of you,” Derek rasped. “Mieczysław ‘Stiles’ Stilinski, will you marry me? Live with me in our home in the Preserve? Stay with me for life?”

Stiles’s lips quivered into a wide, unconquerable smile. His first name flowed from Derek’s mouth like an elixir that rejuvenated him, that made him feel like the glorious hero Mom had believed he would become.

“Yes,” he whispered fervently. Then he said, louder, firmer, “Fuck yeah, I will marry you, Derek Hale, and live with you in our awesome home in the Preserve, and stay with you. For life. Beyond death. For all time.”

Derek’s wide smile quivered too. Derek raised his left hand to kiss it, then again. Stiles swiped a hand across his own cheeks, then reached out to brush his fingers across Derek’s damp, flushed cheeks.

Stiles arranged his features into a stern expression, then said, “On one condition.”

Derek’s expression immediately became solemn. His spine straightened, his shoulders squared, ever the warrior prepared to win the battle.

“Name it, my beloved mate.”

“As my husband,” Stiles said, straight-faced, “you must never, ever deny me curly fries again.”

Derek threw his head back in unbridled laughter, his eyes scrunched up from his mirth. Stiles cracked up into equally euphoric laughter, rocking back and forth from his own mirth, clinging onto Derek’s hand with his left, swiping again at his own face with his right.

After they calmed down, Derek said, “Close your eyes.”

Stiles obeyed, and let Derek position his hands so that they were palms up in front of him at waist level. He smiled to himself as he listened to the rustling of a plastic bag, to something large being removed from the plastic bag. He frowned with curiosity when a round cardboard container was placed on his hands. It was full, and slightly warm to the touch.

Then Derek peeled off its plastic cover. The delicious, salty scent of its contents wafted up to Stiles’s nose. Once more, Stiles was laughing, popping open his eyes to see the packed bucket of curly fries on his lap. Derek was smiling like a smug dumbass at him, and once more, once again, Stiles fell head over heels in mad, perpetual love with his handsome, noble, selfless, unparalleled asshole of a werewolf mate.

“I love you,” Derek said, after they’d kissed and kissed over the bucket of curly fries, “Mieczysław ‘Stiles’ Stilinski-Hale.”

Stiles was tempted to joke about what a mouthful his full name was going to be from today on, but he didn’t. He adored it. Every letter of it. He caressed the side of Derek’s face, his bearded jaw.

“I know,” he replied, deadpan, and Derek gave him that beautiful, bashful grin, that he alone was privileged to bask in.
On Sunday morning, Derek said to Stiles, “Pick the clothes you like best. And put on your Patrick Starfish swimming shorts.”

He didn’t think too much about the requests. They’d discussed several times about going to Mom’s Lake—Derek insisted on that being the name of that small lake that’d been Mom’s favorite place outside of town—since they moved in together, and a Sunday was a fine day to have a picnic and a swim in the bluest waters ever.

“Mom’s Lake?” Stiles asked as he got dressed in a white t-shirt, jeans, his favorite red hoodie, and his black boots. “That’s where we’re going, right?”

Derek had gotten dressed in the en suite bathroom, in a white tank top, light blue jeans, and the black boots Stiles had bought for him years ago. When Derek had worn them to his now former apartment, he’d tumbled headlong into a full-blown panic attack upon seeing them. The last time he’d seen those boots on Derek before that was in that doorless, windowless prison cell. Before that carving knife pierced Derek’s heart.

The sight of them still made his breath hitch in his lungs sometimes. But he was the one who asserted that Derek should wear them, and not throw them away just because of the traumatic memories attached to them. The boots were in decent condition. Stiles bought them for Derek, and they were Derek’s favorite pair, and fuck that dead Nogitsune up its navel with a ten-foot-long barrel cactus if it was going to try robbing him and Derek of anything more.

“Yep. Mom’s Lake.”

“So what are we packing for food and drinks?”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s been sorted out.”

Stiles squinted at Derek as the werewolf removed that sexy leather jacket from its hanger hooked to the closet door and pulled it on. It still had that round hole penetrating its lower left back. Derek didn’t want it fixed: it was proof that the showdown in that warehouse in Salem had happened.

“What do you mean it’s been sorted out?” Stiles’s eyes widened, and he smiled. “Wait, you mean the rest of the pack’s joining us?”

“Uh hm.”

Oh, Derek was giving Deaton a run for his money again with that small, enigmatic smile. Derek was glancing down at his phone and typing on it, angling the screen away from him.

“Derek—”

Derek shoved the phone into the side pocket of his jeans.

“Okay, we gotta go. Now.”

“Why?”

“Now, Stiles.”
“Why? What’s the rush, hm?”

He did his best to stand his ground, his arms crossed over his chest, squinting at Derek again. Without so much as a grunt or a wheeze, Derek bent down, enclosed a muscular arm around his upper thighs and hauled him off his feet into a fireman’s carry over Derek’s right shoulder. He erupted into laughter that was both jubilant and outraged. He smacked Derek on the ass with both hands while Derek carried him to the front door.

“Deeeereeeek! Put me down!”

“Nope.”

Derek carried him down the hallway to the elevator, then out of the apartment building to the Camaro in the parking lot. It was a mercy and a miracle that they didn’t bump into any of their neighbors. Sweet, old Mrs. Reynolds who lived with three black Pomeranians next door to them was totally smitten with Derek, and would always totter over to say hello and compliment Derek on his hair. Stiles was willing to bet real money that she thought Derek’s hair was one of her long-lost Pomeranians that she had to give away in 1996.

Derek lowered him to his feet next to the front passenger door of the Camaro. He huffed. Crossed his arms and squinted at Derek again while Derek strode to the other side of the car. Derek unlocked the car. Opened the driver’s door.

“Get in, you brat,” Derek said, aiming those murder brows at him across the roof of the Camaro. Derek’s hazel eyes twinkled under the mid-morning sunlight.

“Tell me why we’re rushing.”

“No. Get in, or I’m throwing away all your curly fries in the dumpster.”

Stiles gasped, then clutched at his chest with his right hand. “Two days! Two days ago, you swore you would never, ever deny me curly fries again!”

A tremor ran through Derek’s lips. Derek arched a dark, thick eyebrow, and said, “Technically, I’m not your husband yet.”

Derek got behind the wheel of the Camaro, smirking to himself. Stiles stood where he was with his mouth open. Huh—okay, Derek did have a point there. They were werewolf mates, yes, but they weren’t legally married under human law. Not yet.

Stiles obediently climbed into the Camaro.

He didn’t question the route Derek was taking until he realized that they were heading into the Preserve. He gave Derek a sharp glance, but Derek didn’t look at him. Derek stared on through the windshield.

“Derek. This isn’t the way out of town.”

“Nope.”

Derek’s lips quivered for an instant. Derek now had that outward expression of innocence on his stubbled, stupid-beautiful face, and no, sir, it couldn’t even fool the eyeless wolf spider of Kaua’i Cave.

“Stiles. Close your eyes.”
Stiles was tempted, so very tempted to defy the instruction. He was even more tempted to use his magic to suss out where they were headed and what Derek had planned—but he stayed silent. His magic stayed quiescent within him.

He shut his eyes, and relaxed in his seat. He heard Derek’s low hum of approval.

The Camaro charged onward, deeper and deeper into the Preserve.

Stiles’s eyes were still shut when the Camaro slowed to a halt. Derek hadn’t told him he could open his eyes. He felt the back of Derek’s fingers stroke his left cheek, and he smiled softly. He heard the driver’s door open, heard Derek climb out of the car and walk around to his side to open the front passenger door.

“Keep your eyes closed. Hold on to me.”

Derek cupped the crown of his head as he climbed out of the Camaro. Derek gripped his left hand as they ambled away from the car and into the forest. Stiles wasn’t afraid of losing his footing or face-planting: he followed Derek’s footsteps, confident that his werewolf wouldn’t lead him astray. Desiccated leaves crunched beneath his boots. Sunshine warmed his cheeks and forearms that he’d bared after rolling up the sleeves of his hoodie. A breeze swept across his face, conveying the butterscotch scent of pine to his nose.

“Hey, they’re coming!” Stiles heard someone exclaim in the distance. “Get into place!”

Scott. That was Scott.

Stiles walked on for another minute or so. Then, he stumbled to a halt behind Derek. He held onto Derek’s hand. He heard someone clear their throat. He bit his lower lip.

“Stiles, you can open your eyes,” Derek murmured.

Stiles blinked. He stepped out from behind Derek and stood at Derek’s right, gaping at the scene in front of him: the entire pack was here, attired in elegant suits sans ties and vibrant dresses, split into two rows that faced each other with a six-foot gap between them. Scott, in a dark gray suit and a sky blue shirt, stood on the left row, flanked by Isaac, who was in a lighter gray suit and purple shirt, and Kira in an off-shoulder, pink dress. Jackson, in a navy suit and white shirt, stood on the right row with Lydia to his left, celestial in a fitted, white dress with puffy sleeves. Mrs. McCall was also here, standing to Jackson’s right, attired in a flared, floral dress.

Behind Mrs. McCall and Kira was—a wooden arch lavishly decorated with dahlias, hydrangeas, roses, and green foliage. Standing under the arch was Dad, in a dark brown suit with a light blue shirt, his hands held in front of him.

Everyone was smiling at him and Derek. Everyone was here, dressed to the nines, waiting for him and Derek because—

“Oh my god.” Stiles slapped both hands over his mouth, his chest swelling with a swelter of fierce emotions, his eyes stinging. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.”

Good-natured laughter rang through the woods when Stiles swiveled to face Derek and clobbered the grinning werewolf on the chest with both fists. Derek accepted every blow with grace, standing with his arms loose at his sides, his smile brilliant as the sun above them.

“Oh my god, oh my god, you let me dress like this to my own wedding?!”
“Stiles. Stiles, babe, look at me.”

Derek grasped the sides of his head and angled it until they were gazing each other in the eye. Stiles punched him on a bulging bicep for good measure.

“Stiles, this is you,” Derek said, his smile softening, his thumb brushing across the length of Stiles’s lower lip. “You picked these clothes because you like them. Because they’re you. You. And I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

Stiles regained his composure with a sucked-in breath, then another. He tried to glower at Derek, but Derek saw right through his ruse and kept on bestowing that sun-bright, sun-warm smile upon him. He ran his hands down Derek’s chest over the leather jacket in a wordless apology. Derek was so damn gorgeous in this particular combo of clothes, and Derek knew how much it turned him on.

“This is us,” Derek murmured. “And I wouldn’t want us any other way.”

Derek was still smiling when Stiles pressed their foreheads together and then kissed him hard. Derek held his head in place and kissed him back, wetting their lips, making their lips slide together more smoothly.

“Correct me if I’m wrong—especially since I’m the deputy marriage commissioner for the day here —but the kissing happens at the end of the ceremony, right?”

More good-natured laughter rang through the air. Stiles dragged his lips away from Derek’s, and he pressed their foreheads together again, chuckling with his werewolf. Derek clasped his left hand. They walked side by side to their pack, their family, who embraced them in a big group hug: Scott pulled them into his arms with a grin, followed by Kira, then Isaac, then Lydia, Jackson, and Mrs. McCall.

Dad remained standing under the wedding arch, smiling at them, his eyes crinkled. Dad hugged Derek first, giving Derek a pat on the upper back. Stiles wrapped his arms around Dad’s shoulders when it was his turn.

“Mieczysław, my son, my boy,” Dad murmured, and like Mom, like babcia, like Derek, he enunciated Stiles’s first name fluently, flawlessly.

Stiles had to wipe his crumpled face on the sleeve of his hoodie before drawing back to smile at his father again, his throat bobbing. He stepped back until he stood at Derek’s right side once more, intertwining his fingers with his werewolf mate’s. Everyone else gathered behind Stiles and Derek to witness the rest of the ceremony.

“This,” Dad said, raising and spreading his arms, “is apparently the very spot where my son met this big lug of a werewolf over a decade ago.”

Again, good-natured laughter resonated through the air. Stiles straightened up. He glanced around with wide eyes, realizing that his father was right. It’d been cleared of some shrubbery, and there were fewer trees, but yes—this was the very spot where he’d met Derek for the first time, while he and Scott were searching for Scott’s inhaler. They’d been chatting, unaware they’d wandered onto private property until Derek emerged from the forest like the stealthy apex predator he’d been.

The young Stiles who’d met the Derek then would never in a billion years have predicted that he would marry the same man one day, on the very spot where they laid eyes on each other for the first time.

He turned toward Derek. Derek was already gazing at him, his expression at its most tender, most
vulnerable. Stiles raised his right hand to caress the side of Derek’s neck above the collar of the leather jacket, to cup that stubbled jaw.

“And apparently,” he said to everyone, gazing into Derek’s crinkled eyes, “I have asthma to thank for meeting the love of my life.”

Scott laughed the loudest this time, winking at Stiles when he glanced at Scott with a grin. The whole pack knew the story down to the minutiae by now, and so did Dad, and Mrs. McCall.

After the laughter waned back into a serene atmosphere, and Stiles and Derek were facing Dad again, Dad said, “The Preserve has been a part of Beacon Hills for as long as this town has existed. Within its sanctuary, one family had lived in it, and watched over it down the generations, keeping its territory—and its town—safe from supernatural harm: the Hales.”

Derek’s fingers tightened around Stiles’s. Stiles squeezed them in return. Dad gazed at Derek with compassionate eyes that also twinkled.

“I remember the first time I met you, Derek.” Dad’s eyebrows shot up his forehead. “And no, I’m not talking about the time I threw you into the back of my cruiser as a potential murder suspect.”

The amused laughter this time was interspersed with sympathetic noises from Scott, and snickering from Jackson and Isaac. Stiles grimaced and leaned his head on Derek’s shoulder in an apology he’d already given to Derek ages ago. Derek, to his credit, gave Dad a poised nod of understanding, and stroked Stiles’s hand with a thumb.

“No, the first time I met Derek was at the Hale house—which, if I’m not wrong, was about an eight-minute walk or so from here?” Derek nodded, and Dad said, “Yes, the Hale house. You were about seven years old. And Stiles was a year old.” Dad’s lips curled up in a gentle smile at Derek and Stiles. “Your mothers knew each other. They were good friends for many years.”

Stiles glanced at Derek with round eyes. Derek’s eyes were equally round with surprise. Their moms knew each other? And they were good friends? Did that mean—he and Derek had met each other before that fated day over a decade ago, and simply didn’t recall it?

“Now, I don’t know for sure if my late wife had ever brought Stiles to the Hale house. But—” Dad raised two fingers into the air. “There were two things that I remember, when I met Derek for the first time. One: my wife could not stop cooing over how damn cute he was with his bunny teeth.”

Once more, amused laughter erupted from behind Stiles and Derek. Derek blushed, his lips quirked up in a bashful smile. Stiles grinned at his still so very cute werewolf.

“Two: after she and I left the Hale house, my wife told me something about Derek that has stayed with me to this day.” Dad and Derek gazed at each other. “She said to me, ‘That boy is Talia Hale’s son. But one day, Noah, that boy is going to be your son too.’”

Mom’s words struck Stiles in the chest like a swinging sledgehammer. His fingers spasmed around Derek’s. He blinked his stinging eyes hard, then glanced at Derek. Derek’s face had gone blank. But Derek’s fingers were clenching around his.

“I never understood what she meant. Not until today.” Dad gazed at Derek with compassionate eyes again. “I remember your family, Derek. I remember your mother, Talia, and your father, Robert. I remember your siblings: Laura, Cora. Paul, Benjamin, and Thomas. Your uncle, Peter, and his wife, Marjorie. And I knew them well enough to know this: they would have been so proud of you today. So proud of the fine, strong man you have become.”
It should have felt jarring to hear Peter Hale’s name in this moment, but all Stiles felt was—sadness for the dead werewolf. It was easy to be angry at Peter for killing Laura, his own niece. For biting Scott and taking his humanity from him by force. For hurting Lydia. For hurting Derek so much. But long ago, before The Fire, Peter was just another Hale werewolf. Just another man who’d been happily married, who’d looked forward to becoming a father. A man who had lost his everything in The Fire. A man the world had broken, and never recovered.

Derek’s face was still blank. His hazel eyes glistened as they stared on at Dad.

“I also remember the fact that my son, my only child, is alive and standing here because of you. I don’t know much about werewolf biology and culture, but I know that your sacrifice of your Alpha power to save Stiles was one hell of a big deal. The kind of deal that a man deeply, madly, truly in love would make for the love of his life.” Dad gave them both that gentle smile again. “Believe me, I know a thing or two about that.”

Behind Stiles, someone sniffed wetly, and he didn’t need to glance back to know it was his giant marshmallow of a werewolf best friend. Dad looked at Derek once more, and this time, his gaze was forceful although no less kind.

“Do you, Derek Hale, take my son Mieczysław ‘Stiles’ Stilinski to be your husband, to cherish him in friendship and in love for as long as you both shall live? To trust him, honor him, love him faithfully with all your heart, in sickness and in health, in strength and in weakness, through whatever may come?”

Derek’s gaze at Dad was fiery and resolute.

“Sir, death itself tried to stop me from doing all that for your son. And it failed.”

Stiles smiled like a complete dumbass even as his eyes spilled rivulets of happiness. He blinked his eyes clear, and he saw Dad blinking too, giving Derek a look of sincere admiration. Behind him and Derek, he heard another loud, wet sniffle. The beeps of phone cameras snapping photos.

“That it did, son,” Dad said.

Derek turned to face Stiles. Derek’s eyes brimmed, but without doubt, Derek saw him, all of him, and loved him. Derek grasped his other hand as well.

“Yes, I do take Mieczysław ‘Stiles’ Stilinski to be my husband, my mate. For life. Beyond death. For all time.”

“And do you, Mieczysław ‘Stiles’ Stilinski, take this big lug of a werewolf Derek Hale to be your husband, to cherish him in friendship and in love for as long as you both shall live? To trust him, honor him, love him faithfully with all your heart, in sickness and in health, in strength and in weakness, through whatever may come?”

Stiles gazed into those stunning, wet hazel eyes. He intertwined their fingers again. What could he say as a worthy vow in return, after Derek’s exceptional one?

“No matter where we end up,” he rasped, “in heaven or in hell or some other universe, I will always choose to live on. I will always choose you.”

He knew Derek had heard the vow within the vow, his promise that he would never again attempt suicide, from the way Derek’s eyes reddened, from Derek squeezing his fingers.

“And yeah, hell yeah, I do take Derek Hale to be my husband, my mate. For life. Beyond death. For
Derek released Stiles’s hands to reach into the inner pocket of his leather jacket. He withdrew a red, round velvet ring box from it. In the box were two wide platinum rings, each engraved with the triskelie identical to the one on Derek’s back.

Derek plucked out the smaller ring of the two. He held Stiles’s left hand, and slid the ring onto its fourth finger. For one overwrought moment, Stiles worried that his fingers had become too skinny after all the physical trauma he underwent, that the ring would be too loose, and cause embarrassment for Derek—

The ring fitted perfectly around his finger. It was just a piece of metal, he knew that, but that didn’t stop his sore eyes from welling up again. Now he knew precisely what Derek had meant about wanting a physical object to show the world that they belonged to each other: this ring was something real, something he could touch and feel. This ring came from Derek, and was therefore a part of Derek. A part of Derek that he could carry with him wherever he went.

It was the closest alternative he had to carrying Derek’s soul inside him.

“Derek, it’s freaking beautiful,” he choked out, holding up his left hand for everyone to view the ring—his wedding ring. “It’s—it’s you.”

Derek understood. An elated smile expanded across Derek’s face while Stiles slid the bigger ring onto Derek’s finger. Derek stretched his fingers then clenched his hand into a fist to test the ring’s cast. It also fitted perfectly.

“I think you two know what to do next,” Dad said, deadpan.

Scott led the applause with a joyous howl while Stiles and Derek embraced then kissed each other gently. Isaac and Jackson joined him, and soon, their ebullient howls reverberated across the Preserve. Derek, grasping onto Stiles’s waist, stepped back and flung his head back to let out an almighty, triumphant howl of his own. Stiles hopped and laughed with exhilaration at the rare display of unfettered werewolf behavior in celebration. He threw his own head back, and let loose a howl that was higher in pitch than Derek’s.

Stiles could hear everyone clapping and cheering in the background, but all he saw was Derek staring at him with such affection and veneration, as if he was all that existed in his werewolf’s universe. He leaned forward to rub their foreheads together. He felt Derek’s arms wrap around his waist. He pressed his left hand flat on Derek’s chest. His wedding ring shimmered in the sunlight.

“I love you, Derek Stilinski-Hale,” he declared into Derek’s enduring smile. “More than all the curly fries in the world.”

§§§§§§

Three days after moving in with Derek, Stiles had painted one of the living room walls a vivid red.

“This is gonna be our Wall of Life,” he’d said to Derek, standing on newspaper pages spread across the floor in front of aforementioned wall, his hands splattered with paint. “We’re gonna hang our photos here.”
Derek had propped himself on the back of that black leather couch. Crossed his ankles. Crossed those muscly arms over a chest that stretched the seams of Derek’s tight, white tank top.

“Okay.” Derek stared at him, then said, “Is there any particular reason you’re painting the wall while naked?”

Stiles glanced down at himself, then at Derek. He shrugged. The motion sent a glob of paint flying from the brush in his right hand onto his abdomen. Derek’s eyes followed the paint as it striped across the subtle dips and swells of his abs. They were nowhere as defined as Derek’s, but they were an improvement from the concave belly he had after awakening from the twenty-four-day coma.

“Because I—don’t want to do any laundry?”

“Uh hm. Try again.”

“Because I—” Stiles nibbled on his lower lip. Dropped the brush onto the newspapers on the floor. “Was hoping you’d fuck my brains out on the couch?”

Derek had drawn in a deep, long breath, and Stiles knew his werewolf was happily inhaling his scent, paint fumes be damned. Derek’s expression remained deadpan while his gaze sharpened and heated up.

“Fuck your brains out? Hmm.” Derek pursed his lips. “That’s gonna take a while.”

“If you can’t do it, that’s okay, that’s fine.” Stiles shrugged again, then started to turn away from Derek, his own face deadpan. “I’ll just go over here and use my fing—”

Derek had launched himself at him like an unerring fired bullet. Grabbed him by the hips, hefted him up like he was a weightless mannequin. He’d laughed like a maniac as Derek carried him over to the couch. It turned out that lowering himself on his elbows and knees, arching his back and presenting his bubble-butt to Derek was akin to submerging a werewolf in a bathtub of werewolf-nip. As soon as he’d used his magic to lube himself, he was moaning at the top of his voice, clutching onto the arm of the couch while Derek plowed into him from behind and drove him mad with pleasure.

Stiles hadn’t resumed painting the wall until the next afternoon after Derek let him out of their bed, leaking come down his inner thighs, with more come smeared all over his torso. His werewolf mate really had a thing for scent-marking him inside and out.

It’d taken Stiles five days to finish painting the Wall of Life. Mostly because he distracted Derek by doing it nude.

“So should we hang them separately?” Derek asked. “Or side by side?”

Three weeks since their wedding ceremony in the Preserve, the Wall of Life was studded with nails, and overlaid with numerous framed photographs of themselves and their loved ones. Stiles had considered an eclectic collection of frames, but changed his mind and settled on black, simple frames so the photos would be prominent.

“Side by side, I think. In the middle? Like, surrounded by the other photos?”

“Okay. Let’s try that.”

The largest photograph was high on the wall, overlooking the whole collection: it was a horizontal shot taken by Dad from their celebratory picnic and swim fest at Mom’s Lake, featuring Stiles on the left, Derek with arms akimbo in the center, and Scott, Isaac, and Jackson to the right. Stiles was in
his Patrick Starfish swim shorts, pressing his hands to the sides of his face, laughing. The three younger werewolves in plain swim trunks were collapsing against each other in a fit of guffaws, and Jackson was pointing a finger at Derek who had his back toward the camera. More specifically, Jackson was pointing at Derek’s neon yellow swimming jammers. At the enormous print of Spongebob Squarepants’s grinning face. Across Derek’s ass and thighs.

It was Stiles’s favorite photo of the current collection. His second favorite photo was of a grinning Dad with Mrs. McCall, his arm around her shoulders. She was also grinning, with her arms around his waist, her head resting on Dad’s chest. Minutes before Scott snapped the photo, he and Stiles had caught them kissing behind a tree after the wedding ceremony.

_Now, son, this—isn’t what it looks like_, Dad had stammered.

_Yes, this is exactly what it looks like_, Mrs. McCall had proclaimed, and then grabbed Dad’s right butt cheek and squeezed it, making Dad let out an uproarious squeal.

After Scott snapped the photo, Stiles and Scott had rushed over to their respective parents to hug them and congratulate them on _finally_ getting together. Dad had looked so flabbergasted at Stiles’s delight over him being in a relationship again.

_I know you’ll always love Mom_, he’d whispered in Dad’s ear while they embraced, _but you can love other people too, and they can love you._

Dad hadn’t said anything. Dad had hugged him tighter, and stroked the back of his head and his nape.

“This should go on the left. Yeah?”

Stiles glanced at the framed photograph in Derek’s hands. Yep, that wide frame with those ornate, red letters and cartoon hearts still made him smile in amusement. He would never, ever admit it to the other guys, but he thought those cartoon teddy bears hugging each other were rather endearing. Big and fluffy like Derek.

“Yeah, on the left.”

Derek hung it in a vacant area in the middle of the collection, next to another photo taken at Mom’s Lake. It was the one of him walking out of the lake onto the shore, dripping cool water, glancing to the side. Derek had snapped it, calling it his James Bond-sexy beach strut moment. It would have been a sexy strut, yes—if not for Stiles tripping on his own foot seconds later and face-planting in the sand.

Derek had snapped a photo of _that_ too, but it was staying in Derek’s phone and _nowhere else._

“Go on,” Derek said, glancing at the framed photograph in Stiles’s grip. “You hang it up.”

Stiles glanced down at it with a soft smile. He lifted it up to the vacant space next to That Fake Wedding Photo, then securely hooked it on the three nails embedded in the wall. The wooden frame that Derek had cut and engraved from scratch was heavy. It was wide enough for its four corners to feature the triskele set in a square, for the top boundary to feature their inscribed hyphenated surname.

Stiles and Derek stepped back to regard their Wall of Life. Derek pulled him to his side with an arm around his shoulders. He slid an arm behind Derek’s lower back, leaning his head against his werewolf’s.
The Real Wedding Photo—and of course it also had to be capitalized, more than any other image—was the same size as That Fake Wedding Photo. In the photo, Derek and Stiles stood facing each other. Derek’s arms were wrapped around his waist, and Derek’s wedding ring glinted on the rich red of his hoodie. His left hand was pressed flat on Derek’s chest. A spark of golden light reflected off his wedding ring.

In the photo, Derek was grinning at him, unashamed of his bunny teeth, the happiest werewolf on the planet who no longer had to contain himself. Stiles was grinning back, his mouth open, his face flushed. He appeared universes apart from the seething, shaved-headed teenager he’d been, with his voluminous hair and the lean muscles that corded his scarred forearms. They weren’t wearing branded, expensive suits. They weren’t photographed by a professional photographer. They weren’t even in a building, much less a fancy hotel ballroom or a restaurant.

But they were true to themselves. They were Derek and Stiles. Them, inside and out, and that was what mattered to them.

“Now is the Wall of Life done, Your Majesty?”

Stiles pinched Derek’s flank above the waistband of his jeans. Derek nudged his temple with that high forehead, and he smiled to himself, rubbing the spot he’d pinched. His ring was a soothing presence around his finger.

They gazed at their photo collection, at the spaces that waited to be filled with more photos of new and renewed love. Years more of them. Decades more.

“Not even close,” Stiles murmured, and Derek kissed him on his smooth cheek, and pulled him even closer.

§§§§§§

On the nights when Przemysław’s rancid gray eyes and ripped-open flesh plagued Stiles in his nightmares, he would shamble to the living room and sit on the black leather couch in the semi-darkness. He would turn on his side to face the right side table that flanked the couch. He would stare at the small statue of a curled up, slumbering wolf that had ornamented Derek’s grave. Reach a hand out to stroke its ears, to trace its muzzle, and bop its nose.

It looked so much like Derek’s wolf. It brought him solace to see it, to touch it. It helped him to keep at bay the lurid sensations of scorching blood upon his skin, of a dying man’s final paroxysms, until Derek joined him on the couch. Wrapped him in those solid, sturdy arms that held him together in one fragile, mending piece. Held him to that broad, hirsute chest that harbored that thundering heart.

Tonight was not one of those nights.

Tonight, the living room lights were on. Tonight, that marble-handled carving knife was laid out on its shroud of a black cloth on the coffee table. Stiles’s dried blood still anointed its razor-sharp edge. Dressed only in black sweatpants, he sat on the couch and stared down at the carving knife, his elbows on his knees, his left hand enclosing his fisted right hand. He pressed his hands to his lips, and they trembled.

Derek had removed the carving knife from the Camaro’s glove compartment at some point during his nine-day coma. Stashed it in the shadowed corner of a shelf in this apartment’s laundry room.
Retained it despite wanting to destroy it, waiting for Stiles’s decision first.

Stiles had chosen to keep it.

“It’s not—I’m not tormenting myself here,” he rasped to Derek, “with it.”

Derek, in dark gray boxer-briefs and nothing else, sat to his right on the couch. He let Derek wrap an arm around him, let Derek draw him close so their temples touched. Derek’s arm was a bulwark supporting his lower back. They stared down at the carving knife together.

“It’s just—” Stiles lowered his clenched hands to prop his chin on them. He bit his lower lip.

“Sometimes, I wake up from a nightmare and for a while, I believe the whole clusterfuck was just that: a nightmare. That none of it actually happened. Just some—some sick movie my hyperactive brain cooked up. Some movie full of actors playing fictional roles on fake movie sets. And when the director yells cut? Everyone’s okay. Everyone’s alive. Nobody—” He bit his lower lip again, hard. “Nobody got tortured. Nobody got murdered.”

Derek rubbed comforting circles on his hip. Derek stayed silent, listening to his every word.

Przemysław’s last, tender smile haunted the hallways of Stiles’s mind.

“Then I look at this knife, and—I remember.” He tightened his left hand around his fist.

“Przemysław was real. So was his Derek. And the people in his town, his world. Przemysław was real, and he was one of the toughest guys I’d ever met. He fought that fucking demon to the very end, Derek. He fought for all the Stiles and Dereks in those alternate universes, and it must have—it must have hurt so bad, every time he failed to save them.”

“He saved us,” Derek murmured.

Stiles’s lips wavered into a tiny, wry smile. “Yeah. He did.” His smile receded. His lips flattened into a taut, thin line, and he whispered, “Why am I alive, Derek, while he’s dead? Why am I not dead too?”

What did I do, to deserve to be happy with my Derek? To be alive at all?

They stared on at the carving knife. Stiles lowered his hands to his lap. He slumped against Derek, and he felt Derek’s fingers stroking his left flank. If it hadn’t been for his magic, for the power of Derek’s soul in his body, there would have been a round scar there instead of smooth skin.

Derek’s chest swelled with a long, soundless breath.

“After I buried Laura, I broke into a hardware store in town.”

Stiles sat up. He turned his head to gaze at Derek with wide eyes. Hearing that name from Derek’s lips again was like an electric jolt through his nervous system. Derek never spoke about his family. Derek had scarcely been able to write about his father for his workshop website’s profile page. For Derek to say Laura’s name now was probably akin to—being chained onto a metal grill and electrocuted.

“It was in the early morning. Cold and dark. The streets were empty. The hardware store didn’t have security cameras, and I broke the lock with my hands.” Derek was still staring down at the carving knife, his expression unreadable. “I found a twelve-gallon portable fuel tank. You know, the kind for boats that’s made of red plastic. Found liquid fuel, and filled up the tank. Then I got a lighter. A box of matches, just in case the lighter didn’t work.”
Stiles stared at Derek, and his breath hitched in his chest. His hands clenched into tense fists on his lap. Derek’s fingers continued to gently stroke his flank.

“I drove back to the house. What was left of it. I thought about doing it right then and there, but—in the night, a big fire could be seen from miles away. So I figured, I’d do it during the day instead. In the basement.”

Stiles’s fingers itched to reach up and cover Derek’s mouth. To save Derek from the harrowing words that spilled out of Derek’s throat, out of Derek’s heart. But these words were Derek’s words. They were words Derek was giving to him for safekeeping, words that Derek entrusted to him alone.

“I’d thought about dousing myself in liquid fuel for years. Thought about it even before Laura and I left Beacon Hills to go to NYC. Lighting myself up on fire.” Derek’s fingers on his flank became motionless. “Finishing the job. Finishing what she started.”

Stiles’s eyes began to burn. He stared on at Derek through a thin, wet film, and still, Derek stared on at the carving knife, his expression now serene like it’d been when his body had been in that black-and-silver coffin.

“For the longest time, Laura was the one thing stopping me from doing that. She was the only family I had left. As long as she was alive, I had a reason to—force myself to go on. Then we came back to Beacon Hills, and Peter killed her for her Alpha power.” Derek’s expression didn’t change. “At the time, I didn’t know it was him. Laura had been so sure that he was brain-dead. That he was dead in the ways that mattered. And I’d believed I was the only Hale left.”

Derek sat up and raised his head. He gazed forward into the distance, his hazel eyes heavy-lidded.

“It’d been such a sunny day. The sunlight reached the basement through the cracks and gaps in the floor above. I had the cap of the fuel tank in my hand. I smelled the sharp stink of the liquid fuel, and the smell was only going to get worse once I poured the stuff all over myself. I dropped the cap. Gripped the fuel tank’s handle. I was just about to lift the tank when—” Derek’s forehead furrowed. “I heard two distinct heartbeats.”

Stiles’s nails dug into the flesh of his palms. Derek tilted his head, as if he was listening to a specific sound faraway.

“The heartbeats belonged to two guys. Young guys. Talking to each other, walking onto Hale property. I waited for them to go away, but they just came closer and closer to the house. They weren’t just loitering around. They were searching for something.” Derek arched his eyebrows. He still didn’t look at Stiles, immersed in the past. “And I thought, okay, I’ll go out there. Tell them to go away.” Derek twisted his lips. “Then I’ll come back, and finish the job.”

Stiles could already see, in his mind, in his own memories, what occurred next: him and Scott, surrounded by trees and shrubbery, freezing in place as the most handsome, hazel-eyed, stubbled guy Stiles had ever laid eyes on appeared out of nowhere to snarl at them.

“I was right, the two guys were young. They were just teenagers. One of them had wavy brown hair, and kind of a crooked jaw. He was looking for his inhaler. His heart was beating fast after I showed myself. I could smell his fear, smell his changing scent from human to werewolf. But the other guy—” Derek shifted his gaze to Stiles’s face at last, and his eyes were soft and sun-warm. “The other guy’s head was shaved. His heart sped up too, but he wasn’t afraid of me. He looked at me with these whisky-brown eyes from under his eyelashes. I looked at him, and I could smell him. Smell his pure, sweet natural scent. Like honey, and petrichor, and a dash of cinnamon.”
Derek's hand caressed his left flank again. He laid a hand on Derek's bare, muscular thigh, and Derek's other hand pressed down on it, stroked it.

"I smelled the inhaler near my feet. Threw it at the guys. Watched them—*him* walk away from me. I went back to the house, down to the basement where the fuel tank was. I kneeled down. Gripped the tank's handle. I stared down at it." Derek's lips quirked into that devastating, tiny smile. "And all I could see was him. That guy with the shaved head and whisky-brown eyes. With the most exquisite scent I'd ever smelled."

Derek lowered his eyes. Let out a self-deprecating huff of air that made Stiles's lips quiver into a tiny smile too.

"I actually got mad at myself. I jumped up and stomped around, yelling at myself for being such an idiot, thinking about a guy I'd just *met.*" The imagery dredged a low, tremulous snicker out of Stiles, and Derek chuckled with him. "Then I walked back to the fuel tank." Derek's expression turned solemn. "I gripped the handle again. Lifted the tank off the floor." Derek inhaled soundlessly. He gazed into Stiles's eyes once more, then rasped, "And I couldn't do it. His silly face was all I saw. His silly voice was all I heard. He was all I could think about, even while I was surrounded by the ashes of my family." Derek's lips twisted again, and Stiles realized it was Derek's way of sustaining his composure. "For the first time in years, I didn't smell the smoke. I didn't hear the screams."

Stiles's quivering smile lingered as his eyes brimmed again. He intertwined his fingers with Derek's on his werewolf's thigh.

"And I thought, he looked like a guy who’d lost someone he really loved, too. He looked like—someone who would understand me. See me. Know me. If I gave myself the chance to know him too." Derek pressed his lips into a thin line. "So I put the tank on the floor. I put the cap back on. And I walked away." Derek's face softened. "I chose to live. I chose him."

Stiles blinked hard, twice. Derek gently removed his hand from Stiles's. Derek's fingers brushed across his left cheek, then his right cheek, drying them.

"I wish I could tell you that survivor guilt will feel—lesser with time," Derek murmured. "But it doesn’t. It’s like—being in the middle of the ocean. You swim. You keep on swimming. Keep your head up above the water, your eyes on the cloudless sky above you, the air in your lungs. But once in a while, a massive wave crashes over you. You go down, deep into the cold darkness, and you can’t breathe. You can’t see the sky, the sun anymore."

Derek stroked his left cheek, his jaw.

"But as long as you keep swimming back to the surface? You can breathe again. You can see the sky again, and feel the sun shining down on you." Derek's hand skimmed down to rest on his chest, over his throbbing heart. "Survivor guilt stays with you for life, but you find a reason to go on, even when you think there’s nothing left in this world for you. Sometimes—for the really, really lucky ones, like me—that reason comes walking right up to them." Derek breathed in time with him. "And you keep swimming. You keep your eyes on the sky, your face turned toward that golden sun and its sunshine. You go on, to that happy ending."

Stiles pressed both hands over Derek’s on his chest. Derek pulled him closer with the arm around his lower back.

"See, you’re not just my happy ending, Stiles. You were also my happy beginning."

Stiles shut his eyes that spilled anew. He nudged his forehead to Derek’s, rubbed his nose against
Derek’s. Brushed his lips on the corner of Derek’s soft, smiling lips.

“I’m glad you’re here, Big Guy,” he whispered, and what he was also saying was, *stay with me.*

“I’m glad you’re here too, babe,” Derek whispered back, and what Derek was also saying was, *I’m here, we’re here, we’re still here.*

§§§§§§

Stiles told the pack everything on a movie night at Scott’s house in the suburbs.

They were in the living room, seated around the coffee table teeming with junk food and cans of soda. Scott was in an armchair angled toward the TV. Isaac was sitting on a cushioned foot stool next to Scott’s legs. Kira sat with Lydia and Jackson on the main couch that faced the TV. Stiles and Derek sat on the smaller couch perpendicular to the main one.

Stiles had waited until the movie was over, until Scott pressed a button on the remote and the TV screen went black.

“Guys?”

Everyone turned their heads to look at him. Scott glanced at Derek, then back at Stiles. Scott had given them scores of concerned glances throughout the night, particularly at him, and Stiles knew it must have been because of the anxiety he was exuding like a sour stench: Isaac had wrinkled his nose at one point. Jackson had given him a bemused frown.

“I—” Stiles stared down at his wringing hands on his lap. He felt Derek’s reassuring hand pressed to his lower back. “I’m ready. To talk about what happened.”

He sensed Scott’s stare at him like a laser beam. He heard the rustling of clothes and the creaking of leather as the others turned toward him, an attentive audience.

“I have to tell you all about a warlock. A warlock from another universe.” He stared down at his white-knuckled hands. He swallowed hard. “His name was Przemyśl ‘Stiles’ Stilinski, and he was possessed by the Nogitsune of his world.”

He told them everything, starting with him and Derek trapped in that magically-reinforced prison cell. His voice shook as he recounted the Nogitsune’s foul ultimatum offered to him. He glossed over all the words he and Derek had shared with each other, but not Derek’s actions with the carving knife.

Kira gasped aloud. Jackson swore under his breath in shock.

Derek’s hand stayed on his lower back, rubbing it in encouragement.

Then he spoke about his vanishing act from Beacon Hills. The nerve-racking chase all the way to Salem, Oregon in the Camaro. The violent showdown in that warehouse of curly fries packaging with the Nogitsune. He didn’t skimp on the details of how he’d brutally assaulted Przemyśl’s body.

His voice shook, but he kept going, describing the atrocities he’d seen in the ruins of Przemyśl’s
hometown through the traversable wormhole, through Przemysław’s memories. The horror of Przemysław’s Derek being murdered by the Nogitsune. The horror of Przemysław being possessed by the Nogitsune, bound to the demon permanently in its gruesome pursuit of harming and killing every alternate version of Stiles and Derek it could hunt down.

He spoke about the marble-handled carving knife in the Camaro’s glove compartment. About his plans to slice his own throat open with it in the aftermath of Przemysław’s death, so he could be with Derek again. If Derek had truly been dead, if Derek’s soul had not been inside him and saved him, he would have gone through with it.

No one uttered a word in the ensuing suffocating silence.

Stiles stared down at his aching, clenching hands on his lap. He shivered on the couch. His breath caught in his throat when he heard Scott stand up and stride around the coffee table toward him. He stood up on wobbly legs, his head bowed. He tensed, ready to be shouted at, to be shoved to the floor and judged.

Scott’s brawny arms lunged at him.

They enfolded him.

They hauled him tight to Scott’s firm, warm body that trembled with silent sobs. Scott’s hands clutched at his upper back. Scott’s temple was pressed to his, and he felt hot rivulets trickle down his cheek and the side of his neck. He stood with his arms at his sides, dumbfounded, speechless. His shivers intensified into full-body shudders. Scott hugged him tighter.

Another pair of brawny arms enfolded him. He saw a glimpse of Jackson’s glistening, reddened eyes, and he couldn’t believe it, he couldn’t believe that they weren’t yelling at him, that they weren’t punishing him for being a coward, a murderer, an abomination—

Kira also hugged him, stroking his arm. Lydia hugged him from behind, pressing her damp cheek to his shuddering back. Isaac joined the group hug and embraced everyone with his long, sinewy arms. Stiles gasped for air. He shook, and shook, and when he felt Derek’s hand grasp his nape, holding him in one piece, refusing to let him go, he broke. He shattered into a billion pieces, but even as he clutched at Scott’s shirt, as his face crumpled and his body heaved with his noiseless sobs, he knew that those billion pieces of him weren’t lost in eternal darkness, not this time.

His pack would gather them all. His pack would restore him, bind the pieces with the molten gold of their acceptance, their forgiveness, their love, until he was a reconstructed, whole entity again. A man, resurrected each time he shattered. A man, whose scars were illuminated, honored.

A man, just a man, strong at the broken places.

§§§§§§

Stiles told Dad everything on a Sunday afternoon at his childhood home.

Dad didn’t have a shift. Dad led him to the couch in the living room, and they sat side by side in front of the switched-off TV. Stiles, whose hyperactive brain could churn out thousands of words and shoot them from his big mouth at the firing rate of the M134 Minigun, was at a loss how to begin the conversation.
Dad had no trouble whatsoever with that.

“Okay, Stiles,” Dad said, and his voice was tender but inexorable. “Let’s talk about you trying to pull the knife out of Derek’s chest. And why he wanted to stop you.”

Stiles shut his eyes. He swallowed past that jagged lump in his throat, and he knew he was going to break again before the evening arrived.

He told Dad everything from the beginning, everything he knew about Przemysław. He told Dad how damn sorry he was for hurting a hair on his other self’s head. For turning into the monster he’d once condemned and believed he could never become. He tucked himself into his father’s side, and he wept like the little baby that he’d once been, that his father had cuddled in those burly arms decades ago. He tensed, ready to be bellowed at, to be shoved to the floor and deemed irredeemable.

Dad didn’t say a word.

Dad’s burly arms enfolded him, fitted around him like they always had, like they always would. Held him tight and shielded him. Dad pressed a craggy cheek to the crown of his head, and his hair dampened with the silent tears from his father’s merciful eyes.

Dad didn’t hate him. Dad still loved him.

“I will always love you, son. Never doubt that. Never.”

It should have been so awkward later, when Stiles’s chest stopped hitching and he could breathe properly again, when he sat back on the couch and allowed Dad to see him so fractured. But Dad’s eyes were also red and swollen. Dad also swiped at his own face with a hand, and looked and felt centuries older.

And now, Stiles was about to break Dad for the second time today.

“Dad,” he croaked. “I saw Mom. At Derek’s grave. She was—she was standing next to you.”

Dad stared at him. Dad’s wide eyes welled up again, and so did Stiles’s. Dad swiped a thumb under his own eyes when they spilled. When Dad’s lips quivered into a small, sanguine smile, so did Stiles’s.

“How did she look?” Dad rasped.

“She, uhm.” Stiles swiped at his own cheeks once more. “She was in that white dress you bought for her. The one with the different roses.” Dad’s smile widened. “Yeah, and she—” Stiles blinked hard. He gazed at his father, and his smile also widened. “She really did glow like the sun.”

Dad’s throat worked in a long swallow. Dad’s entire face creased in a heart-wrenching smile. Then it wavered, and Dad lowered his glistening eyes. He slowly raised his hand to his own face. To his left cheek.

“Dad?” Stiles whispered.

“I thought—” Dad frowned to himself. He pressed those callused fingers on the apple of his cheek. “I thought maybe it’d been the intensity of the moment, watching you sitting in the grave with Derek’s body.” Dad dragged his fingers down his cheek to his jawline. “I thought it felt like—someone touched my cheek.”

Stiles’s breath shuddered out of him. He blinked multiple times to clear his eyes. His chest ached, but
it wasn’t with pain. It was with something far brighter. Something far more fiery, far more abiding.

“Was it—did it feel like—sunshine on your skin?”

Dad gave him a sharp glance.

“Yeah.” Dad’s face softened into a tiny smile. “It did kinda feel like that. But I felt it—under my skin too?”

“Did you—” Stiles sat closer to his father. “Did you feel that anywhere else?”

Stiles held his breath as Dad’s hand lowered from that familiar, rugged face. Dad raised his right hand, and held it over his lowered left forearm. Dad’s right hand hovered over his left elbow. It skimmed down his left forearm to his left hand.

Once more, Stiles’s sore eyes brimmed hot and wet. He rubbed them dry. They brimmed yet again, but he was smiling, and his chest swelled with a gladness that seemed far too monumental for any mortal body to contain.

“Dad. That was what it’d felt like,” he rasped. “Whenever Derek’s soul touched me.”

Dad stared at him again. Stared at him with those red, soft, swollen eyes, with that spark of tenacious hope in them. Dad touched his own left forearm with his right hand. Directly over where Mom—Mom’s soul—had touched him that day in the cemetery.

Dad had no magic in him, Stiles was certain of that. But—Dad was the love of Mom's life. He’d been her source of power just by being him, by loving her as she was. And maybe, for an eternal moment in time, when the impassable space between the realms of the living and the dead became passable, that alone had been enough to make Dad as powerful as any warlock with an extra soul in them could ever be.

Stiles and his father stood up at the same time, and hugged each other for a long time. Dad was going to need time to process everything. He was going to need time to process the fact that his augmented magic hadn’t created some illusion of his mother.

Mom.

_Mamo, Dad and I are going to be okay. We’ll be okay._

Stiles messaged Derek to come over while Dad went to the kitchen to get ingredients out for spaghetti bolognese and homemade garlic bread. Derek replied within seconds, with a line of emojis that began with a zooming black car, then a red heart, then a wolf's head, then the head of a bearded, smiling man, then three more hearts of various colors. Stiles replied with his favorite zany face emoji and an identical red heart, smiling like the smitten dolt he was.

Married to Derek for two months and counting, and Stiles couldn’t imagine a day when he stopped feeling so much love for his werewolf mate.

