Summary

There’s something weird about Beacon Hills that Stiles can’t quite put his finger on. The way everyone in town knows his name the day he arrives. The way they insist the melancholic howling that echoes through the forest every night is just a dog. The way his dad denies getting a dog, even though Stiles comes home to find one sprawled across his bed, some big black thing whose eyes gleam red in the right light. The way that massive oak tree out in the woods vibrates under his touch, pulsing with sickly life.

There’s something weird going on in this town, and Stiles is determined to get to the bottom of it.

Notes

A year ago today. Jade and I had this conversation on twitter, and a fic idea we liked to call "town pack fic" was born. I can't thank Jade enough for always being willing to bounce ideas back and forth; she helped me through a lot of sticky parts of this fic, and helped fill in a lot of holes.

Thanks as well to Jo and Ro for being my eleventh-hour editors and reading through it when I was losing my mind. Much love. <3

**WARNINGS:** When I say slow build, I mean *slow*, as in, you are going to hate me it’s so slow. Also, there’s some underage drinking.
See the end of the work for more notes.
"You going to be all right on the long drive, kiddo?"

"Fine, Dad," Stiles said with a roll of his eyes, tossing the last of his clothing into his bag. "It's nine hours, not a week."

"I'm just saying," his dad replied, sounding a little hurt. "You've never done this drive before and the roads can get a little tricky at night."

"I'll be fine, Dad," Stiles repeated. "I've got the Jeep. If I have to, I'll go off-road and make my own path."

"Don't you dare," his father snapped. "If you wreck that car — "

"I'm joking!" Stiles laughed. "Calm down, Dad. I've been working too hard keeping your heart healthy for you to fall victim to a heart attack."

"Uh huh," his dad grunted, unimpressed. "Well, you drive safe and call me when you're close."

"I will," Stiles promised. "I'll see you tonight."

"Love you, son."

"Love you too, Dad."

Stiles tossed his phone onto his mattress and heaved an irritable sigh. He was really not looking forward to the nine hours in the car — he gets fidgety when he has to sit for too long. It was the end of the school year, though; he needed to be out of the dorms by noon and it was already ten-thirty. At least he had everything packed, which was more than he could say for his roommate. Jay still had clothes piled everywhere and he wasn’t even awake yet. Stiles shook his head and started carrying loads out to the Jeep. It all fit — barely — and he frowned at the pile of belongings stuffed in the back, wondering just how much junk he’d managed to collect over the school year. He didn’t remember the car being this full on the way down.

Everything loaded, he trudged back inside and punched at Jay’s arm until his roommate rolled over with a groan. Stiles grinned down at him and said, "See you, dude. I'm heading out."

"To the boonies?" Jay said blearily, rubbing at his eyes. "Hah, have fun wasting away out there all summer."

"Fresh air's better than LA smog," Stiles retorted. He offered his fist to Jay, who bumped his fingers against Stiles'. "I'll see you next fall, dude."

"Don't die of boredom," Jay called after him.

Stiles flipped him off cheerfully and headed back down to the Jeep. It was a nice day, at least; he kept all the windows open as he drove, enjoying the breeze as he headed north.

His dad, newly appointed sheriff of Beacon County, moved to the county seat of Beacon Hills just after Halloween from their old place near Santa Rosa. Stiles hadn’t seen the new house in person yet; his dad came down to LA for Thanksgiving and Christmas, grumbling about the flight and how the new house was still in shambles. He seemed more upset about the move than Stiles had been, which
made sense; the house they'd moved out of was the one his dad had married his mom in, and the one she'd died in. For Stiles, it was something of a relief, but he could tell it had hurt his dad, leaving the place behind. He was kind of looking forward to exploring a new town, settling into a new place.

His route wound up the coast, the sun pacing him to his left, settling lower and lower in the sky. He stopped at a roadside diner around six and had quick burger and fries before the roads led him away from the sea and into the forest, where the trees grew dense and tall. He hit Beacon Hills just as the red light faded from the sky, the sun long dipped past the horizon, and he slowed as he hit city limits. Beacon Hills was a small town. He remembered looking it up on Wikipedia before his dad moved up there and if he recalled right, the population was only around five thousand people — pretty tiny, considering it was the county seat. All the surrounding towns were even smaller.

There was a small main street about two blocks long, fairly empty at this time of night, which made sense — it was a little past nine on a Friday, not exactly the time of night to be out. He saw a pizza parlor and a laundromat, a hardware store, and a couple of small restaurants. The sheriff's station sat at the end of all the businesses, a separate, low building with no cars in the parking lot, no lights on in the windows.

The GPS guided him away from the neat rows of houses that surrounded the main street, down a couple of roads where the space between the houses grew greater and greater, wide lawns separated by hedgerows, then small patches of forest, then thick swathes of trees. Their new house was in the woods proper and Stiles liked the look of it; it was painted some pale color he couldn’t make out in the evening gloom, but there was a front porch and the light on it was warm and welcoming. His dad's car was parked out front, right next to a police cruiser that had Beacon County Sheriff painted down the side. Stiles grinned and pulled up on the other side of the cruiser as his dad stepped out onto the porch.

"Hey!" Stiles said cheerfully, clambering out of the car. "Long time no see, Dad!"

His father pulled him into a tight hug when Stiles trotted up onto the porch, slapping a heavy hand between his shoulder blades. "Good to see you. Want the tour first? Or should we unload the Jeep?"

Stiles flapped a dismissive hand toward the Jeep and lifted the small overnight bag he’d grabbed. "That can all wait ‘til tomorrow; I'm good with this for now."

“All right,” his dad said, looking cheerful. “C’mon in.”

It was a small house, but cozy and brightly lit. There was a small living room that led into the dining room, which led into the kitchen and, past that, a small office that looped back around to the front of the house. Upstairs, there were three bedrooms and a small bathroom, and his dad already had Stiles’ bedroom all set up, even had his books on their shelves and a photo of his mom on the dresser.

“Do you like it here?” Stiles asked, his throat a little tight as he turned to look at his dad, who leaned against the doorframe.

His dad thought about it for a moment before nodding. “I do,” he said, and hesitated only a moment before adding, “A change of pace is good sometimes.”

Stiles knew he was thinking about their old house in Santa Rosa, with the sagging front steps his dad had always always been promising he’d fix, and the dent Stiles put in the bathroom door in a fit of teenage angst, and the fine splatters of paint on the floor in the dining room from the time his mom painted the walls. He smiled, trying to disperse the sadness in the air. “Yeah, this house will be great when I’m bringing over grandkids.”
His father laughed, the tension disappearing in an instant. “You just finished your second year of school. I hope that’ll be a while yet — unless you’ve got some secret you’ve been hiding?”

“You caught me, Dad,” Stiles said dramatically, clapping a hand to his stomach. “I’m with child.”

His dad wagged a finger at him before turning to go downstairs, saying over his shoulder, “Stranger things have happened.”

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Stiles sneezed himself awake the next morning. He sat up in bed with his eyes burning and his throat feeling like someone had rubbed it raw with sandpaper. Stiles staggered out of bed with a groan and made his way down to the kitchen, where his dad was doing dishes.

“Did you get a dog? Stiles croaked, and his father dropped a mug. Luckily, it landed in the sink, splashing soapy water onto his dad’s uniform. His dad sighed.

“Yes, Stiles,” he said dryly, and Stiles wondered why people didn’t get where he got his sarcasm from. “You’re allergic to dogs and I definitely went out and got one.”

“I’m dying, then,” Stiles told him piteously. “Dad, save me.”

“Sit down,” his father sighed, shaking water off his hands. “Let me see if I can find any allergy meds.”

Stiles sat at the breakfast nook and listened to his dad rooting around in the bathroom cabinet upstairs. “There must be something in the house I’m allergic to,” he told his father when he came back into the kitchen, a small bottle of pills clutched in his hand.

“Maybe dust in your room,” his dad replied, handing him the bottle and stepping back over to the sink. “Give your sheets a wash and see if that helps.”

Stiles nodded and downed a couple of pills. He waved his dad off to work and spent the morning unloading the Jeep and sending his sheets through the wash. It was an overcast day, but it was warm, and he opened all the windows in the house to let in the air and hopefully air out whatever was still making him sneeze.

When he got sick of unpacking, Stiles wandered around the house for a while, poking through cupboards and acquainting himself with the location of light switches and other essentials. He went out the back door and explored the outside of the house. There was a small back deck a couple of feet above the grass — which was super long; it didn’t look like his dad had been paying too much attention to landscaping — and a small back yard surrounded by trees on all sides. It looked like someone had once had a garden and he surveyed it with glee; he’d been wanting to try his hand at growing vegetables. Maybe he’d mow the lawn after lunch, provided they actually had a lawn mower.

There was a small shed around the side of the house, tucked back in the trees. It was locked, but Stiles had seen a set of keys hanging by the front door. He’d check it after eating. He’d gone back inside and was just pulling the ingredients to make a killer sandwich when he heard a car door slam and a knock on the door a few seconds later.

When Stiles opened it, he found a curly-haired woman in hospital scrubs standing on the front porch, a casserole dish in her hands. She beamed at him, tucking a dark curl behind her ear. “Hi!” she said warmly. “You’re Stiles.”
“I am,” he agreed, grinning faintly. “And you are…?”

“Melissa McCall,” she replied, holding her hand out to shake. “I live just down the road. Your dad said you were coming home today so I thought I’d stop in and say hello.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said. “You want to come in?”

Melissa shook her head, nodding down toward her uniform. “I need to get to work. Let me know if there’s anything you need, all right? Your dad wouldn’t have even hung pictures on the walls if I hadn’t gotten after him.”

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed cheerfully. “He can be useless like that.”

Melissa rolled her eyes, a faint smile hovering around her lips. “Well, if you get bored, we’re number twenty-two just down the hill. My son’s your age and he only works mornings. I’m sure he’d love someone to play video games with. This is for you,” she added abruptly, offering him the casserole dish. “Your father’s a terrible cook.”

Stiles laughed. “Yeah he is. Thanks, Melissa.”

“No problem, Stiles,” she smiled. “I’ll see you around.”

“Bye!” he called after Melissa, watching her climb into her beat-up sedan and back out of the driveway. He looked down at the casserole dish she’d shoved into his arms. It was still warm. Stiles grinned and carried it into the kitchen, stowing it safely in the fridge before texting his dad.

Are you dating our neighbor?

Stiles almost immediately received a flurry of responses from his father and he had to laugh because his dad always typed in all-caps like he was shouting, and he didn’t think he’d ever heard his father shout before, which made it ten times funnier.

NO

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT

WHO

I WOULD HAVE TOLD YOU

Stiles snorted and leisurely put together his sandwich before typing back, The woman down the street — Melissa?

I’M NOT DATING MELISSA I’M NOT DATING ANYONE

YOU IDIOT

10-4, Stiles replied, and set to work eating his sandwich, grinning. He didn’t care what his dad said, he was prepared to tease him mercilessly. It wouldn’t have bothered him if his dad was dating someone; as far as Stiles knew, Dad hadn’t been on a single date since Stiles’ mom died eleven years ago, and he still wore his wedding ring (Stiles had his mom’s; his father had pressed it into his hand after the funeral and Stiles had carefully tucked it inside an envelope between the pages of his first edition Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban). Not that Stiles blamed him for not dating. He didn’t know much about love, but he could see that his parents had been that forever type of couple really only found in fairy tales. Still, his dad deserved to be happy, if he wanted to be and Stiles, as
his only child, got to make fun of him for it.

After lunch, Stiles grabbed the ring of keys hanging by the door and headed out to unlock the shed. It took a couple of tries and the lock was pretty stiff, like it hadn't been opened in a while (which, if he knew his dad and his distaste for lawn work, was probably true). He had to shove his shoulder against the door to get it open because, as it turned out, one of the shelves had collapsed, piling a bunch of rusty paint cans against the door.

He looked at all the dried streaks of paint on the floor and then around the shed and blinked.

“What the hell,” Stiles said out loud. The walls of the shed were covered in weird symbols and there was a deer skull hanging on the far wall. “Uhhh.” He’d seen way too many episodes of *Supernatural* to believe this could end well. Maybe there was a reason why the house had been on the market.

“Cool beans,” Stiles said, deciding to go for casual cheer in case whatever the symbols were had summoned something and it was hanging around behind the bags of potting soil. He’d spotted a lawnmower in the back, anyway, and since he’d already stepped inside and gotten himself cursed or whatever, he might as well get the lawn mowed, so he shifted the fallen paint cans aside and dragged the mower out into the yard.

By the time his dad came home, Stiles was sweaty and covered in a faint sheen of green grass clippings, but he’d managed to get most of the lawn cut before the mower had coughed and run out of gas.

“Shoulda come home sooner,” his dad said, clapping him on the back. “The spare bedroom’s got some cracks in the ceiling if you want to patch them up.”

“I didn’t come home to be your handyman,” Stiles said irritably and his father raised his eyebrows.

“Oh?” he asked lightly. They were sitting in the kitchen, Stiles back on a stool at the breakfast nook. “You going to find yourself a job, then?”

“Maybe,” Stiles said evasively. He’d been hoping to spend the summer vegging out. Hoping to distract his father, he added, “Hey, did you know the shed’s home to some very terrifying Satanic ephemera?”

Dad frowned at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“ Weird writing on the wall, a deer skull,” Stiles replied, gesturing vaguely. “You know. The usual.”

His father didn’t look as worried as Stiles had hoped he’d be. “Uh huh. Well, you can do me a favor and clean it out. This house was full of junk.”

“ Weird junk?” Stiles asked uncertainly. “Whoever lived here before us didn’t die here, did they?” He thought about demons and ghosts and wished they had more than a saltshaker's worth of salt.

“No,” his father replied with a roll of his eyes. “She taught French at the high school and was offered a better-paying position in San Francisco.”

“So no one’s died in here.”

“No,” his dad said again. “Now tell me what you want for dinner and go take a shower.”

“So pushy,” Stiles sniffed, hopping off the stool. “Your girlfriend brought over a casserole; she says you’re a terrible cook.”
His father whirled around, his cheeks going a splotchy red color the same way Stiles’ did when he was embarrassed. “I’m not dating anyone!” he exclaimed irritably.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Stiles cackled, escaping the kitchen before his dad could throw anything at him. “Melissa seems like a very nice woman!”

The casserole was pretty delicious; it was tuna, Stiles’ favorite, and he judiciously told his father that Melissa was allowed to stick around, which earned him a whap on the back of the head as his father headed to the fridge for a beer. He wouldn’t let Stiles have one, either, which Stiles thought was rude. He was only four months away from being twenty-one.

They watched baseball on the couch after eating and Stiles shoved all thoughts of the weird shit out in the shed to the back of his mind in favor of shouting at the television while the Giants absolutely bombed against the Cardinals. He went to bed that night feeling warm and full; he’d missed his dad a lot, and it felt good to spend some time with him. He’d patch the spare bedroom ceiling and clean out the shed, because his dad was good and kind and worked a hell of a lot harder than he needed to.

Stiles didn’t wake up sneezing the next morning, which was a two hundred percent improvement over the previous one. He spent the midday hours outside cleaning the freaky shit out of the shed. There wasn’t that much of it, to be honest, and the shed didn’t so much as quiver when he took the deer skull off the wall and chucked it among the trees. There was more junk than anything; mostly broken pots and empty seed packets. He found a couple of jars of dried herbs — no pot, sadly; the French teacher was boring in the more normal, non-Satanic ways — but he couldn’t identify their scents, so they went in the trash because he wasn’t about to sprinkle mystery herbs on his pasta.

He noticed a lot of people passing by on the road – a lot more than seemed to inhabit the quiet road, anyway. No one said anything to him, though a couple waved when they made eye contact and he wondered if they were all passing by to see him. That seemed…odd. Though then again, it seemed like a quiet town and his dad was a fairly important towns-person. Maybe that made him some kind of small-time celebrity. A B-lister of sorts.

At any rate, he was out by the trash cans, stuffing a bag full of mystery herbs, terracotta pieces, and dead leaves into one of them, when a dark-haired girl around his age slowly cycled past on a bike. Stiles could see her glancing surreptitiously his way, so he sighed and raised a hand in greeting. She smiled and turned her head fully in his direction, waving back. Stiles decided it was time to be outgoing.

“Hey!” he called. “Do you live nearby?”

The girl turned her bike in a lazy half circle, skidding to a halt at the end of the driveway as Stiles walked toward her. “No,” she admitted. “I was just visiting my boyfriend.”

“Oh, cool,” Stiles said lightly. “I’m Stiles.”

“The sheriff’s son,” the girl nodded, her eyes crinkling at the corners when she smiled. “I’m Allison.”

“Allison?” Stiles said cheerfully. “Tell me, Allison, have I become some sort of attraction? People keep walking by the house and staring.”

“Oh, awesome,” Stiles sighed. “I would have put on a nicer shirt if I knew I was going to be ogled by a bunch of soccer moms.”

Allison laughed again, scrunching her nose up sympathetically. “It’ll pass,” she said. “Someone’s opening a new bakery next week and that’ll be the talk of the town for awhile. You’ll have to be brave until then.”

“Story of my life,” Stiles said gallantly.

She tossed him a cheerful smile. “If you’re not doing anything, a bunch of us usually do pizza and board games on Friday. You’re welcome to join us.”

Stiles brightened; he hadn’t been sure how he was going to meet people in this town. “Really? Thanks!”

They swapped numbers and Allison promised she’d text him with more details before looping her bike around and riding off down the road with one last wave. Stiles grinned after her.

That night, Stiles awoke from a dead slumber because something was howling outside. He lay in bed for a couple of minutes, skin crawling at the lonely sound. It sounded like every wolf howl he’d ever heard in a movie, but a thousand times more melancholy. Close, too — it sounded like it was just in the woods outside.

He twisted his head to look out the window, where the moon hung huge and full and silver over the woods. The wolf — or whatever it was, as Stiles didn’t think there were wolves in California — stopped howling after a while, and it was only in the silence that Stiles realized that it had been calling with no response. It was a sad thought; he felt bad for the animal out in the woods, crying to no one. He hoped it found someone soon.

Stiles went into town the next day. He needed to get gas for the lawn mower and paint for the bedroom ceiling, and the house was starting to get boring. Walking down the main street was a little intimidating; people stared at him here, too. It wasn’t like he was that unusual, was he? Stiles nervously ran a hand over his hair, wondering if maybe it was sticking up funny or something, but that didn’t seem to be the case. He went for a cup of coffee at a small diner and the waitress said smugly, before he’d even opened his mouth, “Oh, you’re the sheriff’s son!”

Stiles went to see his dad after that. He wasn’t irritated, exactly, but the way everyone knew him was kind of weirding him out. The woman in uniform at the front desk smiled when she saw him, but obviously she knew who he was because she gestured to a door and said, “Your dad’s office is in there, hon.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said dryly, and headed for the door with the plaque that said Sheriff John Stilinski. “Did you pass out headshots of me or something?” Stiles asked when he opened the door.

His father sat behind a desk, a pile of papers spread out before him. He looked up when Stiles spoke, a smile creasing his face. “What do you mean?”

Stiles plunked himself down in the chair opposite his dad. “I’m talking about the way everyone in town knows who I am. Did you make an announcement?”

“I told a couple of people you were coming home,” Dad replied, bending his head to look at his
papers again. “Word gets around in a small town like this, I suppose.”

“It’s creepy,” Stiles declared, looking around the office. A California state flag hung on the wall behind his dad’s desk, and there were a couple of filing cabinets and bookshelves filled with books about town bylaws and state codes. “Hey, whoa, what kind of skull is that?” He pointed to an off-white animal skull sitting on top of one of the bookcases next to an old framed family photo of Stiles and his parents. “A dog?”

His father glanced over at it. “They tell me it’s a wolf.”

“And why do you have it?”

Dad shrugged. “Passed down from my predecessor. They say it’s lucky. I’m not going to go messing around with that.”

Stiles got out of his seat to investigate, running his fingers over the hard bone. “I heard a wolf last night,” he said thoughtfully.

“No you didn’t.”

Stiles glanced over his shoulder, frowning. “Yeah, I did.”

His father gave him an exasperated look. “You did not. There are no wolves in California.”

“Oh yeah?” Stiles retorted, picking up the wolf skull. “Where’d this one come from, then?”

“It could be a hundred years old,” his dad replied, pulling a sheet of paper toward him before repeating, “There are no wolves in California. You probably heard someone’s dog.”

“Maybe,” Stiles said, giving up. He wandered back over to the chair, throwing himself down into it. “It sounded sad, whatever it was.”

His father looked up at him and for a brief moment there was an expression on his face that Stiles’ didn’t know how to interpret — a little sad himself, and maybe regretful — before it faded into neutrality. “So what are you going to do with the rest of your day?”

“Pick up some spackle and paint for the spare bedroom,” Stiles shrugged. “You got any other maintenance requests?”

“Front steps are a little wobbly,” his dad said, his mouth twisting into a wry grin.

Stiles snorted, getting to his feet. “Fine, I’ll check it out. See you later, Dad.”

His father raised a hand in goodbye and Stiles left the station, heading for the hardware store. Just before reaching it, though, he passed the town library, a small stone building set further back from the road. There was a sign out on the sidewalk proclaiming *Book Sale! 50¢ Paperbacks! $1 Hardcovers!* and Stiles brightened; he was always up for a good book sale. Maybe he could find some books about gardening.

He headed inside, glancing up at the name carved into the stone lintel as he passed: *Joshua Hale Memorial Library.* Inside, the library was cool and quiet, few people in sight — Stiles remembered that it was a Monday and most people were at work. That was fine with him; it gave him the freedom to walk around and stare at things without bothering others. This library was clearly his favorite type of library, the kind that didn’t give a shit about the modern world — they still had an actual card catalogue, and he didn’t see a computer anywhere. There was all sorts of awesome shit hanging on
the walls and tucked on top of towering shelves. There were taxidermied birds in glass cases, old yellowed maps in gilt frames, and minerals with little descriptions typed on a typewriter probably five decades ago. It was half-museum, really.

He was staring up at a black and white photograph of a severe-looking old man with impressive facial hair — a small label below the circular frame told him this was Joshua Hale (1814–1897), founder of Beacon Hills and benefactor of the library — when he became aware of the fact that someone was standing next to him.

Stiles turned his head to find a red-haired girl around his age watching him, her arms folded across her chest. She raised her perfect eyebrows when he turned and he flushed, embarrassed for no reason. “Uh, hi,” Stiles said.

“Hi,” the girl returned politely. “You’ve been in here a while. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t need any help finding anything.”

“Oh, no,” Stiles said. “I came in for the book sale, but I, uh, got distracted.” He made a vague gesture toward the portrait, and the girl’s eyes flicked over to it.

“There’s a lot of interesting stuff in here,” she agreed. “Let me know if you have any questions.”

“Oh, uh — ” Stiles said, as she turned to go, and the girl turned back, raising her eyebrows again. “Where is the book sale?” He’d done a full lap of the library by that point — it wasn’t all that big — and he hadn’t seen any books laid out.

“In the basement,” the girl replied. “I can show you.”

She gestured and he followed her to the back of the library, where an iron staircase spiraled downward. It was even cooler down in the basement, slightly damp and smelling of musty paper. It was just one large room with some filing cabinets up against one wall and maybe ten or so tables covered in books laid out in the middle under a row of fluorescent lights.

“Thanks,” Stiles said gratefully. “I’m Stiles, by the way.”

“I know,” the girl replied, pulling her red hair over one shoulder. “But I figured you’re probably already sick of people knowing who you are. Lydia Martin,” she added, by way of introduction.

“Hey,” Stiles nodded. “Thanks for showing me down here.”

“Not a problem,” Lydia replied. “If you find anything you want to buy, I’ll be upstairs.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said again, watching her head back upstairs before turning his attention to the books. He wandered up and down the rows of tables for a while, picking up books and putting them down. He found one on vegetable gardening and another on basic home repair, since he seemed to have become his dad’s maintenance man, and a couple of trade paperbacks that looked interesting. Stiles was just picking up a book on macramé, lured in by the horrible seventies typeface on the cover, when a light caught his eye and he looked up.

As it turned out, the basement wasn’t one huge room; there was a room behind the stairs he hadn’t noticed before, a dark metal grille covering the doorway. Stiles, forever curious, set his books down and wandered over to it, peering between the bars to see into the room beyond. It wasn’t much of a room, really, more of a closet, with just enough space for shelves to line the walls and room to stand in between. Tucked away at the far end sat a simple wooden chair and a small table. There were a couple hundred books in there at most, all old and leather-bound with peeling spines. Stiles squinted at the gilt titles but he couldn’t focus on them, which was strange because he usually had pretty good
vision. There was a buzzing in the back of his head that made his teeth ache, also strange. He wondered if there was something happening with the electricity that was messing with his body. That was a thing, right? Magnetic waves and all that? It was an old building, there was probably old wiring that was doing crazy things.

Stiles shook his head and retreated back to the book sale tables, the buzzing in his head fading as he went. He grabbed the books he’d set aside and headed upstairs, where he found Lydia sitting at the circulation desk, tapping away on her phone. It looked weirdly out of place in the old building. “Hey,” she said, not looking up. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“I think so,” Stiles replied, digging around in his pocket for some cash while Lydia set her phone aside and counted up his books.

“Three dollars,” she informed him.

Stiles handed her two dollars and a bunch of change, which she made a face at but dutifully counted out. “What’s that room downstairs?” he asked her as she dumped the cash into a tin box.

“Research room,” Lydia replied, pulling out a plastic bag and sliding his books into it. “Rare books. You have to have permission from the town or the head librarian to get in there.”

“Oh,” Stiles said thoughtfully. “You’re not the head librarian?”

Lydia laughed, a surprisingly sweet sound. “This is just a summer job. I have to go back to school in the fall.”

“Oh,” Stiles said again. “Do you happen to know of any place that’s hiring for the summer?”

Lydia pursed her lips, looking thoughtful. “Not off the top of my head,” she said finally. “But we might be. Laura’s not back until tomorrow but you could stop by and ask. She was saying she wanted to overlap shifts. It’s just the two of us right now.”

“That would be awesome,” Stiles said earnestly. “I’ll definitely stop in, thanks.”

“See you around,” Lydia said, a faint smile quirking one side of her mouth. Stiles grinned back, grabbing his bag of books.

Stiles spent the rest of the afternoon spreading putty over the cracks in the bedroom ceiling, then outside in the grass with his book on vegetable gardening, trying to figure out what he was going to grow. According to the book, he was kind of behind on planting, seeing as it was already mid-May, but he figured he could try his hand at it anyway. He’d found a couple dozen small bottles of seeds in the shed when he’d cleaned it out the other day and so he spread them out over the grass, peering at their faded paper labels. Some of them he’d never heard of — weird herbs, he found, when he looked them up on his phone — and some of them didn’t have labels at all, which was intriguing. He split them into three piles: grow, maybe, and no, and headed inside to veg out for the rest of the day.

There was no howling outside his window that night. Stiles slept like a baby.

“Lydia told you we were hiring?” the woman behind the circulation desk repeated, looking doubtful.

“She said maybe,” Stiles said. “It’s okay if you aren’t.”
“Hm,” the woman said, raking her eyes up and down Stiles. “I suppose it would be nice to have someone for back-up. The town will be pissed if I add you to my budget.” That, for whatever reason seemed to delight her. Her eyes lit up as she nodded. “Yep, that’ll piss Finstock off, all right. You’re hired.”

“Er,” Stiles said. Far be it from him to look a gift horse in the mouth, but — “Do you need to see any references or anything?”

She gave him an exasperated look. “Have you ever burned down a building?”

“Uh — no?”

“Have you ever been arrested?”

“No.”

“Have you ever mistreated a book?”

“Um,” Stiles said uncomfortably. “I cut a hiding spot for my pot in a copy of War and Peace when I was in high school, but my dad found it in like two days. I don’t smoke anymore either,” he added hurriedly.

The woman narrowed her eyes at him, considering this tale. Finally, she nodded; he seemed to have past the test. “War and Peace is an abomination,” she declared. “I may have done something similar when I was a teenager. You get a pass on that one.”

“Oh,” Stiles said. “Cool. So, I’m still hired?”

“Yeah,” the woman nodded, getting to her feet. She held a hand out over the desk. “I’m Laura. I’ll grab you the paperwork and we can get you started.”

Stiles spent the rest of the morning getting acquainted with the library. It wasn’t complicated, and there were few patrons on a Tuesday morning. Laura told him about all the various programs — children’s reading hour, the Agatha Christie book club and murder mystery nights, and the historical society that met in the basement every Thursday.

Stiles liked Laura. She certainly didn’t fit the typical librarian stereotype; she was loud, and cheerfully greeted familiar patrons who came through the door. An old man with an armful of James Patterson novels told her a dirty joke and she laughed like a hyena. A mom came in with her four year old and Laura got into an argument with the little boy over who would win in a fight: a bear or a shark. Stiles was maybe a little in love.

Laura sent him off later in the afternoon, telling him to come back the next day and they’d work out a schedule. She couldn’t promise him full time, but Stiles was fine with that. It would allow him to still have an easy summer without getting too bored lying around at home. It allowed him time to work on his garden, which he did that afternoon, laying out the edges and turning over the old soil. Dad laughed at him when he got home, coming out onto the back deck with a beer in his hand to watch Stiles root around in the dirt.

“You laugh now,” Stiles warned, pointing a dirt-stained finger at him, “but you just wait until we can make fresh salad and grilled zucchini and, and mashed cauliflower.”

“Ambitious,” Dad said, making a face at the mashed cauliflower comment. He watched Stiles for a moment, his face softening. “Your mom loved gardening.”
“I remember,” Stiles said, his stomach tightening at the mention of his mother. Eleven years and it still hurt. He could remember her garden, lush with wildflowers and climbing roses. She’d never been into growing vegetables. She used to take him to the farmer’s market on the weekends and teach him how to pick the best produce. Whenever he went to the grocery store, he still heard her voice in his head, making sure he didn’t pick out bruised apples or too-ripe avocados.

“Well,” his father said, tone a little too light. “I’m gonna warm up the last of that casserole. You want some?”

Stiles shook his head. “Thanks,” he said slowly, “but I’m not hungry.” He stayed outside until the sun started to set and the gnats got bad, enjoying the feeling of his hands in the soil and the quiet sounds of the forest.

Later, he was up in his room getting ready for bed with his window open to let in the cool night air when he heard what sounded like laughter outside. Stiles paused, then zipped up his hoodie and stepped over to the window to listen. He could hear, indistinctly, a group of people off in the woods somewhere to his left, further away from town. Stiles frowned. He wasn’t sure exactly how big their property was, but his dad had mentioned that it went back into the trees some distance. Well. He couldn’t have teenagers starting bonfires in the woods or getting into all the weird shit he’d thrown out of the shed.

Stiles pulled his jeans back on and headed downstairs. His dad was asleep on the couch with the television turned to Jimmy Fallon, but Stiles didn’t wake him. He went into the kitchen instead, digging through the drawer of miscellaneous things until he found a working flashlight, and headed outside, closing the back door softly behind him.

The moon hung heavy and full overhead, so bright he actually didn’t need the flashlight until he reached the trees. He could still hear the group of people chattering somewhere ahead, their conversation too soft to hear. He moved a little faster and, for his trouble, tripped over a tree root and face-planted into the loam. Stiles groaned softly, sitting up slowly. His nose had made a gross clicking noise when he hit the dirt and he could feel it now, something wet trickling down his lip. He was wiping the blood from his face when he realized the forest had gone silent and he could no longer hear the people he’d been stalking. Stiles stifled a frustrated noise. Jesus, he’d just been trying to keep people out of trouble.

Stiles got to his feet with a sigh, swiping at his nose with his sleeve. He ventured another couple hundred yards further, figuring if he was already in the woods, he might as well give it a little more effort before giving up. He got all the way to the top of a rise before deciding that this was his end point and when he swung around, someone stood there.

“Jesus!” Stiles yelped, overbalancing and landing flat amongst the leaves. He raised his flashlight and his heart stopped for a moment when the light landed on the dude’s face, which was harsh and inhuman, his brow heavy, thick hair coming down the sides of his face. Stiles was afraid for about two seconds until the rational part of his brain kicked in and decided that there was no way monsters were real and if they were, they would not be in the middle of Nowhere, California, wearing Converse and jeans that were torn in the knees. And now that he was looking, the dude’s makeup really looked like a vampire from Buffy, and those things had never been scary.

“Dude,” Stiles said, picking himself up onto his elbows. “I know everyone’s into Joss Whedon at the moment, but you know Buffy was canceled, right?”

The guy snorted, the corners of his mouth lifting. That’s when a couple of other people stepped out of the trees around them — a tall, lanky guy with curly hair, a curvy blonde, and a big black dude.
They all had their faces made up the same way.

Stiles raised his hand in a mock toast. “Nice job with the make-up, seriously. Are you guys LARPing or something?”

The guy in front of him laughed. “Something like that,” he said, his voice muffled by some impressive fake fangs.

“You’re the sheriff’s kid, aren’t you?” the girl asked him.

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed. “Hey, do you guys play D&D?”

The guy in front of him brightened as the others groaned. “We do on Fridays, sometimes! You should come!”

“Sweet!” Stiles said excitedly. “I’ve got my character sheet somewhere. I — oh, hey, wait, do you know Allison, then? She said some people play board games on Fridays — ”

Everyone groaned again except for the dude in front of him, who grinned brightly. “You know Allison?”

“I’m going to the pond,” the tall kid said impatiently, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. “Erica, you got your lighter?”

The blonde girl passed him a lighter, saying, “I’m coming with you. Scott’s got his gushing face on.”

“Me too,” the big guy agreed. “Scott, meet us there.”

The guy in front of Stiles — Scott? — waved them off, extending his other hand to Stiles to pull him out of the dirt. Standing, Stiles had a better view of his face and he was super impressed by the quality of his makeup; he couldn’t even tell where the prosthetics began. He was even wearing yellow contact lenses. “I’m Scott,” the dude told him earnestly. “Allison’s my girlfriend.”

“Ohhh,” Stiles said. “You live down my road, then.”

“Yeah, a couple houses down,” Scott agreed cheerfully. “I think my mom dropped off a casserole the other day.”

“Oh!” Stiles exclaimed. “Melissa? She said she had a son.”

“That’s me,” Scott grinned. “So you’re going to come over on Friday?”

“Yeah, sure,” Stiles agreed. “It sounds like fun. What are you guys up to tonight?”

“Oh, it’s — ” Scott glanced around the trees. “It’s kinda a secret thing. Not a cult or anything. We’ve just got this thing we do, and, uh…” He trailed off, looking a little lost.

Stiles decided to cut him some slack. “No worries,” he said. “I just heard you guys out here and I thought it might be someone getting up to trouble.”

“Nah,” Scott shook his head. “We usually come out here because no one’s going to bother us. Guess we were wrong about that tonight.”

Stiles laughed. “Sorry. I’ll let you get on with it. See you Friday?”

“See you Friday,” Scott confirmed, holding out his hand for a brofist.
"Have fun howling at the moon or whatever," Stiles said cheerfully. Scott laughed, waving over his shoulder as he trotted off into the darkness.

Stiles was almost back to the house when two things happened: one, it occurred to him that none of the people he'd met had been carrying flashlights and that was kind of strange, wasn't it?; and two, something started howling in the trees off to Stiles' left. It began low, so low he almost didn't notice it until it was rising high and clear and really fucking close. It didn't take any time at all for Stiles to burst into a run — distracted by the people in the woods, he'd completely forgotten about what he'd heard the other night and now it only sounded a couple hundred yards away and he was so, so stupid sometimes. Running was probably the most idiotic thing he could have done, but it wasn't like he was going to wait around for whatever it was to rip out his throat.

He couldn't be sure he was being followed — he'd given up all pretense of being quiet and crunched through leaves and snapped branches — and the way the moonlight came through the trees was deceptive, casting the world stark black and silver, but he was fucking sure he saw something running through the trees beside him, no more than ten yards away. The terror he felt then was real and visceral in a way he hadn't felt since he'd lost control of the Jeep during a heavy rainstorm his senior year of high school. That had ended the way this ended now, with Stiles nearly avoiding crashing into a tree. Instead he just missed it and fell out onto the back lawn, the lights of the house shining soft and promising security.

He flew across the grass, not daring to look over his shoulder, and crashed through the back door, startling his father, who stood at the sink filling up a glass of water. Stiles slammed the door behind him and leaned back against it, his chest heaving. His dad raised his eyebrows.

"Didn't know you'd gone out," he said mildly, eyes taking in Stiles' flushed cheeks and bloody nose. "You get into a fight with a tree?"

"There is something out there," Stiles said adamantly, jabbing a finger toward the dark woods. "Did you hear that?"

"I just woke up," his father replied, infuriatingly calm. "Told you, son, it's just someone's dog."

"Hah," Stiles said scornfully. Now that he'd gotten his breath back, he noticed how much his face itched under the dried blood. Shit, Scott and his friends must have thought he was such a dumbass. "I met some people out in the woods."

His dad looked at him sharply. "Did you?"

"Yeah," Stiles said, stepping over to the sink so he could splash water onto his bloody chin. "They had some pretty rad make-up on."

"Make-up?" his father repeated, looking bewildered.

"Yeah," Stiles said again, gesturing vaguely toward his face. "Heavy brows, fake teeth, yellow contacts. It was pretty cool."

"Yellow — oh, dear god," his dad sighed. "Only you, Stiles."

"What?" Stiles asked, offended. "What does that mean?"

His dad sighed again. "Only you'd go venturing into the woods and come out with new friends."

Stiles grinned. "What can I say? People like me."
His father rolled his eyes. "How's your nose? Broken?"

"I don't think so," Stiles replied, prodding at said body part gently. It ached a little, but it didn't feel swollen. "I tripped."

"Seems about right," his dad said, and Stiles scowled at him. His father snorted softly. "I'd take some ice and get yourself in bed. You're working tomorrow, aren't you?"

-Stiles' nose was not broken, though there was a nice cut across the bridge of his nose he spent a few minutes admiring in the mirror. He thought, privately, that it looked kind of badass, though when he walked into the library that morning, Lydia looked like she was trying not to laugh.

"What happened to you?" she asked, the corners of her mouth quivering.

"I tripped," Stiles said moodily. He'd had trouble with the Jeep that morning. It hadn't seemed to have appreciated the long drive up from San Francisco as he'd come out that morning to find it leaking brake fluid and had had to spend fifteen minutes underneath it trying to stop it.

"You've got dirt on your face," Lydia pointed out, sounding half sympathetic, half amused. Stiles made an irritated clicking noise with his tongue and wiped at his face. It felt more like grease than dirt and that was great — just great. "Is Laura in?"

Lydia shook her head. "It's just you and I this morning."

They spent the hours before lunch putting together letters for the library’s summer donation drive — Stiles folded letters and stuffed envelopes while Lydia sealed and labeled them and they talked quietly as there was a group of young moms with babies over in the children’s room doing activities with their kids. Lydia had stories about every single one of them. She told Stiles, quite proudly, that she knew the name of every single person living in Beacon Hills and at least one detail about their lives. She proceeded to prove this by greeting every patron who entered the library by name, then whispering about them to Stiles, who wasn’t one hundred percent sure that she wasn’t making most of it up. There was no way the buff dude from the hardware store collected porcelain dolls, or the mom in the pink Victoria’s Secret sweatpants was a practicing Wiccan.

Stiles said as much to Lydia, who gave him a pitying look and said, "You can’t trust your eyes alone, Stiles. You need to collect evidence." That sounded like something his dad would say and he sat quietly, thoroughly chastened, when Lydia pointed at a tiny old man and told Stiles that he was on his seventh wife.

Lydia was much more reluctant to diverge information about herself than she was about the townsfolk of Beacon Hills — “Knowledge is power,” she told Stiles solemnly — but he at least managed to get it out of her that she went to Stanford, where she studied chemical engineering.

Around noon, a lanky young man with the curls and jaw line of a Roman statue came sauntering in and leaned over the desk. He murmured something to Lydia, who smiled faintly and said, “Not yet.”

Stiles stared — not because he was nosy (and no shame if he was because Lydia was clearly the goddess of getting into other people’s business) but because there was something familiar about the young man. Lydia caught him looking and said, “Stiles, this is Isaac.”

“Hey,” Stiles said, offering his hand.

Isaac shook it, his mouth lifting on one side in a sarcastic grin. “Hey,” he echoed. “Don’t recognize
“I — oh," Stiles blinked, his memory finally clicking. “You were in the woods last night!” 

“Bingo,” Isaac grinned.

“That make-up must be a bitch to get off,” Stiles said. “What do you use? Silicone?” 

“Make-up?” Lydia repeated, frowning up at Isaac.

He smiled down at her, bat[...](trimmed for brevity)
and Stiles felt an odd twist in his stomach. "Did something happen? You don't have to tell me."

Lydia shook her head. "You'll find out sooner or later," she said softly. "Everyone knows, it's just… it was really sad. The whole town was devastated."

"Oh?" Stiles pressed, the nervous roiling of his stomach intensifying.

"There was a fire," Lydia said quietly. "They had this big house out in the woods. This was maybe five years ago, I was in high school. A lot of people died."

"Shit," Stiles whispered. He felt like an ass for having brought it up. "Laura's the only one left?"

Lydia hesitated for a long, long moment before admitting, "No. She has a brother but…no one's seen him in a while. He keeps to himself."

"Oh," Stiles repeated dumbly.

Lydia got to her feet, towing him over to the biography section, where a collection of picture frames hung over the shelves. "That's what the house looked like," she told Stiles, pointing to a large black and white photograph in the center — it showed a grand house, almost a mansion, really, surrounded by trees. Around the photograph of the house hung family photos dating all the way back to the 1860s.

"This was taken a couple of years before the fire," Lydia said, directing Stiles' attention to one of the few photographs in color. He looked carefully at the group photo, spotting Laura, looking younger and happy, amongst a sea of dark-haired, pale-eyed Hales. "There's her brother," Lydia added, tapping her manicured fingernail against the face of a smiling teenager. "And there's her mom. She used to coach girls' soccer. Her dad was mayor before Finstock, and her grandmother…"

Stiles listened to Lydia spout off facts about the various members of the Hale family, staring at the family photo with a heavy heart. He'd lost his mom over ten years ago and that had hurt bad enough. Lydia never explicitly said how many of the Hales died in the fire but if they were all in this photo and only two were left alive, that meant that at least ten people had passed in one night. At least he'd had months to say goodbye to his mom. He couldn't even fathom the sense of loss that the sudden deaths of ten family members might bring.

"Don't say anything to Laura," Lydia said suddenly, snapping Stiles out of his thoughts. "It's not something she likes to talk about."

"Understandable," Stiles replied, shoving his hands in his pockets. He hesitated before asking his next question. "Was it an accident?"

Lydia bit her lip, shaking her head. "They still don't know who did it."

"Oh," Stiles said. That was even worse — that someone murdered ten people. "Jesus."

Lydia shrugged, an expression on her face like what can you do? "You're off for the rest of the afternoon, anyway," she said. "You're not back until Sunday, and I think Laura scheduled you alone. Do you know where the key is?"

"Laura showed me," Stiles replied. She’d given him a thorough, albeit brief, tour of the library on his first day, and he knew there was a key hidden under a brick outside.

“Well,” Lydia said, her smile a little tense. “Thanks for your help today.”
“No problem,” Stiles replied, sticking his hands in his pockets. “I guess I’ll see you later. And, uh, thanks for opening up to me. About Laura, I mean. I’m not going to say anything, I promise.”

“I know,” Lydia replied, her face softening. “Go enjoy your afternoon.”

Stiles did; he spent the rest of the day in the garden, carefully planting the seeds he’d chosen, using string to lay out grids. There was something satisfying about getting his hands dirty, in seeing the soil laid out clean and without weeds.

When his father came home, he cooked up some chicken on the grill and they ate out on the back deck. His dad hadn’t yet invested in any deck furniture, so they sat on the edge with their feet hanging over the grass. It was quiet, peaceful. Stiles could hear the faint sound of a banjo playing and his dad told him that one of their neighbors down the road was in a bluegrass band and he liked to sit outside and practice.

“Are you liking it here?” Stiles’ father asked abruptly. “I know it’s pretty different from Santa Rosa, but —”

“I like it, Dad,” Stiles replied simply. “I’ve met some really nice people. It seems like a very close community.”

“It is,” his dad agreed with a nod. “I’ve never lived in a place where people care so strongly about each other.” He set down his empty plate, then picked up his beer. “This community’s seen a lot of tragedy in the past couple of years. Car crashes, home invasions, you name it. The sheriff before me got shot responding to a domestic dispute. Didn’t die,” he added hurriedly, at the way Stiles blanched. “Just retired early. But from what folks tell me, the place has changed a lot in the past five years or so. A lot of people are moving away. It’s almost like the town’s starting to die.”

Stiles shuddered. “And you moved us out here.”

“Change of pace,” his dad said, like he had on Stiles’ first night in town. He took a sip of beer and nodded toward the trees. “Country life took some getting used to,” he added. “Not used to not hearing cars all the time.”

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed. “I like it, though. ‘s kind of refreshing.” He drummed his heels against a wood support, then asked, “Do you know about the Hales?”

“I’d be surprised if there was anyone in this county who didn’t,” his father replied. “You heard about the fire?” Stiles nodded and his father continued, “Sad business. I took a look at the file when I started. It’s still an active investigation, but they haven’t had any new leads in a couple of years.”

“Who would do that, though?” Stiles wondered. “Who could kill a bunch of people, just like that?”

His dad shook his head, looking solemn. “The world’s not as simple as we’d like to think it is, son — if there’s anything being a cop has taught me, it’s that. Sometimes people don’t need a reason to do bad things; they do it because they enjoy it. And until we find whoever was responsible, all we’ve got is speculation. We may never know.”

Stiles sat silent for a while, thinking. “Have you met Laura?” he asked curiously.

His father nodded. “Many times. She’s one of those people who likes to be involved with everything in town. She’s got a good heart.”

“And her brother? Have you met him?”
His dad shook his head again. “He keeps to himself,” he said, echoing what Lydia had said early. He nodded toward the woods again. “The house is still out there in the woods. You been out to the preserve yet?”

“Not yet,” Stiles said with a shake of his head.

“You should go,” his father told him. “There are some walking trails and a reservoir. Nice scenery.”

“Maybe I will,” Stiles replied, getting to his feet. “Maybe you should come too; I found that bag of Snickers you tried to hide in the vegetable drawer.”

“Damn,” his dad cursed, following him into the kitchen. “I thought I was the investigator here.”

“Like father like son,” Stiles snorted, piling their dishes in the sink. His dad laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, heading for the fridge to grab himself another beer.

On Friday, Stiles left the house around eight and walked down the road to number twenty-two, the home of the McCall family. Allison, the girl he’d met earlier in the week, had texted him a couple hours previous with the time and place. No D&D tonight, she’d said. Our DM can’t make it. :( Stiles didn’t mind, though; he was just happy to have met some people he could hang out with.

Scott opened the door before Stiles even made it up the steps, a wide grin on his face. Stiles assumed it was Scott, anyway, from his hair and familiar Converse — the only time they’d met was in the forest when Scott had all his make-up on. He looked a lot friendlier without it, his brown eyes twinkling with good cheer.

“Hey, dude!” Scott said happily. “You made it!” His eyes dropped to the casserole dish in Stiles’ arms. “And you brought food!”

“This is your mom’s dish, actually,” Stiles replied, grinning. “I thought I’d make brownies, though.”

“Excellent decision,” Scott enthused. “Come in!” He stepped back, giving Stiles room to step inside and kick off his shoes. Scott waved him down a short hallway and into the living room, where he found Allison sitting in an overstuffed armchair and the big dude and the blonde girl from the woods the other night sprawled on the couch. “You know Allison,” Scott said cheerfully. Allison waved. “And this is Boyd and Erica.”

“Hey, sweetheart,” Erica called, her head in Boyd’s lap and her legs over the arm of the couch. Boyd raised a heavy hand in greeting.

“Hey,” Stiles said, lifting the casserole dish like an offering. “I brought brownies.”

“You’re my new favorite,” Erica declared.

“Lydia couldn’t make it,” Allison said apologetically.

“Yeah, her dad took her to Redding for the weekend to try to buy her love back,” Erica cackled, drumming her heels against the couch. “Isaac’s sobbing in the kitchen.”

“I am not,” Isaac said indignantly, appearing in a doorway off the side of the living room with a bowl in his hands. “I was just getting salsa!”

“Don’t mind them,” Scott said cheerily while Isaac and Erica started into what sounded like an
argument they’d had hundreds of times before. “You want something to drink? We’ve got beer.”

“Sure,” Stiles said agreeably. He set the dish of brownies down on the coffee table because both Erica and Boyd were eyeing it hungrily. He followed Scott into the kitchen and accepted a cold beer from the fridge.

Scott cracked open his own bottle and said, “I know we’re still strangers to you,” he said, “but I’m really glad you came over.”

“Thanks,” Stiles replied. “I am too. My dad’s good company, but it’s nice to mix things up a bit.”

Scott grinned. “You’re welcome here any time, dude. I work mornings most of the time, so feel free to drop in if you get bored.”

“Where do you work?” Stiles asked curiously, following Scott back into the living room.

“At the local vet,” Scott replied, squeezing himself into the armchair with Allison. “You’re at the library, right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, looking around the room. “What about the rest of you? Are you guys students?”

“We all go to the community college,” Isaac informed him. “Lydia’s the only one who decided to leave home.”

“Not me,” Erica put in with a sharp grin. “I’m going to the police academy in the fall. I’m gonna sweet-talk your dad into giving me a job.”

Stiles laughed. “Good luck with that,” he said. “Dad’s pretty impervious to all forms of charm.”

“Maybe no one’s tried hard enough,” Erica replied haughtily. “No man can stand up to the Reyes charm, right, baby?” she added, nudging Boyd in the ribs. He rolled his eyes as everyone else laughed.

The hours slipped by fast; they played several rounds of games, drank beers, ate food, and laughed a lot. Stiles found himself liking the group immensely. Scott and Allison were good-natured and laughed at everything. Erica was loud and vulgar and picked on everyone without discrimination. Isaac was quiet, but sharp, and Boyd was the king of dry humor. It was disappointing when Melissa came home after a late shift at the hospital and broke up the party, but she patted him on the shoulder and said, “There’s always next week, sweetheart.”

The next week passed quickly as Stiles adjusted to life in Beacon Hills, his days settling into a rough pattern. He usually worked into the early afternoon, which gave him time to go home and take care of the garden and whatever little things his dad had found around the house for him to fix.

On Wednesday, temperatures soared. Stiles was working with Laura, who grumbled that it was time to get the ACs put in. When Stiles expressed his disbelief that the building didn’t have central AC, Laura growled and gestured violently as she snapped, “This building’s a hundred years old, Stilinski — does it look like it has central air to you?”

Okay, Stiles thought as Laura retreated to her office, muttering under her breath, Laura gets testy in the heat. Noted.

It was even hotter when he got out around one, and the prospect of standing outside and taking care
of the garden sounded utterly unappealing. He sat in the Jeep for a moment, sweat rolling down his
spine, when he remembered that, one: his dad had mentioned a reservoir in the preserve, and two:
Scott had the afternoons off. He’d gotten everyone’s numbers on Friday night, so he shot Scott a
quick text before kicking the Jeep into gear and heading for the west side of town.

_Yo, you interested in going swimming?_

Scott’s reply came quickly; Stiles glanced down as the Jeep bounced down a dusty country road.
_Hell yeah! You know where the lake is?_

_Think I can find it_, Stiles texted back as he stopped at an intersection. The road turned to dirt, raising
clouds of dust behind him as he drove past a sign that read _Beacon Hills Preserve • 5 MPH. No
dogs_. The road was rough; Stiles gritted his teeth as the Jeep jolted over potholes. It didn’t seem well
treated and there was a strip of vegetation growing down the middle of the road. The parking lot —
if that’s what it was — was more like a field with grass shooting up in sparse patches. His was the
only car and there were no further signs to guide him to the lake, only two trails branching off from
the lot. Stiles shrugged; he couldn’t see the water through the trees, but his dad had made it sound
like the trails did a big loop, so he was sure he’d get there eventually.

He decided to take the path to the left and followed it through the trees, listening to the sound of the
forest; cicadas buzzing and birds calling overhead. It was peaceful, the world bathed in green light,
and Stiles didn’t notice the path had faded away until it simply wasn’t there any longer.

“Oh,” Stiles said aloud, pausing. It probably wasn’t the best idea to just wander around in the woods
— the preserve was a couple hundred acres, he knew — but it looked like the trees thinned ahead.
He decided to head that way and if the lake wasn’t in sight, he’d turn around and head back for the
parking lot and try the other trail.

It wasn’t the lake. What Stiles found through the trees was the blackened skeleton of a once huge
house and it didn’t take long at all for him to realize that this was the old Hale house — what was left
of it, anyway.

Stiles’ eyes took in the once magnificent façade — the broken windows and the vines overtaking the
crumbling wall, his stomach churning as he thought about the people who died here. His eyes
dropped to the sagging front porch, dark with shadows, and froze instantly, his entire body going
tense. There, paws hanging over the top steps, lay a massive black dog. It watched Stiles with pale,
pale eyes, head resting on its front legs, ears pricked forward. Stiles stared back, one foot still half-
raised in movement. He could feel sweat slipping down his chest, sliding down the back of his neck,
itching at his hairline, but he couldn’t move.

What if _this_ was what he’d heard howling in the woods? He couldn’t help but recall that the sign to
the preserve had explicitly stated _No dogs_, though it didn’t look as though there was an owner
around to reign it in. And Stiles knew that his dad had said there were no wolves in California, but it
was hard to keep that in mind when there appeared to be one laying right in front of him — because
if this thing _was_ a dog, it was bigger than any dog he’d ever seen, and it looked _wild_.

It wasn’t moving, though, and Stiles wasn’t sure what to make of that. He knew that some predators
were only interested in the chase — were wolves one of them? Was he safe so long as he didn’t
move? Stiles didn’t know what to _do_.

The wolf — or dog, or whatever it was — watched him for another minute or so, then shifted
slightly, turning its head and closing its eyes. Stiles only grew more bewildered. So…was he okay,
then? Like, if this thing was human, that’d be a pretty clear dismissal, but maybe it was some sort of
clever tactic to lull him into a false sense of security.
Stiles set his foot down carefully, wincing at the noise it made on the dry leaves carpeting the forest floor. The wolf didn’t look up, though. Stiles took a cautious step backward, then another, then another, until there were enough trees between him and the house that he couldn’t see the wolf any more. That was both encouraging and frightening, because now he couldn’t be sure that the wolf hadn’t slunk off to stalk him, but Stiles kept going until he built up the courage to turn around and trot off through the trees. He wouldn’t run, he refused to run, but there was definitely some urgency to his jog.

When Stiles got back to the parking lot, Scott was just riding up on his bike, his face shiny with sweat. “Hey,” Scott greeted breathlessly. “You all right, dude? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I, uh — ” Stiles glanced toward the trees, half expecting to see the wolf standing there, watching them. “It’s nothing. Just got a little turned around in the trees.”

“Happens to the best of us,” Scott replied cheerfully, leaning his bike up against a tree. “Lake’s this way.”

They spent the afternoon splashing around in the shallows of the reservoir, reveling in the cool relief of the water. Scott was apparently capable of some very kung-fu-esque backflips off rocks that Stiles was definitely not jealous of, but it felt good to hang out. Scott was one of those types of people who could get along with anyone.

"That is not true," Scott laughed, wiping water off his face. "You should have met Lydia's ex. He hated me. He hated all of us."

"Lydia doesn't seem like the type to date jackasses," Stiles replied.

"Jackson was just an ass," Scott said with a shake of his head. "But, high school, I guess. You learn a lot about yourself and what you like."

"Amen," Stiles agreed solemnly, his eyes sliding to the tree line. He kept doing it, fully expecting the wolf to be standing there.

"You okay?" Scott asked again, his face wrinkling in concern. "You smell—I mean, you seem kind of freaked out."

Stiles sighed. "No, I just — when I got all turned around in the woods, I saw this dog and I thought it was a wolf and I just — " he cut himself off at the anxious look on Scott's face. "What? What is it?"

"What did it look like?" Scott asked urgently.

"Uh, it was black," Stiles offered, confused. "I saw it at the old Hale house."

"Oh," Scott said, the tension seeping out of his shoulders. "That's fine, then."

"Er," Stiles said. "You know what I'm talking about?"

"Yeah," Scott nodded. "He's not any trouble. I wouldn't try to go near him, but he won't hurt you."

"Okay," Stiles said slowly. That wasn't an entirely reassuring statement. "So...it's not a wolf, then?"

Scott squinted thoughtfully. "No," he decided, and the way it took him so long to do so was also not entirely reassuring, but Stiles decided to leave it at that. He remembered the wolf skull sitting in his dad's office. Maybe it had something to do with the town, like the dog was a mascot or something. Better in this case, he thought, to let sleeping dogs lie.
Friday night (or possibly Saturday morning, Stiles wasn't too sure about the details) found him stumbling home after another enjoyable night of board games and booze at the McCall house. They'd played Carcassonne for three hours straight and Lydia had brought a huge jug of what she said was punch, but Stiles was pretty sure had been some kind of hallucinogenic potion. There'd been flowers floating in it and everyone had gone suspiciously mute when he tried to figure out what they were. He'd decided to call it a night when he'd gone to use the bathroom and found his mom in there braiding her hair, like she'd always done before going to bed. Hallucinations were too hardcore for board games night.

Now it was raining out and Stiles could feel himself sobering up as he walked home. Scott had tried to give him an umbrella, but Stiles had waved it off, though this meant he was soaked to the bone by the time he stumbled up the front steps and unlocked the front door.

His dad had fallen asleep on the couch and Stiles did his best to tiptoe past him, into the kitchen for a glass of water. He was filling his cup at the sink when he noticed a cool breeze rolling across his toes and turned his head to find the back door ajar.

"Jesus, Dad," Stiles muttered, swinging it shut and locking it for good measure. "Do you want a bear in here?"

He headed upstairs, leaving water droplets in his wake, and stripped out of his sodden clothes in the darkness of his room, too tired to bother with the light. He pulled on a clean t-shirt and boxers and threw himself onto the bed, which grunted underneath him. Stiles, much to his almost immediate embarrassment, rolled off the warm, hairy lump on his bed with a scream, hitting the floor with a thump that rattled his bones. His dad came pounding up the stairs, roused by Stiles' yell, and reached the doorway just as Stiles managed to hit the light switch.

He blinked in the sudden light, then kept blinking, because there was a big black dog lying on his bed and he was one hundred percent sure it was the dog he'd seen at the Hale house on Wednesday.

Once Stiles got his breath back he pointed an accusing finger at his father, who had yet to say a word, and gasped, "Didn't get a dog, huh?"

Dad gave him a bemused look. "Not my dog."

Stiles turned to look at the dog, who seemed utterly uninterested in either of them, sniffing at Stiles' comforter in a half-hearted way. "Uh huh. And what's he doing in our house, then?"

"Well, sometimes I leave the door open on rough nights," his father replied calmly, like it was a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

"Uh huh," Stiles said again, unimpressed. "And that sounds like a good idea to you? To let a feral animal into the house? What about everything else in the forest? You want to wake up with a possum in the kitchen?"

His father rolled his eyes. "Nothing else is coming inside while he's in here, Stiles. Look at him."

Stiles had to concede that this was probably true, though, unsurprisingly, it didn't make him feel any safer. He also didn't feel it was fair for him to feel like the crazy one. His dad made it seem like it was perfectly rational, letting a wild dog into the house, which left him grasping at straws. "Why my bed?" he protested petulantly.

Dad shrugged. "Guess it's more comfortable than the guest bed." He heaved a weary sigh and
turned, seeming to address the dog when he said, "Sorry, son. Looks like you're taking the spare room tonight."

"Am I going nuts?" Stiles complained as the dog shifted and hopped off his bed. "Dad, seriously?"

His father frowned at him as the dog padded out of Stiles' bedroom, claws ticking against the hardwood floor. "Does he look like he's hurting anyone?" Dad asked, his tone sharper than Stiles expected. He seemed angry now, which caught Stiles off guard. "If you spent every night in the woods, wouldn't you like to get out the rain once in a while?"

"Well, yeah," Stiles muttered, suddenly feeling under siege.

"Then leave him alone," his father snapped, and disappeared back downstairs.

"Okay," Stiles murmured, thoroughly chastened. His dad had reacted so strongly that he did feel bad, though some of that guilt dissipated when he went to get into bed and found his sheets muddy and covered in dog hair. He had to strip his bed and grab extra sheets out of the hall closet, and he glanced into the spare room as he passed, the dog a deeper black in the darkness of the room. "Enjoy that freshly painted ceiling," Stiles hissed. The dog flicked an ear in his direction, but otherwise didn't move. Stiles scowled and retreated to his room to rebuild his bed.

The dog was still in the guest room when Stiles got up to take a shower the following morning, but it was gone by the time he reemerged from the bathroom. When he went downstairs, he found the back door open again and closed it with a sarcastic, "Hope you enjoyed your stay." He was glad his dad wasn't there to laugh at him, because he knew he was being childish. Whatever! His dad had taken a dog's side over his. He was allergic! He could die.

"Whatever," Stiles repeated out loud, and headed for work.

Another week passed by slowly. There were no more rainy nights, so he didn't find the dog in his bed again, but a couple of times he was out in the garden and glanced up to see a dark shape moving through the trees, or standing at the tree line watching him. It was unnerving at first, the hair on the back of his neck pricked every time he felt the dog's eyes on him, but he ignored it. If the dog wanted to lie in the shade at the edge of the trees, fine. If he noticed his dad putting a bowl of water out there behind the shed, Stiles kept his mouth shut. Not his dog, not his problem.

At any rate, the dog got pushed out his mind a couple of days later. It was a Thursday and Stiles had a solo shift at the library — Laura was at some kind of librarian's conference, and Lydia had the day off. It was quiet. There were no programs running that afternoon. The library was empty and Stiles was bored. He didn't handle being bored very well. He'd gotten into a lot of trouble back in high school through not being able to stay in his seat, for tying people's shoelaces to their chairs, for a whole slew of practical jokes he'd brewed up while sitting bored out of his mind in history class.

He was getting antsy now. He'd already organized the circulation desk, placed all the returns on their shelves, picked up all the toys in the children's room, and dusted every shelf and taxidermied animal in the place. He itched to get into something, and the small room of rare books downstairs called his name.

Laura had been clear on Stiles' first day: only people with permission from her or the town were allowed down there. This was not good news for Stiles, because it only drove his already curious mind into overdrive. He didn't understand just what was so special about the books that anyone who wanted to get at them needed permission from the town to view them. Anyway, he was different,
right? He worked at the library. It wasn't like he was going to steal any of the books. He just wanted
to know what was so special about them that he wasn't even allowed to look.

So, after he closed the library for the day, locking the front door and turning off most of the lights,
Stiles took the key to the grate and went downstairs. He could hear that buzzing again, almost as
soon as his feet hit the concrete floor, and he wondered if he should mention it to Laura when she
came back from her trip in case there was actually something wrong with the wiring. It really kind of
hurt as he approached the door; he could feel the vibration in his teeth and down his spine. It
certainly wasn't comfortable, but he wasn't planning on lingering.

He tried to ignore the way the air beyond the grate had gone distant, putting it down to the buzzing in
his head, and slid the key into the lock. It turned without a fuss, but the moment Stiles put his hand
on the grate to pull it open, the buzzing increased, shuddering up his arm. He took a deep breath,
said, "Nothing to worry about," and yanked the grate open.

The shock he received was powerful enough to lift him off his feet and throw him back several
yards, sending him crashing into one of the book sale tables, sending books flying and the table
smashing to the ground with Stiles on top. He stared up at the ceiling as it grew further away and the
lights faded and thought Laura's going to kill me.

Stiles resurfaced from a peaceful black nothingness to find himself still lying on the cold concrete
floor of the library, books and broken bits of table underneath him. His father stood over him, Lydia
on his other side, the two of them wearing twin looks of exasperation.

"Hi," Stiles said weakly.

His father sighed. "What the hell were you doing?"

"Getting into trouble," Stiles replied with a wince, trying to sit up and giving in when there was an
intense flare of pain along his arm. "Ow, fuck."

Dad sighed again and knelt down next to him, getting his hands under Stiles' armpits so he could lift
him to a sitting position. Stiles noticed he was still in his uniform — had someone called him here?
Who would have known? Lydia? He looked up at her curiously.

"Laura's going to kill you," she told him mildly.

"Figured," Stiles said despondently.

"Come on," his father said, tugging at his shoulders. "Let's get you to the hospital."

"Hospital?" Stiles repeated, alarmed. "Why the hospital?"

"You take a careful look at your arm and tell me," Dad replied, getting him onto his feet and catching
him when his knees shook.

Stiles stretched his arm out in front of him — which hurt, wow — and saw how his skin had gone
red and shiny, bubbling and peeling in places. "Oh."

It didn't hurt that much as Dad led him upstairs and out to the cruiser, which was parked on the street
in a no parking zone. Stiles sat in the passenger's seat and stared at his injury, morbidly fascinated at
the way the skin on his palm had split and was now oozing plasma, while his father talked to Lydia
outside. He could only hear pieces of their conversation, their voices muffled.
"— told him," Lydia said. "I know she warned him."

"I'm sure he wasn't expecting *that*," his father retorted. "He could have died!"

"I'll ask Laura to turn it down. She— " Stiles didn't catch the rest of Lydia's sentence, her voice muffled by a passing truck. By the time the air cleared, his father was coming around the front of the cruiser, climbing into the driver's seat.

"What happened, Dad?" Stiles asked dazedly. He was still having trouble focusing, his vision swimming slightly.

"Electrical shock. Probably a live wire touching that grille somewhere," his father replied briskly, pulling away from the curb and flipping on his lights. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Stiles replied, but maybe he was in shock or the adrenaline was wearing off or something, because by the time they reached the hospital the pain was rolling up his arm in pulsing waves and his entire body shook. His dad had to keep a hand under his uninjured elbow as they walked through the front doors into the emergency room, where his dad greeted the nurses by name. It must have been a slow night — that, or his injury was indeed an emergency — because he was shown into an examining room immediately and a nurse carefully cleaned his burns. That hurt. That hurt a lot, actually; he had to bite his lip hard to keep from making any noise while she wrapped his arm in bandages and he got a prescription for pain meds from the doctor.

His dad drove him home after, stopping along the way at the pharmacy in the grocery store to pick up his medicine. When they got back to the house, his father laid him out on the couch — he said he didn't trust Stiles on the stairs — and headed into the kitchen to make some dinner so Stiles could take his meds on a full stomach. Stiles lay quietly on the couch, staring up at the ceiling and trying not to concentrate on the waves of pain radiating up his arm and across his chest. When his dad came into the living room with a plate of food, Stiles took it with a quiet word of thanks and asked, "How did you know to look for me?"

"I was on my way home when I noticed some lights still on at the library," Dad replied, settling himself down in the recliner. "Got worried when I knocked and you didn't answer, so I got Lydia's number from dispatch, since Laura's out of town."


"If you weren't twenty, I'd ground you," his father sighed. "For all the good it would do."

Stiles grinned lopsidedly and finished his dinner, accepting the two small pills his father handed him. It didn't take long for them to kick in and Stiles settled back on the couch, mind in a haze. His father turned on a baseball game, but paying attention to the television was far beyond Stiles' ability at that point so he stared up at the ceiling instead, drifting in and out of sleep. At some point he surfaced from a drunken sort of unconsciousness and his dad was talking to someone. At first Stiles thought it might be Scott's mom, stopped by on her way to or from the hospital, but no one was responding to his dad's words and he dropped his eyes from the ceiling — which was doing a weird undulating thing that was making him nauseous, anyway — and found the big black dog sitting on the floor near the end of the couch.

"— got zapped by the rare books door," his father was saying. "I told you he was an idiot."

"Hey," Stiles protested groggily, and his father and the dog both looked over at him.

"Some of the time," his father amended graciously.
"Jerk," Stiles muttered. His head felt like it had been wrapped in cotton wool. He couldn't even muster the strength to be concerned about the dog in the house. The beast in question had risen to his feet, turning to sniff up Stiles' pant leg before nosing gently at his bandaged arm. Stiles hissed in pain; even the slightest bump to his skin sent little throbbing shockwaves racing up his arm. The dog took a step back, ears flat, and Stiles waved his uninjured hand.

“Hey, no, it’s okay, buddy,” he slurred, holding out his fingers for the dog to smell. The dog bumped his cold nose against Stiles’ hand before sitting again, watching him intently.

“His name’s Derek,” Dad put in.

“Derek,” Stiles repeated, and the dog’s ears pricked forward. “Did you name him that?”

“No,” his father replied cryptically. Stiles was too out of it to make much of the simple statement or inquire any further. He heaved a sigh and resettled himself amongst the pillows, watching the dog — Derek, that was — shuffle closer, gently pushing his nose under Stiles’ burnt hand. It hurt for just a moment, but then the pain faded, cool relief spreading up his arm, making his head feel distant. Must be the meds hitting again, Stiles thought sleepily, his eyes fluttering shut. Thank fucking god.

When Stiles woke, the living room was bright with morning sunlight and his phone, conscientiously placed on the coffee table next to his head, rang loudly. Stiles groaned, smacked at it with his injured hand, whimpered at the pain this caused, and managed to roll onto his shoulder far enough to grab it with his uninjured hand.

“H-hello?”

“Stiles,” Laura sighed on the other end, and his heart sank.

“Oh,” Stiles said quietly. “Hi. Um, I’m sorry — ”

“No,” Laura interrupted warily. “It’s my fault. I should have gotten that door checked out sooner. Are you all right?”

“I’m okay,” Stiles replied, twisting his injured arm cautiously, not that he could see anything through the bandages. “Second-degree burns.”

Laura cursed. “Dammit! I’m sorry, Stiles. That shouldn’t have happened.”

“Well, I shouldn’t have been poking around down there,” Stiles said glumly. “Are you going to fire me?”

“What?” Laura laughed sharply. “Don’t be stupid. I’ll see you on Monday — and just let me know if you’re not feeling up to it, all right?”