He helped Dad with cooking dinner until he heard the familiar growl of the Camaro in the driveway. He darted to the front door and swung it open, in time to watch Derek saunter up the front porch’s steps. Derek was attired in that cream-colored, v-neck sweater, and jeans, and those black boots. Dark curls peeked above the sweater’s collar. Derek had rolled its sleeves up to the elbows, displaying those muscular, veined forearms that fitted perfectly in the curve of Stiles’s lower back. Freaking stupid-gorgeous was one hell of an understatement to describe his werewolf husband here and now.
Derek gently grasped the sides of his face, and gave him a small, tender smile. Yeah, his eyes were still red-rimmed and swollen, and his throat still prickled, and his knees still wobbled whenever he thought about his mother and remembered what her laughter sounded like in the hallways of this house.

But Derek was here. Derek was here with him, and Derek was staying.

He wrapped his arms around Derek’s shoulders. Nuzzled Derek’s neck like Derek was nuzzling his. Derek inhaled his scent with a deep, loud breath. Derek wrapped those solid, sturdy arms around his waist, and up he went into the air, unburdened, cackling like the six-foot-tall nut he was as Derek swung him in circles down the length of the front porch. His laughter echoed through his childhood home with Derek’s, with Mom’s.

Derek carried him back to the front door. Set him back on his feet in the doorway, and pressed the pad of a forefinger to his curved lips.

“There it is,” Derek murmured, and Stiles’s smile grew together with his husband’s.

Derek and Stiles went to the kitchen to help Dad with the rest of the cooking and baking. Derek was a maestro of homemade pasta sauces, and Dad was happy to let his son-in-law deal with the bolognese sauce while he lounged in a chair at the kitchen table and lamented about how unpalatable soybean patties were and, Stiles, I can eat red meat every day again, can’t I, since you said I can have whatever I want?

Derek, the namby-pamby scaredy wolf, promptly claimed he had to go to the toilet and scampered out of the kitchen with shaking shoulders.

“No, Dad! Only on Sundays when Derek and I come over for dinner!”

“But you said I can have whatever I want!”

Oh god, Dad was crossing his arms, and sticking out his lower lip.

“Dad! This is for your own good.” He also crossed his arms over his chest, his lips quivering with mirth. “Don’t be a brat!”

“I’m not being a brat. I’m just exercising my basic right to express my honest feelings about yucky soybean patties that my son coerces me to eat for no good reason.”

Stiles’s lower face contorted in an effort to stop an amused smile from forming on it. Derek chose that instant to walk back into the kitchen.

“Well, Derek likes those soybean patties! Have you looked at him lately? Seen how healthy he is?”

Derek swiveled around and headed for the kitchen door again. Stiles seized the back of his fleeing husband’s sweater with his right hand. He dragged Derek to his side, then clinched his arms around Derek’s waist. He stared at his wide-eyed werewolf’s profile.

“Derek,” he drawled. “Tell Dad how much you like those soybean patties.”

He tightened his arms around Derek’s waist. Derek’s mouth opened while Dad’s shoulders shook with silent mirth.

“I—I have the very unbiased opinion,” Derek said, deadpan, “in no way influenced by the fact that my husband is an intimidating warlock capable of turning me into a Pomeranian puppy, that soybean
patties can be tasty for certain people with certain tastes.”

Dad pointed a thumb at his own chest. “I am not one of those people.”

Stiles released Derek’s waist to set his arms akimbo, and glowered at his father. “Yes, you are, Dad! You gotta watch your cholesterol! And blood pressure!”

Dad crossed his arms over his chest again, and scowled, his eyes twinkling. “I would rather eat an entire box of Theresa’s terrible prune muffins than another soybean patty.”

Stiles cracked up into a guffaw, slapping his hands over his face. When he lowered his hands, he saw that Derek was covering his mouth with a hand, his broad shoulders shaking. Derek had been skeptical about how horrendous Theresa’s prune muffins were—until Dad brought him one to try during a lunch together with Stiles at a diner near the station three weeks ago. Derek had bitten one mouthful, then spat it out onto a napkin to Dad’s boisterous laughter, exclaiming, *Oh my god, how much salt did she put in this thing?!*

“Okay, fine, no more soybean patties for you! You can give the ones you got to Derek.”

Dad gazed up at the ceiling and flung his arms up. “Hallelujah! There is a god!”

Derek’s burst of laughter set Stiles off again, as well as Dad.

Later, Derek’s chest visibly puffed up when Dad praised the spaghetti bolognese at the dinner table. Derek and Stiles updated Dad about the construction of their future home in the Preserve: it was going great, and it was going to have a three-car garage after all, along with a greenhouse and an infinity pool with lily pads. It was a half hour’s walk away from the location of the old Hale house, where the stone monument of a pack of wolves stood in place of the demolished burned husk, in memoriam of Derek’s family. It was going to have at least six rooms on the second floor, and one of them was Dad’s to utilize whenever he wanted.

Dad’s eyes glistened a little after Stiles told him that.

Derek sat with them in the living room for a while after dinner, watching some TV show or another. Stiles wasn’t sure what any of them were about. In the lull, his earlier distressing conversation with Dad skulked back to the forefront of his mind, lurking there like the ghost of a lost, whisky brown-eyed man. What did Dad think about the existence of other universes? What did Dad think about the existence of alternate versions of his son? About Przemysław, whose actions had inadvertently resulted in so much suffering for his son?

Derek must have sensed his unease despite not showing any signs of it. Derek got up from the armchair, then kissed him on the forehead.

“I think I’ll go upstairs first,” Derek murmured.

Stiles smiled fondly up at him, knowing his werewolf was giving him more time alone with his father.

“Okay,” he murmured back, reaching up to caress Derek’s bristly cheek.

“Saps,” Dad muttered, staring at the TV, his eyes twinkling.

Stiles sat back on the couch and leaned against his father, resting his head on a stable shoulder. “I learned how to be one from the master.”
He knew Dad was smiling at that.

“Good night, sir.”

Dad gave Derek a stern look that made Stiles’s shoulders tremble with mirth. Dad stared at Derek until Derek bowed his head with a small, bashful smile.

“Good night, Dad,” Derek said quietly in correction, and Dad’s expression softened.

“Good night, son.”

They watched Derek amble out of the living room. Stiles repositioned his head on Dad’s shoulder. Dad laid an arm around his shoulders. They stared at the TV, but Stiles wasn’t watching it. He knew Dad wasn’t either.

Dad’s chest rose and fell. Rose, then fell.

“If I—”

They were just two murmured words, but they made Stiles’s throat constrict and his eyes sting. Those two words often preceded the most profound of regrets and sorrow.

“If I had—” Dad cleared his throat, then said with a steadier voice, “If a monster had taken your mother away from me, from us, and I had the slightest chance at all to bring her back, to give her just one more day with us again—”

Stiles stared on at the TV, seeing blobs of colors shifting around on the screen. Dad’s arm tightened around his shoulders.

“If it meant doing whatever I had to, using whatever I could, even if I had to tear through numerous universes just to find that one slight chance—” Stiles felt Dad’s throat bob in a hard swallow. “Yeah. I would have. I would.”

The voice of a news reporter emanated from the TV. It sounded lightyears away from him and Dad. He rested an arm across his father’s midriff in a hug.

“And it just figures the man with the heart, the determination, and the strength to do all that was my son from another universe.”

There Przemysław was again, without those rot-soaked bandages, without all that blood on his pale skin and those fatal lacerations. There his other self was, with crinkled, whisky-brown eyes, and that small, impish smile identical to his own. Still alive in Stiles’s mind, in his heart.

He remembered what Przemysław had told the projection of Derek’s soul in that warehouse. Przemysław’s parents were dead, murdered in that war with the Argents of his world. Stiles knew with incontestible certainty that Przemysław’s parents must have loved him deeply, just like Przemysław’s father must have loved his wife, the mother of his son deeply and truly.

Would Przemysław’s father have done everything he could, if his wife was fading from a brain disease? Would he also have toiled day and night for the necessary money, calling and pleading with every specialist he could reach to save her, to grant her one more day with him and their son? Sat at his wife’s bedside as she lay fighting, lay dying? Buckled at the knees when she smiled at him for the last time, when her heart stopped beating?

Of course he would have. Of course he would.
Stiles couldn’t imagine a universe in which Mom wasn’t the love of Dad’s life. He couldn’t imagine a universe in which Dad wasn’t the determined, kind, smart, strong man he was, with a heart big enough to be broken and yet still carry the pain of others for them. A heart that never quite mended itself to how it’d been, but still went on, and on.

“He probably inherited all that from his dad,” Stiles rasped.

Dad’s chest rose in a long, stuttering breath. He felt Dad’s cheek press on the crown of his head.

“Yeah,” Dad replied, his voice as hoarse as Stiles’s. “He probably did.”

No, time wasn’t infinite. Nor was blood, or bone, or flesh.

But perhaps, as real and strong as any unstoppable force in any universe could ever be, a Stilinski heart was.
Two years after Stiles married Derek, Dad married Mrs. McCall. When Dad had quietly announced to the pack that she’d said yes to his proposal, Stiles had been somewhat discombobulated by the situation. Or rather, by how he should now address the lovely lady formerly known as Mrs. McCall. For obvious reasons, Scott had no problem in that department. Scott had no problem either with the proper designations for Dad: he was either “sir” or “Sheriff Stilinski”.

“It’s cool, dude,” Scott had said to him when he went over to Scott’s house to help the stressed new father and his exhausted wife with colicky, two-month-old twin babies. “She did say you don’t have to call her mom. She knew your mom.” Scott paused, then murmured, “She cried her eyes out after—you know. Lotsa staff at the hospital did. I cried. Your mom was awesome.”

Sitting in the armchair, Stiles had held the slumbering babies to his chest while Scott sprawled on the couch in checkered pajama bottoms. Kira was sleeping like a log upstairs. She hadn’t slept a wink for two days. Scott had managed to grab a nap here and there, but Kira had insisted on staying awake until she figured out why the babies were crying so much.

Hence, Scott calling Stiles in a panic at 3 a.m., for his babies and his wife’s sakes. After a few minutes of deliberation and discussion with the distraught parents, Stiles had used his magic to examine the crying babies—and the issue turned out to be tummy ache plus a whole lot of gas from swallowed air during their crying jags.

Stiles had seriously considered the idea of weaponizing kitsune-werewolf baby farts in future battles. Scott had sprinted from the living room with a screech after Ken released one that sounded like a machine gun at full blast, and smelled like those soybean patties baked under the sun for a month. Pee-eww.

Kimiko was dressed in a cherry blossom-pink onesie dotted with red flowers. Ken was in a gray-and-white striped onesie. Their fragile, round heads were fuzzy with dark brown hair. Their chubby, rosy cheeks were squished on his black sweater, and their chunky fists gripped his sweater with astounding strength. They were so adorable that Stiles was this close to calling Derek who was in Los Angeles for a convention, and saying, Hey, can we have little tots of our own?

Then he’d remembered that neither he or Derek could get pregnant.

“Your mom’s awesome, too. Otherwise, Dad wouldn’t be marrying her, man.”

Scott’s crinkled brown eyes gleamed with a child’s innocent pride.

“Yeah. She’s awesome to the trillionth power.”

Neither of them brought up the spook that was Agent McCall aka Scott’s dumping asswipe of a father. The guy had the nerve to pop up at the clinic after ten years of zero communication, demanding to see his grandkids so they’d know him. Scott’s response had been to display his fangs and command the interloper to get the fuck out of his territory before he wolfed out. Literally.

The dumping asswipe took the hint. In particular after Scott mentioned that his mother aka the asswipe’s ex-wife was Sheriff Stilinski’s significant other.
“It’ll be weird calling her by her first name,” Stiles said, staring down at the babies with heavy-lidded eyes and a small smile. “After a lifetime of calling her Mrs. McCall. But I think it’s my best option.”

Scott chuckled low. “Yeah. Holy crap, dude. We’ve, like, known each other since we were four years old.”

Stiles raised his head to grin at his lifelong best friend who smiled back. “Yeah, crazy, right?”

“Twenty-four years—doesn’t sound like a lot anymore, does it?”

“Twenty-four years?” Stiles’s grin softened into an affectionate smile. “We’ll be sitting here in no time talking about how we’ve known each other for forty-eight years.”

“And counting,” Scott had said, his tone earnest, and they’d grinned at each other again. Scott fondly smacked Stiles on the shin. Stiles fondly kicked at Scott’s hand.

Four months after that night, the whole pack—including Scott’s six-month-old babies who made Stiles want to die from their giggling, plump cuteness—was at Stiles’s childhood home for the private wedding dinner which was actually a barbecue party starring Dad’s scrumptious burger patties. Dad and—Melissa wanted the event to be low-key and limited to the dearest people in their lives.

Some of Melissa’s co-workers from Beacon Hills General Hospital attended, as well as a few deputies from the station, most of whom had worked with Dad for decades. The sole deputy in attendance who hadn’t known Dad that long was Jordan Parrish, a genuinely nice guy with an easy grin and amiable eyes. He started working for Dad four years ago. He was also a hellhound.

“I was the only deputy your dad told about your, uh, disappearance,” Parrish said to Stiles while they leaned on the wall of the back porch with bottles of cold beer in hand, while everyone hung out in the backyard, their bellies full and their faces beaming. “He had no idea what I was at the time, so it was funny when he came to me and asked me to help him—” Parrish wrinkled his nose in good humor. “Sniff you out.”

That’d been the same day Scott and the pack met Parrish for the first time. Without Derek around for guidance, Scott was clueless about whether he had to offer Parrish a place in the pack or not, or be obligated to send Parrish packing if Parrish declined. Luckily, Parrish knew the protocols for such circumstances: due to some ancient, obscure peace treaty signed between the hellhounds and werewolves of yore, hellhounds were free to travel and reside wherever they desired without presenting themselves to the Alpha werewolf of the territory. They weren’t subject to the Alpha’s authority.

The treaty seemed one-sided to Stiles—until he learned from Derek that hellhounds were so rare that they were almost extinct. That peace treaty had delivered them from total extinction centuries ago at the hands of the werewolves who’d feuded with them.

What the hell happened, Stiles had asked, that the werewolves then tried to kill all the hellhounds?

Derek’s eyes had seemed as ancient as that treaty when he replied, We’re a lot more alike than you think—humans and supernatural creatures. Sometimes, the only excuse someone needs to annihilate an entire race is because they’re different.

So, to the surprise of nobody in this universe, the giant marshmallow of a True Alpha that was Scott McCall made Parrish an honorary member of the pack so the hellhound wouldn’t be alone. It’d also helped that Parrish really had tried his best to sniff Stiles out after Deaton broke Stiles’s containment
circle around the town.

“How far did you get?” Stiles asked with a sideways smile.

“The northwest border of Beacon County.” Parrish took a sip of his beer. “That was when your scent just vanished. Like you were never there. How did you do that?”

Stiles smirked as he tipped his head back to drain the last dregs of his beer. “No offense, my good man, but that’s for me to know and you not to.”

Parrish chuckled, showing that easy, sincere grin as his eyes flashed hellfire. “Fair enough, Mr. Stilinski-Hale.”

Parrish left the party soon afterward for an early shift, followed by the other deputies and Melissa’s friends—and that was when Derek and Scott hauled out an ice box full of wolfsbane-laced alcohol, and the party really started. Scott seldom drank alcohol since becoming a True Alpha, citing security concerns, as well as wanting to set a positive example for his pack members. That reason amused Stiles to no end for a long time, seeing as most of the pack had known Scott since they were all teenagers who’d done all kinds of stupid shit. And that wasn’t counting the stupid supernatural shit.

But tonight was a historic night, and not just because his and Scott’s respective parents found love again with each other: from tonight on, he and Scott were legitimate brothers.

It took Scott three bottles of wolfsbane-laced beer to realize this momentous fact.

“Bro,” Scott said, grabbing Stiles’s upper arms and shaking him like a rag doll.

“Bro,” Stiles said, grabbing Scott’s upper arms in return.

“Bro,” Scott said, his eyes wide with baby-like wonder, his face flushed. He squashed Stiles’s warm cheeks between his hands.

“Bro,” Stiles squeaked through a trout pout.

“Broooooo!” Scott exclaimed, enfolding his ribcage in strapping arms that crushed the oxygen out of his lungs. “I love you, bro!”

“Yeah, same, bro,” Stiles gasped, thumping the tipsy werewolf on the upper back in a desperate attempt to breathe again.

He sucked in a deep, grating breath when Scott released him to grab his shoulders and shake him once more. He heard Isaac and Jackson snickering in the background. He glanced over Scott’s shoulder and saw the pack sitting on lawn chairs or standing in a cozy group with Dad and Melissa, watching his and Scott’s antics with crinkled eyes and amused smiles.

“Bro, I wanna go around the world!” Scott said, seizing his head again and squishing his cheeks.

“Yes, you should,” Stiles replied, patting Scott’s hands with his own. “Go ahead, man, go around the world and see all kinda cool things.”

Scott let go of his head—only to stagger around him in a small circle until they were standing facing each other again. Stiles let out a shrill laugh of bafflement and fondness, throwing his head back and squeezing his eyes shut from his mirth.

“What the—Scott, why did you do that?!”
Scott grabbed his shoulders once again, his expression solemn.

“Because,” Scott said, emphatic, “you are my world, bro.”

Stiles gasped. He clutched at his chest with both hands.

“Bro,” he breathed, gazing at Scott with round, shiny eyes.

“Bro,” Scott said, nodding ceremoniously.

Kira, who was sitting next to Lydia, gazed down at her babies in their twin stroller with a dry smile.

“That’s your daddy, kids.”

Kimiko giggled and kicked her legs. Ken sucked on a chunky fist.

Dad, sitting on a rainbow-colored lawn chair, stared at Scott and Stiles, and said with an exceptional deadpan face, “It’s nice to know some things never change.”

Melissa, sitting in a powder blue lawn chair next to Dad, keeled sideways to rest her head on his shoulder while she laughed soundlessly. He wrapped an arm around her shaking shoulders, smiling down at her.

Isaac and Jackson—who were sitting on black lawn chairs, nursing their own bottles of wolfsbane-laced beer—glanced up at Derek who stood behind him.

“Dude,” they said in unison, “you married that guy.”

Derek had those delectably muscular arms crossed over that delectably hirsute chest. Derek stared at Stiles with an utterly unimpressed look and twinkling eyes, shaking his head.

“Scott.” Stiles grabbed the grinning goofball by the shoulders, then spun him around to face Derek. “Scott, if you’re my brother, then Derek is your brother too. You gotta show your bro how much you love him!”

Derek’s eyes widened to hilarious proportions. The rest of the pack guffawed at Scott who aimed that cornball grin at Derek and nodded.

“No,” Derek said, shaking his head from side to side, backing away from everyone.

“Yes, yes,” Scott said, nodding vigorously, charging forward with his arms spread. “Come here, you —”

“No!” Derek yelled, and scampered away from Scott who lurched after him with outstretched arms around the mowed backyard. They ran in circles around the pack who were in stitches.

“Come here and lemme love youuuu!” Scott shouted.

“NO!” Derek shrieked, sprinting straight for Stiles, hunkering down behind his human husband.

Isaac laughed so hard that he fell off his lawn chair. Dad slapped a hand on his own thigh in his amusement. The babies shrieked as vociferously as Derek had, displaying toothless smiles. Stiles was too weak from his own guffawing to stop Derek from hugging him from behind and lifting him off his feet, swiveling so Stiles was always facing Scott, a human shield against a handsy Alpha.

After a minute of this ridiculous standoff, Scott halted in his tracks. He squinted at Derek over Stiles’s shoulder. He tilted his head the way a calculating wolf would.
Then—he lunged forward with his arms spread. He clamped them around Stiles and Derek, squashing Stiles between two powerful werewolves. Stiles guffawed once more with everyone else.

“I LOVE YOU, BRO!” Scott bellowed, tightening his arms around Stiles and Derek.

“NOOOO!” Derek bellowed in return, like the lame-ass version of Darth Vader in Episode III of Star Wars did.

Stiles flailed his forearms at his sides like a capsized Tyrannosaurus rex, laughing and laughing with his loved ones while hot rivulets rolled down his cheeks. These tears weren’t tears of pain or suffering. They were the best kind of tears, the kind from precious happiness, from the hard-earned gratitude that came with any nightmarish brush with death and surviving it.

“I love you too, bro,” he croaked on behalf of his werewolf husband, his face aching from his grin.

§§§§§§

Seven weeks after Dad’s wedding party, Stiles and Derek moved into their completed house in the Preserve. Derek had postponed their relocation until every inch of the house was impeccable, and its boundaries were warded by Stiles for security.

Derek wasn’t taking any chances this time with his family home. There was no basement, nor any underground tunnels leading to and from the house. An ornamental, steel fence encircled the property. At Derek’s behest, Stiles had laid down at least two circles of protective wards along the perimeter of the fence, and strategically placed incursive ones that would give persistent intruders one hell of a run for their lives.

“Seriously, Stiles? Chasing invaders away with the mirage of a shoggoth?”

“Fuck yeah, do you not remember how Lovecraft described it? He wrote that it was some kinda gigantic amoeba monster made outta black, sparkly slime! With glowing, green pustules for eyes!” Stiles had clapped with glee, smirking. “Imagine that chasing you around in the Preserve at night!”

Stiles and Derek had to buy Jackson a new pair of Calvin Klein jeans after he became the unwitting guinea pig for the aforementioned mirage of terror. It was his own fault, really, for swaggering to one of the wards and kicking at it with an arrogant smirk, swearing that nothing Stiles visualized could ever scare him.

Spaghetti Monster bless the invention of smart phones and video-recording cameras, a-freaking-men.

Jackson still hadn’t quite forgiven Stiles by the time the pack—including Dad, Melissa, Parrish, and Scott’s now eight-month-old babies—came over for the first official pack dinner in the Stilinski-Hale home, two weeks after the relocation. Lydia, on the other hand, thought the shoggoth mirage was a stroke of genius, and wanted the same incursive wards for their mansion.

“Stiles,” she said, pinning him with those glinting, green eyes, “I want five of them. And Jackson will test them out.”

“Okay dokey, Lyds.”

Her husband wisely zipped his lips. Stiles wisely refrained from suggesting to Jackson to wear
diapers for those tests.

According to Derek, Scott—as the Alpha of Beacon Hills—was to sit at the head of the dinner table, while Dad—the human counterpart to Scott—sat at the other end. Scott objected with flailing hands and a grimace, until Derek explained that it was just for tonight, to formally christen the home with the Alpha’s blessings. It was probably not the appropriate time for Stiles to snigger at the lewd imagery Derek’s last comment elicited.

Scott, being his bro-bro, knew straightaway why he was sniggering.

“Eeewww, Stiles! I wouldn’t do that!” Scott’s expression of distaste became one of glazed-eyed rumination. “Wait—should I have done that at my own house when we moved in? Like, to mark my territory and stuff?”

“No, honey,” Kira said, shaking her head, her eyes round. “No.”

Derek pressed a hand to his face and released a long, forbearing sigh. Derek wasn’t fooling anybody, though. Everybody in this dining room knew Derek was an even bigger marshmallow of a werewolf than his Alpha, as proven by the palatial home Derek built for Stiles. And the fact that Derek was holding his hand while they were merely deciding on seating arrangements.

“Do I even want to know what you kids are talking about?” Dad asked, eyes twinkling.

“No, sir,” Scott exclaimed, shaking his head like his wife had, his eyes as round as hers had been. “No.”

“Well, Scott,” Melissa said, her left arm linked with Dad’s right. “If you intend to christen our house in the near future, please don’t aim at the asparagus and eggplants in the backyard garden. Noah and I really want to eat those.”

“Moooooom! Oh my god, no!”

Ken, in the twin stroller with his sister, giggled at his father’s horror. Isaac let out a brief snicker. Jackson snorted, and Parrish curbed an amused smile. Lydia arched a perfectly groomed and penciled eyebrow, her lips curled up. Kira covered her smile with a hand. Stiles turned to face Derek, and smothered his contorted face, his laughter in his werewolf mate’s navy sweater. He smacked a hand on Derek’s chest a few times. Against his temple, he felt Derek’s cheek bunch in a smile.

The seating arrangements were decided like so: Scott sat at the head of the table, with Kira to his left, Derek to his right. Dad sat at the other end, with Melissa to his left, Parrish to his right. Kimiko sat in a cushioned high chair to Kira’s left. To everyone’s pleasant surprise—especially Lydia—Jackson was a-okay with sitting next to Kimiko, who gave him the sweetest smile and patted his flushed cheek while everyone aww-ed. Stiles sat to Derek’s right. Ken sat in an identical high chair between him and Lydia. Isaac sat to Parrish’s right—and yeah, Stiles was about 99.99% sure that the blond werewolf and the dark-haired hellhound were giving each other the lustful eye when they thought no one noticed.

Heh. Derek owed him fifty bucks, and Scott owed him twenty. He owed Lydia ten bucks, if only because she was the first to even notice anything was going on between the two guys.

Dinner was an eclectic selection of dishes to cater to everyone’s tastes and dietary requirements: creamy carrot soup, oven-fried buttermilk chicken, eggplant parmigiana, chipotle-marinated steak fajitas, cauliflower steak with olives and salsa, garlic and herb spaghetti carbonara, boneless prime rib roast, seared scallop with mint and bacon, and to top it off, a frozen mud pie oozing semi-sweet
chocolate and coffee ice cream. To contend with the stomachs of four werewolves, a hellhound, a kitsune, two kitsune-werewolf babies, a banshee, and three adult humans, all the dishes were jumbo-sized.

Also, Dad was not to touch any of the red meat, and stick to the veggie dishes. Some chicken was acceptable.

“Aw, Stiles,” Scott said between large bites of a fajita. “Tonight’s a special occasion! Life is too short to not eat yummy red meat once in a while.”

Dad perked up and gazed across the table at Scott with starry eyes. On Dad’s plate were three slices of buttermilk chicken, some spaghetti carbonara, a cauliflower steak, and a few scallops.

“Yes,” Dad said, straight-faced. “Yes, I am in complete and utter agreement with this wise, wonderful young man who clearly cares about my dietary satisfaction.”

Stiles swallowed a mouthful of eggplant and parmesan, then said, “No, Dad! I saw your blood test results last week!” Stiles pointed a fork at Dad with wide eyes. “Your cholesterol went up by 0.5mg from the last test!”

Melissa’s lips quivered with mirth while Dad rolled his eyes and retorted, “It’s on the lowest end of the borderline high range! It improved from the previous test before that one!”

“By one mg!”

Derek was very, very fascinated with the abundant slices of prime rib roast and buttermilk chicken on his plate. Scott was just as fascinated with his glass of cold water, sipping it at a pace that a snail would mock. Isaac and Parrish were engrossed in a quiet conversation with each other. Lydia was spooning soup into Ken’s gaping mouth and smiling at him, and Kira was munching on a huge forkful of spaghetti while Kimiko hand-fed Jackson a segment of cauliflower from her tiny plate.

“I’m still doing Salad Fridays with you!” Dad squinted, then asked, “Did you eat your salad today, Stiles?”

“Yes, I did! You saw the video Derek sent you. I finished the whole thing!”

Stiles shoveled a spoonful of scallops and bacon into his mouth.

“Uh hm,” Dad said. “And did you eat anything else with it?”

“No!” Stiles exclaimed between his teeth, his cheeks bulging. He chewed and swallowed, then squinted at his father. “Did you?”

“No,” Dad replied, utterly straight-faced.

Stiles’s eyes narrowed. “Not even—a deep fried nugget from that new fast food place next to the station? That everyone’s been talking about and giving five-star reviews online?”

“No. Not one nugget.”

Scott’s shoulders shook silently as he devoured another fajita and a heap of spaghetti. Stiles squinted at Scott, then turned to Derek who was still very, very fascinated with the dwindling food on his plate.

“Derek, honey, is my dad lying?” Stiles drawled, a wide, fake smile pasted on his face. “Or do I
Derek sat up and gazed at him with a deadpan face to rival Dad’s. “I’m sorry, babe. This roast has caused me to develop a sudden case of extreme selective auditory attention. I can neither confirm or deny that my father-in-law, the esteemed sheriff of Beacon County who has armed deputies and an arsenal of weapons at his disposal, fibbed about eating a truly delicious nugget worth four-and-a-half stars.”

Scott let out a sound from his pursed lips that was an absurd fusion of a mouth-fart and a giggle. At the other end of the table, Parrish cleared his throat.

Stiles crossed his arms. He sucked in his lips, his lower face contorted, and yeah, it was probably not the best time for him to tumble head over heels in mad, perpetual love with his asshole comedian of a werewolf husband yet again. He needed to stay upset, damnit, not laugh!

“Not one nugget, huh?” Stiles squinted at Derek who stared back with twinkling eyes. He swiveled on his seat to squint at Dad. “Was it—” He widened his eyes until the whites were visible around their whisky-brown irises. “Half a nugget, hm?!"

Guffaws exploded out of Scott’s mouth. The contagious sound affected Isaac, then Parrish, causing both men to grin and Parrish to conceal his chuckle behind the back of his hand. Derek, wolfing down his dinner again, shook his head while his shoulders began to shake. Kira had an expression of innocence that rivaled Derek’s in its believability. Jackson was busy letting Kimiko use his hand as a chew toy for her gummy jaws of doom. Lydia stroked Ken’s fuzzy head with a soft smile, and Melissa was biting her lower lip, her eyes crinkled.

Stiles jabbed a victorious finger in Dad’s direction.

“Ah hah! I got you! You and your loopholes can’t prevail against me and my walking lie detectors!”

Everyone else save for the satiated babies cracked up into amused laughter when Dad glanced skyward and flung his hands up in frustration.

“Half a nugget, Stiles! Half a nugget. A chicken one! It’s not going to kill me—”

“We wrote and signed a contract! We shook hands over it!”

Dad jabbed the tip of his forefinger on the table in emphasis while exclaiming, “It wasn’t notarized by an attorney!”

“Oh, so we’re going there, are we, dear father?!”

Dad’s deadpan expression cracked into an amused smile that creased his flushed face.

“Sir,” Scott said, one finger raised in the air, and oh god, everyone close to Stiles were learning to be deadpan masters now, “at the risk of incurring your divine wrath and feeling first-hand the painful effects of your mighty arsenal of weapons, I gotta point out that my updated Best Friends Forever Contract with Stiles isn’t notarized by an attorney either.” Scott cleared his throat. “And Kira and I really, really want Stiles to continue babysitting the babies on the weekends.”

“For eighteen years,” Kira said, nodding sagely.

“We haven’t negotiated my wages yet,” Stiles said.

“Your wages is that I don’t strangle you for magically painting the walls of my clinic Barbie
pink with fat tanukis all over them!”

Kira smothered a laugh by biting her lower lip while wiping Kimiko’s mouth with a soft napkin.

Parrish turned to Isaac and stage-whispered, “He was the one who did that?”

“Fat tanukis, Jordan. With their giant balls hanging out,” Isaac stage-whispered back. “Who else would?”

Stiles gesticulated wildly with both hands while retorting, “You said, and I quote, ‘Stiles, make my clinic stand out, okay? I want people to see it and talk about it on the internet for years!’”

“I thought you knew that I meant a fresh coat of normal, professional colors! Not Japanese raccoon dogs flying around using their testicles for wings!”

As renewed laughter of amusement rang out in the dining room, Stiles pointed at Scott and yelled, “You got fifteen five-star ratings on Yelp just for that!”

Scott’s mouth opened, then shut. It opened again to say, “Okay, that is true, bro. But Mrs. Anderson also called me and said I was a total pervert, and that she was gonna tell her knitting club to stop sending their chihuahuas to me. So can you please remove the tanukis and put on an appropriate color?”

Stiles rolled his eyes. “Fine, you tanuki-hater. But we haven’t negotiated the wages for that yet.”

“The wages for that,” Dad interjected, holding a fork that speared a colossal hunk of prime rib roast, “is that I get to eat as much yummy red meat as I want tonight.”

“That doesn’t even make sense!” Stiles squealed.

Dad sank his teeth into the colossal hunk of red meat. More laughter rang out at Stiles’s exaggerated expression of outrage as Dad blissfully chewed and licked his oily lips. Stiles glanced down at Ken who glanced up at him with sweet brown eyes just like his mother’s. Stiles plucked the chubby baby out of the high chair, and settled him against his chest, face to face. He rubbed the baby’s back from shoulders to waist.

“You like the tanukis Uncle Stiles painted, don’t you, fluffy-puff?”

Ken stared into his crinkled eyes and gurgled.

“Stiles, he doesn’t even know what a tanuki is,” Scott said, and Stiles didn’t have to look at the corndog to know he had that schmaltzy smile while watching Stiles doting on his baby boy.

“You’re not a tanuki-hater like your dad, though, are you?” Stiles cooed, smiling when Ken’s rosy cheeks rounded with a big, jolly smile. He rubbed the tip of his nose with the baby’s. “No, you’re not. No, you’re not!”

Derek was staring at them. At him, with an even more schmaltzy expression that softened the edges of that handsome, stubbled face, that made something in the left side of Stiles’s chest skip a beat. Stiles shifted Ken so that the baby gazed at Derek.

“Ken, do you think Uncle Derek looks like a tanuki?” Stiles gazed at Derek too. His husband was now giving him that cute unimpressed look, those murder brows getting a light workout tonight as amused chuckles resounded in the room. Stiles made a face, then said, “Nah. He looks more like a giant Pomeranian doggie, doesn’t he?”
Ken’s contribution to the important discussion was a giggle and a wave of chunky arms. Then, Ken stretched those arms toward Derek, trying to grab Derek’s sweater. With a tender smile, Derek plucked the baby out of Stiles’s hands and settled the baby on his broad chest like a pro.

The vision should have been so mundane to Stiles by now, considering how often he and Derek babysat the twins. Instead, his cheeks heated up. That thing in the left side of his chest hammered, and he knew the supernatural beings in the room could hear it, even as it said to him, *Imagine if the baby was yours and your werewolf mate’s.*

“Ken,” Derek said, angling the smiling baby at Stiles. “Do you think Uncle Stiles looks like a giant Beagle doggie?”

Scott snickered the loudest. He pointed at Stiles with half a fajita, and said, “Yeah, you kinda do! You got the big brown eyes, the big paws, the barking—and you got the clumsiness down pat! And Beagles howl!”

“Thanks, buddy,” Stiles muttered, squinting at the grinning werewolf. He turned back to Ken, smiled at the happy baby, and cooed, “You think I’m the coolest uncle in the world, don’t you? I’m, like, a giant Alaskan Malamute, aren’t I?” He clawed at the air with both hands and growled. “Rrrawr!”

Ken erupted into a belly laugh, and Stiles growled again, baring his teeth.

“Uncle Stiles is so cute when he thinks he’s scary,” Derek said to Ken, deadpan. “Isn’t he?”

A riposte was hanging off Stiles’s tongue, ready to deploy and strike Derek on that five-head, but as he opened his mouth, Derek drew Ken closer and planted a raspberry of a kiss on the baby boy’s plump cheek. The sight made all the words bolt from Stiles’s tongue.

*Imagine, Mieczysław, if the baby was yours and your werewolf mate’s.*

Stiles was still staring at Derek when Derek handed the baby to Scott. Scott proceeded to kiss-attack his squealing son, attracting the pack’s attention away from Derek and Stiles. Derek gazed back at him with crinkled, sun-warm eyes.

“What?” Derek murmured.

Stiles had to blink to dismiss the alluring vision of Derek cuddling a brown-haired, hazel-eyed baby, who wrinkled a nose that was just like Stiles’s, who smiled with lips just like Derek’s. Under the table, Stiles reached for Derek’s hand and grasped it on top of a jeans-clad, muscular thigh. Derek criss-crossed their fingers. His platinum wedding ring, lustrous as the day it was bestowed upon him, was tucked between Derek’s third and fourth fingers.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” Stiles whispered.

He knew how inadequate the compliment was, how he could compose Miltonian odes extolling all the facets of Derek and still fall short. Derek’s murder brows lowered in an outward glower, but they just made Stiles’s lips quirk up in a fond smile.

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop stealing the words out of my mouth.”

Stiles’s smile expanded. He leaned forward to press his lips on Derek’s in a soft peck.
“Nope. Not gonna stop.” He touched the tip of his nose to his husband’s. “Nobody orders me around, least of all you, Sweet-wolf.”

“Stubborn like a Beagle, too,” Derek muttered, and Stiles chuckled, his face aching from his grin, his heart free from darkness.

Two more years, and Stiles woke up one day in his home in the Preserve a thirty-year-old man. The big 3-0 didn’t petrify him like it would have many people in this world: Derek had, after all, a six years’ head-start on him, and instead of diminishing, Derek’s beauty and charm had simply increased with time. Derek’s arms were as solid and sturdy as ever around him under the blankets. Derek’s hirsute, intact chest pillowed his back. Derek’s long legs entwined with his.

Derek was there next to him every morning, holding him close with those large hands. Holding him in one real, strong piece. Still breakable, still scarred, still vulnerable at specific points.

Stiles would shut his eyes and sometimes still see those rows of jagged rocks in the distance, still swim against the black, icy waves that towed him toward them and threatened to dash him against them. But Derek would tap those adroit fingers upon his skin, whisper that unwavering vow into his ear. And he would feel the sun shine upon him once more. He breathed easy. He kept on swimming.

One, two, three, four, five.

There you go. We’ll never let it in again. We got each other.

Just you and me, babe, against the world. For all time.

Stiles carefully rolled over until he was facing his sleeping husband. A gap in the curtains let in a narrow shaft of morning sunshine, and it streaked across the blankets, across their lower legs. The light was enough for Stiles to scrutinize Derek’s tranquil features. He did so with a tiny smile, content to just look, just see, and know them again.

There were a few more creases at the corners of Derek’s eyes. Two fine, permanent creases on that high forehead. A single blackhead dotted the side of Derek’s nose. Derek’s stubble needed a bit of trimming unless he wanted it to become a full-fledged beard, and Stiles adored it either way: the sensation of Derek’s facial hair scraping his inner thighs still revved him up like very few other things could.

He watched Derek slumber for a couple of minutes more. Listened to the air being inhaled and exhaled through Derek’s parted lips. Felt Derek’s heart beating on, and on, under his palm.

He was humbled even now, that Derek trusted him enough to sleep so soundly in his presence.

He kissed the smooth skin between Derek’s dark, thick eyebrows. It took some creative wriggling and painstaking transfer of Derek’s arms from around his torso to his pillow to liberate himself from his werewolf mate’s embrace. Over four years since they began sleeping together, Derek still clung onto him like a ferocious limpet, refusing to release him until he threatened to piss all over Derek.

Stiles was never, ever going to tire of Derek’s possessiveness. He never wanted Derek to let him go, and he sure as hell was never going to let go of his husband.
Unless it was to piss.

That was the—*ahem*—golden rule.

Oh, as Stiles expected, the skin between Derek’s eyebrows furrowed. Derek huffed. Hugged Stiles’s pillow closer to his chest and face. One deep and long sniff, and the furrowed skin smoothened again. Derek slumbered on.

Stiles yielded to the urge to kiss his adorable werewolf on the forehead. He did it twice, on different spots. He swung his legs off the bed, then plucked his white t-shirt and navy sweatpants from the floor to don them.

After performing his usual ablutions in the en suite bathroom, he tiptoed barefoot out of the bedroom. He shuffled down the hallway, down the wooden stairs with its Craftsman-style banister that Derek had constructed himself. His mouth gaped open in a humongous yawn. He scratched his belly while he shuffled into the sunlit kitchen.

The massive picture windows that lined the metal counter tops were Stiles’s favorite feature of the kitchen: they allowed so much sunshine in, and they brightened the hardwood cabinets and their silver handles. He and Derek had a spectacular view of their backyard and the woods beyond the fence whenever they dined in here.

Stiles snapped his fingers. They sparked gold, and the bag of coffee grounds sitting on the kitchen island counter next to the hefty black-and-silver coffee maker poured its contents into a filter basket that floated in the air. Stiles sauntered to the stainless steel fridge and took out butter, cream, a carton of eggs, a bottle of fresh milk. Bacon from the freezer. The coffee maker’s water tank filled to the max with another snap of fingers and spark of gold. Stiles laid the ingredients onto the kitchen island counter, then snapped his fingers again. The coffee maker whirred to life.

Six minutes: that was how long Derek had before Stiles got the first cup of delish, life-giving coffee.

Stiles turned to the counter next to the drop-in stainless steel sink with its pull-down faucet. He reached for the wooden rack of seasonings, for the bottles of salt and pepper. His right hand was inches away from the salt when he froze in place. He stared down with stark eyes at the translucent bottle and the white granules inside it.

Someone else was in the kitchen. Standing behind him. Standing in front of the door leading out to the herringboned, red-brick back patio.

It wasn’t Derek.

Stiles opened his third-eye, and it informed him that the trespasser was a man. A warlock, maybe, cloaked from further scrutiny by magic. Someone who’d somehow managed to pass through all of Stiles’s wards without a single alarm blaring in his brain and provoking his magic. The only people who could do that were those Stiles had instructed the wards to deem *safe*: namely, the pack.

Everyone else, regardless of how long they’d been acquainted with the pack, triggered the alarms pronto.

And for the trespasser to materialize *inside* the house? A house magically warded from roof down to its foundations?

Whoever he was, he had to be as powerful as Stiles. Or more.

He heard the man’s clothes rustling. Heard him let out a humming sound under his breath, as if he was glancing around at his surroundings, and liked what he saw.
Stiles stared down at the salt. He slowly lowered his hand to the counter. Two feet away to his left was the stainless steel knife block loaded with six kitchen knives that Derek had purchased last year. Stiles’s eyes glowed gold as the longest knife, an eight-inch blade, slid itself out of its slot.

*Five. Four. Three. Two. One—*

The knife levitated horizontally in the air.

He lifted his right hand off the counter.

Time slowed as he pivoted around to confront the trespasser. It sped up along with his heartbeat as the knife flew through the air, following the fierce swing of his right arm, a lethal projectile aimed at the frail flesh of a long, pale throat. At the same time, he flung up a defensive, invisible shield in front of himself, his eyes glowing brighter.

And the knife—stopped dead in the air between him and the trespasser.

Stiles opened his hand wide and propelled more golden energy into the knife. It shook. It struggled to pierce through the neon-green tendrils of magic holding it in place, an unstoppable force having met an immovable object.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! I come in peace, pal!”

Stiles staggered back at the other man’s agonizingly familiar voice. The glow ebbed from his wide eyes. He lowered his arm, the magical shield, but the knife still hovered in the air, girdled in golden and neon-green tendrils.

“No need to whip out the blades! Unless, uh, this is how you guys welcome people in your universe. Which is kinda new to me, but hey, I’d really rather not become flayed human steak, you know?”

He gaped at the other man facing him. At the skinny-fingered hands raised palms out in the unambiguous gesture of goodwill. At the man’s dark, fluffy hair streaked with gray and white. The moles that dotted a slightly creased face tattooed around the eyes and temples with angular, light brown motifs. Those crinkled, whisky-brown, youthful eyes. That familiar nose wrinkled in amusement, and that familiar, wide smile that he would see in photographs of his own face.

He was staring at his own face.

Except this guy—this alternate version of him from another alternate universe?—had to be much older than he was. Ten years older? Twenty?

“As you can see, my very hunky and irresistible friend,” the other man said, gesturing with both hands at his own body, “you and I have a lot in common.”

Stiles gaped at the other man’s black jacket that glittered neon-green in intermittent flashes, as if it was alive and communicating with its owner. He gaped at the black, full-body, neoprene-like suit that terminated above black tactical boots rimmed with blinking, green buttons.

Behind him, the coffee maker beeped. The rich scent of the dark brew in its glass pot wafted through the air to Stiles’s nose. Neither he or his alternate self acknowledged the now soundless machine.

“Yeah.” Stiles raised his head to stare at those angular facial tattoos that moved like they were also alive. “I’m about a hundred percent sure I don’t have a superhero outfit like that.”

His alternate self grinned at him. Small wrinkles framed his mouth.
“What, this? This is regular fashion where I come from.” His alternate self pointed at his t-shirt and sweatpants. “Is that what superheroes wear in this world?”

Stiles snorted. His shoulders slumped, and his hands loosened at his sides. His racing heartbeat started to slow down.

“Uh, no. This is regular fashion where we are. And I’m not a superhero.”

His alternate self was abruptly gazing at him with solemn yet warm eyes.

“If you’re anything like me—somehow I doubt that.”

The knife was still hovering in the air between them. The neon-green tendrils receded then faded away. With a hand motion, Stiles sent the knife hurtling to the side, landing with a clanging noise on a metal counter. His alternate self tilted his head in a wordless sign of thanks.

Stiles stood motionless while his alternate self inspected him from head to foot. Those tattoo-encircled eyes lingered on his face.

“Huh.” An amused smile spread across his alternate self’s face. “My Big Bad was right. I really did have such a baby face, even at thirty.”

Big Bad?

Who was that?

Stiles’s throat constricted when the answer occurred to him, in flashing images of a young innocent in a red hood, of an enormous, ferocious creature on four sinewy limbs stalking its unsuspecting prey in the woods.

“Your Big Bad? You mean—your big, bad wolf?” he rasped. He took a step forward. “Derek Hale? Your Derek?”

The smile that graced his alternate self’s face was now an affectionate one, a smile that stripped decades away. The same one he’d see in photographs in which he was gazing at his own Derek, as if there was nothing else in his universe.

“Yeah. Derek, my Big Bad. He’s—”

A resonant thump within the house sent Stiles swiveling toward the kitchen entrance. He swiveled around to glance at the knife on the metal counter. Oh god, the noise must have woken Derek up. Derek must have heard his alternate self’s heartbeat and voice, heard his heartbeat, and leaped from the stair landing to the first floor, thinking he was in danger—

Thunderous footsteps announced Derek’s rapid arrival seconds before his livid werewolf mate stampeded into the kitchen in nothing but dark red boxer-briefs. Derek’s fangs and claws were fully bared. Derek skidded to a halt and released a tremendous roar of fury that still managed to put the unfeigned fear of gods in Stiles.

It was also probably—no, really the wrong time to get a semi over how gorgeous and glorious his werewolf husband was, sprinting to him without hesitation, thinking only about protecting his human mate from harm at whatever cost to himself.

Derek’s roar cut off like a song paused. He staggered back even more than Stiles had, his hazel eyes wide with shock, his claws and fangs retracting.
His alternate self was totally unafraid of Derek, even after that up-close display of werewolf aggression. And why would he be, if he had his own Derek Hale? It made far more sense for his alternate self to be grinning like a complete dumbass at Derek.

His alternate self let out a pleased sigh, then said, “Man, it’s been a long time since I saw my werewolf with so much dark hair.”

Derek appeared to be stunned silly, standing ramrod straight, his lower jaw sagging. To be fair, it’d been four years since he and Stiles encountered an alternate version of Stiles from another universe. And this guy was definitely not Przemysław—Stiles had guessed Przemysław’s age to be similar to his, or several years older at most. Przemysław was dead.

Who was this guy? Where did he come from? And why was he here now?

With arched eyebrows, this alternate version glanced down at Derek’s groin, and said, “Hm. I’m pretty sure my Derek had the same kinda underwear back in my techno-mage school days.” He glanced at Derek’s face with an impish grin, identical to Stiles’s. “And his didn’t leave anything to imagination either, big fella.”

Derek blushed as red as his underwear from forehead to neck. Stiles’s lips quivered into a small, amused smile. He stretched out his left arm toward Derek, and Derek darted to his side to wrap both arms around him in a protective embrace. Derek nuzzled his neck. Sniffed him, making sure he was all right. He wrapped his own arms around Derek’s naked torso. Rubbed reassuring circles on his werewolf’s back.

“Aww.”

They turned in unison to face his alternate self. Derek still had one arm around him, clutching him close. His alternate self was still grinning.

“Man, this is cool! It’s like watching one of our old holo-vids at home,” he said, gesticulating with both hands at them. “But you’re actual flesh-and-blood! And I dunno what’s gonna happen next!”