“I’ll be in,” Stiles promised. Laura hung up and he leaned over to place his phone back on that coffee table, which was when he noticed the dog — Derek, he reminded himself — lying on the floor next to the couch, his chin on his paws. “Hey buddy,” Stiles said softly, and Derek lifted his head, looking up at Stiles with a bored expression. Stiles reached out with his uninjured hand and Derek went stiff, but allowed Stiles to pet his head, a resigned look on his long face. His fur was soft and not a true black, more of a deep warm brown.

After a minute, Derek seemed to have enough of Stiles petting him for he rose to his feet and trotted out of the living room. A moment later, Stiles heard the creak of the back door and Derek’s nails on
the back deck, then silence. Dad must have left the door open for him, Stiles thought blearily, wiping his hand over his eyes.

Navigating life with only one useable hand — and his non-dominant hand, at that — was much more difficult than Stiles had ever suspected. Even levering himself off the couch was a chore. His dad had left a note in the kitchen next to his bottle of pain meds that said Be back around six. Don’t abuse these; I will arrest you. Stiles rolled his eyes and made himself a plate of bacon and eggs — all done in the microwave because Stiles didn’t relish the thought of cooking with only one hand — before taking two more pills and then a three-hour nap.

After that, he wasn’t sure what to do with himself. He couldn’t change out of his clothes — he’d tried and nearly suffocated himself trying to get his shirt over his head — so he resigned himself to yesterday’s clothes until Dad got home. Stiles texted Scott, but he wouldn’t get out of work for another couple of hours. Eventually, he wandered outside and managed to untangle the garden hose, literally single-handedly, and watered the garden. Some of the seeds had already sprouted, which he was extremely proud of; little green sprouts dotted the soil. The beans had grown especially quick, some of the plants were already an inch high and he grinned, thinking about Jack and the beanstalk.

Stiles noticed Derek standing at the edge of the trees like he’d done all week, and waved. Maybe he should be more concerned about the dog hanging around. He remembered what Scott had said the other day: I wouldn’t try to approach him — advice that his dad clearly hadn’t been given. But the second part of Scott’s statement — he won’t hurt you — certainly seemed to be true so far, and he hadn’t woken up sneezing, which was encouraging.

Derek didn't move, however; he remained where he sat in the shade of the trees and the next time Stiles looked up, he was gone. Stiles shrugged, not offended, and headed back inside.

When Scott came over he let himself in and strode into the living room, looking inappropriately cheerful. “Hey, dude,” he said cheerfully. “How’s the arm?”

Stiles looked up from the TV — he’d stuck in a random disc of Battlestar Galactica — and blinked wearily. “Aches,” he said, which was true. Scott plunked himself down on the couch next to him and Stiles added, “I apologize in advance if I fall asleep on you. I just took some more meds.”

“No worries,” Scott said, patting his knee. Stiles noticed he seemed a little distracted, sniffing discreetly.

“Everything all right?” Stiles asked warily, suddenly self-conscious of his day-old clothes, wondering if he was starting to smell.


Stiles met Scott’s earnest brown eyes, not exactly sure what to say. If he told Scott his dad let a stray wander in and out, he’d sound crazy, so he went with the technical truth, which was, “No.”

Scott studied him for a moment before shrugging, his eyes turning forward and landing on the television. And just as Stiles warned, he fell asleep a half-hour later, curled on his side with his feet against Scott’s thigh. He barely notice Scott’s hand on his ankle, or the way the pain seemed to get sucked out of him, blessed relief spreading through his body like magic.

Stiles spent most of the weekend on the couch, listening to the rain. His dad took him back to the hospital two days after the accident to get his bandages changed. His arm looked horrifying, but he at
least had the pleasure of seeing his dad talking to Scott’s mom and getting incredibly flustered when Stiles popped up and chimed, “Have you guys picked a date for the wedding?” Melissa McCall just laughed and smacked him on the shoulder.

Stiles forgot about Derek; even though it rained all weekend, Derek didn’t make any appearances until late Sunday night. Stiles woke suddenly as thunder shook the house and in a flash of lightning he saw Derek standing in the hall, looking into his room. Normally this would have startled the shit out of him, but Stiles was a little loopy on meds and sleep, so all he did was hang his uninjured hand over the side of the bed and pat the mattress, mumbling, “C’mere, buddy.”

Derek stood there a moment longer, watching him silently, before padding into the room, gently touching his nose to the back of Stiles’ hand.

“You’re very polite,” Stiles told him. He rolled over, careful not to jar his injured arm, shifting away from the edge of the bed. “You wanna share? I know the guest bed’s not as comfy as mine.”

He and Derek watched each other for a long moment before Derek moved forward, jumping onto the bed in one fluid movement. He settled down beside Stiles, head on the other pillow.

"Good boy," Stiles muttered sleepily, his eyes growing heavy. Derek heaved a sigh next to him, sounding put-upon, but he didn't move.

Derek showed up more often after that. Stiles noticed that his dad started leaving the back door open even when it wasn't raining, but he didn't say anything. It was kind of nice having a dog in the house; they'd never been a family that was huge on having pets — there'd been no dogs because of his allergies, and his mom had had a cat that passed away before she did. Stiles had a snake in junior high, which his mom never would have allowed and his dad hated but tolerated — at least until the time it escaped and Dad found it curled up in his bed — and anyway, he couldn't really cuddle with a snake.

He couldn't really cuddle when it came to Derek, truth be told. He didn't seem to like being touched all that much. He’d allow Stiles to pet his head for about thirty seconds before turning slowly and deliberately, letting Stiles know he was done. He never wagged his tail, either, so Stiles had a hard time judging his mood. Even so, it felt good having him around. When Stiles worked in the garden, Derek stopped hanging around at the edge of the trees and laid in the grass next to him instead, following bugs with his nose or dozing in the sunlight.

Stiles took it as a good sign that Derek hung around him. He didn't seem to like anyone beside Stiles and his dad. Scott showed up unannounced one night while they were eating dinner and a good thirty seconds before he opened the door, Derek lifted his head, lip curling back in a silent snarl before he’d slipped out the back door, tail held stiffly behind him. Stiles was glad he hadn't mentioned Derek to Scott that first time Scott had asked if they had a dog.

Stiles went back to work a week after the accident. He tried to go back on Monday, but his dad patiently convinced him to take one more day off. Stiles could see the sense in that; he couldn’t hold anything in his injured hand, couldn’t drive, couldn’t shelve books, couldn’t write. When he did go back, his dad had to drive him because the Jeep was still parked in the library parking lot.

Laura was on shift and she wrapped him into a tight hug when he came through the doors. Stiles winced as she jostled his arm — it wasn’t so bad now, but his slowly healing skin was still bandaged, as some of the blisters had popped and his doctor said it needed to be kept safe from infection. It didn’t hurt so much, but it was sore, tender all over.

“Stiles, I’m so sorry,” Laura said, stepping back with her brow creased in worry. “I’ve taken — I’ve
taken steps. It won’t happen again.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Stiles told her. “I shouldn’t have been snooping around.”

“Second degree burns are not a proportional punishment,” she admonished. “Come on.”

Stiles followed her through the stacks, bewildered when she headed for the basement stairs. “Uh — ”

“Come on,” Laura insisted. “You wanted to know what’s down here. I think it’s only fair I show you.”

“Are you sure?” Stiles said hesitantly, stepping down onto the concrete floor. Someone had tidied up the book sale tables, no sign of the mess he’d made getting thrown across the room the week before.

“Certain,” Laura said, pulling a key out of her pocket. She unlocked the grille and Stiles winced reflexively as she pulled it open, but nothing happened. “See?” Laura asked. “All fixed. C’mere.”

Stiles stepped forward cautiously, giving the gate a wide berth as he stepped into the small alcove with Laura. He could still feel a faint fizzling in the air but it seemed far off, not jarring his vision like he had before. Now, he could squint at the gilt titles on the spines of the books, and his eyes widened at what he saw.

“What is this?” he asked.

“We have, er, the largest library of the occult on the west coast,” Laura said, sounding a little sheepish, but proud too.

“Uh huh,” Stiles said, reaching out and taking Teutonic Curses off the shelf. It appeared to be written half in English, half in German and he put it back. “Why?”

Laura shrugged. “My family’s always been, hm…a little superstitious, you might say. Know thine enemy, or whatever.”

“Enemy?” Stiles raised an eyebrow at her. Laura shrugged again, but didn’t elaborate. “So why’s it locked up? It’s not like anyone can actually use this stuff.”

“Right,” Laura said heavily. “I don’t know. Some of these books are rare, they’re worth a lot of money. And anyway, there are some really weird by-laws on the record in this town.”

Stiles thought about the bookcase full of code books in his dad’s office and figured she was probably right.

“Anyway,” Laura continued, “this is what you sacrificed your skin for. Hope it’s not too much of a bummer.”

“I don’t know what I was expecting,” Stiles admitted, stepping out of the alcove so she could lock the gate behind them.

Laura winked at him. “Fooled ya,” she said. “Half those books are hollowed out and filled with gold and jewels. It’s the town’s secret treasure trove.”

Stiles grinned. “Good thing I know where to find the key.”

Laura narrowed her eyes at him. “You just try it, mister,” she said, then ruined the threat by laughing. Once they got back upstairs, Laura told him, “All right, now that that’s out of the way, you need to head over to town hall. They’ve been getting after me to have you go in to file a workman’s comp
“Do I still get paid for the time I spend there?” Stiles asked hopefully.

Laura grinned. “And wring more money out of the city? Obviously.”

“Sweet,” Stiles said. “I’ll head down, then.”

“Might as well take lunch while you’re out,” Laura told him cheerfully. “We’ll bill it to the city.”

Stiles raised his eyebrows. “You really like spending their money, huh?”

“Sure do,” Laura agreed jovially. “Finstock hates me. I’ve got a competition with myself to see if I can beat last year’s expenditures and I’m winning.”

Stiles laughed as he headed out the door.

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Town hall was a long, two-story building equidistant from the sheriff’s office and the library, built of blocks of pale stone. Inside, it was cool and quiet, muted with the noise of many people talking in low voices. A man at the front desk pointed him down a hallway to a small room with four desks, all of which were empty except for one, where a woman with dark hair sat in front of a computer. She smiled at Stiles as he came into the room.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah, I need to fill out workman's comp forms?” Stiles said. "Are you Jennifer?” The name plate on her desk said Jennifer Blake, but it never hurt to be sure.

“I am,” she said, offering a hand to Stiles, who took a step toward the desk so he could lean over to shake it awkwardly with his uninjured left hand. The second their hands touched, Stiles felt a sharp shock run down his arm and he jerked back with a cut off swear. It felt exactly like getting shocked by the door, though nowhere near as powerful. “Sorry!” Jennifer exclaimed, shaking her hand as if to rid it of excess energy. She gave Stiles a rueful smile. “You’ve got quite a spark, don’t you?”

“Guess I haven’t gotten rid of all that electricity yet,” Stiles joked, trying to ignore the way his arm still tingled.

Jennifer laughed sweetly and gestured at a chair across from her desk. "Sit down and I'll help you out. I'm guessing you're Stiles?"

"Yeah," Stiles said awkwardly, plunking himself down in the seat.

Jennifer gave him a sympathetic smile as she rifled through a pile of papers on her desk. "How's the arm?"

"Getting there," Stiles sighed.

"Raw honey's a good way to draw the fire out," she told him, handing him a clipboard and a pen.

"Er, thanks," Stiles said uncertainly. He'd stick with the ointment the hospital had prescribed, not some weird folk remedy, thanks. He turned his attention to the form instead, trying to hold the pen without hurting himself, which was a losing battle.

Jennifer watched him for a moment, her brow creasing, before saying, “Let me take care of that. I’ll
ask the questions, you tell me the answers — how does that sound?”

“Fine,” Stiles said, simultaneously relieved and embarrassed. “Thanks,” he added, as he handed over the pen and clipboard.

Jennifer smiled at him before turning her eyes to the papers in front of her. “First name?” she asked, her pen hovering above the top sheet.

“Stiles.”

She blinked at him. “That’s your real name?”

“Uh — no,” Stiles said, his cheeks coloring. “I didn’t realize it needed, uh. It’s Stanisław.”

He spelled it out for Jennifer, who wrote it down dutifully, then looked up at him with a smile. “That’s Polish, right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles replied uncomfortably. He didn’t like people knowing his name. Stanislaw had been his grandfather’s name and he’d died before Stiles was born, but his grandmother had always been weird about it. “Names have power,” she’d told him when he was little and had, in fact, been the one to start calling him Stiles. He didn’t really think there was anything to that statement but whether it was out of respect for his grandma or something else, he shared it with as few people as possible.

“All right,” Jennifer said, after watching him for a long moment. “Middle initial?”

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Stiles returned to the library an hour later with a sandwich from the deli across the street from town hall and a brownie for Laura, who took it with glee, proclaiming, “You’re my favorite.” The afternoon was quiet except for a meeting of the geological society, which had gathered at the library to look at the Hale family collection of minerals. Stiles watched them idly from the circulation desk, swinging his feet back and forth.

He was distracted; his mind kept slipping back to the woman at the town hall, and the way he’d felt that shock when he touched her. It could have been static electricity, he supposed, but he’d never felt a resulting shock that strong before. He was probably being paranoid.

-  

It was Friday, which mean board game night, although they abandoned the board games to play an increasingly rowdy game of charades. Lydia didn’t bring her hallucinogenic punch this time, for which Stiles was thankful, although at one point in the evening he picked up Scott’s beer by mistake and found it had that same sweet, almost herbal taste to it.

“It’s, uh, a homebrew,” Scott said, hurriedly snatching the bottle out of Stiles’ hand when he noticed the face Stiles made. “Still working on the recipe.”

“Definitely needs some work, dude,” Stiles said, wishing he could scrape the taste off his tongue. He settled for pounding a couple of regular-tasting beers instead. It occurred to him that people probably got bored in a small town like this — there probably wasn’t a huge drug market and they’d probably found some kind of weird local plant everyone used to get high. Stiles shrugged; they’d clearly all gotten used to it ages ago.

Hallucinogenic beer or not, Stiles was still astoundingly drunk by the time he left Scott’s house. He managed to keep his feet on the road, though he narrowly avoided collapsing into the ditch once or
twice, and stumbled back to the house in one piece. He was surprised to find Derek waiting at the end of the driveway, sitting primly on the gravel with a look of disgust on his face.

“Hey, buddy,” Stiles slurred cheerfully, ruffling Derek’s ears. The dog huffed, jerking out of his reach, but followed at his side as Stiles tottered down the driveway. He leaned against the Jeep for a moment, looking up at the house. All the windows stood dark, no sign of his dad up watching late-night talk shows, but he didn’t feel like going inside yet. The night was cool but not cold, hinting at warm summer days to come. Stiles looked down at Derek, sitting by his feet with his head turned toward the road. “You know what would be cool?” Stiles said. Derek turned at his voice, looking up at him. “It’d be awesome if you could talk. Wouldn’t that be rad? A talking dog.”

Derek made a soft noise, pressing his wet nose into Stiles’ palm. Stiles watched him, a little surprised — he could probably count on one hand the times Derek had touched him voluntarily. Moving carefully, Stiles slid down the side of the Jeep and leaned back against the tire and to his further surprise, Derek moved into his space without hesitation, sinking down onto the gravel next to him, his head on Stiles’ thigh.

“What do you do all day, huh?” Stiles asked him softly, reaching out and gently stroking Derek’s head. The hair there was short and soft, getting longer and more wiry down his neck, growing into a thick ruff, almost like a lion’s mane around his broad chest. “Do you get lonely? It’s okay if you do; we all do. I do.”

He liked Beacon Hills a lot, but he still felt like a stranger. He imagined it was like moving to a new school where everyone already had a history with each other, their own groups of friends and enemies. Even though everyone he’d met had been nothing but welcoming, he still felt like an outsider, blind to inside jokes and people’s histories. Even his dad had all the people at the station. And here sat Stiles, drunk in the dirt in the middle of the night, talking to a dog. He snorted. At least he had Derek.

"At least I have you," Stiles repeated out loud. Derek beat his tail against the ground just once, but it was enough.

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The next morning found Stiles sitting sullenly behind the circulation desk. He’d somehow managed to pass out on the ground and had woken up dew-soaked and shivering to his dad standing over him with a bewildered frown on his face. He’d called Stiles by his real name, which told him he was going to be in a lot of trouble later. At least Derek had stayed with him, though he’d trotted off into the woods when Stiles’ father had hauled him to his feet and pushed him towards the house.

Now, he had the worst hangover that he’d had since his first few weeks at college freshman year. Thank god the library was quiet for a Saturday, because every echoing whisper ricocheted through his head like a gunshot. Lydia sat at the other chair behind the desk, silent as the grave, dark circles under her eyes. Isaac lay under the desk, faint groans floating up to Stiles every couple of minutes.

Laura burst into the library about an hour after opening, looking inappropriately cheerful. "You're all looking pretty sorry for yourselves," she said brightly. Stiles winced at the volume of her voice and she grinned at him, rapping sharply on the counter with her knuckles. "Lahey!" she called as Isaac groaned. "Don't you dare puke under there!"

"Can we help you?" Lydia asked tiredly.

"I brought my beloved employees donuts," Laura announced, setting a bag down on the counter in front of Stiles. "I will now accept your praise and thanks."
What she got instead was a couple of half-hearted smiles and a muttered, "Thanks," from Stiles, but she didn't seem deterred. "Don't eat too many," Laura warned, putting a hand on Stiles' arm as he reached for the bag. She paused, a strange expression flitting over her face.

"Something wrong?" Stiles asked nervously.

"No," Laura said after a moment, eyeing him steadily. "Do you have a dog, Stiles?"

"Huh?" Stiles looked down at himself. He'd changed, but he hadn't showered since yesterday. Did Derek have a really strong smell or something? He'd never noticed. Maybe it was time to give both of them a bath. "Uh, not really."

"Hm," Laura said softly. She seemed a little thrown. "Well — um. Have a good day, you guys."

After she left, Stiles turned to Lydia. "Did she seem off to you?"

Lydia shrugged noncommittally. Under the desk, Isaac offered, "You do smell like dog."

"Seriously?" Stiles complained.

Isaac scooted out from under the desk and sat up, his nose wrinkling. "You smell like — "

"Isaac," Lydia said sharply.

Isaac gave her a mutinous look and muttered, "Never mind. Where are those donuts?"

Stiles gave him a suspicious look as he handed over the bag. "What were you going to say?"

"He was just going to be rude," Lydia said, narrowing her eyes at Isaac.

He took a donut from the bag and retreated back under the desk. "I'm surrendering," he said, his voice echoing up to them. Lydia smiled smugly and bit into a jelly donut.

The only interesting thing that happened at the library that day was an older woman who came in with a note from the town giving her permission to get into the book room downstairs. She was the first person Stiles had seen come in to use the rare books, and he watched with interest as Lydia carefully read through the letter, then stamped it with an official-looking seal before sliding it into a drawer. She made him show the woman downstairs and unlock the grille for her, which he did carefully, tensing as he pulled it open.

"Why are people so interested in those books?" Stiles asked once he'd returned upstairs. "People don't believe in that stuff, do they?"

"If you look hard enough, you'll find people who believe in anything," Lydia replied evenly. "It's not necessarily a question of belief, but a question of knowledge. Aren't you curious?"

Stiles shrugged. "Not really. Laura showed me around downstairs yesterday."

"You should spend some time down there," Lydia told him. "You might learn something interesting."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Isaac asked, looking a little uneasy. By this point, he'd emerged from under the desk and was leaning against the circulation desk, his curls limp.

"Why, Isaac?" Lydia asked, her voice sweet and pointed. "The door already shocked him. What do you think is going to happen?"
"Nothing," Isaac muttered.

"All right," Stiles said slowly, not sure what he'd just witnessed. "Uh. I'm just, uh, going to put some books away."

Lydia gave him a tight smile. "You do that." When Stiles retreated into the stacks, pulling a book cart along behind him, he could hear the couple whispering furiously at each other. He decided it was best to stay out of it.

- 

"How'd you guys meet?" Stiles asked his dad a couple nights later. Dad was sprawled in his armchair with a beer and he kept tossing Derek pieces of pepperoni. Derek himself was sprawled across the end of the couch next to Stiles, who had his feet up on the coffee table.

"Who?" Dad asked guiltily.

"Derek," Stiles replied patiently. He poked a finger at Derek's furry hindquarters and the dog snapped at him irritably before whipping his head back around to snatch another piece of pepperoni out of the air.

"Oh," his father said thoughtfully. "Well. When I first started in the fall, a couple of people in town told me about a — a stray that hung around the Hale house so I headed up there to see if I could catch him. Took a couple of visits before I even saw him so I started going up there with my lunch and I'd talk — I'd tell him stories about you and me, things going on in town. It took a few months, but after a while we were sharing lunch every day."

Stiles rolled his eyes at his dad's big heart. "And then what? You snatched him one rainy day and brought him home?"

"I told him if it ever got too cold, he could stop by," Dad replied loftily. "And one night last January, I looked out the window and there he was. He's got a lot of pride," he added, eyeing Derek, who huffed. "Waited until the coldest night of the year. I don't think he likes being helped." This was apparently too much for Derek, who made a low, angry rumbling noise deep in his chest — one of the few vocalizations Stiles had ever heard from him — leapt off the couch and left the room, the back door creaking a few seconds later.

"I think you offended him," Stiles said mildly, stretching sideways to take the space Derek had just vacated.

"Sometimes you have to hear these hard truths," Dad replied, tossing a piece of pepperoni at him.

"I'm not a dog!" Stiles protested, but picked the meat off his chest anyway. Just as he was about to pop it into his mouth, there came a sudden storm of noise from the backyard, a deep, thundering snarling that made Stiles jolt upright in surprise. "What the hell was that?"

His father was already halfway out of his seat and he crossed the room as Stiles twisted around on the couch, trying to peer out the window into the darkness. His dad strode into the kitchen and flicked on the back light, which lit the backyard and cast the trees in deep shadows. Stiles thought he saw a flurry of movement at the edge of the light, a mash of dark and light, and his blood ran cold.

"Shit," Dad swore, striding back through the room.

Stiles leaned after him, his heart pounding. "Dad, was that Derek?"
"I don't know," his father replied grimly, disappearing into the den. Stiles could hear him rummaging around there and when he reappeared a moment later, he had a shotgun in his hands. Stiles opened his mouth to speak, but they both paused when a howl rose up through the trees, rough and wild.

"Dad — " Stiles said hoarsely, but his father shook his head as he headed for the kitchen. "Whoa, wait, you can't — "

"Call Laura," his dad told him seriously, "then call the station. Tell them I've got a 10-91AW."

"Wait, Dad — " Stiles protested, but his dad was already out the back door, stepping out into the dim pool of light in the backyard. Whatever was going on in the trees was still audible and whatever it was sounded violent. He scrambled for his phone; he had no idea why Dad wanted him to call Laura, but he wasn't going to question it, not when he was out there walking into probable danger.

Laura picked up on the first ring, sounding tense. "Stiles."

"Hey," Stiles said breathlessly. "Uh, my dad wanted — "

"I know," Laura interrupted abruptly. "I'm on my way."

"Oh, uh, okay," Stiles said, but he spoke only to dead air; Laura had already hung up.

Next he called the station, only to hear a recorded message telling him that the station was closed and his call was being forwarded to whichever deputy was on call. After a few rings, a woman picked up with a sharp, "Deputy Knox."

“Hi,” Stiles said. “Uh. This is Stiles Stilinski, John’s — ”

“What’s going on?” she interrupted.

Stiles blinked. “Dad said to tell you there’s a 10-91AW and — ”

“Where?” Deputy Knox demanded.

“At our house. Uh — ”

“On my way," she snapped, and hung up. Stiles gaped at the phone for a moment before twisting back around, peering out the window. He couldn’t see his dad or whatever thing — things, maybe. It sounded like a fight of some kind, though he could hear them snarling and his dad shouting, too far off to hear what he was saying.

Stiles dithered there, unsure what to do. He knew the combination to his dad’s gun safe — his mom’s birthday. He knew how to handle a gun, but he hadn’t gone shooting in probably five years and anyway, he knew how dangerous it was to wander around the woods in the dark with a loaded weapon. He couldn’t just leave his dad out there alone, though, he hadn’t even taken a flashlight.

Just as Stiles made up his mind to head outside, he heard a car door slam in the driveway and he spun around, expecting a knock on the door. Instead, he heard fast footsteps come round the side of the house and he turned around again just in time to see a woman flash past the back windows, heading for the trees, her long dark hair streaming behind her. Stiles stared, pretty sure that had been Laura.

Before he could shout after her, there came the sound of more cars coming down the driveway, and when he went around to the front of the house, it seemed that Deputy Knox had roused the entire deputy roster. They all went pouring around the side of the house after Laura, most of them clad in
civilian clothes, but all carrying rifles.

“Jesus,” Stiles whispered, his eyes going wide as he watched them flow en masse across the backyard and into the woods. What the fuck was going on? He’d thought there was a bear out there or something.

Most of the snarling from the forest had died down, replaced by the sound of human voices. Stiles could see lights flashing amongst the tree; some of the deputies had had the good sense to bring flashlights with them. Stiles sat staring into the dark woods for what seemed like ages, draped over the back of the couch while he waited for some kind of revelation.

Eventually, there did come movement from the trees; a shadow burst from the woods and Stiles jumped, startled, but it was Derek, sprinting across the backyard. He banged through the back door, but slowed as he came into the living room, head raised and ears pricked forward. Stiles sighed, relieved to see someone he knew, even if it was only a dog.

“Hey, dude,” Stiles said. “Was that you making all that noise out there?”

Derek leapt up onto the couch next to him and shoved his nose against Stiles’ neck, huffing wetly against his skin. Stiles yelped in surprise and twisted away from him, falling sideways against the cushions. Derek gave him a pitying sort of look and put his paws up on the back of the couch to watch out the window while Stiles rubbed at the wetness on his neck.

“Ugh, gross,” he muttered, then froze as he glanced at his fingers. They glistened in the light, streaked red with blood. “Shit, Derek!” He surged up onto his knees, leaning in to examine Derek’s face. He hadn’t noticed at first, as it blended in with Derek’s dark fur, but there was blood smeared all over his muzzle and chest, matting his fur. “Dude!” He tried to poke at Derek’s fur and see if the blood belonged to him or whatever he’d been fighting, but Derek shifted away from him, curling his lip above his blood-smeared teeth.

“Come on,” Stiles pleaded. “Let me take a look at you, buddy. I just want to make sure you’re okay.” He got to his feet and Derek watched him suspiciously. Stiles gestured toward the ceiling. “Will you come to the bathroom with me? The light’s a lot better up there.”

He took a step toward the stairs and gave Derek a hopeful look. Slowly, like it caused him a great loss of dignity to do so, Derek slipped off the couch and slunk upstairs ahead of Stiles. He even sat while Stiles perched on the edge of the bathtub in the bathroom and though he curled his lip while Stiles carefully combed through his fur, he made no further noise or protest.

The only injury Stiles could find was what looked like a bite on one of Derek’s back legs, the skin torn and weeping blood onto the linoleum floor. Derek whimpered when Stiles prodded gently at the skin, muscle shuddering under his touch. “Sorry,” Stiles murmured, and sat upright, wondering what to do. Clean it, maybe?

“Stay,” he told Derek, and went out to the hall closet, where he dug through the shelves to see if they had any antiseptics. He found an old bottle of iodine way in the back and paused there, because right next to his hand was what looked like a set of hinges, but he had things he needed to take care of. He grabbed the bottle and a roll of bandages and went back into the bathroom, where Derek sat patiently.

“All right,” Stiles declared. “Sorry about this.” He poured iodine onto a towel and then leaned forward, gently dabbing at the wound on Derek’s leg. Derek snarled and Stiles froze because it was not an entirely encouraging sound to hear with the back of his neck exposed. After a moment of slightly terrified silence, Stiles felt the press of Derek’s cold nose against his skin, nudging him gently
as if to say sorry to interrupt, do go on. Gathering up his courage, Stiles pressed his hand forward again, gently cleaning the dirt and clotting blood from the wound.

Once it was clean as he thought it’d get, Stiles washed his hands but paused over the bandages. He looked down at Derek, his muzzle stiff with dried blood, and said, “I don’t suppose you’d be up for a bath, would you? Only, I’ve already had three people accuse me of smelling like a dog, and now you’re covered in blood.”

Derek looked up at him, unimpressed, and Stiles sighed. “Fine. But you’re not hanging out on the couch until you get yourself clean, all right? Fair’s fair.”

Derek gave a long-suffering sigh and, after another moment of staring up at Stiles, got to his feet and hopped lightly into the bathtub. Stiles blinked in surprise. “Oh — really? Jesus, you’re smart.” Derek gave him a smug look and Stiles laughed. “Like I didn’t already know that.”

He really was, Stiles thought, turning on the warm water and pulling the shower head down. He was much more perceptive than any other dog Stiles had ever met, and a thousand times more intelligent. Stiles knew that Derek could understand what he was saying, it was clear by the way he’d gone straight up to the bathroom, and jumped in the tub, and just the way he looked at Stiles when he talked. Stiles knew he was listening and he didn’t know if that was awesome or frightening. Maybe a little bit of both.

At any rate, he didn’t put up a fight when Stiles rinsed him. No, he leaned into Stiles’ fingers as he combed through Derek’s coat — a difficult task with one hand still unable to function all that well. The water that came off Derek swirled red and brown down the drain, though, and clearly the bath was long overdue. Stiles didn’t have dog shampoo so he used his dad’s bottle of Suave, which smelled like green apples and made Derek sneeze. Stiles laughed at him and Derek very carefully and deliberately took hold of Stiles’ calf, his teeth pressing against the denim of Stiles’ jeans in a way that seemed to suggest that he could cripple Stiles if he truly wanted to.

Stiles was so distracted taking care of Derek that he’d almost forgotten about the earlier commotion in the woods. He was sitting on the floor toweling Derek off when he heard the back door open, followed by soft voices from downstairs. Derek, who’d been snuffling at Stiles’ hair while Stiles dried him off, stiffened, his entire body going rigid as Stiles dropped the towel and got to his feet. He headed downstairs to find his father and Laura standing in the living room, talking quietly, though they both stopped when he appeared.

“Hi,” Stiles said warily. “So, uh, what was the big deal? Why’d you call in the cavalry?”

His father glanced at Laura and said, “I thought we had a mountain lion on our hands.”

“Oh?” Stiles asked, startled. “Why’s Laura here?”

She gave him a faint smile. “You might call me something of an expert when it comes to big carnivores,” she said. The way she said it made it sound like a joke but Stiles could tell she wasn’t lying, which was a surprise to him. He definitely never would have expected her to have any sort of experience with wildlife.

“Well,” Dad said to Laura, “thanks for your help, anyway. I’ll keep you updated.”

“Please do,” Laura said, taking a few steps toward the front door. As she passed the stairs though, she froze, her eyes looking past Stiles, still standing halfway down. “I thought you said you didn’t have a dog,” she said quietly.
Stiles turned and saw Derek standing at the top of the stairs, his ears pinned back against his skull. “He’s not ours,” Stiles said awkwardly. “Dad says he hangs out at the old Hale hou— ” He cut himself off, remembering who he was talking to and what she’d lost in the fire.

Laura didn’t seem to notice; her face had been overtaken by a very unhappy expression and Stiles shifted uncomfortably as a couple of things slotted into place. The fact that Derek hung out around the Hale house, combined with the look on Laura’s face, made him suspect that Derek was in fact Laura’s dog. He hoped it wasn’t true because he suddenly, desperately, didn’t want to lose Derek’s company.

“Is he yours?” Stiles asked, his stomach heavy with dread.

Laura blinked, then gave a hollow laugh. “No,” she said. “He’s not. He doesn’t belong to anyone. If anything, this town belongs to him.”

“All right,” Stiles said slowly, not understanding what she meant.

“Do you know who he is?” Laura asked him. Stiles’ father made a short, abortive movement like he wanted to stop her, but he didn’t say anything, and Stiles gave him a curious look before he replied.

“I know his name’s Derek. That’s all.”

Laura seemed to relax, real humor sneaking back into her expression. “That’s enough,” she said. “I think you’ll be good for each other. Don’t you, Sheriff?”

“I think so,” Stiles’ dad agreed, sticking his hands in his pockets.

"Well," Laura said softly, her eyes still focused on Derek. "I guess I'll be heading home."

"Drive safe," Stiles' father told her as Stiles said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah," Laura nodded. "Bye, guys." She paused before adding, "Bye, Der."

Stiles glanced up the stairs to see that Derek had retreated. Laura sighed quietly and raised a hand in farewell as she left the house. After the door swung shut behind her, Stiles looked at his father and said, "A mountain lion, huh?"

"Yes," his father said wearily. "A mountain lion. Can we talk about this tomorrow?"

"...Fine," Stiles said. "But only because I gave Derek a bath and now I need to take a shower."

His father waved him away and Stiles went back upstairs. He didn't go into the bathroom immediately, though, he headed for his room instead, where he found Derek as he'd expected. Derek had crammed himself under Stiles' bed, only the tips of his black paws sticking out from beneath it. Stiles got down on the floor, lying on the rug next to his bed so he could see underneath the box spring. Derek was just a dark shape in the shadows, though Stiles could see the glint of his eyes reflecting the light from the hall.

"Hey dude," Stiles said softly. "You all right?" Derek made a very quiet noise, which sounded distinctly unhappy, but Stiles didn't move; he knew better than to reach out to him. He rested his hand on the floor between them though, palm up like a peace offering. He didn't say anything else, just laid there on his stomach breathing steadily, watching Derek. After a long, long moment, Derek shifted forward slightly, bringing his head out from under the bed just far enough to bump his nose against Stiles' hand. Stiles relaxed slightly and reached out to scratch at Derek's damp fur. For once, Derek didn't seem to dislike Stiles' touch; if anything, he shifted closer.
"I know you can't tell me what's wrong," Stiles murmured, rubbing Derek's soft ears, "but you can stay here whenever you want, you know? Obviously you've got some kind of history with Laura, but that's fine."

Derek sighed softly and Stiles ruffled his ears. “I’m gonna go take a shower, but I’ll be back.”

Stiles took his time in the shower, scrubbing blood and dirt off his hands while he tried to process the night’s events. He didn’t believe his dad, was the bottom line. Dangerous or not, he didn’t think the entire sheriff’s department would have gone swarming, heavily armed, into the woods after a mountain lion. He was pretty sure that was what game wardens were for.

He also couldn’t figure out where Laura fit into everything. He could tell she hadn’t been lying that she had experience with “big carnivores,” as she’d said, but if the mountain lion thing wasn’t true, then what the hell was she doing out there? And how did she know Derek? This town belongs to him, she’d said.

Stiles washed shampoo out of his hair, gritting his teeth thoughtfully. Scott had known about Derek, and his dad had said some people had told him about Derek. If he was a stray, it made sense that a lot of people in town were familiar with him, so maybe it wasn’t so weird that Laura knew him too, but she’d seemed almost upset by the sight of him.

He shook his head as he climbed out of the shower. He was pretty sure he was missing something; he had that feeling again of being a stranger, standing outside the window looking in. It wasn’t a great feeling, but he hoped his dad would be willing to open up to him, maybe give him some insight.

As Stiles toweled himself off, he caught sight of the bottle of iodine sitting next to the sink and paused, the sight jolting his memory and reminding him of the hinges he’d noticed at the back of the closet. He didn’t know how old the house was, but he’d found enough weird quirks already to be unsurprised by a secret compartment at the back of the hall closet.

After he was dry, Stiles wrapped his towel around his waist and left the bathroom to investigate the closet. He could hear Dad downstairs, thumping around in the kitchen, and Stiles moved quietly, unwilling to get caught for some reason that he couldn’t quite understand. He carefully shifted aside bottles of cures for various ailments — some of which he didn’t even recognize and looked as though they’d been sitting there for years, probably left there by the previous homeowner — until he had enough space to see the back wall clearly.

There was a small door there, half as wide as the closet and only a foot high, with a porcelain knob and brass hinges, totally innocuous. Stiles reached for it but paused just before touching the knob, remembering the last time he tried to open an unfamiliar door. His burnt hand throbbed at the memory, as if to say proceed with caution. And Stiles did; he kept his hand hovering there, just millimeters from the doorknob, while he considered. He was almost certain he could feel something like the buzzing by the gateway in the library, but not — it felt softer, friendlier somehow. He didn’t know how to explain it, but it felt all right, so he took a chance and put his fingers to the knob, pulling the little door open.

Stiles didn’t feel anything, not even a tingle, which was kind of a relief, if he was being honest with himself, and leaned into the closet to peer inside.

Beyond the door was a shallow hole in the wall, framed on all sides with wood. Sitting inside were two books and, on top of them, a note. When Stiles reached forward and pulled them out, he found the note said only, If you’ve found this place, then you’ll need these. M.M.
“Huh,” Stiles said softly. His head turned as he heard his dad come into the living room. It sounded like he was heading for the stairs so Stiles hurriedly stepped back, shutting the little door and shoving bottles back in front of it before closing the closet door and retreating to his room. Once inside, the door only slightly ajar so Derek could get out if he wanted, Stiles slipped on a pair of boxer and got into bed. He paused there a moment, wondering if Derek was going to come out from under the bed, but there came no movement from below, so he settled back amongst his pillows and turned his focus to the books.

One was a leather-bound journal. Flipping through it, Stiles found that it was written in French, which led him to believe that the book had belonged to the old homeowner. He had a vague memory of his dad telling him that she'd been a French teacher at the high school — that and the fact that the entries only went back to 2009, which told him it’d been placed in the cupboard fairly recently. He didn't know French so it wasn't of much interest to him, but there were drawings mixed amongst the entries, sketches of plants and wildlife. He paused over a drawing of a dog that looked just like Derek, brushing his fingers over the faint imprint of the pen strokes in the paper.

"You ever going to come out from under there, dude?" he asked out loud, glancing toward the edge of the bed. There was no response from Derek though — either he'd fallen asleep or he was ignoring Stiles, who bet on the latter. "Fine," he muttered, and turned his attention to the second book.

This one was smaller, almost pocket-sized, bound in aged turquoise canvas with no title, just an embossed image of a flame on the cover. Stiles touched the worn golden lines, hesitating before he opened the book. He thought he could feel something again, that buzzing at the back of his mind, so faint he was probably imagining it. No, he was definitely imagining it, because there was no reason for it to keep happening. No reason. He was definitely not going crazy.

Stiles opened the book at random and frowned down at the page in front of him. “What the hell?” he murmured. The spread before him looked like a recipe but it wasn't a recipe. The heading at the top of the page said Levitation (Inanimate Objects) and was followed by step-by-step instructions on how to, apparently, levitate inanimate objects. Stiles flipped the page and there was, sure enough, Levitation (Living Creatures). Stiles turned the pages, fascinated, and saw Raising Winds, Basic Glamours, Scrying (Mirrors), Scrying (Water), Defensive Wards, and pages and pages of…spells.

Stiles flipped to the front of the book, certain he'd somehow found a prop from Harry Potter, but there was no sign that this book was anything other than earnest and he shut it, tapping his fingers against the cover. All right, so the lady who’d lived here before them was…a witch? He guessed that kind of made sense, considering all the weird shit he’d cleaned out of the shed. And his dad had said there’d been a ton of strange things in the house, too. And hell, the library had that whole collection of books on the occult. Spend some time down there, Lydia had said.

“This is so fucking weird,” Stiles said. He turned his head, attention caught by Derek, who was finally coming out from under the bed. He straightened and shook himself all over, then turned and put his chin on the edge of the mattress, looking at Stiles. Stiles looked back, his eyebrows raised. “You’re clean,” he said. “You can get up here.”

Derek gave him a long look before leaping up onto the bed without any effort, his entire being exuding a nonchalant air, like he didn’t need Stiles’ permission (which he didn’t, really; Derek was big enough that Stiles wouldn’t have fought him if he wanted to get on the bed, but it was nice to feel like he had a choice). He curled up in the space next to Stiles, who watched him shift closer and closer, pretending not to notice when Derek put his head on Stiles’ stomach. Play it cool, he thought, though he was actually pleased that Derek was finally getting friendly.

“You ever seen anything like this?” Stiles asked Derek, offering him the book of spells. Derek
sniffed the book carefully, sneezed explosively, and it was probably — definitely — a trick of the light, but Stiles could have sworn that his eyes flashed red. "I think it's time to go to sleep," he muttered, setting the books on his nightstand. He shut off his light and settled down in bed, Derek shifting with him so his head ended up on Stiles' chest.

Stiles exhaled slowly, absently sinking his fingers into the thick ruff of fur at Derek's neck. "Been an exciting day, huh? Mountain lions, spell books — what next?"

Derek sighed in what sounded like agreement and Stiles patted his back comfortingly. "At least you're clean now, buddy, so I guess some good came out of the day." Derek huffed at that, his hot breath wafting across Stiles' face. Stiles grimaced, pushing at Derek's head. "Gross, dude; what have you been eating? I guess a toothbrush is next on the list for you."

Derek snapped at his fingers, but it seemed more playful than anything. Stiles let himself be caught and Derek gently gnawed at his hand for a moment before shoving his nose against Stiles' palm. Stiles laughed quietly, sweeping his hand over Derek's head and down his back. "I'm glad you decided I was worth hanging around," Stiles told him softly. "I hope you'll stick about, because I really like having you here."

Derek huffed again, but it was a softer noise, and he shifted around, scooting up the bed until he was crammed up against the crook of Stiles' neck, breathing warm air against his throat. Stiles grinned, unreasonably pleased, and looped an arm around Derek's neck, holding him close as he slipped into slumber.

Waking up sneezing the next morning from having his face shoved into dog hair all night was well worth it.

He went in that afternoon to see his dad at lunch because he was an awesome son and also because he was ready to get some answers about the previous night’s events and his dad wouldn’t be able to get out of it if Stiles trapped him at his desk. Also because he was an awesome son, he brought his dad food, although because he also cared about his dad’s health, it was a veggie burger and a salad. His dad looked at it sadly while Stiles thumped himself down into the chair across the desk. He still felt a little itchy; he’d had to take some allergy meds when he’d woken up because his throat had been half swollen shut, but hey, small sacrifices were to be made when making friends with feral dogs or whatever. At any rate, he had the day off work and he was going to make the most of it.

"Sooooo," Stiles drawled as his dad glowered and dumped ranch dressing on his salad. "Last night."

"Last night," Dad echoed moodily. "What about it?"

"You really expect me to believe there was a mountain lion in our backyard?" Stiles asked.

"There are mountain lions in California," he said. "They’re not as uncommon as you might think."

"I’m aware of that," Stiles said. "But in our backyard? There’s no way Derek could have fought a mountain lion and not have gotten away with only a bite on the leg."

"You might be surprised," Dad muttered.

Stiles frowned at him, opening his mouth to ask just what he meant by that when someone knocked on the door and a deputy poked his head into the office. "Dan’s back from the preserve," he told Stiles’ father. "Wants to talk to you."
Dad nodded and got to his feet. “You stay here;” he said to Stiles, who stuck his tongue out at him, but stayed where he was. He tapped his feet absently as he waited for his father to return, staring around idly. He looked at the wolf skull by the window, then at the bookshelves beneath it, and his feet stilled. He’d looked up the code his dad had told him to tell the deputy last night, 10-91AW, but Google had given him nothing but some kind of racecar.

Stiles got out of the chair and walked over to the bookcase, where he found a slim volume titled *Beacon County Sheriff’s Department Codes and Regulations, 2014 Edition*. He flipped through it, past chapters on ethics and bylaws, all the way to the back where he found a list of radio codes. He ran his finger down the list, past 10-60 – kids playing in the street; past 10-71 – a shooting; until he reached 10-91 – a stray animal. Below that was 10-91A – a vicious animal, and below that — Stiles’ eyes widened.

10-91AW. Wolf.

Stiles’ eyes snapped to the wolf skull on top of the bookcase. “None in California, huh?” he said sarcastically, slamming the book shut. No wonder Derek had attacked. Jesus. He shoved the book back onto the shelf, glared at his dad’s desk for a moment, then slipped out of the office. He didn’t know why his dad was trying to hide things from him, but he wasn’t super pleased about it, and he’d be happy to tell his father as much.

Stiles headed down the hall that led to the room where all the deputies had desks, but jerked himself backward as he turned the corner because his father was standing there with a group of deputies and — Stiles peered carefully around the corner — Laura was there too, her arms folded over her chest. She did not look pleased. His dad was standing with his back to Stiles, his head turned slightly as he listened to one of the deputies speak.

“— Definitely living in town somewhere, not the preserve. Abandoned house, maybe.”

“I don’t understand why now,” Stiles’ father said. “It’s been five years since the fire and Peter — ”

“Derek’s been distracted lately,” Laura said, then pointedly added, “Your son’s waiting around the corner.”

Stiles was too busy wondering what Derek had to do with anything to realize he’d been found out until his dad came around the corner, looking grim. “Oh,” Stiles said hurriedly, forcing a smile. “Hey, Dad, I was looking — ”

“Uh huh,” Dad said, looking unimpressed. “I think it’s time you headed home.”

Stiles scowled at him. He was twenty years old; he didn’t need bossing around. “What’s going on? Why are you being so secretive?”

“This is police business, Stiles,” his father sighed. “Do me a favor and stay out of it.”

“Like that’s ever happened,” Stiles scoffed, heading for the exit. “If you won’t tell me what’s going on, I’ll just have to figure it out myself and you know I will.”

“See you at home,” his dad said, as if Stiles hadn’t said anything. “Why don’t you pick us up something for dinner? I like the sound of steak.”

Stiles grumbled to himself all the way out to his car. Whatever his dad had been talking to the deputies and Laura about, it didn’t sound like it had anything to do with what happened in the woods the night before, but why was his dad being so closed-off about it? There’d been cases in the past that he’d tried to keep under wraps, usually without success, but more often than not he shared stuff
He drove to the grocery store and headed inside, muttering mutinuously the whole way in, only stopping when an old lady gave him the stink-eye. The store was quiet and he stood in front of the meat counter for a while, absentmindedly humming along with the nineties music playing over the store radio. He was just reaching for a couple packs of sirloin when someone stepped up beside him and he jumped.

It was Jennifer, the clerk from the town hall, and she smiled apologetically. “Sorry,” she said. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s fine,” Stiles replied. “I was off in my own world, I guess.”

She smiled again. “Stanisław, right?”

“Er, Stiles, actually,” he said uncomfortably.

“Right,” Jennifer nodded. “How’s your arm doing?”

“Oh,” Stiles said blankly. “Uh, it’s fine. Thanks.”

“That’s great,” Jennifer said, leaning forward to snag a package of ribeye. “Well, have a good day.”

“You too,” Stiles replied, and watched her disappear down the canned foods aisle. There was something strange about her, he thought, though he couldn’t put his finger on it. She made him uneasy.

When Stiles got home, he shoved the steaks in the fridge and spent the rest of the afternoon out in the garden. The woods were quiet and he couldn’t help feeling a little unnerved being outside — whatever was out there, whether it be a mountain lion, or a wolf, or something else entirely, it was obviously dangerous. He didn’t know where Derek had disappeared off to; he hadn’t hung around after Stiles woke that morning, slipping out the back door while Stiles made himself breakfast. Stiles would have felt a lot better if he knew Derek was around.

He made do with his own company, weeding out the garden. Things were coming in nicely now, the dirt mostly covered in a carpet of green growth. He was proud of himself; there was nothing like seeing the tangible results of hard work, even if it was still weeks away from actually being edible.

His dad came home around five-thirty and Stiles took a shower while his father got their steaks on the grill. He’d hoped that Derek might show up, lured by the smell of the meat cooking, but he didn’t. Stiles and his dad ate alone, sitting on the back porch again, toes brushing the grass.

“Dad,” Stiles said after a while, setting aside his plate. They hadn’t spoken much since his father got home, and Stiles had been thinking about what he’d overhead at the station.

His father sighed, sounding tired, like he already knew what Stiles was thinking. “Stiles,” he said. “I told you. It’s police business — ”

“I know, I know,” Stiles said impatiently. “I’m not trying to pry, I promise. I just want to know, for my own peace of mind; is everything all right? Like, are we safe out here?” He watched his father chew at his lip and added, “it’s just — it’s weird being out here. With the woods all around and everything. It’s different than the city.”

His dad nodded slowly, looking grim. “I understand,” he said, and sighed again. “I’m not too sure
what’s going on myself, but I can tell you that there have been some reported sightings of a suspicious man hanging around town, and we don’t know what his intentions are.”

Stiles stared off into the woods, tapping his fingers against the deck. “So,” he said eventually. “Dangerous or not?”

“I don’t know,” his father replied. “But I’m leaning toward dangerous. Man disappears for five years before showing up out of the blue? Doesn’t seem right to me.”


Dad shook his head. “No, no. I’ve got people looking for him. There’d be no reason for him to show up out here.”

“Who is he?” Stiles asked curiously. “Can you tell me?”

His father hesitated a long moment before he said, “His name’s Peter Hale.”

“Peter…” Stiles straightened, his eyes going wide. “A Hale? Is he related to Laura? Is he her brother?”

His dad shook his head, getting to his feet. “No, he’s her uncle. You done?”

Stiles nodded slowly, handing his father his empty plate and following him inside. His dad looked hunted, and Stiles could tell he didn’t want to continue the conversation, so he took a step back for the moment and changed topics. “I haven’t seen Derek all day.”

“Uh huh,” Stiles muttered. Hadn’t Laura said the same thing last night? This town belongs to him. He supposed that when someone didn’t have a house, the whole world was their home. It didn’t really make him feel any better, especially now that he knew there was a potentially dangerous man roaming around outside somewhere.

“Don’t worry about Derek,” Dad said, coming into the living room a few minutes later. “This town basically belongs to him. He’s got territory to look out for.”

“Uh huh,” Stiles muttered. Hadn’t Laura said the same thing last night? This town belongs to him. He supposed that when someone didn’t have a house, the whole world was their home. It didn’t really make him feel any better, especially now that he knew there was a potentially dangerous man roaming around outside somewhere.

“I could start taking you to the gun range again, if it would make you feel better,” his dad offered, but Stiles shook his head. He didn’t like guns all that much; didn’t trust himself not to accidentally shoot his foot off. He couldn’t see himself threatening anyone, not even a home invader.

When he went to bed later, Stiles picked up the book of spells and flipped through it idly. A question of knowledge, Lydia had said, not belief. It seemed so…unreal to him, almost like a prank, and yet — Stiles landed on the page titled Defensive Wards and tapped his finger against the paper thoughtfully. It couldn’t hurt, right? And no one would ever know.
Stiles lifted his head, listening carefully, but the house sat silent. His dad had gone to bed at the same time Stiles had, and there was still no sign of Derek. No witnesses. Stiles swallowed, scanning the instructions, which seemed too easy, but he got out of his bed and rooted around in one of his desk drawers until he found a box of chalk, then sat himself down on the floor. He used the compass app on his phone to orient himself to the north and then it was just chalking four symbols in the cardinal directions. Stiles double and triple-checked them with the book, then dusted off his hands and, feeling a little silly, read the words at the bottom of the page.

Nothing happened. Stiles expected some kind of frisson or something, but the air was still, the house quiet. He put his hand out and met no sort of invisible resistance. Stiles snorted; so much for that. He hadn’t really expected it to work, anyway, but it would have been cool. He’d been so into fantasy as a kid, finding out magic was real would have been fulfilling a childhood dream.

“Stupid,” Stiles muttered, getting to his feet and scuffing out the chalk marks before climbing back into bed. He was glad Derek hadn’t been there; for an animal with no means of communication, he had a fucking expressive face and Stiles didn’t need that judgy look.

“Stupid,” Stiles said again, but his eyes strayed to the book on his nightstand. He picked it up again, and instead of flipping through the pages, he turned to the first chapter. Summoning Light, it said.

For most inclined to magical abilities, the most rudimentary of skills is the ability to summon light from within. Commonly referred to as a ‘spark,’ the center of your magic lays somewhere inside you. To find it, close your eyes and focus on your being; some may find meditation is necessary to find the balance of mind and spirit that will allow you to see your spark.

Your spark may be influenced by any number of circumstances within or beyond your control: your mood and mental state, the proximity of other people or beings with magical abilities, and the very lay of the land and the ley lines that run below the earth. All of these things can negatively or positively affect the power of your spark. Areas where ley lines converge may amplify one’s spark to above-normal levels, while places that do not sit on ley lines may make it impossible for users to find their spark at all. It is not unheard of for people from these areas to go many years without any sign of any magical ability only to move to an area of high magical significance and discover their latent powers. Some of the most powerful enchanters of the last century came from the most magically barren places on earth.

Once your spark has been located, become familiar with it. Understand how it moves through your veins. Your magic is as an innate part of you as any organ, but significant in that, like muscles, it can be built upon and made more powerful with practice and exercise. Understanding how it works with your body will only give you greater control over it in the long run.

To summon light, focus on your spark. Trace its path from wherever it may reside — your brain, under your tongue, the pit of your stomach — and follow its path to the center of your palm. It should take the merest push, the slightest suggestion of a thought, to will your spark into manifesting.

“This has to be a joke,” Stiles muttered, shutting the book. Who could write that and take it seriously? Honestly, some people were so fucking weird. He’d heard of ley lines, but it was some stupid New Age crap. He put the book on his nightstand and shut off the light, flipping around until he got comfortable.

Stiles laid there listening to the crickets for a while, but he couldn’t sleep. Despite his best efforts, his mind kept slipping back to the book. Stiles scowled up at the ceiling, but really, no one was going to know if he tried again.

He shut his eyes and made himself relax, breathing slowly. He listened to his heart beat, to the blood
rushing in his ears. He exhaled evenly, wondering where his center was. He’d taken yoga one semester and back then it seemed to be somewhere below his heart, just above his stomach, but he was pretty sure that wasn’t what he was looking for in this case. He thought through every part of his body, starting at his toes and working his way upward. It would have been hilarious if his spark or whatever was in his dick — he had a hilarious mental image of shooting flames — but he found it, quite suddenly, in the hollow at the base of his throat.

Stiles couldn’t say how he knew what it was, or how he even really found it, but there it sat, pulsing warmly beneath his sternum like a second heart. He could hear a very faint buzzing in his head, something gentle.

“Is this real?” he whispered, touching his skin. It felt as warm as it should be, but in his head he could feel his spark pulse in response to his touch. “Holy shit.” He kind of wished Derek was there for that moment; Derek would have been impressed, he was pretty sure, and not much seemed to impress Derek.

Okay, he murmured, a little nervous. He squeezed his eyes shut, holding his palm out. *Trace a path.* Okay, easy enough — and now that he knew to look, he could feel the spark radiating through his body, spiraling along his limbs and splitting to reach the very tips of his fingers and toes. He focused on the piece that lay under his palm, took a deep breath, and pushed.

Light flared behind his eyelids and his eyes flew open to find a small globe of light hovering a couple of centimeters above his palm. “Holy shit,” he murmured weakly. “Holy shit.”

The sphere was maybe five inches in diameter and glowed a soft, flickering yellow-white, like candlelight. Stiles held his other hand up to it, fingers trembling, but it wasn’t hot. He poked at it with one long finger and it avoided him gracefully. Curiosity growing, he tilted his hand; the light didn’t fall, but followed the movement, bobbing until it hung securely over his knuckles. He was able to pass it to his other hand, then onto his knee, where it lost its balance and rolled slowly down his leg and ended up over his toes. It wouldn’t leave his body, though. When he tried to put it on the bed, it clung to his fingers like a piece of staticky Styrofoam.

“Hmm,” he said absently, reaching for the book. He almost turned on his light until he laughed a little hysterically and realized he didn’t exactly need it. He held his hand over the first chapter and scanned the text because now that he had the light, he didn’t know how to get rid of it.

The book made no mention of how to turn it off, though, and there was nothing in the following pages — the next chapter was on how to summon fire. Stiles shut the book again and frowned down at the light ball of light hovering in his palm.

“Go away,” he told it. The light did not in fact go away. Stiles frowned. He tried closing his fingers over it, like maybe he could snuff it out in his grasp, but the light nimbly avoided his grip. He glared at it. “C’mon!”

Stiles shut his eyes moodily. It must have something to do with his “spark.” He frowned, once again following the golden path that lined his bones, right up to his palm, and imagined jerking it backward, his fingers twitching at the movement. It worked, though, however stupid it seemed. He noticed the light fading behind his eyelids immediately, and by the time he opened them it was gone. Stiles grinned.

He’d fucking summoned light and either he was hallucinating or magic was real. It was everything he’d ever hoped for when he was a kid. Stiles had to do it again, just to prove that it wasn’t a fluke, calling forth the little ball of light and banishing it just as quickly. He laughed excitedly. After a few tries, he didn’t even need to shut his eyes any more, he could watch it bloom into existence and fade
into nothing. With some experimentation, Stiles found he could even change the size, growing it from just a pinprick to an orb a foot wide that hovered two feet above his head, bright enough to fill his entire room with soft, golden light.

It took a long time for him to fall asleep that night, his body thrumming with excitement. He ended up oversleeping the next day and stumbled into the library forty-five minutes late. Laura sat behind the circulation desk, that day's copy of The New York Times spread out before her. She didn't even look up at him.

"Rough night, huh?"

"Not really," Stiles lied. "Just couldn't sleep."

Laura did glance up at him then, her brow furrowing momentarily before smoothing out. She looked back down at the paper and nodded, deftly filling in an answer on the crossword puzzle. "Okay," she said. "Try not to be late next time. There are donuts in my office."

"You're the best boss," Stiles said loyally, and slipped off to grab a jelly donut before shelving the cart of returns Laura had let build up.

The day passed quietly. It was a slow day anyway, a Thursday, and Stiles spent most of it lost in thought. Laura gave him a stack of new arrivals and a brief lesson on how to wrap the covers in their protective plastic covers, and he welcomed the mindless task, standing at a rickety table down in the basement. It gave him plenty of time to think about the previous night, about what he'd done. For a while he wondered if it had just been some kind of weird dream, but then he built up the courage to try again. He glanced around nervously, but he was alone in the basement, so he took a deep breath to settle himself and watched the little globe of light flare up between his fingers with wide eyes. Not a dream, then.

As Stiles stood there, rolling the little ball between his fingers, he realized that beyond the faint buzzing his head that he was now pretty sure came from magic, he could hear a deeper noise beneath his feet, so low it was almost beyond his range of hearing. He could feel it more than anything, a thrum in his very bones. Curious, Stiles dismissed his light, but the buzzing in his mind didn't leave him as the light faded. His head came up as he realized that he'd felt it before, felt it multiple times, and it was coming from the grate over the rare books room.

"Fuck," Stiles breathed, realization smacking him in the face. The door was magicked; of course it was. Laura had said, hadn't she, that the room held rare books and if there were other people out in the world using magic, a simple gate probably wouldn't stop them. Stiles stepped closer and the buzzing got louder. He wondered if the volume of it had anything to do with its strength. It'd been pretty loud when the door zapped him. That made him wonder about the deep vibration he could feel now. Why hadn't he been able to hear it before? Maybe he'd needed to find his spark first, awaken his senses, as it were.

Stiles stood in front of it and listened to it buzz, but his attention wasn’t on the gate, it was on the stone around it. He found what he was looking for at the very peak of the doorway; he had to stand on the tips of his toes to see them, but they were there right enough, faint symbols carved into the stone. If memory served him right, they weren’t unlike the ones in the warding spell he’d tried the night before. Stiles stepped away from the grate and went back to his work at the table, but his mind kept churning.

Just what could be done with magical powers? Was there an upper limit on power? Did people have to level up like in video games? Stiles’ eyes slid toward the rare books. There’d be an answer in there, he was pretty sure.
Stiles knew where the key was, but considering the shock he’d received the last time he’d tried to enter the room without permission, he knew he had to do it the right way. Around noon, he went upstairs. Laura still sat at the circulation desk, chatting with Mrs. Martin, Lydia’s mom.

“What’s up, sweet cheeks?” Laura asked him, grinning faintly. “You heading out for lunch?”

“Er, no,” Stiles said awkwardly, flushing at the pet name. “I was wondering if I could get into the book room downstairs.” He picked at the surface of the circulation desk with a blunt fingernail.

“Sure thing,” Laura said casually. “You know where the key is.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said, and ducked away before anyone could ask him why he was so interested.

It felt strange going into the collection for his own purposes. The last time he’d been in here, he hadn’t known what to think, but now Stiles stood still for a while, slowly scanning every title. It took a while, even though half the books seemed to be in other languages. A couple volumes he pulled off the shelf and flipped through their contents before slipping them back into place. He wasn’t quite sure what he was looking for; a guide for beginners, maybe. He grinned wryly to himself, fairly certain he wouldn’t be finding *Magic for Dummies* down here.

Stiles didn’t have much luck finding what he needed — there were several hundred books on the shelves, and without any sort of catalog, it made research a little difficult — but he did find a book titled *A Compendium of North American Supernatural Beings* that looked interesting enough, so he settled down in the uncomfortable wooden chair at the end of the room to glance through it.

Without a window or even a clock in the room, it was hard to tell how much time passed. Stiles grew thoroughly engrossed with the book, reading through entry after entry on the weirdest creatures he’d ever learned about - almas and rocs and hodags. He was all the way to the Ds — deer women, djinn, drac — when something moved next to him and he jumped, completely startled.

“You okay?” Laura asked, leaning over him with her eyebrows raised.

“I — yeah,” Stiles gasped, one hand over his heart. “Jesus, you scared me.”

Laura smiled. “What’d you find?”

“Oh — this,” Stiles said, showing her the cover of the book. Laura’s eyes widened slightly, her smile widening. “Anyway, sorry, am I late?”

“It’s five,” she told him gently. “I’m heading home.”

“Five?” Stiles repeated, bewildered. “What? Why didn’t you stop me earlier?”

“Slow day,” Laura shrugged, smiling. “And I know what it’s like to get lost in a good book.” She nodded toward the one in his hands. “You can take that home tonight, if you’d like. It’s not worth anything.”

“I shouldn’t,” Stiles said with a rueful look down at the volume. “I might miss work entirely if I get too wrapped up in it.”

“Good point,” Laura laughed, watching Stiles get to his feet and reshelve the book. They carefully locked up the grate and left the library together, separating in the parking lot to head for their respective cars, calling goodbyes as they went.
When Stiles got home, his dad’s car was already in the driveway and Derek lay on the porch, his head on his paws. “Hey, dude,” Stiles said as he approached the steps. “Not hanging out with Dad?” Derek lifted his head as Stiles came up the steps, touching his nose to Stiles’ outstretched fingers. Stiles headed toward the door, grinning when he heard Derek get to his feet and follow him.

Stiles was glad to see Derek; he hadn’t been at the house since the morning before, and Stiles had missed him. He’d kind of started to think of Derek as his, and he’d been a little worried when he hadn’t showed up at the house last night. Now Derek followed him inside, into the living room, where Stiles’ dad lay stretched out on the couch, sound asleep.

“No wonder you didn’t want to hang out with him,” Stiles whispered to Derek. “He’s turning into an old man, I swear.”

Derek huffed and it sounded like a laugh. Stiles grinned and headed for the kitchen, but rather than clanking around making dinner and waking his dad up, he and Derek made their way to the backyard, where Stiles hauled out the hose and watered the garden. Stiles watched Derek circle the backyard before coming to rest at Stiles’ side, head up and ears alert as he watched the forest.

“What do you hear, bud?” Stiles asked him, spraying water over the soil. Derek’s ears flickered back toward him but he didn’t turn his head. “Must be interesting,” Stiles continued innocently, waving an expressive hand. “You must be able to hear for miles.” He grinned and adopted his best movie announcer voice. “Derek thought he was safe. Little did he know, his best friend was about to betray him.” And Stiles turned the jet of water on Derek, who yelped and spun around, looking wounded.

Stiles laughed as Derek tried to escape the spray from the hose, snapping at the water like he could hurt it. He was still laughing when Derek gave up and charged at him instead, smashing into his knees and sending Stiles tumbling to the ground.

“Hey!” Stiles protested, blinking hard as his head smacked against the grass. Derek huffed and flopped down on top of him, his wet fur quickly soaking Stiles’ shirt and pants. “Get off me!” He aimed the hose at Derek’s ribs, hitting him point-blank in the side, but Derek just gave him a smug look as the cold water ran off his side and pooled on Stiles’ stomach. “C’mon, man,” Stiles complained, shoving at Derek. He was fucking heavy. “Lemme up!”

Derek took his sweet time getting to his feet. Stiles groaned as he got up, his shirt soaking wet and smeared with dirt. “This is your fault,” he informed Derek, who bumped against Stiles hard enough to send him staggering. Stiles swore and swiped at him, but Derek leapt backward, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. It took Stiles a second to realize that Derek was being playful — he’d never seen the dog remotely interested in catching a ball or chewing on a toy — but here he was practically skipping around Stiles, mouth open in what was clearly a smirk. “You think you’re funny, huh?” Stiles panted, lunging after him. “We’ll see!”

Derek spun away with a noise that was almost a bark — another surprise as Stiles had never heard that before — and Stiles chased, running through the backyard, looping through the woods and back toward the house. Derek was clearly playing with him — Stiles knew he was fast, but he’d stop, wait until Stiles got close enough to touch, before ducking under his grasp and sprinting forward a couple hundred yards. Stiles was laughing and red-faced by the time Derek allowed himself to be caught on the back deck, and Derek himself was open-mouthed and panting, pink tongue lolling over his white teeth. Stiles was almost dry by then, his shirt cool, Derek’s fur a little damp, but he didn’t really mind. Derek spread himself out over the deck and Stiles sat next to him, absentely running his hands through Derek’s dark fur as they both watched the woods, Derek’s ears twitching occasionally as he caught far-off noises.

If Stiles closed his eyes he could hear stuff too, but it wasn’t natural, at least, it wasn’t a part of the
natural world he was used to hearing. He could hear that thrumming he’d heard at the library that
morning, a pulse of noise that started deep and faded away, almost like a heartbeat. It was fainter
here than it had been at the library, but still strong — strong enough to pull him to his feet and head
toward the garden, a vague frown on his face. Behind him, Derek got to his feet — Stiles could hear
the click of his nails on the wood planks of the deck — and followed.

As Stiles walked, he was almost certain the noise grew louder. He kept walking, past the garden and
toward the trees, then into the woods, and he was definitely sure, the deep noise grew louder as he
went. “Hey, Derek,” Stiles said over his shoulder. “Do you want to go for a walk?”

Derek tilted his head curiously and took a few quick steps forward so he stood at Stiles’ side. He
bumped his head against Stiles’ hand and Stiles grinned. “Now, I’m counting on you, dude. If there
are any mountain lions out here, I need you to keep them away, all right?”

Derek made a soft noise, bumping his head against Stiles’ hand once more before moving forward.
Stiles followed, curiosity pulling him along. It was dim under the trees, the sun sinking toward the
horizon, but there was still plenty of light to see by. Derek walked a couple yards in front of him, the
line of his dark form relaxed, tail swinging from side to side as he walked. If there were mountain
lions in the woods, Stiles would take his cues from Derek; seeing as how he was completely relaxed
at the moment, Stiles wasn’t super worried.

The hum grew louder as they walked. Stiles wondered if Derek could hear it too. He was certainly
headed in the right direction without Stiles even saying anything. Stiles knew that dogs could hear a
lot of things that humans couldn’t; he’d probably been hearing the hum long before Stiles noticed it.

They walked for a while, maybe fifteen minutes or more. Stiles wasn’t really keeping track; he was
watching the woods. Judging by the direction of the sun at his shoulder, they were heading north,
probably on the preserve by now. He wondered how far they were from the lake, how far from the
burnt out shell of the Hale house. He wondered about Derek, why he hung out there. Because it
offered shelter, probably. From what Stiles remembered seeing of it, it hadn’t been completely burnt
down; much of the first floor seemed intact or, at least, had walls and a ceiling. Maybe he’d come out
and explore it some time.

Stiles almost tripped over Derek, who’d stopped walking. He made an irritated noise as Stiles
collected himself, brushing bark off the hand he’d thrown against a tree to catch himself. Stiles
looked up and realized they were at the edge of a clearing and in the middle of it stood the largest
tree he’d ever seen.

Stiles had seen large trees. He’d seen sequoias a couple years ago at Sequoia National Park and the
tree before him was nowhere near as tall — it was no taller than the rest of the forest around it, but its
trunk was massive, at least twice as big around as General Sherman’s. The pulse was loud here,
almost deafening, though, confusingly, even though Stiles knew what he was hearing was loud, he
could easily hear his own breathing, and the sound of Derek and his feet on the leaves lining the
forest floor, and Stiles was almost certain he’d reached the source of it.

He crossed the clearing slowly, head tilted back to take in the massive crown. The bark of the tree
was smooth, a light brown, covered in moss and lichen. Stiles reached out a hand to touch it before
remembering the last time he’d touched something without permission. He looked down at his arm,
at the burns still healing there, shiny and red. He looked down at Derek, who looked back up at him,
his expression neutral. “Is this thing safe?” Stiles asked him. Derek blinked but didn’t move, and
Stiles sighed. That’d probably been stupid, to expect an answer. Derek wouldn’t have any idea what
he was talking about anyway.

Stiles turned his attention back to the tree in front of him and concentrated. It sounded kind of dumb,
but the tree didn’t feel unfriendly. The grate in the library basement definitely put off a Don’t touch me sort of vibe, but the tree in front of him felt…completely neutral, actually. It wasn’t particularly welcoming, but it wasn’t telling him to go away, either.

Stiles took a deep breath and laid his palm flat against the tree and what he felt was like the way his spark had felt, really, a pure, clear energy. But…Stiles’ brow furrowed, his eyes settling shut as he tried to figure out what he was feeling. It was pure, but there was darkness at the edges, creeping in, unsettling. He opened his eyes and squinted up at the huge limbs spread above him. They looked healthy at first glance, lush and green, but there were branches that were dead, the wood split and dark with decay underneath. It was too bad, he thought, taking a step away from the trunk. The tree was clearly sitting on, or made of, great power, but something was warping it.