“You guys have holograms you can touch and talk to?” Stiles asked, smiling with awe.

“Yep. We’ve had that magi-tech for a couple of centuries. You guys don’t, huh?”

Stiles made a face. “Only in sci-fi TV shows and movies.”

Stiles turned his head to look at Derek. Derek was frowning at the single-hung window next to the back patio door. Through it at something outside. Or someone.

His alternate self glanced at Derek, then rolled those crinkled, whisky-brown eyes. He spun around to face the window and wow, did this other version of himself have a fabulous bubble-butt in that skintight outfit or what—

“Oh my god, are you gonna keep lurking outside in the flower bushes?” his alternate self hollered, arms akimbo. “Get your fat ass in here already, Stalker-wolf!”

The silver knob of the back patio door rotated. The door swung open without a sound.

Stiles blinked at the empty doorway after his alternate self stepped aside. Derek was still frowning. Glowering at the doorway, seeing—or hearing, or smelling something that Stiles couldn’t. When Stiles opened his third-eye, all he saw was a hazy, translucent humanoid shape in the doorway.
His alternate self rolled his eyes again. The angular, light brown tattoos around them were glowing neon-green within their borders. It was such a badass-looking effect to Stiles. Could he get the same glowing, moving tattoos for himself using his own magic?

“Derek, be polite and show yourself. You are way too old for puppy training.”

What happened next, Stiles could only describe as clear, viscous liquid sluicing off a human body in layers from head to toe. His gaze followed the waterfall-like effect down to the floor. Then, he skimmed his eyes up a muscular, tall figure attired in a similar full-body, neoprene-like suit and tactical boots. Unlike his alternate self’s plain black suit, the suit worn by the alternate version of Derek had those angular motifs that glowed neon-green and seemed engraved into the arms, chest and legs of the suit. Alternate Derek didn’t wear a jacket, and wow to the nth level, the suit might as well be a second skin, flaunting every bulging muscle to Stiles’s round eyes.

But what truly mesmerized Stiles were alternate Derek’s face and hair: the werewolf looked exactly like his own Derek, except for the visible creases around warm hazel eyes, that bold, straight nose, and on that high forehead. They weren’t regular wrinkles—they were laugh lines, and they manifested in their full splendor when alternate Derek gazed at him and smiled.

He gave the other Derek a soft smile even as his throat shrank down to a pinhole again, as his chest ached with something searing, something gratifying. Now he knew what Derek was going to look like in a few decades’ time, with laugh lines born from decades of contentment, of love. Now he knew what Derek was going to look like with a full head of salt-and-pepper hair.

And who would have thought that salt-and-pepper stubble would be so hot on Derek?

Alternate Derek’s hazel eyes crinkled even more, as if he knew what Stiles was thinking. He probably did know what Stiles was thinking, since his alternate self was him in another universe.

Stiles turned to glance at his own Derek—and he had to suck in his lips to not burst out laughing at Derek’s wide-eyed, wide-mouthed expression of absolute astonishment. Yeah, this wasn’t Stiles’s first rodeo with meeting alternate versions of himself, but it was Derek’s first time. In the early morning, no less. Before coffee. In his underwear that left nothing to imagination.

Alternate Derek stepped into the kitchen, and the door shut behind him. His expression went deadpan when he locked eyes with Derek. He scrutinized his younger self from head to toe.

“Damn. I am hot.”

Alternate Stiles glanced at his straight-faced werewolf with wide eyes of outrage.

“Did you just check yourself out?”

Derek’s face reddened even further. Stiles couldn’t stop his amused chuckle as Derek not-so-subtly shuffled behind him to use him as a human screen. He reached behind to grasp Derek’s hips, smiling to himself.

Alternate Derek smacked the back of his left hand on alternate Stiles’s chest and, oh—he was wearing a platinum ring on the fourth finger. So was alternate Stiles. They were married, too.

“Technically, I’m checking out another version of me, not me. And did you not check out your other self minutes ago?”

Alternate Stiles rolled his eyes, but his face was also flushed and his lips trembled with mirth as he retorted, “It was a mutual checking out totally devoid of sexual objectification, thank you very much.
“And correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re the one reaping all the benefits of my hot, muscular bod, yes?”

“Well, duh, of course I am, being your mate and all—”

“For thirty-three years, five months, twenty-five days and counting—”

“No, it’s thirty-three years, five months, twenty-nine days and counting, because meeting you in your wolf form in the Preserve before I met your human form in town counts!”

“The point is, I know and you know how physically attractive I am. Therefore, I was just stating a fact when I said that this version of myself—” Alternate Derek gestured at Derek with a hand. “Is hot.”

Alternate Stiles pressed two fingers to his pursed lips, his eyes narrowed. “I—find myself unable to refute any of those statements.”

Alternate Derek’s smug expression was so similar to Derek’s that Stiles couldn’t help but grin. Watching their alternate selves banter was like watching his distant future with his Derek unfurl before his very eyes. If either of them looked half as good in twenty years’ time as these guys, they were going to break so many hearts just by existing.

Alternate Derek glanced at him with that smug expression, and Stiles’s grin expanded. He felt his own Derek’s temple and cheek touch his, felt Derek’s body press up to his back while his werewolf peered over his shoulder.

“Stiles.” Alternate Derek gazed at his own Stiles again, those murder brows lowered in a chiding frown. “Radosław, you still haven’t introduced us to them.”

“Excuse you, Whiny-wolf, I was going to—but he threw a knife at me! I thought he wanted to kill first, talk later!”

Derek growled and moved to stand next to Stiles again, firing up those hazel lasers of doom at their alternate selves. Stiles’s grin transformed into an expression that was a combo of a frown and a wince. He grabbed Derek’s hand and gripped it hard.

Sshh, they probably don’t know about Przemysław, Big Guy. It’s not their fault.

Derek couldn’t read minds, but he understood Stiles’s squeezing of his hand. He stayed where he was at Stiles’s side.

“Hey, you can’t blame me for that! You passed all my wards without setting them off and popped outta nowhere! You freaked me out!” Stiles narrowed his eyes. “Did it occur to you that maybe you could have knocked on the front door?”

Alternate Derek raised still-dark, thick eyebrows at his Stiles. “You should have thought of that.”

“Do you recall what happened in Universe XDT-4189 when we did that?!?” his alternate self—Radosław exclaimed, gesticulating wildly with both hands just like Stiles would. “Caveman-you came at me with an axe! And caveman-me tried to give my head an extra hole with his spear!”

“You walked into their cave and made all your tattoos and eyes glow—”
“I couldn’t see inside! I was only being polite by being my usual radiant self and announcing my grand arrival!” Radosław flung his hands up. “And it was a good thing I did! Can you imagine what they would have tried to do if I’d walked in on them while they were already knotted?!"

Alternate Derek opened his mouth for several speechless seconds, then shut it. Then he opened it again, and said, “That caveman version of you did look hot in that animal skin thong and stone jewelry.”

Radosław’s entire face lit up with a delighted grin. It was so contagious that Stiles smiled, while he reeled from the barrage of mind-bending information: his alternate self’s first name was Radosław, another Slavic name of Polish origin, and Stiles had no doubt whatsoever that Radosław’s mother had given it to him. Radosław somehow traveled to different universes to visit alternate versions of himself and his Derek. And there was apparently a universe out there in which he and Derek were cavemen in love who lived in violent, wedded bliss.

Now where was he going to find an animal skin thong and stone jewelry in Beacon Hills? Maybe it was time for some more online shopping. He did have a rather diverse collection of bookmarks for online stores that catered to specific fetishes—

“He did, didn’t he?” Radosław swiveled and peered over his own shoulder in an attempt to look at his truly rotund butt. “But his ass isn’t as big and bouncy as mine, though.”

Everyone stared at Radosław’s butt. Then, alternate Derek glanced at Stiles and Derek once more. The two Dereks stared at each other with deadpan faces and twinkling eyes.

“Some things never change, huh?” Derek said.

“Nope,” alternate Derek replied.

“Hey,” both Stiles said simultaneously, smacking the back of their hands on their werewolf mates’ broad chests and squinting at them.

The four men glanced at each other, Stiles and Radosław with wide eyes, the two Dereks with straight faces. Then, Radosław tossed his head back in a joyful cackle, and Stiles cracked into gleeful laughter of his own: Radosław lived up to his name as a man who celebrated happiness. Both Dereks wore fond expressions while they gazed at their respective human mates.

“Stiles,” alternate Derek said to Radosław, once they’d calmed down. “Introductions?”

“Okay, okay.” Radosław cleared his throat, then gave Stiles and Derek a huge megawatt of a grin. “Greetings, Stiles and Derek of Universe KQL-9910! We hail from Universe APH-1000, which is trillions of lightyears away from yours, but thanks to my mind-blowingly powerful magi-tech that can create traversable wormholes, we can visit any universe we come across on the Cosmo-grid.” Radosław contorted his face. “It just means I end up gorging myself like a Scrolkel pig for a month afterward. It’s not a pretty sight.”

Stiles’s jaw sagged. Like Przemysław, Radosław could create traversable wormholes with his magic—or as he called it, his magi-tech. What were the chances that he could do it too? And did this mean that Radosław was more powerful than Przemysław?

Stiles couldn’t comprehend the magnitude of those overwhelming possibilities. They threatened to break his brain with pure awesomeness.

Radosław made a grand, waving gesture with both arms at alternate Derek, and said, “This is my werewolf mate and supreme sex god, Commander Derek Hale of the starship SS Beacon currently
helmed by Captain Scott McCall.” Radosław slapped a skinny-fingered hand on his own chest. “And I am Lieutenant Radosław ‘Stiles’ Stilinski, head techno-mage of the SS Beacon, voted the sexiest techno-mage in the universe for seven consecutive years.” He arched an eyebrow. “Oh, yes.” He pointed two finger guns at Stiles and Derek. “And you can call me Rad, because—” He winked, making a clicking sound with his tongue. “I’m rad.”

Alternate Derek let out a forbearing sigh that sounded thirty-three years old.

Stiles bit his lower lip hard. He was torn between being dumbstruck by the introduction and hurling himself at Radosław to give the grinning man a bone-crushing hug. Was it too vain of him to fall in love with an alternate version of himself? In another universe, he was a badass lieutenant on a starship. Like Hikaru Sulu in Star Trek!

Derek was staring at Radosław with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. Derek raised a forefinger, then said, “How many Dereks have tried to choke you before you got to the end of that introduction?”

A tremor ran through alternate Derek’s dark pink lips. Radosław’s mouth opened in what Stiles was certain was going to be a monumental rant, and he smacked Derek on the chest, swallowing down an amused laugh.

“Excuse you, that was amazing!”

Radosław shut his mouth. Stared at Stiles, then pointed at him and turned to his Derek.

“I like him, Big Bad. He’s my favorite one. I want to take him home.”

“That’s what you said about the merman version of you.” Alternate Derek rolled his eyes. “You were so crazy about that big, frilly rainbow tail, you wanted one for yourself—”

“It was freaking beautiful! Did you see it when we went surfing with his Derek, and they surfed that gigantic wave together in that merfolk mating dance?! ”

“No.” Huh, alternate Derek’s eyebrows looked even more caterpillar-ish than Derek’s when they lowered and joined like that. “I was cartwheeling in the water. And I vomited half the sea on the beach.”

Radosław hugged his Derek with both arms from the side, squishing his smooth cheek to a bristly one.

“Aww, it wasn’t so bad. At least you now know that you can pull off a rainbow tie-dye tank top and sarong combo!”

Stiles was still reeling from the fact that somewhere out there lived a merman Stiles who was mated to a surfer Derek when he glanced at Derek with wide eyes. Derek looked like he didn’t know whether to cry or flail in horror at being seen in such a fugly clothing combo. His shoulders shaking, Stiles slid his arms around Derek’s waist and rested his head on his werewolf’s chest, concealing his smile in the dark curls there. Yeah, Radosław was speaking from a very biased position there.

He heard alternate Derek clear his throat. He raised his head to see Radosław rolling his eyes at alternate Derek but nodding after that.

“Okay, okay, no more diversions!” Radosław gazed at him and Derek, then said, “Okay, look, the reason we’ve been visiting all these universes—including yours—is because we’re tracking this weird trail of—” Radosław made a face and waved one hand in circles. “It’s not quite magi-tech. It’s more like—” Radosław glanced at Stiles. “Your powers. Except it’s this brilliant blue color instead of
Stiles’s mirth died an immediate death. His smile fell from his face. He felt Derek’s eyes on him, but he stared at Radosław instead.

“Yeah,” Radosław said, his solemn expression mirroring Stiles’s. “You know exactly what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

Stiles nodded, but said nothing. Radosław took this as his cue to further elucidate the situation.

“Yeah, see, I started detecting these anomalous traversable wormholes on the Cosmo-grid about—five years ago?”

“Yep,” alternate Derek said, his expression also solemn.

“Yeah, five years ago. They popped outta nowhere, simultaneously, in at least a hundred universes that we know of.” Radosław’s eyes widened, and he raised both forefingers and said, “What was really nuts was, although I could detect those anomalous wormholes? When I tried to open my own to travel to those universes, I couldn’t. Something was blocking me.” Radosław waved his forefingers in the air. “And lemme tell you, the last time anything was powerful enough to mess with my magi-tech like that?” He clenched his hands into fists and lowered them. “It was the fucking Nogitsune, after it possessed me and used my magi-tech against me.”

Stiles felt Derek’s large hand grasping his nape. He had no idea what was showing on his face, but Radosław and his Derek had a front-row view of it. Radosław’s face paled. He stared at Stiles for a minute that felt like a millennia, his whisky-brown eyes glinting with flecks of neon-green, the tattoos around them shifting with agitation.

“Shit fuck Astorgrath on an imploding nebula,” Radosław muttered. “There’s a Nogitsune in this universe too, isn’t there?” At Stiles’s nod, he asked, “When did it get to you?”

Stiles’s throat pricked. He swallowed hard, then said, “I was a teenager.” He turned his head to look at Derek who gazed back at him. “If it wasn’t for Derek, I would have—” He stared into Derek’s unguarded eyes that showed no judgment. “The Nogitsune would have killed more people. And I would have probably died too.”

Alternate Derek’s expression was compassionate as he gazed at Stiles. Radosław let out a heavy breath, then gritted his teeth, his eyes softening.

“I was twenty-two. On board the Beacon when Dad was still its captain.” Before Stiles could get over his amazement that Dad was once a starship captain in another universe, Radosław turned to alternate Derek with crinkled, warm eyes and said, “If it wasn’t for my beautiful, brave Big Bad, I would have been shot out the airlock and died one nasty death in the path of a coronal mass ejection. But he helped Scott and the pack kill the Nogitsune. He saved me.” Radosław combed his fingers through his Derek’s salt-and-pepper hair. “You just dunno how to give up being my savior, do you?”

Stiles and Derek gazed at each other again. Derek’s eyes were tender like his, and Derek’s fingers caressed the back of his head and neck. Derek was surely thinking about that magically-reinforced prison cell too, thinking about the way their foreheads had touched, the way their tears had mingled and tasted the same in what should have been their final hour of life.

_Why do you keep saving me? How many more times are you gonna be my savior?_ 

_You’re worth suffering for._
“Always,” Stiles whispered, and Derek’s stunning hazel eyes crinkled with remembrance, with sun-warmth. Derek’s hand slid down from his nape to the middle of his back.

“Look, I don’t wanna freak you two out,” Radosław said. Stiles and Derek glanced at him, and he rolled his eyes at himself and muttered, “Anymore than I already did. But, anyway—about a year after those anomalous wormholes appeared, whatever power was blocking me from accessing those universes disappeared.”

“Four years ago?” Derek asked Radosław, who nodded.

Stiles and Derek glanced at each other once more. They both knew what happened four years ago that would cause that seemingly mysterious power to vanish. In fact, they were the only two people left alive to know first-hand what happened in that warehouse in Salem, Oregon.

“My Derek and I have visited about thirty-one universes so far, and—” Radosław’s lips pressed thin into a wan line. The tattoos around his eyes swirled into a configuration of spikes. “Whoever created those wormholes? He’s been hunting and killing versions of us in these universes. And last I checked, the Cosmo-grid showed the weird trail of power ending in this particular universe.” Radosław glanced at Stiles, then at Derek. “So, any chance you two know what happened? Did the fucker come after you guys too?”

Alternate Derek stood at Radosław’s side, his right-hand man observing them in silence with keen eyes. Radosław glanced at Stiles again.

“Radosław,” Stiles said. “Your mom gave you that name, right?”

Radosław’s lips curved into a small, soft smile.

“Yeah. She said I was the happiest baby she’d ever seen, and she wanted a name that was worthy of that.”

Stiles’s lips curved into a bittersweet smile.

“My mom named me Mieczysław. And the warlock who created those wormholes?” Stiles’s smile wilted. “I’m guessing his mom was the one who named him Przemysław.”

Alternate Derek gave Radosław a sharp glance. Radosław stared at Stiles, wide-eyed, expressionless. Stiles stared back, and he allowed his alternate self to see the grief in his eyes.

“Why—” A muscle jumped in Radosław’s jaw. “Why the fuck would one of us go around killing other versions of—”

“It wasn’t him. Yeah, he was the one who created those wormholes, but he wasn’t the one who wanted to kill the other versions of us and Derek.” Stiles shut his eyes, then opened them again, sinking his teeth into his lower lip. “It was the Nogitsune that possessed him.”

It was Radosław who shut his eyes now, averting his face, looking every microsecond of his age. Stiles lowered his eyes. Derek’s hand stroked his back from between his shoulder blades down to his waist.

“The trail stopped here because I killed it four years ago, in a warehouse in Salem, Oregon,” Stiles rasped, staring down at Radosław’s jacket that glittered neon-green in ripples. “And I ended up killing Przemysław too. The Nogitsune had bound itself to his body after—after killing his Derek in front of him. It completely destroyed his Derek’s body. Przemysław showed me what happened via his memories.”
Stiles raised his head to look Radosław in the eye again.

“I think—I think Przemysław created those wormholes only because he was trying to find other versions of us. Find another Stiles who was powerful enough to defeat the Nogitsune in him. And maybe even—” Stiles’s throat worked in a painful swallow. “Bring his Derek back to life.”

Radosław’s heavy-lidded eyes were glistening.

“That’s impossible, kid,” he murmured to Stiles. “No techno-mage in history has ever succeeded in bringing someone back to life once they passed the Veil.” One end of his lips curled up in a dejected smile. “Trust me, I know.”

Stiles stared at Radosław, his eyes reflecting the sorrow in Radosław’s. He knew right then and there that his alternate self had also lost his mother. Lost her, and then attempted to resurrect her. If he’d had the same level of magic as Radosław when Mom died, he would have done the same, without a second thought. He would have.

“So, that Nogitsune,” alternate Derek said, “was targeting the other versions of us to sabotage his efforts?”

Stiles glanced at him, and replied, “Worse. For revenge.” Stiles then glanced at Radosław. “It wanted to—hurt every version of us it could find. For trying to control it and use its powers to end some war with the Argents of his world.”

Uttering that surname was like throwing an ignited match into a lake of liquid fuel: alternate Derek’s fangs dropped, in a rumbling growl edged with anger. With anguish.

Stiles and Radosław glanced at him as those fangs retracted quickly behind an embarrassed expression, Stiles with wide eyes, Radosław with commiserative ones. Stiles glanced at his own Derek, and he saw how wan Derek’s face had become while Derek stared at his alternate self.

“How many?” Derek rasped.

The two Dereks gazed at each other with impassive faces and weary eyes. Stiles slid his arm behind Derek in a gentle hug. He glanced at Radosław to see that Radosław had done the same with his own werewolf mate, and it brought a tiny, empathetic smile to his lips.

“In my universe, Laura and Cora survived.” Alternate Derek’s creased face softened. “Laura’s a grandmother now. Retired from the Alpha Corps after an attack on her starship. Cora’s a techno-mage in Beacon Hills. She specializes in healing werewolves and other shapeshifters.”

Derek’s throat bobbed. Derek blinked hard. That devastating smile that Stiles hadn’t seen for so long on his werewolf husband’s face curled up those dark pink lips.

“I’m glad,” Derek said, and no one pointed out how hoarse his voice was. “In this universe, I’m the only Hale werewolf left.”

Radosław and alternate Derek gazed at each other, and Radosław’s eyes were—twinkling.

What the hell?

“Mmm, I wouldn’t be so quick to say that,” Radosław said to Derek, when he and alternate Derek were gazing at them again.

Derek’s forehead furrowed like Stiles’s with puzzlement.
“What do you mean?” Derek asked.

Radosław pointed a forefinger at Derek, arching one eyebrow. “You may be the only one now. But!” Radosław pointed the forefinger skyward. “Give it a year, or a year and a half from now, and —” Radosław gave Stiles a meaningful glance, pointing the forefinger at him. “You will definitely find out what I mean earlier than that.”

Stiles made a face, and said, “Wha? What do you mean by that?”

“Radosław. You know the rules about sharing your future visions. Lady Lydia and the Council of Mages were explicit about that to you.”

Stiles gaped at alternate Derek, his brain stuck like a broken record on two specific words. Radosław could see the future?

“C’mon, Derek, it’s his birthday today! And it doesn’t count if it’s not our own universe!” Radosław flailed his long arms in his determination to win over his frowning werewolf mate. “My visions are rare enough as it is! Don’t you think they deserve something nice? They’re us in a different universe! And this badass here stopped another Nogitsune from causing more harm! Lemme give him a birthday present.”

Alternate Derek let out a forbearing sigh that was even longer than the previous one. But his hazel eyes were also twinkling. His lips quirked up in a tiny smile as he made an exaggerated hand motion in Stiles’s direction, permission for Radosław. Radosław grinned at his werewolf, then leaned in to plant a kiss on a cheek with salt-and-pepper stubble.

The sight made Stiles’s lips quirk up in a tiny smile as well. He knew, deep in the lit recesses of his heart, that he and his Derek were going to love each other as much when their hair turned as gray and white as their alternate selves’.

“Yeah, that room upstairs you’re thinking of turning into a study?”

Stiles and Derek stared at Radosław. Then they glanced at each other. Then they stared at Radosław again.

“Uhm,” Stiles said, his forehead furrowed once more. “Okay?”

Radosław wagged his forefinger in the air. “Don’t bother doing that. You’ll be having a blast turning it into a cute, little bedroom soon enough.”

“For who?” Derek asked. He looked as baffled as Stiles felt.

Radosław glanced at alternate Derek with a small, impish smile and twinkling eyes surrounded by tattoos swirling into playful loops. Alternate Derek lowered his eyes, but that tiny, affectionate smile still graced his handsome face.

Radosław gazed at Stiles, and said, “If there’s anything I know about being Stiles Stilinski, it’s that we just dunno how to give up when we wanna make our loved ones happy.” Radosław glanced at Derek, then at his own Derek with tender eyes. “Especially our werewolf mates who’ve lost so much.”

Stiles had nothing to say in objection to that. It was the truth.

But it still didn’t enlighten him or Derek about their supposed future that Radosław apparently saw in a vision. How reliable were those visions? Were they ever wrong?
“Okay, okay, birthday boy. For you, I’ll give you a second hint: no matter what your cravings tell you, avoid the curry enchiladas, man.” Radosław pointed at Stiles’s flat belly. “She’ll thank you for it.”

Stiles blinked. He stared at Radosław—but what he saw in his mind were large hazel eyes shining with innocent joy. Chubby, rosy cheeks that demanded to be kissed or pinched. Dark brown hair, combed into lush tufts on a fragile, round head. A teeny version of his nose. And chunky hands, gently patting a bearded face, a doting smile that could so easily become a mouth full of razor-sharp fangs.

“She?” Stiles whispered.

Radosław clapped his hands once then raised them palms out, his head bowed.

“That’s all you’re gonna get from me,” Radosław replied, smiling to himself.

Alternate Derek was gazing down at his right inner forearm, at a row of glowing neon-green symbols on it that flickered and switched into different ones.

“Stiles, we gotta hop soon,” alternate Derek said to Radosław, still gazing down at his inner forearm and pressing on some of the symbols. “Wormhole’s starting to shrink.”

Stiles glanced at Derek, and Derek looked as floored as he felt, gazing back at him with wide eyes and parted lips. His brain had already put Radosław’s hints together into a theoretical possibility—but he wasn’t ready to deal with it yet. Hell, he was barely done processing the fact that his and Derek’s alternate selves from another universe had paid them a visit, much less everything else—Wait, Radosław and his Derek were already opening the back patio door. They were leaving right now.

“Sorry, kids, it’s been great meeting you two, I mean that. Thanks so much for helping us to figure things out, but Derek and I gotta go—”

“Rad!”

Radosław halted in the doorway and pivoted around to face Stiles and Derek. Alternate Derek stood patiently outside on the patio, watching them with those crinkled hazel eyes.

Stiles stepped forward, then said, “Will I—will I be able to create traversable wormholes too, one day?”

Radosław stared at him with warm eyes and lips quirked into a kind smile.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope not.” Stiles frowned, and Radosław gestured with both arms at their surroundings. “Look around you. Look at the gorgeous home you got here.” Radosław glanced at Derek, his eyes becoming even warmer. “Look at the gorgeous werewolf you got there.”

Stiles turned, and he saw Derek standing quietly with his hands at his sides, his eyes lowered. Like a lost boy expecting to be left behind, again. Stiles stared until Derek looked him in the eye.

“You got a whole world here,” Radosław said. “A whole life to look forward to, to live. Decades to go. And trust me on this—in the coming years, you’re gonna be too busy to even go fast food-hopping, much less universe-hopping. Do you see?”

Stiles stared into Derek’s eyes, those stunning eyes that saw so much of him no one else could, that
saw all his faces when no one else would.

No matter where we end up, in heaven or in hell or some other universe, I will always choose to live on. I will always choose you.

“Yeah, I see,” Stiles rasped, caressing the side of Derek’s familiar, gorgeous face. “I do.”

“I know,” Derek rasped in return, and Stiles’s lips twitched in a smile of amusement, of love for his werewolf that’d spanned half his lifetime and showed no signs of waning. They stepped closer to each other, leaned forward to press their foreheads together. Derek’s hands grasped his hips, skinned up his sides. He pressed a delicate kiss on Derek’s curved lips.

They followed a pleased Radosław out onto the back patio. They stood side by side, facing Radosław and his Derek who also stood side by side.

“You’ll visit again, right?” Stiles said.

“Well, the Council has rules forbidding multiple visits to the same universe.” Radosław made a mischievous face at alternate Derek who arched an eyebrow at him, trying not to smile. “But, you know what?” Radosław glanced at Stiles. “Fuck the rules. Fuck the impossible!” He pumped his fists. “That’s what you and I have always done, and it’s what we’re gonna keep doing. Fuck yeah, I’m gonna come back!”

Stiles burst out laughing, and he yelled, “Fuck yeah!”

He slammed his hand on Radosław’s in an energetic high-five. They both ignored their Dereks giving them unimpressed looks and head-shakes. Their besotted, twinkling eyes gave them away every time.

A neon-green glow began to surround Radosław and his Derek like a mist from the feet up. Stiles and Derek stepped back, out of the mist’s range. Stiles’s right hand reached for Derek’s left, and he weaved their fingers together.

“Hey, Mieczysław.”

Stiles gazed at Radosław, who said with a solemn expression, “If you hadn’t killed that Nogitsune, it would have kept hunting and killing other versions of us and Derek. If it was anything like the one that possessed me, it would have killed a whole lotta other people until it was stopped. We’re talking planets of people. Maybe even universes.”

Derek gave his hand a gentle squeeze. Yes, he remembered the Nogitsune’s promise to feed on and murder everyone in Beacon Hills. Everyone in the world. It would have gladly devoured this universe if it could.

“You get what I’m saying here? When you fought that Nogitsune and defeated it, you saved billions of lives, kid.” Radosław’s lips spread into a proud smile. “You are a superhero.” He winked. “Takes one to know one.”

Stiles watched the neon-green mist envelop Radosław and his Derek. He heard Dad’s voice reaching him from the distant past, altering his world once more, like it did then.

She told me that she could see your future in your eyes. That one day, you’re going to be powerful. That you’re going to be a glorious hero who saves many lives.

Radosław and his Derek were shadowy figures in the mist, but Stiles saw the salute Radosław gave
him: the right hand raised sharply to the right of the eye, palm down, hand and wrist straight. Stiles released Derek’s hand to return the respectful gesture, blinking hard, his lips curved in a sideways smile.

The neon-green mist flickered blindingly bright for a second. Then, it shrank to a small neon-green orb and popped out of existence, taking Radoslaw and his Derek with it.

Stiles and Derek stared at the empty spot. Not a glimmer of neon-green light was left. No evidence whatsoever of their visitors from another universe who’d flipped their entire universe on its axis. Stiles felt Derek’s arm wrap around his shoulders. He turned toward Derek, huddling against his werewolf’s firm body under the morning sunshine. He buried his face in the juncture between Derek’s neck and shoulder, and said, “So. That—that was possibly the most awesome birthday present, right?”

Derek tightened those marvelous, muscular arms around him.

“I’m trying to hold myself back,” Derek said, smiling against his temple, “from saying that your most awesome birthday present would be my dick in your ass.” Stiles chortled and smacked Derek’s chest as his husband added, “Last night, you said, and I quote, ‘Big Guy, I want birthday morning sex, then afternoon sex, then evening sex after that surprise birthday party I have no clue about in any way.’”

“And I’m still holding you to all that,” Stiles replied, rubbing the skin he’d smacked.

He’d already discovered the pack’s plans for his thirtieth birthday bash weeks ago: Scott was terrible at keeping secrets about events like that. Dad was worse, chatting with him on Sunday dinners at his childhood home about how the thirties were going to be the best years of his life yet. Derek, the Mush-wolf, had gazed at him while agreeing one hundred percent with Dad.

He really was the most fortunate man in this universe, to have a father, and a husband, and a pack like his. To have had a mother like his, who saved him and Derek even after she was gone from this world. To have such a miraculous second chance to do things right with Derek, and thrive together.

He was alive. Derek was alive. Their loved ones were alive. They were alive while other versions of themselves were dead, tortured then murdered by a demon of chaos that had reveled in their suffering across numerous universes. He’d survived the assaults of two incarnations of the demon, and became all the more stronger for it, in body, magic and soul.

How much luck did he have left, after all that? How much luck did he and Derek have left?

*We’ll keep making our own luck. We always do.*

He wrapped his arms tight around Derek’s bare torso. Derek hugged him back as tightly. Nuzzled his cheek, his neck. Scented him. They stumbled to the nearby wicker couch with its teal cushions, and Stiles collapsed on his back on it, pulling Derek down on him. He didn’t care that his werewolf mate was flattening him with the reassuring weight of all those robust muscles. He held Derek to his chest, ran his fingers through Derek’s soft, tousled hair.

He stared at the towering wall of ceanothus shrubs that sheltered them from the heat, and said, “The coffee’s really, really cold now.”

Under his arms, Derek’s shoulders shook with mirth. He smiled into Derek’s hair. He continued to card his fingers through his werewolf’s hair.

"What do you want for breakfast? I took out stuff to make omelette.”
"You," Derek murmured into his skin.

Stiles snorted, then muttered with another smile, "I know I’m delicious, but I’m not nutritious enough for a big, bad wolf."

"Beg to differ."

"To which part? That you’re bad when you’re actually gooey and sweet like a giant Reese’s cup?"

Derek nipped the skin below his collarbone, and he chuckled. He felt Derek’s bristly cheek bunch against his chest.

"We’ll figure something out," he said into Derek’s forehead.

"Always do."

Stiles stared at the racemes of lilac and pink flowers, and he wondered how many universes there were out there, how many of them had their own versions of him and Derek. He wondered if each Stiles had eventually found his Derek, and also had his young heart stolen by the handsomest, hazel-eyed, stubbled man he’d ever met. He wondered if every version of them—be they cavemen, or mermen, or space warriors on starships, holy crap—had found each other and fallen in love, and loved each other to the very end of their lives.

He wondered how many of them became mates, how many got married—how many of them had children of their own.

"Are werewolf baby farts as horrendous as kitsune-werewolf baby farts?"

Again, Derek’s shoulders shook with mirth. Derek slid those adroit, large hands under his t-shirt to press them to his sides, his shoulder blades.

"My youngest brother had farts that could clear the whole house."

Stiles snickered, causing Derek to rise and fall with his chest.

"Is that genetic?"

Derek pushed himself up onto his elbows, then gazed down at him. He gazed back with eyes that hid nothing. Whatever Derek saw in them, it softened Derek’s edges. It kindled a spark of hope in those crinkled hazel eyes.

"I guess we’re gonna find out," Derek said.

Stiles swallowed, then murmured, "Should I even bother telling you it’s impossible?" He raised his eyebrows. "He could be wrong, you know. And I have no idea how it’s even gonna happen when I don’t have the right plumbing for the job."

Derek’s intense eyes roamed his face as if Derek was seeing him for the very first time. The spark of hope in them bloomed.

"You still make the impossible possible, babe," Derek said, gazing into his eyes. "You do it every day when I wake up and find you next to me. When you tell me that you love me, and that you’ll never change your mind about being with me for eternity."

Stiles stared up at his beloved werewolf mate, his husband. He counted his fingers, and there were five on each hand. Five fingers, which meant this wasn’t a dream, a hallucination. This was reality.
“You sappy lummox,” Stiles rasped. “We’re gonna cut down your socializing hours with Dad. He’s rubbing off way too much on you.”

Derek’s lips quirked up in an amused smirk.

“It’s not him who’s teaching me to be a master sap.”

Derek let out a bark of laughter when Stiles lunged up to playfully bite him on the shoulder. It didn’t leave a mark on Derek’s smooth skin. Derek swooped down to bite his shoulder in return, and it didn’t hurt at all. It made Stiles laugh. He laughed even louder after Derek yanked his t-shirt up and nipped at his chest, his nipples. He smacked Derek on the head until the snickering werewolf ceased his ticklish attack.

Derek tugged his t-shirt down, then rested that head of profuse hair on his chest. Derek pressed a hand to his flat abdomen.

“A girl,” Derek murmured, his words teeming with hope. “A little girl.”

Stiles’s breath stuttered. He stroked Derek’s upper back, traced the triskele tattoo with his fingertips.

“I’m—” he whispered. “Even if he’s wrong about that, I’m a-okay with whatever we get. And they’ll be happy and safe. With us.”

“Me too,” Derek whispered back.

Stiles rested his arms around his werewolf mate’s relaxed shoulders. He gazed down at Derek’s head, at the gray and white hairs popping up along Derek’s temple, and he was content to let their future unfold on its own, one day at a time.

They would be here to live it.

FIN

Chapter End Notes

(I owe that bro scene to a hilarious meme which made me laugh my ass off when I first saw it--because I instantly saw Stiles and Scott being said bros.

Thank you so much for reading the story, and for all the kudos and kind comments! I appreciate them all. I hope you enjoyed reading Strong at the Broken Places as much as I enjoyed writing it. :) This 100,000+ word beast of a story is going to have a special place in my heart for a long, long time.

I will update this with coda chapters from time to time.

If you’re interested in Derek’s perspective of key events that happened in the story, you can read Coda: You Make Me Alive for that. The coda is also about Derek’s past, starting with The Fire and moving on from there. Angst ahoy!)
A week after moving into their new home in the Preserve, Stiles had painted one of the living room walls the same vivid red. The Wall of Life here was at least three times the length of the previous one, and still, it was chock-full of framed photographs after four years of wedded life.

That Fake Wedding Photo hung next to The Real Wedding Photo on the center of the wall. They were surrounded by rings of photos arranged in no particular order or alignment, all fastened with Stiles’s magic instead of nails. Stiles had asserted to Derek that nails were pointless when they frequently updated the collection—and he never got bored of freaking people out by shifting photos around while they weren’t looking.

Stiles liked to leave the oak, sliding double doors connecting his study to the living room open so he could view the Wall of Life from inside the study. Derek had designed the rooms in such a way that when the doors were fully opened, the living room and study appeared to be a vast chamber. The study had narrow, tall windows that almost reached the ceiling. When Stiles tied back the curtains, he was treated to a sumptuous vista of the infinity pool with its water lilies, its clear waters sparkling under the sunshine.

Today, he’d tied back all the curtains, permitting early afternoon light to cascade through the windows into the study and living room. His floor-to-ceiling shelves of books were tucked into an alcove along the length of the study, away from the sunlight. It was while he was standing in front of one of those shelves, about to pluck a tome out, that he sensed the presence of another person in the house.

No doors or windows had opened. None of his wards had flared up. Neither had his magic, quiescent inside him after a tranquil morning of skimming through a new stack of spell books Deaton sent to the house.

It wasn’t Derek. Derek was at his workshop in town, unable to return home until late this evening to make some last minute amendments to a commissioned wood sculpture: a wolf standing on a rock outcropping, its head held high, lord of its boreal realm. Stiles had seen it at various stages of its development, and it was, in his humble opinion, Derek’s finest work yet. He totally understood why Derek wanted it to be as close to perfection as possible.

No, whoever was in the house with him—in the living room, was not Derek. Nor was it anyone from the pack.

Stiles stood in the doorway of the study. His visitor was standing in front of the Wall of Life, studying the two wedding photos in silence. His visitor was a man. A gangly man with long, skinny fingers, with a shaved head like his was when he was a teenager. He stood in profile to Stiles, and the slope of his nose was one that Stiles was no stranger to: he’d see it time and again in the photos of himself in Derek’s phone, or on the Wall of Life. He seemed to be unaware of Stiles while he stared next at a close-up, recent photograph of Stiles and Derek smiling at the camera, their cheeks
pressed together.

His high-collared, leather long coat had peculiar curlicue designs that were sliced through with dark gray, continuous seams, as if the coat had been ripped to shreds then glued back together. Stiles saw a glimpse of viridian green between its parted lapels, the round collar of a t-shirt. Black jeans encased long legs. Plain white sneakers encased feet that Stiles was 110% certain were the same size as his.

The silent visitor tilted that shaved head to one side. He slowly turned to face Stiles.

Oh, it wasn’t just any t-shirt the guy was wearing. It was a t-shirt that had a cute cartoon wolf on it. Its pink tongue stuck out of its mouth while it romped among trees with smiley faces. Stiles had an identical t-shirt in the bedroom’s walk-in closet, except his was white in color.

Stiles could scarcely make out the wolf’s happy expression through the searing, thin film of wetness over his eyes.

“Jak leci, Mieczysław?”

Stiles sauntered into the living room. He stood in front of the other man, leaving him ample personal space. The Wall of Life suddenly seemed akin to a looming stained glass wall in an empty church echoing the desperate prayers of long-dead parishioners. Neither he or Derek, nor any of their loved ones were saints. They’d all made mistakes, done dreadful things. Hurt others, even when they never meant to do so.

But none of them had hurt this man standing before him like he had.

“Still slightly to the right,” Stiles replied, his lips wavering into a small, watery smile. “How’s it hanging for you, Przemysław?”

Now he saw the restoration his magic had done on Przemysław’s body, the gold tattoos of veins in place of those horrible lacerations that had mangled Przemysław’s limbs and torso. The gold veins crepted past the t-shirt collar and up Przemysław’s neck. Przemysław’s hands also gleamed with those gold veins to the fingertips.

One of those hands ascended for a skinny forefinger to tap on a smooth chin. Przemysław glanced up and to the side with squinted eyes in mock contemplation, and for Stiles, it was like watching his reflection move with its own autonomy.

“Hm.” Przemyslaw looked at him, then gave him an impish smile. “Still slightly to the left.”

Stiles snorted. His own smile widened, and he pressed his quivering lips together.

“It’s good to see you again,” Stiles rasped. “Really good.”

That was all he could say before his throat seized and his breath snagged in it. His hands fisted at his sides, not for battle but in preparation for what had to be a brutal blow to his face for starters. Why else would Przemysław be here?

His alternate self couldn’t possibly be here to thank him again.

He stumbled forward a few steps, his hands still clenched, his shoulders taut and his throat prickling. Przemysław didn’t recoil. Przemysław stood with those gold-veined, lax hands at his sides, gazing at him with whisky-brown eyes that were more creased at the corners than his.

Stiles’s eyes brimmed hot, and he blinked hard.
“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he choked out, blinking hard a second time. “I’m so sorry for what I did to you. I—I tortured you. It was you screaming, not the—and I tortured you and then I killed you—”

Przemysław raised his right hand with its palm out, his eyes cast downward, his expression inscrutable. The gold tattoos of veins on that hand rendered Stiles speechless: he remembered what that hand had looked like before he mended the split flesh and shattered bones. He remembered how garish Przemysław’s blood had been upon ashen, mole-dotted skin.

The harrowing visions still prowled his nightmares, even in the refuge of Derek’s solid, sturdy arms.

He snapped his mouth shut. He gritted his teeth. Wrung his hands in the thin material of his red t-shirt over his belly, and tried to inhale, to breathe again.

Przemysław lowered his hand.

“Mieczysław,” his other self said, and it was without condemnation, “you didn’t torture me. You didn’t kill me.”

Przemysław gestured with both hands down the length of his own body, his lips quirking up in a tiny, amused smile. Stiles also managed a tiny smile as he loosened his hands from his t-shirt. He sucked in a shallow breath.

“You killed the Nogitsune, and you freed me,” Przemysław said, locking eyes with him. “You saved me.”

Stiles stared back. His mind was still trying to wrap itself around the newfound reality that Przemysław was alive. Alive, safe, and as powerful as he’d been four years ago, if not more.

“I saw you die,” Stiles rasped.

“I did. But I guess that depends on what your definition of death is, huh?” Przemysław slipped those gold-veined hands into the side pockets of his long coat. “I couldn’t stop my soul from leaving my body. But I had just enough magic and strength left to tether it to my corpse. And I accompanied it back to my universe when you sent it through the wormhole.” Przemysław’s lips quirked up again. “If you hadn’t also healed its wounds, I would have eventually died, yeah.”

Stiles’s mouth fell open. He couldn’t believe it: he really had saved Przemysław, without knowing it. He gaped at Przemysław, then said, “I—I didn’t know that could be done. Tethering your own soul to your, umh, corpse.”

Przemysław nodded. “Your body is a vessel custom-made for your soul. They recognize each other. There’s no chance of rejection. But to tether another soul to your body, or to even try to accept another soul into your body with yours—” Przemysław gazed at him for a long moment. “What you did with your werewolf mate’s soul? Even in my world, no one had ever succeeded at achieving that.”

Stiles’s mouth fell open again, and it stayed open for several silent seconds. Then he said, “Derek. You saw Derek’s soul inside me.”

This time, Przemysław’s lips curled up into a smirk. It was identical to his in every way. Przemysław tapped his own temple with a forefinger, his eyes twinkling.

“When I pulled you into my mind, and we were connected, it wasn’t a one-way street. You didn’t recognize the soul for what it was, I know.”
Stiles pressed a hand to his sternum. It’d been over four years since his confrontation with the Nogitsune from Przemysław’s universe, and he still remembered how Derek’s soul had felt inside his chest: a hot, living entity that throbbed in time with his heartbeat, a wolf of blazing heat and light.

“Did you know that you—”

The blurted question, an inadvertently cruel one, perished on Stiles’s tongue.

“That I wasn’t speaking to my Derek?”

Stiles cast his eyes downward, then nodded.

“Not at the time, no. Connecting and then separating our minds was—not easy on me. While I was so incapacitated.” Stiles winced at the tremendous understatement, and Przemysław said, “But later, when my body and soul were united again, and I was totally healed, memories came back to me.” Przemysław shrugged. “I don’t remember everything that happened that night. My clearest memories are of you, and your Derek. After you killed the Nogitsune.”

Stiles raised his eyes and gazed at Przemyslaw again. He saw no judgment in his alternate self’s eyes. He saw empathy instead—and he was struck once more by the appalling fact that Przemysław had witnessed the maltreatment and murder of numerous versions of themselves and Derek. Przemysław had no choice whatsoever in that. The Nogitsune had surely relished Przemysław’s anguish, each time its host failed to thwart its vengeance.

But Przemysław hadn’t failed every time.

Stiles and Derek were proof of that.

“When Derek and I were in—that cell.” When Przemysław didn’t speak, and stared at him, he said, “Derek told me that after he—after his soul left his body, he couldn’t leave the cell. Because of your magic in the walls. He said that the ‘blue light in the cobwebs’ told him to stay.”

Przemysław’s face softened with a bittersweetness that made Stiles’s throat prickle once more.

“It was all I could do,” Przemysław murmured. “Man, I didn’t know if it would even work that time. The Nogitsune had such a stranglehold on me. But I could sense your magic, when we faced each other. I could tell how powerful you were, even when you didn’t.” His small smile was also bittersweet. “And I thought, maybe, you were the one who would make the impossible possible.”

Stiles’s fingers curled into his t-shirt over his sternum.

“There were others? Other versions of us who—”

Przemysław lowered his eyes. His smile withered.

“Yeah. And they weren’t strong enough to withstand the power of the additional soul.”

Stiles also lowered his eyes. He stared at the happy cartoon wolf on Przemysław’s t-shirt. It looked so much like Derek’s wolf. It looked like how Derek’s soul had felt inside his chest, after he told Derek for the first time that he loved him.

Derek was still alive, still here for Stiles to tell him that he loved him. That he always would.

“What about—” Stiles bit his lower lip. “Your Derek. Is he—”

Przemysław’s eyes remained cast down. The smile on that acutely familiar face was one Stiles had
seen on his Derek’s face. On his own face, when he was alone in front of a mirror, and he was reminded all over again of the blood on his hands, that no water could wash away. That devastating, soft smile, that screamed incalculable dimensions of grief and pain.

Stiles still remembered how Przemysław had wailed as the Nogitsune burned his Derek to ashes with those brilliant blue flames. How the Nogitsune had laughed and laughed with Przemysław’s voice. A voice just like Stiles’s.

Stiles swiveled his head to the right, and he stared with burning eyes at a framed photograph of Derek cuddling Scott’s two-year-old twin toddlers to his chest. The three rascals grinned at the camera. Stiles had used his phone to snap the picture, while they were at the twins’ birthday party.

Every photo of Derek on the Wall of Life had to feel like a blade in Przemysław’s chest.

Right now, Derek—his handsome, noble, selfless, living werewolf mate—was probably carving out more details on the rock outcropping of the sculpture, his intense hazel eyes boring into the wood as much as the curved blade of the gouge in his hand. In a matter of hours, Derek was coming home. He would greet Derek at the door. Hug him. Kiss him. Tell him how much he was missed, although they’d last seen each other mere hours ago.

Stiles would be able to do all that, while his alternate self never would again.

_I love you, Stiles. I will always love you. To the very end._

A searing rivulet rolled down from his left eye.

And something caressed the wet skin beneath his eye. Something hot but not scorching. Something that felt like sunshine upon his skin, and under his skin. It was a sublime sensation. A sensation he last felt over four years ago, when Derek—

Stiles’s left hand flew up to his left cheek. He pressed the pads of his fingers to the skin beneath his eye, and it was still wet. He blinked hard. Glanced around, but all he saw was Przemysław standing in place, gazing at him with crinkled eyes.

With a hand pressed to his sternum, cradling that happy cartoon wolf.

Przemysław’s gaze shifted to Stiles’s left, and that devastating smile became one of serenity.

“He can’t see you, miłością mojego życia.”

Stiles knew what those Polish words meant: the last time he’d heard someone say them in person, it’d been Mom saying them to Dad. Mom, who’d smiled at Dad as if he was her whole world, her everything. Mom, who’d smiled exactly like Przemysław was smiling in this moment.

_Miłośćą mojego życia._

_Love of my life._

Stiles slowly lowered his hand from his face. His eyes filmed over again, and he blinked.

“Had,” he said, his voice hoarse. “You said _had._”

Przemysław’s smile broadened.