“You know,” Stiles told Derek conversationally, “this time yesterday, I wasn’t even thinking about magic, and now I can tell there’s something wrong with this fucking tree.” Derek looked up at him, ears pricked forward curiously, and Stiles brightened. “Oh yeah, I wanted to show you!” He lifted his hand to summon forth the light, then hesitated, glancing back up at the tree. He didn’t think anything bad would happen using his spark so close to the tree, but then again he was new to all of this. What the fuck did he know? “Let’s wait til we’re back at the house, huh?” He looked for the sun and found it sunk below the trees. “We better get back anyway. Dad’s probably up making dinner.”

Derek stuck close to his side on the way back to the house. His body language had changed, slight tension along the lines of his body. It made Stiles a little nervous. He didn’t know if it was because of the tree or something else entirely, so it was a relief to see the house through the trees, his dad out on the back deck grilling hamburgers. He twisted around when Stiles and Derek came out of the woods, lifting a hand in greeting. Derek broke away from Stiles and loped across the backyard, leaping up onto the back deck where, Stiles saw, his dad had laid out a bowl of water. Stiles felt bad; Derek was probably thirsty after all that playing around earlier.

“Where have you guys been?” Stiles’ dad asked as Stiles climbed up onto the deck.

“Taking a walk,” Stiles replied nonchalantly. “There’s a big-ass tree out in the woods back there, did you know?”

“That so?” his dad asked, not sounding interested at all — he’d never been much of a nature guy. Come to think of it, Stiles hadn’t either.

“Yeah,” Stiles shrugged. “Looks like it’s not doing well, though.”

His father set the spatula down next to the grill. “What do you mean?”

“Some of the branches were dead,” Stiles told him. “All rotten.”

Dad’s brow furrowed. “Where was this tree?”

“Way out in the preserve,” Stiles said, pointing. “I mean, it’s nothing you have to worry about, I don’t think. It’s so far out there, no one’s going to get hurt if it falls over or something.”

“Hm,” his father said grimly, turning back to the grill.

They ate on the deck (“We really need to get chairs or something,” Stiles said as he offered lumps of hamburger to Derek, who plucked them delicately from his fingers. His dad didn’t look too concerned about deck furniture, either.), then headed inside. They caught most of a Lord of the Rings marathon, Stiles’ dad slumped in his recliner while Stiles sprawled on the couch, Derek between his
legs, head resting on Stiles’ stomach. Stiles ran his fingers over the soft fur on his ears and asked his dad, “Where do you think he gets his food from?”

Dad snorted. “Have you seen the size of him? He probably takes down deer.”

“Is that so?” Stiles asked Derek, tugging on his ear. Derek made an irritated noise and jerked his head out of Stiles’ grip. “I think that’s a no.” He watched Derek’s eyes follow the movement on the tv screen; if Stiles didn’t know better, he’d swear Derek was actually watching the movie.

Dad fell asleep fifteen minutes into *The Return of the King* and Stiles forced himself to get up off the couch before he did as well, heading upstairs. By the time he’d brushed his teeth, Derek had followed, sprawling himself out over the entire bed. He gave Stiles a smug look when Stiles tried to shove him aside.

“You asshat,” Stiles told him, worming his way under the sheets and kicking Derek’s paws out of the way. “You think you’re so special. You wouldn’t be able to move me either if I spent all my time chowing down deer. What do you do, swallow ‘em down whole like a python?”

Derek snapped at Stiles’ arm playfully and Stiles let himself be grabbed, allowing Derek to gnaw on his arm for a moment before pulling away. “There,” he said to Derek, wiping slobber onto the sheets, “now you’ve had a taste of me. Pretty nasty, huh? You’re better off sticking with deer.” He ran an absent hand over Derek’s head before brightening. “Oh, I never got to show you! Watch.”

Stiles held out his hand. Derek nosed at it, looking unimpressed, and Stiles said, “Just wait.” He concentrated; it took no more than a second for his little yellow light to bloom into existence. “See that?” He waved it in Derek’s face. “Pretty cool, huh?”

He tried balancing it on Derek’s nose, but Derek jerked his head backward and sneezed. Stiles dismissed the light with a laugh and reached out to scratch at Derek’s ears. “It’s pretty cool though, right?” he asked. “I mean, I never would have thought that magic was real.”

Stiles laid back in bed, Derek shifting himself around so his head was on Stiles’ chest. “Kinda makes you wonder what else is out there,” Stiles said to Derek. “You know? What else have I missed?”

He fell asleep with his fingers curled in Derek’s fur, Derek’s nose pressed against his arm. He dreamt of standing at the base of a massive tree, hands pressed to its mossy bark. Someone stood behind him, gentle fingers pressed to the back of his neck, and they said his name in a voice he’d never heard before, soft and sad. Stiles jolted awake in a cold sweat. Derek was gone and outside his window, the moon hung full and silver.
“You look like hell,” Laura said the next day.

“Thanks,” Stiles retorted bitingly. It was noon and even three cups of coffee hadn’t been enough to shake off the vestiges of sleeplessness. He’d been unable to sleep after waking so abruptly the night before, and he’d spent most of the small hours of the morning tossing and turning, hearing that phantom voice in his head. It hadn’t helped that something started howling outside around two and he was pretty sure it was Derek, but there’d been no way of getting him to stop.

He’d been alone at the library all morning, which was normally fine, but there was a children’s summer reading program, which mean an influx of people and books to be checked in or out or put away. At least it had kept him busy; he hadn’t even realized it was noon until Laura showed up, looking far more cheerful than he could handle.

She gave him a sympathetic pat on the back and said, “Go get some lunch, hon, and maybe actually eat it today.”

Stiles smiled ruefully, thinking of the hours he’d spent reading the day before. He took Laura’s advice, though, and left the library to get food. The walk to the deli down the block cleared his head a little — it was a bright day out, the air hot and dry, the sky a pure blank azure. Instead of taking his turkey club back to the library, Stiles walked a bit further to the town green and sat on a bench to eat, watching people as they passed. It was kind of nice how everyone smiled as they passed. He’d seen a lot of movies, growing up, that featured that small-town air, but he’d never experienced it for himself until he’d moved to Beacon Hills. He liked knowing people, how no one he passed was really that much of a stranger. That was probably why his dad liked the job so much — he got to know everyone, in one way or another.

Stiles finished his sandwich and wandered leisurely back toward the library, pushing open the front door and walking into an unexpected scene. It was very still in the library, way quieter than usual, and that was his first clue that something was up. His next clue was the way Laura stood behind the circulation desk, her mouth twisted in anger. “— down there,” she was saying furiously, as Stiles came in. “I’m not going to tell you again!”

There was a woman standing in front of the desk and she turned slightly when Stiles stepped into the room. It was Jennifer, the woman who worked at the town hall. “There he is,” she said.

“Uh,” Stiles said uneasily, frozen in the doorway. “Hi?”

“Get out,” Laura hissed at Jennifer, curling her fingers against the top of the desk.

“I told you,” Jennifer told Laura peacefully. “I’m just dropping these off for Stanislaw.”

“And I’m telling you to get out!” Laura snarled, her voice rising. “I’ll call the cops!”

“That won’t be necessary,” Jennifer said, turning fully toward Stiles. “Here,” she told him, offering him a sheaf of papers. “You just need to send these to your insurance company.”

“Uh, thanks,” Stiles said, glancing uncertainly toward Laura as he reached out for the papers. His fingers brushed against Jennifer’s and he felt that same jolt he’d felt the first time he’d shaken her hand. He jerked backward, the papers clutched in his fist, eyes widening.

“Oh,” Jennifer said softly, smiling. “You’re awake.”
“That’s debatable,” Stiles muttered.

“Out,” Laura snapped, and Jennifer brushed by him with a strange smile on her face. Stiles stared after her, rubbing his hand anxiously. That shock had been magic, he was certain of it, but what it meant — that was another thing entirely.

“Is, uh, everything okay?” Stiles asked Laura, listening to the door swing shut behind him. The few people he could see were talking quietly amongst themselves.

Laura glared around before focusing on him, her eyes burning gold with anger. “If that woman,” she spat, “ever wants access to the books downstairs, do not let her in.”

“Okay,” Stiles said, trying to keep his voice light and helpful. “I can do that.”

Laura breathed in deeply. “Take over the desk, please,” she said, exhaling in a rush. “I need a break.”

“All right,” Stiles replied, watching her stalk off to her office. He sat down behind the desk, completely bewildered by the event he’d just witnessed. Just who was Jennifer that she made Laura so angry? And why had he felt that shock of magic off her? He tapped his fingers against the desk, puzzled. He was missing something.

It wasn’t for another few minutes that it occurred to him that Laura’s eyes were pale green, not the bright golden-yellow he’d just seen. His mouth dropped open, eyes sliding toward the closed door to her office. He was definitely missing something.

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“Just so you know, the library’s going to be closed tomorrow,” Laura told Stiles.

It was four days after the weird confrontation she’d had with Jennifer. Stiles had been watching carefully, but so far he’d yet to see any further signs of… otherness from her. He was starting to think that he’d imagined her eyes turning yellow — maybe it had been some weird trick of the light.

Stiles blinked at her. “Why?” he asked. The Fourth of July wasn’t for another two weeks. He couldn’t think of any other holidays. They’d already passed Memorial Day by a month.

Laura sighed, setting down the stack of books she’d been about to shelve. “I’m sure someone’s told you by now what happened to my family,” she said softly. “Tomorrow’s the anniversary of the fire. It’s been five years, so the town’s put together a ceremony or something.” She waved her hand vaguely, looking unhappy. “There’s no point in the library being open tomorrow.”

“I understand,” Stiles said, his brow furrowing.

Laura gave him a sad smile. “You can come, if you want,” she said. “There’s always a ton of free food.”

Stiles nodded, his stomach twisting. “My dad said, uh, that they don’t know what caused the fire?”


Stiles went home that night quiet and thoughtful. His dad was working a late shift — apparently the county did have someone driving the roads at night, even if the station was closed — so it was just him and Derek. The house sat quiet and cool, windows open to let in the evening breeze. Stiles lay
on the couch, Derek on the floor beside him. Stiles had the little book he’d pulled from the upstairs closet propped open on his knees, one hand hanging over the side of the couch, trailing absently through Derek’s fur.

He’d spent most of the past few days reading. He read the rare books at work, always cycling back to that one encyclopedia of creatures, while at home he read spell after spell in the little book. He tried some of them and they worked, every single one. He lit candles with no matches and blew them out with a very tiny localized windstorm, he used a mirror for scrying and saw a split second of Scott and Allison in a very compromising position, he even levitated Derek, who wasn’t very happy about it, and bit him on the ankle after Stiles gently lowered him to the floor.

He didn’t bother with the lights in the room as he lay on the couch, a softball-sized ball of light hovering in the air over his head instead as he flipped through the pages. The spells toward the back of the book seemed to get harder as they went — he’d noticed, after levitating Derek, how he’d felt a little lightheaded. It made sense, he supposed; the magic had to come from somewhere, Law of Conservation of Energy and whatnot. He envisioned his spark like an HP counter on a video game; use up too much of it and he might pass out.

Stiles paused over a page titled *Giving Animals the Power of Human Speech*. How cool would it be if he and Derek could talk? What kind of voice would Derek have? He made so few vocalizations that Stiles couldn’t even imagine — something growly, probably. Then again…growing up, there’d been a magnet on the fridge that said, “If cats could talk, they wouldn’t.” He imagined Derek would probably be the same. He’d sigh at Stiles more often, probably.

As if Derek heard Stiles’ thoughts, he lifted his head to look up at him. Curious, Stiles said, “Speak.” Derek just looked at him. “C’mon, speak! I’ve never even heard you bark, dude. Speak for me.”

Derek heaved an all-suffering sigh, dropping his head back onto his paws. Stiles stuck his tongue out at Derek and turned his attention back to the book, and the next spell listed — *Basic Mind Control* — when Derek’s head came up again, ears curving forward. For a brief moment, Stiles thought he was actually going to bark, but instead he rose stiffly to his feet, lips peeling back in a silent snarl.

“What is it, dude?” Stiles asked curiously. He’d seen Derek act this way before, right before Scott showed up unannounced. “Someone here?”

Derek had his head turned toward the front yard, hackles stiff. Stiles thought nervously of the man his dad had told him about, Peter Hale, and how they were still looking for him. He dismissed the light hovering over them, plunging the house into darkness, and rolled onto his stomach so he could see out the windows. Derek stepped up next to him, body taut with tension.

Stiles heard it then, soft feet crunching over the stones in the driveway, and he swallowed nervously. The footfalls were light, careful; not the sound of someone who cared if their approach was heard. He reached out for Derek, needing the reassurance of something warm and solid, and Derek shifted closer, close enough that Stiles could smell the earthy scent of him. Stiles curled his fingers in Derek’s fur and they waited silently, listening to the footsteps growing closer.

Something moved in the darkness beyond the living room windows and it took everything in Stiles’ power not to jump. Heart banging in his chest, he watched a dark form move from the front window, down the side of the house, before coming to a halt in front of the window just six feet from the couch. He could see its outline, weak moonlight reflecting off dark hair, and he prayed — he fucking prayed — that it was dark enough in the house that whoever it was couldn’t see him on the couch, couldn’t see Derek standing stiffly next to him.

As Stiles stared at the figure outside, he became aware of a faint humming noise. It wasn’t coming
from the figure, though, it seemed to be coming from all around him. Magic, he realized, and some of the tension left his body when he recognized that it was there for him, there to help him. It came from the house itself. He almost laughed when the figure outside raised a hand and pressed it to the window screen; something like blue lightning cracked out of the wooden window frame and smashed into the stranger, throwing them backward and out of sight. Stiles heard muffled cursing a moment later, then fading footfalls as they made their retreat. Stiles didn’t relax until Derek did, though, and collapsed face-down onto the sofa.

“Jesus,” he muttered into the couch cushion. “Who the fuck was that?” He was shaking, he realized. Adrenaline, probably, and fear.

Derek shoved his nose against Stiles’ neck, huffing worriedly into his ear. He didn’t shy away when Stiles looped an arm around his neck, waiting patiently while Stiles got his breathing under control. Derek only moved when Stiles pushed himself up on his elbows, slipping across the room to stare out the window.

“Are they gone?” Stiles asked, groaning as he forced himself to sit up. Derek made a quiet chuffing noise, which Stiles chose to take as assent — he figured Derek would be making a scene if there was a still a threat. Stiles sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I need to call Dad.”

His hand hovered over his phone, but he didn’t pick it up. He knew he should call his dad, but at the same time…he didn’t want to worry him. Nothing had happened, anyway; Stiles was safe. The house had protected him — and how the hell would he explain that to his dad? Oh yeah, don’t worry about me; the house zapped the weirdo and they ran away. Like that would go over well. Nah. Better to just keep it to himself. His dad had an entire county to take care of; Stiles could handle a Peeping Tom.

Stiles watched Derek wander back over to him, settling himself down in the space between Stiles’ legs. “I’m surprised at you,” Stiles told him, stroking Derek’s silky ears. “I half expected you to launch yourself through the window at that dude, but you didn’t even make a noise. Such restraint,” he added admiringly. Derek made a soft, almost amused noise, and twisted his head to lick at Stiles’ fingers before trotting over to the back door and giving it a pointed look. Stiles hadn’t kept it open — thank god, he thought, realizing the trespasser could have easily have come inside that way if he had. The thought made him slow as he headed into the kitchen to open the door for Derek, and he paused entirely when he touched the doorknob, Derek shifting around impatiently below him.

“You’re going to come back, right?” Stiles asked him worriedly. It wasn’t like he was…scared of being home alone, exactly, especially not after seeing what the house had done, but he’d feel better with someone else with him, even if that someone was a dog. He could go over to Scott’s, but that meant going outside, and there was a stranger out there somewhere that he’d very likely made eye contact with, and he wasn’t super keen to run into them.

Derek bumped his body against Stiles’ thigh as if to say don’t worry. Stiles sighed and opened the door, watching Derek slip outside, his dark shape immediately disappearing into the darkness of the backyard. Stiles dithered there for a moment, not feeling entirely safe with the door open, so he shut it carefully, then stood there in the gloom of the kitchen, unsure what to do with himself. He felt jittery, anxious, too big for his skin. Stiles shut his eyes for a moment, leaning against the kitchen counter, and breathed in deeply. He reached into himself for his spark, and its golden warmth soothed him, some of the tension seeping from his shoulders at the touch of its light.

A soft scratching noise at the back door made him jump, but it was just Derek, his fur cool from the night air. Stiles locked the door behind him, then went around the house closing all the windows — maybe the house would protect them, but better to be safe than sorry. Derek followed him from room
to room like a shadow, a darker shape in the dim rooms — Stiles didn’t feel quite brave enough to turn on the lights and announce he was home. He smashed his shins into furniture a couple of times and cursed under his breath, but eventually the entire house was locked and secure and he felt safe enough to leave the downstairs and head up to bed.

For all the excitement, Stiles fell asleep quickly that night, plunging fast into dreamless sleep. When Stiles briefly woke in the middle of the night, Derek lay by his feet in the same position he’d been in when Stiles had fallen asleep, head up, ears pricked forward alertly, listening hard to the ambient noise of the night. Stiles fell back asleep easily, safe under Derek’s watchful eye.

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The next morning, Stiles got up early, leaving Derek asleep at the end of the bed as he staggered into the bathroom to take a shower. He dressed quietly, putting on a nice pair of dark slacks and a white dress shirt — he didn't know how formal this ceremony was going to be, but better to be overdressed and respectable than not. After he'd dressed, Stiles slipped into his dad's room and shook him awake.

"Are you going to the thing for the Hales?" Stiles asked his father, who squinted blearily at him.

"Mm," his dad grunted tiredly. He propped himself up on one elbow, swiping a hand across his face. "What time's it?"

"Eight," Stiles replied, fiddling with the buttons on his sleeves. "Ceremony's at nine."

His father sighed, flopping back onto the mattress. "I'll be up."

Stiles nodded and headed downstairs to get the coffee maker started. Derek appeared before his dad did, slinking into the kitchen as Stiles cooked bacon on the stove.

"You're not subtle," Stiles told him, but slipped Derek a piece anyway.

"You're spoiling him," his dad said, coming into the kitchen. He'd dressed in his dress uniform, service medals shining on his chest.

"Bit late," Stiles retorted.

"I never said it was a bad thing," his father replied, bending down to stroke Derek. Derek allowed him exactly one pat on the head before jerking away and going to sit on the other side of Stiles. "I think he could use some spoiling."

Stiles ignored the smug look Derek gave him and asked, "Is this enough?" He gestured at his clothes. "I wasn't sure how formal I needed to be."

"Maybe a tie," his dad told him, after a long, considering look. Stiles nodded.

After they’d eaten, Stiles ran back upstairs to grab a tie, and when he got back downstairs he found his dad crouched in front of Derek, speaking to him in a low voice. Stiles opened his mouth to make a joke, but cut himself off because Derek looked miserable, his ears pinned back, head drooping.

"Everything okay?" Stiles asked instead.

His father nodded, getting to his feet. Derek remained where he was, looking small, hunched in on himself. Stiles cast him an anxious glance as they left the house, but Derek didn’t look at them.

They took his dad's car to the cemetery and Stiles stared absently out the window as they drove,
watching the lush greenery of the woods flash past, interspersed here and there with houses. "Did
Derek belong to the Hales?" Stiles asked abruptly. "Is that how Laura knew him?"

His father drove silently for a long moment, fingers absently tapping against the steering wheel. "He
was part of the family," he replied eventually.

"Oh," Stiles said. That made sense; that was probably the reason why Derek used to hang out at the
old Hale house. He looked down at his hands, folded in his lap. "Have you had any luck finding that
other guy? Peter?"

"We've had some reports," his dad said after another thoughtful pause. "Haven't caught him,
though."

"Oh," Stiles said again and the rest of the drive passed in silence.

When they reached the cemetery, they found it packed with people, cars lining both sides of the road
— they had to drive nearly a quarter of a mile to find a place to park. Stiles was startled. "I didn't
realize there'd be this many people here."

His dad nodded, adjusting his tie as they walked. "The Hales founded this town," he explained.
"They were the backbone of this place. The fire hit everyone hard."

"Damn," Stiles said quietly. He chewed on his lip for a moment before asking, "Laura has a brother,
right? Do you think he'll be here today?"

His father shook his head. "I very much doubt that. He's not fond, ah, of people. He's something of a
recluse."

"I see."

At the cemetery, they split up; Stiles' dad headed toward where a group of his deputies stood all
dressed in their best, and Stiles slowly approached a section of the cemetery where a large number of
white plastic chairs had been laid out between the rows of headstones. They faced a stone
monument, a tall obelisk with a list of names carved into its front face. Stiles wasn't close enough to
read them, but he was willing to bet that the names belonged to the victims of the fire.

Stiles took a seat at random, closer to the back. He knew a lot of the people gathered around by sight.
He'd spoken with a lot of them at the library, but they were still mostly strangers, and he hadn't
known the Hales anyway; he was mostly here for Laura. He spotted Lydia; she was up in the front
row next to Allison, their heads bent together to talk. Lydia's mom sat next to Lydia, while on
Allison's other side sat a lanky man with silver-touched, sandy-brown hair. He sat with one hand on
the back of Allison's chair. Stiles was pretty sure he'd seen the man around town — he had to be
Allison's dad; she spoke of him often. He had his head turned to speak with Melissa McCall, who sat
next to him, but Stiles had yet to see Scott — or Laura, for that matter.

People were starting to take their seats around him, the rows filling rapidly as more townspeople
arrived. His dad and his deputies stood at the front, behind the monument, arms folded stiffly behind
their backs. The crowded cemetery fell suddenly silent, an odd tension in the air. The day was hot
and humid and overcast, the sky an ugly dark purple around the edges. With the silence, it was as
though the world was holding its breath; it felt not unlike a storm on the horizon. Stiles shifted
uncomfortably, sweat rolling down his spine.

Behind him came a rustling like wind in the grass, and he twisted to see Laura, dressed in a simple
black dress, long hair over one shoulder, walking up a space that had been left between the rows of
seats. To Stiles' surprise, Scott, Boyd, Erica, and Isaac followed behind her, walking through the rows to sit at the very front. Stiles watched them, puzzled; he hadn't known that any of them really knew Laura. Isaac made a little bit of sense because he was always in and out of the library, but Stiles had never seen any of the others there. What did he know, though? For all he knew, their families had been friends for decades or, hell, they were probably all related somehow — totally possible in a town that small.

The mayor had gotten to his feet and was making a speech. Stiles had met him a couple of times — Finstock had come in to yell at Laura for hiring Stiles and she'd laughed in his face. They didn't seem to get along all that well, but then again, from what Stiles had seen of the man, he didn't seem like the type of person who got along well with anyone. Now, though, he had a surprisingly heartfelt speech about loss that Stiles was pretty sure he'd lifted from a movie somewhere, and then sat down so the town choir could sing a few songs.

After they'd finished, Laura got to her feet, absently tucking a stray wisp of hair behind her ear as she turned to face the crowd. Scott and the others rose as well, forming a protective line at her back, and she spared the four of them a tight smile before saying, "It's been a long five years. I know that. I know that all of you have struggled with this just as much as I have, and I want to thank all of you for your love and support. I never would have gotten through this without you, and I can't thank you enough for that."

Laura shut her eyes for a moment, appearing to collect herself. Stiles looked away, his stomach twisting uncomfortably, and he was startled to see a dark shape standing at the edge of the cemetery where the manicured lawn met the brambles of the forest. It looked vaguely dog-like and he squinted, almost certain it was Derek. In front of him, Laura continued, sounding pained, "I know the town is suffering, and I'm sorry. We're doing our best to figure it out so please, please don't give up on us."

Stiles looked around at the faint murmuring that arose from the crowd at Laura's words. He didn't understand what she was talking about — why was she apologizing?

"Those of you that know — that know my brother, you know he's been struggling since the fire." Laura took a deep breath, closing her eyes again. "But he's found someone — someone good and kind, and I hope — I know that he's going to come back to us someday. Someday soon." Laura put her hand over her mouth, tears spilling over her cheeks. Erica stepped forward, curling an arm around Laura's shoulders and guiding her back to her seat.

A couple other people spoke after that, speaking of fond memories of the Hales, but Stiles couldn't concentrate. There was a sick, uneasy sympathy roiling in his stomach. He ached for Laura and her brother, ached for their loss. This entire ceremony reminded him uncomfortably of his own mother's death; the anniversary was just a couple weeks away. It was an old pain — she'd died over ten years ago, after all — but just because the wound had mostly healed over didn't mean it didn't split open sometimes, raw and aching. He wondered about Laura's brother, what he was like; it was clear that Laura cared for him deeply.

The ceremony ended and people rose to their feet, gathering in small groups to chat. Stiles hesitated before standing, unsure what to do with himself. He didn't feel brave enough approaching his friends, not when they were so clearly involved with Laura and the whole event, and he almost headed for the car before remembering that he'd arrived with his father, who had the keys. Stiles sighed softly and headed toward the obelisk, where he could just see his dad chatting with the deputies.

"Stiles, hey!"
Stiles looked around to find Scott grinning at him, and he summoned up a quick smile. "Oh, hey, dude. Uh. Nice ceremony."

Scott nodded solemnly. "Everyone did a really great job."

"I, uh, didn't know you knew Laura so well," Stiles said slowly, watching people step up to the grave, laying down flowers.

Something like panic flashed across Scott's face, so fast Stiles almost missed it, but his voice was even when he replied, "Yeah, we've known each other for a long time. Her mom was like a second mom to me."

"That's awesome," Stiles said, then winced. "I mean, I'm sorry for your loss — "

Scott shook his head. "It's okay, dude. Anyway, you coming over on Friday?"

"Yeah!" Stiles said enthusiastically, grateful for the change in subject. "Yeah, I'll see you then?"

"Definitely," Scott grinned, clapping him on the shoulder before disappearing back into the crowd.

By the time Stiles managed to get to his dad and tactfully peel him away from the crowd, it had started to rain lightly, and they jogged across the cemetery, dress shoes squeaking against the wet grass. Stiles remembered to look at the treeline again, and was disappointed to see that the dark form he'd thought was Derek was just an oddly shaped bush. He didn't know why he expected to see the dog there, or why he was disappointed Derek wasn't.

When they got back to the house a little while later, the rain was pouring down, forcing them to sprint inside. Stiles' dad changed out of his dress uniform and into his everyday kit, disappearing back out into the rain for his regular shift. Stiles changed into a t-shirt and basketball shorts, and curled up on the couch with his spellbook. Derek wasn't in the house; the back door had been open when they'd got back. Stiles didn't like the thought of him outside somewhere in the pouring rain. It was getting cold, chilly with the damp. He knew that Derek would be fine — he'd obviously lived out in the woods for a long time before he'd started staying with them instead, but still. Stiles could use a friend to curl up with on a gloomy day like it was.

He jogged outside in the early afternoon to snag the mail from the mailbox, and when he made it back inside he found fresh wet dog tracks crossing the living room and leading upstairs. "Derek?" Stiles called curiously, wondering why he hadn't stopped to say hello. He headed into the kitchen to toss the mail onto the counter and shut the back door, which was hanging open and letting rain blow inside, before following the muddy footprints up the stairs and down the hall into his bedroom. He had to kneel to see Derek, who'd crammed himself so far under Stiles' bed that no part of him stuck out from under it. He was just a dark mass in the shadows — Stiles couldn't even tell if he was facing the room or had turned his face to the wall.

"Hey, dude," Stiles said softly. "You okay?"

Derek didn't make a noise, he didn't even move.

"C'mon," Stiles cajoled. "Come out of there, dude. You can’t be comfortable all crammed under there like that." Still, Derek didn’t move, and Stiles chewed on his lip before sighing, “Will you come out for just a sec? I just want to see that you’re not hurt or anything."

He scooted backward, sitting on the floor with his back to the dresser, giving Derek room so he wouldn’t feel crowded or pressured or anything, and waited. Seconds ticked by, then minutes. Stiles was just about to give up and go back downstairs when he heard movement from under the bed and...
Derek emerged by degrees. He finally stood, misery drawn along every line of him, head hung low, tail held tight to his body.

“What’s the matter?” Stiles murmured, holding out his hand. “C’mere, it’s okay.”

He watched Derek hesitate before stepping forward cautiously, ears pinned back against his skull.

“You’re okay.” Stiles told him softly, reaching out when Derek was close enough to smooth a hand over his dark fur. Derek shivered all over and moved in closer, slowly, like he was scared Stiles was going to shoo him away. Stiles didn’t; he opened his arms and Derek stepped into his space, sinking down next to him with his head on Stiles’ thighs. “You’re okay,” Stiles repeated, bending over him, stroking his fingers through Derek’s fur. It was flecked with mud, which was starting to dry into dark clumps. Stiles picked at them absently, his other hand moving over and over along Derek’s back automatically.

He didn’t know how long they sat there — an hour, maybe, or more. Stiles didn’t mind; it was peaceful, with the rain pouring down outside, slamming against the windows, and he could tell Derek needed comfort. He just wished he knew what was wrong.

Stiles didn’t move until he could no longer feel his butt, which had gone numb from sitting for so long on the hardwood floor. He shook Derek carefully — the dog had fallen asleep on him at some point — and when Derek’s eyes met his, Stiles smiled and said, “Let’s get you in the bathroom, huh? Get that mud out of your fur?”

Derek made a quiet noise as though he wasn’t super happy about the prospect, but got to his feet and followed Stiles into the bathroom with his head hanging low. He waited patiently while Stiles turned on the water, then turned to eye him critically; his chest and stomach and legs were coated with mud. Stiles sighed, knowing that this was going to be a mess. He was already dirty from Derek lying on him and he was only going to get dirtier washing Derek, so he decided he might as well kill two birds with one stone and get clean too. So he held the shower curtain aside for Derek to jump into the tub, then yanked off his shirt and his shorts, but as he reached for his boxers, Derek leapt back out of the bath.

“Dude,” Stiles said, exasperated. Derek was wet now from being under the spray, the mud on his torso dripping onto the floor in fat splotches of cloudy water. “Get back in the tub. Just gimme a second.”

But Derek didn’t do as he was told and instead tried to get around Stiles to where the bathroom door was cracked open. Stiles dived after him — there was no fucking way he was going to let Derek drip dirty water all over the house. Seizing Derek was more difficult than he’d imagined because he was all slick, wet fur, and it wasn’t like he was wearing a collar Stiles could grab onto. He was strong, too; when Stiles did manage to get a hold of him, he twisted and jerked around like an eel, growling furiously.

“What’s your fucking problem?” Stiles snapped, struggling to haul Derek back to the tub. He was pissed now, and dirtier than ever, and he just wanted to get this fucking over with. He managed to shove Derek back in the bath, but just as he hooked his fingers in the waistband of his boxers to jerk them down, Derek smashed past him again. Stiles grabbed at him reflexively and managed to catch him by the tail. Derek snarled like Stiles had never heard him before, violent and furious, and he whipped around to sink his teeth right into Stiles’ thigh.

“Fuck!” Stiles howled, pain flaring in his leg. “Shit!”

Derek leapt back as though he’d been shocked, his eyes going wide and seemingly horrified.
“God damn it!” Stiles hissed. There was a perfect bite mark on his leg, white teeth marks surrounded by hot pink skin. Derek hadn’t bit deep, but he’d broken the skin; even as Stiles watched, the teeth marks filled with small crescents of blood. “Jesus, fuck.” He looked up at Derek, who was backing out of the bathroom, looking terrified. “No, Derek,” Stiles sighed. “It’s okay. Come here.”

But Derek took one look at him and bolted down the stairs, tail curled between his legs. Stiles remembered too late that he’d shut the door and there came a couple of loud thuds from downstairs, followed by a splintering noise. He winced; Derek had just broken something. “Fuck,” he muttered, wincing again as he got to his feet and the skin around the bite mark pulled painfully. He grabbed some bandages out of the hall closet, wrapped them haphazardly around his leg, and hobbled downstairs to find the back door hanging off its hinges, rain pouring into the kitchen. “Fuck,” he muttered again, with great feeling this time, and managed to get the door upright so water wasn’t coming in.

There was no sign of Derek. Stiles peered out the back living room windows for a long time, but all he could see was a vertical sheet of gray rain. He jumped at the sound of someone knocking on the front door and staggered over to open it. Scott stood outside, rain dripping off his dark hair. He blinked at Stiles, surprise coming over his face.

“Hey,” Stiles said tiredly. “What’s up?”

“I’ve got the afternoon off and thought I’d stop by,” Scott replied, looking a little bewildered. “Are you okay, man?”

Stiles glanced down and realized that he a) was still dressed only in his boxers, b) was covered in dried mud thanks to Derek, and c) had a haphazardly wrapped bandage around his leg through which blood was beginning to seep — also thanks to Derek. He sighed. “It’s a long story. You want to come in? I swear I’ll put some pants on.”

Scott laughed and followed him inside. He didn’t seem too concerned about Stiles’ pants situation, which was nice of him. Stiles was feeling a little unsettled again, like he had the other night when that stranger had looked through the window, and when he excused himself to dart upstairs and grab his clothes out of the bathroom, he paused long enough to notice his hands were shaking. “Stop,” Stiles told them sternly, yanking on his shorts. “I don’t have time for your shenanigans.”

Scott was still downstairs when he headed back down, but he was in the kitchen, giving the back door a considering look. Stiles sighed again when he saw it; it was pretty obviously broken. Scott gave him the same considering look he’d just given the door and said, “You sure you’re okay?”

Stiles gave up. “I don’t know,” he said. “You think I can fix this door so my dad won’t notice?”

Scott beamed at him. “You can try. I’ll help.”

They did their best. The door looked kind of odd — it definitely hung crooked now — but it opened and closed just fine. Stiles figured his dad wouldn’t notice; he’d never been much of a handyman.

Stiles and Scott collapsed on the couch after they were done, and Stiles was flipping through movie titles on Netflix when Scott asked, “Can I take a look at your leg?”

Stiles stiffened. If Scott saw the bite mark on his leg, there’d be questions — and Stiles had already told him they didn’t have a dog. He didn’t want to talk about Derek.

“C’mon, dude,” Scott cajoled. “My mom’s a nurse. I’ve picked up a few things.”

Stiles sighed. “Yeah, fine.” He put down the controller and carefully unpeeled the bandages from
around his leg, wincing when they caught at the edges of the bite mark.

Scott leaned over the wound and something like relief washed over his tanned face. “It’s not deep,” he said. Stiles looked too, and found the wound looked pretty much the same as it had the first time he’d looked at it, though the teeth marks had gone livid red. There wasn’t as much blood as he’d originally thought there was. “You got any iodine?”


Scott nodded and bounded up the stairs. Stiles heard the sound of the closet door opening a moment later, and he turned his head to look out the window at the pouring rain and the muted colors of the forest. He felt guilty for snapping at Derek, for grabbing him like that. No wonder Derek had bitten him.

“He really likes you,” Scott said and Stiles jumped; he hadn’t even heard him come back downstairs.

“Who?” Stiles asked guiltily.

“Derek,” Scott said. “Laura told me he’s been hanging out here. He didn’t — ” Scott gestured at the bite mark on Stiles’ thigh. “He didn’t mean to do that.”

“I know he didn’t,” Stiles sighed. He didn’t bother asking how Scott knew Derek, the town belonged to him, apparently. It didn’t surprise him.

“He likes you,” Scott repeated, dropping down onto the couch with cotton balls and a bottle of iodine in his hands.

“I don’t think he likes you much,” Stiles retorted sadly. “He peels out right before you show up, every time.”

“He doesn’t like any of us much at the moment,” Scott said glumly, dabbing at the bite mark with an iodine-soaked cotton ball. Stiles winced.

“He likes my dad, I think,” Stiles offered.

“Everyone likes your dad,” Scott replied, shooting Stiles a bright grin. “Laura says he’s the best thing that could have happened to Beacon Hills. Besides you, of course.”

“You charmer,” Stiles laughed, punching him lightly in the arm. “Keep buttering me up.”

“Shall I?” Scott snorted. “Or should I tell you all the unflattering things Lydia says about you?”

“I won’t believe them,” Stiles said, raising his head nobly. “Lydia has only admiration for me.”

Scott rewrapped the bandages around Stiles’ leg and they spent the rest of the afternoon laughing and playing video games. At the back of Stiles’ mind, though, he worried about Derek. Would he ever come back?

- The howling from the woods that night carried on for hours, low and miserable and unbearable.

- Stiles didn’t see Derek for more than a week. The house felt empty without him hanging around; he’d become a fixture in such a short amount of time that Stiles felt his absence like a silence, ringing
in his ears. He hated sleeping alone, even if it meant waking up with clear sinuses, not having sneezed himself away. Every day that Stiles came home from work and Derek wasn’t lounging on the front porch saw his spirits sink a little lower. He went on a hike around the preserve with Allison, Boyd, and Isaac on one of his days off and he couldn’t help constantly looking around, wondering if Derek was going to show up. If his dad noticed Derek wasn’t hanging around, or the way the back door didn’t quite close properly any more, or the way Stiles tried to walk without wincing for a few days, he didn’t say anything.

Stiles wouldn’t have felt quite so weird about Derek not being around if things were going all right, but he was pretty sure that he was being followed. He had this weird sense of being watched whenever he was out in town doing things. Just about the only place he didn’t feel it was at the library and at home, and even though he knew the house was safe after what had happened to the intruder the other week, he hated that Derek wasn’t there to keep him company.

It came to a peak when he was at the grocery store choosing zucchini to grill and he felt eyes on him, boring a hole between his shoulder blades. Stiles whipped around just in time to see Jennifer Blake turning her head away.

Stiles stared after her as she disappeared into the deli section, unease washing over him. She’d made him nervous from the moment he’d met her and now, having caught her staring, he was almost certain that she was the one who’d been watching him — and maybe even the person who’d tried to get into the house.

Stiles gave up and went home, too unsettled to keep shopping.

He told Scott about Jennifer the next day, when he and Scott and Erica were down at the preserve swimming. It felt stupid to talk about when the sun was shining so bright above them, but Stiles hadn’t slept well, his dreams troubled. In one of them, he’d been woken in his dream by someone pounding on the windows, only to wake again for real in a perfectly silent house. In another, he’d stood at the base of the giant tree out in the woods, in a gloomy sort of twilight, watching impassively as branches from it twisted and snapped and fell around him. He’d woken in a cold sweat after both the dreams, only to fall back into them almost immediately. He thought he’d hidden the circles under his eyes pretty well, but the first thing Scott asked when he showed up was “Are you okay?”

So, sitting at the edge of the water under the bright midday sun, Stiles told Scott about the person who’d tried to get into the house, and the way he always felt like he was being watched, and catching Jennifer looking at the grocery store. He ended with a little self-deprecating laugh like this is stupid, right? but Scott didn’t laugh at him. He frowned, looking serious.

“What have you told your dad?” Scott asked.

“No,” Stiles replied uncomfortably, wigging his toes in the smooth stones, cool with lake water. “I don’t want him to worry about me. He’s already got an entire county to take care of.”

“But you don’t feel safe,” Scott pointed out.

Stiles shrugged. That was part of the reason why he was missing Derek. “I’m fine,” he lied.

Scott frowned, but before he could say anything else, Erica came splashing out of the water and plunked herself down next to Stiles, dripping cold water all over him. “That lady is capital c crazy,” she informed him. “She used to teach English at the high school, but she had some kind of mental breakdown and left.”
“That’s not super encouraging,” Stiles told her and Erica smiled cheerily.

“She’s always causing trouble,” she said. “I listen to the police scanner.”

“Huh,” Stiles said, not reassured at all.

They didn’t talk about it much more, but after a couple of days passed, Stiles began to notice that everywhere he went, one of his friends seemed to show up. Boyd was at the gas station, filling up his truck. Isaac hung around the library and offered to go with him when he went out to get food at lunch. Scott materialized out of nowhere at the grocery store, ostensibly to get beer, but he seemed content to follow Stiles around the store and into the parking lot. Stiles would have complained, but he honestly wasn’t all that bothered. If anything, he was a little touched that his new friends cared about him enough to want to keep him safe, and what with Derek lost in the wind, he did feel safer with all of them around.

(It didn’t stop him, though, from spending a couple of long evenings sitting outside on the back deck, staring out at the woods and hoping Derek would appear. He didn’t see Derek, but he learned to recognize the calls of many different nocturnal birds.)

The Fourth of July rolled in overcast and hot, much like the day at the cemetery. Stiles had never enjoyed the holiday all that much — it was close to the anniversary of his mom’s death, and one of his clearest last memories of her was on the fourth, when they’d been allowed to take her out of the hospital for the evening. Stiles' dad had been concerned about overwhelming her with the celebrations in town, so he’d driven them out to a quiet hill and they’d watched the fireworks from there. Stiles remembered sitting with his parents, nestled safe between his mom's legs, laughing and clapping along with her as bright fireworks lit the sky. That was the last time he’d heard her laugh; she’d passed away ten days later with her hand on his head, murmuring, "My little man, my little man."

Still, the McCalls were hosting a barbecue and Stiles didn't have anything else to do — Dad was going to be on patrol all night, along with the rest of the department. If it came down to sitting at home alone or eating a lot of food and socializing, Stiles would always pick food and people. He showed up at the house at six with a couple bags of chips and some store-bought cupcakes — chocolate with vanilla frosting that had been airbrushed red and blue — much to the joy of Boyd, who descended upon him before he’d gone ten feet into the backyard. Boyd took the cupcakes and promptly disappeared into the crowd of people, leaving Stiles scowling after him.

"You better save one for me!" he called and Boyd raised a hand in acknowledgment.

Stiles dumped the chips onto a table laden with finger foods, accepted a hug and a kiss on the cheek from Melissa, then struck off through the crowd to find his friends. There were a lot of people at the party — he recognized most of them from the library and around town. He caught sight of Laura chatting with an older couple. She caught his eye and waved cheerily, which he returned a little stiffly. They hadn't interacted much since the ceremony at the cemetery; he’d had two days off since, and most of his shifts had been alone or with Lydia. He didn't think that it was deliberate avoidance on Laura's part — at work the next day, she'd thanked him for going, but he felt…weird. Maybe it was because he'd seen her cry, or maybe it was because he hadn't had any real business being there, having not known the Hales at all. He wasn't sure the reason, but he was trying his best not to be bothered by it.

Stiles found his friends gathered under under the spreading arms of a massive oak tree, cross-legged on the grass. The cupcake tray sat empty in the middle, and Stiles narrowed his eyes at it as he plunked himself down between Isaac and Allison.
"You guys sure made fast work of them," he said bitterly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lydia said dreamily from where she lay with her head in Allison’s lap.

"Yeah?" Stiles replied. "The frosting around your mouth says otherwise."

Lydia narrowed her eyes at him and wiped blue frosting from the corner of her mouth while Isaac snorted.

"You’re such a big baby," Erica said with a roll of her eyes, as Boyd reached behind his back and pulled out one last cupcake.

"Hey, I bought these," Stiles reminded her, graciously accepting the cupcake from Boyd.

"And I ate three," Erica retorted, looking utterly satisfied.

They behaved themselves, for the most part, until later in the evening, when Scott's mom had to go on shift at the hospital to patch up all the people injuring themselves with illegal fireworks. Most of the guests left around the same time — apparently there was a fireworks show in town that was pretty good, but Stiles and his friends stuck around the house and proceeded to get wonderfully, amazingly shitfaced. They built a huge fire and Scott disappeared into the house only to re-emerge, triumphant, with hotdogs and marshmallows, which sent Boyd and Isaac plunging into the woods to find suitable roasting sticks for everyone.

It was the most fun Stiles had had in a while and when he stumbled home a couple hours later, even the fact that it had started raining lightly — misting, his mom used to call it — couldn't dampen his spirits. It wasn't until he turned down the driveway that his faintly pleased expression slid off his face. He'd thought — hoped — that Derek would be there, but he'd forgotten Derek wasn't coming around any more. His mood soured just like that, unhappiness twisting his stomach. Derek hadn't done anything wrong, Stiles had been more startled than hurt, to tell the truth, and the bite mark was now little more than a couple of faint scabs in a vague crescent shape.

Stiles was going to find Derek, he decided suddenly. His dad was still on shift — he was on a double, Stiles was pretty sure — so Stiles didn't bother going inside. Instead, he lurched across the backyard and into the woods, bellowing for Derek as he went.

"Come on, buddy!" he hollered as he staggered through the dark trees. "You're not in trouble or anything! Please come back!"

There wasn't any sign of Derek, wasn't much of a sign of anything, Stiles realized. It was dark; he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. He nearly smashed face first into several trees before remembering his magic, throwing a globe of light roughly the size of a basketball into the air to hover above his head. His spark was harder to control when he was drunk — he'd only meant for a ball of light the size of his fist, but this was fine too, he supposed. It certainly lit up the woods and, as he cast it, there came an answering pulse of magic below him, a deep buzz that raised goosebumps along his arms. It look a moment, but Stiles recognized it as the underground thrumming that had first led him to the massive tree out in the preserve.

Stiles shrugged to himself. It was as good as any direction to go. He was pretty sure he'd be able to find the old Hale house from there, and that's where Derek might be. And anyway, it wasn't like he had anything better to do now that he'd left the party, so he followed the pull of the magic, his light obediently following along as he tripped over broken branches and fought his way through brambles.
The clearing was much lighter than the woods — a good thing, because the moment Stiles stepped out from the trees, head tilting up to look at the massive tree before him, his globe of light snuffed itself out like a candle. Stiles frowned vaguely at the place in the air where it had been, but wasn't much in the frame of mind to puzzle over it for too long.

Derek wasn't around, he was pretty sure, but Stiles walked toward the tree, inexplicably drawn forward. His head felt more muddled than it had before and he hoped he wasn't going to blackout in the woods somewhere, though he'd passed out drunk in stranger places in the past. He lifted a hand as he neared the tree, placing it flat on the pewter colored bark, and he felt the tree thrum in response.

Stiles didn't know how long he stood there, hand on the tree, absently gazing up at the half moon hanging high over the trees. All he knew was that when something tugged at his pants, jerking him away from the tree, it felt as though he was surfacing from a dream. He looked down, blinking rapidly to clear the fog from his eyes, and found Derek next to him, his teeth clamped down around Stiles' khakis.

"Derek!" he slurred happily, warm pleasure coiling in his stomach. "Dude!"

Derek's pale eyes flickered up to Stiles' face but he didn't let go of Stiles' leg until he'd pulled Stiles across the clearing. When he finally did, Stiles staggered, his head spinning. "Dude, I am drunk," he confessed to Derek, who snorted impatiently and started off into the trees. "Hey!" Stiles called, throwing himself after Derek. "Wait!"

Derek slowed but he didn't stop, forcing Stiles to jog. His body didn't like that much — his head throbbed uncomfortably, making him groan. Derek glanced over his shoulder and slowed further, allowing Stiles to drop to a fast walk. Speaking was beyond him, just keeping himself going was hard enough, but it barely surprised him when Derek led him back to Stiles' house, stopping at the edge of the lawn to give him a pointed look, which seemed to say *I think it's time for bed.*

Stiles took a couple of steps toward the house, but when Derek didn't show any signs of following, he stopped. "Come on," Stiles pleaded softly. "I've really missed you around, dude. Come home, Derek. Please."

Derek didn't move. Stiles didn't either. They stared at each other for a while in the faint silver light from the moon before Derek got very slowly and deliberately to his feet. Stiles held his breath, then bit down on a grin as Derek walked past him, head held high as he headed for the house. Stiles followed silently, opening the back door when Derek stopped and waited patiently.

It was late and he was on the verge of passing out so Stiles headed straight upstairs, unable to stop the grin that spread over his face when he heard the sound of Derek's nails on the floor, following him. He didn't say anything, though, as he didn't want to ruin the moment because he knew Derek would get huffy if Stiles tried to make a joke. So he went demurely into his room, stripping out of his rain-dampened pants and shirt, sliding into bed. Derek slipped around the door a moment later and laid down on the floor next to Stiles' bed. Stiles leaned over the edge of his mattress to say, "C'mon, dude, we both know where you're going to end up. There's no point beating around the bush."

Derek gave him a brief glance and a long-suffering sigh before getting back to his feet and smoothly jumping up onto the bed. Stiles sighed happily as Derek settled down next to him; it felt right. Derek didn't even move away when Stiles reached out automatically to smooth a hand over his head.

"I'm sorry," Stiles said abruptly. "For grabbing you the other day. I shouldn't have tried to force you into the bath like that."

Derek turned his head, resting his chin on Stiles' stomach so he could look him in the eye. Not for the
first time, Stiles had the feeling that Derek understood every word he said — and could reply if he really wanted to. Instead, Derek shifted closer and, with great care, gently touched his wet nose to Stiles'. It was, Stiles felt, an act of both acceptance and apology for his own actions.

"Good," Stiles whispered, folding his arms around Derek's neck. "I missed you a lot."

Derek licked his chin and Stiles really hoped that meant *I'll never leave you again.*

Derek settled back in like he'd never been gone; he was home to greet Stiles every day, and slept on his bed every night. He even tolerated Scott for the entirety of *Pineapple Express,* though he probably would have left if Stiles hadn't crouched down in front of him a few minutes before Scott was due to appear and said, "I know you don't like Scott all that much, but I'd really appreciate it if you'd stick around." Derek did, to his surprise — and Scott's too, judging from the look on his face when he came into the house and found Derek glaring at him from the bottom of the stairs. He didn't say anything, though, and they crammed themselves onto the couch for the movie, Derek seeming to deliberately sit down on the other side of Stiles so he wouldn't be near Scott. He slipped out as soon as the movie ended, but Stiles considered it a success anyway.

He got into the habit of rising earlier than he needed to. He'd get dressed and head downstairs to make himself coffee, then he and Derek would spend half an hour or so sitting on the front steps, watching the world wake up around them. It was quiet, peaceful. Stiles would sip his coffee and flick through the news on his phone, or just sit, with his hand on Derek's warm back. Derek would lift his head every time someone came down the road — the first couple of mornings, he'd slip back inside the house until they'd passed, then he'd come back outside. Stiles ruffled his ears fondly and said, "What do you think they're going to do, bud? Call Animal Control while I'm sitting right here?"

Derek gave him an unloving look, but he stopped disappearing inside every time someone went by, instead he sat upright with his ears pricked forward, watching the joggers, cyclists, and drivers pass on their way in to work. Almost everyone waved and smiled, gestures Stiles cheerfully returned. "See?" he said to Derek, after Allison cycled past on her way home after a night at Scott's. "Everyone likes you."

On Wednesday morning, Stiles managed to drop his phone through a crack between two planks of the porch. He cursed, then cursed again when he got to his feet and realized the bottom of the porch was fenced in with a cheap wooden lattice. "Typical Wednesday," he muttered to Derek, and ducked into the house to grab a hammer to pry the lattice off the support beams. He'd just loosened one piece and had his fingers hooked around the bars to pull it off when he froze at the sound of something moving under the deck.

Stiles looked up at Derek, who got to his feet with his head tilted curiously to one side. He came trotting down the front steps to press up against Stiles' side, ears alert and eyes focused on the darkness beyond the lattice. After a moment, he nudged his cold nose against Stiles' neck, tail wagging from side to side very slowly.

"Is it safe?" Stiles asked. He was pretty sure the house couldn't help him if he was outside of it. Derek nudged him again and Stiles took that as a good sign. He hooked his fingers back in the lattice and pulled it away from the support posts. Whatever it was under the deck went skittering away and he cringed, but Derek pushed past him impatiently, crawling under the deck without a backwards glance. Stiles tensed at the commotion that arose — something was hissing furiously — and flashed through all the spells he'd taught himself so he could be prepared if Derek hauled out a labbu or jerff. He was up to the S's in *A Compendium of North American Supernatural Beings,* and though he wasn't sure it was all true — even if only a fraction of the things in it actually existed — it meant
there were a lot of weird things scurrying around the North American landscape.

To his complete surprise, though, Derek came crawling back out with a tiny raccoon clasped gently in his mouth. Just after him came a bigger raccoon with an additional two small ones clinging to its back. They made an odd procession, Derek trotting off across the lawn with a baby raccoon in his mouth, with what Stiles assumed to be the mother waddling behind, chittering irritably. They disappeared into the woods and Derek came back a moment later, his mouth empty.

"I was wrong about you," Stiles told him solemnly. "You're not afraid of Animal Control; you are Animal Control." He laughed at his own joke, and Derek headbutted him in the chest so hard Stiles fell back against the lawn, still laughing. "Gross, dude, you're completely covered in spiderwebs!"

Derek chuffed irritably and hopped back up onto the porch, leaving Stiles to sit up and collect himself. He crawled gingerly into the narrow space under the porch, making a face as broken cobwebs trailed over his skin. His phone lay in the dirt and he picked it up, absently looking around. There wasn't much to see, just dust and weeds. A broken section of lattice near the foundation was probably how the raccoons had gotten under there. As his gaze swept along the base of the house, Stiles noticed some dark markings on the concrete. They were impossible to read in the darkness, so he turned his phone on, calling up his flashlight app and turning the light toward the wall.

It was a spell, carved right into the foundation. Stiles recognized the first line as the ward spell he'd first tried casting a couple weeks ago — and no wonder he'd been unable to cast it, he thought; it was probably impossible to build a ward within a ward. If he looked carefully, he'd probably be able to find the directionality marks carved on the other walls of the house. He didn't recognize the second and third lines of spell work, but he reasoned that they were probably protectors as well, or enhancements of the first line. If he searched around, he'd probably be able to find them somewhere in the library.

The library. His job, where he was supposed to go on shift — Stiles checked his phone — in two minutes.

"Shit!" Stiles exclaimed, his head coming up so sharply that he cracked it against a porch beam. Stiles groaned in agony, clutching at his skull, which was now throbbing in pain. He heard Derek somewhere behind him, making a worried noise, and Stiles waved a hand at him. "I'm fine," he moaned, pushing himself backward while his head ached in protest of the movement.

Stiles crawled out from underneath the porch with his hands clutched to the back of his head. He'd completely forgotten about going to work, but right then it was hard enough just to get himself out from under the porch and collapse out onto the grass. Derek was waiting for him there, digging his nose against the crook of Stiles' neck.

"I'm okay," Stiles repeated, squeezing his eyes shut against the glare of the sun. "Just banged my head."

Derek didn’t seem convinced; he kept nosing at Stiles until he sat up. "Typical Wednesday," Stiles sighed again. "You think it’d be cool if I called out of work, crawled back into bed, and tried again tomorrow? That sounds fair to me."

Derek huffed, knocking his head against Stiles’ ribs a little harder than necessary. Stiles sighed once more. "All right, I get it. Gotta pay the bills somehow, I guess."

Derek snorted. Stiles managed to scrounge up a grin before levering himself to his feet, swaying a little before steadying himself. Derek stuck by his side as he headed for the Jeep — he seemed to be concerned that Stiles might fall, but the pain in his head was fading already. It only twinged when he
pulled himself up into the Jeep, but he ignored it and leaned out the window to look down at Derek.

“You want to come with? Laura’s so gung-ho about sucking money from the town that I’m sure she’d hire you too.” He grinned at the way Derek deliberately turned, before shouting after him, “Hey, someone’s going to have to take my place when I head back to school!”

- 

Once at the library, Lydia made him sit down and gave him a bag of ice to hold against the back of his head.

“I’m okay,” Stiles told her sheepishly, pressing the bag to his head. It did feel good.

“You need to take better care of yourself,” she admonished, rolling her eyes as she pushed a couple of aspirin into his hand.

“I can take care of myself just fine!” Stiles protested.

“You keep telling yourself that,” Lydia sniffed, turning to a pile of books that needed reshelving.

It was another quiet day at the library. The place got so dead in the late morning that Stiles and Lydia pulled board games from the children’s section and passed a couple hours playing Guess Who? and Chutes and Ladders. Stiles spent his lunch hour down in the rare books room, continuing his read of *A Compendium of North American Supernatural Beings*, finishing *Tizheruk* right as his break ended. He went back upstairs to relieve Lydia, and as she got to her feet, he noticed the book she held in her hands, a thick, heavy book with *La Pleureuse* embossed in silver on the plain black cover.

“What are you reading?” Stiles asked, his head tilted to read the title.

Lydia smiled faintly. “You could call it a family history.”

“Oh,” Stiles said, straightening. “Is that in French?” Lydia nodded and his eyes widened, impressed. “You’re fluent?”

“Allison and I spent a year abroad in high school,” Lydia replied, sounding smug.

“Man,” Stiles said jealously. “I took two years of Spanish in high school and I can’t even remember how to introduce myself.” He tapped his fingers against the desk, thoughtful. “Hey, did you know the woman who used to live in my house? Dad said she taught French at the high school.”

“Madame Morrell?” Lydia asked, raising her eyebrows. “Yeah, we had her. Why?”

“Was she into…” Stiles hesitated. “Uh. Weird stuff?”

Lydia’s eyebrows rose further. “Weird stuff?”

“I found a lot of…strange things in the shed. Weird writing on the walls. A lot of dried plants. A, uh, deer skull,” Stiles said hesitantly. Lydia didn’t say anything, she just watched him, her perfect eyebrows arched in question. “I, uh, found a couple books, too.”

Lydia leaned forward, interest lighting her face. “What kind of books?”

Stiles scratched nervously at the back of his neck. “Uh, like the ones downstairs.”

Lydia gave him an inquisitive look, a smile hovering around the corners of her lips. “And?” she pressed. “Have you learned anything interesting?”
Stiles opened his mouth to answer, then paused, his mind churning frantically. “You know,” he breathed accusingly.

Lydia’s face broke into a true smile then. “I do,” she agreed cheerfully.

“How long?” Stiles exclaimed. “Are you — can you...do stuff too?”

“I felt it wake up inside you,” Lydia told him, looking pleased and a little smug. “And no. I’m a little different.”

Stiles stared at her. “So — so it’s not just me? I thought, I mean, I was psyched, but I also thought I might be — just be dreaming or something.”

Lydia’s smile softened. “It’s not just you,” she assured him. “No one in this town is exactly what you’d call normal.” She straightened, still smiling, and added, “I’m going on break now. See you in an hour.”

“See you,” Stiles said, a little dazedly. Lydia disappeared out the front door with a wave, leaving him alone to process the new revelations. He got to his feet after a while, pacing around the perimeter of the library, staring up at all the Hale family treasures while he tried to wrap his head around the fact that magic was real — like, really real, and the last couple of weeks hadn’t been some kind of fever dream brought on by the burns on his arms getting infected.

Stiles glanced down at his arm, at the dark smears of healing burns. It didn’t hurt, hadn’t for a week or more, but those marks would be there for a long time. He’d burnt the inside of his wrist on the oven once, and the mark had stayed for almost two years. He brushed his finger against one of the burns and remembered Lydia telling his dad, “I’ll ask Laura to turn it down.” She’d been talking about the spell on the grate, he realized, which meant that Laura knew it about it too. Of course she did; her family owned most of the books down there. He wondered if she could work spells too.

He found himself in front of the community bulletin board by the front door, hung with lost pet posters, flyers for summer softball leagues and volleyball tournaments, a barbeque fundraiser down at the high school, someone trying to start a local environmental awareness club. He was staring at a poster from someone offering fresh vegetables for sale when he noticed, down at the corner, a very light line of hand-drawn runemarks. He probably never would have noticed a couple weeks back, but he’d been paying a lot more attention to things lately and this — Stiles frowned vaguely, eyes lifting back to the barbeque fundraiser poster and — yep, there was a line of runes at the bottom of it too. The same runes, even, and they were everywhere on the bulletin board, marked at the bottom of almost every flyer.

Stiles’ frown deepened. He didn’t recognize the line of runes. If it was a spell, it wasn’t one he’d learned yet. Past experience had taught him to be cautious but he felt nothing negative coming from the board, so he lifted a hand and touched the tip of his finger to the runes on the vegetable flyer. From out of nowhere, a wavery old woman’s voice spoke: “Also available are small quantities of — ”

Stiles jerked his hand away, staring around in bewilderment. The only other people in the library were a father and his young daughter. Stiles could hear the man reading a book to her and his voice was nothing like the elderly voice he’d just heard. He looked back at the poster and raised his hand again, pressing his thumb against the runes. Immediately, the old woman’s voice began again, patient and quavering. “Also available are small quantities of deadly nightshade, foxglove, wolfsbane, and cannabis. Stop by the greenhouse on 18 Ferne Lane or call before seven on weekdays. If you — ”

Stiles took his hand away again, slower this time, thoughtful. He touched the runes on the volleyball
tournament flyer and the instantly recognizable voice of Mayor Finstock filled his head as he half- bellowed, “If I catch anyone hexing members of the opposite team, I’ll turn you into a gym bag for a week and store all my unwashed socks in you! Just ask Greenberg how he liked it last year!”

Stiles’ hand dropped to his side as he stared at the wall of flyers. They were almost like answering machines, he thought, but were clearly only intended to be heard by people who knew where to look. He thought about what Lydia had just said — No one in this town is exactly what you’d call normal. It certainly seemed true now that he was looking.

The geological society shuffled in as he stood there, casting him cheerful smiles. Stiles nodded back and retreated to the circulation desk, watching them gather around the table in the reference section before turning his attention to the computer. He played a few idle games of solitaire, checked out a stack of children’s books for the girl and her dad, and played a couple more games. Lydia eventually reappeared, a faint smile still quirking her lips.

“Everything all right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said distractedly. He was trying to listen to the geology club — they were speaking in courteous low tones, but he kept hearing them mention gold, and he wanted to know what they were discussing.

Lydia glanced over at the group. “Oh,” she said dismissively. “The alchemists.”

Stiles tilted his head up to stare at her, his mouth falling open. “Alchemists?!”

Lydia sniffed, settling down next to him. “Hobbyists,” she said derisively. “People have been trying to figure how to turn things to gold for centuries. They’re not going to have any luck.”

Stiles stared at her. “What, you think you could do better?”

Lydia smiled triumphantly, opening her book across her knees. “Give me my doctorate and ten years,” she said smugly. “I can do it.”

“Just what are you studying, again?”

“Chemical engineering,” Lydia replied, looking more smug than ever.

“Jesus,” Stiles said, impressed. Lydia smiled triumphantly and turned her attention to her book. No matter how much Stiles pestered her, she wouldn’t tell him how her magical skills differed from his, though she did acquiesce to watch him summon his little globe of light (with his hand under the desk, because he was still nervous and a little wary of this new world), and he felt gratified when she looked impressed.

“That’s more than a lot of people can manage,” she told him, and Stiles grinned.

Later, as they were shooing out the last of the geology club — alchemy club, Stiles reminded himself — and locking the doors behind them, Stiles asked Lydia something he’d been mulling over all afternoon. “Is everywhere like this?”

She tilted her head curiously. “Like what?”

“Magic,” Stiles said. “I mean, the book I found in the house said that there are like, dead spots where people can’t feel their sparks, but all of this — does this exist all over the world?”

Lydia smiled. “It does.”
“Then how — ” Stiles gestured frustratedly. “How haven’t people noticed?”

“Because the rest of us have practice hiding it,” Lydia told him patiently. “Did you notice anything odd?”

Stiles shut his mouth. “No,” he admitted. “I mean, I thought maybe some things were weird, but I just — I don’t know. I just thought I was seeing things, I guess, or hearing things.”

“Exactly,” Lydia said primly, leaning over the circulation desk to switch off the computer. “Normal people aren’t looking for the odd things that are out there.”

“So it’s all real,” Stiles said slowly, following her through the stacks. “Everything in the books downstairs?”

“Everything,” Lydia confirmed, then paused. “Well, some of the books downstairs are on magical theory — you should take a look, if you haven’t.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Why?”

Stiles flicked off the lights, casting them into the indoor gloom of the late afternoon. “I’ve just been reading this one book down there. It’s an encyclopedia of — of creatures, I guess. And I just wanted to know; all that’s real too? I mean, magic’s one things, but like mermen and thunderbirds?”

“It’s all real,” Lydia said sympathetically.

“Even unicorns?” Stiles asked helplessly.

Lydia laughed and headed for the back door, saying over her shoulder as she went, “Even unicorns, Stiles, though most experts agree that their herds have shrunk to a range of just a couple hundred square miles in the Belarusian forests.”

They’d almost reached their respective cars when Stiles asked one last question. “What do you know about that giant tree out in the woods?”

Lydia froze, her eyes widening. “You’ve been out there,” she said.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, a little thrown by the expression on her face. “I could feel it. I just followed the feeling.” He could feel it now, actually, but the deep thrumming under the earth was much fainter than it was by the house.

Lydia hesitated before saying, “There are these…currents that run under the earth.”

“Ley lines,” Stiles said immediately. He remembered that from the book.

“That’s a little outdated,” Lydia sighed. “These days, most people refer to them as telluric currents. They run under the earth’s surface — ”

“In a grid?”

Lydia waved an impatient hand. “It’s a little more organic than that. There are maps downstairs. I’ll show you tomorrow. Anyway, they carry power, and the places where they converge are magical hot spots. Locals often consider them sacred; you can often find shrines or monuments where they meet.”

Stiles snorted. “What, like Stonehenge?”

“Like Stonehenge,” Lydia agreed, sounding exasperated.
“Oh,” Stiles said. He supposed he shouldn’t keep joking about these things because they kept turning out to be real. “And the tree? It’s sitting on a place where the currents converge, right?”

“Right,” Lydia said. She looked frightened suddenly. “Don’t go back out there, Stiles.”

Stiles blinked, then frowned. “Why not?”

“It’s not safe,” Lydia said, backing toward her car. “Not for people like us. Don’t go back.”

“Okay, okay,” Stiles said placatingly. “I won’t. It creeps me out, anyway.”

Lydia nodded, still looking worried, and climbed into her car.

Stiles drove home in a contemplative silence. He found himself studying every house he passed, staring into the woods. There was tension in his shoulders, and his head, which had stopped aching after he’d taken the aspirin Lydia had given him, began to pound again. By the time he pulled into the driveway he felt exhausted, like he’d been awake for days. Derek wasn’t on the porch, but he came loping across the yard when Stiles headed for the house, bumping himself against Stiles’ legs with a pleased noise.

“Steady on, dude,” Stiles murmured, his head throbbing as he steadied himself. Derek seemed to realize Stiles wasn’t feeling well because he backed off, looking a little ashamed as he followed Stiles into the house. The house was quiet — his dad wasn’t home yet — and he wasn’t hungry enough to eat, so he headed upstairs, figuring he could take some advil and a quick nap.

“Sorry, buddy,” he said to Derek, shucking off his pants and crawling into bed. “I’ve got to be boring today.”

Derek didn’t seem to mind; he hopped up next to Stiles and wormed his head under Stiles’ arm. Stiles smiled wearily, tapping his finger against Derek’s damp nose. “If I didn’t know better,” he told Derek, “I’d say that bump on the head this morning sent me to Oz, but it looks like it’s the town that’s crazy, not me.” He rolled onto his side facing Derek, wrapping his arms around Derek’s neck. Derek huffed, sounding put-upon, but he made no effort to escape.

“’Member?” Stiles murmured, his eyes fluttering shut. The advil seemed to be kicking in quite fast; he felt as though he was drifting through molasses, weariness crashing down upon him in a great wave. “Month ago you’d barely let me touch you. Now look at us.” He sighed quietly, all the tension seeping from him as he slipped into slumber.

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Stiles woke abruptly some time later. He’d been dreaming again; since the Fourth of July, his dreams had grown worse, terrifying in a way he couldn’t describe. They were almost all of the tree in the woods, which was why he’d been secretly relieved when Lydia told him not to go back to it. One night he’d woken to a dark figure at the end of his bed and he’d screamed only to shudder himself awake. Now, he couldn’t remember what the dream had been about, but he was relieved to find Derek still next to him, curled in a tight circle with his tail tucked over his face. A glance at his phone told him it was almost midnight — apparently he’d been more tired than he thought. At least his head didn’t hurt anymore.

“Hey,” Stiles whispered, rubbing his hands over his clammy arms. Derek’s tail twitched, revealing one pale eye. “You been up here this entire time?”

Derek shifted, pressing his nose into Stiles’ palm. Stiles snorted softly, smoothing a hand over Derek’s head before sitting up. “What do you think about grabbing a midnight meal?”
Derek’s ears came forward and he readily followed Stiles downstairs to the kitchen. The house was quiet; his dad was home, but judging from the soft snoring coming from his bedroom, he was down for the count.

“Hm,” Stiles said contemplatively, bending in front of the open refrigerator. It was almost empty; so wrapped up in thoughts about the town, he’d forgotten to go grocery shopping after work. “Not much to work with.”

He sighed; now that he’d thought about food, he was really hungry, and the wilted lettuce in the crisper wasn’t going to fill him. Everything in Beacon Hills was closed, but he knew there was a McDonald’s out by the state highway that was open twenty-four hours. “Road trip,” he said to Derek, who tilted his head to one side. “Wanna come?”

Stiles didn’t honestly expect Derek to follow him out to the jeep. He acted so wary of people, Stiles doubted he wanted anything to do with the car, but to his surprise, Derek sprang into the passenger’s seat when Stiles held the door open experimentally.

“You can be in charge of the music,” Stiles said solemnly, then cracked up at the dour look Derek gave him.

Stiles took the south road through the woods with the windows rolled down, the cool night air rolling in. He watched Derek warily out the corner of his eye, scared he might try to jump outside, but though Derek’s head was upright and alert, he made no attempt to even lean toward the window. Stiles relaxed and enjoyed the drive; the roads were empty, the woods quiet. He breathed in deeply, enjoying the smell of leaves and dew-drenched grass. The thrumming under the earth that he now knew as a telluric current faded the further south he drove. It was an odd feeling, as he’d grown used to the constant background hum.

Stiles elected to go through the drive-through rather than go inside so he wouldn’t have to leave Derek alone. He ordered a couple of burgers for each of them, along with a shitload of fries. He wasn’t quite sure if it was okay for dogs to eat this kind of stuff, but he figured Derek was tough; once wouldn’t hurt him. The girls running the drive-through loved Derek, and Derek looked thoroughly smug at the way they exclaimed over him. Stiles drove a couple miles in the direction of Beacon Hills before pulling off the road, and when he opened the bag of food he found that they’d slipped him a couple of extra burger patties for Derek.

“Oh man,” Stiles said, offering one to Derek, who very gently took it from his fingers and snapped it down in one bite. “I’m taking you everywhere from now on if it means free food.”

Derek didn’t even try to look irritated at the comment, just nosed eagerly at Stiles’ hand, licking his lips as he quested for more food. Stiles laughed and fed him the rest of the meat, snagging french fries in between while they were still hot.

“God,” Stiles said, watching Derek snarf down a double quarter pounder. “You’d think you were starving, to look at you.” Derek huffed at him and tried to shove his head into the bag of food. Stiles hastily yanked it out of his reach. “Hey, no, I need to eat too!”

Derek huffed again, half in Stiles’ seat as he stretched for the bag, breathing dog breath everywhere. “Gross, dude,” Stiles groaned, shoving him away. “I’m buying you a toothbrush tomorrow.” Derek glared at him reprovingly but he backed off, allowing Stiles to eat his burger in peace.

He’d parked at the edge of a field and it made a soft sloughing noise as the wind stirred the grass. Somewhere amongst the trees, far off in the distance, an owl hooted and another answered from even further afield. Above them, the moon shone bright and silver in a star-studded sky, casting the field
and surrounding woods in shades of pewter and ebony. It wasn’t quite full yet, one quarter still hidden and dark.

“Waxing,” Stiles said, fishing french fries from the bottom of the bag. Derek lifted his head to look at him and Stiles said, “It’s waxing, right, before the full moon? And waning after.” Derek watched him and Stiles smiled absentely, dumping a handful of fries on the seat for Derek to eat. He picked them up delicately, eating them one at a time, and when they were all gone he licked the salt from Stiles’ fingers. “My dad says full moons bring out the crazy people,” Stiles told Derek. “He hates working the night of the full moon.”

A little reluctantly, Stiles started up the jeep and headed back toward Beacon Hills. He thought about his dad and wondered how much he knew about what was going on in town. He had a hard time seeing his dad believing any of it; he was probably the most rational person Stiles had ever met. Stiles tried to imagine what his dad would do if Stiles did the light conjuring thing in front of him — get mad, probably, and say it was some kind of trick. But then...but then he remembered his dad at the library the night Stiles had been shocked by the rare books door, and how Lydia had told him, “I’ll ask Laura to turn it down,” and he realized that his dad knew. He’d known exactly what Lydia had meant and he’d told Derek, hadn’t he, later that night, that Stiles had been shocked by the door.

Stiles’ mouth dropped open. His dad had known magic was a thing and he hadn’t told Stiles! Stiles — Stiles was vaguely offended. “I’m trustworthy, right?” Stiles asked Derek indignanty. Derek, who had his chin on the windowsill, dark fur fluttering in the wind, slapped his tail against the seat a couple of times. Stiles patted his flank. “Thanks, buddy.”

God, no wonder his dad had been unsurprised by Stiles’ report of the garden shed looking as though it belonged to a member of a Satanic cult. He’d probably been well aware that the previous owner of their house had been a witch or whatever. He’d been interested in the giant tree in the woods when Stiles had told him about it dying, and he’d lied to Stiles, Stiles remembered, that night Derek got into that fight. He’d told Stiles that it had been a mountain lion, but if the code he’d told Stiles to repeat was correct, it’d been a wolf. A wolf.

Stiles’ eyes dropped to Derek before sliding up to the moon. A wolf, he thought, a cold, nervous feeling coiling in his stomach. He thought about that first full moon back in May, when he’d met Scott, Erica, Isaac, and Boyd out in the woods with all their crazy makeup. Except...he wasn’t so sure now that it had been makeup. No one in this town is exactly what you’d call normal, Lydia had said with a smirk.

Oh.

“Oh my god,” Stiles said out loud, slamming on the brakes so hard that Derek slid off the seat and into the foot well. “Oh my god,” Stiles repeated, clapping his hands over his eyes. “Oh my god, they’re werewolves.” He looked at Derek, who’d paused halfway out of the foot well to stare at him. “I thought they were fucking LARPers, oh my god.”

He smacked the heel of his palm against his forehead, cursing himself. “And Dad — he knew exactly who I was talking about and he didn’t say anything!” Stiles dragged his fingers through his hair. “Is this possible?” he asked Derek, who carefully pulled himself back up onto the seat. He had no idea why it was so easy for him to accept the idea that magic existed but everything beyond that was impossible. “Werewolves? God, this is so fucked up.”

Stiles stared at the steering wheel, curling and uncurling his hands around the plastic. It felt real, solid. It steadied him a little. “Werewolves,” he muttered to himself, like saying the word enough might cancel out the truth. “God, what next?”
Derek laid down on the seat next to him, stretching out his neck to press his nose against Stiles’ thigh. Stiles sighed, dropping one hand to stroke Derek’s soft ears. “What about you?” he asked softly. “Can I expect any surprises from you?”

Derek echoed Stiles’ sigh but made no other movement. Stiles sighed again and took his foot off the brake, heading for home once more. It was a good thing it was almost one in the morning, he thought. He might have caused a major car crash otherwise.

He tried to think about Scott being a werewolf, his dad knowing about magic, Lydia being — something. He couldn’t, though, he found his thoughts bouncing around wildly. It was too much to take in all in one day, Stiles thought, suddenly weary again. He should be scared or excited or something, but he was just — just tired. He needed a couple of days to let everything sink in before he’d be ready to mull it all over. At least he had Derek, though, with his head still resting on Stiles’ thigh, a warm point of contact just as reassuringly solid as the steering wheel in his hands.

-Stiles dreamt of the moon that night, shining full and bright over the trees. A solitary wolf howled far off in the distance, miserable and alone. He woke up with his chest aching in sympathy.

-Stiles didn’t get the chance to confront his father; Stiles didn’t have to be to the library until eleven, so by the time he woke up, his dad had already left the house. Stiles shrugged it off. It’s wasn’t like there wasn’t plenty of time to bring it up later. And anyway, he had bigger things to deal with, like freakin’ werewolves. The thought propelled him out of the house and he headed into town half an hour early.

Lydia looked up when he came through the doors, a faint smile quirking her lips. “You’re early,” she said.

“I know,” Stiles replied, heading for Laura’s office so he could grab the key to the rare books room. “I’ve got something I need to look up. I’ll be back up soon.”

He pulled open the door to Laura’s office and paused. Laura was in there on the phone, an irritable look on her face. “Look, Bobby,” she hissed. “I’m doing the best I can. Once — can I help you?”

This question was directed at Stiles, frozen in the doorway.

“Er, no,” Stiles said awkwardly, reaching for the key hanging on its nail. “I just — er. Sorry to interrupt.”

Laura waved him away and Stiles backed out of the office, carefully closing the door behind him. He’d forgotten about Laura, about the way her eyes had flashed yellow at him that one time Jennifer Blake came into the building — the same yellow Scott’s eyes had glowed out in the woods.

“Fuck,” Stiles breathed, hurrying down the stairs. Was Laura one of them too?

There was an old lady browsing the booksale tables. She smiled at Stiles as he hurried past and he smiled back, almost certain she was the old woman offering vegetables and pot for sale on the flyer upstairs. Whatever. Bigger fish to fry, he reminded himself, swiftly unlocking the grille and pulling it shut behind him. He pulled the now familiar A Compendium of North American Supernatural Beings off its shelf and set it down on the table, hurriedly flipping through its thin pages until he found the entry on werewolves.

Werewolf (see also: shapeshifter, skinwalker)
The werewolf, or lycanthrope, is a shape-shifting humanoid known to inhabit almost every country in the world. Popular mythology recounts their ability to change from a humanoid shape to that of a wolf on the full moon. In actuality, the ability to change into the full wolf form is extremely rare, and the werewolf can shift at any time of the month. The typical werewolf’s transformation is generally referred to as “beta shift,” characterized by a change in eye color and the appearance of claws, fangs, pointed ears, facial hair, and a noticeably protruding brow ridge. Shifting into the full wolf shape is generally referred to as “full shift,” or “alpha shift”; the ability to do so is extremely rare and generally hereditary. This form is akin to that of a real wolf (Canis lupus), though the form may be larger, and reflect the humanoid form’s features, resulting in hair and eye colors not normally seen in the wild. Some aspects of the shift, including eye color, fangs, and claws, can be produced at any time without fully entering beta or alpha shifts.

Most werewolves live under a pack structure that mimics that of wolf packs in nature. Leaders are called alphas and are usually one to a pack, though a pack may be led by a mated alpha pair or, in very rare cases, a set of alpha twins. The power of an alpha is transferred in death. If the cause of death is natural or not by another werewolf, the alpha powers are usually passed down to family members, often — but not always — the eldest offspring. If the cause of death is by another werewolf, the alpha powers will be transferred to the killer. Alphas can be distinguished from other werewolves by their red eyes and increased strength and healing abilities. Alphas are the only type of werewolves that can turn humans — that is, the bite of an alpha will change a human into a werewolf.

Secondary members of the pack are known as betas and make up the majority of the pack. Usually consisting of family members or turned wolves, the larger the pack and the deeper the bond between members, the stronger it will be. A strong pack will have no issues defending its territory; healing abilities are also enhanced with a healthy pack, and a strong beta from a healthy pack may have no issues taking on an alpha from a weak pack. Betas can be recognized by their yellow eyes.

"Yellow," Stiles murmured to himself, his eyes going wide. They all had yellow eyes — Scott, Laura, Erica, Boyd, and Isaac. Did that mean he hadn't met the alpha yet?

Tertiary to the pack structure are the werewolves known as omegas. Unlike the role omegas play in real wolf packs, omega werewolves are wolves without pack. They are generally much weaker than alphas or betas, with poor healing abilities. Becoming an omega is every werewolf's greatest fear; with a pack comes safety, stability, and family. The deep bond between pack members cannot be understated. Without strong leadership, a pack may fall into chaos and if the bond is lost, entire packs can slip to omega status. An alpha who engages with and cares for their pack is absolutely necessary, as betas alone cannot sustain the bond by themselves. There is no visual difference between a beta and an omega.

A werewolf may come into being in two different ways: through birth or through bite. Born wolves are children of werewolves — alphas, betas, and omegas alike may all bear werewolf children. A child born of werewolves is not guaranteed a born wolf; the child may be born human. It is not unusual for a pack to be made up of both werewolves and humans. Indeed, in magical communities, werewolves may be welcomed as leaders and protectors and in return, welcome the entire local populace into their pack. The Alvarez pack of western Texas, for example, includes in its ranks the entirety of Hudspeth County, making it, with a population of over three thousand humans and werewolves, one of the largest packs in the world.

The secondary method of creating werewolves is, as mentioned above, via the bite of an alpha werewolf. This method is not always fool-proof. Bite survival rates are around 75%, making it an option of last resort for most packs. The bite is almost never given without permission. Most packs are approached by humans who want the bite, whether it be for health or other personal reasons —
the bite has the effect of, in addition to giving the bearer werewolf powers and abilities, curing certain cancers and other ailments. In recent years, researchers have unearthed evidence that a deep enough scratch from an alpha may also be enough to turn a human, but this fact is still being disputed and researched.

Because packs are usually made of family members, it is not unusual for packs to have remained in the same place for decades or even centuries. The Mount Baker pack of north Washington, with land stretching into British Columbia, is one of the oldest packs in the Americas, having existed for nearly four centuries. There are packs in Europe and the Middle East of even greater age. One nomadic pack in the Kazakh Steppe is said to have been formed as early as the second century BC.

Stiles had to stop reading at that point; it was already past eleven and Lydia started shooting him irritated texts. He reluctantly closed the book and returned it to its proper place before leaving the room, carefully locking the grille behind him. Laura had left the building by the time he got upstairs, which was something of a relief — Stiles wasn't exactly sure what to do with the realization that she was almost definitely a werewolf, and he didn't feel quite brave enough to mention it to Lydia. Lydia was pissed at him anyway, for being late; she made him help out with the kids' arts and crafts hour. Stiles had nothing against kids, but he was decidedly grumpy by the end and he wasn't sure he'd ever get all the glitter out from underneath his fingernails.

Stiles was very carefully not around when Isaac came to pick Lydia up for lunch. It wasn't like he was scared, okay, but remembering the way the four of them had looked that first night Stiles had met them out in the woods sent shivers down his spine. That had to have been what the book meant when it said "beta shift," Stiles realized, remembering the harsh lines of their faces.

Stiles went home that evening with the intention of storming into the house and demanding his dad tell him everything he knew — like did he know about werewolves? It was hard enough believing he'd believe in magic, let alone mythic wolf men — but when he got home he found his dad grilling on the back deck and Derek dozing in the last patch of sunlight. The peace was too comfortable to break with a lot of questions so Stiles gave up for the time being, settling himself down next to Derek and poking at him until he woke up. Derek twitched an ear at him but refused to move. Stiles laughed and let him be, hopping off the deck to grab the hose so he could water the garden.

Stiles waited until he and his dad had finished eating before dropping the big question as casually as he could manage. "Sooo, Dad," he said. "When were you going to tell me?"

His father squinted at him over the top of his beer. "Tell you what?"

"You know," Stiles said lightly, running a hand down Derek's back. "That this whole town's magic."

He watched his dad out of the corner of his eye. His dad didn't say anything for a while, his eyes on the trees. "Huh," he said after a minute, thoughtful.

Stiles blanched. "Really, Dad? That's all you can say?"

His father sighed. "We were hoping you wouldn't find out."

"We?" Stiles repeated indignantly. "Who's we?"

"The mayor," his dad replied ambivalently. "City council. We all agreed."

"Why?" Stiles asked plaintively. "Dad, this is awesome! Why would you try to keep this from me?"

His father sighed again. "Because the last thing this town needs is to be turned into some kind of freak show. And I know," he said, as Stiles opened his mouth to protest. "I know you'd never do
anything like that, but people slip up sometimes, son. My job is to protect this town and if that means protecting it from you, that's what I have to do."

Stiles sat quietly for a moment, watching Derek crane his head over the side of the deck, sniffing at the long grass. "I've been keeping something from you, too," he said.

His dad sighed. "I know you've been drinking."

"What?" Stiles said guiltily. "No, I mean — yeah, but — look." He offered his hand to his father, summoning forth his little globe of light.

His dad stared at it for a long time before raising his eyes to Stiles' face. "Jesus," he said softly. "Shoulda known." He held out a curious hand and Stiles tipped the light into his palm. Dad stared at it, watching it avoid his finger as he tried to prod at it. "Your mom always said she had a touch of something. Guess she was right."

"I didn't know that," Stiles said softly.

His father coughed roughly, passing the light back to Stiles, who dismissed it. "Anyway," he said. "I guess I don't need to tell you that this is something you need to keep to yourself when you go back to school."

Stiles nodded. "Were you ever going to tell me?"

"That depended on your plans," his dad replied. "If it seemed like you weren't planning on coming back after you graduated, I probably never would have said anything."

"I can understand that," Stiles said, after a moment's thought. He grinned ruefully. "Glad I figured it out, though."

His dad clapped him on the back. "Sure makes things easier on my end, too."

Stiles snorted. "Thanks, Dad."

His dad squeezed his shoulder before getting to his feet, gathering their plates. "You'll have to show me any other tricks you've learned," he said, smiling faintly.

"We should get a fire pit," Stiles told him brightly. "I can start fires from nothing."

"I'll take a look at Kmart," his father replied wryly, heading inside. Stiles heard him call, "Hey, did this door always hang crooked like this?"

Stiles muffled a laugh, leaning over Derek. "You can tell him you broke the door."

Derek made a disgruntled noise and Stiles laughed again, ruffling his ears. "C'mon, dude," Stiles said, getting to his feet. "Let's go help Dad with the dishes."

Stiles didn’t have to work the next day. He slept in late and thought about going in the library to do some more reading, but he knew that Laura was on duty today and he didn’t want to confront her yet. Didn’t want to confront her ever, if he didn’t have to. He stayed at home instead, fixing the lattice around the front porch, taking care of the garden.

The usual Friday hangout session at Scott’s house was that night and Stiles dithered a long time about whether or not he wanted to go. He wanted to go — he loved hanging out with all his friends.
— but the knowledge that four of them were werewolves made him hesitate. He tried to convince Derek to go with him, but Derek just gave him a bored look and disappeared off into the woods. *Fend for yourself,* he seemed to say, and Stiles supposed he was right.

He went to Scott’s house after all, but he couldn’t quite enjoy himself. He kept watching everyone, wondering if there had been signs before that he’d missed, but all he saw was a lot of laughter and people getting along. He felt guilty for being such a downer and left early, waving off everyone’s protestations. He found Derek waiting for him at the end of the driveway; he got to his feet when Stiles approached, tail wagging faintly.

“What, you’ll come to the house but not inside?” Stiles teased, tugging at Derek’s ear. Derek snapped at his hand playfully before loping off down the road, swinging around in a great arc to circle Stiles. Stiles snorted at Derek’s antics as he headed home, pace slow and thoughtful.

He was halfway home when it occurred to him to wonder if Derek might be a werewolf too. Stiles stopped walking to stare at Derek, who was crashing about in some bushes at the edge of the road. He certainly seemed smart enough, what with the way he seemed to understand and respond to Stiles’ actions and conversation, but he’d never given any sign of supernatural abilities or that he was actually a person in dog form.

Derek came trotting out of the culvert toward him, ears pricked forward alertly. Nah, Stiles thought, reaching out to pat his head absently. Derek was a normal, albeit very intelligent, dog. He didn’t even look much like a wolf — not that Stiles had seen many in real life, but he didn’t think Derek was even the same size as a real wolf, and hadn’t the book said that werewolves in wolf form were usually bigger than real wolves? And the ability to transform into a full wolf was supposed to be super rare, anyway.

Stiles got a couple hundred yards further down the road before Derek went suddenly tense, stopping so abruptly that Stiles bumped into him. “What’s up, dude?” he asked, watching Derek wind around his legs so he stood at Stiles’ back, staring off into the trees.

“Come on,” Stiles said uneasily, taking a step forward. “Let’s go ho— ” He cut himself off because there were lights among the trees, two of them at head height, moving closer as he watched. It took him far too long to realize they were eyes, glowing electric blue amid the darkness between the trees. Derek began to growl, low and threatening, and to Stiles’ growing horror, the person, thing, whatever, in the woods snarled back. “Fuck,” he muttered, panicked. He didn’t know what blue eyes meant, but whatever the thing was, it wasn’t friendly, that was certain.

Then it stepped forward, far enough into the moonlight that Stiles could see the smooth side of its face; human, or human-like. “Derek,” it said in a man’s voice. “Made friends with the sheriff’s son, I see. How sweet.”

This statement propelled Stiles into movement; he didn’t know what it was or how it knew who he was, but he wanted to be as far away from it as possible. He flung himself backward just as Derek flung himself forward. The creature dropped into a crouch with a snarl, meeting Derek’s attack head-on. Stiles sprinted the other way, running to the house as fast as he could. He fumbled open the front door, almost slamming into his father.

“Stiles,” his dad said, blinking at him in surprised. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s — there’s a man out on the road,” Stiles gasped, his chest heaving; he hadn’t sprinted like that since high school. “I think it’s a man. He knew who I was. He — he’s fighting Derek. He had blue eyes.”
His father straightened, his face going serious. “Blue eyes,” he repeated, and spun on his heel, heading for the den. “Stiles, call the station. Tell them it’s a — ”

“10-91AW,” Stiles supplied, his eyes going wide as things clicked into place. The man in the woods had to be a werewolf. This was all too much like the last night Derek had disappeared into the trees fighting something, and the next day he’d overheard the conversation at the station about Peter Hale. There’d been no mountain lion. There’d been no wolf. Derek had been fighting Peter Hale in the woods that night. He scrambled for his phone as his father stormed back past him and out the front door, shotgun clenched in his hands.

When the on-call deputy picked up, Stiles wasted no time. “This is Stiles Stilinski,” he said, his words tumbling over themselves in his rush to get them out. “Peter Hale’s in the woods outside our house. Dad’s gone after him.”

“On my way,” the deputy said grimly, hanging up without another word.

Dad hadn’t said anything about calling Laura, but she’d been called in the last time and it made sense now — they were both werewolves and they were family. No wonder his dad had wanted her on-scene. She picked up on the second ring, sounding sleepy. “Stiles?”

“We’ve spotted Peter,” Stiles said without hesitation.

“Fuck,” Laura hissed. “Where are you? Your house?”

“Yeah.” Stiles swallowed. “Derek’s fighting him again. He got hurt last time, Laura. I — ”

“He’ll be fine,” Laura said soothingly. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Stiles hung up and stared out the screen of the front door, where the front lawn shone pale silver under the moonlight. He clenched his jaw determinedly. He could help now; he knew things, spells, that could aid them. He didn’t know how to kill a werewolf, he hadn’t finished the entry in A Compendium of North American Supernatural Beings, but he wouldn’t let Derek get hurt again.

Stiles strode back outside, letting the door crash shut behind him. If his dad could walk into the woods with just a gun, Stiles could do it too. He threw light into the air, casting the yard in sharp relief. A cruiser skidded to a halt at the end of the driveway, lights flashing blue and red, and a deputy leaned over to shout at him, “Where are they?”

“They were further down the road!” Stiles bellowed back and the deputy nodded, zipping off again. Stiles followed at a trot, stretching his light as far as he could to see into the depth of the woods on either side of the road. There was no sign of his father, Derek, or Peter Hale, but the cruiser skidded to a halt a quarter mile down the road from Stiles. Stiles saw the deputy run into the woods and figured that must be where they were; he picked up his pace as more cruisers passed him.

By the time Stiles reached the first cruiser, he saw his dad coming out the woods, shaking his head. “No sign of him,” Stiles heard his dad tell his deputies, and his shoulders slumped, disappointed. His dad spotted Stiles lurking amongst the squad cars and motioned him forward with a frown. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Thought I could help,” Stiles said.

His father sighed. “Just go home, will you?”

“Nuh-uh,” Stiles said, digging in his proverbial heels. “Where’s Derek? I want to know he’s safe.”
“He’ll be fine,” his father replied, sounding exasperated. They both turned as a car came flying down the road, screeching to a halt inches from the nearest cruiser. Laura clambered out, her hair pulled into a messy bun on the top of her head. Stiles got the feeling she’d been asleep when she called.

“Where is he?” she demanded, marching up to them. “Where’s Peter?”

“Couldn’t find him,” Stiles’ father replied. “Think you can track him?”

Laura lifted her head, nostrils flaring. Stiles realized, with a bit of a start, that she was scenting the air. “That fucker,” she growled, her eyes flashing gold. “I was watching Antiques Roadshow.”

Stiles’ father sighed. “Can you find him, please?”

Laura rolled her shoulders. “I’m gonna kick his ass,” she grumbled, trotting off into the woods. Stiles and his father watched her disappear amongst the trees.

“So,” Stiles said, casually shoving his hands into his pockets. “Werewolves.”

“Werewolves,” his dad sighed. “They tried to tell me what I was getting myself into, but I just didn’t believe it.”

Stiles laughed. “Frankly, Dad, I’m not surprised. I don’t think I would have believed anyone if they tried to tell me either.”

His dad snorted, turning sharply as something moved in the bushes beyond the lights of the cruisers. It was Derek, slinking out of the shadows. He didn’t seem thrilled about all the cops gathered around; he put his ears flat to his skull, planting himself at Stiles’ feet to lean heavily against his legs.

“You okay, dude?” Stiles asked, patting his head. To Stiles’ relief, he seemed perfectly fine, no wounds like the last time. There was blood around his mouth, smeared across his muzzle, but it didn’t seem to be from him.

“Sir?” The deputy who’d been first on scene approached them, eyeing Derek warily. Derek eyed him back, looking suspicious, and leaned against Stiles’ legs more heavily than ever. “How do you want us to proceed?”

Stiles’ father glanced toward the area of trees Laura had disappeared into. “Parrish, you and Knox stay here, wait for Miss Hale. You can call me if she comes back with Peter Hale, but I doubt she’s going to find him tonight. The rest of you can head home — thanks for responding so quickly.”

One of the deputies offered them a ride back to the house, but Derek refused to get into the back of the cruiser so Stiles’ dad waved her off and they walked back to the house together. Stiles watched Derek, who walked ahead of them with his tail held stiffly behind him, head swinging from side to side as he listened to the sounds of the forest.

“You’ve found yourself a good friend there,” his dad said as they neared the house, nodding toward Derek. “There’s not a lot of people or animals that would throw themselves in harm’s way for someone else.”

Stiles smiled faintly as Derek glanced over his shoulder at them. “Yeah,” he said fondly. “I know.”

No phone call came from the deputies that night. It took Stiles a while to fall asleep, unsettled by the memory of Peter Hale’s electric blue eyes approaching him from the trees. Derek, to his surprise,
sprawled out at the end of his bed and passed out almost immediately, paws twitching as he dreamed.

Stiles had the house to himself most of Saturday. His dad had the day off, but he’d gone into the station to have a talk with his deputies about the Peter Hale problem, leaving Stiles to fend for himself. Stiles was a little anxious about being alone but then again, he wasn’t alone, he had Derek, who didn’t seem to be in any rush to leave, as well as the house itself to protect him. He didn’t know what Peter Hale wanted from him, or why he’d shown up last night, or even why he knew who Stiles was, but he wasn’t going to let himself be threatened.

Stiles worked up the enthusiasm to go outside after a lazy morning of sitting around watching television. The garden needed watering and weeding, and he couldn’t let it go on much longer. It was a gross sort of day, hot and overcast and humid. It’d probably break with rain later, but while Stiles worked outside it just grew hotter and hotter, sweat rolling off him as he toiled. Derek lay panting in the grass next to him, looking miserable. Stiles felt terrible for him; all that dark fur couldn’t be fun in the heat.

“I say we go swimming after this,” Stiles said him to at one point, sitting back on his heels to swipe a dirt-covered hand across his sweaty forehead. “What do you think, huh?”

Derek rolled over with a groan, which Stiles took as agreement. “Yeah,” he said. “Sounds like the best plan. Wish we had a pool.” He squinted balefully up at the gray sky before returning his attention to the garden.

He’d been outside maybe forty-five minutes when Derek lifted his head, staring intently toward the front yard. Stiles paused, nervousness settling into the pit of his stomach. “Someone there?” he asked quietly.

Derek twitched an ear toward him but didn’t otherwise move. Stiles remained where he was, crouched on his knees. He wasn’t sure they were in danger; Derek wasn’t growling or anything, but neither of them relaxed until Scott rounded the corner of the house, smiling cheerfully.

“Oh, hey,” Stiles said with some relief, dropping his butt to the grass. Derek laid his head on the ground, eyes on Scott. He wasn’t quite relaxed, but Stiles was relieved that he hadn’t disappeared.

“Sorry for showing up unannounced,” Scott apologized. “I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, shrugging. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You seemed off last night,” Scott replied. “You left early. People were worried.”

“Oh,” Stiles said guiltily. “I didn’t mean to make people worry. I just had some things to think about.”

“Okay,” Scott said, sounding uncertain. He watched Stiles absently pluck a few weeds from the soil and offered, “Your garden’s looking good.”

“Thanks.” Stiles cast a critical eye over his little plot of growth. It was looking good, he was proud to admit; most of the dirt was covered in lush greenery — the beans and the squash were doing particularly well. Some of the mystery plants he’d planted on a whim were growing fast; there was a tall plant with silver-gray leaves that had shot up faster than all the rest. It was some kind of flower, almost ready to bloom; he could see dark purple buds at the end of some of its stems.

“You know what that is?” Scott asked, pointing to the plant in question.

Stiles shook his head. “Nah. I found some random jars of seeds in the shed so I took a chance and
planted some.”

“It’s called wolfsbane,” Scott told him. “It’s poisonous.”

“For werewolves,” Stiles said, without even thinking about it.


Stiles eyed him warily. “You knew I knew,” he said accusingly.

Scott nodded. “After you left last night, Lydia said she thought you’d figured it out a couple of days ago, and then Laura called later and told us about Peter, so we figured that was the last nail in the coffin. Is that why you were acting weird?”

“Yeah,” Stiles muttered, embarrassed.

Scott frowned. “We’re not — we’re not dangerous. None of us would ever hurt you.”

“I know that,” Stiles said quickly and he did, really. “It’s just a lot to take in. I’m still trying to process all of it.”

Scott looked relieved. “I get that.”

Stiles smiled tentatively, relaxing when Scott grinned back. “It’s hot as balls today,” Stiles offered. “I was thinking about going swimming. You wanna come?”

“Hell yeah,” Scott replied enthusiastically. “Right now? I can run home and change.”

“We’re not getting any cooler standing around,” Stiles agreed.

“Awesome,” Scott said. “I’ll meet you back here in five.”

Stiles raised his eyebrows. “That fast?”

Scott grinned. “Supernatural speed, dude. I’ll be back in a sec.”

True to his word, Scott returned within minutes — Stiles barely had time to go inside and get changed himself before Scott came back, hollering a cheerful hello up the stairs. Scott had grabbed a six-pack on his run home and they made half a dozen sloppy peanut butter and jelly sandwiches before stashing everything in a backpack, along with a couple bags of chips.

“I feel like we’re going to the beach,” Stiles laughed.

“That’s a good idea,” Scott said cheerfully, leading him out the front door. “We should organize a trip before the summer ends.”

To Stiles’ surprise, Derek sat waiting for them by the Jeep, looking bored. Stiles hadn’t thought that he’d want to go swimming if Scott was coming, but apparently either the heat had won out or he just didn’t care, because he jumped smoothly into the passenger’s seat when Stiles opened the door, then refused to move to the back for Scott. Scott just laughed.

“You’re the boss, dude,” he said, climbing into the back.

The parking lot in the preserve was crowded — it seemed like a lot of other people had had the same idea — but Scott shrugged and said, “There are other places to go,” and set off through the woods following no path that Stiles could see. Derek disappeared into the undergrowth; Stiles kept catching
glimpses of him off to the side or far ahead through the trees.

“So,” Stiles said as they crashed through the bushes, “this werewolf stuff. I did some reading — are you a born werewolf or bitten?”

“Bitten,” Scott replied, jumping over a fallen tree. “When I was a freshman in high school.”

Stiles blinked in surprise. “You asked for it?”

“Nah.” Scott shook his head. “I was attacked. Not by someone from Beacon Hills,” he added hurriedly, at the horrified look on Stiles’ face. “My mom and I were visiting my grandma in New Mexico and they had an alpha that went kind of, uh, wild.”

“Shit,” Stiles said.

Scott shrugged. “It wasn’t as bad as it could have been. We’ve lived here my whole life so the first thing that my mom did when we got home was bring me straight to Talia — Laura’s mom, I mean; she was the alpha before D— uh, before the fire. Anyway, she was really nice and helped me deal with everything.”

“So everyone grows up knowing all this stuff exists?” Stiles asked curiously. He could see the lake through the trees now, glimmering gray-blue in the overcast afternoon light. Derek came circling back through the trees to walk just in front of him, the long fur on his tail occasionally brushing against Stiles’ legs.

“Oh yeah,” Scott said. “There were clubs and stuff at school — you could take private magic lessons from some of the teachers if you had the skills. The whole town’s kind of like one big family — everyone’s pack.”

“Sounds nice,” Stiles said a little wistfully. He’d never had much family, even when his mom had been alive, it’d just been the three of them. His parents were both only children and while his dad’s parents were dead, his mom’s parents lived in Poland.

Scott tossed him a smile over his shoulder. “Chin up,” he said. “You’re pack now too.”

Stiles brightened. “Seriously?”

Scott laughed as they reached the water, crossing the rocky shore. “Yeah you are. What else would you be?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles mused, kicking his shoes off and stripping out of his shirt. He stepped into the water after Scott, sighing in relief as cool water lapped over his shins. There was a warm feeling in his chest, planted by Scott’s words that he was pack, growing as he watched Scott splash his way deeper into the water, as he turned to watch Derek delicately step into the lake. Stiles grinned and kicked water at him, laughing at the irritable noise Derek made. He kept laughing as Derek chased him into the water, not stopping until he was chest-deep. The water felt blessedly cool after the oppressing heat of the day. He ducked his head under, relishing the feeling of clean skin after getting so sweaty working in the garden.

“Dogs are such weird-looking swimmers,” Stiles remarked to Scott when he resurfaced. Scott snorted with laughter. Derek, who’d been paddling around, gave them both haughty looks and headed back to the edge of the lake.

They hung out on the water for the rest of the afternoon, alternating lying on the shore and swimming. Derek settled down halfway into the water and seemed to fall asleep, his head resting
above the water on a flat rock. Scott showed off his supernatural speed by catching a fish and Stiles howled with laughter when it wormed its way out of Scott’s grip, smacking him in the face with its tail before disappearing back into the lake with a splash.

“Hey,” Stiles said thoughtfully at one point, while they sat on the shore and munched on SunChips. “What’s Lydia’s deal? She wouldn’t tell me.”

Scott laughed. “Dude, she’d kill me if I told you.”


Scott shook his head, sending water flying everywhere. “Nah, nothing dangerous or anything, but it’s her business to tell you,” he said judiciously.


“Not off this stuff,” Scott grinned ruefully. “Remember that night you drank some of my beer by accident? It was laced with wolfsbane.”

“Oh yeah,” Stiles said with a shudder, remembering the taste. “And that punch Lydia brought?”

“That was laced too,” Scott nodded. “There are certain types that are deadly, but there are others that just make us a little loopy.”

“That shit was awful,” Stiles told him. “I hallucinated my mom in your bathroom.” His stomach dropped at the thought of his mom, suddenly hit by realization — the next day was the anniversary of her death and he’d completely forgotten.

Fuck.

“You okay, dude?” Scott asked, looking a little worried.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, his mouth twisting. “I just — tomorrow’s the anniversary of her death, so Dad and I will probably go down to Santa Rosa.”

“Oh,” Scott said, his dark eyes softening in sympathy. “I’m sorry, man.”

Stiles shook his head. “It’s okay. It’s been ten years, I just — ” Forgot. He shut his mouth with an audible click, feeling miserable.

“Do you want to leave?”

“No,” Stiles said firmly, shaking his head. “It’s fine, it’s cool.” He picked up a pebble and tossed it at the lake; it made a melancholy *gloop* and disappeared under the surface of the water. “Hey, uh — your dad, is he — ”

“He and my mom are divorced,” Scott replied, making a face. “He’s got a house in town, but he works for the FBI so he’s never around.” Scott shrugged. “Wouldn’t matter if he was around anyway.”

“What did he think about you getting bitten?”

Scott rolled his eyes. “He made a big deal about trying to catch the alpha that bit me, but he didn’t even ask me if I was handling it okay.”

“That sucks,” Stiles said.
“Yeah,” Scott sighed. “Well, I’ve got my mom and Allison and you and everyone else, so I really
don’t need him.”

Stiles nodded, taking a sip from his beer. He watched Derek rise to his feet and shake himself before he wandered up the beach to where Scott and Stiles sat. “Hey, dude,” Stiles said to him. “Chip?” He offered Derek a SunChip. Derek considered it for a moment before leaning forward and gently taking it from Stiles’ fingers. Stiles turned and found Scott watching them, an unreadable expression on his face. “What?”

“Nothing,” Scott said with a quick shake of his head. He paused for a long second, then hesitantly offered Derek a chip of his own. Stiles found himself holding his breath as he watched Derek look at the chip, then up at Scott. An eternity seemed to pass before Derek reached out very slowly and took the chip from Scott, jerking back quickly like he thought Scott might attack him. Scott just grinned, looking immensely pleased.

“Look,” Stiles said cheerfully. “He’s coming around to you.”

Scott shook his head, but the grin didn’t fade from his face. “Enough sitting around,” he said, getting to his feet. “Race you to the water.”

“Hey!” Stiles protested, hastily setting aside his beer to scramble after Scott. “You’ve got supernatural speed! You’ve gotta give me a headstart at least!”

They didn’t head back to the car until the sky began to turn pink at the edges, picking their way through the trees and underbrush. Derek walked at Stiles’ side, head low to the ground like he was tired. Stiles felt that; there was something about being out in the fresh air all day that was absolutely exhausting.

“Hey,” he said abruptly. “What do blue eyes mean?”

“Blue eyes?” Scott repeated, sounding a little bewildered.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, tripping over a rotting stump. He managed to catch himself and continued, “Peter Hale’s got blue eyes, but the book I read didn’t say anything about that, just red and yellow.”

“Oh,” Scott said, sounding uncomfortable. “Well. It means he’s killed an innocent.”

Down at Stiles’ side, Derek growled low in his chest. It sounded threatening. Stiles nudged him and he stopped.

“I don’t know any of the details,” Scott added. “Whatever it was, it happened a long time ago. Talia never told me about it, and I never asked.”

“Oh,” Stiles said thoughtfully. They walked another couple hundred feet in the darkening woods before Stiles spoke again. “Can you tell me about the pack?”

“What about it?” Scott asked, glancing over his shoulder at him.

“What it was like before the fire,” Stiles shrugged. “Are there a lot of werewolves in town?”

Scott paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. “The pack — those of us that were werewolves, I mean — wasn’t all that big. Most of them were Hales and they’ve been living in this area for over a hundred years. Laura told me that the house was built in like 1910. And then there’s me, Boyd, Isaac, and Erica,” he said. “We were the only non-family.”
“Were they bitten too?” Stiles asked curiously.

Scott nodded. “Erica had really bad epilepsy and the bite cured it — cured my asthma, too. Both of Isaac’s parents are dead so Talia took him in and he asked for the bite. Boyd’s never said why he wanted it, but I know he asked for it.”

“And anyone could ask for it?”

“Anyone could ask,” Scott affirmed, “but it didn’t mean that the bite would be offered. It’s dangerous, not everyone survives it.”


“I miss them,” Scott said wistfully, his voice going soft and hurt around the edges. “The Hale house was like our second home. We could show up whenever we wanted and there were always people to hang out with, always a ton of food. I could have died in the fire that night, any of us could have.”

They didn’t speak again until they got back to the Jeep, the only car left in the parking lot. Stiles was climbing into the driver’s seat when something occurred to him. “Who’s the alpha now?”

In the backseat, Scott froze. “Uh,” he said hoarsely. “It’s — it’s Laura’s brother.”


In the seat next to Stiles, Derek made a short, angry noise, and Scott jolted, looking guilty. “I don’t know,” he said evasively. “That’s up to him, I guess.”

Stiles gave up. “All right,” he sighed, and turned the key in the ignition.

Stiles woke up the next morning with a heavy weight in his stomach. Ten years, he thought glumly. Ten years since his mom had passed. He’d been trying not to think about it since yesterday, mostly ignoring his dad during dinner as his dad talked about his plans for the following day. Stiles tried not to think about his mom most of the time because it still hurt too far too much — the anniversary of her death was the one day a year when he let himself hurt and remember her.

Next to him, Derek whined softly, as though he could sense the misery in Stiles. Stiles flipped over to face him, working his hand out from under the sheets to card his fingers through Derek’s fur. It was still early in the morning; the light had that yellow-gray cast to it, the sun still low behind the trees. Stiles could hear birds calling outside, too cheerful. He shut his eyes, feeling sick and cold.

His dad rose after a while; Stiles heard him get up and head into the bathroom for a shower. Stiles didn’t move, he remained in bed with his eyes closed, hand smoothing over Derek’s fur over and over. His dad left the bathroom some time later and Stiles could hear him banging around in his room, muttering to himself. Then his footsteps crossed the hall, pausing by Stiles’ door.

“Stiles,” Dad said gently. “We need to get on the road.”

Stiles clenched his teeth. He’d been thinking about that all evening and he didn’t think he could do it — he couldn’t sit in a car with his dad for five hours down and five hours back. Not today. The first couple of years after his mom died, they always went to the cemetery separately, finding their own precious time to visit her grave. He couldn’t do it. “I’m not — ” Stiles tried. His throat was dry, and clicked when he swallowed. He tried again. “I’m not going to go.” He didn’t open his eyes, didn’t want to see the hurt or surprise on his dad’s face.
His dad was silent for a long moment. “You’re sure?” he asked gently.

“Yeah,” Stiles breathed.

There came another long pause from his dad. “All right,” he said eventually. “If that’s what you — okay. In that case, I might stay the night down there. I got a call from the real estate agent yesterday. The house finally sold, so I’m going to make sure everything’s all set.”

“Okay,” Stiles whispered.

“Okay,” his dad echoed. He paused awkwardly before saying, “I love you,” and disappearing downstairs. Stiles could hear him in the kitchen for a while, eating breakfast, and then the front door opened and closed and he was alone.

It hurt a little, that his dad hadn’t tried to convince him to come. Stiles knew he was being stupid and his dad was just trying to accommodate his feelings, but he felt like a fool. He’d never missed a visit to his mom, never, and now he’d just thrown his chance away because he didn’t think he could handle the drive with his dad.

“Fuck,” Stiles muttered, squeezing his eyes shut tight. He was so fucking dumb. He was going to miss his mom. “Fuck!”

Next to him Derek shifted around, whining worriedly. Stiles exhaled in a rush, throwing his arms around the dog’s thick neck, pressing his face against him. A couple of tears escaped, slipping down his cheeks and disappearing into Derek’s fur, but Stiles ignored them, forcing himself to breathe evenly. Derek lay very still, his warm breath ruffling the hair at the back of Stiles’ neck.

Stiles made himself sit up after a while, pressing his hands to his eyes as he took a couple more deep, reassuring breaths. “Okay,” he said, mostly to himself, but also to Derek, who was watching him worriedly. “Okay. I can fix this.”

Stiles pulled himself out of bed and into the bathroom for a quick shower. He got dressed — nothing fancy, but a nice shirt because it was his mom and she’d always liked to see him dress well. Derek followed him downstairs; he sat closer than usual as Stiles swallowed down a quick bowl of cereal, leaning his weight against Stiles’ leg. Stiles knew that Derek could tell he wasn’t feeling great and was trying to comfort him and he really appreciated that. He took a moment to stroke Derek’s silky ears, murmuring, “You’re the best, you know?” before heading for the front door.

Derek followed him outside and all the way to the Jeep, patiently sitting back on his haunches. Stiles glanced at the the Jeep, then back at Derek. “You want to come?” he asked hesitantly. “It’s a five-hour trip down.” Derek rose to his feet and shoved his nose against Stiles’ palm before walking over to the passenger’s side, a pointed look on his long face. Stiles felt himself smile. “Cool.”

The drive was much more enjoyable with someone to share it with, even if that someone was a big, black dog. Derek lay on the passenger’s seat with his head on the windowsill, eyes closed in the warmth of the morning sun. Stiles smiled faintly, patting Derek’s back every so often. The sun rose higher and higher in the sky as they headed south. Stiles stopped at a roadside stand just before noon, buying fresh-cut flowers from an old woman, and a bag of hot dogs from her son.

Stiles grinned as he watched Derek wolf down half a dozen hot dogs, buns and all. He was feeling a lot better knowing he’d be able to see his mom, and the weather lifted his spirits as well — bright blue skies with nary a cloud in sight, hot and dry.

They got into Santa Rosa just before one. Stiles pulled into a gas station to refill the tank before
heading over to the cemetery, and as the pump clicked, he leaned against the side of the car and pointed out old landmarks to Derek, whose head turned every direction Stiles pointed, like he was actually interested.

“My old high school’s a block that way,” Stiles told him. “And my best friend growing up lived on just the other side of that parking garage.” He sighed, a little sad. There hadn’t really been time to say goodbye to Santa Rosa; his dad had still been in the midst of negotiating the sheriff’s job when Stiles went back to school. Stiles had packed most of his stuff up before leaving, but he hadn’t really thought things would move so quickly.

They headed over to the cemetery and Stiles pulled up on the side of the road before hopping out of the Jeep. He spotted a couple of signs on the fence prohibiting animals, but he didn’t give a fuck — and it was way too hot for Derek to stay in the car in any case. Derek was the most well-behaved dog he’d ever met; he wasn’t leashed, didn’t even have a collar, but he stuck to Stiles’ side like glue as they walked down the long, dusty rows of graves.

His mom’s grave sat far back from the road, tucked into a quiet corner under a scrubby-looking alder tree. Stiles knew his dad had already come and gone by the bouquet of zinnias laid before the grave. They’d always been his mom’s favorite flower; the garden at the old house was overflowing with them. Heather and her mom had been by too — they always left sunflowers.

“Heather’s mom was my mom’s best friend,” Stiles told Derek, settling down cross-legged in front of the grave. Derek followed his example, laying down in the sun-baked grass next to him, his head on Stiles’ thigh. The shadow from the alder tree gave them some relief from the sun, though it was still hot. Stiles was sweating in his long-sleeved shirt, even with the sleeves rolled past his elbows. He had to imagine Derek wasn’t doing any better.

Stiles shrugged his shoulders and laid his bundle of flowers between the bouquets from his dad and Heather and her mom. He touched the dark marble of the headstone, cool even in the heat of the day, fingers tracing the engravings — Claudia Wielicka Stilinski, beloved mother and wife at the top, and the same in Hebrew below.

“Hey, Mom,” Stiles said softly. “It’s Stanisław. This is Derek,” he added, dropping his hand to ruffle Derek’s ears. “He’s been keeping me company in the new place. You’re not going to believe what’s been happening.”

Every year he came to visit, Stiles told his mom everything that had happened to him lately. It usually didn’t take that long. When they’d still been living in Santa Rosa, they’d come out to the cemetery more often: on Christmas and before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, usually, but Stiles hadn’t been back since last August, just before he’d left for school, so there was a lot to tell. He talked for almost forty-five minutes, telling his mom all about school and the new house and his newfound magical powers. Derek dozed next to him, ears twitching occasionally to ward off flies.

Stiles fell quiet eventually, letting the buzz of cicadas fill the silence. Derek lifted his head and Stiles patted him absently. “I guess that’s it,” he said. He felt a lot lighter than he had that morning, a worrying weight gone from his shoulders. He’d have to apologize to his dad later for acting like such a brat, but at least he could go home knowing that he’d made the visit. He got to his feet a little stiffly, sore from sitting on the hard ground for so long, and poked around in the dirt until he found a small rock, which he carefully placed on top of the headstone, where many others already sat. He smiled a little sadly. “See you next year, Mom.”

Before Stiles headed back to Beacon Hills, he made one last stop at the old house. To his relief, his dad wasn’t there — he was probably at the real estate agent’s office — and Stiles pulled into the driveway and sat for a long moment, staring up at the house.
“This is where I grew up,” he told Derek, voice a little unsteady. “Feels weird not to come back here.” He wouldn’t ever again, he realized. Someone else would be living there soon. It wasn’t his home anymore.

Stiles got out of the car and took a slow lap around the outside of the house. He thought about going inside, but he guessed the real estate agency had probably changed the locks. He could have gotten in if he really wanted to; he’d learned a spell for unlocking locks without a key, and if it really came down to it he could break a window, but he didn’t. Something told him it’d be better to just have a clean break.

Stiles was climbing back into the car when a thought occurred to him and he dug around in the glove box until he found a permanent marker. He ducked down into the cool space under the front steps and scribbled a ward spell there, then dashed around to the other three sides, drawing the directional marks on the concrete foundation. He put his hand over the final mark and smiled faintly as he felt the magic take; it felt weak under his hand, which made sense since they were far from the nearest telluric current, but it would hold.

“How about we have a little fresh air?” Stiles told the house, and felt the magic pulse in response. He grinned.

The drive back to Beacon Hills was long and uneventful. Derek slept curled in the passenger’s seat with his tail over his face and Stiles sang along to the radio, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel. He felt light, pleased at having done something good for the next family to live in the old house. He knew his dad would be pleased.

He stopped at the McDonald’s outside of town; the girls recognized him and Derek and when he pulled into a space in the parking lot to eat, Stiles found not only extra burger patties, but an M&M McFlurry, which he carefully picked all the M&Ms out of before offering to Derek. It was a bit like a slapstick routine, he thought, fighting back laughter as he watched Derek attempt to lick all the ice cream out of the cup. He ended up with melted vanilla ice cream all over his snout. He didn’t appreciate Stiles trying to clean him off, growling irritably as Stiles swiped at his nose with a napkin.

“So suck it up, dude,” Stiles told him. “If you leave that there you’ll start attracting flies.”

Derek huffed regally and twisted around to settle back into his usual position with his nose out the window.

The sky had started to fade to red by the time they reached Beacon Hills, the air cooling as the sun dipped toward the treeline. Stiles felt glad to be back; he thought he’d call up Scott, maybe, see if he wanted to do a bonfire.

When he pulled into the driveway and parked in front of the house, Stiles didn’t get out immediately. He stroked a hand over Derek’s bony face and down his spine and said, “Thanks for coming with me, dude. I’m sure it was boring as hell for you, but at least we got a little fresh air, huh?”

Derek made a soft noise, digging his nose into Stiles’ palm and licking at his fingers.

“All right,” Stiles half-laughed, unclipping his seat belt. “Time to veg out, I think.”

Stiles climbed out of the car, slamming the door shut behind him. He took one step toward the front so he could open the door for Derek and froze as his gaze fell to the side mirror. There was someone standing behind him.

Stiles whirled around, his heart hammering in his chest, and he was only half-relieved to see Jennifer
Blake standing behind him, a faint, kind smile on her face. “What?” he asked roughly. “Can I help you?” In the car, Derek went berserk; Stiles had never heard him make the noises coming out of his mouth, a furious blend of snarling and barking.

Jennifer smiled, tucking a wave of dark hair behind her ear. “Yes, Stanislaw,” she said, and a wave of dread rolled down Stiles’ spine. “I think you can.”

Stiles reached for the car door just as Jennifer lifted her hand up, fingers spread wide. He felt the pulse of magic hit him square in the chest and then everything went black.

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When Stiles resurfaced from whatever deep hole of unconsciousness he’d been thrown into, it took him a long moment to wrap his head around the scene in front of him. His head felt heavy, his vision blurred, noise coming to him muffled and echoey as if they were underwater. He couldn’t turn his head — couldn’t move any part of him, in fact, and when he tried to move his fingers, white lightning bolts of pain shot up his arms, making him inhale sharply.

There was a pounding in his head that he thought for a brief moment was his heartbeat — another moment, and he recognized it as the deep thrumming of telluric currents he’d grown so used to to hearing. At the volume he could hear it, Stiles realized it had to be close. No, not close; he was propped against it, the bark rough against his bare back. Not propped, either, because his feet weren’t touching the ground. Suspended somehow, judging by the pain in his arms.

All these thoughts came one by one, slowly. He had to fight to think because his brain wanted nothing more than to turn off. He felt immensely tired, all of his energy slowly seeping from him. It took him that much longer to realize the tree was glowing — he could see a network of roots spread across the clearing in front of him, faintly luminescent in the fading evening light. Only then did he notice Jennifer Blake standing in front of him with her arms raised. She wore a simple black dress, her hair pulled back from her shoulders. The dress was sleeveless, so Stiles could see the ever-shifting black marks that crawled over her skin — runes he knew and recognized, but there was something off about them, something so wrong that looking at them made him feel sick to his stomach. It was the same sort of wrongness emanating from the tree behind him, dark and twisted and terrifying. It was the same wrongness he’d felt in all of his dreams and it scared him senseless.

“Please,” Stiles tried to say, but the word came out a murmur, barely identifiable as sound. “Lemme go.”

Jennifer didn’t pay him any attention; she spoke a word in a language he didn’t recognize, but made the air shiver around him. He groaned, feeling as though he’d been punched in the stomach, the tree pulsing behind him. It felt hungry, and Stiles had the horrible feeling that he was its food. He could feel himself growing weaker, his thoughts more jumbled, his vision darkening. He was scared. No one knew he was out here — his dad was in Santa Rosa and thought he was at home, and he’d told Scott he’d be going to Santa Rosa with his dad. Derek was the only one who knew he was in trouble, and he was stuck in the car.

But as he thought of Derek, fighting to keep his eyes open, Stiles heard a furious howl rise up through the trees and rather than frighten him, it warmed him a little, giving him enough strength to lift his head. Jennifer frowned, turning her head toward the trees. She turned more fully as Derek came sprinting out of the trees toward them, raising her hands defensively.

“Oh now,” she said. “You can’t blame me for wanting to take what’s been left to waste away. You —”
Derek didn’t even slow, he launched himself through the air, knocking Jennifer to the ground. Stiles heard her scream and he squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to know what happened next. After what seemed like an eternity, something warm and furry brushed up against his legs and Stiles managed to crack his eyes open to see Derek down by his feet, twisting around in a worried circle, panting raggedly. Jennifer lay beyond him in a crumpled heap and for a moment Stiles was almost thankful for the fact that his vision kept blurring.

“Hey,” Stiles tried to say, but it came out as an exhausted noise, not much more than an exhalation of air. He would have expected whatever spell Jennifer Blake had cast upon him to stop upon her demise but, if anything, it seemed to be growing stronger, pulling more and more energy from him. Derek pressed up against his legs, his whining growing more and more frantic, crescendoing into a panicked howl. It should have been loud, right at Stiles’ feet, but he could barely hear it and that worried him more than anything.

Derek’s noise changed. The pitch dropped, sounding pained. There came a sharp inhalation that almost sounded human and Stiles tried to tilt his head to look, but he could barely get his eyes open. Something touched his face, cupped his cheeks — hands, he thought blearily, but whose?

“Stiles?” That was his name, but he didn’t recognize the voice, hoarse, like it hadn’t been used in many years. “Stiles, stay with me, please.”

*I’m trying.* Stiles mouthed the words. It was so hard, though. He wanted to sleep, wanted to close his eyes and rest.

“Stiles,” the voice pleaded. “Stiles — Stanisław.”

It was like a rubber band snapping. Stiles was still exhausted, still wanted to sleep, but the world sounded crisp now and he managed to lift his head, cracking his eyes open to find a wholly unfamiliar face staring into his, dark hair and pale hazel eyes.

“Who?” Stiles breathed and then he winced, biting down on his lip to keep from crying out as pain flared at his wrist. The stranger must have undone whatever was holding him up because that side of him sagged. He winced again, bracing himself for pain as the tension in his other arm hit him, but the stranger caught him first, looping one strong arm around his waist to keep the weight off the arm that was still suspended. Then that arm came free and the stranger took all of his weight, Stiles half-slumped over his shoulder. Stiles turned his head into the stranger’s dark hair and thought he smelled something there, something familiar, but it was far beyond his reasoning at the moment.

There came a howling from the trees and the stranger’s head whipped around. “’s that Derek?” Stiles mumbled. He couldn’t see the dog anywhere. Had he run for help? “Lassie,” Stiles murmured into the stranger’s neck, wheezing with an attempt at laughter.

“Stop that,” the stranger told him irritably.

“Make me,” Stiles said drowsily. He was slipping again, they were still too close to the tree. Stiles was still connected. The scariest part was how it didn’t hurt, it just pulled the life right out of him.

“Hey,” the stranger said sharply, sounding alarmed. He carried Stiles into the clearing with odd, staggering steps, laying him down on the cool grass. The stranger was naked for some reason. Stiles wanted to ask him why but he was having trouble forming words again. The sky overhead seemed darker than it should be. “Stiles!”

There came a crashing in the bushes somewhere beyond the clearing. Stiles managed to flop his head to one side, blearily making out the shape of Scott exploding into the clearing, his face in the beta-
shift. “Stiles!” he shouted as the stranger snarled over Stiles. There were more people behind Scott — Erica, Boyd, and Isaac all came running with their faces shifted too, but behind them were Allison, a drawn bow in her arms, and Lydia, looking determined and wielding what looked like a tire iron. Laura was just beyond them, and a bunch of deputies behind her and then, to Stiles’ absolute bewilderment, a whole slew of people he recognized from town, wielding an assortment of homespun weapons — he saw kitchen knives and garden implements and chainsaws. Mayor Finstock was at the back, yelling like a maniac and waving a lacrosse stick in the air.

Scott dived down next to Stiles, his face melting back to its normal human form. “Stiles!” he panted. “Are you all right?”

“Oh my god,” Laura said, skidding to a halt next to him. “Jesus, someone brought a first aid kit, right? Parrish, you call ahead to the hospital — tell Deaton he’s going to need all his staff on deck. Where’s the sheriff, does anyone know?”

“Santa Rosa,” Stiles mumbled.

Laura nodded firmly. “Knox, you get him on the phone. Scott, get Derek — ”

Stiles began losing little patches of time after that. He faded out as Laura stood over him, ordering everyone around, and faded back in as he was carried through the woods on some kind of stretcher. There were people all around him, talking, looking worried, but he didn’t see the stranger anywhere. He faded out again as he was being loaded into the back of an ambulance, with Scott leaning over him and saying worriedly to the EMTs, “Can I come with? His dad’s not here.”

The next time Stiles woke, he was in a white room and there was bright sunlight streaming in through a window to his left. He glanced at it sleepily, noticing with puzzlement the bundle of sticks attached to the top of the window frame. He glanced at the door and found more hanging there; below it, there were runemarks laying out a spell he didn’t know.

Stiles looked down at himself, taking stock of his situation. He lay in a hospital bed, covered from the chest down with a cozy-looking afghan. His arms were above the blankets, his wrists wrapped in crisp white bandages. He poked at his arm curiously, then retreated at the flare of pain it caused. He was wearing one of the hospital gowns that tied up the back, and when he peeked under it, he saw runes written on his chest in some kind of chalky red material. A monitor clipped to his finger was hooked up to some kind of heart rate monitor, which beeped quietly at him.

The door opened as Stiles sat there trying to puzzle out what had happened, and he looked up to see a dark-skinned man in a doctor’s coat standing at the foot of his bed, a slight smile on his face.

“This is a very unusual hospital room,” Stiles told him, nodding toward the sticks and runes over the door.

“You have a very unusual injury,” the doctor replied, looking amused. “How are you feeling?”

Stiles considered this question. “Tired,” he decided.

“You understandable,” the doctor smiled. “Your lifeforce was drained from you. You’ve been asleep three days.”

“Shit,” Stiles said, rubbing at his eyes. “Where’s my dad? Does he know?”

“Easy, Stiles,” the doctor said, coming round to place a steadying hand on Stiles’ shoulder. “I’ll give him a call and let him know you’re awake.”

The doctor patted him on the shoulder. “My name’s Dr. Deaton, by the way. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Can you — do you know what happened to me?” Stiles asked hesitantly.

Dr. Deaton shook his head. “I think that explanation is better left to Laura.”


Dr. Deaton nodded, casting him another faint smile before leaving the room. Stiles sighed, tapping his fingers against his blankets for a moment before slumping back against his pillows, resigning himself to a long, boring wait. At least he had cable.

His dad showed up not fifteen minutes later. He came storming into the hospital room and folded his arms around Stiles before Stiles even had a chance to say hello.

“Er,” Stiles said, awkwardly patting his dad on the back. His dad was in uniform, he must have been on duty. “Hi, Dad.”

“Jesus,” his father breathed. “Thought I was going to lose you and your mom on the same day.”

“Oh,” Stiles said softly, suddenly flooded with a vicious misery. He’d been so scared no one would find him out in the woods that he hadn’t even thought about how his dad would feel if he died. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” his dad grumbled, planting a dry kiss to his temple before collapsing into a chair next to the bed. “Good thing I’ve got lights built into the SUV.”

“Dad,” Stiles admonished. “You did not drive all the way from Santa Rosa with your sirens blazing.”

“Sure didn’t,” his dad said, patting him on the leg. “I don’t have sirens in the SUV, just the lights.”

Stiles sighed, embarrassed in the way only a child can be by their parent. “Can you tell me what happened?” he asked his father. “I mean, I know what happened — I remember all of it — but I don’t understand why it happened.”

His father rubbed a hand over his face, looking weary. “I don’t quite understand it myself, son. Laura’s on her way, she can explain better than I can.”

Stiles sat quietly for a while, hands in his lap. “There was someone in the forest,” he said, and his father looked up sharply. Stiles gestured vaguely. “He got me off the tree. He broke part of the spell, I think.” He knew my name. My real name. “Do you know who he was?”

“I wasn’t there, Stiles,” his dad reminded him gently.

“Right,” Stiles agreed softly. He plucked at the blanket, rolling the fibers of the yarn between his fingers. “Have you seen Derek?”

“Not since Sunday.”

“Oh,” Stiles said miserably. His dad patted him on the leg again.

Laura came in with much less enthusiasm than his father had. She shut the door carefully behind her
and smiled awkwardly at Stiles. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” Stiles said, watching her shuffle in and pull up a chair next to his dad.

“Do you like the blanket?” she asked. “I knitted it last winter.”

“It’s nice,” Stiles said. He watched her twist her hands together and asked, “What happened to me?”

Laura shut her eyes for a brief moment, gathering her thoughts. “That tree,” she said after a moment, “sits at a place of power.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said impatiently. “Where the telluric currents cross. I know.”

Laura narrowed her eyes at him. “The druids call spaces like that a nemeton. My family has been cultivating that nemeton for over a hundred years — when Joshua Hale first founded this town, that tree was just a sapling, but there’s this — this ritual the alpha performs every year. It allows the tree to tap into the magic under the earth, and it keeps the town healthy.

“I know you talked to Scott about the way the pack used to be. My mom was alpha before my brother, but she died before she passed on the knowledge of the ritual. It hasn’t been performed in five years.” Laura closed her mouth, her lips going thin.

Stiles stared at her, the gears in his head turning. “So,” he said slowly, “so everything bad that’s been happening, it’s because the ritual hasn’t been performed?”

Laura nodded. “Exactly. Your dad told me you noticed the dead limbs on the tree — that’s because of the ritual too.”

“And Jennifer Blake?”

Laura rubbed a hand over her eyes. “She’s what they call a dark druid. A darach. She’s power-hungry and she wanted to access the currents. If she could control the currents, she could control the fate of the town. Only a Hale can perform the ritual, though, so she needed a way to bypass the system, a jump-start, if you will. You.”

“Me?” Stiles repeated, his eyes flickering to his dad, who sat listening quietly to Laura’s story. “Why me?”

Laura smiled apologetically. “Your dad says you’ve got quite the spark.”

“Yeah, I — ” Stiles cut himself off, his eyes widening. That time at the library, Jennifer had looked at him and said You’re awake. That’d been right after he’d figured out his spark — and then she’d been around all the time after that, watching him. Waiting, he realized, his stomach dropping.

Laura watched him sympathetically. “It’s not your fault,” she said, like she could hear his thoughts. “You’ve got a powerful talent.”

“She knew my name,” Stiles said miserably. “My real name. Grandma always said to never tell anyone, remember?” He directed the question at his father, who looked startled.

“Guess you’re right,” Dad admitted. “She did say that. I thought it was just an old wives’ tale.”

“Names have power,” Laura said, her mouth twisting wryly. “Like I said, Stiles, there’s nothing you could have done.”

It didn’t make him feel all that much better.
“There’s more,” Laura said softly, a pained note creeping into her voice. “We think she had something to do with the fire.”

Stiles looked at her sharply. “What?”

“There’s an object that’s part of the ritual — I don’t know what it is — but she said she was at the house the night of the fire trying to find it — ”

“Whoa, whoa,” Stiles said, waving his hands. “She said? I thought Derek killed her!”

Laura shook her head, her jaw tightening. “No,” she said. “She’s alive. Probably not for much longer. Your dad’s trying to get her to tell us as much as she can.”

Stiles shuddered, feeling sick. He touched the bandages on his wrists. “Just what exactly did she do to me?”

Laura glanced at his dad, who gestured at her to keep talking, an unhappy look on his face. “She was trying to sacrifice you, Stiles,” Laura said gently. “The spell she used was pulling the life from you and feeding it to the nemeton. You would have died if you hadn’t been found.”

It wasn’t more than he already knew, but it was still unsettling to hear. Stiles swallowed. “Oh.”

His dad leaned forward, putting a hand on his leg. “You’re going to be fine, Stiles,” he said firmly. “We’ve got Jennifer in custody. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“I guess,” Stiles murmured. He did have things to worry about, though, like — “Who was it that saved me in the woods?” He looked up when Laura didn’t say anything, his eyes narrowing. “What?”

“That was my brother,” Laura told him carefully. “Derek.”

“Derek,” Stiles repeated woodenly. “You mean my — ” He cut himself off before he could say my Derek. Derek wasn’t his, not if he was a werewolf.

It made sense, he supposed, twisting the blanket between his fingers. He’d just refused to see it. He wanted to laugh. Part of the family, his dad had said. This town belongs to him, Laura had said. Laura’s brother, Scott had said. And no one had told him anything. No one had said a fucking word. They all knew, even his dad, Stiles could see it on his face.

“When were you going to tell me?”

Laura winced. “We weren’t,” she admitted. “We were hoping that Derek would shift on his own and tell you himself.”

Stiles’ mouth twisted downward. “So what, then?” he asked, temper flaring. “You just let me treat him like an animal? He slept on my fucking bed with me — you don’t think that’s a little fucking creepy?” He glared at his father, who shifted uncomfortably.

“You treated him the way he needed to be treated,” Laura said, looking upset. “Everyone in town knows him, Stiles. Everyone knows what happened to our family, how badly it affected him, and he couldn’t stand that. He withdrew from everyone because he didn’t want their pity. You had no idea who he was. You didn’t treat him differently because you knew what happened to him — you just liked him for who he was.”

“I thought he was a dog!” Stiles snapped angrily.
“And I’m sure he would have been fine with staying that way forever,” Laura said miserably. She leaned forward, her shoulders hunched and tight. “I’m sorry if you feel like we deceived you, but the town had already decided to keep magic from you and when I saw Derek at your house the night Peter came back, I knew you were the only chance we had to bring him back from the edge. I told everyone not to tell you who he was — so if you’re going to be mad, be mad at me.”

Stiles chewed on his bottom lip. “At the memorial for your family,” he said, “you talked about him. You said he’d found someone and you hoped he — Derek — was going to come back soon.” He remembered too, with a sick twist of his stomach, the way Laura had cried. “You meant me.”

“I meant you,” Laura agreed, her eyes shining. “I’m sorry for keeping this from you, Stiles, I really am.”

“Yeah,” Stiles sighed. “I know you are.”

The room was silent for a few minutes. Stiles stared at his hands, trying to come to terms with the fact that the dog he’d known all summer was actually a man in wolf’s clothing.

“I should go,” Laura said after a long moment, sounding uncomfortable. She rose to her feet slowly. “Stiles, I — ”

“I know,” Stiles said. “You were just trying to help him.”

“Please don’t be mad at him,” Laura said, her voice wavering. “Don’t punish him for what I did.”

“I won’t,” Stiles promised. “Is he staying with you?”

Laura shook her head, her eyes once again glimmering with unshed tears. “He let me get him some clothes and then he disappeared. I haven’t seen him since we took you out of the woods.”

“We’re keeping an eye out for him,” Stiles’ dad put in.

Laura smiled mirthlessly. “That’s not going to work,” she said. “If he doesn’t want to be found, he won’t be. Before I saw him that night Peter came back, I hadn’t seen him in three years.”

“He’ll come back,” Stiles’ father said. “I know it.”

Laura smiled again, wistful, as though she wished she shared the sheriff’s optimism, and slipped out of the room. Stiles and his father sat in silence for a while. Stiles picked up the television remote and began flicking through the channels; he needed a distraction, there was too much going on in his mind.

“Stiles,” his dad said gently. “You understand — ”

“I understand,” Stiles interrupted, a bite of anger souring his words. He hadn’t decided yet whether he was going to hold on to the anger he felt. His dad had facilitated all of this, from leaving the back door open so Derek could come in, to not saying a word of truth about Derek. Stiles knew they’d done it for a reason, but he was still angry about it.

His father sighed, getting to his feet. “You’ve got every right to be mad,” he said. “But Laura’s right — don’t take this out on Derek. He trusts you, and right now he’s going to be scared that you’re not going to want him around any longer.”

Stiles looked up at his dad and he knew he was right. “I’m not mad at Derek,” he said quietly. “I’m just — I need time to process all of this.”
“You’ve got it,” his dad said gently, leaning down to press another kiss to Stiles’ temple. “The doctor says you’re not getting out for another couple of days, so you’ll have plenty of time to yourself.”

Stiles tapped his fingers against his thigh anxiously. “How’d Derek get out of the car, anyway?”

His father laughed, though he didn’t sound all that amused. “He smashed through the windshield. It’s in the shop right now.”

“Great,” Stiles sighed.

Dad ruffled his hair. “I have to go back on shift, but let me know if you want anything from home. Your phone’s on the nightstand.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Stiles sighed again. “I’ll see you later.”
Chapter 3

The rest of Stiles’ time in the hospital crept past like molasses. Someone came in every two hours to repaint the runes on his chest, which made them flare with warmth and tingle with magic. Stiles was worried to find that his spark was barely a flicker of what it had been, but when he asked Dr. Deaton about it, the doctor smiled his enigmatic smile and assured him that it would be back to full strength in a matter of days. “It doesn’t come from nowhere, Mr. Stilinski,” Dr. Deaton told him gently. “It will be healthy when you’re healthy.”

Scott came to visit the next day, looking contrite and worried. He too tried to apologize about Derek, but Stiles waved it off. “I get it,” Stiles told him. “I know you guys were trying to help.”

“It was so hard,” Scott said, his face screwed up. “I kept almost messing up and he was right there at the beach, god.”

“Did you know him well?” Stiles asked curiously. “I mean, you said his mom was like a second mom to you.”

“Not really,” Scott shrugged. “He was already away at college when I got bitten, so I didn’t see him that much, and when he was home he didn’t seem all that interested in hanging out with high schoolers.”

“What was he like?”

Scott thought about this. “Quiet,” he decided. “Man, you should have heard him howl the other night, though.”

“What do you mean?” Stiles asked, frowning.

“When you were in the woods,” Scott told him. “He howled for help and I just — I’ve never felt anything like it, dude. It was like, like a calling. I was running out the door before I knew what was happening.”

“The whole town showed up,” Stiles mused.


They watched part of *Napoleon Dynamite* on television, but Scott left when Stiles started to fall asleep. “It’s a bummer you’re in the hospital,” Scott said as he headed for the door. “We play flashlight tag in the woods on full moons.”