“Yeah. No one in my world had ever succeeded in carrying a second soul—until I did.”
Stiles felt sunshine brush his cheek once more. Then, to Przemsław’s right, a hazy human figure manifested in a ripple of brilliant blue light. As Stiles watched, the figure sharpened in detail until he saw a semi-transparent man attired in a black, sleeveless tunic, black tactical pants, and boots. A man with dark, thick hair shaved at the sides. A handsome, hazel-eyed man who might as well have been Derek’s twin, down to that winsome smile.

“Hello, Mieczysław.”

Przemsław’s Derek sounded just like his Derek. He sounded as if he was speaking through a tunnel, but Stiles didn’t feel the reverberations.

“Hey,” Stiles whispered, and he didn’t care that his eyes brimmed and spilled again. He smiled back. Swiped his face dry.

Now he understood that the creases around Przemsław’s eyes weren’t from age. They were from the constant pain of sustaining his body, of preventing himself from being reduced to ashes. He remembered his throes when Derek’s soul had felt like a nuclear bomb detonating in his ribcage.

Months after Derek’s soul had been returned to his body, Deaton had bluntly told Stiles that what he’d felt then was a precursor to the agony he would have experienced when Derek’s soul did cause him to go kaboom.

*You had days, at best. Hours, at worst, after seeing your mother at the graveside*, Deaton had said. *There are reported cases of witches and warlocks seeing the dead during extreme escalation of their powers. Those who failed to control their powers after that either got cooked, or exploded. I’ll leave it to you to guess how many of them survived.*

Deaton was a funny guy like that.

There was nothing funny, though, about Przemsław being a walking ticking time-bomb now. The guy deserved respite more than anyone else Stiles knew.

“How long have you been carrying his soul?” Stiles asked, his eyes wide.

Przemsław glanced at his Derek with those creased, warm eyes.

“A few days after you sent my body back to my universe.”

Stiles gaped at his alternate self, then blurted out, “I’m sorry, but that means you’ve been carrying it for four freaking years.”

“And I haven’t gone kaboom?” Przemsław smirked at him, hand still pressed to his sternum.

“Yeah.”

“Holy shit.” Stiles smiled, his own eyes crinkling with relief. “You figured out how to control its power.”

Przemsław’s gaze flicked to the side, to the right. If Przemsław was like him at all, he knew that telltale motion: it meant Przemsław was about to lie to him.

“Something like that. Mostly I’ve been using it to help with the restoration of the town. Keeps it in check.”

Stiles gazed at Przemsław for a few seconds, then at alternate Derek. There was no mistaking the worry on that familiar, handsome face. Maybe Przemsław was telling the truth about the soul’s
power being controlled now—but for how long?

“It must hurt like hell,” Stiles said.

Again, Przemysław’s eyes flicked to the right, so swiftly that Stiles wouldn’t have seen it if he hadn’t anticipated it. Przemyslaw shrugged.

“It’s—a little uncomfortable.”

Knowing himself, Przemysław might as well have said, *It fucking hurts like fluoroantimonic acid sloshing in my chest while I stop it from bursting out of me like a Xenomorph embryo.*

He could see, in his mind, Przemyslaw putting on a tough veneer in front of other people: walking with his spine straight, his shoulders squared, his face impassive while a fiery, magical maelstrom raged within him. He would be so wary of everyone around him, suspicious of the other survivors. Wondering how many of them knew that he’d unleashed the Nogitsune upon their world, and robbed them of their everything.

Unless any of Przemysław’s remaining loved ones survived the Nogitsune’s rampage, he was alone. In incessant pain that probably had him gasping and thrashing in the dark, like Stiles had in the chest-aching, lonely nights after Derek died in his arms. Unable to cease said pain unless it was to release his Derek’s soul—into a body that no longer existed. Where would his Derek’s soul go, then?

“I saw you die, too,” Stiles said to alternate Derek. “Through Przemysław’s memories.”

“What both of us saw was Derek’s body destroyed.” Stiles glanced at Przemysław, and his other self said, “Even the Nogitsune thought Derek had died.” Przemysław glanced at his Derek with twinkling eyes. “But my werewolf apparently had his secrets.”

Stiles glanced at alternate Derek again, who gazed back at him with warm eyes.

“A soldier must be prepared for all possibilities,” alternate Derek said, standing at ease, his hands interlocked behind him. “And sometimes, that means keeping specific knowledge to oneself for strategic purposes, and taking a chance with risky tactics that had no prior assessment.”

“Particularly when your mate’s been hijacked by a demon of chaos,” Przemysław muttered, glancing at the floor, his lips twisted in a self-loathing smile.

Alternate Derek glowered at Przemysław. Stiles couldn’t help his tiny smile of amusement at those murder brows getting a workout. It seemed they were _multiversal_.

“It was not your fault,” alternate Derek growled.

Stiles knew those words must have been repeated zillions of times to Przemyslaw by now. His own Derek had said the same words to him just as many times in as many years.

“Back in my own universe,” Przemysław said, ignoring his Derek’s admonishment, “I waited for my magic to replenish itself, then reattached my soul into my body.” He sucked in his lips, then murmured, “It’d been a year since the Nogitsune’s attack, and the whole town was still deserted. The containment wards it’d set using my magic had isolated the town and all the open wormholes. Everyone who hadn’t already left was dead. All their souls had crossed the Styx, beyond my reach.” He shrugged. “Well, I thought so, until I went back to where—where Derek died, and I found his soul tethered to a sapling growing from a crack in the sidewalk.”

Stiles glanced at alternate Derek with wide eyes. “You tethered your soul to a _baby tree_? For a
Alternate Derek nodded, his hazel eyes somber. “Like I said, a risky tactic that had no prior assessment. I’m as surprised as anyone else that it worked. And better a tree than a corpse.”

Stiles grimaced. It was surreal enough to imagine a werewolf soul clinging onto a sapling. But a corpse? The corpse of someone who was murdered by a demon and left to rot in the open? A shiver zigzagged down his spine. The hair on his arms and nape stood on end. Yeah, he’d pick a tree over that any time—

Stiles frowned, and said, “Wait. Werewolves can use magic in your world?”

“Our world is not like your world,” Przemysław replied. “Magic is an integral part of it. Supernatural beings are known, and live alongside humans.” He gave Stiles a wry smile. “But, our worlds are very much alike when it comes to war. I don’t know what the Argents are like here, but in my world, they were a—” Przemysław’s lips twisted into something vicious, a blend of a smile and a snarl. “A tyrannical family with direct ties to the US military. Their former patriarch, Gerard Argent, spent billions of dollars in secret weapons research to develop ways to exterminate werewolves and other shapeshifters on a global scale. He hid it from his immediate family except for his daughter.”

“Kate,” Stiles said.

Alternate Derek didn’t react at all, his face stony, his eyes shuttered. Stiles could see through him at the beige leather couches and wood coffee table that Derek had carved and constructed from scratch.

“Yeah, Kate Argent.” Przemysław shook his head. Rubbed his hand up and down his sternum. “She was beyond insane. Even more evil than her father. The two of them massacred shapeshifters by the tens of thousands in concentration camps before the werewolves, hellhounds and other shifters finally rallied and fought back as one.”

Stiles crossed his arms over his chest. He felt afternoon sunlight striping his lower legs over his jeans, but he shivered. Stiles never spoke about the Argents since Allison died. He couldn’t bear to hurt Scott by mentioning her name after her funeral, and as long as Scott didn’t bring her up, he didn’t either. After Scott met Kira during their final year of senior high school, Stiles was even more loath to dredge up traumatic memories.

The last time anyone had brought up the Argents to him was a year after the whole clusterfuck with the Nogitsune from Przemysław’s universe. While they sat on the couch in front of the TV, Dad confessed to him that he’d called Chris Argent in desperation to help find Stiles and Derek. He’d patted Dad’s hand and said nothing. Stiles had no animosity toward Chris—if anything, he was still astounded that Chris hadn’t already assassinated him in revenge for his daughter’s death, instead of shaking his hand at her funeral and then vamoosing to France.

Not all Argents were rotten. It was just a shame that they were markedly outnumbered by those who were.

“I dunno how you’re gonna feel about this, but—” Stiles drew in a quiet breath. “In my world, almost everyone in Gerard Argent’s family is dead. Chris Argent’s somewhere in France.”

Przemysław and his Derek shared a long, somber glance. Then they gazed at him with impassive faces.

“Chris Argent tried to help Derek’s family escape from being burned in their home. He was executed in the Preserve by Gerard. Gunshot to the head. As an example to the other rebels, at the beginning
of the war.”

Stiles’s fingers dug into the firm flesh of his bicep. It figured Gerard was also goddamn diabolical in an alternate universe. He could easily envision the Gerard of this world doing the same thing. Maybe even to Kate, if he’d still been alive when she became a were-jaguar. Another monster in her father’s eyes.

“Here, Gerard was no billionaire homicidal tyrant, thank fuck. He was a crazy, old man dying from a terminal illness. He had this fucked up idea that an Alpha’s bite would heal him.” Stiles made a face of disgust. “And he had the even more fucked up idea to tie me up in a chair in a basement, and torture me until an Alpha werewolf came along to do the job. He failed. Ran outta town.”

Semi-transparent as alternate Derek was, Stiles could see the muscle tic in that stubbled jaw, see the glint of anger in those hazel eyes. Przemysław stayed impassive.

“But—we found out later through the supernatural grapevine that Gerard had died a horrible, painful death in some dump in Arizona. He got an Alpha werewolf to bite him, all right. And it didn’t take.”

“The Nogitsune tortured and killed him after it possessed me,” Przemysław said. “Along with most of his family in their mansion. Just for the fun of it.”

Alternate Derek let out a satisfied rumble between his teeth.

Przemysław’s throat bobbed. “As much as I hate to admit it, the Nogitsune did help to end the war. But on its own terms. Not mine.”

For Stiles, speaking about the Argents again after so many years was—cathartic. It was morbid to speak of so much death and suffering, yes, but those deaths and the suffering were an indelible part of his history, his reality. His and Przemysław’s. They never asked to be hunted, or possessed, or tortured, or dashed into supernatural war. They did what they had to in order to survive. To retaliate against evil, to save others, even if it meant getting hurt. Even if it meant dying.

Stiles nodded. “So—the Argent death toll’s pretty even in our worlds, then. Victoria Argent’s dead. She was bitten, and chose to be shot rather than become a werewolf.” Stiles gazed at alternate Derek. “Kate Argent’s dead too. She became a were-jaguar, and other Argent hunters from France hunted her down in Mexico and killed her.”

“Good,” alternate Derek growled, and no one disagreed with that.

“Allison?” Przemysław asked.

Stiles blinked at him. “Allison is—she’s dead.” Stiles bit his lower lip. “She died in battle with the Nogitsune of this world. While it possessed me.”

He was prepared for the shock of revelation to zap Przemysław like a bolt of lightning, for Przemysław to go ramrod straight and give him that sharp, wide-eyed glance.

“Yeah. You didn’t see that when we were connected, huh? I got that shit locked down tight in my head. For obvious reasons.” Stiles’s lips twisted in a mirthless smile. “It possessed me when I was a teenager. It used me as its human puppet to go on a rampage through the town. I—it stabbed Scott with a sword. And Allison was killed while everyone was trying to stop m—” He shut his eyes, then opened them to half-mast. “To stop the Nogitsune.”

Old habits, old sins died so very hard.
He turned his head to glance at the Wall of Life, at a framed portrait photo of Derek in a white t-shirt and navy blazer, and murmured, “I owe my life to my Derek. Multiple times over.”

Przemysław stepped closer to the Wall of Life. His hand was still pressed on his sternum, hard enough that his t-shirt wrinkled around his skinny fingers, warping the cartoon wolf on it. Stiles glanced around, and saw that alternate Derek had vanished. Stiles belatedly realized that it had to hurt Przemysław for his Derek’s soul to project itself and communicate with Stiles.

“Allison is the current matriarch of the remaining Argent hunters,” Przemysław said. “She and Scott are working to unite hunters and shapeshifters, and broker a peace treaty between the two sides.”

The pall of gloom over them lifted at the mention of the goofball werewolf. But was Przemysław’s Scott a lovable goofball like Stiles’s? Or was he different—more callous in a world gutted by war, where billions of dollars had been spent just to discover the most barbaric ways to butcher beings like him?

“Your Scott—he’s okay?”

“Yeah. He was hunted down, but they didn’t kill him. They shipped him to one of the concentration camps near the town, and made him do extreme labor with thousands of other shapeshifters.”

Przemysław rubbed his sternum, gazing at a photo of a smiling Scott cuddling a fluffy orange kitten to his face with gloved hands.

“According to him, Allison came back to Beacon Hills from Paris after her dad stopped communicating with her. Kate told her that werewolves had murdered her dad, but she didn’t believe it because Kate and Gerard wouldn’t let her see his body. She sneaked into the camp Scott was in to find out what was really happening, and somehow they ran into each other, and—they fell in love. Couple of weeks later, she packed her weapons and ran away from the Argent mansion to help Scott get out.”

Stiles gazed at his alternate self’s impassive face.

“And that was what saved her from the Nogitsune.”

Przemysław nodded. “The freaking irony, man, that being stuck in the camp saved Scott from it.” He rolled his eyes, just like Stiles would. “He still says all the shitty epic love poems he thought up about her eyes and dimples kept him sane in there.”

Stiles cracked up into an amused laugh—it was either that, or weep over the fact that Scott in another universe had to suffer so much. Przemysław’s face softened with an affectionate smile while he stared at a group photo of the pack, at Scott who stood in the back and grinned at the camera.

Yeah, Przemysław’s Scott was most certainly a lovable, loving, loyal goofball like his.

“Oh my god, that’s what my Scott did with his Allison too, when they were teenagers. He wrote these awful poems about her eyes and her dimples and her hair—”

“And her arms when she used her bow and arrows—”

“And her thighs that could crush watermelons!”

Przemysław bit his lower lip, his eyes crinkled with mirth instead of pain.

“Uhm. I guess my Scott’s not so innocent as yours. Because he wrote that he wanted those thighs to
crush his head instead, and to suffocate in her wet petals.”

Stiles threw his head back and guffawed. Oh god, Scott coming up with that? Adult Scott would still blush. Sixteen-year-old Scott would have turned beet-red and scribbled it out with a pen, praying that Stiles never found out.

Przemysław also broke into laughter, albeit a quieter one. The smile that spread across his face erased decades of hardship from it. With that shaved head, he appeared startlingly like teenage Stiles, a young man who’d yet to endure a broken heart, or a fist to his face, or a blade in the thigh. A young man who’d yet to witness his werewolf mate being stabbed in the heart with a wolfsbane-laced carving knife.

Stiles’s laughter petered out, although he was still smiling. He was listening to Przemysław laugh. He was looking at a grinning, laughing Przemysław who was alive, who still had his Derek after all.

Maybe, in a multiverse of people with alternate selves, there were also alternate gods who were truly merciful, who were worth believing in.

“Look, you should stay. At least until Derek comes home,” Stiles said, his smile widening, reaching out to touch Przemysław’s forearm. “He’ll wanna see you again. He’ll be so happy to know you’re —”

The rest of the sentence died in Stiles’s mouth when Przemysław’s right hand flew up with its palm out between them. Stiles withdrew his arm. Przemysław wasn’t pushing him away. But he knew a signal for immediate silence when he saw it. Przemysław’s face was averted, aimed at the Wall of Life.

“I can’t,” Przemysław rasped, staring at a photo of Stiles kissing a smiling Derek on the cheek. He lowered his hand. It clenched into a fist that he pressed to his sternum. “I’d like to, but—I’m not sure I can handle it.” He swallowed visibly, then whispered, “I may not be able to let him go. I’m sorry.”

And just like that, Stiles’s throat constricted and prickled, and his eyes welled hot. He knew exactly what Przemysław meant. He, of all the versions of himself in the multiverse, knew what it’d felt like to harbor Derek’s soul inside him and yet be unable to touch his beloved werewolf. Unable to touch that dark stubble, or trace those thick eyebrows with his fingers. Unable to feel Derek’s large hand upon his, or Derek’s arms embracing him, or Derek’s soft lips on his.

What would he do, if he’d spent the last four years touch-starved, and then encountered a version of his werewolf mate who was practically a twin? That he could touch? That he could hug, and smell, and feel again?

He would never let him go.

Never.


Przemysław nodded, still staring at that photo.

“I have to leave now. I can keep the wormhole open only for so long before it affects me and Derek.”

Przemysław’s voice was neutral, devoid of tone and sentiment. It didn’t fool Stiles for a second. In Przemysław’s shoes, he would be adhering to the scraps of his self-control. Reining in a tsunami of overwhelming emotions and memories, and hoping that his head stayed above the water, that he
didn’t go under and lose the regard of the sun.

“Can I walk with you?”

Przemysław nodded again. Przemysław still refused to look at him, but he wasn’t offended. They ambled out of the living room, down the hallway to the kitchen, then out onto the back patio, and he saw the glistening of Przemysław’s eyes under the afternoon sunshine. Stiles led him to a small, locked gate in the fence; the pack used it to access the Preserve on nights of the full moon. He unlocked it with a hand gesture and a golden spark of magic.

Przemysław led the way from there, guiding him into the woods in silence. Stiles wasn’t bothered by that either. He glanced at his alternate self from time to time, at those gold veins etched on mole-dotted, pale skin like his. Their clashes with the Nogitsune had scarred them both—in Przemysław’s case, the scars were also literal. Przemysław couldn’t escape his past with the passage of time. All the past had to do to remind him of it was for him to see those gold veins on his body, his limbs.

Stiles could stash that carving knife in its shroud of a black cloth, in the warded steel safe in his study. Push it out of sight, out of mind. Pull it out when his nightmares of rancid gray eyes and torn flesh stalked him in the dark.

But those eyes weren’t rancid gray anymore, and that torn flesh was healed.

Przemysław was a resurrected man. A reconstructed man, whose scars were both exquisite and excruciating. Just another man, stronger at the broken places.

Stiles sensed the reverberating power of the traversable wormhole down to the marrow long before he saw it.

It was identical to the one in the warehouse in Salem, floating in the center of a small clearing surrounded by pine trees whose branches had been stripped of their leaves. Clusters of green needles littered the ground.

“The town is still being rebuilt,” Przemysław said, as they stood side by side in front of the wormhole. “It’s populated by survivors from concentration camps that’d been liberated and shut down by the new coalition of hunters, shapeshifters, and an overhauled Department of Defense. Scott promised the survivors from the camp he’d been in that he would find them a new home. A safe haven in Beacon Hills and the Preserve.”

The wormhole still looked like a giant, multi-layered, brilliant blue donut to Stiles. It refracted the sunlight that shone down on it. At the other end of the wormhole, through the portal into Przemysław’s universe, he saw a scene of sunlit tranquility: a cloudless sky, simple bungalows in the process of construction, leafy trees whose branches swayed with the wind, and—people. Living people, humans and supernatural beings in solidarity. Men and women working in teams on those bungalows, or planting saplings into the soil, some aided by young children.

“That’s awesome,” Stiles said, beaming at his alternate self. “That’s just like him, man.”

A ripple of brilliant blue light, and Przemysław’s Derek was a visible figure again, standing next to his human mate. Stiles turned to face Przemysław.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to come here, to see me. But you did, and I’m so grateful for it.” Stiles swallowed down a barbed lump in his throat. “I’m so glad you’re alive.” He glanced over Przemysław’s shoulder at alternate Derek who gazed at him with warm hazel eyes. “So glad your Derek’s still with you.”
Przemysław didn’t say anything. His whisky-brown eyes were lowered, staring at the vicinity of Stiles’s chest. Stiles knew how risky it was to touch Przemysław now, after Przemysław shut himself off like he did back in the house, but he didn’t give a damn: he grabbed Przemysław’s shoulders then hauled the startled man in for a hug. He wrapped one arm around Przemysław’s shoulders, the other around a stiffened torso. He leaned his head of full hair against that shaved head.

“Two months ago, another one of us visited me and Derek. His name’s Radosław. He can create traversable wormholes like you, and he and his Derek have been visiting the universes connected to the wormholes you’d opened.” Stiles tightened his arm around his other self’s shoulders. “Yeah, there were casualties, Przemysław. But there are also other versions of us and Derek that survived, that were unaffected. That met each other, and fell in love with each other, and built a life together. As lovers. As mates.”

Przemysław didn’t say anything at all. He stood stiff as stone, and Stiles knew why, and his heart ached for his alternate self.

“Back in that warehouse,” Stiles rasped, “I told you that you never asked for any of this. That it wasn’t your fault, and it never was. All that’s still true. You just wanted to stop a horrible war from killing more people. You just wanted to save the people you love, the ones you could still save.” Stiles swallowed hard. Blinked hard to clear brimming eyes. “You didn’t want anyone else to be hurt anymore, like you were. I know.” His throat worked in another long, aching swallow. “I know.”

Przemysław’s shoulders began to tremble. Stiles sucked in a noiseless, shallow breath when he felt Przemysław’s hands clutch at his t-shirt. He blinked, then blinked again. He raised his burning eyes and gazed at alternate Derek, who gave him a nod, who gazed back with crinkled, thankful eyes.

Przemysław stepped back, and Stiles loosened his arms and lowered them to his sides. Przemysław’s eyes were aimed downward and to the side. They were red-rimmed. They glistened once more under the sunlight. A gold-veined hand reached up to grasp Stiles’s left shoulder, to give a squeeze. Stiles gave his other self a tiny smile, accepting the silent gesture for what it was.

He knew far better than to assume that a single hug would convince Przemysław to stop blaming himself, to stop hating himself. It’d been over a decade since his own possession by the Nogitsune of this world, and there were still nights when he had nightmares of stabbing Scott with that sword, screaming and screaming while it tormented him inside and out. Decades more could pass before the nightmares waned, before both he and Przemysław stopped blaming themselves for the sins of a demon.

He retreated a short distance as Przemysław and his Derek faced each other in front of the wormhole. His lips curled up in a soft smile at alternate Derek caressing the side of Przemysław’s head with a semi-transparent hand, a hand warm as the sunshine illuminating the forest surrounding them. They turned their heads in unison to glance at him, and he tilted his head, raising his eyebrows in question.

They shared a meaningful glance, then alternate Derek said to Przemysław, “That other version of you might have already told him.” Stiles’s forehead furrowed.

“Told me what?”

They turned to face him, and Przemysław said, “About the spell you’ve been looking for.” Stiles frowned even more in confusion.
Okay, he had no idea what either guy was talking about, because he hadn’t been searching for any particular spell. He was just riffling through the books Deaton sent, curious to know what they contained—

“That spell you’ve been looking for,” Przemysław said. “It’s in the dark red book with the gold inlays. It has an engraving of a human heart on its cover. You know which one I’m talking about?”

Stiles blinked. He stared at Przemysław whose eyes were now—twinkling.

“Yeah.” Stiles blinked again. “Yeah, I—Deaton sent over a stack of spell books, and—” He visualized the books on his desk in the study, six of them. “There is one like that. The one at the bottom.”

The one he had yet to open and skim through.

“The spell is on page seventy-seven.”

Stiles frowned in confusion again, even as he smiled at them.

“Uh, thanks. But—what is this spell I’m supposedly looking for?”

Przemysław and his Derek glanced at each other again, their eyes twinkling even more. Przemysław bit his lower lip while his Derek curbed an amused smile and glanced down at the ground, his hands interlocked behind him.

“It’s the one that’s gonna make you freaking huge like a whale,” Przemysław said to Stiles.

It took several seconds for the words to sink into Stiles’s dazed brain. When they did, his lower jaw sagged, and he gave them his now legendary Blobarotti impression.

“Whaaaaat?!” he squealed.

Przemysław erupted into laughter, partially covering his mouth with the back of his hand. His Derek gazed at him with fond, unguarded eyes, and Stiles realized that Przemysław laughing—much less with genuine mirth—had to be an incredible rarity in the years since the Nogitsune’s possession. Przemysław had very few reasons to laugh. Even fewer reasons to wake up each day and not despise himself for his past mistakes, not drown himself in survivor guilt.

Yet, there Przemysław was, gazing at Stiles with those crinkled, whisky-brown eyes that were just like his. Still standing. Still swimming on through the black, icy waves, with the sun within him.

“Like Mamo’s visions, mine have yet to be wrong.”

Stiles’s eyes widened. Could Przemysław glimpse the future, like Radosław? Like Mom?

And this spell—was it what he thought it was?

Stiles pressed a hand to his flat belly. He gazed at Przemysław and alternate Derek who stood in front of that brilliant blue wormhole, but what he saw in his mind was a chubby, hazel-eyed baby girl with dark brown hair and a nose just like his. A rosy-cheeked sweetheart who smiled at the sight of her Daddy and Papa, who giggled when Daddy kiss-attacked her beaming face, who patted Papa’s bearded face and softened all its edges with unbridled love for her.

“Okay.” Stiles cleared his throat, then said, “Just—tell me one more thing, okay?”
“Which is?” Przemysław asked, his right eyebrow arched.

“Tell me I can eat all the curly fries I want for those nine months.”

Przemysław erupted into amused laughter a second time, and his Derek grinned while shaking his head. Stiles took that as a resounding yes. He grinned back at them, his hand still pressed to his belly.

“No zobaczenia, Mieczysław. And good luck.”

He pressed his hand harder to his belly. He gave them a genial smile in farewell.

“No następnego razu, Przemysław, Derek. And thank you. Again.”

Brilliant blue tendrils of light stretched out from the wormhole for Przemysław and his Derek as they strode into it. The wormhole started to shrink, and Stiles scurried to a nearby pine tree, huddling behind it, peering past it. A gale whipped up and lashed at the trees, at Stiles’s hair and face. The wormhole swirled faster and faster in an anti-clockwise direction, glowing brighter and brighter, and oh shit, he knew what was coming next—

He hunched up behind the tree, pressing his palms to his ears. The explosion of blinding light and deafening sound that followed still made him stagger from its force. He fell on his ass, caught himself on his hands. He rolled on all fours, then leaped to his feet, darting back into the clearing. Like in the warehouse in Salem, there was nothing to prove the wormhole had been there. Not a speck of blue light anywhere.

He smiled to himself. Brushed the seat of his jeans with both hands. He turned around and headed back home, rubbing his belly with his right hand.

Was he really mad enough to go through with it? To cast this spell that was going to alter his body in dramatic ways, make him freaking huge as a whale? That was going to create new life from him and Derek?

He tugged his phone out from the side pocket of his jeans. Unlocked it, pressed number one on the dialer.

“Hey, Fluff-ball,” he said to his werewolf husband, his face aching from his delighted smile. “You won’t believe who visited today to say hello and see how we’re doing.”

In a matter of hours, Derek was coming home. Stiles would greet Derek at the door. Hug him. Kiss him. Tell him how much he was missed, although they’d last seen each other mere hours ago. Maybe they’d make out on the couch. Or make love on their bed after dinner in the kitchen. Or snuggle under the blankets and watch their favorite Star Trek episode on their laptop, murmuring to each other about anything and nothing until they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

But in the meantime, he had a dark red spell book with gold inlays and an engraved heart on its cover to read.

Chapter End Notes

(At one point, I’d planned this chapter to be the last one for the story. But by the time I got to chapter 10, I decided it was better to leave it out of the official story, and turn it into something like a "DVD extra". I was worried that the emotional impact of
Przemysław's death in chapter 4, as well as the discussion about survivor guilt in chapter 9 might be diminished by Przemysław being alive after all. However, sap that I am, I figured that I'd give readers the choice of whether to believe Przemysław is alive or not—if chapter 10 is where the story ends for you, then he's dead and so is his Derek. But if you want a happy ending for them too, this coda chapter is the one for you.

I'll be posting at least two more coda chapters: the next one will be about Przemysław and Radosław meeting, and the one after that will be about what happens after that meeting. I'm also thinking about a coda chapter where Radosław and his Derek meets cavemen!Stiles and Derek. And maybe a coda chapter about surfer!Derek meeting merman!Stiles, although that may end up a long, multi-chaptered story instead. We'll see.

*And I may or may not be already plotting a sequel ... *grin*)
Coda: How He Died, How He Lived

Chapter Notes

Soundtrack: *Time (guitar version)*, from the Inception OST.

(It's specified in the coda, but just to be safe--Stiles here is Radosław, aka space warrior! Stiles who made his first appearance in chapter 10.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The defensive wards surrounding Stiles’s neon-green traversable wormhole flared brilliant blue the instant he and Derek stepped out and set foot on barren soil. Derek thrust an arm in front of him, halting him in his tracks. Derek’s wide eyes glowed a kaleidoscope of colors in the gloom of a starless night. They scanned the clearing around them from one side to the other: with Derek’s hyper-enhanced night and telemetric vision, nothing would escape his scrutiny.

Derek’s eyes dimmed to their usual hazel.

“Cosmo-grid says this is the location of the Stilinski house,” Derek said, his brow furrowing. “But I don’t see anything. At all. It’s like we’re in an empty room that stretches into infinity.” He glowered down at the brilliant blue wards on the ground. “He has to be here.”

“Yep.” Stiles fired up his own magi-tech, his eyes glowing neon-green. “My turn.”

He opened his third-eye, and the world around him flipped from a deceptively empty darkness to a black-mirrored world populated with objects depicted in masses of glowing dots in a variety of colors. The forest surrounding the clearing was dull green. A vehicle—according to the Cosmo-net, this world labelled it a hatchback sedan car—was a mass of light gray, parked in front of a two-story house that was a mass of vivid yellow dots.

“Oh yeah,” Stiles said, closing his third-eye. “The house’s there. And a vehicle. About nineteen meters away, two o’clock.”

“Magical camouflage?”

“Yeah, a damn good job too.” Stiles shook his head, and his eyes stopped glowing. The tech-tatts around his eyes and on his temples shifted into a configuration of curves to enhance his hearing and night vision. “Can’t remember the last time your enhancements got fooled, Big Bad.”

They stood where they were with the wormhole rumbling behind them. A single glance at the twelve-meter-wide ring of defensive wards told Stiles how lethal it was. The wards were shrieking in warning at his senses, sending shivers up his arms and spine under his nanogel-suit. The Cosmo-net was flashing at him in tandem via his deck-jacket that he was jacked into, and if it had a human larynx, it would be bellowing *stay back stay back* at him.

Yeah, anyone who was stupid enough to step over those wards would be fried to a crunchy crisp before their foot landed on the other side. His alternate self was taking no chances with trespassers—and wisely so. There was something horrifyingly ironic to Stiles about this guy employing such a method of defense / offense: the last time he and Derek visited Mieczysław and his Derek in
Universe KQL-9910, Mieczysław had told him more about their alternate self of this universe. About how the poor bastard had to watch the Nogitsune incinerate his werewolf mate with his own magical flames.

Rad, he’s been carrying his Derek’s soul inside him. For four years.

Even Derek knew what bad news that was. Six years ago, the Cosmo-net had gone mad with gossip over a scandal involving a brash techno-mage from the notorious D’Azard family, who’d killed eleven people to enslave their souls and their powers. The moron never got past yoking one soul to himself. The mere act of tethering it to his body resulted in him melting like a Xhellu dunked in seawater: an agonizing, prolonged liquefaction of flesh and bone that saved his brain for last, ensuring that he felt every Planck second of the experience.

It was beyond Stiles’s current comprehension how his alternate self was still alive.

Seeing the man in person at last didn’t help one iota with that.

“Stiles,” Derek said, thrusting that muscular, reliable arm in front of him again. His husband was such a protective wolf. They’d debated over this for decades, but nope, Derek always insisted on acting as his shield, despite being his superior officer on the Beacon—

A crackling, ear-piercing noise preceded a bright blaze of bluish light on the other side of the ring of wards. Stiles knew a teleportation spell when he saw one. He braced himself, his hands stretching open at his sides, his tech-tatts reconfiguring in preparation for battle. The bluish light faded to reveal a lanky man with a shaved head, dressed in what the Cosmo-net described as a white tank top, jeans, and white sneakers. A pallid man, pressing a skinny-fingered hand to his sternum. A man who looked exactly like Stiles had when he was much younger, no more than thirty.

Przemysław “Stiles” Stilinski—the warlock who’d opened up at least a hundred traversable wormholes on his own, while possessed by the Nogitsune. The warlock whose magic had given the Nogitsune the necessary power to hunt down numerous other versions of him, and stay standing after battling each one, until Mieczysław helped him to defeat the demon in him. To say this guy was fucking terrifying was like saying that sailing into a supermassive blackhole was a stroll in an Earth park.

Stiles didn’t want a fight, not in the least. But if Przemysław wanted one, there was no stopping it: Mieczysław had also warned him and Derek about how powerful Przemysław had to be now, with that soul seething in him like a Jupiter-sized anticyclonic storm. Stiles had no illusions about his odds of survival here. If the guy wanted to fry him and Derek where they stood, he had perhaps a one-in-a-billion chance of safely propelling Derek back through the wormhole while he took the blow. Derek was so not going to let that happen.

Which meant, it was time for his big mouth to do its job.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! We’re just here to talk, pal!” He darted out from behind Derek. Flung his hands up palms out, trying to catch Przemysław’s eyes. “We don’t want a fight, okay? There’s no need for that. Really. We just wanna talk with you. To help you.”

Stiles’s heartbeat hammered in his chest, his ears. He held his breath. Held his hands up as he took a step forward, then another, closer and closer to the ring of wards. To Przemysław.

“We have a mutual friend—Mieczysław ‘Stiles’ Stilinski. In Universe KQL-9910,” he said, taking another step forward. “If that means anything to you.”
Damn, the guy—the kid, really, just a kid like Mieczysław, compared to him and Derek—was in bad shape. The kind of bad that would have sent most people to the med-bay for hardcore painkillers, maybe even a one-way shot to the Veil. The neon-green light of the wormhole accentuated his gauntness. The gold veins that striated and branched along the lengths of thin arms gleamed on pallid, sweat-sheened skin. His bloodshot eyes were glazed, creased with pain, encircled by the dark purple of exhaustion. His broad shoulders were hunched and trembling. His left hand was pressed so hard to his sternum that his tank top wrinkled around it, as if all that was preventing him from exploding into bloody chunks was that hand.

Maybe it was.

“You’re—you’re Radosław.”

The kid sounded far worse than he looked, guttural and whipped. His breaths rattled in and out of a concave chest.

“Yeah. He told you about me, right?” Stiles slowly lowered his hands. “I’m the other guy who can create wormholes like you, if you haven’t already guessed.”

He risked firing up his magi-tech to scan Przemysław. He had to grit his teeth to not wince at the insane levels of cortisol in the kid’s deteriorating body. A lesser man would be writhing on the ground right now, screaming to be put out of his suffering. He could see with his third-eye the soul that swirled inside that emaciated torso, far more substantial than any anticyclonic storm in his universe: it was burning Przemysław from the inside out, eating him alive to keep itself alive, and it had nowhere else to go.

But he was going to change that.

“Przemysław. Hey, listen to me, okay? We’re here to help you.”

Przemysław was staring at Derek with eyes gone round as discs. Mieczysław had warned him and Derek about this too, about Przemysław being tormented by any physical incarnation of his werewolf mate, and who could blame the poor kid? At this point of his marriage to Derek, Stiles felt like half of him was gone whenever he and Derek had to be split up on missions. He couldn’t bear to even imagine what it was like for his werewolf mate to be a projection that could speak to him, and yet never be able to touch each other, both knowing that keeping one alive was gradually killing the other.

“Fade out, Big Bad,” he whispered, staring at Przemysław who continued to stare at Derek.

He knew Derek had done his disappearing act when Przemysław’s eyes widened even more and the kid glanced around in a panic. Before Przemysław could do something impulsive, Stiles strode up to the ring of wards, right in front of his younger alternate self.

“How, hey. Przemysław. Hey, look at me, okay? He’s still standing there, I promise. He’s just standing there, watching my back.” He made eye contact with Przemysław, his tech-tatts reconfiguring into parallel lines that highlighted his eyes. He gave the kid a consoling smile, then said, “Is that—better? That you can’t see him.”

Przemysław stared at him with those distraught, wide eyes. Up-close like this, it was like gazing into a mirror, into the past at his own reflection. He’d appeared this sick in the weeks after the Nogitsune was exorcised from him, after he died for fifteen minutes until Kira and her team revived him in the med-bay and then had to quarantine him for a month. Derek’s eyes had been as red and wet as Przemysław’s were in this very moment, every time he visited the quarantine cells, their hands and
foreheads pressed to the aero-glass that separated them.

Przemysław responded with a jerky nod.

“Tell me something, okay?”

Przemysław stared on at him, breaths rattling in and out between chapped, parted lips.

“Did you cast a spell to hide how you really looked from Mieczysław?”

Przemysław lowered his eyes to the side. Stared at the wards on the ground. Said nothing. His fingers dug into his sternum, further wrinkling his tank top. Now Stiles saw the peppering of dried blood on it, as if Przemysław had coughed it out in uncontrollable bursts.

“Maybe you weren’t in such bad shape then. But he couldn’t tell, could he? You made sure of that,” Stiles murmured, giving the kid another consoling smile. “You didn’t visit Mieczysław to say hello to him. You were saying goodbye. Even gave him a parting gift.”

Przemysław stared down at the wards. They blinked out one by one in a clockwise direction, until they were all gone. Stiles stood in place, his hands loose at his sides, his deck-jacket black and quiet, his tech-tatts idle. He was aware of how much trust Przemysław was placing in him, to remove the wards while Derek was invisible, to permit him to reach for a hunched shoulder.

“How much time do you have, kid?”

Przemysław didn’t react to his hand giving that hunched shoulder a squeeze. Przemysław shook that shaved head like he was in a dream, a nebulous dream that he sought to leave but no longer remembered how.

“I don’t know,” Przemysław rasped.

Stiles drew in a deep breath, then let it out as a low sigh. He couldn’t bring himself to tell Przemysław that his magi-tech already gave him the answer. The kid had a few months left, if he was damn determined to fight to the very end. Weeks, if his remaining physical strength failed him before his spirit did. The same death sentence applied to the soul of his werewolf inside him.

“What happened to the wormholes you opened?”

Stiles gave Przemysław’s shoulder another squeeze. Przemysław blinked. Raised his head, and stared at him as if he was seeing him for the first time.

“I—closed them. Too risky to—to leave them open.”

Stiles nodded. Smart move. But it meant that Przemysław had to reopen one of them, in his current condition.

“Can you open one? Can you still universe-hop? Just one more time?”

Przemysław stared at him with wide, uncomprehending eyes. He grasped Przemysław’s other shoulder.

“Listen to me. There’s a universe we designated ZXE-4421, okay? You opened a wormhole to it, but I’m pretty sure you didn’t visit it. It’s—” Stiles bit his lower lip, then murmured, “The Earth in that universe was destroyed by some kind of nuclear holocaust. Everyone, everything in it is dead. But before that happened, there were colonies of humans and werewolves who’d lived in
underground bases, who tried to figure out how to survive it.”

Przemysław said nothing.

“The version of us who’d lived in that universe? I think he was some kind of—genius scientist who specialized in human biology. I don’t know for sure, and I never will.” Stiles shook Przemysław gently by the shoulders. “But listen, listen, okay? He had this enormous laboratory in one of these underground bases. It was still running on auxiliary power when Derek and I visited it. Protected from the nuclear radiation outside.”

Przemysław blinked. His bloodshot eyes sharpened.

“Somehow he figured out how to clone bodies, and grow them in these sealed containment units. He’d cloned a few bodies for himself.” Stiles squeezed Przemysław’s shoulders. His throat began to prickle. “He’d cloned bodies for his Derek too.”

Przemysław blinked again. His shoulders tensed under Stiles’s hands.

“A lot of the containment units weren’t running anymore. But there was one that still was.” Stiles’s throat pricked even more. He swallowed, then said, “It had an adult body of his Derek. I scanned it with my magi-tech, and it was absolutely viable. No malformations, no radiation poisoning, nothing. You understand what I’m saying?”

Under Stiles’s hands, Przemysław’s shoulders started to shake. His rattling breaths became erratic. Stiles’s eyes welled up in unison with Przemysław’s, and his lips wavered into a heartening smile. The kid’s lower face contorted in an effort to cling onto his composure. Stiles rubbed the side of that gold-veined, long neck.

“I can’t go back to that universe. I’ve been locked out of it, along with every other techno-mage who can travel the multiverse. I’m breaking a whole lotta rules here just by telling you all this,” he rasped. He blinked hard. His smile widened into a smirk. “But hey, fuck the rules. Fuck ‘em especially when it means giving somebody a second chance at life. And since you’re not from my universe, the rules don’t apply to you anyway. Right?”

Przemysław’s face was streaked wet, but that heart-wrenching expression had been replaced by one Stiles had seen so many times on his own in the mirror. The one that wiped all fear and hesitation from his features. The one that calmly said, Derek needs me.

Stiles nodded. His smirk softened into small smile.

“So, I ask you again—can you universe-hop, Przemysław, just one more time?”

He had an inkling of what it must be costing Przemysław to straighten up, to square those shoulders, to level out his breathing. Przemysław’s fingers dug even deeper into the flesh over his sternum. A muscle spasmed in his lower jaw.

“Yes,” Przemysław said, and his voice didn’t quaver.

Stiles released Przemysław’s shoulders and lowered his arms to his sides. He stayed motionless when Przemysław raised a trembling right hand to his temple. Derek was still invisible, but he could sense his werewolf’s presence behind him. He didn’t have to see Derek to know that those muscular arms were flexing with tension, those large hands clenching and unclenching in anticipation of a potential attack. He held out his right arm to the side in a placating gesture.

Przemysław’s eyes glowed a brilliant blue. Stiles let the kid press that skinny-fingered hand to his
temple. He pushed whatever information he had about Universe ZXE-4421 to the forefront of his mind, and he could sense cautious, smoke-like tendrils reach for it. Przemysław was being as restrained as possible. Yet, Stiles’s mindscape vibrated and went psychedelic from the power raging within the kid. The Cosmo-net was flashing in alarm as rippling spikes across his deck-jacket, but he didn’t move, didn’t say a word. He didn’t feel any pain. He wasn’t in danger.

Within seconds, Przemysław removed his hand and broke the connection. A glint of awe brightened the kid’s weary eyes.

Stiles smirked. “My universe’s a pretty cool place, huh?”

“You’re a lieutenant on a starship.” Przemysław blinked. “It’s—just like Star Trek.”

Stiles tilted his head. “What is that?”

“It’s a TV show. A sci-fi TV show,” Przemysław murmured, as the Cosmo-net jabbered out information about it inside Stiles’s head. “Derek—” He blinked hard, then whispered, “Derek liked to—he liked watching it with me.”

Stiles’s lips curled up into a fond smile. He had his own memories of cuddling with his Derek on the couch, watching holo-vids of their favorite entertainment shows in their quarters on the Beacon, or in their house in the Preserve.

“You’re welcome to visit, anytime. You and your Derek.”

Przemysław gazed at him for a long while, then nodded.

“I have to go now,” Przemysław rasped. “Thank you.”

Stiles nodded back.

“Good luck, kid,” he said, knowing Przemysław was going to need every atom of it. The odds were immensely stacked against his younger alternate self. There was a chance that he might not return from Universe ZXE-4421, that the act of transporting the containment unit and its precious cargo through the wormhole might kill him.

But since when had the impossible ever stopped Stiles—any version of him, in any universe—from attempting it anyway?

*You make the impossible possible, my falcon of the stars. You always do.*

Derek dropped his camouflage and stood beside him. He clasped Derek’s hand in his. He rubbed his thumb across the platinum ring that graced Derek’s fourth finger.

“I wanna watch this,” he said, as Przemysław strode away from them, farther into the clearing.

Derek gave his hand a squeeze. They followed Przemysław from a safe distance. They observed in silence as Przemysław raised his right arm high in the air and summoned what appeared to be a black mist with a burst of brilliant blue light in his palm. The mist wrapped itself around Przemysław, solidifying into a black, long leather coat with a high collar and curlicue designs sliced through with dark gray seams. It was akin to how their nanogel-suits molded to their bodies.

Przemysław held his right hand out in front of him, its long fingers stretched apart. It glowed brilliant blue. His wide eyes also began to glow brilliant blue, and with a deafening crackle of thunder, a brilliant blue orb the size of a baseball materialized in the air four meters in front of him. It rapidly
swelled into the massive, multi-layered donut form of a traversable wormhole that was identical to Stiles’s.

If he hadn’t been scared shitless of his younger alternate self before, he certainly was now.

Hot-damn Astorgrath gliding in on a pitwoo’s wings, Przemysław was capable of summoning a traversable wormhole without any preparatory measures. No binging on food beforehand, no tweaking of enhancements, no boost-sleep, no nothing. And the guy was dying due to an additional, fiery soul inside his body while he was at it.

*I think he’s the most powerful version of us that exists*, Mieczysław had said to him. *If he succeeds, he’ll only become stronger, having his Derek back again.*

Stiles had held his tongue at the time. Mieczysław didn’t know how to create traversable wormholes now—but in the years to come, if he kept training, that kid was going to become a juggernaut in his own right. Like Mom’s visions, Stiles’s visions—as rare as they were—had yet to be wrong.

Przemysław stood in front of the now open wormhole. Stiles could see the desolate, steel interior of the underground laboratory he and Derek had explored in Universe ZXE-4421 at the other end of the wormhole. Przemysław turned his head to gaze at them with an impassive face but grateful, wide eyes. Przemysław’s left hand was still pressed hard to his sternum. Stiles gave him a sideways smile, his throat prickling once more.

He and Derek watched the kid stride into the wormhole, engulfed in brilliant blue tendrils. He had to stop himself from charging into the wormhole too, from helping his alternate self: he was well and truly locked out of it by the Council of Mages, and even he would think twice before screwing with their vicious blocker spells. In the aftermath of his visit, Lady Lydia had blacklisted that universe on the Cosmo-grid, and officially forbidden all techno-mages capable of multiversal travel from ever visiting it for safety reasons.

He and Derek had been lucky when they popped into that laboratory. If its auxiliary power had failed, so would its defenses against the severe nuclear radiation beyond its walls.

If its auxiliary power had failed—he’d just sent Przemysław and his Derek to a lonelier, swifter death.

He swiveled and wrapped his arms around Derek’s sturdy torso, pressing his face into the heat of Derek’s neck, counting the stable pulse within it. Derek hugged him back, stroking his nape above the collar of his deck-jacket.

“He’s gonna make it,” he rasped into his werewolf mate’s warm skin.

They stood in the radiance of two traversable wormholes, bathed in neon-green and brilliant blue. They were here, in this place, this point of time, somehow still alive and together after all they’d undergone across multiple decades, multiple universes. They were here, while so many others were not. They were still here.

Derek kissed his temple. The press of those soft, dark pink lips to his skin, the gentle scrape of that salt-and-pepper stubble still sent a rousing tingle through his body, over thirty-three years after their first kiss. He raised his head to look Derek in the eye. He pressed his forehead to his husband’s.

“If he’s anything like you?” Derek murmured, conviction ingrained in every word. “Yeah. They’ll make it.”
(You'll find out what happens to Przemyslaw and his Derek in the next coda!)
Coda: If Two People Love

Chapter Notes

Soundtracks: Time (guitar version), and Time (cello version), from the Inception OST.

(Just in case—Stiles in this coda is Przemysław.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stiles had seen the arrival of his alternate self in a vision that assaulted his mind nine days before it became reality. In that vision, his alternate self—the one Mieczysław had called Radosław—had appeared like an avenging angel, a tall, undaunted figure in black, his features masked in shadow as he stood in front of a neon-green traversable wormhole. In that vision, Radosław’s wide eyes had also glowed neon-green as they stared at him.

He’d been so certain that he had met his executioner. His judge and jury in one man, who would mete justice on behalf of all the innocents whose blood soaked his hands. Perhaps Radosław would reach into his chest and crush his putrid heart with a fist of magic. Perhaps Radosław would slice his throat open from ear to ear with that magic, letting him bleed at a slug’s pace to prolong his pain. Or perhaps Radosław would get the hint from his defensive wards, and burn him to ashes in neon-green flames.

It was what he deserved. It was the least of what he deserved.

But none of that was what his beloved werewolf mate deserved.

He would have gladly begged Radosław to spare Derek’s life. Gladly prostrated himself before his righteous executioner, pressed his forehead to those black boots while imploring him to remove Derek’s soul from his body first before ending his wretched existence.

Instead, Radosław had been the deliverer of miraculous news. Radosław had grasped his shoulders like a friend, a brother. Looked him in the eye with glistening ones. Looked at him, and saw a man, not a monster.

Just a broken man, beyond salvation.

He knew this as irrefutable fact when he and the containment unit hurtled through the wormhole. The containment unit looked like a coffin, with a lid of transparent glass, and a steel body branded with words in bold black: HALE INDUSTRIES. It landed with a resounding thump on the barren ground in front of the decrepit building that was once the Stilinski family home. He landed with a lesser thump on it, his heaving upper body and his long coat splayed across its glass lid.

His quivery legs slipped down until he was on his knees next to it. His left hand clutched at his broiling chest. He wheezed, and tried not to scream from the fiery agony of Derek’s soul frenetically churning inside him.

Derek knew. Derek knew what was going to happen to him—

Dark blood gushed out of his throat and mouth in a torrent. It spattered the side of the containment unit, drenched the front of his white tank top. He hunched forward and spewed another torrent of
blood onto the ground. He was dying, he knew that. Radoslaw had known that. He had to transfer Derek’s soul into the new body while he still could. There was no more time, not for him.

The wormhole sealed itself with an explosion of light and sound. He didn’t feel it when he should have, and that spurred him into frenetic action of his own. With a burst of magic from his shaking hand, he melted away the mechanism that kept the containment unit locked. He threw open the lid with both hands. Shivered in the blast of ice-cold air that struck him in the face as he leaned over the side of the containment unit.

The pristine body in it was naked and sinewy, lying supine with its arms straight at its sides. Its dark, thick hair was silky and medium-length. It had dark stubble that delineated the sharp jaw of a familiar, handsome face set in a serene expression. Its eyes were shut, but Stiles knew that if they were open, they would be hazel. They would be green, blue, brown and every other color under the sky that meant alive and gorgeous and forever.

They would be Derek’s eyes.

Stiles’s face crumpled. His shoulders quaked, and he sobbed in the raw solitude of the moonlit night. He pressed his hand to a cool, stubbled cheek. He carded his fingers through the dark, silky hair that, in another time, another life, would have been gelled up, cut shorter, and shaved at the sides. He bent down to press his quivering lips on that high, smooth forehead, then a second time. The rim of the containment unit dug into his waist. Clear droplets dotted pale skin that had never been caressed by fresh air until tonight.

He toppled back onto his knees on the ground. He stared at the bloody impression of his lips he’d left on that pale skin. Coughed out more gouts of blood onto his clothes, then slumped against the containment unit, sitting on his heels, wheezing again. His vision was blackening at the edges like smoldering paper. He couldn’t feel his hands or feet anymore. He couldn’t rise anymore.

No more time. No more time for him.

Derek’s soul spun and spun inside him. He felt Derek’s panic, Derek’s anguish as if they were his. He shoved his shaking left hand to his sternum. The blood soaking his tank top stained his palm and fingers.

“I don’t—don’t think I’m gonna m-make it, kochanie,” he rasped. Hot rivulets rolled down his cheeks to mingle with the blood on his lips, his chin, even as he smiled. “But you will.”

The transfer was going to kill him, he knew that.

But Derek would be alive. Derek would be safe, now that the war was over and the peace treaty was established. Derek would find a way to go on without him, because his beloved werewolf mate was the bravest, toughest man he’d ever had the privilege of knowing.

“Time to leave, Derek,” he whispered. He pressed his hand harder to his sternum, his eyes glowing brilliant blue while they spilled again. “Time to live.”

There was no way for Derek to stop him from forcing Derek’s soul out. His entire world filled with a blue light more luminous than all the supernovae in the universe. A maelstrom of fire erupted in his torso and surged up his throat, scorching it. His mouth gaped open in a soundless scream at the rocketing agony. His head flung back, his neck convulsing with his body against the containment unit.

Derek’s soul exploded in a stream out of his mouth as a gargantuan wolf of light and heat, swirling in
the air above him. The sight was as magnificent to behold with his third-eye as it was over four years
ago, and his wide eyes welled and spilled yet again. He stared up into large, lightning-bright eyes
that stared back at him for an eternal moment in time. He was unable to speak, to breathe past his
scalded throat. He collapsed against the side of the containment unit, his whole body numb. Wet iron
flooded his mouth.

Derek, miłość mojego życia, look at you.

It took the final ounces of his strength to turn his head and peer over the containment unit’s rim, to
witness Derek’s soul surging into the new body via its mouth, slipping in between those dark pink
lips. His own lips quivered into a blood-mottled, victorious smile.

Live, kochanie. Live, and be free.

The tremendous shockwave of light and sound that followed was far more brutal than the one
generated by his sealed wormhole. It tossed him through the air like a toy from a child’s hand. His
left shoulder smashed into the ground first. The impact dislocated his shoulder and splintered his
collarbone, but he didn’t feel it. The momentum flipped him head over heels, and he didn’t feel the
collision of his limp body into the ground again, didn’t feel it roll to a sprawled halt on its right flank.

He faced the steel wreckage that was the containment unit. He stared at it with hazy, stinging eyes at
half-mast across the swathe of barren soil. Wet iron flowed from his nostrils and the corner of his
mouth, down the width of his cheek. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t feel anything else.

He was dying.

He was dying now, but Derek was—Derek was sitting up amid the steel wreckage, swaying, raising
muscle-bound arms and gaping down at them. Derek had successfully united his soul with the new
body, like Stiles knew he would. Derek was among the living once more.

Stiles quirked his lips into a tender smile, for the last time.

Kocham cie, Derek.

Derek swiveled that head of dark, thick hair in his direction. The shadows concealed his last kiss for
his werewolf mate. Derek’s wide eyes were glowing—and they were hazel. They were hazel, just
like he remembered them. Like he would always remember them, even in the deepest bowels of hell
where he belonged.

“Stiles?”

See you on the other side of the Styx, my handsome werewolf.

Stiles’s vision blurred. The blood on his skin cooled. His eyes fluttered shut.

§§§§§

Stiles awakened to complete darkness. Somehow, against all the odds in this universe and the next,
he was not dead. He was—lying on a bed. His bed, in the shell of his house. Covered up to the chest
in a blanket. His left shoulder, left arm, and chest were tightly bandaged.
“Is he dying?”

He tried to blink at the sound of Scott’s gruff voice. He couldn’t move his eyelids. He couldn’t move any part of himself. He should be afraid, paralyzed as he was, but he wasn’t. Scott was here. Scott, his best friend, his brother-in-arms, would never let any harm come to him.

Someone else’s weight was sinking the side of the bed. A callused hand was grasping his right forearm above the wrist on top of the blanket. He felt tendrils of benevolent magic flow with caution through him, examining him on a surface level.

“He senses me. But he’s not responding.”

Oh. Deaton was here.

He had to be in critical condition, for Scott to summon Deaton all the way from Nevada where he was training future emissaries for so many werewolf packs who’d lost theirs in the war. Deaton wasn’t the kind of guy who dropped his work after a single call. Not even for a True Alpha like Scott, who had authority over the Beacon Hills-born emissary.

For Stiles, though—Deaton would never admit it, but the guy had a soft spot for him. It was the natural consequence of saving the guy’s ass from being enslaved by the Argents for helping Derek to escape the concentration camps.

Derek.

Oh, Derek. His glorious, handsome werewolf who stole his heart in the Preserve a lifetime ago, and took it with him to—to—

*Where did you go, kochanie?*

*Where are you?*

“I can sense his spark, deep within him. It’s—struggling to stay alight. But it’s there. It’s diverting all its energy to repairing his body.”

“So he’s not dying.”

Deaton took an eon to respond to Scott.

“I cannot say for sure. You must understand, he’d carried an extra soul in his body for years. It’s unprecedented. It was considered an utter impossibility, a futile endeavor that could only end in immediate death—until he did it. By all rights, he should have died years ago from the overload of energy.” Deaton withdrew his magic, then his hand. “The damage to his body is grave.”

“But his magic—it’s healing him, right?”

The desperation in Scott’s low voice felt like a heavy, pulverizing entity that sat on Stiles’s aching chest. He tried to lift his eyelids again. Tried to move something, anything.

“He’s strong, Scott. Stronger than anyone I’ve ever known.”

Stiles’s entire body started to tingle at that new voice that spoke. He couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, but he could now sense the presence of three people in the room with him. Three men, including Deaton and Scott. Who was the third man? Who was that man who spoke with that familiar voice?

A large, warm hand touched his right cheek. It felt—so familiar, so real. It stroked the curve of his
shaved head as if it’d done so innumerable times. He tried once more to open his eyes, to speak.

Who are you?

“If his spark’s there, he’ll heal. He just needs time.”

Tell me who you are.

“I agree. Still, both of you may want to keep vigil for the next few days—it will help him to return, listening to your voices,” Deaton said. “Especially yours, being his mate.”

Please tell me who you are.

“I’ll be here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Have I told you how freaking awesome it is to have you back, dude?”

“Yeah. I’m still—getting used to being in this body. It’s—younger than I actually am.”

“Give it another week, Derek. The feeling of displacement will eventually go away.”

Derek?

Which Derek are you? To whom do you belong?

Are you—my Derek?

Stiles didn’t receive an answer. The complete darkness invited him back into its soothing embrace. He slumbered in it for an immeasurable epoch. His spark flickered into a flame. He slumbered, and he dreamed of a gorgeous man with dark, thick hair and stubble, with hazel eyes that crinkled above an affectionate smile. A brave and tough man who caressed his cheek with the back of familiar, warm fingers.

“You’ve been sleeping a long time, mój gwiazdko. Time to wake up.”

Stiles’s eyes stayed shut. They weren’t ready to open, to chase away this beautiful dream where he was spoken to and touched with love, so much love that he didn’t deserve.

“Are you gonna let a little thing like a soul transfer beat you, hm? You, Przemyslaw ‘Stiles’ Stilinski—and this is in your own humble words—the most badass, ingenious warlock to ever walk this planet.”

A thumb brushed the length of his lower lip. It felt like a searing brand upon his cool skin, and he yearned for more of that heat, for it to suffuse his chest, his heart. He yearned to be alive again. To be among the living again.

Was that—was that where Derek was now?

“You promised Mieczysław that you would see him later. Remember?” That thumb brushed across his upper lip. Traced its bow. “Yeah, you thought you were saying goodbye to him for the last time. But it wasn’t the last time. Because you’re coming back. And we’ll visit him again—you and me.”

Yes.

I remember.
“And remember when we went to the Grand Canyon eight years ago? When you teleported us to that valley that no one else could get to?” Stiles felt coarse stubble against his face. Felt a bold, straight nose nuzzle his cheek. “You carved a fifty-foot mural of the two of us with your magic on its rock wall.”

Yes, I remember that.

“You were laughing like a nutball. You had your arms raised to the sky. Your eyes were glowing. You commanded the stone and the soil and the heavens, and yet—” He felt a shuddering gust of warm air on his cheek. “You were looking at me. You looked at me as if I was a star. Me—this ordinary werewolf, this tiny flare to your supernova.”

I remember that day, kochanie.

I remember the light in you when you looked back at me, and it was more luminous than all the supernovae in existence. More luminous than I will ever be.

“To the very end, remember? The very end of forever—that’s what you said.” The voice that spoke to him had become husky. “And fourteen years isn’t forever. Not even close.” Those familiar, warm fingers caressed his face again. “So, wake up. Come back.”

Derek?

Derek, is that you?

I can’t feel you in my chest anymore. Where are you, kochanie?

“Come back to me.”

You are the star, not me. My star. My North Star that leads me home. Don’t you know that by now?

“Come back to me, Stiles. Please.”

He curled in the fingers of his right hand. Cool cotton bunched in his fist.

I’m coming, mój gwiazda Północna. I’m coming back.

His eyelids fluttered.

I’ll be with you soon, Derek.

Wait for me.

The brilliant blue flame in him flickered. It burgeoned into an inferno that spiraled through his bones, his flesh, his veins. It healed his scorched throat, then his ravaged innards. It restored the broken bone of his clavicle. It mended the torn ligaments of his left shoulder. It erased the bruises from his left arm, his chest, his hip.

He sucked in a rough breath, then another.

And he opened his eyes.

“Stiles?”

He stared up at a discolored plaster ceiling that was peeling at its corners. Sunlight through the open window was casting angular shadows and prisms of gold across it. It was the ceiling of his childhood
bedroom. Once upon a time, before Mom and Dad were shot dead by Gerard Argent’s hunter cronies on the outskirts of the town, the ceiling was immaculate and white. He’d glued glow-in-the-dark stars to it, positioning them to represent the constellation of Ursa Minor.

He stared at the empty spot where the North Star once was.

“Stiles? Are you awake, bro?”

He turned his head to his right, and saw Scott sitting on the side of the bed, smiling down at him. Scott was dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans. The permanent scar that snaked down Scott’s left cheek from below his left eye distorted that buoyant smile but did nothing to lessen its joy. Scott gripped his right hand on the blanket covering him, and gave it a fervent squeeze.

“Hey, man. Welcome back to the land of the living. How you feeling?”

He stared up at Scott, at those crinkled brown eyes that had always gazed at him with fondness since they were four years old. He curled in the fingers of his right hand again. They gave the Alpha werewolf’s hand a squeeze in return.

“I—I should be dead,” he rasped.

“Yeah, well.” Scott arched his right eyebrow. “None of us were gonna let that fly, so you can forget about it. Death’s gonna have to come back another day for you. In the very distant future.”

Stiles’s chapped lips quirked up in a faint smile. Scott’s smile widened, and he gave Stiles’s hand another squeeze.

“Seriously, man. How are you feeling? It’s gotta be—kinda weird, right? After four years.”

Stiles blinked. He frowned in puzzlement.

“Wha?”

Scott’s smile waned, but his crinkled eyes remained warm. “Stiles. Do you remember what happened?”

Stiles blinked again, like an owl. “I feel—wrong.”

This time, Scott gave him a wry smile. “I guess that’s one way of putting it. But it’s gotta feel good to not be in constant pain anymore, right? You—you were—” Scott’s smile vanished. The stark anger and sorrow, the love in his eyes made Stiles’s throat constrict. “I’m still so mad at you for pushing me and Allison away. I get that you were scared of hurting anyone, that you didn’t know when you couldn’t handle the power overload anymore. I get it, I do. But what did locking us all out do in the end, huh? You almost died, Stiles. This time it was for real.”

Stiles stared at his lifelong best friend with stinging eyes. Scott had yet to let go of his hand. He’d never told Scott what happened to him in Mieczysław’s universe. Not everything.

He didn’t deserve to have the burden of his sins eased, least of all by Scott.

“If it wasn’t for Deaton teleporting straight from Reno, you would have died that night. He healed enough of your internal injuries to give your spark a chance to jumpstart. And after that, we still didn’t know if you were gonna be okay. Derek stayed here every day and night for the last three weeks, holding onto you, talking to you.”
Stiles’s eyes widened. His fingers spasmed around Scott’s.

“Yeah, you heard me. You scared Derek so much that he refused to leave the room until last night.”

Scott let out a loud sigh. His stern expression softened. “When your magic finally did its job and got you out of the danger zone.”

Stiles’s mouth worked soundlessly. He bit his quivering lower lip, then whispered, “Derek?”

Scott’s expression softened even more.

“Stiles. Do you remember?”

Stiles clutched at his bare chest with his left hand, above the hem of the blanket. He pressed his palm to his sternum. His sternum that no longer ached, no longer broiled. Where there had been unrelenting fire and rib-creaking shockwaves of power, there was now only—a void. A placid void in which his soul alone resided.

His left hand clenched into a fist on top of his chest that throbbed for a very different reason.

“Where is he, Scott?” he whispered. “He’s not here anymore.”

Not here in his chest. Not here in his room.

*Where are you, kochanie?*

*Come back to me.*

That buoyant smile returned to Scott’s face. He tightened his grip on Stiles’s hand.

“Can you get up?”

Before Stiles could reply, Scott glanced out the open window. Scott tilted his head, as if he was listening to something out of sight, something far from the house. Scott smiled again, but it was a small one to himself.

“You’re that close?” Scott said, still gazing out the window. “Okay. We’re coming down now. Give him a minute.”

No, Scott wasn’t listening to something. Scott was listening to someone. Speaking to someone who could hear him from afar, who had the supernatural hearing to do so.

Stiles’s heart began to pound.

Scott gently tugged him up to a sitting position on the bed. He pushed aside the blanket, and he didn’t care that he was nude in front of Scott—they were bros in every way except in blood, and there was nothing Scott hadn’t already seen. The bandages had been removed. He was as skinny as his fingers, but that didn’t surprise him: healing comas often cost him in physical mass and weight, along with lost time, lost memories.

He swung his long legs over the side of the bed. He rolled his left shoulder. He stretched his left arm straight. Bent and twisted it at the elbow, testing its restored flexibility. It was as good as new. Perhaps even better than it’d been before his injuries.

The gold veins that branched and striated his pale skin from the neck down gleamed in the sunshine. Scott skimmed his eyes over them, but said nothing. Scott never asked how he ended up with these golden scars. He in turn never asked how Scott ended up with that scar on that benign face. Pain was
the backbone of their stories, and for now, that was all they needed to know.

With his magic, his open right hand raised in the air and sparking brilliant blue, he clothed himself. He didn’t realize what he’d unconsciously chosen for his outfit until he saw Scott’s nostalgic smile.

“That’s what you wore that day. When we went into the Preserve to look for my talisman.”

Stiles glanced down at himself. At his red hoodie, black jeans, and white sneakers.

“It’s fitting,” Scott said also.

Stiles’s heart pounded faster. He fisted his right hand in the fleecy fabric of his hoodie.

Hello, Red Riding Hood. What a tender, young creature you are.

Thank you kindly, Stalker-wolf. If you’re gonna eat me tonight, I suggest you start with my juicy ass that is the height of plump perfection.

“C’mon, Stiles. He’s coming.”

Scott gripped his upper right arm as he pushed himself up to his feet. He staggered, then tottered out of the bedroom with Scott still gripping his arm. His legs wobbled while they descended the rickety staircase, one languid step at a time. The second last step creaked under his right foot.

He didn’t feel the hardwood floor under his feet. His hands trembled too much for him to turn the knob of the front door, and Scott mercifully opened the door for him without a word. He stood on the front porch and blinked. Squinted his eyes against the dazzling sunlight. Scott released his arm and stood beside him.

Yeah, there his front yard was, devoid of a single tuft of grass—nothing had grown in it since Mom died, and her sunflowers had long died with her. There sat his car, the same vivid blue as Mom’s jeep that’d been bombed by Kate Argent before the war began. There the driveway was, winding from the house to the woods, pockmarked with old bullet holes from the time Dad defended the home against Argent cronies.

Stiles narrowed his eyes. He lurched forward to stand at the head of the short flight of stairs that led to the driveway.

Someone was at the end of the driveway, sauntering toward the house.

A man. A tall man, with dark, short hair shaved at the sides. He was attired in a white tank top, black tactical pants, and boots. He walked with slow albeit confident steps across the pockmarked concrete. His handsome, stubbled face was flushed with jubilation. His lips were dark pink and soft, quirked up in a small smile. The white tank top molded around a brawny torso with a flat belly and tapered waist. It flaunted muscle-bound arms that appeared strong enough to punch through brick walls, to smash apart a machine-gun. To carry the weight of the world and all its sins. To carry Stiles.

Stiles’s hands started to shake. He sucked in a harsh breath, then another, then another. His eyes welled and burned, and he couldn’t breathe. He clutched at his chest with his right hand. It swelled, as if it was going to detonate like a nuclear bomb, but this time it wasn’t with agony. It was with a different kind of pain. An exquisite pain. The very best kind of pain.

That handsome, stubbled man was gazing at him with hazel eyes. Hazel eyes that were green, blue, brown and every other color under the sky that meant alive and gorgeous and forever. Hazel eyes that were sun-bright and sun-warm with stubborn life, with abiding love. Hazel eyes that he would
always remember. That he would know anywhen, anywhere.

Scott gripped his upper arm again. He tottered down the stairs to the head of the driveway, and he stood on wobbly legs, trying to breathe, to not shatter into irretrievable pieces.

Was he still sleeping? Was he dreaming? Was all this just the dream of a broken, dead man beyond salvation? Just another fleeting dream, before hell took it away from him?

“Go, Stiles.”

He swiveled his head to look at Scott. Scott was smiling. Scott’s crinkled eyes glistened under the sunlight.

“Go to him,” Scott said, letting him go, gently pushing him forward with a hand on his upper back. “It’s him, Stiles. It’s really him.”

Stiles staggered forward several steps. He froze in place for a few seconds after that, his shoulders hunched, both hands clutching his heaving, thrumming chest.

That handsome, hazel-eyed, stubbled man was nearer now, so near. Stiles saw him, and so did Scott. Scott saw him too.

Scott saw him too.

Stiles staggered forward once more. He started to hyperventilate. He set one tremulous foot in front of the other, and his eyes burned, and his mouth opened wide in a raucous gasp when that handsome, hazel-eyed, stubbled man reached him—when Derek finally touched him with those large, warm hands.

“You’re not dreaming, mój gwiazdko,” Derek rasped against his temple. “This is real. I’m real.”

He held his own arms to his chest as those muscle-bound arms wrapped tight around him. He stared ahead with sightless, wet, wide eyes. He gasped, and gasped, and he couldn’t believe it, he couldn’t believe this was real, not when he still deserved the worst punishment for his wrongdoings, when he deserved to die—

“Remember when we met for the first time?”

Derek grasped his nape. Stroked it with a thumb, like he would when the nights were cold and the reality that Mom and Dad were dead was overwhelming.

“You and Scott were searching for his talisman in the Preserve. You were wearing this exact red hoodie, and the hood was flipped up over your head. You already knew I was there behind the trees, watching the both of you. Watching you.”

Stiles squeezed his eyes shut. Rivulets of hot salt trickled down his cheeks.

Yes. Yes, I remember.

“You waited for me to show myself. You knew exactly where the talisman was, but you let me pick it up instead,” Derek murmured into his ear. “And then you waited until Scott had turned around to leave. To give me that magical flying kiss that imprinted your phone number on my forehead.”

A low huff of what might have been laughter puffed out of Stiles’s mouth. He opened his brimming eyes to slits. He leaned his head against Derek’s, and he couldn’t believe that he was doing that. That
he could again.

My number, circled with red hearts and disembodied butts.

“Laura laughed so hard at me when I got home. Cora snapped a photo of my face and showed it to everyone else in the house except me. I had no idea what you did to me until I went to the bathroom.” Derek’s bristly cheek bunched against his in a smile. “And everyone laughed when they heard me howl in outrage.”

Slowly, Stiles turned his hands outward to press his palms on Derek’s chest. It was broad and firm, like he remembered it. Under his right palm, Derek’s heart thundered true, just like he remembered it.

“I called your number later, and you were laughing your ass off before I could even rant at you. I called you a shaved porcupine. And you called me—”

“Silly-wolf,” Stiles rasped. His chest swelled again, to bursting point. His throat convulsed, his eyes welled once more, and he knew there was no stopping the oncoming deluge from his eyes, his heart.

“Yeah. You called me Silly-wolf. And then you said that I was the most handsome werewolf you’d ever seen in your life, and you thought I would never call you. You thought you weren’t good enough for me. That I would never have looked at you.” Derek’s arms tightened around him in an ardent embrace that he’d thought he would never feel again. “But you were wrong, Stiles. I was watching you, remember? I looked at you. And I saw you.”

Stiles curled his fingers into Derek’s tank top.

Derek. His Derek. His glorious, gorgeous werewolf mate. His steadfast protector. His everything.

“And remember the night I sneaked into your room through the window, for the first time? You were so worried that your parents would wake up.” Derek’s shoulders shook with silent mirth. “I tried so hard not to laugh when you showed me all the spells you looked up to make your room soundproof.”

Derek’s voice went gravelly, like it would before he kissed Stiles. “But they worked. They worked so well, didn’t they?”

Yes. You spoiled me for anyone else, miłością mojego życia. With your hands, and your kisses, and your smiles that you showed no one else.

How can anyone else ever compare to you?

“Remember what I called you, after we made love for the first time? I called you my Red Riding Hood to make you laugh, and after we made love the second time—”

“I called you mine,” Stiles whispered wetly.

You’re mine, Derek Hale.

You’re still mine. You’re still here, with me.

The deluge was instead an avalanche of irrepressible emotions from within the prison cell he’d locked them, deep in his soul for over four long years. The cell blew apart like that steel containment unit had, and in the sultry warmth of the sun, of his werewolf mate, he shattered.

His face crumpled. His shoulders quaked, and he sobbed, still standing at all because Derek was holding him up with those strong arms. Derek was holding him in one salvaged piece. Derek would help him find a way to go on, even when he believed he couldn’t and shouldn’t. Derek’s bristly
cheek was pressed to his. He couldn’t tell whose tears were whose, and it didn’t matter for they all tasted the same on his lips and tongue. They tasted of salt, of life.

In the years to come, the miles of flowery, verdant land that sprawled outward from the Stilinski-Hale house would earn the global honor of being one of the most resplendent locations of nature on the planet. Its eternally blooming sunflowers would arrest all who saw them with awe and hope. They would be fabled to have sprouted by the hundreds of thousands in unison, brought to startling life by the rapture of a powerful warlock who’d lost and then found his werewolf mate again. They would never die.

In the here and now, Stiles’s eyes were too sore and wet to see anything beyond Derek’s face. He stared at Derek’s radiant face, at the sunny grin that adorned it as Derek glanced around at the golden splendor that surrounded them. Even Derek’s bunny teeth were exactly like he remembered them.

Dziękuję bardzo, Mieczysław, Radosław.

I don’t deserve this, but I am grateful. I am.

“Look at what you did, Stiles.”

Stiles stared at Derek, and rasped, “I am looking.”

Derek’s stunning hazel eyes alighted on his face once more. Derek stroked the crown of his shaved head. Brushed the damp skin under his eye with a thumb. Derek was still holding him up with his other arm around his waist. Derek was touching him. Derek could touch him again. Derek was alive, so alive and real.

“Hi,” Derek murmured.

“Hey,” Stiles replied, his face lighting up with a sunny grin of its own. He slid his arms around his werewolf’s solid torso, and he too felt so alive and real.

Derek’s expression became deadpan, but Stiles’s elation only increased.

“Did you know,” Derek said, his eyes twinkling, “that it takes a really, really long time to reach the very end of forever?”

Stiles’s grin softened into an affectionate, closed-lipped smile. He tilted his head forward to nudge his forehead to Derek’s.

“I’m counting on it,” he whispered, then pressed his lips to his werewolf mate’s in the first kiss of a million more to come.

Chapter End Notes

(It seems I am a far more merciful god than most, aren’t I?

But to be more serious, in the original plotting of the main story, Przemysław was meant to be dead dead. For a while, I was reluctant to bring him back to life, much less let him live on, because I didn't want to risk pulling a deus ex machina—which I can't stand in any story, really--and cheapening his death in the main story. But! You can thank Radosław for the solution that eventually came to me, as elaborated in the previous
coda. Good ol' big-hearted, stubborn techno-mages and their regular fuckery of the rules for true love, eh?

Coming next—Radosław and his Derek meet cavemen! Derek and Stiles!}
Coda: Good As Spring Itself

Chapter Notes

Soundtrack: Olafur Arnalds ft. Arnor Dan - A Stutter

(My brain said to me, "Dude, how could you write about Przemysław's reunion with his Derek--and not also write about them having epic sex with intense feels?!" And I said, "Yeah, that's a good point."

So here it is.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Derek’s back was bare. Its triskele tattoo was no longer there.

On this new body, it was never there.

Stiles was riveted by that patch of alabaster skin. He lay sprawled on the bed, divested of his clothes, his golden veins gleaming in the dying rays of the sun that streaked across his pale legs. He stared at that patch of skin while Derek, sitting on the side of the bed, removed his boots with languorous care, first the left then the right.

In another life, in which they hadn’t been robbed of five years of physical intimacy by a now dead demon of chaos, Stiles would already be yanking Derek back onto the bed. Hauling the laughing werewolf full-body onto him. Kissing him, again and again. Running his fingers through the dark, silky curls on that broad, firm chest. Running his fingers down an arched spine, the sensual dip of a lower back that flowed up to the swell of that incredible ass.

He’d never touched this body until today. Derek had been thirty-one when the Nogitsune razed his original body to ashes. Derek now appeared like he had when he’d been twenty-five: slimmer, more sinewy than burly, with the slightest of baby fat lingering on his stubbled face. Derek also had the same alabaster skin that had fascinated Stiles a lifetime ago, that still fascinated him and made him yearn to scratch it with his blunt nails to see it redden.

It was surreal that his lover, his werewolf mate—his husband, in all the ways that mattered—was now physically younger than him by five years. That was him assuming that Derek’s new body had developed in that steel containment unit at the same rate a human body would in nature. It might have developed to adulthood in a few years. Perhaps a few months. Perhaps mere weeks.

It was far too much for Stiles to contemplate in the present. Mere hours ago, he’d awakened from his three-week-long coma, and he’d believed Derek was lost to him. But his memories returned while Derek kissed him and clasped him close amid the blooming sunflowers. He remembered his journey to that devastated world, his crippling agony at expending so much power to shield himself and the containment unit from the encroaching nuclear radiation.

It was a miracle that he succeeded in transporting it back to his own universe.

It was an even greater miracle that Derek’s soul had been compatible with the body, considering its origin.
Maybe it was apt that he was the physically older one now: after everything they’d endured, with all his sins that still weighed his weary soul down, he felt centuries older. Giving Derek a new, immaculate body was the least he could do for the man he loved, who’d laid down his life for him without a second thought.

“Scott said he’ll help me with the triskele tattoo, if I want that.”

Stiles raised his eyes to meet Derek’s gaze. Derek was nude like he was. Yet, he felt so small, so humbled in Derek’s presence that seemed to occupy the whole room. Derek slid into place next to him on the bed. Slowly slid a muscular leg between his, as if he was a skittish wild creature on the verge of bucking and fleeing. He did neither of those things when Derek caged him in with those sturdy arms, framing his head with forearms dusted with dark hair.

“Are you getting the tattoo back because you want it?” Stiles murmured. “Or because—you think you gotta have it?”

Are you doing it for yourself—or for me?

Derek gazed down at him with heavy-lidded, unguarded eyes. He felt Derek’s fingers caress the crown of his shaved head.

“You know my mom had the same tattoo on her back,” Derek murmured. “And my dad.”

“Yes.”

Derek arched a dark, thick eyebrow. “And you liked it. You liked to touch it. Draw on it with your fingertips.”

Stiles stared up into those mesmerizing hazel eyes, and whispered, “Yes.”

Derek shifted to prop himself up on one elbow, on his left side. He pressed his right hand on Stiles’s chest, below his collarbones, over the wide, golden scars depicting the aorta and superior vena cava that swelled from his skin.

“Do you want these removed from your body?”

Stiles stared on at his werewolf mate’s cherished face.

“No,” he whispered. “I need them. To remember.”

Derek leaned down and pressed their foreheads together, the tips of their noses touching. Stiles laid his left hand over Derek’s hand on his chest. A shudder went through Derek, coursing into Stiles like an indolent wave.

“I’ll always remember them,” Derek said, lifting that luscious head of dark hair to gaze down at him again. “I’ll always think about them. They’re in my blood, my fangs, my eyes. But this is for me and you.”

Stiles’s throat bobbed once in a hard swallow.

With Stiles’s hand on top of his, Derek traced the first spiral of the triskele over his beating heart with a forefinger. “Past.” He traced the second spiral. “Present.” He traced the third, slower than the previous two. “Future.”

Stiles gripped the dorsal side of Derek’s hand. Derek’s forefinger was still pressed to his skin, and he
moved it in the first spiral of the triskele. “Life.” He traced the second spiral, gazing up into those warm hazel eyes. “Death.” He traced the third spiral, ending it over the center of his heart. “Rebirth.”

Deep within his chest, his restored magic flickered like a flame swept by an exhaled breath. It mellowed back to a quiescent spark, ever ready to be harnessed, to rage into an inferno.

Derek’s lips quirked up in a tender smile.

“How do you know what I said to Scott?”

“What?”

“I told him I’d be happy for him to help me with the tattoo. Unless you wanted to do it for me.”

Stiles pressed Derek’s hand flat over his quickening heart. Derek tilted his head to one side, still smiling.

“How is that a yes?”

Stiles raised his other hand to card his fingers through Derek’s chest hair, to skim it up Derek’s neck, and brush his thumb across his werewolf mate’s lower lip. He tugged Derek’s head down. Surged up to claim those parted lips, that hot mouth, and he spread his legs for Derek to move between them, sinking into the bed, letting out his first moan of pleasure in years at Derek’s swiftly stiffening cock rubbing its generous length against his. Vivid as his memories of their past lovemaking were, they were scintillations of sensations compared to reality.

His own cock hardened at a slower pace, and he wasn’t surprised by that—he hadn’t masturbated since Derek was murdered, much less had sex. The mere thought of pleasuring himself, even in the most perfunctory way, made him sick to his stomach when he knew how many innocent people had suffered and died because of him. Derek had numbered in that tally.

No, he didn’t deserve to feel pleasure. But Derek did.

This was for Derek.

He had to remember that.

He seized Derek’s shoulders. Rolled them over to pin Derek face up on the bed, straddling his wide-eyed werewolf’s lap. He smirked at the elation flushing Derek’s face and crinkling Derek’s eyes. Good—Derek was feeling good, and he could give Derek that. As much as Derek wanted, needed.

Derek’s cock was new and yet felt so familiar in his hand, with its reddened, wet head, and its smoothness, and its pulsing shaft. As he stroked it from hilt to tip, the realization struck him like a bullet to the gut that no one else had touched Derek’s new body this way except him. No one else ever would.

Derek’s body was a clean slate. Untainted by the deceitful touch of an Argent hunter who, after failing to seduce a teenage werewolf boy into spilling secrets, would burn his whole family to death in savage retribution, and even help her father to execute her brother for attempting to rescue said family. Derek might still have the distant memories of her, but his body didn’t.

Was he tainting Derek, then, with his touch? With his magically scarred body that had felt the scorching blood of numerous alternate versions of Derek splashing its clothes, its skin?

No one knew how many alternate versions of himself and Derek that the Nogitsune had tortured and
murdered, except him. The Nogitsune had made sure of that. The Nogitsune wanted him to remember that tally till the day he himself died.

In another life, he would already be bending down to suck Derek’s cock into his gaping, watering mouth. He would swirl his tongue on its underside, embedding its musky flavor in his taste buds. Derek would grab his head. Thrust into his mouth and down his throat, just the way he liked it, and he’d moan around Derek, on the cusp of coming just from his werewolf’s pleasure.

But that meant pleasure for him too. And that wasn’t what he deserved.

He deserved something else entirely.

He held Derek down by the shoulder with his left hand. He rose up on his knees, and Derek grabbed his hips, steadying him. Derek’s forehead furrowed. Stiles reached behind himself to grip Derek’s cock, and Derek’s forehead furrowed even more with bewilderment.

“Stiles?”

He hastily lined up Derek’s cock with his dry, unstretched hole. Derek’s fingers dug into his hips.

“Stiles, you haven’t used your magic to—”

In one thrust, Stiles sank down on his werewolf mate’s long, thick cock to the hilt. The abrupt breach and stretch hurt as much as he’d expected, but the pain still shocked him, driving out all the air from his lungs in a hoarse gasp. His feet curled in. His cock went limp. He squeezed his eyes shut, and prevented his magic from assuaging his pain. His head dipped until his chin touched his chest. He bit his lower lip hard. Propped himself up with trembling arms, his hands pressed flat to Derek’s rising and falling chest.

Derek’s body trembled like his arms did. He gasped again, squirming in Derek’s hands, staked in place by Derek’s cock that had never felt as enormous as it did in this prolonged minute.

“Stiles.”

Stiles’s eyes peeled open at the peculiar edge to Derek’s gruff voice. Derek was grimacing as he stared up at Stiles with wide, concerned eyes. Derek was—also in pain. Derek was—fuck, of course Derek was in pain. He’d gone in utterly dry, and Stiles was so tight after years of abstaining from any form of sexual activity.

Stiles squeezed his stinging eyes shut again. Bowed his head again, concealing his face with the back of his right hand. He hurt Derek. He wanted to give Derek pleasure but hurt his beloved mate instead. Of course he did, of course he’d end up doing that. Hurting people was all he’d done for years, across multiple worlds, multiple universes. He was so stupid. Stupid, stupid, so fucking stupid—

His pain was ebbing. Fast. Too fast.

His brimming eyes opened to see the black veins branching up Derek’s forearms. Derek was absorbing his pain, and that—that wasn’t right, Derek shouldn’t do that. He needed the pain. He needed the punishment. Didn’t Derek understand that?

“No. Stop it,” Stiles croaked, shoving at Derek’s hands clamped around his hips. “Stop it.”

Derek’s hands were like immovable stone molded to his flesh. Derek sat upright, his abdominal muscles rippling with the fluid action. Stiles squeezed his eyes shut yet again. He averted his face
from Derek, but Derek simply wrapped those muscular arms around his waist, drawing him closer, nuzzling his damp cheek.

“Stiles. Look at me.”

His eyes stayed shut. He gasped once more, at the undeniable, incredible sensations of Derek’s lips upon the corner of his quivering ones, of Derek’s cock deep inside him, paring his self-control down to a thread.

“No,” he whispered, his hands flying up to grasp Derek’s upper arms. “I don’t—”

Derek’s hands clasped his hips once more. His eyes snapped open when Derek slowly lifted him up, draining away whatever pain was left. Without it, all he felt was the extreme pleasure of sinking down on Derek’s cock again, his inner muscles clenching around it on their own volition. He let out a stuttered moan. He heard Derek’s breath hitch, felt it billow against his cheek. Felt Derek’s hips attempt to flex upward. Derek lifted him again, then lowered him as carefully, giving him time to become accustomed to the stretch.

He was beginning to harden again. His hands clenched around Derek’s bunched biceps. He turned his head toward Derek. Nudged his forehead to Derek’s, and knew how futile it was to struggle against werewolf strength. How futile to deny Derek anything, when his beloved mate was his everything.

Five long years of not feeling this extraordinary intimacy with Derek, and he couldn’t believe he’d survived that long without it—they’d made love for the first time when he was sixteen, right here in this bedroom when its ceiling was pristine white and Ursa Minor glowed upon them in the cozy darkness. Derek had taken him apart with those large hands, and that agile tongue, and those soft lips, and that perfect cock that had filled all the empty, lonely spaces in him he hadn’t even known were there.

Derek was being taken apart now like he was by the union of their feverish bodies. He watched Derek’s bristly cheek twitch with the effort to not yank him down and split him open. He swiveled his hips as he sank down yet again, deliberately tightening around Derek’s cock this time. When Derek let out a gravelly groan, he began to rock up and down, accepting his werewolf mate into his body with zeal.

“Stiles,” Derek gasped into his mouth.

He clung onto Derek’s arms, used them as leverage to lift himself. He shut his eyes and panted. He pushed away his own intense pleasure, focusing on Derek’s shuddery breaths and Derek’s tense thighs smacking against his ass each time he slammed his hips down. His breaths quickened into breathy whines as he fucked himself harder and faster on Derek’s cock.

Derek.

Oh, Derek, tęskniłem za tobą.

Forgive me, kochanie. Forgive me one day, when I have been punished enough.

Stiles forced every downstroke to miss his prostate on purpose. He slammed himself down as hard as he could, feeling the soreness of his abused hole now that Derek was no longer absorbing his pain. He had to suffer, not enjoy himself. This was for Derek. This was all for Derek alone. He had to remember that. He didn’t deserve to feel any pleasure, he had to remember that—

“No,” Derek said. “No, Stiles.”
Derek’s arms were a vise around his waist. His half-hard cock rubbed against Derek’s belly, and it felt so good, too good. He let out a sharp whimper. He shoved at Derek’s shoulders in an attempt to free himself, to resume ruthlessly fucking himself on Derek’s cock, but Derek wouldn’t let him.

Derek seized his nape with one hand. Angled his head so that they faced each other, their panting breaths mingling, their lips grazing.

“Look at me,” Derek commanded.

Stiles, unable to deny Derek this either, obeyed. Derek was reining him in with that hand on his nape. Forcing him to gaze into those fierce hazel eyes whose pupils were blown wide. Eyes that read him like an open spell book, that exposed his most vulnerable facets to their sun-bright light.

“My star. My supernova,” Derek growled. “I refuse to let you hurt yourself.”

Stiles’s fingers scrabbled in vain at Derek’s taut shoulders. He tightened hard around Derek’s cock, but Derek only gritted his teeth and held onto his nape. He let out a distressed, rough sound. Derek wouldn’t let him go. Derek wouldn’t let him do what he had to do: earn his penance.

“You don’t get to decide that for me,” Stiles rasped, his narrowed eyes burning, his nails digging into Derek’s skin.

Derek, the unyielding bastard, arched an arrogant eyebrow at him.

“As your mate, I do.” Derek’s stern expression transformed into one of dismay. “Or have you forgotten the vows that we exchanged seven years ago?”

Stiles’s burning eyes widened. His quivering lips parted, but no sound emanated through them. Derek wasn’t referring to marriage vows. It was still illegal in this country for a human to marry a supernatural being, thanks to the Argents’ political interferences before and during the war. Being a werewolf’s mate was so much more than being his spouse. It meant being their best friend, their brother-in-arms, their lover for life. It meant being their other half in all things, no matter how bad or good things got along the way.

Their mating vows had been simple: they’d sauntered hand-in-hand in the Preserve a few nights after a full moon, just the two of them. They’d stripped their clothes off, then made love on the leaf-laden ground, lit by floating brilliant blue flames that Stiles had conjured up around them. And then, under the blessing of the moon, they’d promised each other that they would always stay true to each other, and treasure each other, and protect each other.

Even if it meant protecting the other from himself.

Stiles shut his eyes, but his eyelids couldn’t contain the hot wetness behind them. Seven years. A whole lifetime ago, when Mom and Dad were still alive, when he was still young and wild, and unscarred from neck to toes. When he still had hope in his heart that everyone he loved would survive the war and live happily ever after in a world of peace.

He sagged in Derek’s grip. He opened his eyes to half-mast. Derek’s handsome features were blurry.

“Oh of course I haven’t forgotten,” Stiles choked out. “How could you even ask me that?”

He felt Derek’s other hand press on his upper back between his shoulder blades. Derek’s hands were all that stopped him from falling back. From falling apart.

“Then you know that the comfort, health and safety of my mate is paramount to me. I made a vow to
you, mój gwiazdko, to always take care of you. To keep you safe. Even from yourself.” Derek pressed their foreheads together, gazing into his brimming eyes with unblinking ones. “Don’t you get it, Stiles? When you hurt yourself, you hurt me too.”

Stiles’s legs tightened around Derek’s hips. His trembling hands clutched at Derek’s shoulders. His choked, erratic breaths tumbled from his quivering lips as Derek licked away the tears from his cheeks. He wanted to apologize, but he didn’t know how, he didn’t know how to give Derek what he wanted without letting himself off the hook for his crimes. He didn’t know how to erase all the suffering, the deaths he’d caused with his selfish, stupid decisions, and he didn’t deserve to, he didn’t deserve it—

He went down hard onto his back on the bed. Derek slipped out of him as Derek rolled them over, and he couldn’t curb the whine of gut-wrenching need that escaped him. The room was darker now as the sun descended in deference to the moon. Derek’s eyes flashed in the dimness.

“You deserve this,” Derek growled.

Derek spread Stiles’s golden-veined legs wide open and settled between them, using one hand to guide his rigid cock back inside. Derek pushed in hard, enough to drive Stiles up the bed. He gripped Stiles’s hips and angled them higher while Stiles clawed at the sheets above his head, his feet curling and drawing up.

Derek’s deep, swift thrusts hammered keening wails out of Stiles. He felt the electric drag of each one inside him. Each one struck his prostate with deadly precision: Derek had eight years of direct experience to teach him how to please Stiles. More often than not he knew Stiles’s body better than he himself did. Derek knew how to play it like a complex musical instrument, and make him sing an euphonious aria in high-pitched cries and lusty moans.

This ferocious lovemaking was unlike anything before: he was utterly overwhelmed by Derek’s hands pulling him into each powerful thrust, by the burn of friction on his back from the sheets, by the soreness of his hole now sweet instead of raw. By his werewolf mate’s force and hunger for him, amplified tenfold with time and coerced distance.

Derek was taking what he wanted, but he was also giving Stiles what he needed.

“You deserve this,” Derek growled again, after slamming in to the hilt, trying to push in deeper.

“No,” Stiles wailed, tossing his head.

“Yes, you do.” Derek withdrew until he almost popped out, then slammed in. “You deserve a second chance.” Withdrew again. “And another.” Slammed in again, the muscles of his abdomen and his arms rippling. “And another. As many as you need. Do you hear me?” Derek’s hands caressed Stiles’s flanks with a gentleness that belied his aggressive repossession of his human mate. “You deserve to be loved.”

Stiles’s eyes spilled hot and wet down his temples. He panted hard, feeling like he was suffocating. Derek was filling him up completely. There was no room at all inside him for anything other than his werewolf mate. He belonged to Derek, and that was the absolute truth. Derek reminded him of that with every roll of their hips in sync, every stroke over that sweet spot in him that transfigured him into an arched embodiment of unrelenting ecstasy from the vertex of his head to the tips of his toes.

“Oh, Derek,” he rasped. “Derek.”

His hands flew up from the sheets to Derek’s shoulders. He fisted one of his hands in Derek’s hair.
Derek knew exactly what he wanted, and laid that gorgeous, muscular body on top of his, spreading his legs as far as they could go. Derek slid an arm beneath his back in a snug embrace.

He stared up at Derek’s flushed face, at the ceiling above them through blurry eyes. Those glow-in-the-dark stars were long gone, flaked off for a variety of reasons. But in this intoxicating moment, being ravished like he was by Derek, his rocking body held so close and safe, he saw Ursa Minor glowing upon them.

He stared up at Derek, and he basked once more in the radiance of a complete, eternal constellation of stars.

*There you are, mój gwiazda Północna. There you are again.*

He grasped Derek’s nape and tugged his werewolf mate down for a fervent, open-mouthed kiss. One of Derek’s hands found its way up his back to his nape. The other skimmed his left inner thigh.

“I’m here. I’m here, Przemysław,” Derek murmured into his lips. “I’m not going anywhere. Not without you.”

Derek’s hips snapped forward, and this time, Stiles didn’t deny himself. He moaned in exultation at Derek striking his prostate just the way he liked with deep, hard thrusts, again and again. He clung onto Derek’s shoulders as Derek plowed into him.

“Make love to me, kochanie,” he gasped, his whole body shuddering with escalating pleasure.

Derek grinned down at him with a hint of those lethal fangs. A grin of triumph. He clenched around Derek’s cock, and Derek answered him with another vehement thrust and a husky groan. Derek’s alabaster skin was slick with sweat. Derek’s hips began to move faster, and Stiles scratched at his werewolf’s rippling back, panting in tandem with his mate. His own cock was so hard, trapped between their bodies, and he was so glad that Derek didn’t reach for it, that Derek knew not to so that he wouldn’t come yet.

Not until Derek knotted him.

“I need you,” he gasped. “Please, inside me—knot me, kochanie.”

Derek stared down at him with fierce, wide eyes, as if he was memorizing every inch of his face. He could feel the knot forming fast at the base of Derek’s cock. His orgasm was spiraling up with each rub of his prostate, and he bore down, desperate to stave it off. He grabbed at Derek’s hips, at Derek’s ass. His breaths left him as shaky moans.