Scott’s words didn’t quite register until much later, after Stiles had slept through the afternoon and woke on his side facing the window, where he could see the vast deep purple expanse of the night sky and the moon hanging heavy and full. He wondered if Derek was out there, alone again.

Stiles flipped onto his other side so he wouldn’t have to see the moon. Thinking about Derek hurt his head. He didn’t want to hurt Derek’s feelings, but he didn’t know what he would do if he saw him. It was one thing to find out that a friend he’d thought was human could turn into a wolf-beast, but quite another to find that the thing he’d thought was a dog — the thing that had slept in his bed, licked his hand, comforted him when he was feeling upset — was a person. It felt like a betrayal.

Still, he found himself wondering about Derek. He had a vague memory of Derek’s face and voice, but what was he like? Would he act the same as he had as a wolf? Smug, irritable, pushy — Stiles
thought about the way Derek had warmed to him, how he’d sought out Stiles’ touch time after time, and Stiles had done the same, his hands always absentmindedly straying to stroke Derek’s fur. His heart twisted when he thought about how lonely Derek must have felt, how glad he must have been when he found someone who treated him — for lack of a better word — normal. As normal as could be while he a werewolf, anyway. Stiles didn’t want to know how he felt now, once more alone in the woods. He knew the loneliness of loss all too well.

Stiles was cleared to leave the hospital the following day. His dad picked him up and drove him home, then built him a veritable nest of blankets on the couch.

“I’m not that weak,” Stiles said irritably, even though his legs had started shaking during the walk from the car to the living room. He felt fine, right up until he tried to do something that involved moving any muscle, that was.

“I’m not having you fall down the stairs and end up back in the hospital,” his father retorted. “You’re supposed to be on vacation, Christ.”

“Some vacation,” Stiles said. He touched the bandages on his arms, covering the long cuts Jennifer had made — she’d needed his blood to start the spell, Dr. Deaton had told him. They ached a little, the cuts deep; he’d seen the stitches when a nurse had changed his bandages. He shuddered faintly.

His dad didn’t even dignify him with a response, coming over to hook a hand under his armpit and help steady him on his way to the couch. Stiles gave up any pretense of not needing help — it was a lot better than falling into the coffee table — and allowed his dad to help lower him down onto the cushions.

“Good?” his dad asked, looking worried.

“Good,” Stiles assured him. “Don’t worry, Dad. I’m well on the road to recovery.”

“I’m working a double today. If you need me — ”

“I’ll call,” Stiles said, waving a hand at him. “I’ve got it, Dad. I’ll be fine.”

“Call me,” his father warned, pointing a finger at him before disappearing out the front door. Stiles lay quietly on the couch for a while, slowly re-adjusting to being in the house. It was very quiet; if he concentrated, he could feel the hum of magic in the walls, but that also meant he could feel the thrum of the nemeton, and remembering what had happened there made him feel sick. Stiles tried not to think about how empty the house felt without Derek and he turned on the television instead, quickly falling asleep to reruns of Everybody Loves Raymond.

He woke some time later to a knocking on the front door. The television was still on; Stiles turned down the volume and levered himself off the couch, breathing deep and careful. It was a little frightening how weak he was, as unsteady on his legs as a newborn fawn. Dr. Deaton told him he’d be back to normal in a week or so, but he wasn’t exactly looking forward to the time between then and now. He had to brace one hand against the wall to get the door open and he was glad for the support when he opened the door to find Derek standing on the porch.

He hadn’t expected it to be Derek. Scott would have just come inside without knocking, so he’d thought Lydia, maybe, or Allison, or even Laura. For some reason, it never occurred to him that Derek might actually show up — some part of him had kind of expected to never see Derek again.

Now, all Stiles could do was stare. He hadn’t had much time before, in the woods, to get a good look at Derek — his vision had been clouded with pain and confusion. Stiles had gotten an impression of
dark hair and the same pale hazel eyes Derek had had as a wolf, but now Stiles saw the sharp line of his jaw, the firm set of his mouth, the rough stubble of a couple days gone by without a shave. They were about the same height, shoulders the same width, but Derek was much more built than he was, the lines of his muscles clearly defined under his t-shirt. At first glance he looked normal, clad in jeans and sneakers and a dark t-shirt.

The longer Stiles looked, though, the worse-off Derek looked. Once he’d taken in what Derek looked like, he began to notice the dark circles under his eyes, the dirt on his shirt. He looked defeated and miserable and exhausted.

“Hi,” Stiles said after an inappropriately long amount of time passed and he realized he was still staring.

Derek met his eyes briefly, then dropped his gaze to his feet. “Hi,” he said quietly. His voice was just like Stiles remembered from Sunday. It was odd, he thought, trying to reconcile the Derek he knew with the Derek standing in front of him.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you,” Stiles told him truthfully.

Derek flinched. “I don’t — I can go,” he said, sounding pained. He took a step backward, looking ready to run at any moment.

“That’s not what I meant,” Stiles said hurriedly. He might’ve been having a minor internal freak-out, but the last thing he wanted to do was drive Derek away. “You want to come inside? I’m about to collapse.”

Derek looked up sharply, worry tightening his face. “Laura said you’d be fine.”

“I will be,” Stiles said, as gently as he could. “I’m not there yet, though. Are you coming in?”

Derek hesitated briefly before stepping inside, carefully closing the door behind himself. He hesitated again before asking, “Do you need a hand?”

“Please,” Stiles said gratefully. The only reason he hadn’t moved yet was because he was pretty sure if he tried to change his position he’d collapse. He only paused for a fraction of a second at the arm Derek offered him before latching on so Derek could lead him back to the living room. He wasn’t sure what he expected to happen; Derek’s arm felt like any other arm he’d ever touched.

Stiles chanced a glance up at Derek’s face and found it solemn, eyes creased with weariness. He looked like he hadn’t had a good rest in days — and he probably hadn’t. Stiles had a sneaking suspicion he’d been sleeping in the woods, probably in the remains of the Hale house. At least he didn’t smell bad, Stiles amended with a surreptitious sniff.

“Do you want something to eat?” Stiles asked him as they shuffled toward the couch. Derek as a wolf in the woods eating squirrels was one thing; Derek as a human in the woods eating squirrels was quite another. It made him a little queasy just thinking about it.

“No, thank you,” Derek said stiffly.

Stiles didn’t try to fight him, but he was definitely going to make Derek eat before he disappeared off into the woods again. He sighed when he let go of Derek’s arm and lowered himself down onto the couch, pulling his nest of blankets to his side so Derek could sit, which he did slowly, cautiously, like he expected the couch cushion to explode under him or something.

“So,” Stiles said, when they’d sat there in an uncomfortable silence long enough. “You’re a
werewolf.”

Derek shut his eyes very briefly. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“You couldn’t have,” Stiles said with a shake of his head. “You don’t have to apologize. I should be better at picking up on clues.”

Derek looked over at him, then down at his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said again, his voice quieter, “that you got hurt in the woods. I should have been faster.”

“Dude, no,” Stiles insisted, leaning forward intently. “In no way was that your fault. You saved my life.”

Derek didn’t say anything, misery set deep into the lines of his face. Stiles could see he was hurting deeply, and he didn’t like that. In an attempt to distract Derek, he asked, “Can I see it? Your beta shift?”

Derek blinked, looking a little startled, but after a moment he nodded. He turned his face away like he was embarrassed, but Stiles could still see the way his profile changed, his brow growing heavy, thick hair growing along his jaw like sideburns, the tips of his ears going pointed. When he turned back to Stiles, he looked completely different, eyes burning red under a thick brow, hints of fangs peeking past his lips.

“Whoa,” Stiles said, reaching out without even thinking about it. Derek tensed and Stiles froze with his hands about a centimeter away from Derek’s face. After a long moment, Derek nodded almost imperceptibly and Stiles relaxed, leaning forward to brush his fingers over the stiff muscles in Derek’s brow. “Where’d your eyebrows go, dude?”

Derek snorted, his eyes settling half-shut. “Laura always made fun of me for that.”

“Huh,” Stiles said. He dropped his hands when he realized he was absently swiping his thumbs over Derek’s cheeks, and picked up one of Derek’s hands instead, examining the thick claws that had replaced his fingernails. “What does it feel like?” Stiles asked curiously, testing the tip of the claw with his finger; it was just as sharp as it looked.

“What do you mean?”

“The shift,” Stiles said. “Does it hurt?”

Derek shook his head slowly. “It’s not painful,” he said quietly. “It’s like an itch.”

“And the full shift?” Stiles asked. He had a faint memory of a pained gasp somewhere near his feet.

“That — that hurt,” Derek admitted, sounding unhappy. “I’d never done it before, and I was panicking.”

Stiles stared at him, wide-eyed. Derek turned his head, jaw tightening as he shifted back to his human form. “Just how long were you in that form?” Stiles asked.

“Since the night of the fire,” Derek mumbled.

“And you never changed back?”

“Never wanted to.” Derek closed his eyes again, his dark eyebrows drawing together.

“Hey,” Stiles said, leaning toward him. Derek’s hand was still right there next to his so he took hold
of it, fingers squeezing tight. Derek looked down at their hands, startled, then up at Stiles when Stiles continued, “I’m not going to lie to you — this is still super weird to me and I’m still getting used to it, but I told you a while ago that I really like having you here and that wasn’t a lie.”

Derek’s mouth twisted downward. “Even if I’m like this?”

“Any shape or form,” Stiles told him, the corner of his mouth quirking up. “Come as you are. Like that Nirvana song.” He hummed a few bars and for a moment, Derek stared at him as though he’d grown a second head. Stiles didn’t mind; people looked at him like that all the time. Derek, after a minute, leaned forward and for one confusing moment Stiles thought Derek was going to kiss him, but instead he bumped his forehead against Stiles’ before sitting back, some of the tension seeping out of him.

For some reason, it was this gesture that really cemented it in his brain that this was Derek. Maybe it was because that wasn’t the sort of gesture that most people would use; there was something a little animalistic in it. It reminded him of when Derek would press his nose into Stiles’ palm. He trusts you, his dad had said, and it wasn’t until that moment that Stiles realized how true that was. Derek would rather live in the woods than live with his sister, he’d disappear rather than see Scott, he’d been nervous laying out on the front porch with Stiles, but had stuck it through because Stiles told him it’d be all right. Derek had kept him company on rough days, slept in his bed every night — hell, Derek had driven Peter Hale off twice. They had a special bond and it didn’t matter what form Derek took.

Stiles couldn’t help but grin as he settled back into the couch. Derek glanced over at him and seemed to relax fully at the look on Stiles’ face. For the first time, he seemed to actually sit on the couch instead of being tensed, posed for flight. There was a feeling of a hurdle jumped. “How are you feeling?” Derek asked courteously.

“Achy,” Stiles told him truthfully. He touched the bandages around his wrist. “My stitches hurt.” He also couldn’t feel his spark at all, which unnerved him. Dr. Deaton had told him he’d be able to sense it in a few days — Jennifer Blake’s spell had sucked all the magic out of him before turning on his life force — so it’d take a while to regenerate, but Stiles missed the warm comfort of it.

Derek made an oddly familiar noise of consideration, holding his hand out to Stiles expectantly. Stiles wasn’t sure what Derek was going to do, but he put his hand in Derek’s and Derek closed his fingers around Stiles’. After a moment, Stiles couldn’t help but gasp; dark lines like veins began to trace their way up Derek’s arm, disappearing as they reached his elbow. At the same time, warmth flooded Stiles, his body relaxing without his volition. All of his low-grade aches and pains began to fade, including a headache he hadn’t even realized he’d been carrying since leaving the hospital. The pain in his wrists, sharp and itchy, backed off to a dull irritation.


“Taking your pain,” Derek said quietly. He uncurled his fingers from around Stiles’ hand. “Better?”

“Way better,” Stiles said gratefully. He exhaled slowly, sinking more fully against the couch. “Would you be offended if I took a nap?”

Derek shook his head. “You need it,” he said. “I can leave.”

“You don’t have to,” Stiles said. “I could put on a movie or something. You look like you could use some rest yourself.”

For a moment, Derek looked as though he was going to argue but then he nodded and said, “You’re
probably right.”

Stiles grinned sleepily and leaned over to grab the Xbox controller off the coffee table so they could browse Netflix. “Any preferences?” Derek shook his head and Stiles grinned wider, nudging him conspiratorially. “C’mon, dude, I saw you watching that night Lord of the Rings was on. It’s okay to admit you’re a nerd.”

Derek narrowed his eyes at Stiles but he didn’t say a word when Stiles put on Warehouse 13. Stiles twisted onto his side, drawing his knees to his chest. His eyes started to droop; whatever Derek had done to him had taken all his pain, but it’d also brought on weariness in a tidal wave already beginning to hit. He melted into the couch as it crested over him, plunging fast into unconsciousness. He didn’t even make it five minutes into the show before he was completely gone.

When Stiles woke later, the light in the room had gone the pink-red of sunset and he’d managed to spread himself over the entire couch, his feet crossed over Derek’s thighs. Derek didn’t seem to care; he was slumped against the other end of the couch, fast asleep. Stiles was glad to see him resting; he couldn’t imagine that sleeping in the woods without any kind of shelter or comfort was very relaxing.

Stiles very carefully lifted his legs off Derek’s and staggered off to the first-floor bathroom. When he came back, sleepily running a hand through his hair, Derek was awake, his head turned to stare out the side windows. “All quiet out there?” Stiles asked, dropping back down onto the couch with a great sigh.

Derek nodded, swinging his head back around to look at Stiles. “I watered your garden while you were gone.”

“You did?” Stiles blinked. “Thank you.”

Derek nodded again. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, you?”

“Better than I have been,” Derek replied.

Stiles smiled faintly and leaned forward to grab his phone off the table. Derek gave him a questioning look and Stiles said, “I’m ordering pizza and you’re going to help me eat it.”

Derek frowned. “I don’t have any money.”

“It’s on me, dude,” Stiles smiled, dialing the number for the only pizza place in Beacon Hills. He’d almost completed his order — large pepperoni pizza, garlic sticks, and a dozen buffalo wings — when he realized that he wouldn’t be able to pick it up. He was under express orders not to drive until he’d been cleared by his doctor, and he had no idea if Derek even knew how to drive. “Sorry,” he told the woman on the other end of the line. “I’m going to have to cancel.”

“Don’t worry about that, sweetheart,” she told him. “We’ll bring it out to you.”

“I thought you didn’t deliver,” Stiles said, startled.

“We don’t,” she told him cheerfully, “but you’ve done this town a favor. It’s the least we can do.”

“I didn’t even do anything!” Stiles protested, but the woman had already hung up. “Did you hear that?” Stiles asked Derek. “I mean — could you hear that?”
Derek gave him a wry look. “Supernatural hearing,” he pointed out.

“Just how strong is it?” Stiles asked curiously. “What’s your range?”

Derek didn’t answer. For a moment, Stiles thought he was ignoring the question, but then he realized Derek was listening, his head tilted to the side ever so slightly, eyes distant. “Quarter mile,” Derek decided. “It depends on what I’m listening for.”

Stiles thought about this for a little while. “Do you remember the night that person showed up and was looking in the windows? That was Jennifer, right? Not Peter.”

Derek’s eyes flashed angry red at Peter’s name and Stiles swallowed nervously, but Derek’s tone was even when he agreed, “Not Peter.”

“I thought so,” Stiles sighed. “I kept seeing Jennifer everywhere that week you were avoiding me.”

He pulled his legs to his chest, resting his chin on his knees. “Why’d you bite me?”

A guilty expression flashed across Derek’s face. “Sorry,” he muttered, his cheeks flushing pink. “I didn’t — I didn’t want to invade your privacy by seeing you naked.”

Stiles’ mouth fell open. “Ohh,” he mumbled. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have tried to force you.”

“I shouldn’t have bitten you, regardless,” Derek sighed, looking unhappy. “If I had bitten any deeper, I could have turned you.”

“Oh,” Stiles said again. He hadn’t even thought about that. No wonder Scott had looked so relieved when he saw the bite wasn’t that deep. “Well, we were both being idiots, then. Don’t worry about it.”

Derek nodded, but the expression on his face seemed to suggest that he had worried about, and was going to keep on worrying about it for a long time. They fell into a slightly awkward silence, both turning to watch the television, which was still playing episodes of Warehouse 13. Stiles didn’t think Derek was retaining any of it; a surreptitious glance out of the corners of his eyes showed Derek looking unhappy again, his distant gaze landing somewhere on the wall above the tv. Though Stiles barely knew him, he was worried about Derek, but he didn’t know how to help him.

“Did you know Jennifer?” Stiles asked Derek eventually, his voice soft.

Derek shook his head. “No,” he said quietly. “If she’s lived in town all this time, she’s not someone who was ever on my mom’s radar.”

“Erica told me that she was always getting into trouble with the law,” Stiles said thoughtfully. “I bet my dad could tell us more.”

Derek glanced over at him. “Where is your dad?”

“He’s working a double, so he won’t be back until like two in the morning,” Stiles replied. “He told me the county’s been running extra shifts at night. Everyone’s still a little riled up after, uh, what happened to us, and they’re trying to find Peter still.”

Derek frowned. “They’re not going to find Peter.”

“Why?” Stiles asked curiously. “Do you know something?”

Derek shook his head. “I haven’t seen him since that night I was with you. He’s sneaky, though.
He’s always been that way.” Derek shut his mouth, his face settling into a thunderous frown.

“How did he know who I was?” Stiles asked, still unnerved by the way Peter knew him.

Derek shrugged. “He likes knowing things,” he said, abruptly rising to his feet. Stiles watched him stalk into the kitchen and then a moment later, heard the sound of the bathroom door closing. He felt a little guilty. Derek clearly didn’t like talking about his family — and Peter in particular. Stiles was curious to know what had happened, though; why had Peter left town, and why had he come back now?

Derek was still in the bathroom when the pizza came, so Stiles shuffled over to the front door himself, digging out his wallet, which Scott had retrieved from the woods for him. The delivery girl was all smiles and chatter and tried to give him the pizza free, which Stiles refused, and he gave her a ten dollar tip because they’d made the no-delivery exception for him. He dropped the boxes on the coffee tables and staggered into the kitchen for plates and napkins. Derek was standing in there, staring at the photographs covering the fridge.

“That’s my mom and her cat,” Stiles told him, pointing at one of the photographs. “Jesse James. Named after the outlaw, not that dude who cheated on Sandra Bullock.”

Derek studied the picture. “She looks like you.”

“That’s what people always say,” Stiles smiled, leaning forward to grab the plates out of the cupboard. He wobbled and suddenly Derek was right there next to him, taking the plates from him with one hand, his other steadying Stiles. “Thanks,” Stiles breathed.

Derek just looked irritated. “Tell me what you need and I’ll get it for you.”

“I can do it,” Stiles protested. “I’m not an invalid.” Derek raised his eyebrows and Stiles realized he was still clutching at the countertop to keep himself steady. “Well,” Stiles added with dignity. “If you want to grab us drinks I won’t say no.”

Derek gave him a light, almost playful push. “Go sit down.”

Stiles grinned and lurched back to the living room like a drunken sailor, collapsing gratefully onto the couch. Derek emerged from the kitchen thirty seconds later, placing plates and bottles of soda down on the table before sitting himself down next to Stiles. He sat closer than was probably necessarily, their legs almost touching, elbows brushing, but Stiles didn’t mind, he was used to Derek being close to him and this was just Derek in a different shape. Nothing weird about that — okay, maybe it was a little weird, and he was still trying to get used to it, but that didn’t mean he minded. He watched with some amusement and a little bit of heartache when he opened the pizza box and Derek’s eyes fluttered shut, his nostrils flaring.

“How long has it been since you had pizza?” Stiles asked, lifting a couple slices onto a plate and pressing it into Derek’s hands.

Derek looked down at the plate reverentially. “Years,” he said with great feeling.

“That fast food we had must have been like a dream,” Stiles said sympathetically.

“It was good,” Derek agreed, picking up a slice. The noise Derek made when he bit into it almost made Stiles choke on his pizza, a quiet groan so heartfelt it was almost erotic. Flushing madly, Stiles concentrated on his own food and tried not to watch Derek eat, because he looked as though he was having a religious experience. They ate the entire pizza between them, which Stiles couldn’t bring himself to feel bad about — he’d had the life drained out of him, after all, and no leftovers meant
nothing unhealthy for his dad to eat. Stiles let Derek have all the chicken wings and munched absently on a breadstick as he switched to the Star Trek remake instead.

“Was that everything you ever dreamed of?” Stiles teased, as Derek shoved his pile of chicken bones away.

Derek pushed at him goodnaturedly. “Shut up.”

Stiles grinned, but didn’t press further. They both sank back into their respective corners of the couch, content and full of food. Stiles watched Derek lean against the armrest, arm crooked under his head. He looked over fifteen minutes later and Derek was asleep, head turned in to his arm, chest rising and falling slowly. Stiles smiled fondly and, after a moment’s thought, leaned forward to pull a blanket over him. Derek shifted minutely, sighing quietly, but didn’t wake. Stiles sank back onto his section of the couch and it wasn’t long before he, too, was out like a light.

Stiles woke abruptly to the feeling of a hand on his forehead. He tried to surge upwards, startled, but another hand on his shoulder gently pressed him back to the couch and his dad’s voice came out of the darkness, saying, “Hey, hey, relax.”

Stiles thumped back against the couch, his heart hammering in his chest. The room was dark, lit only by the faint glow for the television, which was playing the Star Trek menu over and over. Derek was gone and Stiles had stretched out over the couch again. “Oh,” he muttered.

“How you feeling?” Dad asked gently. “Looks like you had yourself a party.”

“’m fine,” Stiles mumbled, rubbing at his eyes. “Derek came over.”

“Did he,” his father said, smoothing a hand over Stiles’ hair. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s sad,” Stiles told his dad sleepily.

“Of course he is,” his dad said. “Think about how long you were sad about your mom.”

“I know,” Stiles said, rolling onto his side. “It’s just sad to see him sad.”

“He needs a friend,” his father told him.

“He’s got one,” Stiles assured him, his eyelids growing heavy. “I want to help him.”

“You already have, son,” his dad said, ruffling Stiles’ hair as he headed into the kitchen. “You already have.”

Stiles spent the next couple of days convalescing on the couch. He slept a lot, but moved around when he could, ignoring his shaking limbs until they threatened to collapse underneath him. Derek came to visit him every day, politely knocking at the front door every time. Stiles tried to tell him that he could just come inside on his own, like he had when he was a wolf, but Derek refused. “I’ve got to get used to being human again,” he said morosely.

They didn’t talk much after that first day. Derek wasn’t much of a conversation-maker, and Stiles was too tired to push him. He didn’t really mind, it wasn’t like he wasn’t used to Derek being non-verbal. They took a lot of naps and as Stiles grew stronger, the dark circles under Derek’s eyes began to fade and he asked once, tentatively, if he could use the shower. He came back downstairs clean and smelling like soap, his almost-beard trimmed back to scruff.
“I used your razor,” Derek told him sheepishly.

“That’s totally fine,” said Stiles, who was just pleased Derek seemed to be loosening up a little. (Though he did surreptitiously text his dad and ask him to pick up a new pack of razors on the way home.)

They went outside one afternoon, Derek hovering close to Stiles in case he got wobbly, so Stiles could spend some time in the garden, and they ended up taking a nap in the shade of the treeline, leaning against each other with their backs up against a massive sycamore. Derek was still there when his dad came home that evening — the first time he’d stayed. They were sitting on the back porch when Derek stiffened and it wasn’t long before Stiles heard the cruiser turn into the driveway, the door slamming as his dad got out. Derek was tense, but he didn’t leave, which pleased Stiles greatly, and they both turned when the back door opened and Stiles’ dad stepped out onto the porch.

“Well,” he said, when he saw Stiles and Derek. “You must be our infamous alpha.”

Derek climbed to his feet, offering Stiles’ father a hand. “Sheriff,” he said politely. Stiles thought he sounded nervous.

“Call me John, Derek,” he said gently, clasping Derek’s hand. “I need to thank you for saving my son’s life.”

Derek shifted his footing uncomfortably. “It shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

“Nothing you could have done,” Stiles’ dad replied, clapping him on the shoulder. “You staying for dinner?”

“Yeah he is,” Stiles said cheerfully, grinning at the horrified look Derek gave him.

“Sounds good,” his dad said, winking at Stiles. “You boys sit tight.”

Dinner was simple — burgers and grilled vegetables — and the three of them sat on the edge of the porch. “Guess I really do need to pick up some deck chairs if we’re going to have visitors,” Stiles’ father mused.

“Oh, sure,” Stiles snorted. “You’ll buy chairs for Derek, but not me? Thanks a lot.”

“Well, he is the alpha,” his father chided, elbowing Stiles in the side. “Speaking of,” he added, looking over at Derek. “The mayor’s expressed an interest in having a meeting with you and the town councilmembers.”

Derek’s jaw tightened. He set down his burger and pushed it away like he was no longer hungry. “Don’t you think it’s a little soon?” Stiles asked his dad, glancing worriedly at Derek.

“Maybe so,” his dad said sympathetically, “but there are some important issues to discuss. Do you think you could go, Derek?”

“I don’t know,” Derek said, glaring down at the porch. “It’s — ” He exhaled harshly.

Stiles could see him stressing out. He carefully put his hand over Derek’s and Derek froze, his nostrils flaring. “Would it be any help if I came along?”

Derek sat silent for a long minute before nodding jerkily. Stiles squeezed his hand encouragingly. Derek exhaled again, slower. “Has there been any more news from Jennifer Blake?” he asked evenly.
Stiles’ father hesitated before saying, “She passed away last night.”

Derek nodded, his mouth going tight again. Stiles’ heart sank. “So you don’t know, then,” he said slowly. “If she’s the one who started the fire.”

“We think it was her,” Stiles’ dad said gently. “She freely admitted that she was in the house that night. She said she was looking for something — something to do with the ritual your family would perform for the town.”

Derek nodded very slowly. “There’s an object needed,” he said, teeth clenched. “I don’t know what it is.”

“That’s what your sister said,” his dad said with a nod. “She said Blake’s been looking for it these past five years. She seemed to think it might be in the library, which is why your sister banned her.”

“Is it in the library?” Stiles asked curiously.

“Laura doesn’t seem to think so,” his dad replied, shaking his head.

“Mom didn’t keep it in the house, I know that,” Derek sighed. “But I don’t even know what it was, let alone where it is.”

“She never told you?” Stiles asked curiously.

Derek shook his head, misery tracing the lines of his face once more. “No. She said she’d teach us when the time was right, but she never — no one expected this.”

“And no one knew except her?” Stiles’ father pressed.

Derek’s mouth went thin. “Peter might know,” he admitted.

“Well,” Stiles’ father said after a long pause. “It’s a start, anyway. Thank you, Derek.” He got to his feet with a sigh.

“Sheriff,” Derek said, as Stiles’ dad turned toward the back door. “Jennifer wouldn’t have been able to get into the house any other night, but that night there was an eclipse.”

“What does that mean?” Stiles asked curiously.

“No moon,” Derek told him. “We lose all our powers and become — human, basically. That’s the only night she would have been able to get in without anyone noticing.”

“So it was probably premeditated,” Dad said, looking dejected. “You do realize that now she’s dead, we may never know exactly what happened.”

Derek nodded, his eyes downcast. Stiles’ father tossed him an unhappy smile before he disappeared inside. Derek stared down at his hands, the corners of his mouth twisted downward. Stiles bumped his shoulder against Derek’s shoulder in solidarity, but he said nothing — what could be said to someone who’d lost almost their entire family in one fiery night? Derek turned, bumping his nose against Stiles’ temple, so briefly that Stiles almost missed it, then said, “I’m going to head out.”

“Where are you going to go?” Stiles asked Derek, watching him hop off the porch, bare feet landing on the grass. Derek looked at him blankly and Stiles added, “I mean, you know you don’t have to, right?”

Derek frowned faintly. “I know.”
“So?” Stiles pressed. “You don’t have to sleep in the woods. We have a guest room.”

“I know,” Derek said, and Stiles was pretty sure there was faint smile playing around his lips. “You made me sleep in there the first time we met.”

Stiles laughed. “I didn’t make you do anything, dude. You and I both know that.”

Derek snorted and turned his head to look out at the trees. “Thanks,” he said. “I’m going to go run the boundary of our territory.” He swung his head back to look at Stiles, his pale eyes bright. “But I’ll be back.”

Stiles felt all the tension seep out of his shoulders. “Oh. Good.”

Derek trotted off into the trees as Stiles gathered their plates and went inside. His dad stood at the sink, drinking a beer. “Um,” Stiles said to him, setting the plates down in the sink with a clatter. “I may have just invited Derek to stay with us.”

His dad lowered his beer and raised his eyebrows. “Did you now?”

“Yes,” Stiles said sheepishly. “Is that all right?”

“Better than him sleeping in the woods,” his dad sighed. “I think he could use a break.”

“Me too,” Stiles said fervently.

His dad smiled and patted him on the back as he headed into the living room. “Your heart’s in the right place, Stiles.”

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Derek came back much later, long after the sun had dipped below the horizon, cheeks flushed and skin shining with sweat. He came through the front door — without knocking, Stiles was proud to see — and stopped at the bottom of the stairs, shifting from foot to foot uneasily.

“Everything okay?” Stiles’ dad asked.

“…Yes,” Derek said uncomfortably. “Stiles said I — ”

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like,” Stiles’ dad said magnanimously. “Stiles, why don’t you go get the guest room ready?”

“Sure,” Stiles said cheerfully. He gestured Derek up the stairs and heard him follow behind. “You wanna shower?”

“Probably should,” Derek said slowly.

“Let me see if I have anything that would fit you,” Stiles told him, ducking into his room. “You’ve been wearing those clothes for like a week.”

Derek hovered uncertainly in the doorway, watching Stiles dig through his dresser drawers for a moment before stepping into the room, looking around with interest. “Dude, it’s nothing you haven’t seen before,” Stiles told him, looking up from a pile of sweatpants - he didn’t think Derek’s legs would fit in any of his skinny jeans, but maybe he’d fit in those.

“I know,” Derek said, “but I see differently in the other form.”
“Oh,” Stiles said curiously. “In black and white?”

Derek nodded, running a finger along the top row of books in Stiles’ bookcase.

“You can borrow anything you’d like,” Stiles told him. “Mi casa es su casa.”

“Thank you,” Derek said quietly, “for being so kind.”

Stiles paused with a pile of clothes on his knee. “That’s what a pack does, right?” he said. “They take care of each other.”

Derek’s gaze dropped away from him. “I haven’t been taking care of anyone,” he said bitterly. “That’s why this town is falling apart.”

Stiles didn’t know what to tell him; he silently handed Derek a shirt and a pair of sweatpants, and Derek turned abruptly on his heels, disappearing into the bathroom. Stiles shrugged to himself and went into the guest room, where he changed the sheets and opened the window to get some fresh air circulating in the warm room. Then he sat on the end of the bed and waited for Derek. He emerged from the bathroom ten minutes later, clad in the sweatpants and shirt Stiles had handed him. The shirt was a little tight, accentuating Derek’s firm muscles, and Stiles tried not to stare. Instead, he said to Derek, “It’s not your fault.”

Derek glowered at him, edging into the room like he’d rather be somewhere else. “I shirked my duty for five years and now the town’s dying,” Derek said stiffly. “That is my fault.”

“You don’t know the ritual,” Stiles argued. “What else could you have done?”

“I could have gotten my act together and tried to figure it out,” Derek snapped. “I’ve failed everyone in this place.”

Stiles blinked. “No one thinks you’ve failed them, Derek, and you can’t — look, everyone grieves differently.” Derek gave him a long look and Stiles said, “When my mom died, I totally went off the rails. I started getting into fights at school — I got sent to an alternative school, you know? The kind where all the bad kids go? I was one of the bad kids. I hated everyone. I hated my dad. I tried to blame everyone and everything for my mom’s death, and it took me a long time to grow out of that.” He shrugged. “I sucked up too, dude, but at some point you have to let go of the past and keep moving forward.”

Derek stared at him for a long time before moving forward, slowly sinking down onto the end of the bed next to him. “What happened to your mom?” he asked quietly.

Stiles sighed. “Complications from dementia,” he told Derek. “It was this certain kind that hits people a lot younger than usual. She kind of just withered away.” He looked at Derek, one side of his mouth quirking up unhappily. “You can’t blame yourself for anything that’s happened. You just need to be the best leader than you can be from this point onward.”

“Thank you,” Derek said softly. He looked at Stiles. “You’re a lot wiser than I am.”

Stiles blinked. “No, I’m not,” he argued. “I’m just a dumb kid that had to grow up fast.”

Derek sighed quietly, his gaze dropping to his hands. Stiles watched him for a moment and then, without even thinking around it, leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Derek in a tight embrace. For a moment Derek froze and Stiles thought he was going to pull away, but instead it was like all the fight went out of him, his body going limp. He dropped his head to Stiles’ shoulder, exhaling harshly as his hands rose to touch Stiles’ back, fingers curling into his shirt.
“Hey,” Stiles said to Derek, whispering into his soft hair. “Maybe I’m a dumb kid and you’re a stupid wolf, but at least we have each other.”

Lydia and Allison came to visit the next day and, to Stiles’ surprise, Derek didn’t disappear. He accepted the box Lydia handed him with a slightly surprised look on his face, as though he hadn’t expected kindness.

“My mom said it’s a traditional gift for the new alpha,” Lydia explained primly, settling herself down in the recliner while Stiles scooted over next to Derek so Allison could sit on his other side. Derek opened the box and lifted out an ornate crown woven from tree branches. “Oak’s customary.”

“Stylish,” Stiles said. “Just like Jesus.”

Derek and Lydia both gave him sour looks. “Thank you,” Derek said to Lydia, carefully placing the crown back in the box.

“This is from me and my dad,” Allison said, leaning across Stiles to hand Derek a ring box. Inside sat a silver bullet stamped with an ornate seal, nestled on a bed of velvet. “Dad said he’ll help with the ritual any way he can. You’re welcome to come look through our archives.”

“You’re not human either?” Stiles asked Allison, as Derek tipped the bullet into his palm and looked at it carefully.

Allison laughed. “I’m as human as you are.”

“The Argents are an old family,” Derek supplied, placing the bullet back in the box. “They hunt werewolves.”

“Not in Beacon Hills, though,” Allison added. “There’ve been Argents here almost as long as there have been Hales.”

“We guard this town together,” Derek said with a nod. “Tell your father I said thank you.”

Allison nodded, smiling brightly.

“So what are you?” Stiles asked Lydia, hoping to catch her off-guard.

She smiled smugly and said, “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Yes,” Stiles said, frustrated. “I would.”

Lydia didn’t tell him, though; she just gave him a superior look and turned her attention back to Derek. Stiles gave up and disappeared into the kitchen to grab some snacks. Allison followed, looking somber.

“I heard they found out who started the fire,” she said softly, leaning against the counter while Stiles used a wooden spoon to stir some lemonade mix into a pitcher of water.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, glancing toward the living room. He heard Lydia laugh. “It was the lady who took me.”

“They thought my aunt did it, for a while,” Allison said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “They, um, dated. Her and Derek. When they were in high school. She’s never really liked werewolves.”
Stiles’ stomach gave a strange twist. He had a hard time imagining Derek dating anyone. “But she was cleared?” Stiles asked, tapping the spoon against the glass.

Allison nodded. “That was the year Lydia and I were living in France, and she was with us when it happened. I’m really glad they found out who did it, though,” she added, eyes darting toward the living room. “When we came home, it was like a completely different town. Everyone was so sad.”

“Did you know the family well?” Stiles asked curiously.

Allison shrugged. “Dad was always over at the house making plans with Talia.” Allison smiled sadly. “Losing her — it was hard. It was hard on everyone.”

“That’s what I’ve been hearing,” Stiles said sympathetically.

Allison’s smile was a little sad, but the way she bumped her hip against his as she reached out to grab them all glasses for the lemonade was entirely companionable. Together, snacks and drinks in hand, they headed back into the living room, where Lydia and Derek were still talking. Derek looked up at Stiles as he sat down, and Stiles had the feeling that Derek had overheard the entire conversation between him and Allison, but he didn’t say anything, just pressed his leg against Stiles’. Stiles smiled faintly, pleased for some reason he couldn’t explain, though the feeling faded when he glanced up to find Lydia watching him, a calculating expression on her face.

The girls left some time later, talking cheerfully in practised French. As Stiles put the leftover lemonade in the fridge, he said to Derek, “I’m kind of surprised you didn’t disappear when they showed up, to be honest.”

Derek watched him from his place in the doorway, arms folded over his broad chest as he leaned against the doorframe. “I like them,” he said simply. “They’re straight-forward. Their families are important to the town too.”

“So you’re networking,” Stiles said with a faint grin.

Derek shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. “You told me to be the best leader I can be.”

Stiles’ smile faded. “I’m proud of you,” he said earnestly.

Derek’s cheeks went pink. He looked away when he muttered, “Thank you.” Stiles went warm all over.

-

Stiles’ sleep was restless that night. It’d been more than a week since Derek had shifted to his human form and Stiles missed the weight of him in the bed next to him. He mulled the possibility of asking Derek if he’d abandon the guest bed and sleep with Stiles. It wasn’t like Derek was all that different from his wolf form except for being able to talk and Stiles was completely aware that he was a person.

Okay, so it was completely different, and he knew that asking Derek to come share his bed had a whole range of possible connotations and meanings that he wasn’t sure if he was ready to face yet, least of the all the fact that Derek in his human form was utterly and insanely attractive. It honestly hadn’t occurred to Stiles, while he was lying in the hospital thinking about Derek after the whole “he’s a werewolf” revelation, that Derek might be good-looking. He should have suspected, he supposed, since Laura was gorgeous in a dark and stormy sort of way, but he’d been more preoccupied with the fact that Derek wasn’t a dog and also someone had tried to kill him. He’d been trying not to think about it because Derek was around all the time and it didn’t seem right to just
throw himself at someone who’d spent five years living as a wolf. He couldn’t do that.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Stiles muttered to himself, angry for even considering it. He could sleep alone; he’d done it for twenty years already, and in a little more than a month he’d be heading back to school anyway. He’d be fine.

- 

Scott tried to visit the following day. For lack of anything better to do, Stiles and Derek were in the kitchen making chocolate chip cookies and Stiles was just measuring out flour when Derek’s head came up sharply and he moved, banging out the back door without a word. Stiles frowned as he watched Derek disappear into the woods and then not thirty seconds later, the front door opened and Scott called out, “Hello?”

“Kitchen!” Stiles shouted back, still frowning at the trees. Scott came through the living room and Stiles nodded toward the backyard. “Derek just left.”


“He stuck around for Lydia and Allison yesterday,” Stiles said, still frowning a little as he scooped flour into the mixing bowl.

“I know,” Scott repeated, snaking an arm around Stiles to snag some chocolate chips. He popped them in his mouth and said around them, “Allison told me. He sounds like he’s doing okay.”

“I think he is,” Stiles replied, shrugging helplessly. “I don’t know why he wouldn’t stick around for you.”

“Beats me,” Scott said glumly. “It sucks not having him around.”

Stiles gave him a worried look, accidentally stirring the dough too quickly and sending a cloud of flour rising through the air. “Why’s that?”

Scott thought for a moment, his brow furrowing. “He’s our leader,” he said slowly, “but it’s more than that. With him not around, it feels…the pack doesn’t feel whole. It feels like we’ve been abandoned. Laura’s been doing her best to carry us all forward — she always has dinners and stuff at her house for us, but she’s not the alpha and we all know it.”

“So it’s something instinctual?”

Scott shrugged. “Something like that. It’s hard to describe, I guess, but it just feels…” He tapped at his chest, over his heart. “Empty.”

Stiles’ mouth twisted downward. “I’ll talk to him,” he said.

“Thanks, man,” Scott said despondently. “We’ve all tried before, but he’d just avoid us if we went out into the woods to try and talk to him.”

“He can’t keep avoiding things forever,” Stiles said. “Now c’mon, you want to help me with these?”

“Sure,” Scott agreed, smiling faintly. He stepped up beside Stiles and asked, “Hey, how are you feeling, anyway?”

“A lot better,” Stiles told him. “I don’t feel like a limp noodle anymore, anyway.”

Scott laughed. “That’s always a good thing. You think you’ll make it over tomorrow night?”
“Man, is tomorrow Friday already?” God, his summer was slipping by depressingly fast. “Yeah, I can definitely come, but I probably shouldn’t drink — my doctor kind of warned me off all that stuff for a while.” Stiles drummed his fingers against the counter, nodding when Scott offered to pour the chocolate chips in. “You probably know a lot of the hospital staff, right? Since your mom works there?”

Scott nodded, biting his lip in concentration as he stirred the cookie dough. “Yeah. When I was little and she couldn’t find a babysitter, she’d bring me in to work with her and I’d play under the nurses’ station. I’ve known all of them since I was like, a baby.”

“Do you know the doctor I had? Dr. Deaton?”

“Oh, yeah,” Scott said, his brow furrowing. “He’s pretty cool. He only moved here in the past couple of years, though, so I don’t know him that well.”

“Obviously he knows about, well, everything,” Stiles said, gesturing vaguely. He bent to grab a cookie sheet out of the cupboard and set it on the counter next to the bowl. “I can’t imagine that’s something they teach at medical school.”

Scott laughed again. “Nah. Mom said he’s a druid.”

Stiles froze. “Like Jennifer was?”

“No, no,” Scott said hurriedly. “There’s like, two different kinds, I guess? Jennifer was an evil one. Dr. Deaton’s good. Or at least neutral. Mom told me that sometimes packs have — emissaries? I think that’s what she called them. They’re kind of like advisors. She thinks Dr. Deaton moved here to be the new emissary, but since Derek’s been living out in the woods, nothing’s come of it.”

Stiles frowned as they began to spoon dough onto the cookie sheet. “What happened to the old emissary?”

“She moved.” Scott gestured around. “This was her house.”


“Yeah,” Scott shrugged. “She was never around much, as far as I can remember. I guess Talia didn’t need much advice.”

“Huh,” Stiles said absently.

Scott nudged him. “These ready to go in the oven, man?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, blinking. “Yeah, definitely.”

Stiles was still in the kitchen a couple hours later, preparing a salad for dinner when Derek came slinking back in through the back door, looking around warily — like he couldn’t already tell the house was empty except for Stiles. He didn’t say anything to Stiles, but put a hand toward the pile of freshly-baked cookies. Stiles snatched the plate out of his reach. Derek frowned at him.

“Nuh-uh,” Stiles told him, holding the plate above his head.

Derek gave him an exasperated look. “You realize I can reach those.”

“So?” Stiles retorted. “Why’d you leave when Scott showed up?”
Derek’s exasperated look turned irritated. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does!” Stiles argued. “He wants to talk to you, Derek!”

Derek glared at him. “Keep the cookies,” he snapped. “I’m not hungry.”

Stiles dropped the plate on the counter so hard that it cracked. Derek winced, turning away, but Stiles lunged at him, grabbing at his arm. Derek tried to shake him off, but Stiles clung on stubbornly. “Why are you avoiding him?” he insisted. “Is it Scott? Or is it all the werewolves? Why are you staying here instead of at Laura’s house?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Derek growled again, his eyes flashing red.

“It does matter!” Stiles insisted. “You can’t just avoid every werewolf in town! Everyone in Beacon Hills might be pack but your true connection is to the werewolves, isn’t it? They’re your family!”

“And I failed them!” Derek spat viciously, shaking his arm so violently that Stiles thudded back against the counter. Derek exhaled harshly. “I failed them,” he repeated more quietly. “I was supposed to take care of them and when they needed me most, I hid in the woods.” The familiar misery was back in his face, more intense than ever. “I’m ashamed,” he told Stiles. “I let this town down. I let my pack suffer. I did everything wrong.”

Stiles’ back hurt from where he’d smacked against the counter, but he ignored it. “I already told you that’s not true,” he said insistently. “No one blames you for anything.”

Derek just shook his head and Stiles could tell he didn’t believe him. He sighed quietly and pushed the plate of cookies toward Derek. “Have one.”

Derek shook his head again. “No thanks,” he muttered, turning on his heel. “I’ll be upstairs.”

Stiles watched him go. He didn’t know what more he could say.

Derek never came back downstairs. Stiles’ dad came home, and if he wondered where Derek was, he didn’t say anything. They ate dinner and watched television for a while before Stiles headed upstairs. He deliberately didn’t look toward the guest room as he passed; if Derek wanted space, he could have it. Instead, Stiles collapsed onto his bed and curled up with his little book of spells. He attempted to summon his little light and, for the first time since the night at the nemeton, Stiles was able to find his spark and call his light into being. It wasn’t very big — not much larger than an egg — but it cast plenty of light down upon him. He relaxed a little, some of the tension seeping from his shoulders, and let himself be lost amongst the pages of spells.

Some time around midnight, a soft noise roused Stiles from his reading and he lifted his head to find Derek standing in the doorway to his room.

“Can I talk to you?” Derek asked quietly.

“Yeah, dude,” Stiles said, sitting up and setting his book aside. “Come in.”

Derek stepped across the threshold and paused a moment before carefully shutting the door. He took a step toward Stiles’ bed and then stopped, looking pained. Stiles watched him patiently and eventually Derek said, “I’m sorry.”

Stiles raised his eyebrows. “For what?”

“For getting angry,” Derek said, his gaze dropping to the floor. “Maybe you’re right,” he added.
despairingly, “but I’ve been telling myself these things for five years and it’s — it’s hard to think any other way.”

“That’s okay,” Stiles told him gently. He watched Derek stand there, shifting around uneasily, and patted the bed next to him. “C’mere. Sit down.”

Derek glanced at him uncertainly and it was a long moment before he moved, carefully stepping around to the other side of the bed and tentatively sitting down next to Stiles.

“Can I ask you something?” Stiles said slowly. Derek sat still for a moment, then nodded. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but…how did you survive the fire?”

“I wasn’t there,” Derek said after a long pause. “Neither was Laura.” He looked down at his hands, his mouth going thin. “We’d planned on taking a camping trip that night. We wanted to know what it was like to get drunk like humans do, and Laura had gotten weed from somewhere.” Derek exhaled slowly. “But we got a flat tire just outside of town. I swapped it with the spare but you’re not supposed to travel far on those, so we decided to head back to the house. We knew something was wrong as soon as we headed into the woods. Laura started crying and I—” Derek cut himself off, breathing heavily. Stiles hesitated a moment before reaching out for Derek’s hand. Derek’s fingers curled around his, clutching at him like a lifeline.

“When my mom died, her power came to me,” Derek said, much more quietly, his voice shaking. “I shifted immediately. I didn’t have any control. I shouldn’t have been able to shift during the eclipse and it hurt. Laura started screaming; she knew what it meant that my eyes were red and I— I panicked.” He closed his eyes, his brow furrowing. “I jumped out the window and I ran. I ran for days. That was my first mistake,” Derek added bitterly.

“And you never shifted back,” Stiles said quietly, ignoring Derek’s last statement.

“Not until last week,” Derek agreed unhappily. “I came back just in time for my family’s funeral and never left the woods again.”

“Would you have ever shifted back if I hadn’t come along?” Stiles asked.

“No,” Derek replied, so softly Stiles almost couldn’t hear him. “I never wanted to be human again.”

“So?” Stiles pressed, feeling a little nervous for asking. “Why don’t you change back?”

“I can’t,” Derek said, giving him an unhappy smile. “I don’t know how.”

“But then—”

“The first time, the shift was shocked into me,” Derek told him. “The second time, I did it out of panic.” He shook his head slowly. “I don’t know how to do it deliberately.”

“I’m sorry.”

Derek shook his head. “It’s probably for the best,” he said morosely.

Stiles sat quiet for a while, mulling things over, while next to him, Derek sat with one of his hands still loosely wrapped around Stiles’, his gaze on the blankets. Stiles shifted after a few long minutes, scooting down so he was in more of a reclining position. He didn’t say a word, but he smoothed the blankets over his stomach and Derek exhaled slowly. When Derek moved, he did it carefully, hesitant like he expected Stiles to tell him to stop at any moment. Stiles said nothing, though, and Derek laid himself out next to him, resting his head on Stiles’ chest. Stiles’ heart beat fast beneath his
ribs, nervous, but it felt right to have Derek’s weight on him — normal. He lifted a cautious hand and gently placed it on Derek’s head and Derek exhaled again, shaky, his body relaxing by degrees as Stiles combed his fingers through his hair.

“I never thought I’d be alpha,” Derek said after a while, his voice soft. “It usually goes to the oldest child - everyone thought it’d be Laura.”

“Did you want to be alpha?”

“Not particularly,” Derek admitted. “Laura was always more of a leader. I was more of a — a scholar.”

“What’d you study in college?” Stiles asked curiously.

“Linguistics and medieval history,” Derek sighed. “Didn’t get a chance to graduate.”

“Do you think you’ll go back?”

“Don’t know,” Derek muttered. He shifted, pressing his cheek against Stiles’ chest, and sighed again, soft and defeated. “Not sure about anything any more. I don’t know what will happen to the town if I can’t perform the ritual.”

“Are you scared?” Stiles asked quietly.

Derek was silent for a long, long time. “Yes,” he whispered eventually, voice so small Stiles could barely hear him, and he turned his face into Stiles’ stomach, shoulders hunched and defensive.

“It’s okay,” Stiles said softly, rubbing a hand down Derek’s back. “We’ll figure it out.”

Derek didn’t say anything and after a while, Stiles was pretty sure he’d fallen asleep. That was fine with him; the repetitious motion of his hand on Derek’s back was making him tired, his eyes slowly falling shut to the sound of Derek’s steady breathing.

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When Stiles’ phone went off the following morning, he opened his eyes to find himself on his side facing Derek, who was curled toward him, their foreheads almost touching. He jolted backward as Derek stirred, flipping onto his other side to snatch up his phone and shut off the alarm. Be cool, he thought frantically, sitting up. Be cool. Derek didn’t even seem to notice him, though; he shifted around, mumbling something sleepily, and appeared to go back to sleep. Stiles’ shoulders sagged in relief and he slipped off to the bathroom to take a shower.

He didn’t even remember falling asleep, and it had been a shock to wake up with Derek still in his bed, though some part of him couldn’t help but be pleased. He hadn’t woken up with someone else very often; he’d had one steady girlfriend his freshman year of college, and a couple of awkward one-night stands — not that there was anything between him and Derek, of course — even if he was starting to wish there was.

Stiles shook his head violently, sending water droplets flying everywhere. Now wasn’t the time.

Derek wasn’t in his room when he reemerged from the bathroom, but he was in the kitchen when Stiles went downstairs, bent over the stove.

“Whoa,” Stiles said, deeply inhaling the smell of bacon and toast. “Are you making breakfast?”
Derek cast him a tired look, his eyes lidded and his hair flat on one side. Huh. Stiles had had this suspicion that Derek would be a morning person, but he certainly didn’t look like it, standing at the stove in a t-shirt and sweatpants, his hair askew. Stiles let him do what he needed to and got the coffeemaker started. By the time the coffee was ready, Derek was portioning food onto two plates, so Stiles filled two mugs and said, “Wanna eat outside?”

It was a lot like their normal morning routine, sitting out on the front steps. The breakfast part was new, but they saw the usual morning parade of joggers and commuters. First to pass was the girl who lived down past Scott — Braeden, Stiles thought her name was. She came into the library sometimes to get books on CD and there was something about her that absolutely intimidated him. Derek paused in the middle of lifting a forkful of scrambled eggs to his mouth, eyes focused on the road as Braeden appeared. She lifted a hand in greeting like usual and Stiles waved back but Derek — Derek watched her until she was almost past the yard and then grudgingly lifted a hand as well. Braeden smiled widely, looking absolutely pleased. Stiles was a little stunned; he’d never seen her smile before.

“Did you bespell her?” he asked Derek accusingly. Derek gave him an irritated look and didn’t answer, diving back into his pile of eggs. He waved at everyone who passed after that, though — if lifting a hand could be called waving — and everyone who saw him smiled and returned the gesture. Derek even greeted Scott, driving by in his mom’s beat-up old Honda. Scott nearly drove off the road in his haste to wave back.

After they’d eaten, they set their plates aside and Stiles pulled out his phone, flipping through the day’s headlines on CNN while next to him Derek leaned back on the steps and shut his eyes, basking in the warmth of the early morning sunlight. Stiles smiled to himself, content. Eventually, though, he ran out of time; this morning would be his first back at work and he needed to get going.

“Hey,” Stiles said, knocking his knee against Derek’s outstretched legs. “I have to head to work. Thanks for breakfast, dude.”

Derek sat up slowly, his pale eyes translucent in the bright light. “You’re welcome,” he said sleepily. He leaned forward and Stiles thought for a moment that Derek was about to kiss him, but he bumped their cheeks together, his skin warm against Stiles’. Stiles’ pulse kicked into double-time at the feeling of Derek’s stubble, rough against his cheek, the hot rush of his breath ruffling Stiles’ hair.

“I — I’ll see you later,” Stiles stammered, scrambling to his feet with his cheeks aflame. Derek lifted a casual hand in goodbye and leaned back against the stairs, watching as Stiles got to the car only to realize his keys were still inside. Stiles was forced to dart past him and into the house. Derek had his eyes closed again when Stiles came back out, face turned toward the sun, but Stiles would have sworn he looked smug.

He figured it took about half the drive into town for his cheeks to stop burning, and about the same length of time for his heart rate to return to normal, though it started to pick up again when he pulled into the library parking lot and realized he’d have to see Laura. Would she notice? God, could werewolves smell emotions? He fucking hoped not, because the last thing he needed was for her to figure out he had a crush on her little brother.

Lydia was sitting behind the circulation desk when he came into the library and she smiled at him encouragingly. “How are you feeling?”

“Mostly normal,” Stiles replied, leaning against the counter. He’d worn a long-sleeve shirt despite the heat, a little self-conscious about the still-healing cuts on his wrists. They itched a little. “I’m glad to be back, though.”
“We’re glad to have you back,” Laura said cheerfully, striding out from the stacks with a pile of books in her arms. She thumped them down in front of Lydia and said, “Mark these up for the book sale, would you? Stiles, my office, please.”

Stiles took a steadying breath as he followed Laura into her office, plunking down in a chair as she gently closed the door behind them and took a seat at her desk. “How are you doing?” she asked. “You sure you’re ready to come back to work?”

“I’m fine,” Stiles insisted.

“Good,” Laura said, a little distractedly, her fingers tapping out a fast beat on her desk.

Stiles watched her bite her lip and guessed at what she wanted to ask. “Derek’s good, too.”

Laura smiled at him, relief crinkling the corners of her eyes. “Scott said he’s been staying with you.”

“Yeah,” Stiles nodded. “I think he’s adjusting okay.”

“You smell like him,” Laura said a little wistfully, and Stiles resisted the urge to cross his arms over his chest defensively.

“Hey,” he said, a sudden realization hitting him. “Earlier this summer, when everyone was saying I smelled like a dog, was that — was that Derek?”

Laura laughed, but sobered immediately. “Yeah,” she told him. “I wasn’t sure, at first, if I was just imagining things. And then I saw him at your house and I knew.” She sighed softly. “He won’t talk to me.”

“He said he’s ashamed,” Stiles said quietly. “He thinks what’s happening to the town is his fault.”

Laura’s mouth twisted downward. “That idiot,” she said unhappily. “We don’t even know the ritual.”

“That’s what I tried to tell him,” Stiles said. “Maybe you should talk to him — ”

Laura shook her head sharply. “He doesn’t want to see me right now,” she said. “He’ll just disappear if I try to come over.”

“Well,” Stiles said thoughtfully, “he’s supposed to have a meeting with Finstock and the town council in a couple of days. Maybe you could come to that?”

“I can try,” Laura sighed. She smoothed her hands over her pants, distracted. “Thanks for taking care of him.”

“Of course,” Stiles said, a little startled.

“Is he still wearing the clothes I gave him?”

“No,” Stiles admitted. “He’s been borrowing mine, but nothing really fits him.”

Laura rolled her eyes. “He’s always been clueless that way. See if you can get him to Walmart or something and I’ll pay you back for whatever you can get him to buy.”

Stiles snorted. “I’ll do my best.”

Laura smiled at him, a trace of sadness left in her expression. “You’re sure you’re ready to come
back to work, though? You can take a couple more days if you need to.”

“Nah,” Stiles said, shaking his head. “I’m fine — and I need the money, anyway. I have to pay Dad back for the windshield on my jeep.”

Laura looked a little guilty. “Your insurance won’t cover that?”

“Kinda hard to explain, isn’t it?” Stiles retorted with a wry grin. “‘Yeah, it got busted out by a werewolf.’ I don’t think our agent would buy that.”

“Well,” Laura said, “I can give you some money for that, too. Derek’s the one who broke it, after all — and we’ve got money.”

Stiles shook his head. “That’s okay. I mean, he broke it to save my life — ”

“I know,” Laura said with a wicked grin. “Let’s bill it to the town. I’ll draw it up and give it to Finstock at the meeting. I want to see his face.”

Stiles laughed. “If that’s what you want to do, I won’t say no to the free entertainment.”

Laura cackled gleefully as they got to their feet and shuffled out of the office. “Oh, he is gonna flip.”

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When Stiles returned home that evening, the house sat empty, no sign of Derek. He didn’t worry though; Derek ran the boundary of Beacon Hills several times a day, ensuring his territory was safe. He’d be back sooner or later, Stiles figured with a shrug, and got busy in the kitchen making dinner. His dad came home before Derek did and when he came down from his shower, he leaned against the kitchen counter, watching Stiles stir a pot of baked beans for a moment before asking, “How was work?”

“Quiet,” Stiles replied. It had been slow for a Friday, mostly empty except for a children’s activity group around noon. Laura had sent Lydia home early, then gone home herself, leaving Stiles to close alone.

His dad nodded slowly. “And where’s our alpha?”

Stiles shrugged. “Haven’t seen him yet.”

His dad watched him for a moment, a calculating expression on his face. “I couldn’t help but notice,” he said evenly, “that when I got up this morning, Derek wasn’t in his room and your door was closed.”

Stiles flushed bright red, stirring the pot at little more violently than necessary when he said, “So? We were talking and he fell asleep.”

“Uh huh,” his father said placidly.


“I’m sure it was,” his dad said, his tone completely neutral. Stiles narrowed his eyes at his father; he knew that tone. He’d been on enough ride-alongs as a kid to know that was the voice his dad used when he wanted to put someone he was interrogating at ease — the whole buddy-cop thing.

“What do you think happened?” Stiles asked pointedly.
“Nothing,” his father shrugged. “I’m just curious to know if — if there’s something between you two.”

Stiles shook his head. “No.” He chewed on his lip for a moment before asking, “Do you think it’d be…weird? If there was?”

His dad smiled faintly, taking a sip of beer before replying, “I think it’s pretty obvious the two of you care about each other. I don’t think it’d be much of a stretch.”

Stiles nodded thoughtfully, an odd hopeful feeling settling into his chest.

Derek came in fifteen minutes later, just as Stiles and his dad were settling down to eat in the living room, a flush high on his cheeks from running.

“All quiet?” Stiles’ dad asked him, shoveling baked beans onto his fork.

Derek shook his head. “Another branch has fallen off the nemeton.”

Stiles looked up sharply. “What’s that mean?”

“Nothing good,” Derek said dejectedly. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“What’s that mean?” Stiles repeated, directing his question at his father after Derek had disappeared upstairs.

His father shrugged. “Not my field,” he said enigmatically. “As far as I can understand, though, since no one’s performed the ritual, it’s affecting the tree — can’t get the power it needs, or something. They’re tied together, I think, like — ”

“It’s like a gauge,” Stiles said, his eyes widening in sudden understanding. “If the town’s doing well, the nemeton’s doing well, but if it’s not — ”

“Right,” his dad nodded.

Stiles sat back on the couch, frowning as he ate his dinner. Maybe there was something in the library, he thought. Laura probably would have found it by now if there was, but then again, maybe she hadn’t been looking all that hard with Derek staying in wolf form — it wasn’t like she could do it even if she knew what it was. There had to be something, or someone who could tell them what was going on, and Peter Hale wasn’t exactly an option when they didn’t even know where he was. He chewed at his lip thoughtfully, head lifting as Derek came back downstairs, hair wet from the shower, clad in a pair of Stiles’ sweatpants and a slightly too-tight t-shirt with the Santa Rosa panther mascot across the chest. Derek glanced at Stiles as he passed through the living room, his face neutral, expression placid, and Stiles found himself momentarily distracted by the memory of the conversation he’d had before with his dad. He couldn’t stop himself watching as Derek headed into the kitchen and when he turned back to the television, he could see his father out of the corner of his eye, looking smug.

There had to be someone in town who knew about the ritual, Stiles thought a little desperately, ignoring the sound of Derek moving around in the kitchen. Maybe not, though — if there had been, they probably would have come forward by now. Someone who’d moved away, perhaps, someone like…the woman who’d owned their house. She’d been the — emissary, Stiles thought Scott had called her. The advisor to the pack, and she’d known how to do magic; of all people, she was the most likely to know anything about the ritual. She was in San Francisco now, though, Stiles remembered, shoulders drooping. Though…there was Dr. Deaton. Scott had said Melissa thought he’d moved to down to be the new emissary. Maybe he knew something.
The couch dipped as Derek sat down next to him, a plate of food in his hands. Stiles glanced over at him, sparing him a faint smile, which Derek returned slowly before turning his attention to his plate. He sat cross-legged, one knee pressed up against Stiles’ thigh. Stiles couldn’t help but focus on that contact, the warmth of his body. He put a hand on Derek’s knee and refused to let him himself over-analyze it; his dad could smirk all he wanted to but Derek, if anything, just shifted closer and kept eating like nothing had happened.

They all watch television together until it got late; the sun long dipped below the horizon, the sky a silky deep navy, studded with stars and a silver slice of moon. Stiles got to his feet and stretched before announcing to the room, “I’m going to Scott’s.” He glanced down at Derek. “Do you want to come?”

Derek hesitated a moment, then shook his head but offered, “I’ll walk with you.”

Stiles nodded graciously and left the house with Derek, ignoring yet another smug look his dad tossed him. Outside, the air was cool and a little damp, the trees buzzing with the sound of cicadas. “You sure you don’t want to come?” Stiles asked Derek as they crunched down the driveway. “I think Scott and the others would really like to see you.”

“Probably,” Derek agreed quietly.

“So?” Stiles pressed, elbowing him gently.

Derek turned his head to look toward the trees, mouth thinning. “I can’t,” he said after a long pause. “I’m — I’m not ready to see them.”

“Okay,” Stiles said lightly. “That’s fine.”

“I’m sorry,” Derek muttered.

“Hey,” Stiles said, nudging him again. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about.”

Derek stopped walking a couple hundred feet before they reached Scott’s driveway, leaving Stiles on his own for the rest of the journey. “Don’t wait for me,” Stiles said before they parted. “I don’t know how long I’ll stay.”

Derek didn’t say anything; he just leaned into Stiles’ personal space. It was only slightly surprising this time when he rubbed his cheek against Stiles’, though it still sent Stiles’ heart hammering in his chest, the conversation he’d had with his dad fresh on his mind. “See you,” Derek rumbled, eyes flashing red before he turned and disappeared into the trees. Stiles stood still for a moment, watching his dark form disappear into the gloom, then forced himself onward, heading down Scott’s driveway.

Scott swung open the door before Stiles had even got up the porch steps, a wide grin on his face. “Dude,” Scott said feelingly. “It’s been way too long.”

Stiles laughed. “Agreed.”

“Can you drink?” Scott asked, stepping back so Stiles could come inside. He could hear music beyond, his friends laughing. “I mean, you’re not on any meds, are you?”

“No meds,” Stiles grinned. Scott looked relieved and pressed the beer he’d been holding into Stiles’ hand.

“It doesn’t have any wolfsbane in it, I promise,” Scott winked, then paused, his head tilting consideringly. “You okay? Your heartbeat’s going crazy.”
Stiles put a guilty hand over his heart as they headed for the living room. “You can hear that?”


“Well, I —” Stiles swallowed. “Do I smell like Derek?”

Scott narrowed his eyes at Stiles. “Dude, I can barely smell you, his scent’s so strong. Has he been, like, rubbing all over you?”

Stiles flushed. “Not — not exactly? He kind of just keeps kind of, uh, rubbing his face against mine.” Scott’s eyebrows rose and Stiles sighed. “Okay, that sounds super weird.”

“He’s scent marking you,” Scott said, his eyebrows still raised.

“What does that mean?” Stiles asked, a little nervous.

“It means he loves you!” Erica hollered from the living room.

Stiles flushed darker but Scott laughed, shaking his head a little. “Not exactly,” he said soothingly. “It’s just — a pack thing, you could say. Derek’s marked you so you smell like pack — he wants everyone to know.”

Stiles tried to make himself relax. “So it’s not — it doesn’t mean anything, uh…you know.”

Scott smirked at him. “Well, I don’t know for sure.” In the living room, someone wolf-whistled, and Stiles groaned.

“I am not drunk enough for this,” he told Scott, who smiled brightly and ushered him into the living room.

Everyone else was already there, a half-completed game of Carcassonne on the coffee table that looked as though it’d been abandoned a while ago, a bowl of potato chips plunked down in the middle of the board. Boyd lay sprawled across the floor with his eyes closed, Erica halfway on top of him, idly checking her phone. Isaac and Lydia and Allison were all crammed on the couch and, judging by the pile of lime rinds on the table, they’d been doing tequila shots.

“You guys started without me?” Stiles asked, pretending to pout.

“‘S not our fault you were too busy making out with your boyfriend,” Erica retorted, not looking up from her phone.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Stiles protested, cheeks flushing once more.

“Ignore her,” Scott said cheerfully, leaning over the couch to press a quick kiss to Allison’s cheek and pluck the bottle of tequila from her hand. “Shot or beer?”

“Shot,” Stiles said vehemently, abandoning his beer in a heartbeat.

To his surprise, no one teased him much more about Derek; instead, all the wolves leaned in closer, asking him question after question. Was Derek doing okay? Had he said anything about them? Did Stiles know if Derek would ever come to see them?

Stiles felt bad for his friends; he could tell that all of them — the wolves especially — cared for and were concerned about Derek. He got the sense they all felt incredibly guilty for not doing anything when Derek disappeared into the woods though, as Boyd said, sounding frustrated, “What were we supposed to do? He’d vanish if anyone tried to get close.”
“Is there anything we can do?” Erica asked, sounding a little desperate. “Anything at all?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles said uncomfortably. He wasn’t an expert here; he just happened to be the one person Derek seemed to trust. He glanced toward the sliding glass door that led out onto the patio and hoped that Derek had gone home; he couldn’t stand the thought of Derek lurking around outside, listening to his betas’ heartache. “He said he needs time.”

“He’s had five years,” Isaac said, annoyed. Scott nudged him and Isaac sighed. “Sorry. I know it’s not easy.”

“I know,” Stiles said, “and Derek — he just doesn’t want to disappoint you guys.”

“He’s our alpha,” Erica said quietly. “He’s our brother.”

“I know,” Stiles repeated, softer. “He’s working on it. At least he didn’t leave when Allison and Lydia came over the other day. That’s progress.”

Erica nodded, her eyes falling to the floor and they sat in awkward silence for a moment before Scott leaned in with the bottle of tequila and said firmly, “Shots.”

“Shots,” everyone agreed, and the evening devolved from there. Lydia procured some kind of pale purple liquid — concentrated wolfsbane, she informed Stiles smugly — and everyone got exceedingly drunk. They played charades for a while and Stiles almost fell asleep on the couch, wedged between Scott and Lydia, but Scott nudged him before he could pass out completely.


“C’mon, man, take pity on me,” Stiles whined, punching half-heartedly at his arm. “I got all the life sucked out of me.”

“Which is why your bed will feel so much better than the couch,” Scott laughed, tugging him upright. “C’mon, I’ll walk you.”

“Are you even drunk?” Stiles asked suspiciously, waving vaguely at everyone else as Scott towed him out of the living room.

“Yes,” Scott said solemnly.

“Drunken on power,” Stiles accused, and they both cracked up. They stood by the front door for a while, Stiles struggling to get his sneakers back on while Scott watched in amusement. “Hey,” he said suddenly. “Is there anything I can do for Derek? I mean, like pack-wise, to put him at ease, maybe?”

Scott thought for a moment. “You can do the scent marking too,” he said, smiling faintly. “I’m sure he’d like that.”

“How do I do it?” Stiles asked curiously.

“It’s touch,” Scott replied, wiggling his fingers. “You don’t have to do anything different. There’s just, uh, a kind of intent that’s different.”

“Hm,” Stiles said thoughtfully, finally managing to slip his shoes on. They headed outside, down the front steps, and along the gravel driveway. Stiles was a little loose on his feet, swaying as they walked down the dirt road. They’d barely gotten a couple hundred feet away from Scott’s house when someone stepped out from the trees. Stiles froze, flashing back to the last time he’d been
walking home from Scott’s and Peter Hale had approached him. It took him another moment to realize it was just Derek, but Stiles remained stiff, casting a worried glance at Scott. Scott looked a little nervous himself.

“Dude,” Stiles said to Derek, hoping to ease the tension. “I told you you didn’t have to wait around for me.”

He could barely make out Derek’s shrug. “Didn’t have anything else to do.”

“Uh, okay.” Stiles glanced over at Scott again. “Well. Derek’s here, so…”

“Yeah,” Scott said, not looking away from Derek. “I’ll see you later, man.”

“See you,” Stiles said, taking an uncertain step toward Derek.

“Have a good night, Derek,” Scott said firmly.

Stiles raised his eyebrows in surprise, then looked over at Derek for his reaction. Derek stood silent for a long moment before shifting his weight slightly. “Good night,” he said, polite, albeit a little stiff. Scott grinned and trotted off back toward his house with a wave. Stiles relaxed as he reached Derek, a faint smile lighting up his features. Derek looked at him, unimpressed.

“You talked to Scott.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “And?”

“I bet you made his week,” Stiles said cheerfully, stumbling off in the direction of his house. Derek followed quietly. Stiles glanced over his shoulder to look at him. “You really didn’t need to stick around, though.”

“I didn’t want to chance Peter showing up again,” Derek said stiffly.