“Please, now, now—*now*—”

Derek bared his fangs with a rumbling snarl. Snapped his hips hard once, twice, and on the third time, shoved his swelling knot past the throbbing rim of Stiles’s hole. Derek’s second, louder snarl was drowned out by Stiles’s gurgling cry that erupted from his arched throat. Oh god, it’d been years since he last felt Derek this way, this total claiming of his body by his werewolf mate. Derek’s knot swelled huge inside him, locking them together. It was so much bigger and fuller than he remembered. It pressed directly on that sweet, sensitive spot in him.

Derek was still staring down at him as he arched and tensed. His eyelids fluttered, but he forced his eyes to stay open, his orgasm surging through him like a battering storm at its zenith. His mouth fell open in a soundless scream of bliss. His cock spurted copious stripes of come across his heaving belly and chest, their milky color a stark contrast to the golden scars emblazoning his skin. His thrumming body felt bruised and alive. He struggled to catch his breath, clenching hard around
Derek’s knot. His hands shook when he reached up to cup Derek’s bristly cheeks.

Derek released a filthy, satisfied groan as he came deep inside Stiles in strong jets. Stiles felt each one filling him more and more, and the thought that he could experience this again—many, many more times—made him smile and caress Derek’s face. Derek dropped his head so that their foreheads touched. The rest of his body collapsed on Stiles after the last jet of come, his elbows braced on the bed. Stiles didn’t complain about the breathtaking weight of robust muscles on top of him: he’d missed this so much. Missed Derek with every fiber of his being.

Derek carefully rolled them over, holding Stiles tight to his body with both arms. They were still knotted. They would remain so for at least fifteen minutes or more, if Derek’s new body was anything like his former one. Stiles snuggled into the firm warmth of Derek’s chest, threading his fingers through Derek’s chest hair. He laid his cheek on Derek’s shoulder. Breathed in Derek’s natural scent: the teeming forest, the sun-beaten earth after a downpour, moonlight on unclothed skin.

Derek traced the golden scars down the length of his spine with a few fingers. Those were scars that Stiles himself had yet to see. In the wake of the Nogitsune’s rampage across the multiverse, mirrors were not welcomed in the shell that was the Stilinski house, lest they reflected and multiplied Stiles’s sins beyond his resilience.

But from today on, this house might not be a mere shell anymore.

A luminous star had its way of making even the vastest darkness a brighter place.

“I don’t—” Stiles’s throat worked in a painful swallow. “I don’t know if I—if I’ll ever be free.”

Derek’s fingers continued to trace curlicues of love down his skin. Derek pressed those dark pink, soft lips to his forehead.

“We all have our monsters, our nightmares,” Derek said into his skin. “But we go on. And we win when we go farther than they can.”

Stiles drew in a shuddering breath. He felt Derek’s thundering heartbeat under his palm.

“Are you really here?” he whispered wetly. “Am I just dreaming all this?”

“This is real. I’m real. I’m really here,” Derek murmured. “And you deserve to be loved, my brilliant supernova.”

Stiles breathed. He felt Derek’s hand stroke the back of his shaved head, the back of his neck. He felt Derek deep inside him, paring away at the shell he’d mounted around himself, one loving touch and word at a time.

“You deserve to be loved. Every face of you,” Derek whispered, tracing the triskele on his nape. “In the past, the present, and the future.”

Someday, when that shell around him was gone, Stiles would believe it. Someday—perhaps on an exquisite day like today, in his werewolf mate’s arms, under the blessing of the new moon—he would absolutely, finally believe it.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, on a more serious note, I wrote this particular coda to address Przemysław's survivor guilt, as well as his mental and emotional issues. I don't believe in trauma being magically erased by certain words or happy events, and in Przemysław's case, there was no way that just having his Derek back would magically erase his immense guilt and self-loathing. I figured--and hoped--this coda will reflect a realistic development in their ongoing relationship and journey to their happy ending.

The next coda will definitely be about Radosław and his Derek meeting cavemen! Derek and Stiles.)
Coda: The Hunting Of Man

Chapter Notes

Soundtrack: Maenam, from Braid OST.

(This 12,000+ word coda is one that fans of Radosław will enjoy. It takes place about two years before Mieczysław meets Radosław in chapter 10. It was a multi-level challenge of a chapter for me that involved the meeting of two pairs of alternate selves of Derek and Stiles from universes that were such polar opposites of each other, which also meant building two alternate universes and weaving them together into one narrative. Oof! I hope I did a decent job of it.

The "graphic depictions of violence" tag really applies to a certain scene half-way in this coda. I don't want to spoil it any more than that, but you'll know what's coming before it happens. Please read at your discretion.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Cosmo-net says their names translate from their native language as Drek and Stails,” Stiles said. “That is so cute I wanna die.”

Stiles and Derek stood in front of the low, jagged entrance of the murky cave, re-orienting themselves after Stiles teleported them from the traversable wormhole he’d opened several kilometers away in the forest surrounding the cave. They didn’t want to risk scaring their alternate selves: many people in their own universe still feared the very existence of wormholes, and the techno-mages capable of creating them. What would cavemen think of Stiles’s glowing, neon-green wormhole?

In this universe designated XDT-4189, their alternate selves lived in the Stone Age—its version of the Upper Paleolithic, to be precise. It was akin to their universe’s same period in that humans and werewolves co-existed, had their own biological species, and were segregated into nomadic clans and packs far apart from each other. They were also engaged in a cold war, one in danger of exploding into open warfare on a grand scale. According to the Cosmo-net, the only reason it hadn’t happened yet—and might never happen—in this universe was due to the even more savage internal conflicts between werewolf packs, gory battles in which no human could survive.

If it hadn’t been for the Vozuds visiting Earth and declaring their presence in the Modern Era of their own universe, humans and werewolves might have ended up extinct, instead of becoming erudite, peaceful space explorers numbering in the billions and counting. Bless the Vozuds and their fluffy, hexagonal ears.

Derek’s eyes glowed with their kaleidoscopic beauty as he fired up his hyper-enhanced senses. He tilted his head at an angle, listening for any sounds inside the cave.

“I can hear their heartbeats,” Derek said. “Just the two of them. They’re talking to each other.”

Derek straightened his head. His eyes dimmed back to hazel.

Stiles’s brow furrowed, and he said, “Where’s their pack? Or clan?”
“If they have one, I don’t sense anyone else around.”

Derek’s salt-and-pepper hair shone gold under the early morning sunshine. His black nanogel-suit reflected the same sunshine, and made him look like a sleek, muscular creature from deep blue waters basking in the warmth. He was so damn beautiful that Stiles almost suggested they delay the meeting with their alternate selves, find a big, nice tree, and fuck against it like they were cavemen in the Stone Age.

*Priorities, Rad. Talk first, sweet lovemaking with your werewolf husband later.*

Derek dimmed the neon-green glow of his nanogel-suit’s tech-tracks. In contrast, Stiles amped up the glow of his eyes and tech-tatts. Derek arched a thick eyebrow at him.

“What, you think I’m gonna walk into that dark, dark cave without light? Nuh uh, no sir, you know better than that, Big Bad.” He gesticulated at his face with both hands. “And this way, they’ll see us coming and they’ll be prepared, right?”

Stiles didn’t wait for a reply. He strode into the cave and instantly felt claustrophobic despite the illumination from his magi-tech. He and the darkness had a neutral relationship until the Nogitsune possessed him and crawled through the destabilized Beacon’s air ducts, picking off the crew one by one. For a decade after that horror, he couldn’t sleep in the dark unless Derek was with him, clasp ing him from behind, soothing him with hot, steady breaths on his nape.

This meant he was much more swagger than brains the farther he strode into the cave, his eyes and tech-tatts lit to the max. Green circles rippled across his deck-jacket. The Cosmo-net hibernated, until Stiles glanced at the cave wall to his right.

“Derek! Look at these awesome paintings!” Stiles pointed at what he thought was a skillfully rendered image of furry, horned creatures lumbering across a grassy plain. The artist had employed sweeping curved lines of black paint to delineate the creatures’ humped backs, and skinny-fingered hand prints added texture to their fur. “Cosmo-net says they’re probably bison. Which one of them painted these, you think?”

Derek didn’t respond. Stiles glanced over his shoulder, and saw his werewolf mate standing two meters behind him, making a face that was an amalgam of *uh oh* and *well, this is awkward.*

“Stiles.”

Stiles rolled his eyes and resumed walking. “Okay, okay, art appreciation and interpretation later. Let’s go find them—”

“Stiles—”

“They’re here, so all we gotta do is keep going and—oh.”

Stiles stumbled to a halt on the uneven, rocky ground, but it was too little, too late. The high-pitched moan that wafted to his ears from farther down the cave was one he knew so well. He would hear it from his own mouth, from the soundtrack of the many *graphic* holo-vids he and Derek had recorded throughout the decades of their marriage.

The neon-green illumination from his eyes and tech-tatts revealed a scene that he also knew so well, with his own body, his own pleasure: Drek and Stails were naked, cushioned from the cave floor by a dense pelt. Stails was on all fours in front of Drek, his head bowed, his face veiled from view by luxuriant hair that was at least waist-length. Drek was upright on his knees, gripping Stails’s hips tight and—oh yeah, there was no mistaking what Drek’s large hands were doing, pulling that
bouncing bubble-butt flush against vigorously thrusting hips. Now Stiles heard the lurid noises of skin slapping skin, and Stails’s choked cries of pleasure. Foreplay didn’t seem to be their alternate selves’ thing, if Derek was hearing them chitchat minutes ago—

Oh shit, Drek was looking at him. Drek appeared like Derek had during his early to mid-twenties, with dark, tousled hair, and a surprisingly trimmed beard.

“Uhm. Hi?” Stiles squeaked, grimacing. He raised his right hand and wriggled his fingers in clumsy greeting.

Drek roared at him with a mouth full of fangs. In the neon-green-tinged murkiness of the cave, the young werewolf’s shifted face was terrifying to behold, even to Stiles who adored his own werewolf’s shifted face. Stiles froze like a petrified fawn at the forceful sound that echoed through the cave and rang in his ears.

In the four seconds after that, Drek shoved his squawking human companion behind him on the pelt, whipped out a stone axe and charged at Stiles with it swung high, still roaring in rage. Stiles let out what he thought was a very manly scream. He staggered back and flung up an invisible shield in front of himself. The stone axe’s lethal point bounced off the shield like a rubber ball off a wall. A wide-eyed Drek also bounced off the shield, crashing on his naked ass on the pelt, and the stone axe cartwheeled out of his hand onto the cave floor, far from his reach.

If Stiles wasn’t in mortal danger, he might have cracked up at the hilarious sight. Instead he let out another very manly scream at the spear that hurtled through the air toward his head. Its stone head was sharpened. It glowed a brilliant purple to his third-eye. It pierced his shield like it was the surface of water and—

A neon-green beam from Derek’s forearm blaster in his nanogel-suit vaporized the spear to atoms. Derek always set the blaster to safe mode so he wouldn’t harm any living thing, and only to kill mode when it was his very last resort. Stiles knew that. But Drek and Stails didn’t. How could they possibly know what a blaster beam was, if magi-tech didn’t exist in their universe?

Drek’s face was human again. Drek howled in terror, scrambling back on all fours on the pelt, shoving Stails behind him. Stails was yelling in his native language of melodious words and throat clicks, hugging Drek from behind around a broad, hirsute chest. Stiles was still shrieking, still seeing the honed point of the spear inches away from the center of his forehead—

“Enough!” Derek bellowed, his hazel eyes flashing a bright red.

A tense silence reigned in the wake of Derek’s reverberating command. Stiles sucked in his lips, his heartbeat racing, his lungs aching from his held breath. He glanced at his werewolf mate with wide eyes, then at Drek and Stails. They were on their feet now. Cowering against the cave wall, clinging to each other, staring at Derek with stark eyes brimming with fear. Drek’s eyes flashed gold in the shadows.

Drek was an Omega. A lone wolf. A packless wolf.

Stiles released a heavy sigh.

“Aw, geez,” he muttered, his heart slowing down to a calmer pace. “It really is just the two of them, isn’t it? They have no pack or clan.”

Derek released an equally heavy sigh, his shoulders slumping. Stiles gave him a small, consoling smile. He knew Derek hated using his Alpha voice. It was thanks to that *hunter* who almost
destroyed Derek inside and out with her cruelty and jealousy: she’d constantly cajoled a teenage Derek to show off his Alpha voice for her, as if it was a silly trick to entertain her. After she burned most of his family to death in the Preserve, Derek hadn’t spoken a word for years until Stiles ran into him for the first time in town, in human form instead of wolf form.

Derek’s gruff first words had been, You smell funny.

Granted, Stiles had spent the whole morning in his greenhouse behind his family home, and part of that morning had involved inspecting a humongous heap of compost. Which he of the most stable balance and grace toppled face first into after tripping on his own foot. He’d taken a shower, but apparently, it hadn’t been enough for Derek’s heightened sense of smell.

He’d smelled much better to Derek the next morning, after the besotted werewolf spent the night rubbing come all over his sated, worn-out body. His beloved mate was deliciously possessive like that.

“Cosmo-net has no information on why his pack is missing,” Derek murmured, his hands held behind his back, standing at ease. “But I can take a guess.”

Stiles glanced at Drek and Stails again. They had yet to move away from the cave wall. They stared at him and Derek with round eyes, their shoulders taut, their breaths shallow and shuddery. Stails held Drek tight to his lanky, long-limbed body with both arms. Stiles’s lips quirked up in an amiable smile, but neither Drek or Stails responded. He couldn’t blame them for that.

“Do the Argents exist here at all?” Stiles said. “These two don’t even have family names.”

Stails’s long hair was now swept to one side and over one shoulder, exposing his face in full to Stiles’s view. Yeah, it was identical to his when he was eighteen or nineteen, right down to the moles and the plump lips. So baby-faced. So innocent and young. But those large, whisky-brown eyes were anything but young. They were old eyes like Stiles’s. Eyes that had witnessed terrible things, that knew enough of the world for Stails to be so protective of his intimidated Omega werewolf.

Derek was an Alpha. Although not as strong as a True Alpha like Scott, that status alone gave him a massive advantage over Betas and Omegas: for them, wounds from an Alpha took much longer to heal, and Omegas were weaker than Betas. If Derek managed to inflict just one critical blow, it could kill Drek despite his supernatural healing abilities. Stiles knew this, and so did his alternate self.

Did the kid know that his eyes were glowing purple because of his spark?

“Stiles,” Derek said, eyebrows arched. “Multiversal translator?”

Stiles rolled his eyes and swiped the right side of his neck where the tiny implant was.

“Yeah, yeah, of course I remembered.” He rolled his eyes again at Derek’s unimpressed look. “I did! They distracted me! Did you see what they were doing?!”

Derek stared at him with an even more unimpressed look. Stiles let out a long, noisy sigh, then bowed his head.

“All right, I messed that up, I know. I’m sorry, Commander.”

Derek huffed. Stiles raised his head, and saw that twinkle of affection in his werewolf mate’s crinkled eyes.

“We’re not here on official capacity. We’re here as—” Derek glanced at Drek and Stails, his
handsome face softening from its stern expression. “Concerned individuals.”

The last two words sobered Stiles faster than a shot of kodamin serum to the jugular. He and Derek were here not just for their alternate selves, but for the homicidal monster hunting them. All they had to go on from their travels through the multiverse was that the fucker had formidable power that left a lingering trail on the Cosmo-grid, capable of opening at least a hundred traversable wormholes into as many universes. A faceless man in a long coat. An absolute psychopath playing a sick game with their alternate selves in those universes. It wasn’t much.

But Drek and Stails alive meant one thing: the fucker had visited this universe, and failed in his mission to kill them.

“I’m gonna light up this place,” Stiles said, opening his hands and raising them palms up. “Keep an eye on them.”

He heard Drek gasp when a large, neon-green ball of flame manifested above each palm. The flames shifted in color to the common gold-orange, then floated away from his hands. Drek followed them with wide eyes, his lips parted in wonderment. Stails gazed at Stiles with intrigued eyes dimmed from their glow to whisky-brown flecked with purple, and Stiles knew in that moment that his alternate self was attuned to his own spark in some way or another. This time, when Stiles smiled, his alternate self smiled shyly in return.

Stiles conjured two more balls of flames, changed their color, then positioned them all in a square formation a meter above their heads. Drek stared up at them with a child-like awe. Stiles lowered his hands, then dimmed his eyes and tech-tatts. Drek stared at him with the same child-like awe, and he had to fight the urge to pinch the younger werewolf’s bristly cheek and coo at him.

“Forgive us our trespass.” The multiversal translator implanted in Derek’s neck converted the Universal English into the region’s native language. “We didn’t mean to frighten you, or intrude on your privacy.”

Drek and Stails were unashamed of their nudity—and hey, to Stiles, rightfully so. They were in the prime of their lives, doing whatever was necessary to survive. It showed in every firm muscle and streamlined curve of their bodies, in their lack of fat, in the scars that marred the mole-dotted, pale skin of Stails’s arms. They stood with their arms around each other’s waists, the tautness gone from their shoulders.

“My name is Derek. And this—” Derek glanced at Stiles with an arched eyebrow. “This is my human mate, Stiles. Who should have announced himself at the door first.”

“Honey, I hate to break it to you,” Stiles muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “but doors haven’t been invented yet in this universe.”

Stails mouthed the last word, his supple lips contorting around its three syllables—there was no equivalent word in his native language, not yet. Drek stared at Derek, his eyebrows lowered in a baffled frown.

“You are an Alpha,” Drek said, turning in Stails’s embrace to face Derek.

Stiles’s multiversal translator allowed him to hear the native language as a subdued layer under the translated Universal English. It truly was a melodic language, so different from the guttural speech Stiles had expected based on his own universe’s records of Stone Age languages. He wished he could directly converse to Drek and Stails with it.
Drek averted his face to expose his neck to Derek. Derek didn’t react, and remained standing at ease. Stiles did his best to not cringe at Drek’s gesture, as well-intentioned as it was. Traditional werewolf gestures like it were outdated in their universe, and had been for centuries, especially in the cities on Earth. Space travel rendered obsolete so many old werewolf laws on territory and tradition that rebel factions of werewolves rioted in opposition to any kind of space travel: they hunted down its most popular proponents, and to their own detriment, killed these proponents live on the budding Cosmo-net to instill fear into governments and public alike.

They were so successful that they became government-sanctioned prey for hunters, which led to the horrific Decimation of Wolves in 2243. That led to the establishment of new global laws with the help of the Vozuds that ensured werewolves—in particular those who conformed to the old werewolf laws and traditions—were protected from hunters. The sole catch was, it was strictly forbidden for anyone to coerce werewolves into maintaining those old laws and traditions if they chose not to do so. In retaliation, the old-school werewolves flipped the bird at the authorities, moved out of the cities in droves into rural areas—and died out with their old ways in three generations.

The old ways were barbaric, violent ways. No one wanted them anymore when the alternatives were to experience long, tranquil lives aided by magi-tech, and join the Cosmo-fleet to explore the mysterious, thrilling vastness of space and its countless worlds. And for techno-mages like Stiles, the multiverse beckoned with its innumerable universes, galaxies, stars, and planets of diverse inhabitants in infinite combinations.

“I am an Alpha, yes,” Derek replied his alternate self. “But where I come from, werewolves do not engage in fights of dominance, nor do we adhere to the old hierarchy of rank. They are unnecessary.”

Drek looked as if he got clonked on the head with his own stone axe. He gaped at Derek, his lower jaw sagging, his hazel eyes wide. Derek just capsized his entire world with those casual statements. Stails gazed at Derek with eyes that were wide for a different reason: they were bright with curiosity, with intelligence. They scrutinized Derek’s face from forehead to chin.

Stiles turned to Derek with a smirk, and said, “Actually, those fights are so totally necessary at the Hippocampus. Those Friday night fights are what people live for!” Stiles flung his hands up. “I mean, have you seen the werewolves there in their glitter nanogel-suits, and those itty bitty shorts, and those sky-high heels?! Mahfrood wanted to hire you to be their Friday star and put you in that low-cut rainbow—”

“You talk too much.”

Stiles spun around to face Drek. He squinted at the younger werewolf and those lowered eyebrows of disapproving doom. From the corner of his eye, he saw Stails slap a hand over lips quivering with mirth.

“Excuse you.” Stiles widened his eyes in outrage. His tech-tatts altered into a vibrating configuration of spikes. “Excuse you, Rude-wolf, I do not talk too much!” Stiles smacked the back of his right hand on his left palm repeatedly. “I am a trained master in the art of conveying important information in an exciting, provocative manner—”

“Stiles.”

“And I will have you know that I was invited to at least thirty—thirty!—techno-mage symposiums simply because of my legendary oratory skills!” Stiles opened his mouth, then shut it, then opened it again to say with a smug expression, “Well, there’s also the fact that I look absolutely fabulous on stage, and I have a bubble-butt that looks phenomenal in realtime holo-high-def, but—”
“Stiles,” Derek muttered again, and Stiles didn’t need to look at him to know he was pinching the skin between his eyes.

“No! No, I do not talk too much, pal.” Stiles repeatedly stabbed his right thumb on his puffed-up chest. “I captivate people with my fabulousness, that’s what—”

“You’re me.”

Again, Stiles’s spellbinding monologue was interrupted. He glanced at Stails who stared at him, studying his face. Stails’s eyes gleamed with more flecks of vibrant purple.

“You’re me,” Stails reiterated. “Your name sounds just like mine. And you have a werewolf mate, just like me. A werewolf mate who looks like mine.” His brow furrowed in a slight frown. “But—you do not wear animal hides or furs, like us, and your face-marks are strange. You’re not from here.”

Slowly, Stiles’s lips curved up in a pleased smile. His alternate self—a caveman in the Stone Age—was an observant, smart cookie. Every alternate version of him had turned out that way so far.

And like every alternate version of Derek so far, Drek was a total mush-wolf under that scowl of primal ferocity.

“What do you mean, my other half?” Drek murmured, reaching out to hook his human mate’s hair behind a shapely ear.

“Drek, their names sound just like ours.” Stails rested a hand on his werewolf’s bare chest, then glanced at Stiles and Derek. “Look at them. They look like us.”

Drek stared at Derek, then at Stiles. Then he stared at Derek once more, tilting his head at an angle, the skin between his eyebrows wrinkling. Drek sniffed at them to examine their scents. But to Stiles’s pleasant surprise, the younger werewolf didn’t freak out.

Drek turned his head to look at Stails, and asked, “Are they blessed like you?”

Stiles knew to grab an opening when the multiverse accorded him one.

“Hey, listen to me, okay?” Drek and Stails gazed at him, and he said, “No, we’re not gods or anything like that, if that’s what you’re thinking. You’re right, we’re not from here. We’re just visitors from a very, very faraway place. We’re good guys.” He gestured at Drek. “Derek’s a werewolf like you.” He gestured at Stails and at himself. “And your human mate and I, we’re the same. ‘Blessed’, like you said. You’ve seen Stails’s eyes glow sometimes, right?”

Drek glanced at Stails once more, his hazel eyes tender. “Yes. Like the sun. But with the color of beautiful flowers.” Drek’s face softened along with his eyes. “Everything about my mate is beautiful.”

Stails lowered his eyes, a sweet smile spreading across his flushed face. He tucked more of his long hair behind his ear. Drek stroked his hair from crown to shoulder, gazing at him as if he was that very sun that brought life to the world.

Stiles knew exactly what it felt like to be bestowed with such a look. His own mush-wolf was giving him the same look right now, with more creases around those gorgeous hazel eyes and those quirked lips that still sent tingles through him whenever they touched his. He returned the look, his tech-tatts swirling around his crinkled eyes.
Thirty-one years, four months, and fifteen days—and he only loved Derek more with each passing second.

He had to tear his eyes away from his werewolf husband to say to Drek, “Okay, see, that’s his power inside him showing itself through his eyes. Do you understand?”

“My power?” Stails asked. “What do you mean?”

Stiles tapped the tip of his right forefinger on his chin, his eyes narrowed in thought. Then he said, “Do you know what a spark is?”

“Seh-pahrk?” Stails said, frowning in puzzlement. “What is that?”

Stiles bit his lower lip. It seemed his alternate self could tap into his spark and use it, but didn’t understand what it was, or what he was doing with it. There was no vocabulary for it in the native language either. That meant the people of this world didn’t recognize what a spark was, and probably had no clue how to deal with someone who possessed that kind of power.

The Cosmo-net was adamant that magi-tech didn’t exist in this universe. At least, not the same kind like in Stiles and Derek’s universe. Stiles skimmed through the rapid flow of new information in his head, stopping at sections that reported human clans banishing members for various misdeeds. The most prevalent cause of banishment was any friendly interaction with a werewolf. The second most prevalent was, as the Cosmo-net stated it, the “display of evil tricks.” No second guess was necessary to know what that meant.

“Stails, when you threw that spear at me, it glowed with your power,” Stiles said. “I could see that with my third-eye.”

“Third-eye?” Stails asked. Before Stiles could answer, his alternate self raised a skinny forefinger to a high forehead and tapped its center twice. “My eye in here?”

Stiles’s eyes crinkled. “Yeah. That’s one way of describing it. You can see my power inside me with it, right?”

Stails lowered his hand, and also smiled. “You have light inside you. It is the color of green leaves in sunshine.” The smile was replaced by a disconcerted expression. “I was scared when you appeared. I thought you were going to hurt Drek. When he fell—” He chewed on his lower lip, then said, “I grabbed my spear, and I just knew I had to stop you.”

Stiles winced. “Yeah, I honestly hadn’t meant to frighten you and Drek like that. That was my bad.” He curled his lips into a small, pleased smile. “But what you did? It’s proof that you know how to use your spark. That you got the faith to tap into it. Do you understand that?”

Stails blinked at him. Drek gazed at him, then glanced at Derek. Stiles glanced up at the balls of fire still floating above their heads. Drek and Stails glanced up as well, and Stiles said, “See those? What if I told you guys that Stails is capable of creating those too?”

Drek and Stails glanced at him, then at each other in amazement.

“Is that why you’re here?” Stails murmured, pressing a hand flat on his own chest. “To teach me how to use my—seh-pahrk?”

Whatever high spirits Stiles was feeling perished. He glanced at Derek who stood silently beside him, still standing at ease. Derek gazed at him, and yeah, Derek was already prepared to hear the worst. Derek suspected that Drek’s entire pack was dead, very likely slaughtered, for Derek to be an
Omega. Stiles suspected that Stails’s clan had banished him because of his spark, and / or because of his relationship with Drek—but it was just as possible that his alternate self’s entire clan was also dead.

“I’ll be happy to teach you how,” Stiles replied. “But the main reason Derek and I are here? We wanted to make sure you two are okay.” Stiles glanced at Derek again, then back at Stails and Drek. “Have either of you met a strange man? Who didn’t have a face?” Stiles gestured down the length of his torso with both hands. “And wore a long piece of clothing?” He tugged at the lapel of his deck-jacket. “Maybe something like this?”

Drek shook his head with a mystified frown. Stails went pale as a Riyarr spirit, hugging himself with both arms. Drek’s frown became one of concern, and he wrapped brawny arms around his shivering human mate, murmuring his name.

“Hey, hey,” Stiles said, raising his hands palms out. “It’s okay, kid. You’re okay. You don’t have to say anything.”

He glanced at Derek once more. Derek’s impassive face was inscrutable to anyone but Stiles, and he understood what Derek was saying to him with those intense hazel eyes: if Stails had any knowledge of the faceless man in the long coat, they had to retrieve it. Out of the twenty-one alternate universes he and Derek had visited so far, eleven of them had alternate versions of themselves who’d survived their encounter with that fucker, including this one. In the other universes, either one or both were dead, or they were fortunate enough to have never met their would-be murderer.

They had to know what happened to Stails. Every scrap of new information could mean the difference between the fucker killing yet another alternate version of them or stopping him for good.

Stiles waited patiently while Drek comforted Stails with gentle strokes of his bowed head and upper arm. The poor kid was petrified by his own memories.

“How?” Stails raised his head to look at him with doe eyes, and Stiles said with a benevolent smile, “Will you let me look into your mind? To see what happened? I promise it won’t hurt.”

He’d expected Stails to quail at his request. Instead, Stails sucked in a shuddering breath, then straightened up, stiffening his spine, squaring his shoulders.

“You and your mate,” Stails said. “You want to find the faceless monster.”

Pride flared in Stiles’s chest at his alternate self’s courage.

“Yeah. Derek and I are looking for him. And we want to stop him.”

Stails stared into his eyes for a long minute. Drek glanced back and forth between them, his brow furrowed with worry. Derek said nothing, but pressed a large hand to his lower back under his deck-jacket, a reassuring touch that he needed. If Derek hated using his Alpha voice, Stiles detested entering another person’s mind, even if it was with explicit consent, or for the reliving of positive memories.

It had been the truth when he told Stails that it wouldn’t hurt.

He never said that it wouldn’t hurt him.

“Yes,” Stails said, then nodded in emphasis. “You can see.”

Stiles’s throat prickled at the sympathy in Stails’s eyes. He’d been a hellion at Stails’s age, still
figuring out who he was and what to do with his spark that would eventually evolve into his potent magi-tech, riding high on his unfolding relationship with Derek. The most he had to worry about then was Mom catching him sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night to spend time with Derek. Death had been a mere word in the lexicon of his youthful existence, and not a real, undefeatable entity that would wrest Mom away from him and Dad years later.

And here was his teenage alternate self, enduring the tribulations of the Stone Age with no one but his werewolf mate, having survived a run-in with that faceless fucker who’d already murdered numerous alternate versions of them—thinking about his distress instead.

“I promise it won’t hurt you,” Stiles rasped, raising his right hand to gently press it to Stails’s temple. “I’ll do my best to insulate you from the reliving.”

He knew Stails didn’t quite understand what he said, from the slight frown that creased Stails’s forehead. He felt Drek’s fierce stare on his face. He felt Derek’s hand on his lower back, anchoring him.

His eyes began to glow as they shut to half-mast. His tech-tatts reconfigured into overlapping triangles, reinforcing his mental fortifications. The Cosmo-net fired up, rippling across the black surface of his deck-jacket in zigzags of dots, preparing to process and render the incoming onslaught of external memories. He gazed into Stails’s wide eyes, but what he saw with his third-eye was the entrance to Stails’s mind, depicted as the round, flower-bordered entrance of a cave filled with blinding light.

He drew in a long, soundless breath.

He dived in.

§§§§§§

He huddled behind a tree, his hands clenched over his mouth that threatened to erupt with piercing screams. His wrists and ankles were still sore from the rough twine that his clan members had bound around them, to ensure he couldn’t swim after they threw him into the river. Cold water dripped from his soaked hair, from his goat hide loincloth. His bare feet curled in the mud, and he wheezed through his nose, shaking from head to toes.

The faceless monster hadn’t seen him. He was still alive. He was still safe.

He was Stails: a sixteen-year-old human boy whose clan had attempted to drown him because he fell in love with a werewolf who was beautiful inside and out, who was unafraid of his glowing eyes, who loved him in return and swore to do so for life.

But he was also Radosław “Stiles” Stilinski: a forty-seven-year-old techno-mage traveling the multiverse with his werewolf mate who was also beautiful inside and out, who loved him from the moment their eyes met in the Preserve, who became the wind that bore him to the stars.

In this instant, this three-year-old memory, they were one and the same.

The faceless monster spoke with a voice that grated as though rotten talons were scratching flayed bones. Stails didn’t understand what the fucker said, but with the Cosmo-net’s assistance in parsing the distorted speech, Stiles clearly heard the snarled question in Universal English.
“Where are Stiles Stilinski and Derek Hale?”

Stails peered past the edge of the tree trunk, between the leaves of the bushes concealing him from the faceless monster. The memory warped the monster into a sinister, towering being that blotted out the sun and the sky, that loomed over Stails’s clan who stared up with wide-eyed expressions of pure terror. His whole head was enveloped in black smoke. His long, strange tunic was as dark as the starless night, and what looked like runes coiled down its endless expanse.

This man was no caveman from any prehistoric age. The Cosmo-net identified the man’s shoes as laced white sneakers that were popular in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—so chances were, the guy was from a modern universe, although not one as advanced as Stiles’s. Some kind of mage, all right, who had one hell of a vendetta against any Stiles Stilinski and Derek Hale in existence.

What happened, that this fucker made it his life’s vocation to stalk and kill them all across the multiverse? What could either guy have conceivably done to deserve that?

Stails’s clan members babbled in fright. Some of them prostrated themselves in front of the faceless monster, while others clustered together into small groups, kneeling and clutching at each other. The children were so scared that they didn’t dare to make a sound, cowering behind their parents. None of them had a third-eye to see the monster’s tremendous evil radiating in dark waves over them. They couldn’t see his bloodlust, his malicious glee at their immense fear and impending annihilation.

The fucker tilted his head at an unnatural angle, then straightened it with a sickening creak. It made Stiles’s neck hurt just to observe the action. Was this guy even human? Or something far worse?

Stails started to hyperventilate through his nose. He couldn’t look away. His trembling hands over his mouth were all that curbed his panic, all that stood between him staying hidden and him being butchered.

“You’re all just animals, aren’t you?”

Stails didn’t understand that either. But Stiles did, and his breaths sped up in unison with his alternate self’s huffs of air, and he knew what was coming, he knew what the faceless fucker was about to do, he knew—

The first to die were the ones who prostrated themselves on the sparse ground. With a single swiping motion of a long arm through the air, their heads burst apart from their necks like smashed melons. Their blood sprayed across those already stained white sneakers, across soil now accursed, an infernal chorus of crimson that accompanied malevolent laughter.

The other clan members couldn’t comprehend what had just occurred. They gaped at the headless corpses that were once people they knew, that were family. Someone screamed, but Stails couldn’t recognize who it was. His vision was a searing haze. More of his clan—his people who’d tried to kill him, who he thought was his family—screamed in horror. They lurched to their feet and tried to stampede into the woods. They were silenced by more swiping motions of those long arms, their throats splitting open from ear to ear in garish smiles below their cavernous mouths.

The faceless fucker flourished his arms like the dramatic conductor of a repulsive orchestra, dancing to a chilling song only he could bear to hear. A downward slash of a long-fingered hand ripped open another innocent from neck to groin. Dark purple and red internal organs spilled out in a bloody, steamy cascade. More downward slashes, more shrill cackling, sundered numerous men and women to grisly sections of bone and flesh that scattered the land.

The goddamn monster didn’t spare a soul. He saved the children for last.
Wet tracks burned down Stails’s aching cheeks and fingers. He knew all the children. He’d eaten with them, played games with them, held their hands during the clan’s arduous journeys from one settlement to another. Unlike the adults who always reminded him that he’d been an adopted feral child, an outsider, they had accepted him without a second thought—his glowing eyes, his harmless tricks that made them clap and giggle.

Stiles refused to look away. Through the scorching film of tears over his eyes, he saw writhing blobs of color in the air, but he heard their terrified screams pealing in his ears, his chest. He heard them choke off into agonized gurgles, then into eternal silence. Their small bodies plummeted onto lakes of blood without a sound.

He couldn’t breathe. He rocked in place. He shook, and shook, and nothing of him and his world would ever be the same.

*Drek, I’m so scared, I don’t want to die—*

He watched the fucking monster tilt that head of black smoke again, as if he was listening to something no one else could hear. He stared at those blurred, pitch-black fumes, and he knew the fucker was grinning behind them.

“Did you enjoy that? I did. Oh man, I did. But it’s never enough for me.”

*Sick, filthy murderer—*

“There are so many universes, aren’t they? So many more animals to slay, thanks to you.”

*You’re the goddamn animal, not them, I’ll find you, I’ll never stop hunting you, you monster, you fucking abomination—*

A vibrant flash of purple filled Stiles’s burning vision. An astronomical force shoved him back, launching him out of the memory, out of Stails’s mind. It was akin to an asteroid slamming into him at ninety-thousand kilometers per hour.

He gasped.

His hand whipped away from Stails’s temple.

His back collided with a solid wall of muscle. Two sturdy arms enfolded him from behind, holding him up, holding him together. He heard harsh sobbing that echoed all around him, but he didn’t know who was crying so hard. He couldn’t see anything past the searing wetness over his eyes. He couldn’t breathe—the river water was rushing into his mouth, his lungs, and the twine around his wrists and ankles were so fibrous, he couldn’t break them, he couldn’t breathe, *he was going to die and never see Drek again—*

“You’re okay. You’re safe now. You’re safe.”

He clenched his shaking hands over his mouth. The harsh sobbing became muffled whimpers.

*Those kids, those helpless babies, no one deserved to die that way—*

“Sshh, you’re safe. I’m here with you. I’m here, Stiles.”

The sturdy arms gently turned him around. They clasped him to a muscular, sun-warm body that he knew so well. A large, strong hand grasped his nape. Another hand that was as large and strong rubbed his heaving back over his deck-jacket. A stubbly cheek pressed against his smooth, wet one.
“I’m here, Radosław. We’re safe.”

He gasped again. Rivulets of hot salt continued to trickle from his eyes, over his fingers. Yes—yes, his name was Radosław. His name was Radosław “Stiles” Stilinski. He was a forty-seven-year-old techno-mage from Universe APH-1000, and he wasn’t drowning, nor was he in peril. He and Stails were no longer one and the same.

Firm fingers tapped in a constant rhythm on his nape.

_one, two, three, four, five—there you go, my falcon of the stars. You’re safe. You’re free. And I’m still here with you._

“Derek,” he croaked behind his hands.

“Hey,” Derek murmured, caressing the back of his head. “You’re okay. We’re okay. Are you back with me now?”

He let go of his quivering mouth to cling onto Derek’s broad shoulders. He gasped yet again. Dug his fingers into the malleable structure of Derek’s nanogel-suit, and gradually, with each longer, steadier breath, he returned to himself, anchored by his werewolf mate’s hands upon him.

He was alive. He was safe.

He would never be the same again.

“Derek.” He lowered his head to nestle his damp face in the juncture between Derek’s neck and shoulder. “Derek.”

Derek stroked his head, his back, and rocked them from side to side. The Cosmo-net was silent. His deck-jacket was utter black.

“He was—the fucker was here. Maybe about—three years ago,” he rasped. “He spoke in Universal English. And he was—”

Stiles raised his head. Derek loosened his embrace, and Stiles stepped back, running a hand down his aching face. He blinked hard, then again. His tech-tatts were vibrating, faded to light brown angular lines, reacting to his sorrow. Derek gripped his other hand, and he squeezed Derek’s hand in return.

“He was powerful, Derek.” He sucked in a shaky breath. Glanced at the rocky floor. At the cave wall, at the flickering shadows cast by the floating balls of fire above their heads. “He was fucking insane. And a coward, too.” He swiped a hand across his sore eyes. “He hid his face with some kinda spell, some kinda black smoke around his head.”

“A rogue techno-mage?” Derek murmured.

Stiles shook his head, scrunching his eyes shut. He could still see all that blood splashing the ground, splattering those stained white shoes. How many of those old stains had come from defenseless innocents? How many of them from children?

One was already far too many.

“No. No, I don’t think so. He didn’t come from our universe. But it was probably a modern universe.”

Stiles withdrew his hand from Derek’s. He ran both hands down his face. Covered his eyes with
both hands. Paced the ground, five steps in one direction, five steps in the opposite direction. He felt Derek’s gaze on his face. He also sensed another pair of hazel eyes on him.

When he lowered his hands, he stood facing Drek and Stails. They had retreated to give him some space. It was obvious to him that they needed the space too: Drek was hugging Stails tight with both arms, stroking Stails’s head and long hair, staring at him with glistening eyes. Stails’s face was obscured by his hair and Drek’s head.

Stiles sucked in another shaky breath. He turned to face Derek, his lips pressed into a tense line.

“The fucker massacred Stails’s whole clan. He just—” He carded his fingers through his hair in frustration. “The only reason Stails is alive is because his clan tied him up and threw him into the river. For loving a werewolf, for having a spark.” He paced again, rubbing his fingers across his lips. “He survived. Used his spark to free himself. And then he went back to them anyway. Because they were the only family he knew.” His teeth flashed in a mirthless grin, and he kept pacing. “Their ignorance, their hatred of the unknown saved him from being slaughtered like—” He halted in his tracks. Swiped a hand across his eyes once more. “Like an animal. I don’t know how to process that right now.”

Stiles was facing Drek again. They stared at each other in silence. When Drek hugged his human mate tighter and rocked them from side to side, comforting himself too, Stiles realized that Drek hadn’t known what had happened to Stails. That Stails had spared his werewolf mate the burden of such a horrendous memory. Carried the despair of it on his own all these years—and then shared it with a visitor who was just as strange, as frightening as the man who’d murdered every human he’d ever known.

*I’m sorry, kid. I’m so sorry.*

The compassion in Drek’s glistening eyes made Stiles’s throat prickle, made his eyes sting all over again. It must have been alarming for Drek—and for Stails—to witness him channeling Stails’s emotions in that memory. All that fear, all that grief, that carved into the heart more acutely than any blade could.

“They’ve been alone for three years, Derek.” He didn’t turn around when Derek sauntered up behind him. He leaned back into his husband’s secure arms. “Moving from one cave to the next. Avoiding all contact with other people.”

Drek lowered his eyes. Sniffed at Stails’s cheek, and continued to rock them from side to side. Under the warm illumination of the floating fires above them, they appeared to be one being, inhabiting the same space, the same body.

“They’re mates,” Derek murmured. “They anchor each other.”

Stiles intertwined his fingers with Derek’s over his abdomen. His platinum wedding ring clinked against Derek’s. Yeah, he knew the kind of power that love had when it was between a mated couple. The kind of power that could prevent an Omega werewolf from going insane due to the lack of pack, that could grant a young human access to his spark without even knowing what it was.

Stails turned in Drek’s snug embrace to face them. Maybe the multiverse was trying to tell Stiles something in the mirroring of their postures, of their loyal werewolf mates holding them from behind, holding them in one precious piece. Whatever the message was, it was muted when Stails’s gaze locked with his.

“Is the faceless monster going to come back?”
Stails’s red-rimmed eyes belonged to an ancient soul. Stails’s voice belonged to a scared boy—and he really was just a boy surviving in a barbaric, violent world. Just a nineteen-year-old boy, who never deserved to be drowned by his own clan because of love, who never deserved to watch them all die because some sick, filthy murderer wanted him dead.

Just a boy, who shoved him out of that horrendous memory to spare him from more torment.

Stiles and his young alternate self stepped out of their werewolves’ arms. Stails walked easily into his embrace, wrapping lean arms around his torso, laying that head of long, luxuriant hair on his shoulder. He hugged Stails like he would his own beloved children, with all his affection and strength, rubbing soothing circles on a bare upper back.

“I don’t know, kid,” Stiles said, shutting his eyes. “But Derek and I are gonna find him. And we’re gonna make sure he never hurts anyone again. One way or another.”

§§§§§§

Stiles unspooled the wide hood of his deck-jacket from its collar and tugged it over his head. The afternoon drizzle was light, but it was as convenient an excuse as any to shroud his head, his face from the world for a while. He listened to the droplets sprinkle upon profuse leaves. Watched them reflect sunshine as they plunged to the grassy ground to burst and die.

“Did you wonder why it took Drek and Stails so long to realize who we are?”

He and Derek sat side by side on a moss-covered boulder near the cave entrance. It slanted at a slight angle, causing him to lean much of his weight against Derek. Derek didn’t mind. His werewolf mate liked it when they were pressed so close together that they appeared a single entity with black nanogel skin and angular, neon-green veins.

Derek’s left arm clasped his waist under his deck-jacket. He leaned his head against his werewolf mate’s, their temples touching, and answered himself.

“Stails’s clan—not a single person in it was over the age of thirty-five. Most of them looked like they were in their early twenties. Or younger. So much younger.” He breathed past a lump in his throat. “Cosmo-net said the average lifespan here for humans and werewolves alike is thirty years. Do you know what that means?”

Derek said nothing, but Stiles knew he was listening. He felt Derek’s fingers caress his left flank.

“It means Drek is already an old man by this world’s standards. He’s only—what? Twenty-five? And yet, the years he gets from here on may be his final few.” He snuggled closer into Derek’s side. “I just can’t process that. Do you remember when you were thirty? When I was thirty?”

Derek turned his head, and his stubble grazed Stiles’s cheek. The familiar, prickly sensation made Stiles’s lips quirk up in a small smile: in the first few years of their relationship, Derek would pounce on him and rub that bristly, handsome face all over his nude body, eliciting shrieks of laughter from him. Derek had been enamored with the red beard burn branding his pale skin. Whenever they sneaked to The Jungle, he would mold his nanogel-suit into a low-cut, sleeveless unitard that flaunted the beard burn on his chest for all to see.

Which inevitably resulted in his parents finding out about his relationship with Derek in the most
awkward way—Dad, in his Cosmo-fleet captain uniform, catching a twenty-four-year-old Derek making out with his barely legal son in front of The Jungle, after some dumbass snapped a brief holo-vid of them together and uploaded it to the Cosmo-net.

Oh, they’d both been hellions when they were young. It was nothing short of a miracle that Dad hadn’t shot Derek in the groin with his blaster after seeing the beard burn. And his nanogel-suit molded into a skimpy, sparkly outfit. And his full-on make-up of feathery eyelashes, smoky eyes, and red lips. And his aero-gel heels that made his exposed butt-cheeks look, oh yes, phenomenal.

He’d certainly inherited his dramatic posturing from Dad.

_Hale_, Dad had growled, his arms crossed over his chest, _give me one reason why I shouldn’t shoot your furry werewolf ass where you stand._

And Derek, with his hands held behind his back, had replied, _Sir, I’ll give you three. One: Stiles is eighteen. Two: I love your son, like I’ve never loved anyone else before, and I know I’ll never love anyone else like I’ll always love him. And three: I’ll die for him, and if that means you shooting me right here and now—okay._

“When I was thirty, we got married in the Preserve, on the very spot where we met for the first time.”

Derek’s hair and stubble lost their dark color over a decade ago. They were still dark when Dad had confessed at their wedding dinner that he’d been secretly impressed as hell by Derek’s honesty that night in front of The Jungle. Derek had then confessed that he’d been seconds away from baring his neck to Dad, such had been his fear of the legendary Capt. Noah Stilinski of the SS Beacon.

Truly, it was nothing short of a damn miracle that Derek became his lieutenant on board the Beacon four years after that confrontation.

“One of the best days of my life, Big Bad.” Stiles kissed his werewolf husband’s stubbly cheek bunched in a tender smile. “You looked so good in those burgundy ceremonial robes.”

Derek stroked his cheek with fingers that could be so gentle yet so lethal when their gunmetal-gray claws popped out.

“When you were thirty, you gave birth to our first child. Our little girl.”

Stiles pressed his forehead to Derek’s, and shut his eyes, his tech-tatts humming in circular waves around them. Calia—their beautiful, good, hazel-eyed daughter, the embodiment of her name. They’d named her after their deceased mothers, combining their names into one not used by anyone in their families before. Her aunts Laura and Cora approved.

In their universe of magi-tech and advanced medicine, it should have been a no-brainer decision for Stiles to give birth in a hospital, without any pain, while being cared for by medical professionals. But since the prehistoric ages of their world, after humankind and werewolves made peace with each other and interbred, human-werewolf couples tended to prefer secluded natural births in the woods, usually at a location of personal significance to them.

It’d indeed been a no-brainer decision for Calia’s birth to take place on the very spot where he and Derek met, where they married. Derek had built a temporary wooden shelter from the logs and leafy branches of the Preserve’s trees, with his hands and an axe, the way his werewolf ancestors had for their pregnant mates. Stiles had made one exception to the whole au naturel birth experience: an aero-gel birthing chair that he could manipulate into any shape he needed. No wood splinters in the butt-cheeks for Radosław “Stiles” Stilinski, thanks.
To say that pushing their baby girl out was painful was like saying that being split open from the inside out was a tiny tickle. With his magi-tech working overtime just to maintain the pregnancy and his temporarily transformed lower body, he couldn’t use it to numb himself. Derek had drained so much of his pain with hands on his contracting belly, those muscular forearms bulging with black veins, but it’d still hurt so bad when her head emerged. Worse with her shoulders, that made him scream for the one and only time in the process.

He’d forgotten every microsecond of agony the moment he laid eyes on their wailing baby girl cradled in a grinning Derek’s hands. Derek was also crying as much as he was. For an eon, nestled together on the birthing chair with their quietening newborn between them, they let their crinkled eyes spill while they studied her perfect face, held her perfect hands and feet, and kissed her perfect cheeks.

And two years later, Stiles willingly underwent another agonizing birth in the Preserve, and gave Derek an equally perfect human son—Nolan, his name a combination of their fathers’. Their little champion with potent magi-tech and whisky-brown eyes just like his dad.

“Our little girl is now a seventeen-year-old werewolf hellion,” Stiles murmured, opening his eyes and leaning back so he could gaze at Derek’s face. “Like her magnificent Papa was.”

Derek let out a low chuckle at that. Stiles smirked, then kissed his werewolf mate on those still so very luscious lips. Yeah, there was that delightful tingle right there in his chest, that tingle that said oh yes and you’re still the one, my beautiful, brave Big Bad.

The drizzle fell unabated upon them and the surrounding forest. Stiles kissed Derek once more, then another time. Then he sat back, lifting his chin, glancing up at the white-clouded sky. He felt Derek’s unblinking stare on his face. Felt droplets of water dot his cheeks.

“Calia’s two years younger than Stails,” he said, still gazing up at the sky.

“She’s still our little girl,” Derek murmured.

Derek grasped his right hand, and weaved their fingers together on top of his thigh. He felt more droplets dot his cheeks, under his eyes. His tech-tatts reacted to them by rippling around them.

“Yeah. She is.” He sucked in his lower lip, then rasped, “Somebody has to stop him, Derek.”

Derek tightened the grip around his hand.

“The last time we hopped to another universe, you were bed-ridden for two weeks. You had to be admitted into the ICU at Beacon Hills Gen. When you collapsed, Nolan was so—”

Derek trailed off into silence. Stiles said nothing, and continued to gaze up at the sky. Derek wasn’t guilt-tripping him here. Derek was just stating the truth: their last universe-hop, in combination with the stresses of recent previous ones, had taken such a toll on his body. One minute, he’d been standing at the kitchen sink talking to Nolan, and the next minute, he’d crumpled in a paralyzed heap on the floor, blood pouring from his nose. His last sight before blacking out was of Nolan bent over him and patting his cheek, his large eyes glistening and red.

He’d frightened the daylights out of his family. Made Derek worried to pieces. Pissed off Dad and Calia who Nolan helped to teleport from the Academy in San Francisco. Scott joined in the livid fun via a holo-call from his in-laws’ home in Kyoto, scolding him with a commendable list of synonyms for idiot. Even Lydia holo-called him from her private room in the August Palace in Los Angeles. Her light gray hair appeared as fiery to Stiles as her red hair had. She glared green lasers of
doom at him while her consort Jackson idled in the background, and she threatened to literally scream his brain out of his ears unless he took a long break from universe-hopping.

None of them apart from Derek knew about that faceless murderer he was hunting. He was content to keep things that way, until Calia declared she was leaving the Academy altogether in response to his unreasonable secrecy. To become a feral werewolf in the Preserve preying on deer and insolent hikers. And his iron-willed daughter meant it.

After a tense discussion with Derek in his hospital room, he told their children why their fathers had to visit all those universes, even at the cost of his health. He omitted all the gory details, but their kids were smart and imaginative. Both of them were well versed in werewolf history. Both of them, especially Calia, understood the enormity of being hunted by a homicidal psychopath determined to kill you just for existing: another homicidal psychopath had murdered most of her werewolf father’s family long before she was born.

It was also why said werewolf father was so harrowed by his obstinate human mate’s quest. There were only so many times that a man could endure losing his immediate family to a murderer, and once was already far too many, for anyone. The mere thought of experiencing that a second time was intolerable.

Stiles knew that. He did.

“It doesn’t have to be you, Radoslaw. Maybe—” Derek huffed, then murmured, “Maybe another version of you will defeat him before we find him.”

Stiles finally lowered his head to look at Derek. Derek stared forward into the woods, his hazel eyes at half-mast. Derek held on tight to his hand. Derek’s arm around his waist also tightened. Derek turned his head toward him, and once more, their foreheads touched, their thighs pressed together from hip to knee. Stiles caressed his werewolf husband’s bristly jaw with his left hand.

“How many more of us have to die before that happens?” he whispered.

Derek had no answer for that. Neither did Stiles.

“Stails’s memory is three-years-old. The memories from other versions of you were also that old. He may already be dead.”

Stiles wanted to believe that. He really wanted to believe in the best outcome.

“Or we’re just uncovering the start of his insane rampage through the multiverse. I still haven’t found the end of that power trail on the Cosmo-grid. A hundred universes, Derek. That we know about.”

Stiles swallowed hard. “Do you know how powerful this fucker has to be, that he can mark the Cosmo-grid for years?”

Derek had no answer to that either. He leaned his head into Stiles’s palm.

“Do we really have the right to interfere in the lives of our alternate selves?” Derek murmured, gazing into his eyes. “There are vast repercussions for what we’re doing. We’ve already directly interfered in multiple universes, against Lady Lydia’s official orders.”

Stiles smirked. “Exactly. What’s one more?”

“Stiles—”

“Derek.” Stiles leaned back against Derek’s arm around his waist. He lowered his left hand from
Derek’s jaw, and clenched it into a fist between them. He glanced down at it with a frown. “What’s all this power I got for, Derek?”

Derek stayed silent. Stiles opened his hand, and a small neon-green flame manifested above his palm, pirouetting on a sharp point.

“I spent so many years figuring that out. When the Nogitsune possessed me, I thought my magi-tech would free me. When Mom died, I thought my magi-tech would bring her back. But it failed me both times.” He clenched his hand into a fist again, snuffing out the flame. “But, although I couldn’t save Mom, I saved other people. I’ve saved lotsa people, across our universe, across the multiverse. Together with you. And Scott, and Kira, and the rest of our crew.”

Derek stared at his face, as if he was seeing it for the first time. As if he was falling in love with him all over again.

“If I choose not to at least try to find that—that goddamn monster, if I just sit back and wait for someone else to do the job?” Stiles lowered his left hand to his lap. He let out a heavy sigh. “Then I may as well not have my magi-tech at all.”

Derek ran fingers through his dark, fluffy hair streaked with gray and white, and his hood fell back to expose his head. He drank in the adoring expression on Derek’s eternally gorgeous face. He melted under its warmth, feeling like the moonstruck sixteen-year-old he’d been so long ago, when the handsomest werewolf he’d ever laid eyes on in his life looked at him and saw him.

“Have I told you today that I love you?” Derek murmured.

If anyone else in the multiverse had said that to Stiles, he would have rolled his eyes at them and told them to jump into a sandslugger’s maw to get all that corn out. But Derek wasn’t just anyone else. Derek was his commander on the Beacon. His best friend, his brother-in-arms. His husband, his werewolf mate, the father of their children. His everything.

“You just did,” he replied, deadpan, “but I don’t mind hearing it a few thousand more times.”

A smile that was both amused and fond spread across Derek’s creased face. He kissed Stiles once, twice, then said, “By today, or for the rest of our lives?”

“I’m willing to choose the latter option if you throw in a million orgasms too.”

Derek’s expression also became deadpan. “Only a million?”

“Let’s just consider that a starting number, okay?”

Derek cradled his jaw, and he smiled into Derek’s bombardment of kisses all over his cheeks and lips. He would never, ever tire of loving Derek Hale, of being loved by him.

They sauntered back into the lit cave hand in hand. Stiles soon caught sight of Drek and Stails sitting on that dense pelt on the cave floor, murmuring to each other. He and Derek were distant enough that their alternate selves didn’t notice their presence, and he observed them with a small smile, stroking Derek’s fingers with his thumb.

He switched off his multiversal translator so he could listen to Drek and Stails speak in their native language. Stails was saying something with crinkled eyes and a wide smile, leaning back against Drek’s chest, his head turned to nuzzle his werewolf mate’s bearded face. Unlike Drek, Stails wasn’t nude anymore: necklaces of twine and stone pendants adorned his long neck, and he wore what appeared to Stiles to be a thong-like piece of clothing made from animal hide. There were other
pieces of clothing in a pile on the pelt, but Stiles couldn’t identify what they were.

Stails was in a much more cheerful mood after the impromptu lesson Stiles had given him on using his spark to make fire, with all of them sitting cross-legged on the cave floor. The mood in the cave had been somber in the aftermath of Stiles’s memory-reliving. It’d remained so until Stails made his first attempt to create a fire ball—instead of the tiny spark of fire Stiles had anticipated, Stails conjured up a column of vibrant purple fire that exploded upward from his palm.

It’d surprised everyone, Stails most of all. The startled kid had let out an ear-piercing shriek, frantically shook his arms until the column of fire vanished, and then shrieked again, his fisted hands flailing in his exhilaration. Drek had laughed so hard that he toppled over onto his side on the cave floor, slapping his muscular thigh in his mirth. Stiles and Derek couldn’t resist the contagious laughter, definitely not after Stails pounced on Drek and smacked the red-faced werewolf with both hands, also laughing.

If it wasn’t for Stails’s long hair, Stiles could have fooled himself into believing he was watching an old holo-vid of himself and Derek when they were that young.

From there, it’d been a piece of scrumptious curly fry to persuade Drek and Stails to leave the cave for good. They had to, for their own safety, for their precious future.

“It’s kinda amazing, isn’t it,” Stiles murmured, leaning closer to Derek, “when you think about the odds of them meeting each other in this great, big world.”

Drek was now brushing Stails’s luxuriant hair with his fingers, running them through and down the dark, waist-length strands, pulling them back from Stails’s face. Stails reveled in the affectionate treatment, sitting on his heels, his eyes shut, his lips curled up in a serene smile. Drek adroitly sectioned off a top portion of the hair, then weaved two lace-braids that met in the middle to be weaved into a larger braid down to Stails’s mid-back. No doubt Drek had done this countless times for his human mate, and fed him well for such abundant, healthy hair.

Stiles rested his head on Derek’s shoulder. “Amazing—for them to meet, to fall in love with each other, and become mates for life in this great, big multiverse.”

His small smile grew at the adorable sight of Drek playfully poking at the tiny moles on Stails’s grinning face, on that slim torso that arched when Drek tickled its bare flanks. Stails’s giggles washed away the fading memory of Stiles’s harsh sobs from the cave walls.

Derek gave his hand a squeeze. “The same could be said of us.”

“Who said love at first smell was impossible, huh?”

Derek snorted, but his eyes were crinkled. On another afternoon, Derek would be bantering with him over whether it was love at first sight or love at first smell in their case: in his wolf form, Derek had heard him from kilometers away long before seeing or smelling him in the Preserve. Love at first faraway teenage babble didn’t have that nice ring to it.

Now, they watched Drek and Stails don their clothing made from a variety of animal hides, leather, and sinews. Drek only wore a loincloth and furry shoes shaped to his feet, but Stails also dressed in leather leggings that fitted loosely around his long legs, and a simple tunic made from three rectangular pieces of animal hide sewn together with sinew. A belt around a trim waist cinched it close.

The dense pelt turned out to be a multi-purpose item that also served as a large receptacle of their
meager personal possessions of flint blades and stone tools. Stails tied it up with twine and slung it over one shoulder. Stiles noted that Drek’s stone axe was hanging from a loop of sinew attached to the waist of the loincloth.

In a world like theirs, Drek would need both hands free in the event of an attack, be it from humans or werewolves. If his claws were anything like Derek’s, they were far more deadly than that stone axe would ever be.

After Stiles snuffed out the balls of fire he’d created earlier, he and Derek led their alternate selves out of the cave. Afternoon sunlight streamed in, illuminating their path, the walls and their artistic paintings. Stails paused in front of the painting of bison, and Stiles watched him press his right hand over one of the handprints. They were a flawless match.

It was a dignified farewell to a place Drek and Stails had called home for over a year.

Outside of the cave, Stiles and Derek stood side by side facing their alternate selves who also stood side by side. The drizzle had ceased. Stiles wiped at the right side of his neck, switching on his multiversal translator again. While Drek and Stails gazed on in curiosity, Derek raised his left forearm with its inner side up, then summoned his aero-steel knife out of his nanogel-suit. It bulged beneath the black nanogel, then emerged and slid down to Derek’s open hand that caught it by its ribbed steel handle.

“For the spear,” Derek said to a gawking Drek.

Derek handed the blueish-silver weapon handle first to the younger werewolf who accepted it with both hands. Stails also stared round-eyed at it, reaching his skinny fingers out for it. Drek smacked away his hand with a grunt.

“Sharp,” Drek muttered.

The doubled-edged blade was indeed extremely sharp, and Drek learned that the painful way after touching one of the edges with his left thumb. It sliced through his skin into his flesh. He whipped his left hand away and sucked on the injured digit. When he popped it out of his mouth, it was already healed, with no sign of any injury. He and Stails admired the knife for several more seconds, turning it this way and that under the afternoon sunshine.

“Thank you, big brother,” Drek said solemnly to Derek.

Derek nodded in response with similar solemnity. Stiles had to restrain himself from pinching both of Drek’s bristly cheeks and cooing to him how cute he was. Unless some other multiverse-traveling techno-mage decided to visit this universe and start handing out aero-steel knives, the knife was the only one of its kind here. Damn near indestructible. Capable of cutting through starship steel.

“Stails, I got something for you too,” Stiles said.

He reached into one of the inner pockets of his deck-jacket, and drew out a long necklace with a polished, arrowhead-shaped pendant made of magnetized iron. Stails accepted the gift with even
rounder, starry eyes, smiling like a boy who’d been given his first holo-game console—Nolan had an identical expression when Stiles and Derek gave him one for his eighth birthday.

“This is the lodestone you spoke of,” Stails murmured, staring at the gleaming pendant, lifting the necklace higher for Drek to see.

“Yep. Watch this.”

Stiles gave the pendant a strong tap. It whirled in the air, then froze, pointing unerringly north. Stails gasped in amazement. Drek poked at the pendant, and it spun again before pointing north once more.

“You’ve been traveling at night, right?” Stiles asked Drek. “Using your night vision?”

Drek nodded, then glanced at his human mate who gazed back at him. “Stails can also see in the dark.”

“Right,” Stiles said, “his spark.”

“It’s a little safer at night. Other humans are asleep, and so are most werewolves.” Stails held the necklace to his chest. “But on the nights of the full moon, we hide.”

Stiles gave Drek and Stails a reassuring smile. In his own universe, only werewolves on Earth were affected by the full moon, and only if they chose not to take the lunatizine shot that suppressed any shift-related symptoms. It was mandatory for all werewolves on starships to take the shot. For those in the Cosmo-fleet like Derek and Scott, they were permitted to decline the shot if they were on leave and with their pack on the night of the full moon. Derek reveled in shifting into his wolf form and chasing Stiles through the Preserve.

The Cosmo-net was scrolling out fresh information about the effects of the full moon on werewolves in this world, and none of it was pretty: full moon nights were the most dangerous ones due to warring werewolf packs preferring to fight at optimal strength and in full shift. Lone wolves were at the mercy of violent fits of rage unless they were mated, like Drek was to Stails. It was common for multiple werewolves to be found dead with their throats torn out after a night-long battle.

“It is true that we have stayed here too long,” Drek said, turning his head to glance at the low, jagged entrance of the cave, his expression pensive. “Stails must be safe.”

Stails smiled tenderly at his werewolf mate. “You also, my other half. Now I know how to make great fire with my power. We are stronger.”

Drek was right to be so anxious about Stails’s welfare.

But Stiles was about to give them both hope like never before.

“You wanna know why I gave you that lodestone?” When Drek and Stails gazed at him, he said, “It always points north, and north is where you have to keep going to reach your new home, your new family. A clan of humans and werewolves living together in peace.”

Drek and Stails were so stunned that they stared at him in silence for six seconds before turning their heads in unison to gaze at each other.

“Yeah, seriously. It’s led by an Alpha werewolf. A True Alpha. And his mate’s a human woman.”

Drek looked as if he got clonked on the head twice with his stone axe. Stails clutched the necklace closer to his chest, and yeah, there it was, that smile of hope slowly spreading across his youthful
“Drek, we must find this clan. You’ll have pack again, and—”

“He may still reject us,” Drek growled, glowering at Stiles then at Derek. “He may kill us.”

Stiles glanced at his own werewolf mate with crinkled eyes and tech-tatts vibrating with his amusement. Derek’s eyes were also crinkled and warm.

Stiles gazed at Drek again, and said, “Mm, no, I’m very sure this True Alpha won’t reject you two, much less kill you.”

Oh, there went those dark, thick brows of wary doom over those fierce hazel eyes.

“You would lay down your life for that guarantee?”

Stiles’s lips curled up in a confident smile. “Yeah. I would. See, where I come from, I’ve laid down my life for this guy more times than you’ll ever know. And I’ll gladly do it a thousand times more, like I know he will for me.”

Drek’s scowl waned into a wide-eyed expression of surprise. Stails gazed at Stiles, his hopeful smile lingering.

“This True Alpha’s name is Skott. If he’s like my Scott, I can also guarantee that he’s the sweetest goofball ever, and the best chief you could hope for. When you two meet him?” Stiles stared into bright, whisky-brown eyes that were just like his. “You’ll never be the same again.”

Drek and Stails stared at each other. It didn’t take long for Drek to crumble like a cookie, his entire face softening, his hand reaching up to tuck Stails's long hair behind his ear. Stails’s welfare was paramount to him, and where else would they be more accepted, more safe than in a clan with other human-werewolf couples?

Stiles yearned so much to teleport the young couple to that clan right now, over a thousand kilometers from here. Drek and Stails’s new journey was going to take them weeks, if not months on foot. But Derek was right—he could only interfere so much in the lives of their alternate selves across the multiverse, before the vast repercussions of his actions resulted in more harm than good. Yes, the Council of Mages had very valid reasons for rules that strictly forbade techno-mages from interacting with their alternate selves.

But hey, fuck the rules, especially when it meant giving somebody a second chance. When it meant giving them hope, and saving their lives. Mom would have done the same.

“Thank you, big brother,” Stails said to Stiles, but there was nothing amusing about the words to him this time.

“Thank you, kiddo,” he rasped. “And good luck.”

It seemed fitting to Stiles that they didn’t say goodbye to each other. He and Derek remained standing side by side while they watched Drek and Stails saunter hand in hand into the forest. Stails wore the lodestone necklace around his neck, and it glinted in the sunlight as he swiveled around to look at Stiles and Derek. Drek also turned to look at them.

Stiles’s throat constricted when he realized why Stails was taking his time scrutinizing him and Derek this last time: Stails was gazing at his future with Drek, and memorizing it for the days, the years to come.
And if they were lucky, very lucky, those years would be decades.

Stails released Drek’s hand and raised that free hand up, palm out. Stiles arched his eyebrows in mild confusion—until Stails wriggled his fingers in the same clumsy way Stiles had earlier in the cave. With a huff of laughter, he raised his own hand and wriggled his fingers in return, but he wasn’t saying goodbye.

This wasn’t the end. This was just the beginning for the lifelong lovebirds.

“They are so cute I wanna die,” Stiles said, grinning like a dumbass.

Derek pressed that large, sun-warm hand to his lower back under his deck-jacket, anchoring him yet again. Holding him high and in one precious, unbreakable piece. Renewing him for their own journey home.

Chapter End Notes

(Ya know that part about Radosław giving birth to his baby girl? Let's just say, maybe that's kind of a preview of what Mieczysław will experience in the sequel. *grin*

For the next coda, I'm kinda torn about which one to write:
- Drek and Stails confront Deucalion and his Alpha pack on their journey north
- Radosław and his Derek get their kinky freak on between the sheets
- Surfer!Derek meets merman!Stiles

Which one appeals most to you?)
Coda: You Make Me Alive (Part I)

Chapter Notes

Soundtrack: We're All Leaving, from Her OST. I listened to this on loop while writing this coda.

(A coda from Derek's perspective! Yes, it's so long that I had to split it into two parts. At 16,000+ words, Part I covers Derek's past from The Fire all the way to the Alpha Pack, featuring some key Sterek moments from the first three seasons of the show. But, if you're expecting events to happen exactly as they did on the show--you might wanna set aside expectations, and just enjoy the ride. :) Or to put it another way, this coda--and the main story and all the other codas--is what I wish the show had actually been.

The tags for PTSD, suicidal ideation, and suicidal thoughts really apply to this one. Yep, things start very heavy on the Derek angst...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Derek thought about his mother, he always pictured her dark, long hair first. He had a crushed, soot-stained photograph of her cuddling his six-month-old self in her arms, smiling at him while he fist ed chubby hands in her hair. He didn’t remember doing that, or how eagerly he must have yanked her hair, or her smile. He didn’t remember if Dad was the one who snapped the photo. Or Peter—before he screamed and screamed and then went silent in the flames.

He didn’t remember a lot of things from before The Fire.

Laura and Cora had inherited Mom’s hair as well as her eyes. Dad had teased him about being the only Hale child with Mom’s dark hair but his hazel eyes, and he’d rolled his eyes while his sisters teased him even more about his pretty boy looks. Yeah, yeah, sure, what a pretty boy he’d been. So pretty that he hid in the library whenever he could, shoving his face into a spine-cracked Hemingway, or a creased Vonnegut, or a hefty Steinbeck. So pretty that if it wasn’t the library, it was the school’s swimming pool that was his cool sanctuary, far below the undulating surface where the world was blue, calm, and his alone.

He’d liked being alone. It was nice to get away from his family for a while, to have his space. In a werewolf household, there was no such thing as privacy: even with soundproofed walls, werewolf hearing meant being able to listen to a muffled conversation in the kitchen from a third-floor bedroom. It meant having to listen to music or watch movies and TV shows on his laptop with noise-canceling headphones. It also meant that jerking off in his own room would earn him a smack on the head from his sisters at breakfast, unless he alerted them beforehand. Which was a whole other level of eww and do not ever want.

So swimming it was. It was good for a while. It kept him fit, and it kept his mind clear.

It must have been some kind of omen, a foreshadowing that stretched its pitch-black darkness over his whole life, that the swimming pool was where he met her. She had told him what a pretty boy he was. Stroked his short hair, his heated face. Touched his bare, wet skin like he was a priceless treasure she’d discovered and wanted to keep forever. Told him he was so pretty, so precious. Told him that she couldn’t think about anything else but him after she saw him for the first time, that she
had to talk to him, that she *needed* him.

He’d been sixteen years old. She’d been twenty-four.

And after she taught him how to fuck a woman, how to make her moan and writhe like the women did in the few porn videos he dared to click on—she trapped his family in their home and razed them to ashes. She’d made sure he was exhausted. Made him giddy with foolish happiness that she wanted to meet his family, to get to know them by asking all those questions about them and their home in the Preserve. Made him sleep like a whipped dog in her stinking bed while she laid down the accelerant, the mountain ash.

He’d woken up from a fabricated dream into a perpetual nightmare. He and Laura were minutes too late. They heard the screams of agony and terror long before they reached the house, and Laura tried to charge into the flames, and he just stood there like a fucking useless moron, his hands shaking, his lips quivering, his eyes burning as hot as his whole home, his whole life. Laura cried and screamed for both of them at the edge of the mountain ash.

Then Mom’s Alpha spark struck Laura like a bolt of lightning from the heavens, hurling her back at him.

Then the firefighters and the deputies showed up in a clamor of sirens and red-white engines, their wan faces burnished gold by the flames.

A deputy drove him and Laura to the Sheriff’s Station. They were bundled up in blankets in some random room that had a couch and a desk. They were given water and snacks. The room was cold, but the cold scalded him like fire inside and out.

Sheriff Payne, a bear of a man with a pot belly, came in at some point and spoke to Laura. A couple of deputies came in later to check on them, but one came in alone and spoke to them both with a consoling, low voice, grasping Laura’s hand, giving his shoulder a squeeze. He couldn’t see what the deputy looked like through the searing film over his sore eyes. The deputy said that he and his wife knew Mom, that his wife had been her close friend, and that they were sorry, so sorry for their tragic loss.

The deputy offered them a place in his home. He elicited a tiny smile from Laura when he mentioned that his ten-year-old son would love to have much younger company around. Laura politely declined, and the deputy didn’t push.

They’d sneaked out of the station as soon as they could. Laura hauled him by the hand, making him move, making his body work when all he wanted it to do was to die with everyone else in the ruins of their home. The shadows of the night veiled them from human sight while they dashed through the woods to the Camaro that Laura had parked far from home.

She’d seen the flames and the smoke above the tree tops. She’d known in a stricken heartbeat what they signified.

They’d jumped into the Camaro without a word to each other. It roared its rage when Laura stomped on the accelerator and sped them out of Beacon Hills. They had nothing except the clothes on their back, the stash of money in the glove compartment, and Laura’s handbag on the backseat. Neither of them had looked back. Neither of them wanted to look back and see the homicidal monster that was surely going to hunt them down and finish the job.

He hadn’t told her that he knew what the monster’s face looked like. That he knew what the monster’s hands felt like upon his violated body, and how tight the monster’s moist heat had been
Laura skidded the Camaro to a halt in time for him to vomit everything in his belly, his heart onto asphalt.

Then they drove on, and on, and they never looked back.

He didn’t remember a lot of things in the months after The Fire either. Somehow they traveled unhindered from California across the country to New York, occupying a two-bedroom apartment on the border of Queens. He didn’t go to school. Laura didn’t force him to go. He’d catapulted into an overwhelming panic attack at the idea of being in a school again—and meeting someone like her again.

It was too much. It was too much for him to even think about.

He didn’t want more people to die because of him.

Laura worked multiple jobs despite insurance money rolling into her bank account in the millions. Mom and Dad had multiple insurance policies for the whole family. Mom and Dad had known what real monsters were, and the kind of prey they relished in hunting and killing.

She showed him the bank statements. She told him that she could open a bank account for him as his guardian, and that when he turned eighteen, it was his to manage as he wished. Told him the money was for him. For his future.

But he didn’t have a future. He knew that, and he said that.

What he didn’t say to her was this: one day, he was going to douse himself in liquid fuel, and then he was going to light himself up on fire, and it would be the warranted end of him. It was just a matter of time.

So they’d argued, and went nowhere. She was a turbulent storm. He was a blank wall smothered in the ashes of dead Hales. She worked her multiple jobs because they gave her multiple reasons to go on, gave her space from him and the memory of shrill screams and throttling smoke. He locked his dirty secrets inside him and let them poison him because that was what he deserved. The least of what he deserved.

They infested him with fiery nightmares that sent him thrashing to the floor and screaming awake in the gloom of moonless nights. Laura would charge into his room, and he would recoil from the one sibling he had left, and her face would crumple. She’d kneel on the floor next to him. She’d tell him how much she loved him. Tell him she wasn’t going to leave. Tell him she knew he was starving himself and she didn’t want him to die, don’t die, please don’t do this to yourself, Der, you’re all I’ve got, don’t you get that?

Laura was his older sister. Laura was his Alpha.

Laura was all he had left.

So he ate. She fed him everyday and he ate, he bulked up, he exercised for hours on end in the apartment, and he ate some more. He grew several inches more to hit six feet. He developed bulging muscles and tough skin where he once had lean flesh and soft skin. There was no more home in the Preserve to return to, not anymore. No more swimming pool to dive into and drift alone in its blue calmness. His brawny body was his sole sanctuary now, and its claws and fangs his most reliable weapons against the monsters out there.
There were so many of them. So many, wearing pretty faces and sensual bodies, dressing themselves in regular clothes, working regular jobs with regular hours. Hoarding mountain ash, carrying guns loaded with wolfsbane bullets. Seducing underaged boys to slaughter their families.

Golden, flowing tresses soaked red with the blood of his family every time he caught a glimpse of them in the milling ocean of pedestrians surrounding him. He walked the streets in his leather jacket, with his dark stubble, and his savage scowl, and his sheathed claws—and people steered clear of him. Like they should. He was a murderer, after all. Just another kind of monster with a pretty face and a sensual body. The worst kind: guilty of familicide.

His youngest brother, Benjamin, had been eight years old. Just a boy who’d liked to play with toy trains and robots. Just a baby who’d beamed at everyone like the summer sun. He remembered what Ben’s tiny hand had felt like in his grasp, after Mom placed him on his lap. He remembered that.

It took Laura two years after they moved to NYC to ask him, Derek, who’s Kate?

He’d toppled from his chair and vomited his dinner on the laminated floor. He didn’t remember what he told Laura after that. There was a lot of crying on both sides. A lot of tussling on the floor of the cramped kitchen. Laura stopped him from clawing his own forearms to shreds, from ripping off his own face from forehead to chin. His pretty boy face. His fucking pretty boy face that she had flattered so often, that had attracted such a monster to him.

It’s not your fault, Laura had whispered against his lacerated forehead, her tears anointing it while she held him and rocked them both on the shallow lake of his blood. It’s not your fault at all, Der. Sshh, no, no, you didn’t kill them. She did. No, not you. She did. She did.

The damage to his face had been so severe that three days passed before the claw marks and gouges healed completely. He’d stared at his restored face in the bathroom mirror, and he hadn’t smashed his fist into it because Laura needed it to put her makeup on. He understood that armor could appear very different on other people. He didn’t want to rob her of yet another essential thing for her continued survival.

If his body was his sole sanctuary, his face was the one mask he had. It could be another piece of his armor. Another weapon in his limited arsenal.

Maybe it wasn’t just a magnet for monsters.

In the four years after that brutal night in their kitchen, he prowled the bars and clubs in every borough of the city. He’d figured out he was bisexual about a year after moving here, when he had glanced at a dark-eyed, dark-haired man passing him on the street, and thought fleetingly about how the man’s lips would taste. The revelation hadn’t shocked him: when Laura and Cora had teased him about his physical appearance, they’d said that women and men would consider him a pretty boy, just to aggravate him. But the idea had embedded itself in his teenage brain. Far from aggravating him, it’d encouraged years of introspection.

Yeah, he knew he was sexually attracted to men too, when he slipped into the bustling, dancing throng and felt their eyes on him—and also felt a frisson of lust at the notion of sex with them.

They weren’t women. They were far less likely to trigger a PTSD flashback, especially if he avoided blonds. He’d learned that harsh lesson by way of allowing a random blonde woman to lead him into the dark alley outside a club, and freaking out when she licked the side of his neck, when all he saw were golden, flowing tresses that suddenly reeked of spilled blood and scorching smoke.

Still, something in him dissuaded him from responding to the libidinous stares of those men, or to
men brave enough to approach him. He was fucked up in the head, but he wasn’t stupid: he knew all they saw was a pretty piece of meat. He knew his face and his body were all men and women alike saw of him, and that they didn’t give a shit to know him deeper than that.

Still, there was something about this guy who’d sauntered up to him at the bar tonight. Something that caused a peculiar flutter in his chest. Like a double-take at a stranger who seemed familiar.

“Can I get you a drink?”

The guy was dark-eyed, dark-haired. Placid-voiced. Tall as he was. Lanky and long-limbed in a flannel shirt over a black t-shirt, jeans, and boots. Older than him by maybe a few years, if the wrinkles at the corners of his long-lashed, warm eyes meant anything. He had nice lips. Plump, kissable ones. Tribal tattoos down the length of his right arm to his wrist.

The guy was human, and Derek didn’t smell any gunshot residue, or mountain ash, or wolfsbane on him. He smelled the guy’s sexual desire for him as a subtle bouquet of spicy scents over the lingering, overall miasma of alcohol and sweat in this watering hole.

Something in his chest stirred, then settled. It said one word in mild reaction to this guy.

No.

Derek turned his head back to the bar. He gazed down at its polished glass counter, his hands gripping its rounded edge.

“I’m not looking for anything,” he said, and that thing in his chest settled deeper and went dormant once more. “I just want a drink.”

“That’s okay. Can I buy you a drink anyway?” When Derek glanced at him again, the guy raised his right hand with its palm out in an amiable gesture. “No ulterior motive. Not expecting anything for it.”

Derek stared at him, but the guy just smiled. His heartbeat stayed slow and stable. His scent stayed pleasant. He was telling the truth. He seemed to be just a nice guy who tried his luck with Derek.

“Yes,” Derek replied.

His right hand tightened around the counter’s edge. The guy waved down the bartender, then ordered for him a shot of the best whisky on the menu. He didn’t order anything for himself.

“Thanks,” Derek said, and he meant it. His right hand relaxed.

The guy stayed out of his personal space. It was another plus in his books.

“If I give you my phone number, any chance you’ll call or message?”

Derek took a languid sip of the whisky. It wouldn’t do a thing to his sobriety unless he laced it with a particular variant of wolfsbane, but he could still enjoy a fine whisky for its smooth taste and sweet burn. Dad had also enjoyed a shot of whisky now and then.

Dad died six years ago. A lifetime ago.

He didn’t remember which brand of whisky Dad had stored in the basement, where his family had burned to an agonizing death. But he remembered how strong Dad’s hugs had been, how luminous Dad’s hazel eyes had been, just like his own. He remembered those things.
He gave the optimistic guy a quirk of lips that was unmistakable in its gist. The guy let out a disappointed sigh. The warmth in those dark eyes remained.

“Ah, well, at least I tried.”

Derek’s small smile spread into a kinder, wider one. In another life, another universe, he might have given this guy a chance. Given this guy one night.

But that thing in his chest had said no for a reason.

He’d listened to it for years. He wasn’t about to stop now, not when it’d served him well so far. When it’d protected him from the monsters in this city. Including himself.

“Hope you find somebody tonight,” he said, looking the guy in the eye, still smiling to show he had no hard feelings about the question.

The guy sighed a second time, then glanced around the bar, making a face.

“Nah, don’t think I’m gonna bother.” The guy didn’t look at him. “No one here compares to you.”

He let out a snort, but he was still smiling. Damn, the guy’s heartbeat was still slow and stable. The guy had meant those words.

That thing in his chest spoke once more.

No.

Not him.

Derek raised his glass in acknowledgement of the sincere compliment. The guy smiled at him again, and he knew it was one in farewell.

“Have a good night.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “You too.”

He didn’t watch the guy saunter away. He sipped the remainder of the whisky, then placed the empty glass on the counter. He strode through the throng of dancers and drinkers to the exit, and no one spoke to him or touched him. That was how he liked it.

He still liked being alone.

But being alone was not synonymous with being lonely, and he never liked being lonely. Lonely was all he’d been since fleeing Beacon Hills. And Laura knew it.

He was twenty-two. He was an adult werewolf, and thanks to the smart investments he and Laura made, he had more money in his bank account than billions of people on this godforsaken planet would ever have. Laura still had a massive chunk of the insurance money to herself. Two weeks ago, she’d added his name to her account, and she wouldn’t tell him why.

She wanted to return to Beacon Hills.

She said that he had to come with her, that he had to go back to their hometown sooner or later. Beacon Hills and the Preserve were the territory of the Hales, and she and Derek had a duty to watch over it, to defend it. They couldn’t hide forever in NYC. They couldn’t run forever.
Your home is in Beacon Hills, Derek. That’s where you have to be.

She wouldn’t tell him why she was so certain about that.

She wouldn’t tell him why she spoke as if he was the only one who had a future there.

She was in her usual t-shirt and sweatpants, sitting on the couch waiting for him when he reached their apartment and let himself in. Waiting for his answer. She didn’t say anything about the whisky on his breath, or about his thundering heart that his stony mask of a face failed to obscure.

They stared at each other across the sparse living room.

That thing in his chest knew what he was going to say hours—no, years before he did.

“Yeah,” he rasped, his shoulders slumped. “Let’s go back.”

Laura’s shoulders also slumped. She beamed at him like Ben used to a lifetime ago, a mere dream ago.

“This is the right decision,” Laura said, her eyes glistening. “We’re going home, Der. You’ll find your future there. You’ll see.”

Then that thing in his chest—that hopeful, thundering thing—spoke to him once again.

No. Not yet.

But soon.

And although he didn’t understand what the message meant, he listened.

§§§§§§

It took Derek two hours to bury what he had of Laura’s corpse with his bare hands in the icy darkness.

He knew this because he’d glanced at his watch before commencing to dig, dig, and dig, while the lower half of her wolf form lay on the ground nearby, never to move again. After placing her in the hole, stroking her dense fur for the last time, wrapping her up and tying her securely, and shoveling the earth over her with both hands, he glanced at his watch again.

Then he planted the wolfsbane flowers around the grave, careful not to touch the flowers themselves.

Then he sat on his heels beside the grave, his soiled hands palms up on his lap.

He stared forward at nothing, his eyes dry, his mouth shut.

He breathed, but it wasn’t because he wanted to do so.

He breathed.

A lifetime ago, he’d read in a book that a guy called Buddha had said misunderstood and misused desires were the root of all suffering. That the only desires worth having were those that caused no
harm. As a twelve-year-old boy, he’d thought it was a rather sensible idea, but he hadn’t known which desires were bad and which ones weren’t. As a twenty-two-year-old man, he thought that having no desires whatsoever must therefore be an even better state of being to attain.

Being hollowed out of anything and everything now should have given him that sought-after peace, right?

No desires. No family. No future.

No home, certainly not the burned husk of a house that loomed over him, like a gargantuan tombstone of cold embers and rotten wood.

Laura was dead.

Laura was the last living family he had, and she was dead. Murdered. Ripped in two like she was a rag doll with her innards strewn all over the grass, and he didn’t know who’d done it. He didn’t know who could have done such a thing to his older sister who’d been one of the most resilient werewolves he’d ever known. He didn’t know where her Alpha spark went, or who had stolen it from her.

It should have been his now. But it wasn’t. Maybe it was because it knew he wasn’t worthy of it. And it would be right.

If Peter wasn’t brain-dead on a hospital bed and beyond reach, he would have gladly thrown himself at the older, wiser werewolf’s feet. Gladly let his uncle hug him like he used to, and tell him everything was going to be okay, they’d figure something out together, they were Hales and surviving was what they did.

Except when they didn’t, when they couldn’t.

He was alone.

He was truly alone, and empty. He was the last Hale alive. There was nothing left for him in this world.

So why was he still here?

If the only desires worth having were those that caused no harm, then the only people worth living were those who caused no harm. He wasn’t one of those people. He was a murderer. A monster, the worst kind. The kind that couldn’t even protect the one person left in this godforsaken, unjust universe who’d still loved him after knowing what he was under his mask, what he’d done. The kind that couldn’t even give her a decent funeral. Couldn’t even bury her whole corpse since the Sheriff’s Department had the other half in its morgue.

It made total sense, then, that if he had to have one last desire—a very healthy one, at that—it was to execute himself.

He should have done that six years ago. If he had, maybe Laura would still be alive. If he had, maybe Mom, and Dad, and Cora, Paul, Thomas, Benjamin would all still be alive with her. What was one miserable life snuffed out compared to seven good ones?

Yeah. He should have also burned to death that night. Burned to ashes so nothing remained of him.

Laura, you left.
You said you wouldn’t. But you did.

He listened to the wind rustling the leaves of voiceless trees around him. To the buzzing of insects whose lives were as ephemeral as his own, as his family’s.

I didn’t want you to die either.

No one replied him. No one was here anymore to reply him.

It was so easy to find a hardware store in town, and break into it: the sheriff and his deputies were too preoccupied in the Preserve with hunting the wild beast they believed had killed Laura, and he wished them luck, and hoped none of them died. The streets were vacant. He checked for security cameras and saw none. The steel lock cracked like a twig in his hands. His watch showed the time to be 3:43 a.m.

He grabbed a red, twelve-gallon portable fuel tank. Grabbed cans of liquid fuel and filled the tank up. Grabbed a lighter, and a box of matches. There was a chance the lighter might not work. He needed it to work.

He set the tank in the trunk of the Camaro, then drove back to that gargantuan, wooden tombstone that had once been his pack’s den. He carried the tank down to the basement. Set it on the soot-stained floor. He didn’t know which one of his family members had died where he was standing: two years ago, Laura had obtained the police reports and forbidden him from seeing them, from seeing the attached photographs. He hadn’t wished to see them. His imagination, and his nightmares, were macabre enough.

He’d forced himself to listen to her sob in her bedroom afterward, instead of losing himself in the hustle and bustle of NYC beyond his window. Reminded himself that it was indeed his fault their family was dead, that his older sister was bawling her eyes out from wounds that he’d inflicted with his ignorant, selfish actions.

Now she was dead too. Soon, he would join her, and the rest of their family.

Maybe that was what the message from that silent thing in his chest had meant.

He considered doing it right then and there. But he remembered how blinding the flames had been that night. They’d been seen from miles away. He had to immolate himself during the day, when it would take longer for the flames, the smoke to be noticed. The last thing he wanted was to be rescued by firefighters and then confined in a hospital ward, alive only in the most rudimentary sense.

Fine. He could wait a few hours.

He sat on the floor and leaned back against a soot-stained wall that was even blacker in the night. He shut his eyes. He breathed, and he smelled old smoke. He heard Mom’s screams, and Dad’s, and maybe Paul’s, or Thomas’s. He heard Peter’s screams too, although his were of fury. He heard the crackling of wood. The shattering of glass. The crash of a section of floor collapsing. More screams. Maybe they were Cora’s, or Ben’s.

Sometimes it was difficult to tell if he was having a nightmare or if he was awake.

Sometimes he was convinced that he’d never woken up from the perpetual nightmare of The Fire. That he was already dead in all the ways that mattered, like Peter.

He peeled open his eyes, and he saw shafts of sunlight streaming through the cracks and gaps in the
floor above. The day had come. A cloudless, fine day, it seemed.

It was as good a day as any to finish the job she started.

He staggered to his feet, to the fuel tank. He twisted its cap off. He ignored the sharp stink of the liquid fuel. He dropped the cap to the floor, then gripped the tank’s handle with both hands.

He felt absolutely nothing. He was empty. He was going to burn quick.

The muscles of his shoulders and arms tensed in preparation to lift the tank up and over his head. His fingers tightened around the handle.

And then, he heard two distinct heartbeats.

Two heartbeats that belonged to—two guys hiking through the woods toward the house.

What the fuck? Who were they?

He released the fuel tank’s handle and straightened up, scowling, tilting his ear in their direction. They were talking to each other. They sounded like young guys. Teenagers, probably—

Wait. They were talking about infection.

About lycanthropy.

He squinted his eyes, then rolled them when one of the guys let out a pathetic imitation of a wolf howl. He tuned out of the babbling. Christ, they were just joking around. Dumb kids. They’d crap their pants if they ever met a real werewolf. Like him.

He huffed. Rubbed his fingers over his scrunched eyes. Listened to their babbling again. Tuned out just as fast. Okay. Okay, they weren’t going to go away until they found this inhaler one of them dropped. He was going to have to go out there, find this thing, and then tell them to get lost.

Fine.

He’d waited six years to kill himself. He could wait a few more minutes.

He was outside and storming into the forest toward them in seconds, desiccated leaves crunching under his boots, slender branches smacking his taut chest. He tucked his fisted hands in the side pockets of his leather jacket. The nearer he got, the angrier he got.

What had these guys been up to, anyway, that one of them would drop his inhaler here? What business did they have on his family’s land? They weren’t Hales. They were trespassers. They had no right to be here.

What the fuck were they doing hanging around the spot where he’d discovered the lower half of his sister’s corpse?

Were they involved in her murder?

“What are you doing here, huh?” he snarled at the two teenage boys. “This is private property.”

They hadn’t seen him coming. They flinched, then fidgeted in place, unable to look him in the eye for more than a few seconds. He glared at them although his anger was ebbing.

No—no, he was a murderer, and he knew what a murderer looked like. These guys weren’t
murderers. They were just anxious teenagers. If they were already so nervous in his presence, in broad daylight, there was no way they were capable of assaulting Laura in the murkiness of night, much less rip her in two. That would have required incredible strength. Supernatural strength.

The guy on the left had wavy, dark brown hair, and brown puppy eyes, and a crooked jaw. His heart was hammering with fear.

But he smelled—weird. Like a werewolf, and yet not like one.

Derek stared at him.

Oh. It’d been a long time since he encountered such a scent, but he remembered now: the guy was a human changing into a werewolf. An Alpha werewolf must have bitten him in the past few days. Did that mean Laura hadn’t been the only Alpha werewolf in town when they got here? What kind of werewolf would bite a teenager? What kind of teenager would be okay with that?

He gritted his teeth when the answers hit him: a teenager who didn’t know he’d been bitten by a werewolf. A werewolf who might be Laura’s killer—

“Uh, sorry, man. We didn’t know.”

Derek swiveled his head to stare at the other guy.

And that silent thing in his chest woke up with a jolt, like it never had before. It did a double-take at this stranger who seemed so familiar and yet so unfamiliar. It drank in this lanky, long-limbed teenager’s tenor voice like it was an elixir. It drank in this shaved-headed teenager's youthful face like it was a sui generis work of art. It scrutinized those large, whisky-brown eyes framed by long lashes, that upturned nose that looked just right on him, and those dark pink, plump lips with that appealing bow.

Then the guy’s scent wafted to his nose. It was pure. Sweet and natural. Like honey, and petrichor, and a dash of cinnamon. Like the forest as the sun rose over the tree tops. Like sunshine upon bare skin.

It was the most exquisite scent he’d ever smelled.

That galvanized thing in his chest absorbed every facet of the scent as well. It pulsated, then uttered one indubitable word to him.

But he couldn’t comprehend the word.

“Yeah, we were just looking for something, but, uhm—”

The other teenage boy—the other werewolf looked like he was about to vibrate out of his skin with trepidation. Derek stared at him again, then at the other guy whose cheeks were flushed. They fidgeted even more. Glanced here and there at the ground near their feet.

Derek inhaled deeply through his nostrils, and that exquisite scent inundated his lungs, his blood. It made his head spin in a mystifying way. Made the ground fall away from below his feet.

He blinked.

Clenched his hands tighter in the pockets of his leather jacket, until his fingernails burrowed into his palms.
Right. Right, the inhaler. They were looking for the inhaler.

And a full tank of liquid fuel was waiting for him in the basement.

The fact that one of them was turning into a werewolf was not his problem. The fact that one of them had the most goddamn exquisite scent he’d ever had the pleasure of smelling was not his problem. They were not his problem. He was going to find that inhaler, and give it to them, and then he was going back to the basement to die.

Simple as that.

He smelled the inhaler before he saw it, nestled in a small pile of leaves on the ground several feet away from him. He plucked it up and tossed it at the younger werewolf who caught it with lightning-fast reflexes. From the wide-eyed expression of the other guy, that wasn’t normal—

No. Not his problem.

No.

“Uh, thanks,” the younger werewolf said, his face softening into an affable smile. “It cost my mom eighty bucks, and I really need it for my asthma. So, yeah, thanks.”

The other guy was staring at Derek from under those long lashes, his cheeks still flushed, those whisky-brown eyes bright and inquisitive. The guy’s thoughts were so loud that Derek could almost hear them spoken for all to hear: wait, how did that guy know we were looking for the inhaler? How did he know it was right there?

This guy was smart. Given enough time, he was probably going to figure out what was happening to his friend. His friend was never going to need that inhaler again.

But that was not Derek’s problem. None of it was.

He watched the two teenagers turn around and saunter away from him. He maintained his impassive face when he heard the shaved-headed one mention his full name.

Laura had been right: they couldn’t run forever. Maybe they were never able to run at all from their past, no matter how far they went. The folks of Beacon Hills still remembered him—or at least, that guy did.