“Oh,” Stiles said quietly, his shoulders slumping a little. “Thanks.”

Derek didn’t say anything, but matched Stiles’ pace, bumping their shoulders together. When they got back to the house, Derek plucked Stiles’ keys out of his hand to unlock the front door and Stiles leaned against the wall, watching Derek’s deft hands move, the way the porch light cast shadows beneath his long eyelashes. He wanted to kiss Derek badly, so bad it almost hurt. Derek glanced over at him and Stiles almost leaned in, his lips parting — but then Derek twisted the doorknob and stepped inside and Stiles jerked backwards so fast it made his head spin. He prayed Derek hadn’t noticed; if he had, he said nothing, heading up the stairs silently. Stiles followed with one careful hand on the rail and when they got to the top and Derek seemed ready to disappear into his room, Stiles caught him by the arm.

“Hey,” he said, and lifted his hands to Derek’s face before he could chicken out, swiping his palms against Derek’s cheekbones. It wasn’t quite the same as rubbing their faces together, but judging by the way Derek’s face warmed with a smile, he understood what Stiles meant. Still, Stiles dropped his hands to his sides, suddenly nervous. “Well. Good night.”

“Night,” Derek said softly, though he didn’t move until Stiles did, disappearing into their respective bedrooms. Stiles laid in bed, grinning at nothing, until he drifted off to sleep.

- 

The following morning found them out on the front steps, enjoying the morning sunlight with coffee
and omelets Derek had cooked up for them. They’d already waved the sheriff off on his way to work and Stiles was finishing up his second cup of coffee in an attempt to rouse himself from a hangover, when Braeden went jogging by. She waved and they both waved back, but Stiles noticed her glancing back at them more often than seemed necessary. She disappeared beyond the edge of the property, but not five minutes later came jogging back, cutting across the front lawn toward them. Stiles sat up in surprise, Derek stiffening next to him.

“Hi,” Braeden said, skidding to a halt in front of them. “Stiles. Um. Alpha Hale. I’m sorry for intruding.”

“Not a problem,” Stiles said with a glance over at Derek. “What’s up?”

Braeden shifted her weight from foot to foot. “I was hoping that I could ask Alpha Hale something.”

Stiles looked over at Derek again. “Oh. Uh, is that okay, dude?”

Derek looked up at Braeden for a moment before nodding.

“Thank you,” Braeden told him. “Um. My mom was thinking about planting a line of oaks on our property, but wasn’t sure what the best alignment for them would be. What do you think?”

Stiles raised his eyebrows, startled by the question. He didn’t think that Derek would be able to answer — what did he know about gardening, anyway? — but when he looked over at Derek, Derek had his head turned toward the trees, a frown on his face.

“Lay them perpendicular to the road, to the north side of the house,” Derek said after a long moment.


Derek nodded and she turned without another word. After Braeden had trotted off across the yard, Stiles said, “What was that all about? I didn’t know you were a master gardener.”

Derek gave him a slightly exasperated look. “It’s not about gardening,” he said. “It’s about magic. Oaks are protectors; if they sit parallel to the telluric currents, they’ll be able to draw the most energy and work at their strongest.”

“Oh,” Stiles said, impressed. “But why’d she come to you?”

Derek shrugged, his mouth going thin. It took him a moment before he said, “People were always coming to see my mom and ask her opinion on stuff like that.”

“Really?” Stiles asked. “Whoa, so you’re like — like the town sage. You’re our Yoda.”

Derek snorted, though he didn’t look amused. “I don’t know about that,” he said quietly.

Stiles could feel him getting sad again so he did the only thing he could think of, which was to lean his weight against Derek and hope he found the touch comforting. Maybe he did; Derek sighed quietly and didn’t move away, at any rate, and they remained in that position until Stiles had to leave for work.

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After a surprisingly busy day at the library — there’d been a plant sale fundraiser Laura had conveniently forgotten to tell him about — Stiles didn’t immediately head home. He drove to the hospital instead; he had a sort of free-standing follow-up appointment to see Dr. Deaton sometime
that week anyway, but he figured he might as well kill two birds with one stone and see if he knew anything about the ritual at the same time.

One of the nurses showed him into a room, taking his weight, height, and vitals before leaving Stiles to change into a hospital gown. He sat quietly, swinging his legs back and forth over the end of the examination table. Like his hospital room, this room had bundles of sticks over the windows and door — beech wood, Dr. Deaton had explained to him. A protector, like oak. Stiles had read about the powers of a tree called mountain ash, which could be used as a literal barrier against the supernatural. When he’d asked Dr. Deaton why they hadn’t used that instead, he’d shaken his head and said with a faint smile, “Because that keeps out werewolves as well, and we don’t want to seem inhospitable.”

The doctor himself came into the room as Stiles sat there pondering the wood, casting him that familiar faint smile. “Mr. Stilinski,” he said warmly, drawing up a chair. “How are you feeling?”

“A lot better,” Stiles told him, watching Deaton as he took Stiles’ wrist and gently turned it so he could listen to his heartbeat.

“Mm,” Deaton said thoughtfully. “And your spark?”

“It’s — ” Stiles took a moment to close his eyes and feel it out; it was there, still a little weak, but glowing warmly. “Getting there.”

“Excellent,” Deaton murmured. He spun in his chair, bending to dig around in a cabinet before turning back with a small jar of red clay in his hands. He dabbed a finger in the jar and leaned forward to write a short line of runes across Stiles’ collarbone, smiling as they flared blue. Unlike the last time, Stiles could feel the runes, almost hot on his skin. He didn’t know enough to be able to translate them, but Deaton had explained the last time that they gave him an insight into Stiles’ vitality levels.

“Good?” Stiles asked the doctor.

“Good,” Dr. Deaton nodded. “Have you been back to the nemeton yet?”

“No,” Stiles said with a faint shudder. “It creeps me out.”

“It’s probably best you stay away until you feel completely healthy again,” Dr. Deaton told him. “There’s a risk the tree might try to pull your strength from you if you’re still weak and you get too close.”

Stiles shuddered again. “Trust me; I’m not going to go near it.”

Deaton nodded, putting the cap back on the jar and turning to wash his hands at the small sink. “An unfortunately wise decision. If the tree — and the town — were in good health, you wouldn’t need to worry, but in their current states, you’re an appealing meal.”

“Oh, Scott said you moved here to be the next emissary,
“No.” Deaton shook his head. “I’m here to train the next emissary.”

Stiles’ eyes widened. “Really? Who is it?”

Deaton glanced up at him, that faint smile back on his face. “You.”

Stiles drove home in something of a daze — though he did manage to stop at the diner and order three massive cheeseburgers — two beef and loaded with bacon, one turkey for his dad — and all the fries they could fit into a brown lunch bag. Stiles sat at the laminate counter and tapped his fingers against it absently while he waited, the sound of the diner loud and joyous around him. Like his first day in town, he wasn’t immune to stares; today, they were less curious and more welcoming, people giving him big smiles when he met their eyes. It was like they all already knew the news, like they’d known for ages — and maybe they had, Stiles thought absently, turning his wrist over to stare at the thick line of dark scab where Jennifer had cut him.

He jumped a little when the waitress placed his bags of food in front of him, including a cardboard drink holder with three vanilla malt milkshakes he hadn’t ordered. “It’s on the house,” she told him, when he tried to pay, and he left her a twenty dollar tip.

When Stiles came through the front door, juggling the bags of food, he found his dad in his recliner and Derek on the couch, watching a baseball game.

“What’s the occasion?” his dad asked as Stiles dumped the bags on the coffee table, spilling french fries everywhere.

“I am,” Stiles said grandly, placing the tray of milkshakes down a little more carefully, “the new pack emissary.”

His father’s eyebrows rose. “Are you really?”

“Yup,” Stiles nodded. “I mean — if you want me,” he added, looking at Derek, who hadn’t even blinked.

Derek nodded slowly. “I knew,” he said quietly.

“You knew?” Stiles exclaimed. “When?”

“That night you showed me you’d found your spark,” Derek said. He looked down at his hands and added, sounding a little embarrassed, “It just clicked.”

Stiles glanced at his dad, who smiled, and he threw himself down onto the couch next to Derek. He knew what Derek meant. He’d been in shock when Deaton had told him he was the new emissary, but the more he thought about it, the more it just felt…right, like he was supposed to be here to help. “We’re going to make a great team, dude,” he told Derek firmly.

Derek looked at him for a long moment before smiling faintly. “I think we will.”

Later, Stiles was in bed reading when Derek appeared in the doorway. “Can I come in?”

“Course you can,” Stiles told him, patting the bed next to him. As Derek settled down next to him,
he asked, “What’s up?”

Derek shrugged and Stiles realized he had a book in his hands. He struggled not to grin like a loon; had Derek come in just to hang out? “What are you reading?” Derek held it up: *Crime and Punishment*. “You like the classics?”

Derek shrugged again. “More than most things, I guess.” He nudged Stiles. “What about you?”

“Deaton gave this to me,” Stiles said, showing him the cover of the book. “If that book of spells I found in the closet was level one, this one’s level two.” He gestured at the other book, sitting on his bedside table.

Derek followed his hand and frowned slightly, eyes narrowing. “What’s the book beneath it?”

“This?” Stiles pulled out the old journal. “I think it belonged to the old emissary. It’s all in French.”

Derek carefully took it from his hands, the frown not leaving his face. “May I?”

“Yeah, dude, go ahead,” Stiles said. “I can’t read French — let me know if you find anything interesting.”

Derek flipped through the journal. “You said Deaton gave you that book?”

“Yeah, he’s a doctor at the hospital,” Stiles replied. “Do you know him?”

Derek nodded jerkily. “He taught Marin — the old emissary. The emissary we had before that had been around since my mom was a kid.”

“He said he knew the ritual, but he didn’t know what the object was,” Stiles said quietly. “You really don’t know?”

Derek shook his head. “Mom never told us. All I know is that it’s been in the family a long, long time.”

“Maybe it says in there,” Stiles said, nodding toward the journal in Derek’s hands.

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Derek replied grimly. “Though I doubt it. Mom didn’t like her much — she never had much to do with us.”

“Isn’t that her job?” Stiles asked, a little startled.

Derek nodded. “I’m not surprised she moved.”

“Well, I promise I’m not going to do that,” Stiles told him, putting his hand on Derek’s wrist. “I mean, I have to go back to school eventually, but Deaton said he’d stay while I was gone and make sure everything goes okay.”

“Thank you,” Derek said quietly, looking down at Stiles’ hand on his wrist. “You barely even know me.”

“I might not know a lot about you,” Stiles said slowly, “but I think that I’ve got a pretty good measure of you as a person, even when you were in wolf form. I know I want to help you.”

“Thanks,” Derek said again, almost a whisper.

Stiles squeezed his wrist and let his hand fall to his side. “Besides, it’s not like you know much more
about me.”

“I do,” Derek admitted wryly. “Your dad, when he first came to town — he’d come up to the house and eat his lunch and he’d tell me stories about you.”

“Oh no,” Stiles said, horrified. “Embarrassing stories?”

Derek snorted. “Sometimes. He’d talk about you when you were a kid a lot. I think he missed you.”

Stiles smiled faintly. “Yeah. I missed him too. Moving out of our old house was hard for him. He and my mom had lived there since the day they were married.”

“He talked about her, too,” Derek said. “She sounded like a good person.”

“The best,” Stiles agreed. “She worked for Fish and Wildlife, but my dad probably told you that.”

“You can tell me,” Derek told him softly, and Stiles looked over at him and knew he’d listen to every word, so he did. He told Derek about his mom and how she’d take him to the biology labs and lead him through rooms of tanks filled with turtles and frogs and freshwater fish; how his dad used to always cook a huge meal of Polish dishes on Sunday afternoons and his grandparents — when they were still alive — would come over to eat and tell stories. In return, Derek quietly shared stories of his family — how they’d all run through the woods together on full moons; of the massive picnics and barbecues the town used to hold when he was a kid.

“We should do that,” Stiles said sleepily. He’d ended up on his side facing Derek — they’d both given up on reading, the room too dark to see. He could barely make out Derek next to him.

“Do what?” Derek asked.

“Host a big party,” Stiles yawned. “Everyone would like that.”

“I don’t know,” Derek said uncertainly. “I’m not sure I…” He trailed off.

Stiles reached out a finger and poked Derek in what he hoped was his chest. “C’mon. You want to be a good leader, right? This would give people the chance to see that.”

Derek didn’t say anything. Stiles poked him again. “Come on, dude. I’m your emissary; you have to listen to me.”

Derek snorted, his hand catching Stiles’, big and warm. “I’ll think about it.” Stiles heard him shift around. “It’s late. I’m going to go to bed.”

“No, you, uh — ” Stiles swallowed nervously. “You don’t have to. If you don’t want to.”

He listened to Derek shift around again, an agonizingly slow minute of silence passing before Derek said, “I can stay?”

“Yeah,” Stiles whispered. Derek’s hand was still around his; he twisted it so he could slot their fingers together. “You can stay.” Derek didn’t say anything, but his fingers tightened around Stiles’, and that was the only answer he needed.

Stiles woke the following morning to find himself being crushed under Derek, who was fast asleep on top of Stiles with his face pressed up against Stiles’ neck. Despite not being able to fully expand his lungs, Stiles wasn’t particularly bothered; there was something nice about being weighted down
so completely. He patted absently at Derek’s back as he checked his phone and Derek made a 
pleased rumbling sort of noise that Stiles could feel in his bones. It was probably one of the most 
pleasant ways he’d ever woken up, and he almost definitely would have fallen back asleep had not 
his dad emerged from his room at the other end of the hall, already clad in his uniform. He came to 
lean against Stiles’ doorframe and Stiles could barely bring himself to be embarrassed.

“Don’t forget,” his dad told him, “meeting at town hall at ten.”

Stiles gave him a thumbs up and was a little surprised when his dad just nodded and disappeared 
downstairs; he’d expected some measure of teasing from his father, considering Derek was literally 
on top of Stiles, but apparently he knew when to go with dignity. Stiles appreciated that.

Stiles poked Derek in the side until he growled. Stiles laughed quietly and said, “Dude, we’ve got to 
get up.”

Derek grumbled something indecipherable but rolled off him obligingly, propping himself up on one 
elbow to squint at Stiles, his hair sticking out at odd angles. Stiles smiled at him. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Derek mumbled, rubbing a hand across his face.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Stiles told him lightly, hooking a thumb in the direction of the 
bathroom. Derek nodded absently, looking as though he was going to fall back asleep any moment. 
Stiles snorted softly and left him to get himself together.

By the time he got out of the shower and into the day’s clothes, Derek had disappeared downstairs. 
Stiles found him already outside, two plates of eggs and toast sitting on the porch beside him. Derek 
had abandoned the t-shirts and sweatpants he’d been wearing for the past week, dressed instead in 
the dark jeans Stiles had first seen him in, and a long-sleeve gray shirt pushed up his forearms. He 
looked serious, like he wanted to impress — and he probably did, Stiles realized. Derek was the 
alpha, after all, and they were headed for a meeting with the mayor and the town council.

“Thanks for breakfast,” Stiles said, settling down next to him and snagging a plate. Derek nodded 
silently, his gaze far away and faintly worried, burrow slightly furrowed. “Hey,” Stiles added, and 
Derek looked at him, his eyebrows drawing further together. “You okay?”

Derek seemed to consider this before shrugging and picking up his own plate.

“Are you nervous about the meeting?”

Again Derek hesitated, his eyes falling to his plate before admitting, “A little.”

“It’s gonna be fine,” Stiles assured him. “We’ve got good news, right?” Derek gave him a perplexed 
look and Stiles waved his hand excitedly. “We know the ritual — or Dr. Deaton does, anyway. So 
that’s one step forward!”

Derek frowned. “We still don’t know what the object is.”

“Right,” Stiles nodded, “but now instead of trying to find two things, we only have to concentrate on 
one! And hey, I don’t know, maybe I can find a spell that’ll help us look. It’s all going to work out.”

Derek didn’t argue with him, but he didn’t quite look as though he believed Stiles, either. Instead, he 
turned his attention to his food and the two of them ate in silence for a while, Stiles absently tapping 
his foot against the bottom porch step while he chewed on his toast. Braeden jogged past, waving at 
them, and as Stiles waved back he wondered if they’d be seeing any more guests seeking advice. 
And then, like he’d summoned them, not one but two cars turned into the driveway and next to him
Derek sat up straighter.

First came Mr. Sanderson, the withered old library patron who was on his seventh wife. He handed Stiles a huge tin of shortbread and then wheezed at Derek that he was building a new house and would Derek know the best place to lay the foundation? Derek didn’t seem to need any sort of description of Mr. Sanderson’s land; he turned his head to the north, pale eyes distant like he could see the property laid before him, and after a moment he turned back to Mr. Sanderson and said, “The knoll where the birch trees stand.”

Mr. Sanderson frowned thoughtfully. “They won’t like me cutting them down.”

“Make something useful out of their wood,” Derek replied. “They’ll like that.”

After a moment, Mr. Sanderson nodded briskly. “I think they would,” he agreed. “Thank you, Alpha Hale.”

Derek nodded solemnly. Stiles leaned in as Mr. Sanderson tottered back to his car and hissed, “What’s with all these cookies?”

Derek gave him an amused look. “It’s payment for service rendered,” he said.

“Oh!” Stiles exclaimed. “Is that standard?”

Derek smiled faintly. “It’s not required,” he said. “I think most people just find it polite.”

“Braeden didn’t give you anything,” Stiles muttered as their next visitor got out of their car. He looked up, with some surprise, to see it was Ms. Martin, Lydia’s mom. She beamed down at Derek and launched into a complicated story Stiles couldn’t quite follow; something to do with wanting to go on vacation but not stepping on anyone’s toes. Stiles wondered if it had something to do with what Lydia was. He wondered if whatever she was, her mom was too. Derek listened to Ms. Martin talk, his brow furrowed intently as she went on and on. She spoke for so long that Stiles checked his phone and was unnerved to see they only had fifteen minutes until their meeting.

He nudged Derek, who looked down at the phone with a sharp nod, then said to Ms. Martin, smoothly interrupting the flow of her speech, “I’m sorry, but we need to be somewhere. I’ll check into this for you.”

Ms. Martin looked a little startled but said, “Oh — all right. Thank you.”

As they drove into town a few minutes later, Stiles asked, “What was that all about?”

Derek watched the trees glide past for a moment before answering. “Being what we are can make travel difficult — certains places may be unwelcoming to…our kind.”

“You mean werewolves?”

Derek shrugged. “Depends on the place and depends on what you are.”

“And what’s Ms. Martin?”

Derek narrowed his eyes at Stiles. “Lydia still hasn’t told you.”

“No,” Stiles sighed. “C’mon, dude, please tell me. The mystery’s killing me.”

Derek huffed quietly, amused. “They’re banshees.”

“They’re notoriously territorial,” Derek sighed. “So finding a vacationing spot may be difficult. My mom had a whole network of places and people she trusted — but I doubt anyone’s kept in contact with them.” Derek’s voice took on a dejected tone that told Stiles Derek blamed himself for any lost connections.

“Hey, hey,” Stiles said sharply. “No pity parties allowed in the Jeep.”

Derek snorted quietly. “I am sorry,” he told Stiles, “for breaking your window.”

Stiles shrugged. “No worries. It needed replacing anyway — and before you offer to pay for it, Laura already did and I turned her down.” Derek snorted again, less amused this time, and turned to look out the window again. “By the way,” Stiles said a little nervously, “I told her she should come to the meeting today. Sorry if that was out of line.”

“It’s fine,” Derek said, but the way his jaw went tight told Stiles that it probably wasn’t. He watched Derek out of the corner of his eye as they got into town. Derek sat ramrod straight, mouth thin, eyes staring straight ahead. He didn’t seem to notice the couple of people on the street who spotted him in the car, the few that waved. Stiles waved back because someone had to, but Derek just sat stiffly, his hands curled over his knees, fingers clenching tight.

“It’s going to be okay,” Stiles reiterated as he found a parking spot on the street and pulled to a halt. “Derek.” Derek didn’t move, staring woodenly at the dash. Stiles sighed and leaned over to him, curling a hand over Derek’s stiff one. “Derek,” he repeated, softer, “what’s done is done. All you can do is move forward, right?”

Derek’s pale eyes landed on him and for a few long moments neither of them moved. Then, by barely perceptible degrees, some of the tension leaked out of Derek’s body and he nodded. “You’re right,” he said quietly, exhaling. “You’re right.”

Stiles grinned at him. “Emissary, remember? Here to advise.”

“I’m going to need it,” Derek said ruefully, unbending his stiff limbs to unfasten his seatbelt. He sighed. “Let’s get this over with.”

They walked into town hall at three minutes before ten. The receptionist flushed when Derek looked at her, but obligingly directed him and Stiles to a meeting room on the second floor. The place was just like Stiles remembered from the first time — vast and cool and hushed — but as he sat in a chair and slowly spun from side to side as they waited for the rest of the meeting’s members to show up, he found he could pick up the faint hum of magic; not from the nemeton, but the building. It sounded like the house.

“Is this place protected?” Stiles asked Derek, who nodded slowly.

“Pretty much every building in town has some sort of warding on it,” Derek told him. “All public buildings, at least, and most homes as well.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” Stiles asked curiously.

Derek shrugged. “Lived here all my life,” he said. “I listened to my mom.” He shut his mouth abruptly, eyes snapping to the doorway. Stiles followed his gaze; ten seconds later the door swung open and Mayor Finstock strode in, followed by Stiles’ dad and a couple of people Stiles didn’t know, but vaguely recognized from seeing them around the library. Laura trailed in last and Stiles saw her glance at Derek uncertainly and then away again almost as quickly.
“Derek Hale!” Finstock boomed, heading right for Derek, who got to his feet with a grim look on his face. “Grown a bit since high school, haven’t you? Glad to have you back!” Derek frowned at him, but Finstock didn’t seem to take any notice, enthusiastically shaking Derek’s hand before rounding on Stiles. “And you’re Stilinski’s son. The uh, liability from the library.”

“Stiles,” Stiles said exasperatedly, at the same time Derek said, “Emissary.”

“The new emissary, huh?” Finstock said, squinting at Stiles. “Good, I’ve been needing someone to freshen up the wards around my Playboy collection.” He tilted his head back and laughed like a hyena as he strode around the table to find himself a seat. Stiles’ father put his hand over his face.

“Sorry about him,” one of the council members whispered to Stiles. “We’re still not sure how he got elected.”

“Potion in the water supply,” another one muttered, brushing past to shake Derek’s hand. The rest of the council members followed suit, welcoming Derek back with smiles before settling themselves around the table. Stiles’ dad came to sit next to Stiles, exchanging a solemn nod with Derek. That left Laura hovering by the door, clearly not sure where she should sit. Stiles’ dad came to sit next to Stiles, exchanging a solemn nod with Derek. That left Laura hovering by the door, clearly not sure where she should sit. Stiles caught her eye and motioned to the space on Derek’s other side, which had been left empty, but she shook her head unhappily, and ended up on the sheriff’s other side. Derek didn’t seem to notice; his attention was on the council members, fingers tapping casually at the table — a little too casually, Stiles thought. He glanced down the table at Laura and found her watching her brother, her brow furrowed.

“All right,” Finstock said abruptly, smacking his hand down on the table like a teacher trying to silence a rowdy class. “We’re here today to welcome back our alpha and hopefully solve some of the issues in town. Current status report — May!” He pointed his finger at one of the council members. “How’s the nemeton doing?”

May — the woman who’d apologized to Stiles for Finstock’s behavior — tapped the table with a polished nail, her mouth twisting downward. “Not well,” she said. “We did a survey last week. One of the main trunks is beginning to split. Mr. Stilinski’s, um, burst of energy — ” She gave Stiles an apologetic look. “— seems to have slowed the illness somewhat, but we’re worried the magic’s going to become unstable.”

“We’ll need fast action, then,” Finstock nodded, his eyes swinging to Derek. “You have any insight on this mess?”

Derek flinched like he’d been hit. Stiles glared at Finstock, who took no notice. On Stiles’ other side, like he could sense their rising indignation and wanted to forestall any hostility, Stiles’ dad leaned forward and said, “Stiles said that one of the doctors up at the hospital knows the ritual.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said moodily, eyeing Finstock balefully. “Dr. Deaton’s going to teach me, so we’ve got that part taken care of.”

“That’s excellent news!” one of the other council members said excitedly. “That means we’re close, right?”

“No,” Derek said bluntly. “I have no idea what the required object is.”

“Oh, come on,” Finstock said incredulously. “Your mother was our alpha for thirty years — she never told you?”

“No,” Derek repeated coldly, his eyes flaring red.
“I’ve told you before, Bobby,” Laura said quietly. “She never told us.”

Finstock threw up his hands, exasperated. “So you’re telling me no one can fix this? I’m not going to lie to you — I was kind of banking on Mr. Hale here to save our asses!”

Derek went very still, jaw tightening. He looked just about ready to lunge across the table and rip out Finstock’s throat; clearly May thought so, because she slowly began inching her chair away from the mayor. Stiles sighed softly, slouching just a little so he could press his leg to Derek’s in silent support. Derek’s expression didn’t change, but after a moment, his leg pressed back against Stiles’.

“Look,” Stiles’ dad said, in a patient tone that clearly said he knew the room was about two seconds away from a yelling match and/or mauling. “Why don’t we go over what kind of effort has gone into finding this thing in the past? I’m still new to this, and Derek’s been out of the loop. I think it’d be beneficial.”

Finstock shrugged. “Why not? Miss Hale, you led most of those efforts — why don’t you fill us all in?”

Laura nodded. “Well,” she said slowly, “not knowing what we were looking for didn’t exactly help, but based on researching rituals of a similar nature, we think whatever it is is something organic, so not an amulet or anything like that. We did several sweeps of the forest around the nemeton as far out as a mile, but we didn’t find anything in the woods. We searched the family collection in the library, but it doesn’t seem to be there, either.” She chewed at her lip for a moment, eyes darting toward Derek. His eyes were on the table, leg still pressed against Stiles’. “There’s not much to report,” she concluded unhappily. “We know just as much as we did five years ago.”

“So what are our options?” Finstock asked, looking aggravated.

Laura shook her head slightly. “I don’t know.” She hesitated, then added, “Peter might know.”

Finstock looked even more incensed. “Your uncle’s the next item on the list. I want to know why he’s back in town — thoughts?”

Laura shrugged, looking pained, but Derek lifted his head, voice tense when he said, “He can sense what’s going on just as well as anyone else here. He probably thinks that now’s a good time for a power play.”

“The last thing this town needs is more instability,” Stiles’ dad said sharply.

Finstock nodded his agreement. “I want him taken care of — whatever that means,” he said, pointing at finger at Derek. “He’s your pack member, Alpha Hale. I’m putting the responsibility on you to deal with him, and do it fast; if he knows something, we need to hear it.”

Derek nodded, the corners of his mouth turning downward.

“We can’t rely on the chance that Peter might know something,” Stiles said. “And it could take ages to track him down.”

“Stiles is right,” his father agreed. “I think we need another plan just in case.”

The room fell into a reflective silence. Stiles watched Finstock gnaw on a pen as he glared thoughtfully up at the ceiling; next to him, May drew slow spirals on her notepad. Derek stared down at the table again, brow furrowed.

“Is it possible your mom gave it to someone?” Stiles asked Derek abruptly. Derek looked over at
him, his frown deepening. “For safe-keeping,” Stiles explained. “Maybe it’s tucked away in someone’s attic somewhere, totally forgotten.” He sat up a little straighter, growing excited. “Look, what if we get the whole town together? We can have a barbecue, huh? Like we talked about last night. And we can talk to people, see what they know.”

Derek didn’t look terribly excited by the idea, but he didn’t shut Stiles down, either. “That could be helpful,” Laura said slowly, and Derek looked at her for the first time since she’d come into the room. She gave him a hesitant smile and continued, “Even if no one knows anything, it’d be good — for people to see you.”

Derek shook his head slightly, like he didn’t believe that anyone would want to see him, but with both Stiles and Laura for the idea, he seemed disinclined to disagree.

“Think you can throw that together, Stan?” Finstock asked the tall council member who’d muttered about potions.

The man nodded, jotting a few notes down on his pad of paper. “Soon as possible? Next weekend, maybe. At the high school?”

“It’s got the biggest parking lot,” May agreed, and the meeting quickly dwindled into hashing out the logistics of such an event. Stiles tuned them out after a few minutes, focusing instead on the constant press of Derek’s leg against his. They hadn’t spoken about the way they’d woken together that morning, or the way Stiles had invited Derek to stay the night before. He wondered if that had made it clear enough how he felt. Derek certainly wasn’t avoiding him or giving him any clues that he’d felt uncomfortable, but then, maybe he’d thought nothing of it. Stiles chewed absently at his lip. He wanted to touch Derek’s face again. He wanted to kiss it.

When the meeting finally ended, everyone trailed out of the room. Stiles’ dad patted him on the shoulder and said, “I’ll see you tonight,” before walking off down the hall with Stan, who began complaining about youths wrecking the playground. Finstock waved at them, hollering one last “Glad you’re back, Hale!” before disappearing off with the rest of the town council. That left them standing outside the meeting room with Laura, who shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably.

“Well,” she said after a long, awkward moment. “I — I’ve got to get to the library. Stiles, I’ll see you tomorrow?” Stiles nodded, and Laura’s eyes flitted in Derek’s direction. “Okay. Der?”

Derek, who’d been resolutely staring down the hall, turned to look at her, eyebrows furrowing. “Yeah?”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, movements exuding anxiety. “Would it — would you mind if I stopped by sometime? To talk?”

Derek stared at her for a long moment before exhaling. “Fine.”

“Oh, okay?” Laura said, smiling faintly. “Okay.” She made an aborted movement, like she was about to go in for a hug and then thought better of it. “I’ll see you guys around.”

“See you,” Stiles said. Derek didn’t say anything and they watched her walk off down the hall. Stiles waited until she’d turned the corner before saying, “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Derek said tersely and then, after a beat of silence, “Get me out of here.”

Outside, Derek breathed in deeply, eyes squeezing shut for a moment before opening again. Stiles watched him out of the corner of his eyes as they crossed the street and headed back to the car, a little worried, but Derek didn’t say anything. They climbed back into the Jeep and Stiles tapped his fingers
against the wheel thoughtfully before asking, “You want to go back to the house, or do you mind a quick trip somewhere?”

Derek gave him a baleful look. “Another meeting?”

“No,” Stiles laughed. “I promise.”

Derek shrugged, making an expressive do what you want gesture with his hand, and Stiles pushed the car into gear before pulling out onto the street. He navigated his way to the county road headed south, picking up speed as they left town. Derek seemed to relax a little as the houses thinned and the forest swelled around them, filling the air with a fresh, green smell.

“That wasn’t too bad, was it?” Stiles asked after a while.

Derek, his head turned to watch the trees flash past, hair waving in the breeze from the window, seemed to consider this. “No,” he replied eventually.

“You’re going to have to do a lot more of that, I’m guessing,” Stiles said.

Derek nodded. “My mom was always out meeting with people,” he said, with something of a sigh.

“Well,” Stiles said thoughtfully, “Finstock aside, no one seemed too awful.”

Derek snorted. “My mom used to have a lot to say about him. Town meeting day was always a fiasco.”

Stiles laughed. “I can see why.”

Derek turned away from the window to look at Stiles, his pale eyes placid. “Thanks for being there.”


Derek touched his wrist, looking pleased, before turning back to the window. He snorted when Stiles pulled into the McDonalds by the highway. “Really?”

“Hey,” Stiles teased, “they know you, don’t they?”

In fact, the girls at the drive-through looked disappointed when Stiles came through. “Where’s your dog?” one asked.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Stiles said, grinning brightly as he leaned toward her. He hooked a thumb in Derek’s direction. “He’s actually a werewolf.”

The girl laughed, then eyed Derek critically. “I’d say this is a better deal,” she told Stiles confidently, and even though she whispered it, Stiles could tell by the flush high on Derek’s cheeks that he’d heard. He flushed even darker when Stiles laughed and said, “Oh, I definitely agree.”

“You can’t just go around telling people outside of town I’m a werewolf,” Derek sighed as they drove off down the road; his cheeks still pink.

“No one’s going to believe me if I say it’s like a joke,” Stiles said. “Actually, they’d probably be even less likely to believe me if I said it seriously.” He glanced over at Derek. “Dude, I understand. I’m not going to tell people when I go back to school. The last thing I’d want is for Beacon Hills to turn into some kind of sideshow attraction.”

Derek nodded, his face softening as he reached into their bag of food and pulled out a deluxe quarter
pounder. Stiles laughed. “Dude, you’re totally in love with food, aren’t you?”

Derek growled irritably. “You try living off squirrels for five years,” he said around a mouth of burger.

“Couldn’t do it, man,” Stiles said with a shake of his head, rooting around in the bag until he came out with a handful of fries. “I don’t know how you managed it.”

Derek shrugged. “Where are we going, anyway?”

They were still heading away from Beacon Hills, now headed south-east on the highway. “I thought I’d pick up some stuff for the house, if that’s all right,” Stiles told him.

Derek shrugged again, eating the rest of his burger in three big bites. He dug through the bag, eyebrows lifting in surprise when he pulled out a McFlurry. “Did you order this?”

Stiles glanced over at him and laughed. “Nope. Those ladies still love you, dude.”

Derek frowned at him, like he’d never heard anything more ludicrous in his life. “Do you want it?”

Stiles shook his head. “It’s all yours.” He watched Derek settle back into his seat, biting back a smile at the way Derek’s eyes closed in bliss as he ate the ice cream. “You know, you’re a lot less messy in this form.”

Derek cracked open one irritable red eye. “Says the one with salt all over his pants.”

“I was saving that for later,” Stiles replied with great dignity, brushing crumbs off his lap. Derek snorted, the corners of his eyes crinkling in apparent amusement. Stiles grinned to himself as he pulled into the Walmart parking lot, pleased for no good reason.

Derek stuck close to his side as Stiles grabbed a cart and pushed it through the front doors, nodding at the elderly greeter. Stiles watched him out of the corner of his eyes; Derek kept his head high and alert as they walked, head swinging around from side to side, watching the people around them.

“Hey,” Stiles said gently, elbowing him in the side. “I don’t think anyone’s going to attack us in here.”

Derek looked at him sharply, then almost visibly forced himself to relax. “I know.”

“You okay?” Stiles pressed, a little worried.

“I’m fine,” Derek said, then hesitated a moment before adding, “It’s — there are a lot of people.”

Stiles stopped walking, concerned now. “You want to leave?”

Derek shook his head. “No, no, I — it’s fine.”

“You sure?”

Derek nodded. “Okay,” Stiles said, as they rounded a corner. He nodded to the racks before them. “You want to pick out some clothes? You’ve got to be sick of mine not fitting.” Derek didn’t say anything, but Stiles wasn’t blind; he saw the way Derek’s jaw tightened. Stiles stared at him, confused. “You do like them?”

Derek exhaled slowly. “I like — the way they smell,” he admitted, color seeping back onto his cheeks. He looked at Stiles, his expression a raw mixture of embarrassment and determination. “They smell like safety.”
Stiles stared at him for a long moment, lips parting silently as his own face flushed hot. “I — okay,” he finally managed. “Um. But I don’t have enough clothes for the both of us. What if you — what if you buy some stuff and I wear it around for a while?”

Derek considered him for a moment. “I don’t have any money.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Stiles said with a shake of his head. “Laura said she’d pay me back.”

Derek watched him for another long moment before nodding slightly. “All right.”

Only then did Derek turn, weaving his way between the racks of clothes. Stiles followed his dark hair, smiling when Derek turned his way and caught him watching. Stiles thought Derek might have smiled too, but he disappeared behind a tall display of jeans before he could tell for sure.

There was a warm, comfortable feeling in his chest he was pretty sure Derek was to blame for, and he was trying not to think about it too much in case it didn’t mean anything. It was hard, though, when Derek came back to the cart laden down with an armful of clothes — dark denim and soft shirts in various muted tones, which he dumped in the cart before coming back to Stiles’ side, one hand coming out to touch Stiles’ hip like he wanted to make sure Stiles was real. Stiles wanted to lean into him, tuck his head against Derek’s neck — and the thing was, he was sure Derek would let him, but he didn’t know what it would mean. So instead, he just smiled at Derek and they set off together down the aisle, off to the back of the store where all the outdoor stuff was kept.

“Chairs,” Derek said, when they stopped in front of the display. He gave Stiles an enlightened look. “For the deck?”

“Spot on,” Stiles grinned. “You think Dad would kill me if I got pink ones?”

Derek eyed the wall critically. “I think that one’s more your style,” he replied, pointing at a canvas folding chair covered in comic book characters.

“Dude,” Stiles sighed, clasping his hands to his heart. “You know me so well.”

Derek looked pleased.

They left with a bunch of clothes and four plastic adirondack chairs that were not pink or covered in comic book characters, but a stately evergreen, which they loaded into the back of the Jeep before heading back to Beacon Hills.

“There,” Stiles said, when they got home and arranged the chairs on the back deck. He grinned over at Derek. “Your office.” Derek gave him a perplexed look and Stiles explained, “If more people come to talk to you.”

Derek’s expression cleared. “Oh,” he said. Then, gruffly, “Thanks.”

They both turned at the sound of a car pulling into the driveway, and Stiles smiled widely. “Looks like your first appointment is here.”

The afternoon rolled by in a golden haze of sunlight and a steady stream of visitors; it was like their visit that morning to the town hall had broken some sort of dam. Stiles tried not to hover. He worked in the garden with half an ear on the conversations on the porch, watching people come and go. Nearly everyone brought some kind of gift with them and Stiles frowned at the amount of baked goods they were receiving. His dad was going to gain ten pounds at this rate. Derek, though — he
looked completely comfortable, sitting in one of the chairs like a king, listening seriously to every
problem he was presented with. Stiles smiled to himself and let himself get lost in his head, pulling
weeds mechanically.

By the time the light began to turn red, Stiles sat by the edge of his garden, staring absently at a
withered row of pea plants. They were his one failure; most of them had gone brown and crumpled
under the heat of the sun. He wasn’t sure where he’d gone wrong with them; everything else in the
garden was growing nicely.

“There’s always one that doesn’t make it,” said a voice behind him, and Stiles turned to see Derek
settling down next to him, crosslegged in the warm grass. Derek nodded toward Stiles’ sad pea
plants. “My dad always said every gardener’s got one type of plant they can never grow.”

“Your dad liked to garden?” Stiles asked curiously.

Derek nodded, his pale eyes traveling over the rows of greenery. “He had gardens all around the
house and a greenhouse for the winter.”

“What did he grow?”

“Orchids,” Derek replied, his gaze going distant like he was staring into the past. “He used to win
prizes for them.”

“Wow,” Stiles said, awed.

Derek gave him a faint sad smile and shrugged as if to say what can you do? Stiles watched him for
a moment, his head turning to listen to the sounds of the forest, and reached out on impulse, curling
his fingers around Derek’s. If Derek was surprised, he didn’t show it; he just twisted his hand around
and threaded their fingers together. They sat there together silently as the sun sank behind the trees,
and when Stiles’ dad came home they rose to greet him together and neither one of them let go.

That night, Derek appeared in Stiles’ doorway and didn’t say anything. Stiles didn’t say anything
either; he just patted the bed next to him and Derek crossed the room without hesitation, sinking
down next to him. If Stiles woke the next morning with Derek curved around his back, one heavy
arm around his waist, no one was there to witness the way he grinned into his pillow.

“Hey,” Stiles said to Lydia when he came into the library that morning. He leaned up against the
circulation desk, grinning at her. “Heard you’re a screamer.”

Lydia rapped the book she was checking in sharply against his knuckles. “Don’t be rude, and keep
your voice down.”

“Shouldn’t I be telling you that?” Stiles retorted, then relented at the dangerous way her eyebrows
rose at him. “Okay, sorry.”

Lydia nodded sharply, adding the book to a stack next to her left elbow. “Did Derek tell you?”

Stiles nodded. “Don’t be mad at him, though.”

“I won’t,” Lydia replied primly, opening a new book. “Not if he can get Mom and I a vacation.
She’s hoping for the Caribbean, but I’d like to go to Scandinavia.” She sniffed. “It’s not the right
time of year for the Caribbean. Anyway — I heard your meeting went well.”

“I think so,” Stiles sighed. “Though we’re not much closer to figuring out what we’re looking for.”

“You should take a look around,” Lydia told him, nodding at the collection of objects ranged around the library. “We all looked before, but if you’re our new emissary, you’ll have a much stronger sense than anyone else in town — maybe you’ll be able to see something we missed. Congratulations, by the way,” she added with a faint smile.

“Thanks,” Stiles said, unable to stop a grin from breaking over his face. “It’s kind of weird, you know? To have gone my whole life not knowing any of this — ” He gestured around in a broad way that was meant to encompass the entire town. “Any of this was real, and now I’m supposed to be important?”

Lydia laughed. “Sweetheart,” she told him, her eyes sparkling, “you’ve only scraped the surface of weird. Now,” she pushed the stack of books over to him, “put these away and then take a look around.”

“Yes ma’am,” Stiles said with an over-exaggerated bow. Lydia laughed again, shooing him away. Stiles laughed quietly as he disappeared into the stacks, gently slipping books back into their proper places. When he’d finished, he stepped over to the nearest wall and looked at the cluster of objects arranged atop it. Something natural, Stiles remembered Laura saying; that ruled out the small silver and glass box (Jewelry Box, Parisian craftsmen Mignone Orfèvres, 1859, according to the card next to it), and probably the taxidermied raccoon lounging on a log next to it. He had a very hard time imagining a serious ritual involving a dead raccoon with a fake fish in its paws; he had to stifle a fit of giggling at the thought of Derek holding it above his head.

The rest of the items in the library were similarly dismissed. Some of the specimens had a faint buzz of magic around them and Stiles examined them carefully. None of the minerals ranged around the library gave off anything at all, but there was a locked glass cabinet in the biography section in which every object hummed with magic and Lydia spent fifteen minutes searching out the key so he could inspect everything inside. Even though everything inside the cabinet buzzed with magic, nothing jumped out at him, not even an ornate dagger (Yataghan, Ottoman Empire, 1760s) that made him uneasy to look at. He shut the door with a frustrated sigh, turning the key in the lock before sticking into his pocket for safe keeping.

Stiles helped Lydia at the front desk for a while, dealing with a small rush of patrons. Then, while Lydia settled in with a tall stack of discards to prep for the book sale, Stiles did another slow lap of the library. He stared up at all the old maps hanging above the stacks, wondering if they might hold some clue, point him in the right direction, but they were just old maps of Europe; no help there. He found himself back in the biography section, staring up at the old Hale family photos hanging on the back wall. His eyes fell on one of the family photos and he took a step closer, remembering Lydia pointing at faces. This is Laura’s dad, and this is her grandmother, and this — Stiles’ eyes landed on a teenager’s face. This is her brother.

Derek looked so young in the photo, his hair longer, face soft and stretched in a wide smile. He couldn’t have been much older than fifteen when the photograph was taken, nor could he have looked any less like the Derek Stiles knew — his face so angular and full of sorrow, shoulders broad and powerful. The Derek Stiles knew was angry, always on the offense, ready to take down any threat, but the Derek in the picture, he looked like he knew how to laugh and love. Stiles wondered how much of that Derek was left in him, and how much of him the fire had burned away.

When Stiles turned around, he found Lydia standing behind him, a stack of books in her arms and a knowing look on her face. Stiles didn’t even try to pretend he was doing something else. “Did you
know him?” Stiles asked her. “Before the fire?”

Lydia tilted her head to one side, shifting the weight of the books in her arms. Stiles took them from her and she smiled faintly. “Only in passing,” she told him. “My sister knew him better; they were in the same grade.” Her smile widened. “I remember him coming to the house once — they were working on a school project. He was such a flirt.”

Stiles laughed incredulously. “Derek? A flirt?” He had a harder time imagining Derek flirting than imagining him performing the ritual with a taxidermy raccoon.

Lydia’s smile faded. “Tragedy changes people,” she said, her eyes soft.

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed soberly, remembering his own tumultuous weeks and months after his mother’s death.

“Bring those downstairs for me, would you?” Lydia asked, gesturing to the books in his arms. Stiles nodded, glad to get away for a moment, escaping to the quiet sanctity of the basement. He could feel the hum of the nemeton stronger down there, but it didn’t bother him as much as it did at the house; he could ignore it, focus on the cleaner buzz from the rare books room.

Stiles cast a rueful look toward the grille; he’d never gotten around to finishing the entry about werewolves in A Compendium of North American Supernatural Beings, though maybe it was a moot point now that he actually knew werewolves and could ask them anything he was curious about. He couldn’t help but think of one of the lines he’d read: An alpha who engages with and cares for their pack is absolutely necessary; betas alone cannot sustain the bond by themselves. That worried him. He knew Derek was reluctant to connect with his pack, but with the town already beginning to fall apart, the pack might not be far behind. Stiles knew he was going to have to push him, and Derek probably wasn’t going to like it.

When Stiles wandered his way back upstairs, Lydia was back behind the desk, a book in her lap. Stiles noted it the same book she’d been reading the day he found out the whole town was magic — you could call it a family history, she’d said. “What does it mean?” he asked, leaning against the counter.

Lydia didn’t look up. “What does what mean?”


“La Pleureuse,” Lydia said smoothly. She glanced up at him, one corner of her mouth quirking up. “The wailing woman.”

“The wailing — oh,” Stiles said expressively. “So it really is a family history.”

Lydia laughed. “Yes, it is.”

“Is your sister a banshee too?” Stiles asked curiously, conscientiously lowering his voice in deference to Lydia’s desire for privacy.

Lydia nodded. “Everyone on my mom’s side is.”

“What about your dad?”

“Dad,” Lydia said, rolling her eyes. “He lives in Redding. He knows about the banshee thing, but not about everything in Beacon Hills. It makes him nervous.”
“ Seriously?” Stiles asked. “ Did your mom not tell him before they got married?”

“ Maybe he didn’t believe her,” Lydia shrugged. “ I don’t know, and I don’t really care. I only see him once in a while, when he realizes he hasn’t talked to us in months and he’s feeling guilty over it. I’ve got family in the pack, not him.”

Having lost his own mom due to circumstances beyond anyone’s control, Stiles would never be able to understand how people could disregard one of their parents so easily, but he supposed when you had an entire town to love and protect you compared to a blood relation who didn’t care, it was easy enough to choose. “ So what does it mean that you’re a banshee?” Stiles asked. He was sure he’d read an entry about banshees in the book downstairs, but he couldn’t remember much. “ You scream when people die?”

“ It’s not that straightforward,” Lydia told him with a faint smile. “ I get… feelings. It’s like…” She looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. “ You know that electric feeling you get in the air before a storm?” Stiles nodded. “ It’s like that, but I hear things sometimes. Voices. When I first came into my power, I couldn’t interpret what I was feeling. It’s taken a couple years to gain an understanding of it all.”

“ Is it always for bad things?”

“ Almost always,” Lydia said quietly, the smile fading from her face.

Stiles hesitated before asking his next question. “ Did you — did you know the fire was coming?”

“ Yes and no,” Lydia said after a short pause. “ That was — it was the first time I’d ever sensed my power. My mom had warned me what it’d feel like, but I was away in France — I had no idea what to do, and I didn’t know how to focus my power, so I couldn’t tell what was wrong. I could hear this — ” She gestured vaguely. “ — this roaring. It was after I found out what happened that I realized it was the sound of the fire.”

“ Jesus,” Stiles said softly. “ I’m sorry.”

Lydia shrugged helplessly, looking down at her hands. “ I just — sometimes I feel like if I’d been able to control my powers, I could have stopped the fire.”

“ Oh, no way, Lydia,” Stiles said, leaning over the desk toward her. “ How could you have known your powers would kick in then? There’s nothing you could have done differently.”

“ I know,” Lydia murmured, her lips pursing.

Stiles felt so bad for stirring up her hurt that he went to the bakery during his lunch break and got her the most expensive slice of cake they offered - a truly monstrous beast; three layers of chocolate cake with thick chocolate frosting, smothered in toasted almonds and crushed toffee. Lydia smiled at him when he placed the box down in front of her, and she squeezed his wrist briefly, a gesture that seemed to tell him she wasn’t upset with him.

They didn’t talk much as the afternoon slipped by. Lydia stayed behind the desk, and Stiles wandered the library, scouring every surface to make sure he hadn’t missed any tchotchkes that might end up being the missing object for the ritual. There was nothing, though, and he felt thoroughly disheartened by the time closing time came around.

“ Don’t worry,” Lydia said, patting his arm. “ We’ll find it.”

Stiles sighed as he locked the front door. “ Why do you think Jennifer did it?”
Lydia, who’d crossed the room to shut off the lights, paused. “I’ve been thinking about that,” she admitted, then offered up a tremulous smile. “Do you have any plans tonight?”

Stiles found himself sitting in the passenger’s seat of Lydia’s car as she drove them west out of town, into the preserve. “You sure this is a good idea?” he asked, as they pulled into the parking lot by the lake.

Lydia nodded seriously as she unbuckled her seatbelt. “You can cast spells and I can’t,” she explained, “but I can feel things you can’t. I think if we work together, we might be able to figure it out.”

Stiles eyed her incredulously as she climbed out of the car, standing tall on high heels. “You going to be okay walking through the woods in those?”

Lydia gave him a scornful look. “You just watch.”

Sure enough, Lydia got to the ruined remains of the Hale house without stumbling once, while Stiles managed to trip over two fallen trees and snag his shirt in brambles so badly Lydia had to turn around and help him extricate himself. She didn’t say a word, but the triumphant look on her face said quite enough. The look faded, though, as they came to stand in the ankle-high grass of the front yard, staring up at the charred wooden skeleton before them. They stared up at it for a long moment, silent.

“Did you ever go inside?” Stiles asked eventually. “Before the fire?”

Lydia shook her head. She seemed to be steeling herself. “Ready?” Stiles hesitated before nodding and when Lydia offered her hand to him, he took it without delay, her elegant fingers closing around his with determination. They walked up the sagging front steps together, and Stiles pulled open the front door, half hanging off its hinges, so they could go inside.

Though the sun still hung over the trees outside, the inside of the house seemed to be stuck in a dusky sort of twilight, dust stirred by their movement drifting through the air, glittering gold in the warm afternoon sunlight. The house sat quiet, the noise of the woods filtering in through the gaping holes in the walls. Before them, a wide set of stairs led to the second floor; to their left, an open doorway led to what looked as though it might have been the living room, a defeated-looking couch placed haphazardly in the middle of the blackened floor. Stiles wondered if that had been where Derek slept when he was still living in the woods. A touch of panic clutched at him as he looked around; he couldn’t imagine living here. It felt like a graveyard, the very foundation saturated with misery.

Like she knew what he was thinking, Lydia squeezed his hand. “Do you feel it?”

He didn’t ask what it was. “I don’t like it here.” It had to be even worse for her, he realized. “What’s the plan?”

Lydia took a deep breath. “I can reach back and see things, sometimes,” she told him. “But I need a push from your power to help me there.”

Stiles shifted uneasily, thinking of Jennifer and how she’d tried to use him to crack into the telluric currents. His wrists hurt. “You don’t need to cut me open to do it, do you?”

“Of course not,” Lydia said. “We don’t have to do it if you don’t feel comfortable.”
Stiles drew in a long, steadying breath. “So you’re like…psychic?”

Lydia gave him an encouraging smile. “Close enough.”


Lydia reached out and took his other hand. “Just relax,” she told him. “I’m going to concentrate and you’re going to think about pushing your power into me.”

Stiles laughed nervously. “That sounds super inappropriate.”

Lydia rolled her eyes. “Shut up and let me concentrate.”

Stiles shut his mouth, watching her eyes settle shut, her breathing steady. After a moment he closed his own eyes, reaching out for the warm golden light nestled beneath his collarbone. He followed its path in his head, flowing down his arms to his fingers clasped around Lydia’s. He gave a tentative push, the same gesture he used to bring his light into being, and heard Lydia’s breath hitch when it hit her. He exhaled evenly and pushed harder, feeling his power flood into her body. Lydia inhaled at the same time, and then she began to scream.

Stiles startled backward, his eyes flying open; he would have broken the circle had not Lydia’s hands tightened around his, keeping them connected. Her eyes were squeezed shut, mouth open to scream and scream she did; the sound rolled on and on, high and painful even to Stiles’ ears. It bounced off the hollow walls, layering atop itself, cacophonous like church bells. It should have stopped by now. No human had that much air in their lungs, but then…Lydia wasn’t human. Stiles shut his eyes, wincing as the sound grew around them. He had the oddest feeling it was building to something, building around them maybe — a wall of noise. To protect them? He didn’t know, but he squeezed his eyes tighter and pushed more power into Lydia.

Behind his closed eyes, things suddenly went a little darker, like a cloud passing over the sun on a sunny day. He heard something through the screams — or maybe the screams were becoming something else, a murmuring of voices he couldn’t quite make out, which suddenly rose high in panic and anger. The worst feeling crawled over his skin — he sensed danger, immediate and clear. Stiles’ eyes flew open to darkness, nose and mouth clogged with the acrid taste of smoke. An ever darker shape moved past him and every hair on his body stood on end, heart pounding with fear.

Before him, Lydia’s eyes were wide open, shining with unshed tears. She’d stopped screaming, but the sense of danger hadn’t passed; if anything, it’d grown to a screaming, wrenching terror deep in Stiles’ chest. He knew, he knew they had to get out of there. It didn’t matter if Lydia hadn’t gotten what she needed — they needed to go.

Stiles launched his body sideways, pulling Lydia stumbling after him. He couldn’t see; the smoke was making his eyes stream, working its way into his lungs to make him cough and choke for air. Hale house, he thought furiously, gasping. They’d been standing in the living room. He just needed to make it to the front door. One of his flailing hands smacked against a beam and he ripped himself to the right, groping hand making contact with something that shifted under his touch, letting in a rush of cool air. Stiles bulled through it, yanking Lydia along behind, stumbling down the porch steps to land in a heap on the front lawn.

Stiles rolled onto his back, coughing roughly, to blink up at the golden sky. The air was hot and clear and completely devoid of any smoke and, when he propped himself up on one elbow, the Hale house stood empty and charred before him, no fire in sight. Stiles stared at it, perplexed. He could taste the ash in his mouth, nostrils burning with the harsh scent of smoke.
“Lydia?” he asked dazedly, looking over at her. She was just sitting up, looking horrified, tear tracks down her cheeks. “Hey,” Stiles said with concern. “Lydia? You okay?”

He touched her arm and she jumped like she hadn’t realized he was there, swinging her head around to look at him with wide eyes. “Are you okay?” Stiles repeated.

“I — ” Lydia raised a hand to her cheek, wiping away her tears. She shuddered. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize!” Stiles said. He put an arm around her shoulder, needing the comfort as much as she did. “We shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry.”

Lydia shook her head, wiping again at her cheeks as more tears spilled from her eyes. “Can we go?”

Stiles looked up at the house. “I’d be glad to get out of here.”

He clambered to his feet, offering a hand down to Lydia. She winced as she pulled herself upright, but apart from a blossoming bruise across one of her shins, and a scrape down Stiles’ forearm, neither of them were worse for wear. Or, not until they got into the woods at least, and Stiles’ hands began to shake. He wasn’t sure if it was the adrenaline leaving him, or the power Lydia had drained from him, but he didn’t want her to worry so he jammed his hands in his pockets, even though that left him more unbalanced than usual.

Only when he could see Lydia’s car through the trees and he knew they were far from the Hale house, did Stiles ask, “Did it work?”

Next to him, Lydia inhaled sharply. “Yes,” she said softly.

Stiles’ stomach turned with nerves. “And?”

“It was…murky,” Lydia said slowly. “Like I was hearing things underwater. But I think someone startled Jennifer — she was in the house, looking for the object for the ritual — and she wasn’t expecting anyone to notice her. She panicked.”

“And that caused the fire?”

Lydia shrugged, looking unhappy. “People are unpredictable when their fight or flight mechanism is engaged. If she thought she was in danger, who knows what she could have done?”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” Stiles said angrily. “She was in their house.”

Lydia shrugged again, her eyes going glassy with tears once more. Stiles reached out for her hand again, ignoring his shaking fingers. “What happened? I felt it — I felt like I was there. I could smell the smoke — ”

“Residual energy,” Lydia said, passing her free hand over her eyes. “Violent deaths like that — they make an impression.”

“I’d say,” Stiles muttered. If he never felt terror like that again, it’d be too soon. As they reached the car, Stiles said, “Hey, could you warn a guy next time? I was not expecting the screaming.”

Lydia smiled ruefully. “Sorry,” she said. “It’s the only way to clear out the clutter.”

Stiles snorted. “Come on,” he said, gesturing at her. “Give me your keys. I’ll drive.”

Lydia didn’t even argue, which was telling of how tired she was. Stiles was feeling pretty exhausted himself; he was looking forward to a hot shower, dinner, and then to bed, preferably with Derek
wrapped around him — in that order. He’d just put the keys in the ignition and backed the car out of its spot when a movement in the trees made him pause.

“Lydia,” Stiles said quietly, carefully pulling his phone from his pocket. “Call my dad, would you?”

“Why?” Lydia asked curiously.

“Because Peter Hale is watching us from the trees.”

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Hours later, Stiles had yet to take his shower, or eat dinner, or go to bed. Instead, he sat now on an examination table at the hospital, head in his hands. Everyone was pissed at him — his dad, Derek, Dr. Deaton — and he just wanted to sleep.

Things hadn’t gone well after Lydia called his dad. His dad had shouted at them to get the hell out of there and Stiles had driven like Satan himself was on their tail in order to get away from Peter. They’d passed a whole squadron of cruisers on their way back through town, all racing to get to the preserve before Peter disappeared again, and Stiles had pulled into the library parking lot with some relief. The house had been empty when he got home, his dad gone to the preserve and Derek with him, presumably. He’d just been about to head upstairs for his blessed shower when Hurricane Derek came slamming through the back door, knocking it off its hinges once more, and causing Stiles to leap about three feet in the air in surprise.

“Are you okay?” Derek demanded, skidding into the living room. He came at Stiles with worry carved deep in his face — only to stop two feet away, his eyebrows furrowing together. “Why did you go to the house?”

Stiles raised his eyebrows. “How’d you know that?”

“Why?” Derek demanded, so Stiles told him. He’d thought Derek would be pleased — or something — that they’d found out why Jennifer did it, but he just looked angrier than ever, and when Stiles stopped talking, he’d snapped, “Are you fucking stupid?”

“What?” Stiles asked, startled. “But we — ”

“Peter is out there!” Derek snarled. “He could have killed you!”

“But why would he — ”

“Because you’re my emissary!” Derek said furiously. “Because you’re important to me! The pack is vulnerable — my position as alpha is vulnerable. This town can’t take any more chaos and if I lose you — ” He took a step back, exhaling forcefully.

“You’ll what?” Stiles asked quietly, his eyes widening.

Derek shook his head violently, eyes burning crimson. “Never mind,” he said flatly. “Just sit down and wait for your dad.”

Stiles knew when not to push any more buttons; he sat down on the couch obediently. “Was there any sign of Peter?”

“No,” Derek replied bluntly. He scrubbed a hand over his face, looking as weary as Stiles felt, and disappeared into the kitchen. Stiles heard him a moment later, trying to fix the back door. He sat quietly with his hands in his lap, worrying about Lydia. She’d seemed fine when they got back to the
library, but if his hands were still shaking (and they were), he couldn’t imagine how bad off she was.

When his dad came home, he was just as mad as Derek had been. “Can’t you stay out of trouble for ten goddamn minutes?” he yelled.

“No one told me I was a target!” Stiles bellowed back, while Derek watched from the kitchen doorway, his face flat and unimpressed. Stiles didn’t think it was fair; no one had told him to watch out for Peter. That he might be dangerous, yes, but even his dad had said not to worry about him.

His father wasn’t impressed; he told Stiles to shut the hell up and get his ass outside so he could take him to the hospital. Stiles tried to protest that he wasn’t injured but his dad wasn’t putting up with it and half-dragged him out to the cruiser. Stiles flipped off Derek as he went, but it didn’t do much to relieve his anger — and Derek didn’t even seem to notice.

Dr. Deaton, too, was not impressed with Stiles’ actions. “You need to be more careful,” he told Stiles sternly, swiping more of that red clay across Stiles’ collarbones. “Lacking the proper training, you could have lost control of the power transference — and after the massive loss you suffered a couple weeks ago, it could have been fatal.”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles told his dad, when he came back into the room after Dr. Deaton left. He felt small, young.

His dad sighed quietly. “I’m sorry for yelling at you,” he said, ruffling Stiles’ hair. “I heard about Peter and I — I’m afraid of you getting hurt.”

“I’m not going to get hurt again, Dad,” Stiles told him. “It’s really not my goal.”

His father smiled tiredly. “I know, son.”

As they drove home at a much more sedate pace than the journey to the hospital, Stiles said, “What’s the threat from Peter, really? Why do you guys want to catch him so badly?”

His dad sighed again. “From what Laura told me, Peter went a little, hm, off the wall after the fire.”

Stiles frowned out the window. “Well, you could say Derek did too.”

“Yes,” his dad nodded, “But he was angry the alpha powers didn’t go to him — Talia was his sister, you know. He was pissed and getting into trouble, and with Derek out of the picture, there was no one to rein him in. The town voted — they wanted him out, so they drove him away themselves.”

“But he came back,” Stiles said slowly. “Because he knows the town’s in trouble?”

His dad nodded again. “Right, and Derek’s status as alpha is not set in stone. I know he didn’t mean for it to happen, but his power’s weak, and so’s the town. If we’re not careful, Peter could take him out and assume the role of alpha, and no one wants that.”

Stiles bit down on his lip, worried. He didn’t want Derek to die. “Derek said he could kill me too.”

“Yeah,” his father said softly, unhappily. “That’s a risk as well. It’s a volatile situation, Stiles, and I’m sorry for not telling you before. I shouldn’t have gotten angry. You didn’t know.”

“It’s okay, Dad,” Stiles sighed as they turned down the driveway. He worried about what to say to Derek, but when they went into the house it was empty and Stiles didn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved. It wasn’t the first time Derek had been angry with him, but it was the first time they’d fought when Derek was human. Stiles didn’t like the thought of him out in the woods
somewhere, or on that gross old couch in the ruins of the Hale house — especially not when Derek was in danger from Peter.

He didn’t sleep easy that night, tossing and turning the whole time. He woke the next morning feeling worse than he had when he’d gone to bed, his head thick and heavy. Most of it probably had to do with all the power he’d used the day before, but some of it was due to a lingering unease about fighting with Derek. His dad took one look at him after he stumbled downstairs and pointed his finger at the ceiling.

“Back to bed,” he told Stiles. “I’ll call Laura and tell her you’re not coming in today.”

“I can’t miss work again,” Stiles protested half-heartedly, but he didn’t resist when his dad took him by the shoulders and pushed him toward the stairs. He managed to shoot a text to Lydia before he fell back into bed, but he was asleep within moments.

The next time Stiles woke, the light streaming through the windows was bright and clear. He sat up, blinking blearily at his phone, and found it nearly three o’clock. He had a text message from Lydia which, when he thumbed it open, said “I feel fine. Mom’s pissed; she said I could have killed you. I’m really sorry.”

don’t worry about it, i’m fine, Stiles texted back, even though he felt a little like he’d been hit by a truck. He didn’t blame Lydia for what had happened, not in the slightest — it was probably his fault for not asking more questions before plunging in. He rubbed a hand over his face and headed downstairs only to freeze in the doorway to the kitchen, where Derek sat at the counter. Derek, who had a book spread in front of him, lifted his head to look at Stiles, his face entirely neutral.

“Hi,” Stiles said cautiously.

“Hey,” Derek said after a moment, and his gaze shifted back to his book.

Stiles hovered in the doorway, unable to read him. Was Derek still pissed? Finally, he just gave up and said, “I’m sorry for last night.”

Derek sighed and closed his book. “You don’t need to apologize to me,” he said. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I didn’t realize you didn’t know about Peter.”

“Crazy as it sounds, I don’t actually willingly throw myself at dangerous situations,” Stiles told him, smiling wryly. “This summer is an anomaly, I swear.”

Derek rolled his eyes and Stiles relaxed, moving into the kitchen to make himself a late lunch. “Are you feeling all right?” Derek asked, as Stiles bent forward to look in the fridge.

“Yeah,” Stiles replied, waving a lackadaisical hand over his shoulder. “Just a little drained, don’t worry.” He made himself a sandwich and settled down at the counter next to Derek, who shifted his position just far enough to press his knee to Stiles’. Stiles smiled faintly.

“What Lydia saw,” Derek said after a while, his voice muted. “Do you think that’s what happened?”

Stiles shook his head slowly, swallowing a mouthful of sandwich before replying, “I don’t know, dude. I mean, you’d have to ask her. All I got was this really strong sense of panic.” He regretted the words as soon as they came out of his mouth; Derek wouldn’t want to know what his family had been feeling in their last moments. Derek just nodded though, an unhappy expression on his face.
“How’d you know I’d been to the house, anyway?” Stiles asked.


Stiles watched Derek for a moment, taking in the dark smudges under his eyes, the misery creasing his face. “You want to watch a movie?” Stiles asked carefully. “I’m probably going to pass out again soon.”

“Okay,” Derek said quietly, and he followed Stiles into the living room after Stiles put his plate in the sink.

They settled down at opposite ends of the couch, and Stiles hummed as he flipped through the tv channels. “Anything you want to watch?”

Derek shrugged. “I’m fine with anything.”

_The Dark Knight_ was playing on TNT; Stiles selected it and turned to Derek. “Did you ever see this?”

Derek shook his head. “It came out after the fire. I remember seeing the trailer.”

“You like Batman?” Stiles asked, prodding him with a toe.

Derek caught him by the ankle, something like a smile quirking his lips. “I always preferred Spider-Man.”

“Funny,” Stiles grinned. “I would have pegged you as a Wolverine man.”

Derek bared his teeth playfully and raised his hands, claws popping out from the ends of his fingers. “Watch yourself.”

“Ooh,” Stiles laughed. “I’m so scared of the big bad wolf.”

“Keep it up,” Derek warned, his claws disappearing, his hand falling back to rest on Stiles’ ankle. “I’ll tell everyone how you shrieked the night we met.”

“You wouldn’t!” Stiles exclaimed, affronted.

“You watch,” Derek said smugly. Stiles snorted and they fell silent, eyes on the television. Most of Stiles’ attention was on Derek, though, and the hand he still had on Stiles’ ankle, thumb slowly sweeping back and forth over the knob of his ankle bone. It reminded him of weeks earlier, when Derek had been a dog, and they’d passed evenings on the couch like this, Derek’s head in his lap with Stiles’ hand absently tracing through his fur, over and over. He missed it a little, even if he infinitely preferred Derek in this form.

“You okay?” Derek asked, and Stiles realized Derek was looking at him, concern on his face.

“I’m fine,” Stiles said. “I was just thinking about your wolf form. How silly you looked swimming at the lake,” he added, grinning slyly.

Derek gave him an icy look. “You tell that to anyone and I’ll tell everyone your real name.”

“Nice try,” Stiles scoffed. “Like anyone can pronounce it.” He pulled his foot free from Derek’s grasp, shifting around so they were sitting shoulder to shoulder. “How’d you know it, anyway? That night at the nemeton — you said it, and it broke part of the enchantment on me. That’s how Jennifer could use my magic, I think,” he added, feeling a little sick at the memory. “She knew my real
name.”

Next to him, Derek turned his head, drawing his nose along Stiles’ cheek with a slow inhalation. Stiles wasn’t even sure Derek was aware he was doing it because he straightened like he hadn’t done anything and said quietly, “At your mom’s grave. You announced yourself.”

“Oh, right,” Stiles said uncomfortably. “You heard all that stuff I said. You must have been bored.”

“I didn’t mind,” Derek said, his voice even softer. “I wouldn’t have gotten into the car if I didn’t want to spend time with you.”

Stiles turned to look at him. Derek gazed back placidly. That familiar misery still clung to his features, but there was something else there, a quiet earnestness that tugged at Stiles, called to him; he leaned forward without even thinking about it, and kissed Derek. For a moment it was perfect, Derek’s lips warm and soft against his, and then a gentle hand on his chest pushed him away and Stiles’ mouth dropped open, his face flushing with color as horror flooded his body.

“I’m sorry,” he said immediately. “I’m sorry — I wasn’t thinking.” Oh, god, he was so dumb. Derek had only been human again for two weeks, of course it was too soon, if Derek even wanted anything from him at all. “I’ll just, uh — ” Stiles hooked a thumb toward the front door. A car ride sounded good and he wondered if there were any convenient cliffs nearby he could drive off.

He wished Derek would say something, but Derek just watched him passively, a faint furrow to his brow, like Stiles was some kind of enigma that he just couldn’t figure out (which — fair; Stiles was an enigma to himself sometimes too). When Stiles tried to rise, however, desperate to escape, the hand Derek still had on Stiles’ chest stopped him, Derek’s fingers curling into his shirt. “C’mon, dude,” Stiles begged him. “Let me just go die with dignity in a field somewhere — ” Derek tugged him forward and oh. That was Derek’s mouth on his, pulling him in for a brief, gentle kiss that ended with Derek nuzzling against his cheek before he pulled back, his pale eyes soft. “Okay?”

Stiles nodded numbly. “You — you’re okay?”

“You’re important to me,” Derek told him quietly, and he’d said that yesterday, hadn’t he, when he was so angry?

Stiles found himself grinning, unable to stop. “Good,” he said, leaning in for another languid kiss. “You’re important to me, too.”

Derek truly smiled for the first time since Stiles had known him as a human, tentative and earnest. Stiles could have kissed him again but he didn’t; he didn’t feel like they needed to rush into anything at all. Their understanding went deep beyond mere conversation, but still, it was as though the kiss had broken down one last barrier between them. Derek’s movements were steady and sure when he shifted them around, pressing Stiles down to the couch on his side and insinuating himself behind him, hooking one heavy arm around his middle — it felt right.