He ignored the frisson of lust that surged down his spine. It simply proved how fucked up he was, how much he deserved to die. That guy was a teenager. Barely older than he was when she—when she—

He pivoted around and stomped through the woods back to the gargantuan tombstone of a house, his hands clenched in fists once more at his sides, his teeth gritted to the point of pain. His eyes stung, and he blinked hard.

No. No, not his problem anymore. None of that shit was his fucking problem anymore.

He was going to do what he had to do, and then everything would be over.

He stomped down to the basement. Kneeled on the floor next to the fuel tank. Gripped its handle with both hands.

He stared down at it.
But all he saw was that guy’s mole-dotted, youthful face. Those large, whisky-brown eyes staring at him as if he was a sui generis work of art.

And he couldn’t lift the fucking tank up. His arms wouldn’t obey him.

With a strident growl, he released the fuel tank’s handle. He leaped up. Stomped around the basement, summoning clouds of dust and soot with each furious step.

“Idiot! Moron!” he bellowed at himself, yanking at his hair with both hands. “What the fuck are you thinking about him for, huh?! You don’t even know him!”

The walls said nothing. Neither did the floor below his feet, or the one above his head, or the fuel tank that stood there mocking him with its blood-red skin and its sharp stink. He strode back to it. Bent down and grabbed its handle with both hands.

He lifted the tank off the floor.

He heard the liquid fuel slosh inside it.

And he—he couldn’t lift it higher than his hips. His hands trembled. So did his arms. So did that hopeful, thundering, woken-up thing in his chest.

He squeezed his searing eyes shut, but that guy’s silly face was all he saw. That guy’s silly voice was all he heard. That guy was all he could think about, while surrounded by the ashes of his family.

For the first time in six years, he didn’t smell the smoke when he closed his eyes.

For the first time in six long years, he didn’t hear their screams.

He clung onto the fuel tank. He kept his eyes shut, and he sucked in a shuddery breath. Then another.

No smoke.

No smoke at all. No screams echoing in his ears, his chest.

Just that exquisite scent, making his head spin in such a mystifying way. Making the agony-steeped ground fall away from below his feet. Just blessed silence, gently rippling with words murmured by that tenor voice.

He opened his eyes to half-mast. Everything around him glowed gold to his hazy, stinging vision. A beam of sunlight streaked across his aching face, another across his trembling hands.

That guy—that guy looked like someone who’d lost a loved one, too. Someone he really loved. Derek didn’t know how he knew that. He just did. Maybe if he was a murderer who could recognize another murderer, he was also someone who could recognize another who’d endured such a loss.

And that guy looked like someone who would—understand him. See him. Know him. If he gave himself the chance to know that guy too.

He didn’t know how he knew that. He just did. Just like that hopeful, thundering, woken-up thing in his chest did, that uttered that one indubitable word to him once more.

He still couldn’t comprehend what the word was.

But he listened.
He lowered the fuel tank to the floor. He replaced the cap with numb fingers. He walked up the rickety stairs to the first floor, then out onto the front porch.

He was going to set himself on fire. Sooner or later, he was going to do it. It was just a matter of time.

But—that teen werewolf. He seemed like a genuine guy. A guy who cared about his mom, and felt bad for inconveniencing her. A guy who wasn’t financially rich—but had a good friend willing to accompany him into the Preserve despite a murder occurring here last night.

The murder of Derek’s older sister, who’d been the best he could have asked for in life. Who never deserved to die that way.

Laura.

He stood on the porch with his arms at his sides. He stared forward into the forest. He stretched his fingers, then curled them into his palms. His claws itched to pop out.

Someone killed Laura in cold blood. Someone supernaturally powerful, who stole her Alpha spark—and the only creature that would resort to killing a werewolf for that spark was another werewolf. Maybe the same one that bit that affable, genuine teenage boy.

Who was this werewolf? Who was powerful enough to defeat an Alpha like Laura?

He didn’t know. Not yet.

But maybe—those two guys could help him find out. In turn, he could help the young werewolf with his transition, teach him how to handle his new abilities and senses.

Maybe in time, he could become a wolf brother to this guy.

Maybe in time, he could become a friend—just a friend—to that other guy, and stop being lonely for a little while before he had to do what needed to be done.

Maybe.

That adamant, thundering thing in his chest spoke again. It declared that one indubitable word as a retort to him, an admonishment to his doubts.

And this time—he understood the word.

He froze, his breath hitching in his throat. He pressed his right hand flat to his chest. Pressed his palm over that adamant, thundering thing that repeated the word to him, now in reassurance, in encouragement. The word was such a simple one. He hadn’t comprehended it before because that thing in his chest had never, ever said it until today.

Until he locked eyes with those large, whisky-brown ones. Until he looked at the owner of those eyes, and saw him.

He shut his eyes. He listened again to that simple word, basking in its newness, its rightness.

Yes, that thing in his chest said.

Yes.
Derek was a dead man walking. He’d known that since he was sixteen and still a boy, down to his moldering marrow. He was a man who had death stalking him with a red, twelve-gallon tank of liquid fuel and a match, so near that he could feel its fiery breath on his nape. He was a man existing on time borrowed from the sacrifices of others. A man who shouldn’t set down any roots, who shouldn’t form any bonds with anyone, lest he harmed them when those bonds were severed.

The problem, Laura would have said to him, was that he was an obstinate asshole once he settled on a plan of action. If that plan involved befriending someone even after the idiot tried to get him arrested for his own sister’s murder, he was doing it. If that plan involved protecting said idiot from his not comatose and fucking insane uncle who’d murdered his own niece for power, he was doing it. If that plan also involved executing said uncle at the ruins of their family house to save said idiot along with his friends—yes. Yes, he was doing it.

Said idiot’s name was Stiles Stilinski. He was the sixteen-year-old son of the sheriff, and a student at Beacon Hills High. He was the resident bench-warmer of the lacrosse team. He was the best friend of Scott McCall, that affable, genuine teenage werewolf who no longer had asthma, or any other illness. He was obsessed with some video game called Call of Duty, and considered curly fries to be manna from the gods. He drove a bright blue jeep that had belonged to his deceased mother. He had a terrifying crush on another student called Lydia Martin, and he was about 99.99% certain that one day, she was going to become Mrs. Stilinski.

His name was Stiles, and Derek had no clue why he was so bothered by that stupid crush, of all the damn things about this big-mouthed, flailing, shaved-headed, smart idiot.

Stiles set Peter on fire with a lobbed Molotov cocktail.

And Derek didn’t flinch. He didn’t shake, or scream, or suffer a PTSD flashback.

He tore out Peter’s throat with a swipe of his claws. It shouldn’t have been so easy. It shouldn’t have felt like nothing, killing the very last living member of his family.

He felt no victory whatsoever when the Alpha spark slammed into him like a speeding train into a mountainside. He somehow managed to stay on his feet, to stand tall with his shoulders squared. He turned his head to look at Stiles, at the other teenagers who gaped at him in shock, in fear.

“I’m the Alpha now,” he said, his eyes glowing red, putting on a fabulous show for his flabbergasted audience.

But he felt nothing.

If he hadn’t been guilty of familicide before, he was now: Peter had killed Laura for the Alpha spark to wreak vengeance on the humans who’d murdered their family, who’d covered up the crime by claiming it was a “short circuit fault” to the authorities. Laura really was dead because of him. So was Peter.

His whole family was truly dead. He was truly and utterly alone, and it was by his own blood-soaked hand.

It was the sole excuse he had for biting Jackson, then Erica, Boyd, and Isaac. Four teenagers—when Peter had only bitten one. Unintentionally, no less. In a world where Laura was still alive, she would have smacked him extra hard across his thick skull. Yelled at him, smacked him some more, and
yelled even louder at his imbecilic decision to screw up these kids’ lives.

But that wasn’t why he bit them. He’d picked teens who needed the power to escape their horrible circumstances. He’d intended to give them confidence, hope, a way out to a brighter future. To make them bolder, stronger, so that they were no longer prey but the predator.

He didn’t anticipate a monster like Gerard Argent to swoop in and kidnap Erica and Boyd from under his nose. To torture them in his soundproofed basement, and revel in their blood spilling, their suffering, their screams.

He didn’t anticipate Gerard Argent doing the same to Stiles.

His vision drenched as crimson as the blood trickling from Stiles’s split lip, from the wound in that lean thigh. He smelled the salt of Stiles’s tears. He saw the ropes binding Stiles to the chair, the blood-stained knife in the monster’s hand.

He didn’t quite remember what happened after that. Scott would later tell him that Gerard had shot him eleven times with a handgun, when he lunged at Gerard with his claws instead of biting him. Those shots had hurt less than mosquito bites.

It’d apparently been Gerard’s plan to get an Alpha werewolf to bite him so he could escape death by cancer. Instead, what he’d gotten was an enraged Alpha werewolf hellbent on rending him asunder. An Alpha werewolf with eleven gunshot wounds that didn’t slow him down for a microsecond while he hunted the fucker past the town’s border.

Scott had found him on the roadside the next morning, and driven him back to town in Stiles’s jeep. Scott told him that Stiles was safe at home, without any prompting from him. He was too furious at himself for letting that monstrous fucker escape from him to speak.

Stiles didn’t rant at him when he climbed into Stiles’s bedroom via the window that evening. Stiles was sitting straight-legged at the head of his bed in a t-shirt and sweatshorts, staring into space with glazed eyes. Bluish-purple bruises marred his face. A skinny-fingered hand rested on a bandaged thigh. The other hand held his phone.

They stared at each other across the room.

I’m sorry. You shouldn't have been taken, or tortured.

I should have been faster, stronger. Better.

The words stayed inside him. He inhaled through his nostrils, and once more, Stiles’s exquisite scent inundated his lungs, his blood, his entire body. No sourness from fear. No salt from tears. Just sweet, spicy, and natural. As it should be.

He saw the relief softening Stiles’s already young face. Stiles placed his phone on the bed and didn’t look at it. He stood in silence in a fresh set of clothes, letting the teenage boy see that the bullet wounds were long gone, that he was physically okay. He wasn’t so sure that he was okay in any other way. He wasn’t going to let Stiles know that.

Stiles said nothing. He also said nothing.

Stiles didn’t stop him when he turned to the window and hopped out onto the tree in front of Stiles’s bedroom. Sometimes, words were unnecessary. Sometimes, words were too weighty.

That hushed thing in his chest knew that well.
He returned to that charred, gargantuan tombstone of a house in the Preserve. He’d allowed himself to have an old, tattered mattress bought from a yard sale as his sole comfort. He didn’t consider the ancient phone he’d owned since his NYC days to be a comfort: he only had to open Laura’s messages to him to crucify himself on them, over and over. In what was once the living room, he sprawled on the mattress under the regard of a waxing crescent moon.

He thought about Erica and Boyd. He thought about how they’d flinched from him when he tried to approach them at the town’s Greyhound bus station earlier that afternoon.

*We have to go*, Boyd had said with that gravelly voice, gazing at a spot past Derek’s shoulder. *We don’t want to be here anymore.*

Derek knew what Boyd had meant. He had failed them as their Alpha. He’d let an evil monster like Gerard hurt them in ways that no teenager should ever experience. The supernatural power he’d granted them had meant nothing then.

They were scared. They were right to be.

There were monsters everywhere, including at home. Especially at home.

They were just teenage werewolves in love with each other, with a whole life ahead of them, and Derek let them go without a word. Jackson was around, still waiting for his werewolf traits to kick in. Isaac was also around, glued to Scott’s side, learning to harness his werewolf abilities from Scott rather than Derek.

Derek was also failing Isaac as his Alpha, and he wasn’t surprised by that. Maybe it was more fitting that Scott was the other teenage werewolf’s mentor. Derek would have to be senseless to not see the early makings of a good pack leader in Scott. Scott had a genuine charisma that he didn’t have. Scott was considerate and merciful, but also fearless and fierce when he had to be. Given enough time, Scott could become a formidable werewolf with his own pack, if he became an Alpha.

But right now, Scott was technically an Omega, having declined to pledge himself to Derek’s now fractured pack. Scott was technically a threat to him. A trespasser on his territory.

And with one blurted-out sentence on the front porch of Stiles’s house weeks later, Scott confessed to being a traitor of the highest order as well.

“You went behind my back to work with the *Argents*?” Derek snarled at the younger werewolf gone pale. “*That* was why you were at the house that night? To help them trap me?”

He didn’t remember what Scott’s answer was. He didn’t remember losing control of his claws and fangs, letting them drop and pop to their full length. What he did remember was Stiles jumping in front of Scott with his arms spread, turning himself into a human shield—against *him*. Stiles, heart hammering in that fragile chest, staring at him with wide, unblinking eyes. Daring him to attack, to hurt his best friend.

He could have seized Stiles’s hoodie and slammed him against the wall to make a point. He’d already done that to Stiles multiple times: upstairs in the teenage boy’s bedroom, or in the kitchen. Once in the sheriff’s study. He could have crushed Stiles’s neck with one hand. Snapped his fangs inches away from that silly, striking face.

He could have.

But he didn’t.
That fucking stubborn thing in his chest forbade him.

So he snarled and stormed off to the Camaro parked in the driveway. Zoomed away without looking back at the two goddamn traitors. He couldn’t believe it—he just couldn’t believe that Scott had betrayed him over a girl. A girl called Allison Argent.

*Her* niece.

He knew how pathetic he was, that he had to stomp on the brakes and then stagger out of the Camaro to puke his guts out on the roadside. He thought he was over this bullshit. The last time he’d puked because of *her*, it had been in NYC, after he sprinted away from that random blonde woman in that dark, dirty alley.

Was he never going to be free of her? Was he damned to be her prey until the day he died?

He didn’t know. He didn’t know, and he didn’t want to be around anyone who was willing to sell him out to the humans—the *monsters* that had murdered his whole family and celebrated their demise.

He ignored that fucking stubborn, wailing thing in his chest. It wasn’t protecting him this time by telling him to go back to Stiles, to set aside his wrath and demand an explanation. No, it was not. No. Stiles chose Scott, and that was all he needed to know.

Stiles chose Scott over him.

Until he was struck in the neck with some barb, paralyzed with venom from the hissing, scaly, yellow-eyed creature crawling across the white walls surrounding the school’s swimming pool. It had a long tail, and teeth. Lots of teeth. And he didn’t know what the hell it was.

What he did know was that Stiles, the *idiot*, had been hunting this horror show of a creature on his own while Scott was gallivanting around town with Allison or whatever. Stiles had called him to meet him at the school.

That was all it’d taken for him to jump into the Camaro to rush his way here.

The creature seemed to dread water. That was all that prevented it from killing them both straightaway.

“You get me out of here before I drown.”

Stiles was holding him up in the water. He had to protect Stiles. He had to protect Stiles, although Stiles chose Scott over him and must hate him now.

“You’re worried about drowning?” Stiles exclaimed, his eyes round with alarm while he glanced around for any glimpse of the damn creature in the shadows. “Did you notice the thing out there with the multiple rows of razor-sharp teeth?!”

“Did you notice I’m paralyzed from the neck down in eight feet of water?”

Stiles didn’t reply him. Stiles held onto him. Held him up, and up.

It must be some kind of portent, a promise from gods he’d never believed in that pierced the pitch-black darkness over his whole life, that he and Stiles would end up in this very swimming pool. That Stiles would keep him afloat for hours, keep him alive when no one else would have. Not even himself.
What kind of portent, what promise it might be was a mystery to him. He had far more urgent quandaries at hand to tackle.

“Okay,” Stiles gasped.

Stiles was only human. There was only so much he could do, so much time he had to do it.

“Okay, I—I don’t think I can do this much longer.”

Stiles was staring at his phone that he’d dropped in his haste to grab Derek as he toppled into the pool. It was lying on wet tiles near the edge of the pool. A rectangular beacon of hope.

“No, no, no. Don’t even think about it.”

“Would you just trust me this once?” Stiles retorted.

It made something in him ache to think about it, to accept it, but he knew there were just two possible reasons Stiles was holding him up all this time: one was that Stiles felt obligated to recompense him for stopping Gerard Argent from torturing him further. The other far more plausible one was that he was the teenage boy’s sole meat-shield from the creature. Stiles had no other reasons to do it. If Stiles did have other reasons, he couldn’t think of them.

Stiles was going to attempt calling Scott. But that meant Stiles had to release him, and swim to the edge of the pool.

That meant the creature, whatever the hell it was, could get to Stiles. And hurt him. Even kill him.

“No,” Derek growled.

Emotion flashed across Stiles’s damp face. Derek scarcely caught it before Stiles was yelling at him, those wide, whisky-brown eyes blazing with fury.

“I’m the one keeping you alive, okay? Have you noticed that?!”

He wished he could feel Stiles’s hands on him. He wished he could feel the heat of Stiles’s body against his, and let it incinerate all the corruption in him, futile an endeavor as that might be.

“Yeah. And when the paralysis wears off, who’s gonna be able to fight that thing? You or me?” He sputtered when his head sank under the water up to his eyes. He tilted his head up, and gasped for air. “You don’t trust me, I don’t trust you. You need me to survive, which is why you’re not letting me go.”

If Stiles had been furious before, the emotion that flashed across his damp, flushed face was fiercious tenfold. Derek had no idea which of his statements had pissed off Stiles the most. He had no time to contemplate on this, on anything.

Stiles shoved him away.

“Stiles!”

He sank like a hefty boulder to the bottom of the pool. He was shocked not by the abrupt lack of air, but by the return of an old, familiar solace while he drifted down, down, down. He’d expected to die by fire, not by a flood into his lungs. Didn’t some god promise to never destroy the whole world by water again?

Stiles was alone up there. The creature was still out there, waiting for the opportunity to kill him.
The waters were still so blue, so calm.

Derek’s eyes slid shut.

The last bubbles of air burst from his lips.

But he wasn’t alone in the waters. He wasn’t alone anymore.

Long-fingered hands grabbed his saturated henley, his floating arms. He opened his eyes to slits, and he stared at the vibrant red of Stiles’s Adidas jacket, at the arch of Stiles’s long neck. His lungs instinctively inhaled a tremendous amount of air upon his resurfacing. He coughed, then sucked in more air, then coughed again. Still paralyzed, still at Stiles’s sheer mercy.

He wasn’t afraid.

“Did you—did you reach Scott?” he gasped, blinking water out of his eyes.

Stiles said nothing. Stiles stared at him with heavy-lidded eyes, with lips quirked down.

Then, to his overwhelming surprise, Stiles leaned forward—and pressed their foreheads together. He was numb from the neck down, but he acutely felt every inch of Stiles’s warm, wet skin on his. He felt Stiles’s nose rub against his. If he angled his head just a little to the left, their lips would be touching.

For the first time since they met in the Preserve, Stiles was bestowing upon him a gesture of affection.

That stunned thing in his chest had no words to say. It was too busy howling with elation.

He couldn’t process what that meant, not yet. But he was aware that this was a pivotal moment in his existence. As pivotal a moment when his claws and fangs first popped out, when he was accepted into the school’s swimming team, when he gazed into a mirror and saw a man, not a boy anymore. When he told Laura they were coming back here to Beacon Hills, coming back home, and finding his future here.

Stiles didn’t hate him.

Stiles actually cared about him.

And it seemed so did Scott, who barreled into the scene in the nick of time, and hauled both of them out of the water and onto the poolside, Derek first, then Stiles. Stiles had succumbed to the iciness, to his floundering physical strength seconds after Scott grabbed Derek from him. Stiles had sunk back into the water, under its undulating surface—and Derek should have been embarrassed as hell about bellowing at Scott to get Stiles, save Stiles, I’m okay, save Stiles, save him, go, GO!

But he wasn’t.

Stiles was alive. Stiles was sprawled on the tiles next to him, panting for breath. They were weighted to the floor by their waterlogged clothes.

Scott frightened off the creature with a display of razor-sharp fangs and a reverberating roar.

“My punctual hero,” Stiles muttered.

Derek snorted, his limbs prickling with sensation again. In the nick of time, indeed.
A few nights later, the three of them along with Allison and Lydia learned via a bestiary book Allison had stolen from her father that the creature was called a kanima—and that the kanima was Jackson. None of them saw that madness coming, least of all Derek. He certainly hadn’t expected Jackson to become such a creature because of his bite.

But that made so much sense in retrospect. What was one more epic screw-up on his rep?

For all he knew, Isaac was going to call him up soon and say to him, *I’m going to France with Chris Argent, see ya.*

For now, he had to witness the freaking *power of love* from Lydia healing Jackson and turning him into the pulchritudinous werewolf he should have been from the beginning. There was some kind of head-pummeling parable to be made about amorous hugs and kisses transforming a beast into a beauty by a lake under the moon, he was sure, but he couldn’t be bothered to parse it.

If only everything else in this godforsaken, unjust, wicked universe was so simple. If only everyone else could be so easily rescued by love.

Where was love to save his family when they’d needed a miracle?

He stood with his fists at his sides. He felt the fiery breath of death on his nape once more. Smelled the sharp stink of liquid fuel, and heard it sloshing around in its blood-red tank.

Where the fuck was love to save him, free him?

He swiveled away from the embracing, lip-locked lovers, and trudged back to the Camaro. He felt Stiles’s eyes on him, but he didn’t look back.

*Sometimes the shape you take reflects the person you are.*

Laura had said that to him so many years ago, while they were chatting in his bedroom about shifting into full wolf form. Mom had been able to do it. Laura, too, after she inherited Mom’s Alpha spark. Now he possessed it—but he had yet to shift into full wolf form. He didn’t dare to do it.

He didn’t want to know what shape he would actually take.

An abomination, probably, like Stiles had said to his face.

Maybe the only difference between the kanima and him was that his venomous barbs and slick scales didn’t show on the outside. Maybe his pretty boy face and brawny body concealed the monster in him so well now that nobody could see it, except big-mouthed, shaved-headed, smart guys who still retained his phone number.

Stiles sent multiple messages to his ancient phone. He didn’t read them. He didn’t want to know what Stiles must think of him, that such a horrifying creature had been born from *his* bite, never mind that Jackson’s personality supposedly had so much more to do with the warped transformation.

Maybe he’d infected Jackson through his bite, somehow. Maybe he’d also infected Erica, Boyd, and Isaac with his monstrosity.

He didn’t know. He didn’t know so much. There were so many things about being an Alpha werewolf he didn’t know, that he wished Laura or Mom had taught him while they could.

He lurked in the haunted ruins of his family house. In the basement with its sealed underground tunnels. On the second floor in what was once Laura’s bedroom but was now a deformed shell of
ashes. On the third floor in what was once his bedroom, under the broken bookshelves he’d nailed to the wall above his bed so, so many years ago.

At some point, he heard the rumble of Stiles’s jeep while he sat with his knees to his chest under those broken bookshelves. He heard Stiles call his name. He listened to Stiles’s slow and stable heartbeat. He smelled the beef burgers, fries, and soda placed on the front porch. He heard Stiles let out a low sigh. He listened to Stiles’s heartbeat retreat, to the teenage boy’s hesitant footsteps down the stairs of the front porch, to that bright blue jeep departing.

His phone was dead. His watch wasn’t, and it told him the time and date. He hadn’t eaten anything for five days. He’d drunk bottled water he kept by the wall near the mattress, or fresh water from the well behind the house, but that was it.

He devoured Stiles’s delectable offerings in minutes. He wished his phone wasn’t dead. He had to go to that coffee shop in town again to charge it. Or maybe to Stiles’s house. While Stiles and his dad were out.

What kind of a person would leave food for an abomination?

The answer took its sweet time to reveal itself to Derek. It did so while he was curled up on the mattress that night, staring sightlessly at the wall.

What kind of a person would care about an abomination?

A person who didn’t think he was one.

He lurked only on the first floor after that. Two days after Stiles’s visit, he was sitting on the side of the mattress after washing himself with water from the well, freshly clothed, tying the laces of his boots. He heard the distant growl of an unfamiliar vehicle. It was approaching the house fast. A large SUV: the preferred vehicle of many hunters across this great, big country.

He was on the front porch in an instant, his hands opened at his sides, his claws ready to pop and rip flesh. The black SUV rolling up to the front porch this late afternoon didn’t belong to any random hunter. No, it had to belong to one of them. He honed his wide-eyed glare on its blond driver that got out, shut the driver’s door, then calmly walked to the front of the SUV, empty hands raised in a gesture of goodwill.

He let out a resounding snarl. He stretched his itching fingers. He let his canines drop in a blatant gesture of hostility.

Chris Argent, in a dark gray t-shirt, jeans, and boots, stared him in the eye and said, “She’s dead.”

He stared back at the older, stony-faced man. His glare waned into a wide-eyed expression of puzzlement. His fingers curled in. His fangs withdrew.

“What are you talking about?”

Chris didn’t reply. He kept staring, kept his hands raised.

Derek narrowed his eyes in a suspicious frown. He stared, and stared at the hunter—and then, he understood. His eyes popped wide open again. A gasp puffed out of his mouth on its own volition. His fisted hands trembled at his sides, but his claws didn’t pop. They hid in his flesh.

He didn’t know what Chris was seeing on his face. Chris’s face softened with something he never thought he would see on a veteran hunter’s face: compassion toward preferred prey. The hunter
cautiously lowered his hands to his sides.

“A year ago, she was bitten by a were-jaguar in Mexico. That was where she’d been since she—
since she murdered your family.” Chris pressed his lips into a thin, wan line. “I swear to you that I
had no part in that, or my wife. She only told our father about her plans, and only after she’d already
done it. He was the one who’d told me afterward. If I’d known earlier? I would have done
everything I could to stop her.”

Derek said nothing. He stared at her brother. Listened to that slow, steady heartbeat in the older
man’s chest, and he breathed. He breathed.

“When certain—” Chris’s lips twisted. “When certain relatives in France heard what happened to
her, they went to Mexico and hunted her down. They caught her in Oaxaca City. Shot her twenty-six
times, tied her to a metal grill, and electrocuted her for days. Chopped her head off. Burned her
corpse to ashes.” The hunter’s voice didn’t waver. “They sent me the video. They made very sure
she was dead, and that she will never resurrect.”

Derek said nothing. He stood statue-still, and he breathed. He felt nothing.

“I thought you’d want to know.”

Chris hadn’t been in the house when his monster of a father tortured Erica, Boyd, and Stiles. Derek
would have heard his heartbeat otherwise. But it didn’t mean Chris, or his wife, hadn’t been
complicit in that crime despite being somewhere else at the time. It didn’t mean a thing that Chris’s
daughter was dating a teenage werewolf, and that he had yet to shoot Scott dead.

Maybe the hunter and his wife were just biding their time until they could get away with it. Their
family had already committed far worse atrocities to werewolves. What was one more dead teenage
werewolf to them?

Derek watched the hunter climb into the SUV and drive away. He stood there on the front porch for
a very long time after that, staring forward at nothing, feeling nothing.

He drove into town to fill up the Camaro’s gas tank, and buy a cup of coffee just to charge his
phone. He still felt nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Then he opened up Stiles’s messages, sent over a period of days, with hours between them.

U don’t trust me, fine
But i trust you

U think I woulda kept you afloat

if i didn’t

Derek stared down at the screen, at that last message. Was that the end of a sentence? Or a truncated
sentence? If it was the latter, what had Stiles intended to say? That Stiles had kept him afloat because
he wanted to stay alive? Stiles had kept him afloat because he wanted him to stay alive?

Stay alive for what?

That question prowled the hazy hallways of his mind all the way back to the Preserve. That quiet
thing in his chest throbbed in a mystifying way that had nothing to do with the news about her.
That evening, Scott showed up, leaping onto the front porch in his werewolf form. Derek stood in the empty doorway that once featured splendid, wooden double doors Dad had produced as a gift for Mom. He didn’t ask if Scott had run all the way here from his house. He didn’t ask where Stiles was, or what Stiles was doing now.

They saw each other clearly in the moonlit night with their supernatural vision. They faced each other with their arms at their sides, their hands relaxed. Scott shifted back into his human form with a shake of his head. The teenage boy had mastered the shift so swiftly. The teenage boy had such old eyes now.

“He threatened to kill Mom. And Stiles.” Scott’s throat bobbed in a hard swallow. “And I couldn’t tell Allison. I had to pretend to everyone that everything was okay.” He gritted his teeth. “Pretend to sit at the table with her and her dear old grandpa, and tell him what a nice guy he was.”

Derek said nothing.

“He confronted me at my house, while Mom was at work. He knew about me being a werewolf. Probably from Allison’s dad. He said that if I didn’t do what he wanted, he would kill Mom and Stiles. And then he’d sic hunters on me. To torture and kill me.” Scott’s lips contorted in a pained expression. “And he’d make sure Allison watched the whole thing, so she could see what a monster I really am.”

They stared at each other with eyes far too weary for their faces. Derek would have laughed at the extreme irony of Gerard Argent’s deranged thinking, but the old monstrous fucker was still out there. Still alive, after hurting Stiles like he had.

“You’re not a monster, Scott.”

Scott didn’t blink. He looked Derek in the eye, and said, “Neither are you.”

Scott’s heartbeat was slow, steady. Scott meant what he said.

“I swear to god, I had no idea that he’d intended to kidnap and torture Erica and Boyd.” Scott squeezed his eyes shut for several seconds. “And Stiles.” He opened his eyes again. “He said all he wanted was an Alpha werewolf to bite him. And the only one I knew was—you.” When Derek didn’t respond, his shoulders slumped, and he said, “That’s why I called you to meet me there that night. He wasn’t watching me, because he was—” Scott grimaced. “Too busy in the soundproofed basement. I thought—I thought we would have the chance to talk first, come up with a plan. Before we faced Gerard together.”

He remembered that call. He remembered the wavering of Scott’s voice.

He remembered hearing a muffled whimper, and smashing his way into the house, down to the basement.

He remembered the iron scent of Stiles’s blood. The salt of Stiles’s tears. The hammering of Stiles’s frantic heart, and Stiles’s shuddering breaths of pain.

“He said he’d leave town after he got the bite,” Scott whispered, sounding like a little, lost boy found minutes too late. “He promised.”

Scott’s heartbeat was still slow and steady.

Scott really was just a boy, compared to Derek. A boy who’d yet to have a girl break his heart, who’d yet to finish high school, who’d yet to bury someone he loved. Barely a year older than he’d
been when she seduced him—abused him.

“It’s fine.”

Scott’s eyes widened with gladness, with relief. Scott could also hear his slow, steady heartbeat.

“Is it?” Scott’s tone was considerate. The twist of his lips was now in self-deprecation. “I should have been more determined to explain things to you after Gerard left, after that meeting at Stiles’s house. I should have cared more about the kanima when Stiles told me about it. I should have picked up Stiles’s call. I should have been at the pool way sooner.” He lowered his eyes. “I was at the cinema with Allison, but that’s no excuse. I’m sorry.”

“Scott, it’s fine.”

He meant those words. He was speaking to his wolf brother who had not betrayed him, after all.

Scott nodded. He was silent long enough that Derek thought their conversation was over.

“Derek.” Scott sucked in a breath. “Allison talked to me about—her.”

Derek stared at Scott, and stood statue-still, silent. Scott’s eyes were glistening, but his voice was firm.

“She found out what her aunt had done, from her dad.” Scott stood straighter. A muscle palpitated in his lower jaw. “I’m glad she’s dead, and that she’ll never hurt anyone ever again.”

Derek said nothing to that. Scott meant those words as well.

“Are you okay, man?”

Scott’s expression was now a compassionate one. So much like the one her brother wore earlier in the afternoon. But Derek knew without doubt that Scott’s sympathy was sincere, every ounce of it.

Derek nodded. Scott gave him a small, consoling smile. It was also a knowing smile, with Scott being able to see the old, tattered mattress, the utter lack of electricity and other amenities. Okay was such a loaded, vague word that could mean anything.

The smile became an amused smirk.

“By the way, Stiles says hi. He’s mad at you for ignoring him. I recommend getting him a bucket of curly fries first if you wanna kiss and make up.”

Derek’s lips twitched for a moment before straightening again. Scott’s expression softened once more.

“I gotta go home before Mom gets back from her shift. Don’t be a stranger, dude.”

He watched Scott shift into his werewolf form and sprint away into the Preserve, and he felt—he felt like shifting too. He felt like sprinting into the woods too, and running with the blessing of the moon, running and running until he found home again.

He vaulted over the stairs of the front porch. He shifted as he loped into the forest, and he willingly lost himself in the primal adrenaline rush, willingly let that howling thing in his chest guide his path.

Home.
Where was home?

Where was home, if it’d been razed to ashes and soot, washed away by rain and tears long ago?

When Derek shifted back into his human form, he was sitting among the branches of the tree outside Stiles’s bedroom. The lamp on Stiles’s desk was switched on. The laptop next to it was not. He could hear Stiles’s heartbeat nearby. Stiles was inside the room.

He hugged his folded legs closer to his body with both arms. He stared down at his knees.

He saw a flash of vibrant red at the window: Stiles was wearing that red hoodie, the one the teenager sardonically called his Red Riding Hoodie. He listened to the creaking of the window being swung wide open. From the corner of his eye, he watched Stiles go down on his knees and rest those long arms on the window sill.

If he turned his head, he would be looking Stiles in the eye. He sensed Stiles’s unblinking gaze on his face.

He didn’t turn his head.

The impassable space between them tonight—physically just two arms’ length—was one he could only hope to cross by opening his mouth to say words he’d never said to anyone before.

“Allison had an aunt called Kate. Her father’s sister.” He breathed, and the air did not snag in his throat. “Seven years ago, when I was a year younger than you, she seduced me. She pretended to love me to get information about my family home in the Preserve. And I told her everything. I told her I loved her, and that I couldn’t wait to spend the rest of my life with her.” His voice didn’t waver at all. “She was twenty-four.”

He heard Stiles’s sharp intake of breath. He listened to Stiles’s heartbeat shoot up.

“And while I slept in her bed, she trapped my family with mountain ash and burned them to death. I rushed home in time to listen to them die.”

He heard Stiles swallowing hard. He heard Stiles’s fingers tighten around the window sill.

Stiles said nothing.

But he didn’t expect the teenage boy to speak.

He had good reasons for not talking to anyone about her—about Kate Argent. Laura, his beloved older sister, had to wrest the words out of him in a shallow lake of his blood while they cried and roared their unabating anguish. There were still nights when he had unsettling dreams of glancing into a bathroom mirror and seeing a black, bleeding cavern where his face should be. Since his whole family—the most important people in the world to him—was dead, who else had the capability to siphon such words from him?

Stiles was still gazing at him.

Stiles still said nothing.

Derek was grateful to Scott for not telling Stiles about Kate, for giving him the chance to do it himself. The words were necessary. The words were weighty, but they didn’t reduce him to ashes like he thought they would. The words felt right coming from him to Stiles.
“I trust you, Stiles. It’s me I don’t actually trust,” he rasped. “I don’t think anyone should trust me. Ever.”

He stared down at his jeans-covered knees.

He heard the melancholic hoot of an owl miles away. He heard the soft breaths of Stiles’s sleeping neighbors, the ticktocking of a clock in Stiles’s bedroom.

He smelled the salt of soundless tears.

He didn’t turn his head to look at Stiles. Using his claws, he climbed down the tree to the ground, and plodded toward the dark woods. He didn’t look back. He heard Stiles draw in a shaky, wet breath, but he didn’t look back. He felt Stiles’s gaze on him all the way to the tree line, until the shadows engulfed him.

That thing in his chest was speechless.

For once, Derek had said words far more powerful than it did.

§§§§§§

The verdant leaves above Derek shaded him from most of the night drizzle. Cold droplets struck him on his head, his cheeks. They submerged into his hair and stubble. His henley’s sleeves were tugged down to his wrists. His knees were pulled up to his chest.

Seventeen days ago, he’d been so sure that he would never sit up here among the branches of the tree outside Stiles’s bedroom again. He’d been so sure that Deucalion, Kali and their foul Alpha pack would kill him, mashing him underfoot like a helpless wolf cub under a boulder. He’d been one Alpha werewolf against half a dozen Alpha werewolves who were the kind of fucking insane that would have unnerved even Peter.

They had come to Beacon Hills months ago. They saw what they’d assumed to be a defenseless, packless town, and they almost conquered it.

Almost.

Without Scott, Jackson, and Isaac as his werewolf brothers-in-arms, Derek would have been slaughtered during the first battle with the Alpha pack. Without Deaton, all of them would have been slaughtered during the second battle; the former Hale emissary’s magic and supply of mountain ash had thwarted that colossal, savage brute of a werewolf called Ennis from finishing the job of clawing out Derek’s heart. It’d taken a week for him to heal from that severe injury.

Without Stiles, Kali would have surely killed him after shoving Boyd onto his claws as punishment for declining the Alpha pack’s offer to join them. The Alpha pack had killed Erica not long after she and Boyd left town, and taken Boyd hostage as future leverage against him.

*It’s okay, Derek.*

*No, no. No, it’s not. It’s not.*

*It’s all okay.*
I’m—I’m sorry.

The full moon, that feeling—it was worth it. The lunar eclipse—I always wondered what—that felt like for one of us.

Boyd had died in his arms, his brown eyes open, becoming rancid gray as he stared into them through searing tears. Kali had made the gutless attempt to attack him then, but Stiles had thrown a circle of mountain ash around them. She’d fled from the scene with an unashamed grin and a snarl, her clawed toes clicking on the damp cement floor, her cackles echoing in the warehouse.

More droplets struck Derek on his cheeks.

He’d been sitting up here in this tree for a long time. He laid his numb hands on his boots, palms down.

They still stank of Boyd’s blood, and Erica’s by proxy.

His shoulder still tingled from Stiles’s tentative hand that had grasped it. That hand that had later glowed so bright and golden, like Stiles’s eyes had.

Without Stiles and his awakened magic, the Alpha pack would still be alive, gloating over Derek’s mangled corpse in their third and final battle in a clearing in the Preserve. The blind Deucalion had been a fearsome opponent, having murdered his own pack and numerous other Alpha werewolves before arriving in Beacon Hills. Derek had inflicted two strikes, and then Deucalion had sunk long claws into his belly and eviscerated him.

He’d curled up on the ground, holding his guts in with both hands, waiting for Deucalion to rip open his throat next. He’d been in too much shock to feel pain. He had been facing Stiles who stood beside an ashen-faced Scott on the periphery of the fighting ring. Allison and Isaac stood with Scott. Jackson and Lydia stood with Stiles. Deaton stood seven feet away from the teenagers, a lone observer and chronicler of what seemed to be Derek’s inexorable demise.

Stiles was trembling from head to toes, his fisted hands shaking at his sides. Those wide, whisky-brown eyes glistened red as they stared at Derek. Those dark pink, plump lips quivered with words unsaid.

And Derek, feeling wet iron trickle from his mouth and down his cheek, quirked up his lips at Stiles. The gods he’d never believed in had pitied him and given him this last gift in life—a solacing vision of someone who still cared about him that much, even after knowing what he was under his frail mask, what he’d done.

Deucalion had raised a bloody, clawed hand with a maniacal grin.

Stiles’s mouth fell open in an almighty roar. His round eyes glowed like the sun, and so did his hands, and a shockwave of light and sound just as almighty swept everyone else off their feet. Derek felt the shockwave flow over him like the waves of a stormy ocean. It didn’t hurt him at all.

With a scream, Deucalion exploded into a pillar of flames. The blind werewolf lurched away from Derek and flailed his arms, screaming and screaming. Then he collapsed into a fiery heap of melting, silent flesh.

Stiles raised his glowing, golden hands and aimed them at the other Alpha werewolves. They were on the opposite side of the fighting ring. They tried to scamper away into the forest, but they were too slow, too weak to withstand Stiles’s magical assault. They exploded into pillars of fire like Deucalion had, screaming like their dead leader had. Their burning corpses lit up the forest
Derek still felt no pain. He stared at Stiles who gaped down at his glowing, shaking hands with eyes returned to their whisky-brown shade. Blood began to run in rivulets from Stiles’s nostrils. Blood drained away from Stiles’s face, and his eyes rolled up into his skull. The golden glow of his hands dimmed and disappeared.

Stiles had toppled over in a dead faint onto the grassy ground. Scott yelled Stiles’s name as he dashed over to his best friend’s side. Allison and Lydia followed suit, while Jackson and Isaac scrambled over to Derek. They rolled him onto his back. They pressed their hands on his chest, and their forearms bulged with black veins. Jackson’s blue eyes were glistening in the light of the burning corpses. Deaton helped Derek to keep his exposed intestines inside his torso, murmuring in a language Derek didn’t recognize, his brown, heavy-lidded eyes gleaming with bright, bronze flecks.

He’d let his own eyes flutter shut.

He’d believed he was dead—until he opened his eyes again, and found himself staring at Stiles who sat in an armchair next to the clean, new bed upon which he was lying. Stiles was wearing a flannel shirt over a black t-shirt, and jeans. Stiles’s spindly arms were crossed over his chest, and his forehead was furrowed, and his lips were a thin, downturned line.

Stiles looked like he was a few microseconds away from smacking Derek hard across the head with a baseball bat. It was a marvelous sight to behold: it meant Stiles was alive. Stiles was all right.

“Welcome to your new apartment, Sour-wolf,” Stiles said. “Jackson’s paid the rent for a year, so if you don’t move your ass in here asap, he’s gonna be ultra pissed off at you.”

He’d drawn in a deep breath. Ran his tongue over a dry lower lip. Laid a hand on the thick bandages around his abdomen. He glanced around at the bedroom’s white walls, at the simple bedside table to his right.

“I dunno,” he croaked, deadpan. “It’s kinda missing that burned chic vibe.”

A tremor had passed across Stiles’s lips. The gleam in Stiles’s eyes became a twinkle.

“I’m serious, Derek. No more lurking in the Preserve. This place is in a good area. It’s got the basic amenities, like a freaking bathroom and a kitchen. And a good bed.”

If anyone else had told him to leave the ruins of his family house, he would have ripped their face off with his claws. Once upon a time, it’d been his home, his refuge from the rest of the world. Who had the right to tell him to abandon it?

But Stiles wasn’t just anyone else.

Stiles gave him food when he forgot to feed himself. Stiles sent him goading messages when he needed to be towed back down to the earth from his haunting memories, his relentless nightmares. Stiles was the closest thing he had to a best friend. Stiles had saved his life multiple times. Stiles knew what he’d done, what his numerous mistakes had cost him—and still gave a damn about him, about his future.

And Stiles, it seemed, had somehow convinced Jackson to pay a year’s worth of rent for an apartment with a good bed in a good area. For him.

There was no one else like Stiles. No one else who was Stiles.
“Also, it’s a place where the pack can meet. So you gotta get a big TV. And some nice couches.”

Derek had stared at Stiles, and basked in the fact that he still had a pack.

“Then they’re gonna be black,” he rasped. “And leather.”

“Fine. Black leather is sexy hot.”

Derek had let out a snort that made Stiles crack up. He’d smiled, and Stiles had also smiled, and then Stiles told him that he was going to be okay, that they were both okay. Stiles told him that Deaton was going to be his mentor on all things magic. That he had way more than a meager spark. That he had the potential to do some damn awesome things if he learned as much as he could from Deaton and from spell books, and regularly practiced using his magic.

Derek had said, “Thank you. For saving me.”

Stiles had replied, tongue-in-cheek, “Aw, shucks. It’s not like we’re friends or anything.”

And Derek, without an iota of sarcasm, had looked Stiles in the eye and said, “Yeah, you are, you’re my friend, Stiles.”

What he hadn’t said to Stiles was this: he didn’t care whether the couches were black, or leather, or even rainbow-colored or not. He cared that someone was going to use them, that this place that might be his new abode was going to be filled with chitchat and laughter.

What he hadn’t also said to Stiles was this: that gargantuan tombstone of a house in the Preserve was just a pitstop now. It was a place from which he could sprint through the woods under the moonlight, from which he could journey in an unerring path to Stiles’s house.

To sit right here among the branches of this tree, watching over Stiles.

The night drizzle continued with the same intensity. It left dark, wet spots on his henley. It dampened his hair. It left more droplets on his forehead, his cheeks.

Stiles’s bedroom was dark. Stiles was asleep on his bed in a t-shirt and sweatpants, lying on his side, facing the window. His phone was on the bed next to his pillow. His skinny-fingered hand was inches away from the phone.

Stiles had rearranged the things in his bedroom since Derek’s previous visit: the bed was now in the middle of the room, its head against the wall. The chest of drawers that stored Stiles’s clothes faced the bed. The desk, with its lamp and Stiles’s laptop, was now under the window. If Stiles sat at the desk, he could scan the environment beyond the window with a lift of his head. He could see someone approaching the house from far away.

If Stiles sat at the desk, it was the perfect spot to have a conversation with someone who was sitting up in the tree outside his bedroom.

And if someone was sitting up in the tree outside his bedroom, that person had an unobstructed view of Stiles in bed.

Derek blinked a droplet of water out of his eye. He stared another minute at Stiles, at Stiles’s phone, then pulled out his own phone from the side pocket of his jeans. It wasn’t the ancient one he’d bought in NYC. This one was a smart phone, one Stiles had helped him to pick in town months ago, before the Alpha pack came. Stiles had also helped him to transfer all his messages and pictures from his old phone. He managed to retain his phone number.
Stiles had sent him a few messages in the days after he’d awakened in that apartment—his apartment. Instead of SMSs, the messages were in a private chat via some messaging app that all the kids were using these days. Stiles had snapped a photo of himself as his avatar image, and Derek stared at the full photo for a while, at Stiles’s crinkled eyes and soft smile. Stiles was growing out his hair. It made him look like an electrocuted porcupine with shaved sides.

Stiles had a sweet smile, when it wasn’t a sarcastic smirk he hid behind to protect himself from the world.

Stiles could babble on and on about anything his hyperactive mind obsessed with—but he was just as efficient with a few words when the situation called for it.

*i trust you*

*I trust you with my life, Derek*

*You’re my friend too*

Droplets struck the glass screen of his phone. He wiped them away from Stiles’s avatar image. He listened to Stiles’s slow and stable heartbeat, to Stiles’s deep, long breaths. He’d memorized Stiles’s heartbeat mere days after meeting the guy in the Preserve. Yeah, that sounded like creepy, stalkerish behavior, but it wasn’t to Derek.

It was common for werewolves to memorize the heartbeats of those important to them. Mom and Dad had been able to identify the heartbeats of all six of their children. Derek could do the same with his parents and his siblings.

He’d been able to do the same with Kate’s heartbeat, too.

Sometimes, in his most vicious nightmares, her rapid heartbeat had been the soundtrack overlaying the agonized screams of his family and the crackling of the flames killing them.

That red, twelve-gallon fuel tank was still there in the basement. Waiting for him with the everlasting patience of death itself. He could go there now. Go down to the basement among the ashes of his family. Uncap that fuel tank, and lift it off the floor, over his head.

With a single lit match, he would go up in flames like they had.

And he would finally finish the job.

The night drizzle persisted. He leaned against the tree trunk, and his knees remained pulled up to his chest. He tucked his phone back into the side pocket of his jeans. He laid his hands on his boots, palms down.

He didn’t sense death behind him, or its fiery breath upon his nape.

He stared at Stiles slumbering so safely, so serenely, and he knew the answer to that question that had prowled the hazy hallways of his mind months and months ago: stay alive for what?

*I couldn’t stop death from taking all my loved ones before.*

*But maybe, I can stop death from taking this one.*

That shrewd, tenacious thing in his chest approved. It pulsated with kinship. It said that one indubitable word to him, as a benevolent nudge to his doubt, as support.
Derek pressed a hand to his chest. In the cozy shadows, he allowed his lips to curl up in a small smile, a hopeful smile. He stared on at Stiles. At Stiles’s silly, striking face. At Stiles’s long lashes that fanned across pale cheeks. At Stiles’s lips that twitched while he dreamed about something good, something happy.

Derek’s wolf had recognized his mate long before he did.

Yes, that shrewd, tenacious and equally hopeful thing in his chest said again, while it also gazed at Stiles.

Yes.

You’re the one.

Chapter End Notes

(Oh yes, there will be even more Derek angst and loads of Sterek feels in Part II!)

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