“I was hoping for this,” Stiles said.

“I was too,” Derek offered, his breath warm against the back of Stiles’ neck.

“Told you we’d make a good team,” Stiles said smugly.

Derek poked him in the ribcage with a finger. “I never disagreed.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said after a while, as the Joker blew up a hospital on screen, “for trusting me.”
Derek shifted around, pressing his face to the back of Stiles’ neck. “Always,” he breathed.

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Being around Derek now was just easy — not that it had been hard before, but it was indeed as though some barrier had fallen away between them. Derek got a lot more touchy-feely, for one. He kept leaning toward Stiles, no matter where they were — sitting on the couch, doing dishes in the kitchen — his hands reaching for Stiles, tugging him in close so he could rub their cheeks together. Stiles didn’t mind much, except when his dad caught sight of them and burst into a coughing fit to poorly disguise his laughter.

There was no beating around the bush that night. Derek disappeared into the guest room only for a moment to change, then climbed into Stiles’ bed and tucked himself against Stiles’ side, resolutely falling asleep in a matter of minutes. Stiles wasn’t so quick to slumber; he lay awake for a while, head turned so he could watch Derek’s face, the slow rise and fall of his chest. His face softened in sleep, the harsh planes of his cheeks and nose dulled by darkness. Stiles could see it then, the smiling teenager from the photo at the library. There was hope, he thought, curling his hand around Derek’s wrist. If Derek would let him in, he’d let in others — Stiles was sure of it.

- 

“You smell like my brother,” Laura said the next morning, a knowing smile on her face.

Stiles looked up sharply from the stack of books he’d carried in from the after-hours return box. Someone had dropped a candybar in there and it was smeared all over the place; he had a wad of paper towels in his hands, trying to clean the books off. “What?”

“You heard me,” Laura said smugly. “You smell — ” She took a dramatic sniff, and then grinned wickedly. “Intimate.”

Stiles made a face. “You’re his sister. Isn’t that supposed to gross you out?”

Laura beamed down at him. “With senses like ours, there are few boundaries between wolves, sweetheart.”

Stiles scowled at her. “Fine, whatever, we kissed, okay?”

Laura looked ecstatic. “Really? I was mostly joking, but that’s great!”

“You’re the worst,” Stiles informed her. “I like these books covered in melted chocolate more than I like you.”

“Well,” Laura said, grinning toothily, her eyes flashing gold at him. “Now it’s my role as big sister to tell you this: break his heart and I’ll rip your lungs out.”

“Bite me,” Stiles said cheerfully, and Laura laughed, disappearing into her office.

The day passed quickly, the two of them kept busy by a steady stream of parents and their children, and the geology club — alchemy club, Stiles had to keep reminding himself. He wondered what Derek was up to. They’d passed their morning in the same way they always did, lounging in the sun on the front steps, but this morning Stiles had sat between Derek’s legs leaning against him like a lawn chair. Stiles grinned faintly at the memory.

It was five o’clock before he knew it, and Laura was locking the doors while he shut off the lights. As they crossed the parking lot together, Laura said, “Do you think it’d be all right if I followed you
“Why?” Stiles asked, then realized why almost before the word had even left his mouth. “You want to talk to Derek.”

Laura nodded, looking a little worried. “He said it’d be okay, but it’s your house, so — ”

“It’s fine with me,” Stiles told her. “People have been stopping by non-stop.” Their guest that morning had been the old lady on Ferne Lane who grew pot in her greenhouses. “You can stay for dinner.”

Laura laughed nervously. “I’d hold off on that plan until I get to talk to Derek, I think.”

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed soberly. “Maybe that’d be for the best.” He wanted to tell Laura that things would be fine, but he couldn’t say it — he had no idea how Derek would react to Laura trying to talk to him. Sure, he’d said it would be all right if she showed up at the house, but he’d never said he’d talk to her.

Stiles worried about it the entire drive home. Derek stood on the front porch waiting for him, but the pleased expression on his face shifted when Laura pulled in after Stiles.

“Hey,” Stiles said to him, tumbling out of the Jeep. “So, uh…”

“Hi,” Derek said distantly, his eyes following Laura as she climbed out of her car and walked down the driveway. She stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, looking up at Derek.

“Hey, Der,” Laura said softly, mouth curved in an unsteady smile, eyes shining with unshed tears. Derek stared down at her for a long moment, his jaw tight, lips thin. Stiles hovered between the two of them, not sure who’d make the first move and whether it’d be violent or not. Derek exhaled harshly and moved suddenly, storming down the steps. Stiles thought for sure he was going to attack Laura, but instead Derek surprised both of them by throwing his arms around her and burying his face against her neck. Laura gasped, tears spilling over her cheeks, and she flung her arms around Derek’s neck, clutching at him like a lifeline. Stiles backed away quietly, slipping up the stairs and inside the house; it wasn’t his place to intrude, not on something so deeply personal.

His dad was in the kitchen shucking ears of corn, completely oblivious to the family reunion occurring outside, though he looked up when Stiles came into the kitchen. “Hey, son. Good day at work?”

“Okay,” Stiles said, glancing over his shoulder like he’d be able to see through the walls between the kitchen and Derek and Laura outside.

His dad gave him a concerned look. “You all right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said distractedly. “I just — ” He lowered his voice, remembering Derek’s remark about supernatural hearing abilities. “Um. Derek and Laura are outside.”

His father looked a little alarmed. “Do I need to call in reinforcements?”

Stiles shook his head. “I think they’re hugging it out.”

His dad relaxed. “Hoped we’d get there eventually,” he said, relief strong in his voice.

“Me too,” Stiles sighed, leaning against the counter.
“I hope it all works out,” his dad said, bending to pull a pot from one of the cabinets. “It’s tough being alone after someone you love dies. I thought I was going to go crazy after your mom was gone, with you hating me those first few months.”

“Dad,” Stiles said, his throat aching. “You never said — ”

“You were ten years old,” his father told him gently. “I wasn’t going to put that burden on your shoulders. I knew you’d come back to me eventually.”

And he had, Stiles thought, his heart aching a little as he watched his dad fill the pot with water. He’d spent weeks getting into trouble, burning through all his excess energy by mouthing off and getting into fights — and then one day he’d picked a fight with the wrong kid and gotten his face smashed against a bathroom sink. He still had a faint scar down his cheek where the skin had split open, but that fight had changed things. He’d sat in the school’s office with his face all bruised and bandaged while his dad talked to the principal, and when his dad had come out to take him home, he’d crouched down in front of Stiles and he wasn’t angry, his face lined instead with exhaustion and sadness. His dad had cupped his cheek in one big hand and it wasn’t a dad gesture — it was a mom gesture. Stiles had given in and cried for the first time since just after the funeral, when he’d decided he was too old to cry. Things had changed after that, slowly but surely getting better.

“Dad, I’m sorry,” he said, head heavy with memories.

His father spun around, a startled look crossing his face as he took in Stiles’ miserable expression. “Oh, jesus, son, you don’t have to worry about that!” He reached Stiles in two big steps and wrapped him in a tight hug. “We had our rough times and we made it through; that’s all that matters.”

Stiles inhaled deeply before pulling away, breathing in the familiar, comforting scent of his dad, the same aftershave he’d been using for twenty years. His dad patted him on the back. “Go light the grill for me, would you? I bought steak. You think Laura’s staying?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles said with a shake of his head, heading for the back door. All was quiet at the front of the house. He had to resist the urge to peer into the living room and spy on them through the front windows. He had to assume that the absence of noise was a good thing; Derek was pretty quiet, but he didn’t think Laura was the type to keep her voice down when she got upset.

He got the grill lit and wandered into the backyard while he waited for it to get hot enough, checking over the garden. There were a couple string beans long enough to pick; he snapped them off and ate them thoughtfully, then grinned as he realized they were the first harvest of his garden. Stiles saved a couple for his dad and Derek, then knelt to pull a few stray weeds from amongst the beets. He was still crouching low when he heard soft footfalls approached him and he looked up to see Derek crossing the yard.

“Hey,” Stiles said, getting to his feet. He tried out a cautious smile. “How’d things go?”

Derek smiled faintly, stepping right into his space, his fingers catching Stiles’ belt loops. He leaned in close, pressing their foreheads together.

“Is that good?” Stiles teased in a low voice, slipping a hand around Derek’s warm back.

“Good,” Derek agreed, his voice a low rumble.

“Is Laura gone?”

“No,” Derek sighed, pulling away as someone inside the house wolf-whistled at them. “She’s
staying for dinner.”

Laura was in the kitchen with Stiles’ dad, and she winked at the two of them. Derek made an irritated noise and ducked into the living room, but Stiles laughed, dodging around her to grab the steaks out of the fridge. “Let me guess,” he said to her. “You like your steak raw.”

Laura punched him on the arm cheerfully. Her eyes were red, her makeup smudged, but she seemed lighter, unburdened. “Medium, you little shit.”

“Hey, you can’t call me that!” Stiles protested. “I’m your employee! That’s harassment!”

Laura snorted and nodded toward the living room. “Take it up with your alpha, then.”

“Leave me out of it!” Derek bellowed.

Dinner was fun, if not a little stiff; though they’d made up, it was clear that Derek and Laura would need some time to fully recover from the five years lost between them. They tried, though, Stiles could see. Laura was full of jokes and laughter, even if she was careful how close she got to Derek, and while Derek was a little tense still, he smiled dutifully at all of his sister’s jokes. She left after the sun went down and while Derek didn’t walk out with her, Stiles watched him listen carefully until she was out of earshot down the road.

That night, with Derek curved around him, breathing softly in the dark room, Stiles said, “I’m really proud of you.”

Derek shifted around behind him. “Thanks,” he said after a while, voice quiet. And then, “Thanks for pushing me.”

“I just want you to be happy,” Stiles said, not even thinking about the words as they left his mouth. He tensed slightly — it was a little heavy to be saying to someone he’d only known two weeks — but Derek just nosed at his neck and said, “I know.”

Stiles twisted slightly, craning his head around until he could see Derek’s face, pale gray in a room full of gray shadows and they watched each other for a long moment before Derek leaned into him, pressing their mouths together. Stiles hummed quietly, pleased, and flipped around so he wasn’t half breaking his neck, and he thought he felt Derek smile against his lips. Derek pressed forward, pushing him back against the mattress, and Stiles let himself be maneuvered, hands rising to clutch at the back of Derek’s neck, fingers curling into the soft hair at the base of his skull.

Derek pulled back just far enough that Stiles could see him, eyes glowing faint red in the gloom of the room. He swiped a thumb over Stiles’ lip and exhaled shakily.

“You okay?” Stiles asked softly.

“Fine,” Derek breathed, and the red glow of his eyes disappeared momentarily as he ducked his head, pressing his forehead to Stiles’ sternum. Stiles waited patiently, absently scratching his finger through Derek’s hair like he used to when Derek was in his wolf form, and after a moment Derek lifted his head again. “Can I — touch your neck?”

Stiles raised his eyebrows. “My neck?”

“Yeah,” Derek said, voice so quiet it was nearly a whisper. “It’s…” He trailed away, sounding unsure how to explain.

“A werewolf thing?” Stiles offered.
“A — a little,” Derek admitted. “Betas show their throats to alphas as a sign of submission. But it’s mostly a me thing,” he added, sounding embarrassed.

“Dude,” Stiles said warmly. “Go nuts. Just — no bruises, okay? I don’t think I could handle the teasing from your sister.”

Derek seemed to smile and he leaned forward, pressing a soft, open-mouthed kiss to Stiles’ lips, teeth catching on his bottom lip before tilting his head down. For a moment he just breathed, hot and slow against Stiles’ neck, and Stiles breathed with him. Derek had this smell, like fresh, clean earth and it filled his nose with every inhale. Derek made a soft, incomprehensible noise and tucked his face against Stiles’ throat, rubbing his cheek against Stiles’ skin with long, steady pulls of his head, the roughness of his stubble making him tingle. Scent-marking, Stiles remembered from Scott, mouth falling open as Derek turned slightly, pressing his mouth to the underside of Stiles’ jaw, teeth grazing his skin.

“Derek,” Stiles sighed, his hands tightening in Derek’s hair. “Jesus, that — ” He broke off in a strangled groan as Derek sucked his way down Stiles’ throat; Derek growled low in response, the noise vibrating against Stiles’ skin, and he was not responsible for the way his body arched at that. “I — ”

Stiles cut himself off again, both of them freezing at the sound of footsteps in the hall. Then the bathroom light flipped on and Stiles’ dad was visible for a moment before the door closed behind him — a little harder than necessary? Stiles wondered, his face going hot.

“You’re a menace,” he whispered accusingly at Derek.

“We’ll shut the door next time,” Derek said, sounding amused. He pulled away from Stiles, though, settling back down next to him, putting an arm around his chest. Stiles stared up at the ceiling, grinning at nothing as he began to drift to sleep.

Next time.
Thursday passed quickly; when Stiles came into the library, Laura handed him a stack of flyers to hang around town. When he glanced down at them, he was surprised to see they advertised the town barbecue: noon on Sunday, down at the high school.

“So it’s happening?” Stiles asked Laura.

“Yes?” Laura gave him an exasperated look. “It was your suggestion, doofus.”

“I know,” Stiles said, a little hurt. “I was just surprised it came together so quickly.”

Laura smiled. “It shouldn’t,” she said. “Don’t forget how we all came running to your aid.”

“Oh yeah,” Stiles said quietly, remembering that rush of movement the night Jennifer Blake had taken him, everyone in town running through the trees. Laura’s face softened in sympathy, her hand rising to rest on his shoulder. “Derek called you, right?” Stiles asked her. “That night? He howled.”

Laura nodded. “That’s right.”

“But it was a different kind of howl,” Stiles pressed. “I mean, I’d heard him before, howling out in the woods, but that wasn’t an emergency. No one came running then — as far as I know, I mean.”

“No,” Laura agreed. “There are different kinds of howls. The one he used that night — it’s only for when shit’s going down.”

“Like Susan’s horn in *Chronicles of Narnia,*” Stiles said.

“Right,” Laura said with a wry smile. “Though I doubt C. S. Lewis would describe her horn that way, but you get it.”

“So how is it that everyone knew to come?” Stiles asked. “Not everyone in town’s a werewolf.”

Laura shrugged. “It’s just one of those things everyone knows about,” she told him. “Like what to do when an air raid siren goes off.”

Stiles stared at her. “So, what, do they have drills in school?”

Laura laughed. “Could be. It’s been a long time since I was in school, sweetheart.” She patted him on the shoulder again and said, “People say they can feel it. I don’t know how true that is because as a wolf I sense it differently, but the pack’s been living on this land for so long that — I don’t know. Maybe we’re more than just protectors by now.” She waved her hand around vaguely. “Maybe it’s - what do you call it? A symbiotic relationship. We help the land and the land helps us.”

“Maybe,” Stiles said thoughtfully. “I wonder if my dad felt it. I’ll have to ask him.” He eyed Laura. “Hey, I’m glad things went well last night.”

Laura smiled almost shyly, looking pleased. “I am too,” she admitted. “It was — a relief.”

“I bet.” Stiles gave her an encouraging smile. “I think he really missed you.”

“I missed him too,” Laura said, her eyes going a little watery. She turned away quickly, waving a hand behind her. “Go hang those up, will you?”
“Sure thing,” Stiles said softly, slipping out of the library before he saw her cry again.

- 

As Friday evening rolled around, and another party at Scott’s loomed, Stiles carefully broached the subject to Derek as they stood in the kitchen, washing the dishes from that night’s dinner. Stiles had had the day off work and they’d slept in late, then gone swimming before coming home to make out on the couch like a couple of teenagers for a while. After, they’d collapsed together for a nap until Stiles’ dad got home and made a lot of loud throat-clearing noises as he came through the front door.

“So,” Stiles said slowly, accepting a wet plate Derek handed him, wiping it dry. “It’s Friday.”

“Correct,” Derek replied, sounding amused. “And?”

“I’m going to Scott’s tonight.”

Derek shrugged. “Okay.”

“You don’t have to lurk around in the woods,” Stiles told him, wiping down a cup.

Derek shrugged again. “I won’t. I found some board games in your closet. I think your dad will play with me.”

“Well you can — wait,” Stiles frowned. “What were you doing in my closet?”

“Looking for clothes last week,” Derek replied, bumping their hips together. “Sorry.”

Stiles shook his head. “It’s fine, I — look, no, I didn’t mean you had to come back here tonight. You should come to Scott’s. I mean, if you’re ready.”

Derek stilled, his pale eyes falling on Stiles.

“You don’t have to,” Stiles said hurriedly. “Obviously. I just thought, since seeing Laura went so well the other night, that maybe you’d like to see the rest of the pack. Think about it,” he added hurriedly. “You’ve got a couple of hours to decide.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Stiles repeated.

Derek nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

“Oh!” Stiles said, a little surprised. “Awesome.”

Derek nodded again, leaning into Stiles’ space to absently brush his nose against Stiles’ cheek before moving back and returning his attention to the dishes in the sink.

After they’d finished in the kitchen, Derek disappeared upstairs to take a shower and Stiles collapsed onto the couch to watch television. His dad was outside, doing God knows what to the Jeep. Stiles could change the oil if pressed and that was about it, but his dad had been on an eternal quest to fix “that rattle” the Jeep had had since Stiles’ mom had owned it. He gave it another try every couple of months. Stiles had to give him an A for effort, especially since “that rattle” was a Tic-Tac box full of BB gun pellets Stiles had jammed beneath the floor panel shortly after he’d turned sixteen and his dad had fixed the original rattle. His dad had looked so bummed about not having a reason to tinker with it that Stiles had to do something. He moved the box around a couple times a year, making it impossible to pin the rattle down to one part of the car. Stiles could hear his dad outside, cursing
happily as he dug around in his toolbox.

As Stiles shifted around on the couch, rearranging himself for the hundredth time, he managed to kick the remote off the arm of the couch, sending it skittering onto the floor. Stiles groaned, forcing himself upright to bend over the arm and pick it back up. As he straightened, about to fall back onto the couch, Stiles glanced out the window into the backyard and paused. There was an all-too familiar figure standing in the shadow of the trees by the garden, staring toward the house — Peter Hale.

Stiles swallowed, sinking back onto the couch slowly. He was safe inside the house, he was almost certain, but his dad was outside, armed only with a toolbox full of various-sized wrenches. Derek was upstairs, but he was still in the shower; Stiles wouldn’t be able to call to him — or his dad — without Peter hearing. If he moved, he risked the chance of losing sight of Peter and there was no telling where he’d disappear to next. If he was willing to go after Derek or Stiles, he might go after Stiles’ dad, too.

Stiles’ eyes flickered around the room. He didn’t think he could go after Peter himself. He had no idea what was needed to take down a werewolf — he was belatedly realizing he probably should have asked by now. He remembered Scott saying wolfsbane was poisonous, but the only wolfsbane he had was out in the garden next to Peter and what was he supposed to do, anyway? Shove it down his throat? Stiles was not a fighter, he was a strategist.

His eyes landed on his little book of spells and a light bulb went off inside his head. There was something he could do. Stiles peered cautiously over the back of the couch; Peter still stood at the edge of the yard, gazing at the house. He sunk back down and carefully drew a couple of runes in the air — magic pulsed from the end of his finger, trailing gold light where his finger moved, so when his hand fell back to his side, four shimmering runes hung in the air before him. Stiles hesitated; he hadn’t practiced this spell, but it’d caught his eye as something that might be useful someday. He hoped it’d work and shut his eyes, concentrating hard to ingrain his message in the spell. Dad, come inside. Peter Hale’s in the backyard. Stiles made an abrupt sweeping gesture with his hand and he felt the magic take, zipping off toward the front of the house. A couple seconds later, he heard the clatter of a dropped wrench and his dad swearing, his voice growing louder as it approached the house.

Stiles grinned and shot a second message off to Derek: Peter’s in the backyard. There was a startled thump from upstairs and Stiles grinned again, sending one last message off as Derek came rocketing down the stairs, naked as the day he was born, eyes burning scarlet and his face in the full beta shift. This final message was to Peter and it said, You’re in for it now, you fucking creep.

His dad came through the front door just as Derek went slamming out the back, breaking it off its hinges for the third time that summer. Stiles peered over the back of the couch in time to see him sprinting across the backyard, long bare legs flashing over the grass. He couldn’t see Peter any longer, but he’d probably run away already; Stiles certainly wouldn’t have stuck around if there was a naked alpha werewolf stampeding toward him.

“Was that Derek?” his dad asked from the doorway, looking a little dazed.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, still staring out the window at the now-empty backyard. “Are you gonna call your cavalry?”

“No,” his father said, coming to stand by the couch, peering out the window. “Hasn’t worked so far. My guys aren’t quick enough.” They both jumped as a howl rose from the trees, low and furious.

“What was that you did? I heard you in my head.”

Stiles shrugged, watching the woods worriedly. He wondered if he should call Laura, but then he
remembered what she’d said about the different types of howls; if Derek needed help, he’d call for it. “It was just a spell.”

“Quick thinking,” his dad said, ruffling his hair.

Darkness had partially fallen before Derek returned. Stiles and his dad were in the kitchen, attempting to fix the back door, when his dad nodded and said, “Heads up.” Stiles, who was leaning his weight against the door while his dad drilled the hinges back into place, looked through the window panel to see Derek coming up the backyard fast. His face was still shifted, bare body smeared with dirt like he’d fallen. He looked pissed.

“You might want to step back,” Stiles said to his dad, who raised his eyebrows.

“I’m the one with conflict-resolution training,” his father said, but he backed away into the living room as Derek hopped up onto the porch. Stiles opened the door before Derek could knock it off its hinges again, though he himself was almost knocked off his feet as Derek bowled into him, pressing him up against the wall. Stiles’ dad, looming in the doorway to the living room, stepped forward, a hand going to his belt like he’d forgotten he wasn’t wearing his gun, but Stiles held up a hand to stop him. He waited for his dad to step back before turning his attention to Derek, who’d shoved his face into the crook of Stiles’ neck, his breathing ragged. One of his hands cupped the back of Stiles’ head and Stiles could feel the tips of his claws pricking against his scalp.

“Hey, buddy,” Stiles said, carefully patting Derek on the back. His skin felt too warm, sticky with sweat. “You okay?”

Derek took a deep breath before exhaling, his breath hot against Stiles’ throat. After a moment, he nodded.

“Okay,” Stiles said, glancing over at his dad. “I’m guessing you didn’t catch Peter.”

“Lost him,” Derek said hoarsely. He lifted his head and Stiles was relieved to see his features had melted back to human, though his eyes still burned red. “Are you okay?”

“Right as rain,” Stiles assured him. “I don’t think he even knew I noticed him. Dad’s the one who was outside.”

“Oh,” Derek said, his eyes flickering over to Stiles’ dad, who nodded at him.

“We’re all okay here,” Stiles’ dad told Derek. “Now, maybe you’d like to go put some clothes on.”

Derek glanced down at himself; he didn’t seem all too concerned about his nakedness, but he nodded and brushed past the both of them, heading upstairs. Stiles’ dad gave Stiles a pointed look.

“What?” Stiles asked.

“He listens to you.”

Stiles shrugged. “I’m his emissary.”

His father gave him a long look before turning to grab a beer from the fridge. “You’re more than that.”

Stiles grinned. “I know.”

When Derek came back downstairs, freshly showered for the second time, and dressed in a t-shirt
and basketball shorts, he plunked himself down on the couch half on top of Stiles, shifting around until he could press his face into Stiles’ neck again. Stiles didn’t mind in the slightest; he wrapped an arm around Derek’s shoulders and slouched down against the couch cushions, comfortable. He had a feeling that Derek’s behavior had something to do with the wolf’s instincts — a desire to keep his pack safe, maybe — and to be able to touch Stiles was reassuring. If it wasn’t and Derek just wanted to be close to him, then that was perfectly fine too. They had an hour or so to kill before heading to Scott’s house, and if that hour was spent with Derek curled around him like an octopus, Stiles could think of worse.

“Derek,” Stiles’ dad said, and Derek lifted his head. “We need to do something about Peter. We can’t have him showing up like this.”

“I know,” Derek said quietly. “I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Any ideas?” Derek shook his head and Stiles’ dad sighed. “Well, if you think of something, let me know. My deputies are at your disposal.”

“Thank you,” Derek said politely, dropping his head back to Stiles’ shoulder with a soft sigh. Stiles patted his shoulder.

Later when it was time to head to Scott’s, Stiles gently shook Derek, who’d fallen asleep with his head tucked under Stiles’ chin. “I’m going to Scott’s now,” Stiles told him. “You coming?”

“I’ll walk you,” Derek said sleepily, forcing himself upright.

“You guys be careful,” Stiles’ dad said from his recliner. “After this evening —”

“We’ll be fine, Dad,” Stiles said, clapping his hand to Derek’s shoulder. “Derek’s got his scary alpha mojo.”

Derek gave him an injured look. “That’s not what it’s called.”

Stiles grinned as he pushed Derek toward the door. “Stop pouting; you look like an underwear model.”

The road was quiet; only one car passed them on the walk to Scott’s house — the old lady who grew cannabis on Ferne Lane, who waved cheerily. “She’s probably high right now,” Stiles said to Derek, who snorted and took Stiles’ hand. Stiles squeezed his fingers and hummed happily as they walked along. He should have been nervous, he supposed, since it’d only been a couple of hours since he’d seen Peter Hale lurking in the trees, but he felt safe with Derek — he always had.

“Hey,” Stiles said thoughtfully, the memory of Peter Hale stirring up another memory. “Question. How do you kill werewolves?”

Derek gave him was Stiles assumed was an exasperated look, though it was hard to tell in the dim light of the quarter moon. “Why? Are you planning on taking me out?”

“Oh, I want to take you out all right,” Stiles said cheerfully, swinging their hands. He sobered a little. “I was just wondering. In case I have to protect myself from one.”

“Peter,” Derek guessed gloomily, and Stiles nodded. “We’re not invincible, Stiles.”

“No,” Stiles agreed, because there’d been the fire, after all. “But you are superhuman.”

“I guess,” Derek sighed. His hand tightened around Stiles’. “Our healing abilities mean that
something that would kill a human probably wouldn’t kill us — a stab wound, a gunshot wound pretty much anywhere other than the head.” He sighed again. “My dad told me once that back in college he’d been stabbed through the chest with a lead pipe, but I don’t know if he was lying or if he was just drunk.”

“So, what would kill you?” Stiles asked with a slight shudder.

Derek tilted his head, considering this. “Anything that occurs too quickly to recover from. A car crash, maybe. Drowning. Certain types of wolfsbane can be deadly in the right quantity. Hunters use wolfsbane bullets. It slows our healing abilities, so any major wound could kill us if we’ve already been poisoned.”

“Hunters,” Stiles said slowly. “Like Allison’s family?”

“Yeah,” Derek said slowly. “They’re most of the reason why we keep this town’s secrets so…”

“Secret?” Stiles offered.

Derek nodded. “Yeah.” They walked a couple hundred feet in silence before Derek said, “Allison’s family — they’re well known in Europe.”

“But Allison’s not a hunter, right?” Stiles asked. “I mean, that’d make things pretty awkward with Scott.”

“No.” Derek shook his head. “My mom made a deal with Allison’s father — our families would coexist in peace, and Chris acts as a lookout; if there are hunters in the area, he’ll hear about it and let us know.”

“So, Allison’s dad used to be one? But he’s retired.”

“You could say that,” Derek shrugged. “Though I’m sure he had a large part in helping drive Peter out of town after the fire.”

“And that bullet Allison gave you,” Stiles said slowly. “A token from him? For a continued alliance?”

Derek nodded again. “Oh,” Stiles said, squeezing his hand. “Good.”

“If Allison ever invites you over, you should go,” Derek told him. “I think you’d like their library.”

“Oh yeah?” Stiles hummed. “Maybe I should get us a dinner invite. That sounds like something an emissary would do, right? Arrange a meeting between the alpha and his ally?”

Derek probably rolled his eyes. “If that’s what you want.”

Stiles tugged him to a halt as they reached Scott’s house. Derek turned to look at him and Stiles said seriously, “All I want is for you — and, by extension, this town — to be happy again.”

Derek stood silent for a long moment before lifting a hand, cupping Stiles’ cheek. “I am happy,” he said quietly.

Stiles grinned and leaned forward to kiss Derek, a thrill running through him at the easy way Derek’s mouth opened for his, the way Derek bit at his lip before they pulled apart. “So, what do you say?” Stiles breathed. Derek was still close, their foreheads almost touching. “Are you going to come inside?”
Derek lifted his head to stare past him at Scott’s house, all the windows lit with welcoming golden light. Derek’s hand gripped harder at Stiles’.

“You don’t have to,” Stiles told him. “But the pack won’t be unhappy to see you, I promise.”

Derek pulled in a slow breath. “Okay,” he said.

“Yeah?” Stiles asked, brightening. “You sure?”

“Yes,” Derek said shortly, tugging him forward. “Let’s get inside.” Before I chicken out hung unspoken in the air between them, but Stiles had faith in Derek. They walked quickly down the driveway and up the porch steps, and Stiles pushed open the front door so they could step inside and kick off their shoes. He could hear his friends’ voices in the living room, loud and raucous, and he knew they were probably faking it because unless all the wolves were very drunk already, he was absolutely sure they knew Derek was in the house. It was kind of them, he thought, not to rush at Derek, but give Stiles time to lead Derek down the hall — Derek’s hand, now kind of clammy, still clenched around his. They paused in the doorway to the living room and Stiles knew the betas were all pretending not to see them; he caught the way Boyd’s eyes flickered over to them, and Scott, his arm around Allison, was way too stiff as he talked to Isaac.

“Hey, guys,” Stiles said casually, as Derek’s hand clamped down on his so hard it kind of hurt. “Look who I found out on the road.”

Everyone turned to look at him and Derek — at Derek, really, not Stiles, though Scott met his eyes and smiled faintly. Stiles nodded back and looked at everyone else’s faces — he saw nervousness, happiness, even tears shining in Erica’s eyes, but no hatred or disappointment. He hoped Derek noticed.

Scott, good host that he was, got to his feet slowly, eyes on Derek. “Hey, man,” he said cautiously. “Welcome back.”

“...Thank you,” Derek said after a short pause, taking a nervous half-step closer to Stiles.

“Can I get you something?” Scott gestured toward the kitchen.

“No, thank you,” Derek said politely.

Stiles cleared his throat. “I’ll take a beer, please.”

Scott grinned and headed toward the kitchen, but he paused in front of them, offering his hand out to Derek. Derek stared at it. Stiles wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it: all his friends, staring silently at Derek while he watched Scott’s hand like it was a viper about to strike. After a long moment, Derek reached out and clasped Scott’s hand firmly and Scott beamed so brightly it was like the sun had risen twice that day.

Derek shaking Scott’s hand seemed to break the floodgates open; the rest of the pack got to their feet, Isaac and Boyd approaching cautiously, while Erica marched right up to Derek. Stiles felt him tense — he himself wasn’t sure what Erica was about to do; she looked like she might slap him — but then she threw her arms around Derek’s torso with a happy cry of “You’re back!”

Derek looked at Stiles, absolutely bewildered. Stiles knew he couldn’t believe that he’d be welcomed back so easily — surely there must be another shoe about to drop — but then Isaac and Boyd crowded in as well and Lydia, laughing, pulled Allison off the couch to join in the group hug. Stiles could see the moment Derek gave in, his head dropping forward, all the lingering tension draining from his body.
“Here, man,” Scott said, appearing next to Stiles to hand him a beer. He nodded toward the huddle of bodies. “You gonna get in on that?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Stiles said, cheerfully accepting the beer and turning to worm his way in between Lydia and Boyd. He couldn’t have said how long they all stood there together, warm bodies pressed together on a too-hot summer evening, but it didn’t matter because when they finally all pulled apart, Isaac muttering about how much he needed to pee, Derek was different. He looked exactly the same, but there was something about him that just felt right, like before this evening something inside him had been missing and now it had been found. It had, Stiles thought fondly, Derek’s hand slipping back into his as they settled crosslegged on the floor. Derek had found his family.

It was a good evening. Conversation was a little awkward; no one wanted to ask Derek any questions about his five-year absence, and Derek didn’t seem to know what to say to anyone, but the pack happily filled him in on their lives and Derek listened intently, his eyes bright and interested. He relaxed more and more as the evening wore on, leaning heavily against Stiles, nodding when Scott offered again to grab him a drink. The most serious things got was when Boyd leaned over and said, “Did something happen earlier?”

“We heard you howl,” Erica added.

Derek shook his head, a dark look crossing his face. “Peter.”

That seemed to be explanation enough; Isaac made a face and Erica muttered, “That guy’s the worst.”

By the time Melissa came home from her late-night shift to break up the party, everyone was tipsy and happy and Derek didn’t even look confused when Melissa gave him a quick hug. Boyd, designated driver of the evening, offered them a ride back to Stiles’ house but as his car was already crammed with Erica and Lydia and Isaac, Stiles waved off his offer. He and Derek walked back to the house instead, hand-in-hand. They didn’t speak; Stiles wanted to give Derek the time to process the evening before he started asking nosy questions.

The house sat quiet when they got back; it was past two in the morning, Stiles’ dad long since gone to bed. They climbed the stairs quietly, but before Stiles could throw himself in bed, Derek caught him around the waist, reeling him in close.

“Hey,” Stiles said, a little surprised.

“Hey,” Derek echoed quietly. “Thank you.”

“How’s it feel?” Stiles asked him, lifting his arms to fold around Derek’s shoulders.

Derek leaned into him, pressing their mouths together for a long, slow kiss. When they pulled apart, he didn’t go far, pressing their foreheads together. “I feel,” he said slowly, “whole.”

“Good,” Stiles whispered.

“I’ll never be able to thank you enough,” Derek told him softly.

“You don’t need to,” Stiles said. “Just get this town healthy again. That’s all I need.”

Derek snorted softly, his hands slipping under Stiles’ shirt, thumbs pressing against the jut of his hipbones. “That’s all you need?” he asked, his voice dropping low.

“Derek Hale,” Stiles said, grinning widely. “Are you flirting with me?”
Derek laughed, a rich, happy sound Stiles could do with hearing a lot more of. “And if I am?”

“Then I’m going to ask you to continue,” Stiles told him, tilting his chin up to catch Derek’s mouth. He could feel Derek smiling, his hands warm and steady at Stiles’ hips.

“You don’t want to hear my bad pickup lines,” Derek murmured, biting at Stiles’ jaw.

“Don’t — don’t need to,” Stiles sighed. He tugged them away from the door until the backs of his calves hit the bed and he sat down, grinning up at Derek. “You already got me.”

Derek reached out a hand, fingers brushing Stiles’ cheek. His voice was much softer, almost a whisper, when he asked, “Are we something, then?”

Stiles blinked up at him. “Yeah. I mean, if you want to be.”

“Good,” Derek said softly. He dropped down onto the bed next to Stiles. “I do.”

Stiles grinned as he settled back against the bed, Derek shifting to kneel over him. “This has been a good day,” he said, lifting his hands to card them through Derek’s soft hair.

He saw Derek’s teeth glint white in the dim light of the room as he smiled. “Yeah,” Derek breathed, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to Stiles’ temple. “It really has.”

Stiles woke to someone jabbing him repeatedly in the arm with what was either their finger or a penknife, and he cracked open his eyes to see Laura standing over him, her eyebrows raised so high they were in danger of disappearing into her hair. “Noooo,” Stiles groaned. “Not you.” He flipped onto his stomach and attempted to hide himself under Derek, who grunted irritably. Laura smacked him between the shoulder blades.

“Get up, asshats,” she said impatiently. “It’s eleven-thirty. The barbecue starts at noon. Half the town’s already at the school.”

Derek pried himself up onto one elbow, squinting blearily at Laura with his hair flattened on one side. “What barbecue?”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Stiles, you didn’t tell him?”

“Forgot,” Stiles mumbled. His head hurt; he didn’t remember drinking that much the previous night.

Laura heaved a sigh. “The town’s hosting a barbecue so we can address everyone and try to find that stupid thing for the ritual.” She tilted her head, giving Derek a considering look. “That okay?”

“Fine,” Derek sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He looked up at Laura. “I saw the pack last night.”

“I heard,” Laura said, giving him an encouraging smile. “I’m proud of you.” She folded her arms over her chest and continued, “Well, I’ll be downstairs. You guys need to get a move on.”

Stiles listened to her tread down the stairs before looking sleepily at Derek. “Morning, I guess. Sorry that got sprung on you.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Derek mumbled, leaning in to rub his nose along Stiles’ cheek. “Gotta happen sometime.”
Stiles patted his hair absently, shifting around uncomfortably; he didn’t have a shirt on, but he was still wearing his jeans, and they’d left imprints on his hips. “Did I fall asleep on you?” He had a vague memory of Derek hovering over him, mouth hot on his neck, but not much further.

“Yes,” Derek said, looking as though he wanted to laugh. “You’re going to be pissed at me.”

“Why?” Stiles asked suspiciously, narrowing his eyes at Derek as he pulled himself out of bed. Derek just lifted a hand and waved him out of the room. Stiles headed for the bathroom, pausing along the way to grab aspirin out of the hall closet, and froze when he stepped into the bathroom, eyes snapping to his reflection in the mirror, and the ring of dark bruises around his collarbone. He prodded at them angrily. “You dick!” Stiles hollered. He could hear Derek laughing from his room, and climbed into the shower, grinning; he couldn’t be annoyed with Derek, not when he sounded so happy.

Once clean and dressed, he went downstairs to find Derek and Laura sitting on the front steps, drinking coffee. “Breakfast?” he asked hopefully.

Laura rolled her eyes at him. “We’re going to a barbecue, Stilinski. Your hunger can hold off another ten minutes.”

Still, as they headed for their respective cars, Derek quietly pushed a granola bar into Stiles’ hand. “Knew you’d be hungry.”

“Dude,” Stiles sighed gratefully, unwrapping the bar and shoving half of it into his mouth. “I love —” He cut himself off, swallowing before floundering, “granola bars.” He’d almost said I love you, which was something he said to everyone with little care, but now that he and Derek were together, saying it took on a whole other meaning he didn’t quite mean. Not yet, anyway. Derek glanced at him and then away; if he noticed Stiles’ near slip-up, he didn’t say anything.

They followed Laura across town to the high school, where the parking lot was quickly filling with cars; Stiles’ dad was directing traffic, though when he spotted Stiles and Derek he waved them toward the front of the lot, where a couple of spaces had been marked as reserved. “Oh, look at that,” Stiles grinned. “VIP status, man.”

“Who’s the important one here?” Derek asked lightly, and looked like he was holding back a smile when Stiles sputtered angrily at him.

“Come on, losers,” Laura said, appearing suddenly at Stiles’ window and making him jump in surprise. “Everyone’s hungry.”

“Me too,” Stiles said fervently, clambering out of the car. The granola bar had been enough to tide him over, but he was a bottomless pit when it came to food.

It was a bright day, sky a brilliant blue, not a cloud in sight — hot, but a cool breeze blowing in from the north that made things bearable. Laura walked ahead of Stiles and Derek, waving and calling out to people she knew. Derek stuck close to Stiles’ side; he didn’t pull away when Stiles linked their fingers together. “You okay?” he murmured.

“I’m okay,” Derek breathed, his head turning from side to side to watch the crowd, all heading for the barbecue laid out on the lacrosse field. There were a lot of people staring at them, but most were smiling; Stiles saw parents leaning down to talk to their kids, pointing at Derek. Explaining who their alpha was, he figured.

“S’okay to be nervous,” Stiles told Derek, squeezing his hand. “There’s a lot riding on this.”
“I’m not nervous,” Derek replied quietly. “I’ve got you.”

Stiles’ face flushed hot. In front of them, Laura glanced over her shoulder at him, casting him a wicked grin. Stiles flushed darker, knowing she’d heard.

Laura led them to the back of the bleachers, where Finstock and the town council were standing around, chatting. “Hale!” Finstock roared jovially, catching sight of them. He appeared to be a little drunk. “Beer?”

“No, thank you,” Derek said solemnly.

“Good man.” Finstock blinked, swaying a little. “Is it time?”

“It is noon,” Laura said reproachfully, glancing at her phone.

“All right, all right,” Finstock said. He squinted at Derek. “You want to address the masses?”

“No,” Derek said, looking alarmed.

“Fine, then you get to play governor’s wife,” Finstock grunted, navigating his way around the bleachers.

“What the hell does that mean?” Derek hissed as they all followed Finstock into the middle of the lacrosse field. There were people all around, sitting on the bleachers and on the field itself; some people had brought blankets, and they all looked happy. Everyone shifted to watch as they stepped out onto the field and Stiles didn’t miss the way Derek’s cheeks went a little pink.

Laura leaned in. “I think it’s when politicians have those sex scandals, you know? Their wives are always standing in the background, looking angry.”

Derek groaned quietly as Finstock stopped dead in the middle of the field and passed his beer to the councilwoman May, then fished a microphone out of his pocket. “Afternoon!” he bawled into it, and the speakers around the edge of the field squealed. Derek and Laura both winced. “Thanks for coming out today, everyone. I want to thank Maurice’s Diner for providing us with our meal today.” There was a polite round of applause from around the field before Finstock continued. “As you may have gathered, you’ve all been brought here today for a reason — our alpha is back! Derek Hale, everyone!” Finstock clapped his hand against Derek’s shoulder and the field erupted into applause. Stiles caught sight of Scott and the rest of the pack, sitting up at the top of the bleachers, stamping their feet and howling. Derek didn’t seem to know what to do, his expression caught somewhere between a scowl and a hesitant smile. Stiles grinned.

As the applause died down, Finstock raised his microphone again and said, “Now, we need your help. Derek, you want to explain?” He shoved the mic into Derek’s hands, who stared down at it, bewildered, until Laura took pity on him and leaned in, jerking out of his hands again.

“Hey, everyone,” she said smoothly. “As most of you know, in order for the town to thrive, the alpha must perform a ritual each year. We’ve got our alpha and we know the ritual, but we’re missing something else, and we need your help finding it. The problem is, we don’t know what it is. All we know is that it’s something that was in our family for a long time. I need you all to think — did my mother ever give you anything, either as a gift or maybe for safekeeping? Did you ever find anything around town or in the woods, particularly near the nemeton? We can’t do the ritual until we find this thing, whatever it is, and if we don’t — ” Laura paused, clearly hesitant to drop the heavy news, but then she breathed in deep and continued, “If we don’t find it, the town’s just going to get worse and worse.”
There came a low murmuring from the crowd, concerned faces turning to look at one another. Laura sighed and raised the microphone once more. “Please, everyone, just think about it, and if you’ve got an ideas, let us know.”

She handed the microphone back to Finstock, who shouted, “All right, folks, you heard the woman! Queue up if you’ve got any leads! Now, feel free to help yourself to lunch!”

“Thank you,” Derek said quietly to Laura, who patted him on the shoulder.

“Come on, baby brother,” she said. “Let’s get some food.”

It took a while to reach the buffet line; pretty much everyone they passed wanted to talk to Derek, to shake his hand, or tell him how happy they were he was back, and Derek stopped to listen to every single person, his expression growing more relaxed with every greeting. Stiles smiled to himself as he watched Derek crouch to listen to a little girl, Laura chatting cheerfully with her parents.

“Hey, Stiles!” He turned to see Scott bounding up, a grin on his face.

“Hey!” Stiles greeted brightly. Derek and Laura moved on, but he remained where he was, watching the crowd part and swell around them.

“Any luck yet?”

“I don’t think so,” Stiles laughed. “It’s only been like five minutes.” He watched a thin man step up to Derek and shake his hand, pale blue eyes almost white in the sunlight. “Hey, that’s Allison’s dad, right?”

“Mnhmm,” Scott nodded. “And Allison’s mom. She ran for mayor against Finstock.”

Stiles watched a lithe woman with short red hair step up next to Allison’s dad, smiling icily at Derek. “She looks terrifying.”

“She is,” Scott agreed cheerfully.

“Future in-laws, you think?” Stiles asked carefully.

Scott beamed at him. “I hope so.”

Stiles laughed. “Good luck, man.”

“Thanks,” Scott grinned. “Hey, so, we were thinking that we might go to the beach tomorrow. You and Derek want to come?”

“What beach?” Stiles asked. “Isn’t it like four hours to the ocean?”

“Yeah,” Scott agreed, “but Lake Shastina’s only an hour and a half west.”

Stiles shrugged, looking back to find Derek, but he’d disappeared into the crowd. “Sure, man. I’ll ask Derek. I don’t know how busy this whole search is going to keep us, though.”

“Oh,” Scott said, his face falling a little. “That’s true. Do you think — is there anything we can do to help?”

“I dunno, Scotty,” Stiles sighed. “You wouldn’t know anything about this whole mess, would you?”

Scott frowned thoughtfully up at the clear blue sky. “I don’t think so,” he finally admitted. “Laura’s
talked about all this stuff so much that I’m not sure my memory’s all that reliable. I mean, Talia never gave me anything, not even the bite.”

“Not exactly tangible any more,” Stiles said ruefully.

Scott bumped up against him, smiling encouragingly. “We’re gonna find it, dude. You’re on a roll.”

“A roll?” Stiles repeated. “What does that mean?”

Scott shrugged. “I don’t know. You brought Derek back, and you know what the ritual is — you have to find the object. Good things come in threes, right?”

“I think that’s bad things,” Stiles corrected quietly. He certainly hoped Scott had a point, but he also knew he couldn’t count on his good luck to keep coming.

“Don’t worry about it, man,” Scott said, unperturbed, and linked their arms together. “Let’s get some food.”

“Yes,” Stiles said fervently, his hunger momentarily forgotten in the excitement.

Scott pulled him toward the long tables of food, where they loaded their plates with hotdogs and hamburgers, corn on the cob and pasta salad. Stiles stood on the tips of his toes as they left the line, craning his neck over the crowd, trying to spot Derek.

“He’s over by the bleachers,” Scott said, then tapped his nose with a wink when Stiles looked at him curiously.

“Bless you and your keen senses,” Stiles simpered and Scott laughed, hip-checking him roughly.

Derek and Laura sat on the lowest level of the bleachers, already accompanied by some of the pack; Boyd and Erica sat up behind them, Boyd grimacing as Erica tried to feed him veggies and dip. Lydia sat next to them, head resting on her hand while she scrolled through her phone.

“Quite the ragtag team of betas you’ve got yourself,” Stiles said to Derek, dropping down next to him. Scott sat down on his other side, digging into his food hungrily.

Derek rolled his eyes. “Can’t choose your family,” he said, and when Laura made a cooing noise, he glared at her and added, “Unfortunately.” Laura kicked him.

They hung around at the high school for almost three hours, watching the crowd slowly dwindle. Few people approached them; a couple had memories of a gift from Talia, and they promised to stop by the house later, but mostly it was just sitting around. Stiles didn’t mind. It was a nice day, and after they’d served barbecue, they laid out materials for ice cream sundaes and didn’t seem to care that he came back for seconds, and then thirds, and then fourths. Derek eyeballed him hard.

“Is that disgust I see?” Stiles asked, patting his stomach contentedly. “Gotta eat it when I can get it, big man. My dad’s not allowed to have this kind of stuff.”

Derek snorted. “Doesn’t seem to be stopping him,” he said, nodding across the field. Stiles squinted; his dad stood over by the scoreboard with a bunch of his deputies, and they were all holding ice cream sundaes.

“Oh, he’s gonna get it,” Stiles hissed. “That sneak.”
“He works hard,” Derek said, sounding amused. “Let him have a reward.”

“I guess,” Stiles grumbled, his eyes drifting to the middle of the field, where the pack had scrounged up lacrosse sticks and were playing a game. Apparently all the guys had been on the team when they were in high school, but it seemed they’d gotten rusty; the girls were kicking their asses, even though Lydia was in heels. Finstock, their old varsity coach, stood on the edge of the field, yelling advice to his former players. “Wanna play?” Stiles asked Derek. Stiles had never been much of a sports guy himself — he’d been a sit at home and play WoW type of guy — but he suspected Derek had played sports in high school.

Derek hesitated. “I don’t think I should.”

“Why?” Stiles cajoled, getting to his feet. “You’re not going to hurt anyone. It’ll be good for team-building.”

Derek looked unsure of that, but he still climbed to his feet, following Stiles out onto the field. They rearranged the teams, trying to make things as equal as possible: Stiles, Lydia, Boyd, and Derek, with Scott, Isaac, Erica, and Allison on the other, while Laura catcalled from the bleachers.

They had fun, running and shouting and laughing under the bright afternoon sun. The wolves were rougher with each other, not at all hesitant to bodyslam one another into the ground. Allison was fast; Stiles saw her do a couple of flips over the other players he was pretty sure even a gymnast couldn’t handle. Lydia wasn’t as physically fast, but she could calculate plays like lightning, calling out moves to the rest of them. They ended in a tie, collapsing onto the field in a sweaty mess, the grass warm under their backs. Stiles glanced over at Derek and found him looking utterly content, eye half-closed and tranquil. His expression was mirrored in the rest of the pack, and Stiles was glad he’d suggested they join in.

“That was fun,” Derek said as they drove home later.

“It was,” Stiles agreed. “Scott invited us to go the beach tomorrow, if you want.”

Derek thought about it for a long minute, his head turned to stare out the car window, hair shivering in the breeze. “Shouldn’t,” he said ruefully. “I need to be at the house in case people stop by. You can go, though,” he added, glancing over at Stiles.

“Nah,” Stiles said. “Summer’s not over. There will be other chances to go. Besides, I’m your emissary. I should look at everything people bring over too.”

That was how they spent their Sunday; the doorbell began ringing at eight in the morning, and Stiles’ dad had to come get them both out of bed so they could stumble downstairs and stare blearily at an old book Mrs. Martin held out to them. They both held it, Stiles running his hand down the spine thoughtfully, but it didn’t seem to hold any trace of magic. “S not natural, either,” he said to Derek, who nodded sleepily and handed the book back to Mrs. Martin with a “Thank you.”

“Any news on that vacation?” she asked hopefully.

Derek rubbed a hand over his face. “I’ll get on that soon.”

They had enough time to change into fresh clothes and have breakfast before the next visitor arrived, an old woman with a framed map of Beacon Hills. “Talia gave this to me when my husband passed,” she explained in a papery voice. Stiles shook his head; old and interesting, but not what they were looking for.

They had visitor after visitor. Stiles made four jugs of iced tea and pulled out the tin of shortbread
Mr. Sanderson had brought them the previous week. They saw more books, a vase, a geode, an old globe, a necklace, even a potted plant Talia had given someone while they were in the hospital, but nothing struck Stiles as particularly magical.

“What if it’s not?” he asked Derek, watching their latest visitor, Pastor Thomas from the Protestant church across the road from town hall, totter back to his car with a ceramic lamb figurine Talia had given him during the celebration of his fortieth year as a clergyman. “I mean, what if it’s some totally innocuous thing and we pass over it because it doesn’t seem significant?”

“It will,” Derek said patiently, fishing the last piece of shortbread out of the tin. “If it’s been used in the ritual for a hundred years straight, there’s no way it hasn’t picked up some residual magic.”

“So how do we discount other magical items?” Stiles pressed. He dragged an absent finger through the condensation on the outside of his glass of iced tea. “I mean, that geode had a weird vibe to it, and it’s a natural object. Why’d you turn that down?”

Derek shrugged, his eyes turning to the woods and the dark green shadows the trees cast on the lawn. “I don’t know,” he said after a moment. “I just — I think I’ll know. It’ll smell like family or something.”

“Okay,” Stiles said, because he couldn’t argue with that, not when he couldn’t sniff things out himself. “You don’t think this is a waste of time, do you?”

Derek thought for a minute, turning to look down the driveway as another car pulled in. “No,” he decided.

And it wasn’t, Stiles realized, watching Derek as their next visitor laid an old hunting knife down on the table in front of them. Even if they didn’t find what they were looking for, this was a positive way for Derek to relive memories of his family; there was no distress on his face as the man in front of them talked about how he and Derek’s dad used to go hunting with some old high school friends every fall, just a faint, soft smile. Derek may have grown up in Beacon Hills, but he’d never experienced it as an adult. Stiles doubted he’d known half the people coming to see them in more than a cursory manner. Hearing all their tales about his family — it was kind of like keeping them alive, in a way.

The amount of visitors slowed after the first couple of days, but they kept trickling in for a while after that. Stiles went back to work on Monday, and it was a little disheartening, coming home to hear no news.

“What are we going to do if this doesn’t work?” he murmured Monday night as they lay in bed.

“Dunno,” Derek sighed, shifting around next to him until he was half on top of Stiles, nose shoved into his neck. “I can’t let this town die.”

“It won’t,” Stiles said firmly, with a lot more confidence than he felt. He stared up at the ceiling long after Derek fell asleep, trailing a hand up and down Derek’s back as he thought. It had to be something obvious, some clue they’d missed — but what?

Wednesday morning, Stiles opened the front door to find a dead deer on the porch. He gave a yell of surprise and went stumbling backward into Derek, who gently moved him aside and stepped outside, crouching down next to the limp body with a frown on his face.
“What is it?” Stiles asked, putting a hand over his nose. “Who did this?”

“Peter,” Derek said grimly.

“It’s not good, is it?” Stiles said. “I mean, I know cats leave stuff for their owners but — ”

“It’s a threat,” Derek said bluntly, pointing a clawed finger at the buck’s side, where the hide had been torn in a spiral pattern. He straightened, looking around at the trees. “He’s going to do something soon if we don’t find him.”

“You mean worse than this?” Stiles grimaced.

Derek nodded, his jaw tight. “Call Scott,” he said. “I need the pack.”

Stiles raised his eyebrows. “Why don’t you just howl for them?”

Derek rolled his eyes. “That’s for immediate emergencies. This isn’t an emergency. Yet.”

“Okay, so it’s like calling the police instead of 911,” Stiles said helpfully. Derek gave him an exasperated look but, after a moment, he nodded.

Stiles called Scott, who promised to round up the rest of the pack and head over. While they waited, Derek picked up the buck, shook off Stiles’ half-hearted offer to help, and disappeared into the woods. When he came back five minutes later, there was blood on his hands and smeared across his chest; it was an intimidating look.

“Did you eat it?” Stiles asked cheerfully. Derek shoved at him, smearing blood on his arms. “Ugh, gross!”

Derek rolled his eyes, heading inside to wash off his hands and change his shirt. Stiles following, grumbling under his breath about feral werewolves. By the time they’d both cleaned up, Scott was trotting down the driveway with Allison on her bike at his side; Stiles grinned at both of them and disappeared into the kitchen to make coffee. When he reemerged, Scott and Allison had been joined by Boyd and Erica — Isaac was just walking up the driveway, Laura right behind him.

“No Lydia?” Stiles asked her.

“Someone’s got to watch the library,” Laura replied, giving him the stink-eye.

“It’s not my fault your crazy uncle left a deer on my doorstep!” Stiles protested.

“Children,” Derek said impatiently, and smirked when both Stiles and Laura glared at him, though the look soon faded from his face as he glanced around at his gathered pack. “We need to deal with Peter before he becomes a major issue. I want to split you into groups and search the town.”

“Don’t forget my dad offered you his guys,” Stiles said, but Derek shook his head.

“They’re not of any use at this point. Once we’ve pinpointed the area he’s been hiding in, they may be helpful, but we’ll be tracking him with scent, not sight,” he told Stiles. Stiles nodded, stepping back as Derek instructed the pack, splitting them into groups of two and directing them to search areas. As the two teams of Boyd and Erica, and Laura and Isaac headed off into the trees, Derek turned to Stiles. “You might as well go to work,” he said. “It’s going to be a long day.” He nodded at Allison. “Maybe you can give her a ride.”

“Sure,” Stiles said, glancing over at Allison, who nodded cheerfully.
“He wants me to protect you,” Allison told him lightly, after Derek and Scott had disappeared into the trees.

Stiles huffed. “What, I can’t protect myself?”

“I’m sure you can,” Allison said. “But it’s always good to have backup. I’ve got a crossbow in my backpack.”

“Do you now,” Stiles said slowly, eyeing her bag with interest. “I hope the safety’s on. My Jeep doesn’t need any more holes in it.”

They headed into town, and Stiles dropped Allison and her bike (and her crossbow) off at the big Argent house in a neighborhood of similarly huge houses (“Most of our neighbors are lawyers,” Allison said brightly, as Stiles gaped). At the library, Lydia sat behind the desk, chewing on her lip. She gave Stiles a look as sharp as daggers when he came through the door.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Laura told me to ‘hold down the fort’ and went flying out of here.”

Stiles sighed and sat down behind the circulation desk, launching into the tale of the dead deer and Peter. Lydia shuddered. “He was always a little weird,” she told him.

“What happened?” Stiles asked. “Dad said everyone basically ran him out of town.”

“They did,” Lydia said, her brow furrowing. “Keep in mind that Allison and I were in France when most of this happened, so I heard this all second-hand, but after the funeral and Derek was AWOL, Peter started trying to act like he was the alpha. That didn’t sit well with anyone, especially when he started talking about running for mayor, too.” Lydia paused, tapping her fingers against the desk. “He worried people. The fire broke him like it did Derek, but instead of running, Peter just went quiet and dangerous. Laura said looking into his eyes was like looking into those of a dead man’s — just empty. No one wanted him in charge of anything, let alone the entire town. The kicker was when he tried to get Laura to leave. He told her the town would heal faster without her around.” Lydia shrugged. “As you can probably imagine, people didn’t take too kindly to that, especially seeing as he wasn’t even alpha.”

“That’s a shitty thing to do when the rest of your family’s just been killed,” Stiles said quietly.

Lydia nodded her agreement. “The pack tried an intervention after that, but Peter wouldn’t back down. They had to bring in Allison’s dad to help because even though Peter was being awful, he was still pack and it went against every instinct they had to drive him away so soon after such a major loss.”

“That sucks,” Stiles said, his face wrinkling in sympathy. “So he got driven out?”

Lydia nodded again. “Yes. He tried coming back a couple months later and Laura let him stay, but he started stirring things up almost immediately, so he was forced out again.”

Stiles’ stomach twisted as a thought occurred to him. “Lydia, what if he’s got the thing we’re looking for?”

Lydia bit down on her lip, her brow furrowing with worry. “It’s possible,” she said very quietly.

Stiles sighed. “We better hope they catch him, then.”

-
When Stiles got home from work, however, he found the pack hanging out in the living room, looking discouraged. “No luck?”

Scott sighed. “No luck.”

“We found signs of him,” Laura added, frowning slightly. “But the problem is we all did. His scent’s all over town and the woods. It’s impossible to track.”

“Just the way he planned it, I’m sure,” Derek growled from where he sprawled across the couch.

“Well, you might not like this,” Stiles said, and told them about the idea he’d had at the library.

Derek looked sharply at Laura, who chewed on her lip for a moment before she said, “It’s entirely possible he’s got what we need.”

Derek swore. Scott, who was laying on the floor, pushed himself up on his elbows. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

The room fell into thoughtful silence. Stiles stepped over Erica and plunked himself down on the couch next to Derek, who drew his legs back to give him room. Stiles curled his hand around Derek’s ankle and looked around the room absentely. He didn’t have the physical strength or abilities that the werewolves did, but there must be some way he could help. His eyes landed on his book of spells, still laying on the coffee table, and he leaned forward to pick it up and leaf through the spells.

“Maybe there’s something I can do,” he mused aloud. “A missing persons finder.”

The werewolves all looked at him hopefully. “You think so?” Isaac asked.

“Maybe,” Stiles repeated. “And if I can’t find something here, Dr. Deaton might know something.”

It wasn’t an immediate solution, but it was the best they could come up with for the time being. Laura, who was the most familiar with the rare books at the library, promised she’d go through them and let Stiles know if anything promising popped up. The werewolves all headed home after a while, Erica complaining loudly about needing a shower after traipsing around in the woods all day.

Once the house fell silent, Stiles turned to look at Derek. He had his eyes closed, chest gently rising and falling, a faint furrow to his brow. “You tired?” Stiles asked, and Derek cracked one eye open to look at him.

“Frustrated,” Derek admitted after a moment. He sighed. “I feel like I don’t have a handle on anything.”

“Dude, that’s not true,” Stiles protested. “Your uncle’s just a dick.”

Derek sighed again and Stiles shifted around, leaning against Derek’s bent legs until he spread them and Stiles could stretch himself out over Derek’s torso. One of Derek’s hand came up to press between his shoulder blades, heavy and warm, fingers curling against Stiles’ shirt.

“We’re in a rut,” Stiles told him firmly, “but we’re going to get out of it. I swear.”

“Shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep,” Derek said softly, dragging his fingers along Stiles’ jawline.

Stiles turned his head to catch Derek’s hand, kissing the tips of his fingers. “It’s not a promise,” he replied quietly. “It’s a guarantee.”
Despite Stiles and Laura’s best efforts, neither of them were able to scrounge up a spell for finding missing persons, so on Saturday after work, Stiles drove to the hospital to see Dr. Deaton. Scott’s mom brought Stiles to his small office, which was crowded with bookshelves, and Stiles settled down in front of his desk, folding his hands in his lap as he explained the situation with Peter.

Dr. Deaton listened to him patiently, nodding every so often, and when Stiles was finished speaking, he took a moment to think before replying. “Unfortunately,” he said slowly, “I don’t have a spell for you off the top of my head. There are a myriad spells for missing objects — ”

“I know,” Stiles said dejectedly. “I found all of those.” Too bad he needed to know what he was looking for in order to cast them.

Dr. Deaton nodded. “A pity. If you knew of something he had on his person, you might use a spell like that to track down his location.”

“The only thing we think he might have is what we’ve been looking for this whole time,” Stiles sighed. “And since we don’t know what that is…”

Dr. Deaton nodded again. “Not a successful method, I’m afraid.”

“Do you know what it is?” Stiles asked hopefully. “We asked everyone in town and there’s been nothing. Something like that couldn’t just disappear, could it?”

The doctor shook his head. “It’s very unlikely. Such an object would be highly magical in its own right, and would keep itself somewhere safe.”

“It would know?” Stiles asked, his skin crawling.

“In a sense, yes,” Dr. Deaton said. “It’s not sentient, but it will have a certain awareness to it, to keep it away from harm. Something like that can’t be lost.”

“So why can’t we find it?” Stiles asked, frustrated.

“I can’t answer that,” Dr. Deaton said, giving him a sympathetic smile. “Sadly.”

Stiles sighed and got to his feet. “Well,” he said, “thanks anyway.”

“Stiles,” Dr. Deaton said patiently. “When you’re ready, we should begin your training. If you are unable to find the object necessary for the ritual, your magic may be able to stabilize the town — or at least keep things from getting worse.”

“Seriously?” Stiles asked. “Why can’t we just do that, then?”

“Because it’s only a temporary solution,” Dr. Deaton told him, “and it’s dangerous.” His eyes flickered down Stiles’ arms and Stiles swallowed, looking down at the thick red lines on the insides of his wrists where Jennifer had cut him open. He understood.

“Take care,” Dr. Deaton said gently, and Stiles went home.

“Maybe it’s in the basement of town hall or something,” Stiles said later, close to midnight, while he climbed into bed next to Derek. Derek was reading the previous emissary’s journal again, looking half asleep. Stiles nudged him and Derek blinked at him tiredly.
“In the town hall?” Derek frowned off into the distance. “It seems…wrong. If Deaton’s right and the object knows where to put itself, why would it make itself impossible to find?”

“That’s true,” Stiles sighed, thumping back against his pillows. “But if that’s the case, why doesn’t it just show up next to you? You’d think it’d know it’s needed.”

Derek shrugged expressively. Stiles gave up for the time being and flipped onto his side, watching Derek turn the page of the journal. “Anything interesting in there?”

“Depends on what you find interesting,” Derek replied. “Nothing about the ritual. Just a lot of stuff about the town.”

“Anything helpful, then?”

“ Mostly memories,” Derek said softly, brushing his fingers across a delicate drawing of a wolfsbane plant.

Stiles stared at the little leatherbound book and the tiny cupboard at the back of the closet where he’d found it. Something occurred to him. “Derek,” he said. “Did your parents have a safety deposit box?”

Derek’s head came up sharply. “There’s an idea,” he said. “I think they did — Laura would know.”

Laura did know; she came over for breakfast the following morning and Derek asked her before she’d even said hello. The urgency in his voice stopped her short and she frowned. “This is about the object, isn’t it?”

Derek nodded and Stiles said, “Well?”

“They did,” Laura said, slowly sinking down onto the couch. “I saw it, Der. I had to get it opened after the fire because they had copies of their wills in there. But I don’t remember —”

“Think,” Derek said forcefully. “Was there anything that could have been it?”

Laura shook her head. “Not off the top of my head. There was some jewelry — I don’t know, Der.”

“Let’s go,” Stiles said eagerly. “I mean, you have access to it, right?”

“It’s Sunday,” Laura pointed out. “The bank’s closed.”

“Monday, then,” Stiles said impatiently, and they all agreed: Monday.

The following morning, Derek and Stiles met Laura in front of Beacon Hills Federal Credit Union at eight sharp. The moment the doors were unlocked, they went inside and Laura presented the key to the security deposit box. The woman helping them didn’t want to let Stiles into the vault because his name wasn’t on the security box’s authorized user list, but the manager was an old high school friend of Laura’s and when she heard what they were looking for, and that Stiles was the new town emissary, she ushered them right in.

Derek paced anxiously around the small viewing room while they waited for the manager to bring in the box. Laura watched him worriedly. “Just don’t get your hopes up too high, Der,” she said gently and Derek made a stressed whining noise.

“It has to be here,” he said, clenching his teeth. “If it’s not — ”
“We’ll figure something out,” Laura finished patiently. “Stop pacing; you’re stressing me out.”

But Derek didn’t stop moving until the manager reappeared with the box in her arms. It was a large one, a foot cubed and after she set it down on the table, she respectfully left again.

“Oh, okay,” Laura said, looking nervous. She pulled out the key and stuck it in the lock. “Here goes nothing.”

Stiles felt the cold, clean buzz of magic as soon as she turned the key, intensifying as she opened the box. They all leaned forward, the tops of their heads touching as they peered into it. Stiles heard Derek exhale slowly. Laura reached into the container and began pulling things out, laying them on the table to examine — folders of documents, small ring boxes, larger cardboard boxes. Stiles could feel magic emanating from several of them, but he didn’t reach for any of them; this stuff was all intensely personal and he didn’t feel comfortable reaching out and touching anything unless it was offered first.

“God, I’d forgotten about some of this stuff,” Laura said quietly, opening a box to find a plaster cast set of baby’s footprints. Stamped below the tiny footprints was a name — Cora — and a birth date. Laura traced her fingers over the plaster slowly. “I didn’t take a lot of time to look after the fire. I was just trying to find their wills, you know?”

Stiles glanced up at her, then over at Derek and found him standing there with a distressed look on his face, his eyes burning crimson. “Hey, Derek?” Stiles said quietly, and Laura looked up sharply.

Derek shut his mouth, jaw working for a moment before he said roughly, “Smells like them.”

Laura dropped the plaster with a clatter and immediately turned into him, flinging her arms around his neck. Derek exhaled shakily and curled his arms around her. Stiles looked away from them, feeling uncomfortably like he was intruding.

“You can go,” Laura said softly, but she was talking to Derek, not Stiles. “We can do this some other time.”

Derek shook his head. “No,” he said, voice still rough. “It’s okay. I can do this.”

Laura hesitated for a moment and then said, “If you’re sure.”

Derek nodded, his face going grim and determined. They turned back to the table and began opening boxes, carefully examining the contents of each. Most of them contained precious momentos with no trace of magic — Laura set these all aside, though Derek lingered over the small box that contained his parents’ wedding bands, fingers ghosting over the cold metal.

Some of the items in the box were magic. Laura opened a jewelry box containing a gold pendant set with a large sapphire that almost vibrated with magic. Laura said that she could remember their great-grandmother wearing it, though she had no idea what its powers were. Derek and Stiles both shook their heads; it wasn’t what they were looking for. There were other items — a locket and ring set that burned Stiles’ fingers when he touched them, and a thin ledger full of columns and columns of numbers none of them could puzzle out.

“I don’t know what half this stuff is,” Laura confessed as they neared the bottom of the box. “I think this box has been in the family forever.”

It was mostly papers at the bottom of the box, birth certificates and social security cards and deeds to land. As Laura lifted out the final folder, though, she exclaimed, “Oh!” and her hand darted back into the box. When she retracted it, she held a small statue of a wolf carved from hematite, which glittered
dully under the lights. It was incredibly detailed, from the scruff of fur around its neck to the claws sticking from its toes, darker flecks of obsidian marking the solemn eyes.

“I remember this,” Derek said quietly, his face softening as Laura placed it in his hands. “It sat on the windowsill in the kitchen for a long time.”

“You think that’s it?” Stiles said excitedly, but Derek shook his head.

“No,” he replied. “There’s not much magical about this.”

“You should hold on to it,” Laura told Derek. “There’s no reason for it to be in here.”

Derek nodded slowly, his fingers curling around the stone figurine. Laura sighed when she looked into the box. “That was all that was left in there.”

“We struck out yet again,” Stiles said gloomily. He swallowed, subconsciously rubbing his hands over the healing cuts on his arms. It was beginning to look as though Dr. Deaton’s last-resort suggestion might indeed be their only option.

“Well,” Laura said, carefully placing folders and boxes back into the security box, “at least we got a trip down memory lane out of it. What do you guys say to some breakfast?”

They left the bank, stepping into the bright morning sunshine, and headed down Main Street toward the diner. Everyone they passed on the street smiled and said hello, but Laura was the only one of them who responded. Stiles was busy watching Derek, who looked lost in thought, the small figurine still clasped in his hand. They slid into a booth at the diner, Laura on one side and Stiles and Derek on the other, and it was a while before any of them spoke.

“I bet it’s Peter,” Laura said eventually, sighing as she propped her chin on her elbow.

Derek echoed her sigh, his eyes flitting around the crowded diner as he poured packet after packet of sugar into his coffee. Laura reached out and smacked his hand. “You’re going to rot your teeth out.”

Derek bared said teeth at her moodily. “I was a wolf for five years,” he said curtly. “Let me have my goddamn vices.”

Stiles reached out and picked up the little wolf carving, which Derek had set down on the table. It sat heavy in his hand, cool and smooth to the touch. He flipped it over and found a carving on its belly; two letters, J. H. “Who did this belong to?” he asked curiously.

Laura gave Derek — who was tearing open another packet of sugar — the evil eye and said to Stiles, “Mom said it’s been in the family for decades. We always thought it might have belonged to Joshua Hale.”

“Oh,” Stiles said. “The town founder?”

Laura nodded. “Or his father, maybe — Johannes.”

“Huh,” Stiles said absently, setting the wolf back down on the table as their waitress came back with their orders. He looked a little despondently at the large plate of waffles he’d decided on; he didn’t have much of an appetite at that moment.

“Come on,” Laura said, digging into her hashbrowns. “Don’t give up. Let’s go back to the library after this and Derek, you can take a look around and see if anything calls out to you.”
“I did that the other day,” Stiles pointed out.

“Yeah, well, you’re not the alpha, are you?” Laura retorted, jabbing her fork in his direction before burying it in her scrambled eggs. “Der? That sound good?”

“Fine,” Derek grumbled, stabbing at his sausage.

Stiles was halfway through his waffles when his phone rang. He grunted and pulled it from his pocket, swallowing down his mouthful when he saw it was his dad calling. “What’s up?”

“Where are you?” his dad asked sharply.


His father exhaled roughly. “We’re starting to get calls in. People have been seeing Peter. It sounds like he’s headed toward the center of town.”

“What?” Derek snarled, shooting to his feet. “That fucker — ”

He made to head for the diner door but Laura scrambled after him, grabbing his arm. “Hey, whoa!” she protested. “Just hold on — let’s think this through.”

Derek shook his arm, his eyes burning red around the edges. “This is my problem!” he snarled, breaking free and heading for the front door.

“Oh no you don’t; we’re a pack,” Laura muttered, pulling her phone from her pocket as she followed Derek out the door. “Hey, Scott — ”

“Stiles?” his dad said in his ear. Stiles jumped a little, so distracted by Derek and Laura that he’d forgotten he was on the phone. “Where are you?”

“Leaving the diner,” Stiles replied, hastily pulling out his wallet and dumping a pile of bills on the table. He shoved the little stone wolf into his pocket and headed for the door.

“Okay,” Dad said grimly. “I’m coming to find you.”

“You don’t have to!” Stiles protested, scrambling out of the diner and onto the street. “I’m pretty sure Derek’s got this under control.” He swung his head around, looking for the aforementioned alpha, and spotted him far down the street, Laura running after him.

“It’s my job,” his father replied grimly. “I’ll be there soon.”

Stiles sighed exasperatedly and hung up, breaking into a run as he tried to keep up with Derek and Laura. It was a gorgeous day, skies blue and patched with white tufts of clouds, the sun shining warmly down on the street. There seemed to be a lot of people out and about — walking to work, maybe, or taking their kids to the park at the end of the block. It seemed almost normal, but even as Stiles ran, he could see people’s heads turning in the direction of the library, looks of bewilderment — and even fear — on their faces. The source of this became apparent soon enough as Peter Hale came sauntering up the middle of the road, walking on the double yellow line.

Derek made a furious noise when he saw his uncle and stepped out into the road, narrowly avoiding behind hit by a middle-aged woman in a station-wagon who was too busy gawking at Peter to notice him. Derek didn’t seem to notice her, either; all his attention was on Peter. Even as Stiles stared, Derek shifted, long claws punching out from the ends of his fingers, brow growing protruded and harsh, eyes burning scarlet. As Peter drew near, Derek tilted his head back and howled.
Goosebumps broke out on Stiles’ arms — he’d never heard a sound like it, so low he could feel it in his bones, then rising so high it almost hurt. Laura, a couple yards ahead of him, lifted her chin to join in, and beyond them, somewhere maybe streets away, more voices rose to join the howl — the rest of the pack showing their support. A challenge, Stiles thought with a shudder, angry and defiant.

Derek dropped his head and threw himself at Peter with a furious snarl. Peter met him in a blur of motion and for a moment they moved so quick Stiles could barely tell them apart, limbs swinging and claws flashing and mouths snarling. When they pulled apart, as suddenly as they’d started, Derek’s nose was bleeding and the front of Peter’s shirt had been slashed to pieces.

“Well met, nephew,” Peter said sourly, licking blood from the corner of his mouth.

Derek swiped at the blood leaking from his nose, eyes following Peter as he casually walked the edge of the circle their onlookers had formed around them, concerned faces watching the two werewolves. Peter’s eyes moved constantly, flickering from Derek to the crowd around them. He smirked faintly when he looked at Stiles and Stiles glared back. “Why did you come back?” Derek asked coldly. “I think we made it clear you’re not welcome in Beacon Hills.”

“Well, Peter repeated softly. “Funny you should say ‘we.’ Where were you five years ago when your pack needed you, Derek?” Derek flinched and Peter smiled, triumphant, though the look faded when he added, “I came back because even in Los Angeles I could feel this town dying. It’s under your protection, Derek; why aren’t you protecting it?” His last words snapped out, harsh as a whip, and Derek took an uncertain step backward. Stiles could see the doubt in his eyes; all that worry that people blamed him for the failure of the town, all the fear that it was his fault.

“It’s not,” Stiles whispered, his hands clenching at his sides. “It’s not.” He longed to step up beside Derek, to take his hand and tell him it wasn’t true — but this fight was between Peter and Derek.

“You hid,” Peter said scornfully. “Your family needed you and you turned your back on them. You don’t deserve to be alpha!”

Derek made a distressed noise and launched himself again at Peter, but it seemed half-hearted this time; Peter threw him off easily and Derek went stumbling back across the pavement. He threw himself at Peter again and Peter landed a hard punch to the side of his head. Derek dropped to his knees, spitting blood. Stiles stepped forward anxiously, unaware he was even moving until Laura stopped him with a hand to his chest. Stiles forced himself to stand still, biting down on his lip. The street was so quiet, more and more people joining the crowd as word spread.

“I was ready,” Peter hissed, circling around Derek, ready to strike the final blow at any moment. “I was ready and willing and yet — ”

“They didn’t want you,” Derek said, spitting more blood onto the pavement.

Peter sneered. “I — ”

“They didn’t want a ruler,” Derek told him. “They drove you out. They made their choice.” His eyes moved from Peter to the silent crowd around them. Some people smiled back.

“You’ve let this town fall to pieces!” Peter snarled, swinging a clawed fist at Derek, who ducked it. Peter made a furious noise, gesturing around at the gathered townspeople. “This — this is who you choose? This town is dying and the blame rests on his shoulders!”

No one said a word; most of the people gathered them around were, in fact, glaring at Peter. There came movement from the crowd — the rest of the pack arriving, stepping onto the road in a loose
circle, their faces turned to their alpha. Derek seemed to straighten with their silence, body full with self-assurance, a new mantle of control settling around his shoulders. Stiles fought back a grin; he’d told Derek, hadn’t he? The town didn’t hate him — they loved him.

Peter sensed it too; he hunched his shoulders, stepping back as Derek rose to his feet. Sudden movement next to Stiles made him turn, momentarily distracted; his dad stood there, one hand touching the gun at his side, a frown on his face as he watched the tense circle of werewolves. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Stiles, who shook his head. He didn’t think that intervening would be a good idea. To his relief, his dad made no move to step in, though his hand remained on his holster.

“You have a choice, Peter,” Derek said, taking a step forward, his movement easy and casual, yet coiled like a spring, ready for attack. “Beta or omega. It’s up to you.”

“Not good enough,” Peter snarled. “I’ll take the third option.” He launched himself at Derek this time, and Derek met his attack, driving his shoulder into Peter’s chest to throw him backward into Boyd. Boyd caught Peter easily, shoving him forward into Derek, who wrapped a hand around Peter’s neck and slammed him to the ground.

“Submit,” Derek snarled. Peter growled at him, struggling against his grasp. Derek slammed him back against the pavement. “Submit!”

Peter glared up at him and then, by degrees, tilted his chin up, exposing his throat to Derek. Derek let go of him roughly, unbending his knees. “Get out of here,” he told Peter coldly. “Go back to whatever hellhole you call home and stay there.”

“So it is, then,” Peter snarled. “I’ll enjoy watching this place consume you all.” He spat at Derek’s feet and turned, trotting off down the road, the crowd parting to let him through.

“Follow him,” Derek told his betas. “I want to know he’s left our territory.”

Laura and the others nodded and set off after Peter, the crowd watching them go. “Good riddance!” someone in the crowd yelled, and suddenly everyone was cheering and yelling, the noise deafening. Stiles saw the startled look on Derek’s face as the crowd swelled around him, people laughing and clapping him on the back and shaking his hand. Derek turned his head, eyes finding Stiles’ through the crowd, and Stiles grinned. “Proud of you,” he said, knowing full well that Derek could hear him over the noise of the crowd, and Derek threw back his head and laughed.

“You think it was all right, letting Peter go like that?” Stiles asked a little while later. The joyous crowd had dispersed and he and Derek and his dad were walking up to the sheriff’s station to make a report.

Derek shrugged. “He’s family,” he said, sounding a little lost.

“That may be,” Stiles’ dad said, “but you remember that he was willing to kill you — and Stiles. Family only goes so far.”

“You’re right,” Derek said quietly, the corners of his mouth turning downward. Stiles felt sorry for the disappearance of the happiness he’d shown surrounded by the crowd of townspeople, smiling and laughing and looking happier than Stiles had ever seen him; he’d gotten a glimpse of the old Derek, the boy laughing in the family photo that hung in the library.

“I’ll be inside,” Stiles’ dad said as they reached the station. “Whenever you’re ready.” He left them
standing outside the station doors. Stiles hesitated before tucking himself against Derek’s side, a little relieved when Derek curled an arm around him, turning to press his nose against Stiles’ temple and inhale deeply.

“I’m sorry you had to do that,” Stiles muttered.

Derek exhaled roughly, his breath ruffling Stiles’ hair. “I should have just killed him,” he said quietly. “He’ll be back — he’s that kind of person.”

Stiles shrugged. “If he does, you’ll send him packing again. Or we’ll do it together — we’re a pack.”

“We are,” Derek said, sounding a little surprised, like he’d finally realized everyone was on his side. “We are,” he repeated, sounding a little more sure of himself. Stiles looked at him and found him smiling faintly.

“We are,” Stiles agreed, slipping his hand into Derek’s, something settling inside his chest when Derek squeezed his hand. “Hey, um — we have a problem, though.”

“What’s that?”

“We didn’t find out if Peter knew anything about the ritual object,” Stiles said, a little anxiously.

“He didn’t,” Derek said quietly. “If he had, he would have tried to use it as leverage.”

Stiles nodded slowly, swallowing back the disappointment rising in his chest. If Peter didn’t have what they needed, that meant they were pretty much out of options. From the look on Derek’s face, he knew it too.

“Come on,” Stiles said, tugging on his hand. “Dad’s probably getting impatient.”

When they stepped through the doors, however, this didn’t seem to be the case; Stiles’ dad was leaning against the front desk, joking with a couple of deputies.

“Don’t you guys have crimes to be solving?” Stiles asked sarcastically, leaning up beside his dad, who snorted.

“You ready to make your statement?”

Stiles nodded but Derek jerked his head toward the hall. “Bathroom,” he said. Stiles watched him turn and get waylaid by the deputies, who all wanted to shake his hand. Stiles grinned to himself and told his dad, “I’m gonna go sit.”

His dad waved him away, attention caught by Deputy Knox, who was telling him about the stone wall she and her husband were installing. Stiles rolled his eyes and ducked into his office, which seemed oddly still after all the commotion out on the street. It was quiet enough that he couldn’t hear the deputies and his dad talking about in the hall, but the sound of the building’s protective wards buzzed loud in his ears. He dropped into a chair, glad for a moment off his feet, a brief second of quiet after all the activity that morning. His head spun a little as he tried to wrap his mind around everything that had happened; Peter’s arrival and subsequent dismissal had happened so fast, a ‘blink and you might miss it’ moment.

It was important, though, that it had happened in public, Stiles was certain. Important for Peter, because he was faced with the entire town and their dislike. Important for Derek, because he got to see how the town loved him. Important for the town, too, to see how their alpha dealt with a problem like Peter. Stiles thought Derek had handled it well — even if killing Peter would have meant
eliminating their problem with him, Stiles didn’t think that Derek’s first major act as alpha should be bloodshed. Magnanimity, though — that was a good start.

Stiles shook his head distractedly. He was having trouble concentrating over the sound of magic. It seemed loud in the small office — louder than it should be, anyway, not like the background hum of the house or town hall. He wondered if there was something wrong with the warding spell, like the way the one on the rare books grate at the library had gone warped and shocked him so violently. He got up from the chair, antsy now, and ranged around the office, eyes flickering over the photographs on his dad’s desk, and his combat medals from his time in the army hanging on the wall right next to a drawing of their old house Stiles had done when he was six. He swung around to peer through the windows, but they just looked out on the station parking lot — nothing interesting there. He turned to look at the bookshelves next to the door and paused, a weird feeling settling in his stomach when his eyes fell on the wolf skull sitting on the top of the bookcase.

The last time he’d been in his dad’s office, it had been mere weeks after moving to town, the first night Peter showed up in the backyard — he’d just barely started to know Derek. He’d known nothing about werewolves or magic or any of the other weird shit happening in town, long before he’d been strung up and almost killed by a dark druid, weeks before he’d kissed a man who could grow claws at will.

Stiles’ hands trembled as he reached out to touch the skull. There was no explosion, no rush of sensation or sting of magic — just cool, cream-colored bone under his fingers. He knew, though, with certainty that this was the object they’d been searching for for weeks. He wanted to laugh; missing for five years, the whole town searching for it, and it’d been sitting in his dad’s office the entire time, safe and sound.

Stiles’ head snapped up as the office door opened and his dad stepped inside, saying over his shoulder, “— do what we can. I’m sure there are other options.” He glanced at Stiles, raised his eyebrows at the skull in his hands, and headed for his desk. Derek stepped in behind him and looked over at Stiles, his eyebrows drawing together when he saw the skull.

“Derek,” Stiles said quietly, meaningfully, and god, Derek got it. His head went back sharply, pale eyes going big and wide. After a long moment where Stiles’ dad watched the two of them with confusion on his face, Derek exhaled and stepped forward. His hands came up to touch Stiles’ and they were shaking, just like Stiles’ had.

“Hey,” Stiles’ father said behind them, his voice sharp. “Is that — ”

Stiles nodded, his eyes fixed on Derek’s face. Derek’s eyes were on the skull, fingers slowly tracing over the smooth bone before gently lifting it from Stiles’ hands and flipping it over. He breathed out roughly at the sight of the initials carved on the interior dome of the skull. J.H., just like on the belly of the wolf carving. “Joshua Hale,” Derek said quietly.

“You think it’s his?” Stiles asked, a little weirded out by the thought.

Derek nodded slowly. “It makes sense, in a way,” he said softly. “Our family’s dedicated our lives to this town. Kind of stands to reason that a part of the founder is part of the ritual.”

“Literally,” Stiles pointed out.

Derek snorted quietly. When he finally lifted his head to look at Stiles, his eyes were soft with relief. “We can save it,” he said, his voice a little unsteady. “We can fix the town.”

Stiles smiled. “Yeah, we can,” he agreed softly. “Told you we’d find it.”
Derek leaned over to kiss him, his touch gentle and warm; Stiles could feel the care in it, the unspoken thank you. Behind them, his dad coughed and they pulled apart, Stiles’ cheeks flushing red. His dad didn’t seem all that bothered; mostly, he looked bewildered.

“That thing,” he said, almost embarrassed, “has been in my office the entire time?”

“Seems that way,” Derek told him, smiling faintly.

“Jesus,” Stiles’ dad sighed, dragging a hand over his face. “I didn’t even think about it.”

“Probably why it ended up here,” Stiles told his father. “Somewhere no one would mess with it.”

“Huh,” Dad said, eyeing the skull.

Word of the find quickly spread through town; as Stiles and Derek walked back down the street to where the Jeep was still parked at the bank, the skull carefully cradled in Derek’s arms, they found themselves stopped by person after person, all eager to check out the skull and give them their enthusiastic congratulations. Halfway back to the bank they met the pack returning. Laura knew what the skull was immediately, throwing her arms around Derek with an excited cry. The rest of the pack picked up on it quickly; Scott tilted his head back and gave a triumphant howl everyone else joined in on — even Derek, a blissful look on his face.

Somehow, everyone ended up back at the Stilinski house and the day became a celebration, the pack lounging in the living room, relaxed and full of laughter. Stiles broke out all the food people had dropped off at the house over the past few weeks, as well as a crate of wine a local vineyard had left them in thanks for some advice Derek had given him on a supernatural blight his grape crop was suffering from. Laura called Lydia and told her to close the library; she and Allison showed up half an hour later and, from the sounds of it, most of the town had declared the day a holiday, most of the businesses on Main Street shutting their doors for the rest of the day.

Derek was mostly silent; he seemed content to sit back on the couch and watch everyone talk around him, a faint smile on his face the entire time. Stiles had never seen him look so relaxed. His contentedness seemed to pass itself along to the rest of the pack, everyone loose-limbed and happy.

“This is the way it used to be,” Scott told Stiles, jovial and a little tipsy sometime in the late afternoon as they stood in the kitchen and uncorked another bottle of wine. “Before, you know.”

Stiles nodded in understanding. “Feels good,” he said.

“Yeah,” Scott said, his voice going soft and a little sad. “I missed it.”

Stiles slung a companionable arm around Scott’s shoulder as they headed back into the living room. “Times are changing, man,” he said. Derek, sunk so deep into the couch he looked like he’d grown into it, caught Stiles’ eye and smiled.

Everyone was still at the house when his dad came back later that evening. He paused in the doorway to stare at them stretched out around the living room, looking slightly exasperated. “Three of you,” he said, giving Stiles an especially pointed look, “are underage, and you’re drinking at the sheriff’s house.”

“Come on,” Stiles groaned from where he lay on the couch, head cushioned on Derek’s lap. “Dad, I’m two months away from being legal.”

“Uh huh,” his father replied, sounding unimpressed. He leveled a dark look at Derek. “Aren’t you supposed to be keeping your pack in check?”
Derek didn’t even try to look chastened. “Kids will be kids,” he said solemnly, then grunted when Stiles punched him in the thigh.

Stiles’ dad gave up trying to shame them and disappeared back outside, reappearing an hour later with a stack of pizza boxes. He confiscated everyone’s keys and then left them to their own devices with a roll of his eyes. Stiles could hear him upstairs, whistling to himself. He sounded happy. Stiles hid his grin against Derek’s leg.

The house didn’t quiet down until long after midnight; since Stiles’ dad had confiscated everyone’s keys, almost everyone ended up crashing somewhere in inside — Scott and Allison being the exceptions, as they could walk to his house. Boyd and Erica got the bed in the guest bedroom, while Lydia and Laura got the couch in the den and living room, respectively. There was no place left for Isaac, but he didn’t seem too bothered, constructing himself a nest of blankets on the floor of the living room and settling in with a contented sigh. It wasn’t long before Stiles and Derek were the only ones left awake in the house, quietly cleaning the downstairs. Stiles grinned as he brought empty wine bottles into the kitchen; he could hear Lydia snoring and couldn’t wait to blackmail her over it.

Stiles leaned against the counter and watched Derek rinse out the wine bottles. He looked content, his eyes half-closed, long lashes casting shadows on his face. He glanced over at Stiles like he could feel his eyes on him, and gave him a placid smile.

“What?” Derek asked quietly, raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

Stiles shrugged, smiling faintly. “Nothing,” he said. “I just like looking at you.”

Derek stepped away from the sink, drying his hands on the cloth hanging from the oven door. “Is that so?” he murmured, taking another step into Stiles’ space, his fingers curling in Stiles’ belt loops. “Cross my heart,” Stiles assured him.

“Hm,” Derek said thoughtfully, leaning in to press a slow kiss to Stiles’ lips. He pulled away after a moment, but only far enough to ask, “You tired?”

Stiles shook his head. He was astoundingly clear-headed considering he’d had most of two bottles of wine, as well as half a pizza. If he laid down, he’d probably be out cold in thirty seconds, so as long as he remained vertical, he was good.

“Let’s sit,” Derek said softly. He towed Stiles to the back door and they stepped out into the cool air of the night. The moon shone bright over the trees, almost full. It was kind of amazing, really, just how much had happened since the last full moon. Derek sat himself down onto the edge of the porch and, to Stiles’ slight surprise, tugged Stiles down to sit on his lap. He hooked his arms around Stiles’ waist and Stiles settled back against him with a happy sigh, laughing when Derek hooked his chin over Stiles’ shoulder and nosed at his cheek.

It felt good to be able to sit outside and not have to worry about what lurked in the shadows. Stiles could focus on the night itself, the glitter of stars in the sky, the buzz of night insects, the cool taste of the air. He wondered what Derek could hear and smell.

“I want to thank you,” Derek said after a while, his voice soft. “For everything you’ve done.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Stiles replied. “It’s what anyone would have done.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Derek said. He drew his nose along Stiles’ jaw, breath hot against his throat. “Just shut up and be gracious.”
Stiles grinned, skin tingling at Derek’s touch. “Okay, fine,” he said. “You’re welcome.”

“Good,” Derek breathed, his arms tightening around Stiles’ waist as he dipped his head, lips brushing against Stiles’ neck, frustratingly light. Stiles squirmed in his grip, but Derek held him still, tongue flicking out to trace the hinge of Stiles’ jaw, teeth scraping his skin.

“Come on,” Stiles sighed, heat flushing his cheeks. “Can I just — ” He broke off with a strangled noise as Derek bit down on his throat — not hard, but hard enough to make Stiles’ toes curl. “Okay,” he mumbled, tilting his head back against Derek’s shoulder to give him better access. Derek made a pleased noise, a rumbling sort of sound that came from deep in his chest. Stiles laughed breathlessly as Derek sucked a bruise into his skin. “Are you purring?”

Derek pulled away from him with a wet noise. “I’m not a cat,” he said indignantly.

“Coulda fooled me,” Stiles grinned, eyes soft as he tugged on Derek’s hair. “You going to let me return the favor?”

Derek huffed, sounding put-upon, but acquiesced, loosening his grip on Stiles’ waist so Stiles could twist around, straddling Derek’s thighs. He gazed down at Derek for a long moment, Derek’s solemn face painted silver and softened by the moonlight. Derek gazed back at him, his pale eyes bleached gray in the light, hands light at Stiles’ waist. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Stiles told him softly, his heart banging in his chest as he rubbed his thumbs against Derek’s cheeks.

For a long moment, Derek just stared up at him, his face inscrutable, and then he surged up, bringing their mouths together in a fierce kiss, fingers digging into Stiles’ hips. Stiles met him gladly, hands slipping down to grip at his shoulders. They’d never kissed like this before, fierce and uncontrolled, Derek’s hands gliding under his shirt to palm at his skin, digging his nails into Stiles’ shoulder blades. There’d always been something cautious about the way they touched, like maybe Derek was afraid Stiles was fragile.

“Have you been holding out on me?” Stiles mumbled into Derek’s hairline as Derek bent his head and fairly attacked Stiles’ neck again.

Derek paused, looking contemplative. “Not entirely,” he said. “I guess I was just waiting for things to calm down.”

“And?” Stiles pressed, half smiling. “The verdict?”

Derek blinked at him languidly. “All clear,” he said, “to the best of my knowledge.”

“Good,” Stiles said with fervor, tangling his fingers in the soft hair at the base of Derek’s skull and pulling him in for another long kiss.

They got a little lost in touch after that, hands and mouths roaming. Stiles was hard in his pants, rocking down against Derek with his hands on Derek’s shoulders to keep his balance, mouth open and panting against his neck, when the light came on in the kitchen and he froze. Derek stilled as well, tilting his head back so he could follow Stiles’ gaze, a faint frown on his face as he listened. “Lydia getting a drink,” he murmured after a moment, and Stiles relaxed. The light went off again a second later and Derek tilted his head back, nuzzling at Stiles’ neck. “Bruises,” he mumbled. “Broke the rule again.”

“You know,” Stiles said quietly, twitching his hips downward, enjoying the way Derek hissed against his throat, “I just can’t find it in myself to care right now.”

“I’ll take that as an open invitation,” Derek murmured, his hands sliding round to Stiles’ back,
slipping under the band of his underwear.

“Hm,” Stiles hummed, gasping softly as Derek’s fingers curled against his ass, pressing him down so their hips ground together. His body felt as though it was on fire, his spark pulsing under his collarbone. Every touch of Derek’s hands and mouth vibrated through his body, causing ripples that echoed from his ribs to the tips of his fingers and toes. “Am I glowing?” he mumbled, lips dragging against Derek’s cheek.

Derek kissed him as they rocked together, heat building between them. “Never seen a star shine brighter,” he whispered. Stiles bit back a moan as he came in his pants — just like a teenager, he thought muddily — overwhelmed by Derek’s gentle words and even gentler touch. Derek pressed their foreheads together, a soft smile on his face as he stilled Stiles’ movements with his hands on Stiles’ hips, holding him steady.

“God,” Stiles mumbled, dizzy, body flooded with a hazy golden feeling. “I don’t think you’re real.”

“Real enough,” Derek murmured, nuzzling at his sweaty cheeky. “Can you…?”

“Yeah, let me — ” Stiles said, pressing in for a languid kiss while his hands slipped between them, nimbly unbuckling Derek’s belt and unzipping his pants. His fingers paused at the band of Derek’s boxers, trembling at the heat from Derek’s skin. “Is it okay? To touch you?”

“Please,” Derek said softly, and Stiles smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners. He squeezed his hand down the front of Derek’s pants and curled his fingers around him, sighing at the way Derek fit in his hand, hot and real.

“Real,” Stiles repeated out loud, whispering it into Derek’s hair. Derek snorted softly, his breath hitching as Stiles jerked him off slowly, taking the time to indulge the way he pulsed in Stiles’ hand. When Derek came, he did so silently, mouth open in a silent oh as he pressed his face to Stiles’ neck. Stiles carefully extracted his hand from Derek’s pants, his other hand rubbing up and down Derek’s spine in slow, looping movements. After a long moment, Derek exhaled.

“You too,” he murmured.

“Me what?” Stiles wondered, smiling faintly.

“The best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Derek told him quietly, straightening slowly. His eyes were half-closed, heavy and content. Stiles did nothing to stop the wide smile spreading across his face, heart aching with happiness.

“I’m glad,” he told Derek, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “I’m really glad to hear that.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, foreheads pressed together, surrounded by the night. Eventually, though, Stiles’ knees started to complain about the prolonged kneeling and he said, a little sadly, “You ready for bed?”

“I think I could be ready,” Derek said, amused. He steadied Stiles as he got to his feet, then followed, trailing close behind as they headed back inside. Stiles’ eyes were closed before his head hit the pillow, but he had time before drifting off to be aware of Derek arranging himself around him, a steady wall of heat and muscle curled around Stiles’ back. Stiles smiled into his pillow as Derek threw an arm around him, tangling their fingers together. They’d done it. They’d won.

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Somehow, the Stilinski house turned into the place to be; without fail, Stiles came home from work
every day that evening to at least three pack members lounging in the living room or out on the porch. Derek looked increasingly smug and content and Stiles really couldn’t fault him for that, especially because the pack actually did stuff — Laura made dinner, Boyd brought bagels from the bakery he worked at, Isaac fixed the front step Stiles had never got around to. When he came home on Thursday, Derek was sandwiched on the couch between Scott and Boyd, who were determinedly teaching him how to play *Fallout: New Vegas*. He looked bored, rolling his eyes at Stiles as Stiles grinned and passed through the living room.

Isaac was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables, though he looked up when Stiles came into the room, peering curiously into the pot on the counter. “What’s this?”

“Gazpacho,” Isaac said with a haughty sniff. “My mom’s secret recipe.”

“Smells good,” Stiles said.

Isaac smirked at him and said, “Boyd brought some of that foccacia you like.”

Stiles groaned, staggering toward the back door. “You guys are killing me.”

Isaac laughed. Stiles was halfway out the back door, intent on watering his garden, when someone knocked on the front door. Isaac turned his head and, in the living room, all the werewolves lifted their heads curiously. Stiles sighed and crossed back through the house. To his surprise, Dr. Deaton stood on the front porch, casting Stiles one of his enigmatic smiles.

“Hi,” Stiles said curiously. “Did I miss an appointment or something?”

“No,” Dr. Deaton said patiently. “I’m here to talk to Derek.”

Stiles heard Derek shift and a moment later he was at Stiles’ back, pressing up against his shoulder. “Yeah?” Derek asked, his tone guarded.

Deaton smiled faintly. “Derek,” he said, “it’s been a long time.”

Derek nodded jerkily. “Can I help you?”

Deaton smiled again. “I’m actually here to help you,” he said placidly. “The full moon is tomorrow night — a prime time to perform the ritual and get this town back on track.”

Derek breathed in sharply. Stiles said, “You want to come inside?”

Scott and Boyd were on their feet when they came back into the living room, and Isaac lurked in the doorway to the kitchen, looking a little anxious. “Do you want us to leave?” Scott asked Derek, who looked a little uncertain, his eyes flickering over to Dr. Deaton.

“It’s entirely your call,” Dr. Deaton told him. “The ritual is performed alone.”

Derek exhaled angrily. “Does it have to be?”

Dr. Deaton looked a little startled. “I — suppose not.”

“Good,” Derek said firmly. “Then I’m not going to do it alone. The reason we’re in this mess is because everything was kept a secret, and I’m not going to let that happen again.” He nodded at Scott and Boyd. “Stay.”

“Actually,” Dr. Deaton said, “this requires a trip to the nemeton. The ritual must be tailored to each specific site, and I’ve yet to see the tree.”
Derek nodded, his eyes flickering to Stiles. “Are you going to come?”

Stiles shook his head, barely suppressing a shudder at the thought of seeing the tree. “I’ll go with you tomorrow if you want me to, but I’d prefer to stay away from it.”

Derek nodded again and turned, leading the group across the house and out the back door. Isaac elected to stay behind to work on his gazpacho, but Stiles followed them to the edge of the yard, watching them disappear into the trees. He shuddered again and turned away, focusing his attention on the garden.

Stiles was still outside, on his knees pulling weeds, when they returned — Scott and Dr. Deaton at the front conversing cheerfully while Derek and Boyd walked behind, slower and silent. Derek paused by Stiles as the others headed for the house, reaching down to brush his fingers against the back of Stiles’ neck.

“Hey,” Stiles said, tilting his chin up to look at Derek. “Everything good?”

Derek smiled faintly. “We’re good to go.”

That night, Stiles dreamt about the nemeton for the first time in weeks. He stood at the base of it, so massive its upper branches were wreathed in clouds, tall as a skyscraper, limbs reaching out for miles. It shook violently in the wind and then, with a groan like a leviathan rising from the depths of the ocean, began to fall toward him. Stiles ran but he was nowhere near fast enough, the ground shaking under his feet, causing him to stumble and fall to the ground where he found himself trapped, unable to move as the nemeton came screaming down at him.

He woke up pinned under Derek’s weight, struggling and sweating, his breath coming in harsh heaves. “Hey, hey,” Derek said sharply, his hands cupping Stiles’ face. “Stiles.”

As awareness of where he was filtered back to him, Stiles stopping struggling, his hands finding the back of Derek’s shirt and tangling there, glad for the touch of something real. Derek stared down at him, looking worried. “Are you okay?”

Stiles nodded slowly, his breathing still uneven, though it was smoothing out now that he was awake. “Bad dream,” he mumbled, mouth dry.

“I’d say,” Derek said softly. He tilted his head, brushing his cheek against Stiles’. Stiles relaxed by slow degrees, his fingers loosening their death grip on Derek’s shirt. “Do you want to talk about it?” Derek asked, his voice a low rumble.

Stiles sighed. “It’s okay,” he said. “It was just the nemeton.”

Derek frowned faintly. “It frightens you.”

Stiles nodded, not ashamed to admit it. “Even before Jennifer took me,” he told Derek. “I kept having all these weird dreams about it.”

Derek was silent for a long moment. “I noticed,” he said finally. “I’d wake up because your heart rate went through the roof. I’d wake you up sometimes.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said softly. “I really appreciate that.”

Derek nodded, carefully shifting his weight off Stiles and back to the mattress, though he kept one
leg hooked between Stiles’, head resting on the same pillow. Stiles sighed quietly, turning to face Derek, their foreheads touching. It wasn’t long before Stiles drifted back to sleep, weightless this time, undisturbed by dreams.

- 

Derek wasn’t in the house when Stiles rose the next morning, though he’d left a note saying he was off to run the boundary of the town so Stiles wasn’t too worried. Erica showed up as he sat out on the front steps drinking coffee; she seemed a little disappointed Derek wasn’t there, but she was happy enough to sit with Stiles and talk. Stiles gave her a ride back into town — apparently she’d jogged all the way out to the house — and spent a quiet morning working a solo shift at the library.

The door opened around noon, announcing the seventh visitor he’d had all day, though when Stiles looked up he was startled to see Derek coming through the front door, a solemn look on his face. Stiles straightened from the stack of book he’d been entering into the system and grinned.

“Hey buddy,” he said cheerfully. “You’re a welcome surprise.”

Derek rolled his eyes, looking fond, and said, “Are you busy?”

Stiles gestured around at the empty library expansively, raising his eyebrows. “What do you think?”

Derek snorted. “I need your help.”

“Yeah?” Stiles shoved the books aside, leaning his elbows on the counter. “What’s up?”

“I’d like everyone in town to come to the ritual tonight,” Derek told him, leaning against the other side of the counter. “I don’t think this is something that should be kept a secret anymore and Deaton agrees — he thinks that by inviting everyone, the ritual will be more powerful, anyway.”

“Okay,” Stiles agreed. “Sounds like a good plan. What do you need from me?”

“Your body,” Derek said, deadpan, and Stiles laughed. Derek relaxed, eyes crinkling up at the corners, and continued, “I need you to go door to door and let people know. Laura’s already given the all-clear to close the library for the rest of the day.”

“I can do that,” Stiles nodded. “What do I tell people?”

Fifteen minutes later, Stiles had all the lights and computers turned off, signs hung on both the front and back doors.

*Library closed early today.*

*Please come to the nemeton (that big-ass tree out in the preserve) tonight at sundown for a revitalization ritual with your favorite new alpha.*

*See you there!*

- S.S.

- 

Stiles got back to the house around six, right around the time his dad got back. Derek appeared maybe fifteen minutes later and he seemed agitated, ranging around the house while Stiles cooked dinner.
“Dude, cut that out,” Stiles sighed, as Derek twisted to peer out the back windows for the tenth time. “You’re making me nervous.”

“Sorry,” Derek muttered, clearing his throat with an anxious cough. He started picking at the paint on the doorframe instead and Stiles smacked his hand. Derek bared a fang at him but he backed away anyway, looking chastened.

“I understand why you’re nervous,” Stiles told him, “but everything’s going to be fine.”

Derek ran a hand through his hair, looking out at the backyard again, to where the sun was beginning to sink over the trees, dark clouds closing in. “Do you really think so?”

“Yeah, I do,” Stiles snorted, tossing the salad. “I think Deaton knows what he’s doing, and I think you do, too.”

Derek abandoned the window to come stand behind him, curling his arms around Stiles’ waist. He rubbed his face against Stiles’ neck and Stiles let him, even though it was really too hot for such close contact. He knew that it soothed Derek, though, so Stiles let him have his indulgence. Derek didn’t move away until Stiles’ dad came downstairs, freshly showered, but he seemed a little looser.

It started to rain while they ate dinner, not totally unsurprising; it’d been hot and humid all day, with the odd stillness that came before rainfall. Derek looked ruined, his shoulders slumping as he stared out at the darkening backyard, now lit with a yellow-gray light.

“No one’s going to want to come,” he said, sounding absolutely dejected.

“They will,” Stiles said firmly. “This is more important than a little bit of rain.” He hoped so, anyway; it was pouring by the time they had to go, coming down in thick sheets.

Derek stared out the window at it, him mouth turned down at the corners. He shook his head when Stiles asked him if he was coming. “I need to get ready,” he said. “You go ahead; I’ll be there.”

Stiles looked at his dad, who shrugged and pulled out the umbrellas, offering one to Stiles. They set off across the wet backyard, shoes squeaking on the sodden grass. Stiles pulled a face as they stepped into the woods, where it was a different sort of wet. The rain came down through the trees in big wet drops, the air damp and cold.

“He’s not going to back out, is he?” his dad asked as they made their way through the trees, the lights of the house fading behind them.

Stiles shook his head, absentmindedly tugging at his spark to pull his little ball of light into existence, illuminating the way through the darkening woods. “No way,” he said firmly. “Maybe the rest of town will, but he’s the one who’s got to perform the ritual, and there’s no way in hell he’s not going to do it. Not if it’s going to save the town.”

His father nodded. “You’ve got a lot of faith in him.”

“Yeah, I do,” Stiles said fiercely, and they didn’t speak again. Stiles was focused on the deep thrumming in the earth that would lead them to the nemeton. It made his skin crawl, the scars on his wrists aching at the memory of the last time he’d been at the crossroad of the telluric currents. He was scared of the nemeton, it was true; he was afraid of it latching onto him again, sucking him dry. He knew he was stronger now — Deaton had said it wasn’t likely to happen, but that didn’t make the thought of it, or the memory of what had happened, any less terrifying. Like he knew Stiles was getting nervous, his dad put a hand on his shoulder as they drew close to the clearing.
To Stiles’ surprise and gratification, the clearing and surrounding woods were crowded with people. Most of them held a light of some sort — candles, mostly, and flashlights and lanterns, though Stiles spotted a few people with little lights like his, though theirs flickered like candlelight. He saw Dr. Deaton across the clearing, a ring of flames around his bald head like a halo on fire. “Showoff,” Stiles muttered, biting back a smile.

The nemeton didn’t feel as threatening with so many people around; he could feel the magic of telluric currents strong under his feet, converging under the gnarled roots of the nemeton, but mostly he felt the energy of everyone in the clear, bright and alive. It felt a little like a carnival with everyone talking and holding their lights. He knew that Derek had been right to pull the town into the fold; just them all being here, in this clearing, was making things better.

Stiles spotted the werewolf members of the pack standing at the edge of the clearing, huddled under a massive blue-and-white golf umbrella held by Boyd. Stiles tapped his father on the shoulder and nodded over at them. His dad smiled. “Go on, then.”

Stiles trotted across the clearing, his light bobbing in front of him like a tiny guide, and skidded to a halt on the wet grass next to them. It was still raining hard, the temperature dropping low enough that he could see his breath, steaming in the air. He was glad he’d put on jeans and a sweatshirt. “Hey guys,” he said, shaking heavy droplets of rain off his umbrella.

“Hey,” Scott said, turning his bright smile on Stiles. “Where’s Derek?”

“You think this is going to work?” Erica asked him, looking worried, and Stiles had to wonder just how he’d somehow managed to become the authority on the matter.

“I think so,” he told her, the same thing he’d told Derek. Stiles looked at the pack, all of them watching him with wide, anxious eyes. “I trust Derek.”

Isaac exhaled. “Me too,” he said firmly, and everyone else nodded. Stiles grinned.

Back across the clearing, people fell silent and Stiles twisted around to see Derek emerging from the trees, his pace measured. Derek was bare-chested, but his skin was painted with symbols and runes that Stiles couldn’t read. The marks didn’t bleed in the rain — either Derek had painted them with something grease-based and waterproof, or the marks themselves were magic, which wouldn’t have surprised Stiles in the slightest. Derek hadn’t shifted, though his eyes glowed red in the dim light of dusk, and his claws were long and sharp, curled carefully around the skull of his ancestor they’d spent so long searching for. He wore the crown of woven branches Lydia had brought him, the wood pale against his dark hair, plastered to his skull by the pouring rain. Stiles wondered if he was cold without a shirt on, but Derek didn’t seem to be aware of it. He didn’t seem to be aware of anything but the tree, his eyes fixed on its spreading canopy.

Around the clearing, people drew back as though pulled by invisible strings, until the clearing was empty and the town stood in a great circle around the edge of the trees, silent as they watched their alpha step amongst the massive roots of the nemeton. Stiles, sandwiched between Scott and Lydia, stared at Derek’s back and the spiral figure tattooed between his shoulder blades. Had it always been there? How had he not noticed?

Derek stretched his arms forward, lifting the skull to hang it from the tree. There must have been a nail or a hook there — it’d probably been there for generations, Stiles realized, ready to be used for the ceremony year after year. Derek straightened, and only then did his eyes flicker around the clearing, like he was seeing everyone there for the first time. His eyes paused on Stiles, who smiled
encouragingly, and Derek pulled his shoulders back proudly, reaching into his pocket for a slip of paper.

The words he read were strange, alien to Stiles’ ears, like nothing he’d ever heard. Derek’s voice, too, seemed unfamiliar, rolling and booming over the noise of the rain. Slowly, Stiles became aware of an unfamiliar sensation rising in the clearing, lapping at his shins. He could feel power building, buzzing in his chest, not entirely pleasant but energizing. He found himself dropping the umbrella, gasping at the cold shock of the rain, his hands seeking out Scott and Lydia’s. Their hands closed around his, wet and freezing and solid, and he felt the energy in the clearing rise higher. It whined in his ears, almost painfully loud; next to him, Scott flinched but didn’t let go of his hand. Everyone was holding hands, Stiles saw, all around the circle — his dad next to Melissa, Laura next to Finstock — everyone.

The magic in the circle grew to such a pitch that Stiles couldn’t tell if the ground was shaking or if it was in his body, clutching at him right down to the bones. It was scary, in a way, but the tree didn’t feel hungry like it had when Stiles was strung up against it. The magic curling around his shoulders now was curious, exploratory, excited; Stiles couldn’t feel the rain anymore, body cloaked in magic, warm and fresh. Over by the tree, Derek continued to read from the piece of paper, words slurred and half a howl, feverish.

Without warning, the magic burst, breaking over the circle like a shockwave, shooting off into the trees. The nemeton shook like it’d been caught in a gale, showering everyone with twigs and leaves. Derek stamped a foot against the wet earth, tilted his head back, and howled so loud Stiles felt it in his bones, an echo of the magic that’d just encircled them. The pack howled with him and, one by one, so did the people of the town; Lydia, Allison, Finstock — looking delighted — the town council members, the little old lady who grew pot on Ferne Lane, Mr. Sanderson the seven-times widow, even Stiles’ dad. Stiles was one of the last, giving into the call of the bright, wild energy coursing through him.

When the last of the cries faded away, echoing off the hills that gave the town its name, there was a slightly stunned silence, filled only by the sound of the rain, gentle now. Next to Stiles, Lydia was crying, and she wasn’t the only one. Derek turned from the tree, crossing his arms over his chest like he’d suddenly realized he wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“Did it work?” someone called, voice thin in the vastness of the clearing.

Derek twisted to look at whoever had spoken, a long moment passing before he admitted, “Yes,” a grin breaking out on his face. The crowd began to cheer — several people howled again — and swarmed forward around the tree. Stiles pushed his way toward Derek, grinning like a lunatic. Derek saw him coming and dodged the reaching hands that wanted to shake his, slipping around people until he reached Stiles, his face open and happy. Stiles threw his arms around Derek’s neck and Derek whirled him off his feet with a laugh, pressing their mouths together.

“You did it,” Stiles whispered when they broke apart. People laughed around them; someone slapped his back. “You saved us.”

Derek grinned at him, his pale eyes wet. Stiles kissed his forehead, the tip of his nose, each cheek, body full of a golden happiness he couldn’t even begin to subscribe.

“Look!” someone said, pointing up at the tree, and everyone craned their heads up to follow their finger. A collective gasp ran through the crowd as the branches of the nemeton shivered into life, tiny buds burst open to reveal soft white flowers with whorls of delicate pink at their centers. Stiles, mouth open in delighted surprise, looked at Derek, who blinked, a couple tears spilling down his cheeks. He looked at Stiles, expression raw, like he’d been punched in the gut.
“It’s real,” Derek said hoarsely.

Stiles smiled at him, his own eyes burning. “Yeah,” he agreed. “It is.”

Despite the pouring rain, the celebration at the nemeton raged on for hours. Stiles managed to work up the courage to press his hand to the bark of the tree and, to his relief, the magic coursing through the wood no longer felt wrong. It felt pure, like a well of crisp water. Some of the tension seeped out of his shoulders. When he could no longer ignore how cold he was, soaked to the bone, Derek gathered him onto his back and trotted off through the woods. Stiles curled his arms around Derek’s neck and pressed his forehead against Derek’s cheek, eyes suddenly heavy.

“’M proud of you,” he mumbled.

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” Derek replied softly, crossing the backyard with long, sure steps. The house was dim and quiet, the sound of the rain suddenly muffled. Derek carried him upstairs and into his room — their room, Stiles was pretty sure it could be called now — and they slipped out of their sopping wet clothes. The unfamiliar runes written on Derek’s skin had smeared into dark blurs. Derek wiped at them with a dirty shirt before climbing into bed after Stiles and wrapping himself around him like an octopus. Stiles melted under his weight, boneless and utterly content. He dragged his cheek against Derek’s neck in a poor imitation of the move Derek always used on him, murmuring, “You’re mine right?”

“Yeah,” Derek agreed quietly, rubbing a thumb along Stiles’ cheekbone. “I’m yours.”

The next week passed slowly, languid like molasses. Stiles worked his shifts at the library and on his day off, the pack had their beach day. They spent the day at Lake Shastina, basking in the sun and throwing each other into the frigid lakewater. Derek was particularly vicious; no member of the pack was safe from him. He even managed to throw Boyd, who had considerable bulk on him — and then chucked Erica in after when she laughed. She came out of the water screeching — “Like a banshee,” Stiles told Lydia smugly, and Lydia punched him on the arm. Stiles laughed until Derek decided it was his turn in the water. Stiles gave a undignified squawk of surprise when warm hands hooked under his armpits and flung him into the lake.

“Good to know your boyfriend doesn’t play favorites,” Lydia said smugly when Stiles climbed out of the lake, shivering and swearing. Lydia’s words made him freeze in the middle of toweling off, eyes flickering over to where Derek was rummaging through the pile of snacks they’d bought, saying something sarcastic to Scott, who laughed. “You are, right?” Lydia asked softly, watching him.

Stiles nodded jerkily. “We — not in so many words.”

Lydia raised her eyebrows. “Are you Facebook official?” she asked sarcastically, leaping away with a shriek when Stiles shook his wet hair at her.

“Part of me suspects Derek doesn’t even know what Facebook is,” Stiles replied.

“You’d be wrong there,” Lydia retorted. “He’s got one and it’s adorable.”

Stiles found it later, in the car as they drove back to Beacon Hills. Lydia had borrowed her mom’s SUV and Erica sat up front with her, Boyd stretched out across the middle row of seats while Stiles and Derek sat in the back. Scott drove ahead of them with Allison and Isaac. They hadn’t left the
park until after sundown; it was truly dark down, and Derek had fallen asleep leaning against Stiles, head tucked against his neck. He smelled good, a little like salty sweat and sunscreen, and Stiles absently traced his hand up and down Derek’s thigh as he flipped through his phone.

Remembering what Lydia had said, Stiles searched Derek Hale on Facebook and got eight results, only three of whom lived in the country. He squinted at his screen. The picture of the Derek Hale who lived in California was taken from behind, his face not visible, but since the other two American Derek Hales lived in Virginia and Arizona, respectively, Stiles had to assume he’d found the right one. He tapped on the name to get to the profile and was disappointed to find most of it locked, unaccessible to him. He could see Derek’s basic information — student at UC Davis, birthday in early November, all his siblings and cousins. It made Stiles’ stomach twist to see their names — except for Laura, they were all dead.

He could look at Derek’s profile pictures and flicked through them slowly, strangely unsettled to see Derek so much younger, his face smooth and happy. In one picture he was at a party, ubiquitous red cup in hand, laughing in the middle of a crowded room. In another, he stood sandwiched between a younger Laura, and another girl much younger, who looked like Laura’s clone — Derek’s younger sister.

“What are you doing?” Derek asked sleepily.

“Doing some detective work,” Stiles replied, rubbing his cheek against the top of Derek’s head. He held up his phone, the window open to a picture of Derek with his face painted for some kind of sport event. “Do you recognize this man?” Stiles asked solemnly.

Derek tilted his head, staring at the photograph for a long moment before snorting. “Where’d you find that?”

“Your Facebook,” Stiles told him. “I sent you a friend request.”

Derek snorted again, plucking Stiles’ phone out of his hands. “I’ll be sure to deny it.”

“Rude!” Stiles exclaimed, shoving at him. Derek didn’t budge an inch, casting Stiles a sarcastic look before returning his gaze to the phone, swiping sideways through the pictures. Stiles watched him pause on the picture of him and his sisters.

“I remember this,” Derek said, sounding a little sad but mostly amused. “We had a barbecue and Cora stole a bottle of whiskey. All the kids got drunk. My mom was pissed.”

“I remember that,” Boyd said, sitting up from the middle row of seats. “That was my first time at one of the family parties. Your mom was terrifying.”

“She didn’t even use her alpha voice,” Erica added, twisting around from the front seat. “She was so disappointed in us.”

Derek snorted. “We heard that tone a lot growing up.”

“You were a bad boy, huh?” Stiles asked brightly. Derek glowered at him. Stiles laughed. “Oh, you totally were. Did you have a leather jacket?”

“Yeah, he did,” Erica input cheerfully. “So very not scary.”

Derek growled at her, looking half furious, half mortified. Erica just laughed at him and turned around to face out the windshield.
“Don’t worry, buddy,” Stiles told Derek, pinching his cheek. “I find you very scary.”

Derek snapped at Stiles’ fingers, grinning at his startled yelp. “You should,” he said, his eyes sparkling with wry amusement. “Do I need to tell everyone how you reacted the night we met?”

“No,” Stiles said firmly, clamping his hand over Derek’s mouth. “You do not.”

Two days later, Stiles came home from work to find his dad lounging on the couch and Derek in the kitchen making dinner. Stiles grinned at his dad, jerking his head in Derek’s direction. “You putting him to work?”

His father snorted. “He’s not paying rent, is he?”

Derek leaned into the living room, looking offended. “I said I could pay if you wanted me to.”

“Sure, now you say that,” his dad teased. Stiles could tell he liked having Derek around, though, and it relieved him to know that when Stiles left for school, his dad and Derek would have each other for company. “By the way,” his dad said, like he’d heard Stiles’ thoughts, “you got a letter from your school. It’s on the counter.”

Stiles nodded and went into the kitchen, sneaking a quick kiss to Derek’s cheek before rifling through the pile of mail sitting on the counter. He found the letter from his school and ripped it open, quickly skimming the contents with a sigh.

“Everything all right?” Derek asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, tossing the letter back on the counter. “It’s just a reminder about first day stuff — where I need to go to get my ID picture taken and whatever.”

Derek frowned down at the carrots he was dicing. “When do you go back?”

“Uh…” Stiles scanned the letter. “September third? I’ll go back before then, though, so I can settle in. Me and a couple of friends are renting a place for the year.” He chewed on his bottom lip, watching Derek a little anxiously. He hadn’t really thought about what was going to happen when he went back to school, and they certainly hadn’t talked about it. He knew Deaton would be holding down the fort as temporary emissary while he was away, as far as it came down to personal relationships — aka him and Derek — some part of him had somehow believed there was still at least a month left of summer before he had to think about it, not less than two weeks.

Derek didn’t look happy; he nodded at Stiles’ words but didn’t look up at him, his shoulders tense as he continued to chop the carrots up finer and finer. Stiles didn’t know what to say to him. Instead, he asked, “You want any help with dinner?” and when Derek shook his head — still not looking at him — Stiles retreated to the living room.

Derek was kind of stiff for the next few days. Maybe normal people would have looked at him and assumed it was just part of his personality, but Stiles knew Derek pretty well now, and he could tell when Derek wasn’t happy. Maybe the pack sensed it too, because the only person who showed up at the house that week was Laura, and she rolled her eyes exasperatedly at Derek’s closed-mouthedness. He spent a lot of time out of the house, running the boundary of the town, and Stiles spent a lot of time reaping the harvest from his garden, which was in full swing. He had a few magic lessons with Dr. Deaton, learning a wide range of runes, as well as how to handle his spark with more finesse for when it came time for him to learn more delicate spells than tossing a ball of light into the air. He didn’t mind the lessons; it was fun learning, and it kept him out of the house and
Derek’s way, so that was fine with him.

As the days ticked down to his departure from Beacon Hills, though, Stiles had to face the fact that one, he badly needed to begin packing, and two, he needed to talk to Derek. He tackled the packing first because, if he was being truthful, he was dodging the issue with Derek. As it happened, though, the two needs coincided. On the last Wednesday before Stiles planned on leaving, he sat in his room digging through his desk drawers for anything that might be helpful and, the next time he looked up, Derek stood in the doorway, slightly obscured by a haze of dust.

Stiles sneezed explosively before managing a weak, “Hey, dude.”

“Hey,” Derek said quietly, not moving from the doorway.

Stiles swallowed; this was the moment, he knew. He patted the floor next to him. “You want to sit?”

Derek stared at him for a long moment before he stepped into the room. To Stiles’ surprise, Derek didn’t sit next to him but behind him, long legs on either side of Stiles’. Derek looped his arms around Stiles’ waist with a sigh, pressing his face between Stiles’ shoulder blades. Stiles sat stiff for a moment, startled, then relaxed in relief. Derek hadn’t been all too touchy for the past couple of days. They still ended up tangled together at night, sure, but Stiles thought that had more to do with Derek moving in his sleep than any conscious act on his part. Stiles had missed the comfort of his body.

“You okay?” Stiles asked softly, circling his hands around Derek’s wrists and squeezing gently. “Derek?”

Derek didn’t answer. Stiles waited a moment, listening to him breathe, then shrugged and reached out to sort through another pile of junk he’d pulled from a drawer. Derek would talk if and when he was ready; Stiles might as well get some work done. This drawer was interesting, anyway — it’d been ages since he’d cleaned out his desk, and his dad’s hadn’t bothered to go through it when they’d moved. There were all sorts of mementos from elementary school: certificates of participation, math worksheets with gold stars stuck on them, bad drawings of his parents. A worn folder held a bunch of work from second grade and Stiles laughed as he pulled out an essay.

“What I Did On My Summer Vacation

by Stiles Stilinski. Let’s see — Mom took me to the zoo. We went camping — I remember that. We always went to Point Reyes, but that summer I got poison ivy all over my legs and I was just miserable.” He snorted wryly, looking at his arms, marred by scarring from the burns from the grate at the library, and the cuts on his wrists from Jennifer. “Guess I’d have quite the essay to write about this summer.”

Behind him, Derek sighed again, but shifted, hooking his chin over Stiles’ shoulder to look at the paper Stiles held. “What’s ‘kalmin loshun’?”

“Calamine lotion, I think,” Stiles said. “We went through like three bottles.” They sat silently for a long moment, staring at the paper in Stiles’ hand. Stiles swallowed, his throat tightening. “This isn’t — I’m not going to be gone forever,” he said haltingly.

Derek heaved out a long breath. “I know.”

Behind him, Derek sighed again, but shifted, hooking his chin over Stiles’ shoulder to look at the paper Stiles held. “What’s ‘kalmin loshun’?”

“Calamine lotion, I think,” Stiles said. “We went through like three bottles.” They sat silently for a long moment, staring at the paper in Stiles’ hand. Stiles swallowed, his throat tightening. “This isn’t — I’m not going to be gone forever,” he said haltingly.

Derek was quiet for a while before he said grudgingly, “I don’t like change.”

“Not many people do,” Stiles said. “We’re not changing just because I’m leaving, are we?” he asked with a sudden stab of worry.
Derek’s arms tightened around his waist. “I don’t want us to.”

“Good,” Stiles breathed. “I’ll come back whenever I can, I promise, and you can come visit me whenever you want.”

“Okay,” Derek said quietly. “I’d like that.”

“You’re going to busy, anyway,” Stiles told him. “Getting the town back in order. Taking care of the pack. You probably won’t even realize I’m gone.” He blinked down at his hands, throat gone tight again. He was going to be the one nine hours from home, living with a couple of guys from school who were more acquaintances than friends. He suddenly wasn’t looking forward to going back to school at all.

“Don’t say that,” Derek replied, sounding a little wounded. He dragged his nose along Stiles’ cheekbone. “You’re never out of my mind.”

“I’d take you with me if I could,” Stiles said mournfully.

“I’d go,” Derek breathed, tilting his head to kiss Stiles. “If I wasn’t…”

“Alpha,” Stiles finished for him. He twisted around suddenly so he could kneel between Derek’s legs, bringing them nose-to-nose. “My alpha,” he said firmly. “Doesn’t matter where I go.” Derek’s face softened, a thin line of red light outlining his pale irises. Stiles managed to drudge up a smile, brushing a thumb against his cheek. “Can I ask a favor?”

Derek blinked slowly, leaning into Stiles’ touch. “What?”

“Can I — ” Stiles flushed a little, gathering his courage. “When I leave, can I take one of your shirts? I like — I want to smell like you.”

Derek’s eyes flashed full red, his nostrils flaring; Stiles was pretty sure that meant he was into it. His voice, though, was steady when he replied, “Only if I get one of yours in exchange.”

“Fair’s fair,” Stiles agreed, smiling for real then, though his heart ached a little as Derek leaned in for another kiss. He was going to miss this more than anything.

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By Friday evening, Stiles’ car was packed and ready to go for the long drive the next day. His last day at the library was that day; Laura brought him a cake, and Lydia had her group of arts and crafts kids make him a banner that said We’ll Miss You in huge, glitter-covered letters. It got all over his hands and shirt, but he was too busy trying not to weep to notice.

When it came time to close the library down for the night, Stiles took one last slow lap around the place, absentmindedly straightening books, eyes sweeping over the walls. He went down into the cool, quiet basement and put his hand on the grate to the rare books room. It vibrated gently under his hand, the magic almost like an old friend by now. When he finally went back upstairs, Laura and Lydia were waiting for him by the back door, twin melancholy smiles on their faces. Stiles blinked rapidly at the sudden ache in his eyes, his throat tight. This isn’t permanent, he told himself fiercely, though it certainly seemed like a final goodbye. He welcomed the tight hug Laura gave him.

“We’ll have you back next summer,” she told him firmly. “I’ve already told Finstock. He had a conniption.”

Stiles laughed as she pulled away, her pale eyes sparkling suspiciously. Lydia hugged him next,
standing on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his cheek.

“I’ll see you later,” she promised, and Stiles nodded; there was still the regular party at Scott’s house that night, which he was both dreading and looking forward to.

Laura ruffled his hair. “C’mon, then,” she said, a little sadly. “Time to lock up.”

Stiles gave the library one last fond look before following the girls outside into the dusty heat of late afternoon. He drove home slowly, taking in all the sights and sounds that were Beacon Hills. The town had changed in the week since the ritual — nothing a casual observer could see, but Stiles could feel it in the air, a vivaciousness and sense of life that hadn’t been there before. The town felt more real, in a sense. Alive.

Derek was on the front porch when Stiles got back to the house, talking with a middle-aged woman Stiles had seen around town — she was there for a consult with the alpha, Stiles guessed, squeezing Derek’s shoulder as he headed into the house. His dad was in the kitchen; Stiles lifted his head, sniffing appreciatively.

“Tacos?” he ventured.

“Fajitas,” his dad corrected. “Your mom’s recipe — and don’t even give me that look,” he added at the way Stiles narrowed his eyes at him. “It’s your last night home. I’ll eat what I want.”

Stiles gave in with a laugh as he settled himself down at the counter. “Fine, fine.”

Derek wandered in a few minutes later, settling himself down on the stool next to Stiles, pressing his knee to Stiles’. Stiles gave him a faint smile. “Hey, dude,” he said. “Who was that?”

“Her name’s Maura,” Derek told him, rubbing a hand over his face. “She’s an old friend of Mom’s. Likes to talk.”

“You were out there a long time,” Stiles’ dad agreed.

“We always used to run off into the woods when she came to visit,” Derek admitted, his eyes crinkling at the corners when Stiles snorted. “You might get roped into an hour-long conversation about her latest operation or whatever.”

“But you managed to escape,” Stiles grinned. “Did you use your alpha voice?”

“Maybe,” Derek said placidly. “I told her it was your last night in town and she disappeared.”

“You big softy,” Stiles said, his stomach twisting. Derek smiled, dropping his hand to Stiles’ thigh and keeping it there.

Stiles’ dad had to go in for a late shift after they’d eaten; it bummed Stiles out that he wouldn’t be able to spend any more time with him. “We never did get to go camping or anything,” Stiles said mournfully.

“You hate camping,” his dad retorted. "I think we spent enough time sitting around on the couch together to fill our father-son time quota for a couple of months, don't you?"

Stiles huffed out a laugh. "You may have a point there."

His father smiled. "I'll see you in the morning. Derek, make sure he doesn't stay up too late; I don't want him tired on the drive tomorrow."
"Yes sir," Derek said solemnly, while Stiles made an indignant noise behind him. The sheriff grinned and disappeared out the front door.

Stiles and Derek made their way out into the backyard so Stiles could take care of the garden one last time. Beyond watering it and pulling up a few scraggly weeds, there wasn't much he could actually do except harvest some cucumbers and tomatoes.

Derek, who'd settled on his back in the grass nearby, eyes closed, said suddenly, "You should take some of the wolfsbane to school with you."

"Why's that?" Stiles asked curiously, his hands full of string beans. "Are there packs around Los Angeles?"

Derek shrugged, cracking one pale eye open to look at him. The light of the setting sun washed it red. "Probably. I just want you to be safe."

"I've made it this long without being ravaged by werewolves," Stiles pointed out.

Derek sighed. "The supernatural attracts the supernatural, Stiles. It's how communities like this are formed."

"I'm not supernatural, though," Stiles protested.

"You've got a spark," Derek argued, "and you've spent all summer surrounded by us."

"Oh," Stiles said, realizing what he meant. "So I'm like, infused with the supernatural."

Derek made an exasperated noise. "If that's how you want to think about it."

Stiles looked down at his hands, dirt from the garden under his fingernails. "And I smell like you," he said thoughtfully. "Would that be a problem? If I ran into another pack?"

"Not for most packs," Derek replied. "Especially not in a city, where there's no real way to claim territory. But some packs can be aggressive. I just want you to be safe," he repeated.

"And I appreciate that," Stiles said softly. He flopped back on the grass, resting his head on Derek's stomach. He lay quiet for a moment, listening to the faint, steady sound of Derek's heart beating. "I'm not going to take it, though," he added. "I don't want to be the weirdo roommate with herbs drying in my room."

Derek snorted. "Fine," he said, his hand rising up to smooth over Stiles' hair. "Just watch out for yourself."

"I will," Stiles promised, his voice soft.

They fell silent after that, listening to the sounds of the day fade around them, the shadows growing long. They didn't get up until after the light had faded from the sky and Stiles began to shiver from lying for too long on the cool grass. Even then, though, they didn't head inside, but made their way down the long, quiet road to Scott's house.

As they drew nearer, Stiles noticed a lot of cars parked on the side of the road past the house, including a police cruiser that looked a lot like his dad's, and there seemed to be a lot more noise coming from the house than usual, all the windows ablaze with light. "What's going on?" he asked suspiciously, hand tightening around Derek's.
Derek smiled faintly. "Can't say," he said, sounding pleased — and rather smug.

Stiles eyed him crossly as Scott came around the side of the house, a wide grin on his face. "Dude!" Scott said enthusiastically. "Everyone's here!"

"Everyone?" Stiles repeated despairingly as Derek took him by the shoulders and guided him to the backyard. What looked like half the town stood back there, gathered under the glittery banner the kids at the library had made. Everyone shouted joyously when Stiles came around the corner of the house, cheering and clapping.

"God," Stiles said, his throat going tight again. "You assholes."

"Come on, Stilinski," Laura grinned, stepping up and pressing a beer into his hands. "You didn't think we were going to let you leave with just a hug, did you?"

"That's what normal people do," Stiles argued, but not very hard — mostly he was just touched that they'd done this for him. Derek and Scott both looked incredibly pleased with themselves, and Stiles couldn't help the grin that spread over his face as he looked over at them.

"Late shift, huh?" Stiles said when he found his father in the crowd.

"I am, technically, on call," his dad replied, swinging an arm around his shoulders. "You ignore the lie and I'll ignore that beer in your hand."

"Agreed," Stiles laughed, clinking their beers together.

The party lasted late into the night, giving Stiles time to talk to everyone. "I think I've reached my hug quota for the year," Stiles told Erica, wheezing when she hugged him so hard his feet left the ground.

"That means anything after this is just a bonus," she retorted, a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"I'll make sure Dad puts in a good word for you at the police academy," Stiles said hurriedly, and ducked away.

Laura found him some time before midnight, wrapping him up in a hug more bone-crushing than Erica's. "I can't thank you enough," she murmured in his ear. "Derek wouldn't be here without you."

Stiles' eyes snapped to Derek, standing over by the back door as he talked casually with Scott's mom. "Maybe," he said, voice wavering a little. "But it's your job to keep him here while I'm gone."

Laura sniffed as she let him go. "I'll accept that task."

Derek showed up at his side a few minutes later. "Your dad says you need to go home."

"What, he can stay up late and I can't?" Stiles retorted, swinging around to look for his dad. He was talking with Boyd and Erica, and when he saw Stiles glare at him, he just waved cheerfully.

"Come on," Derek said, rolling his eyes at Stiles' indignant expression.

"Wait, wait," Stiles said. "I've got to say goodbye to Scott." He'd been putting it off; after Derek, Stiles knew he'd miss Scott the most out of all the friends he'd made that summer. Derek nodded, and Stiles found Scott by the snack table, looking a little sad.

"Hey, man," Stiles said quietly. "Thanks for everything you did this summer, including not calling me a dumbass for thinking you guys were LARPers."
Scott laughed. "We never did get around to playing D&D, did we? Our DM's still in Japan."

"Next summer," Stiles told him firmly.

Scott nodded. "Next summer."

They hugged tightly, Stiles thumping Scott's back and blinking madly. "Can I come and visit?" Scott asked, his eyes looking suspiciously misty. "I'm gonna use the money I earned this summer to buy a motorcycle."

Stiles laughed. "What does your mom think about that?"

"She doesn't know," Scott said, looking a little guilty.

"Well, you're welcome anytime, man," Stiles told him. "I'll see you around."

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Stiles and Derek walked home in silence, their fingers loosely entwined. Stiles had this uncomfortable unhappy feeling twisting at his stomach; this time tomorrow he'd be back in Los Angeles, settling into the new apartment. Going back to school had never bothered him before but now, knowing there'd be no more working at the library, no more hanging out with his friends, no more curling up with Derek, he wanted nothing more than to say fuck it and never go back.

Derek sat on the end of Stiles' bed — their bed — watching Stiles yank his shirt over his head. He'd already stripped, clad in just his boxers, with his hands hanging loose over his knees as he watched Stiles. "I don't want you to go," he said abruptly.

Stiles paused with his jeans pushed halfway down his thighs, turning to look at Derek with a glum expression on his face. "I told you; it's not forever."

Derek clenched his jaw, looking down at his hands. "What if it is?" he said, and the misery in his voice made Stiles' heart hurt. "What if you decide that being our emissary isn't what you want? What if you can't find a job here, or you get offered something better hundreds of miles away?"

Stiles shoved his jeans off and pushed his way into Derek's space, straddling his thighs. Derek's hands lifted automatically to steady him and something in Stiles' chest settled a little at his touch. "That's not going to happen," he told Derek firmly. "Beacon Hills is where I'm gonna stay. You're here, my dad's here, all my friends are here. I'm your emissary; I'm not going anywhere else."

Derek looked at him for a long moment, a troubled look on his face. Stiles could tell Derek wanted to believe him, but wasn't sure if he could. "What about your schooling?" Derek asked. "If you waste your degree by staying here — "

Stiles laughed softly. "Dude, I'm studying programming. I can do that from anywhere." His face softened. "I always planned on staying near my dad. If you're around, that's just a bonus." He could feel Derek beginning to relax, his grip on Stiles' hips less desperate and more controlled. "What about you?" Stiles added, tone teasing. "Are you going to get a job and start paying my dad rent?"

Derek snorted, his body relaxing. "I thought I'd give the town a few more weeks to settle down," Derek told him truthfully, "and then I thought I might apply to the park service."

"Become a park ranger?" Stiles asked curiously.

Derek nodded. "There are a couple close by. Boyd's dad works for one."
"Hmm," Stiles said thoughtfully.

Derek frowned at him a little suspiciously. "What are you thinking about?"

"You in a ranger uniform," Stiles told him, grinning. "Do you think you'll get an axe?"

Derek snorted again, amused. "I'm not going to be a lumberjack."

"You sure you wouldn't rather be one?" Stiles asked, grinning. "Now I'm picturing you as the Brawny man and you look amazing."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," Derek said dryly.

"Oh, I am," Stiles said, looping his arms around Derek's neck, his grin softening to a fond smile. "I've got a goodbye present for you."

Derek raised his eyebrows curiously; instead of saying anything more, Stiles leaned in for a slow kiss, Derek's mouth soft and welcoming against his. Stiles liked kissing Derek a lot. He moved so gently yet insistently, lifting his hand to press against Stiles' jaw, directing him where he wanted him to go. Stiles could feel the power in his touch and wondered if Derek ever really let go. Maybe when they'd been together a bit longer he'd ask, but for now and forever he liked Derek like this, liked the way he groaned low in his throat when he tilted his head to mouth at Stiles' neck, like a starving man presented with his first meal in months.

Stiles sighed happily, his hands skimming over Derek's solid chest, grinning at the way Derek's breath hitched when he tweaked a nipple. His hands slid lower, Stiles scraping his nails through the thick trail of hair below Derek's navel, which disappeared into his boxers. Derek made a quiet noise against Stiles' neck, half muffled against his skin.

"Okay?" Stiles asked softly, his fingers plucking at the elastic band of Derek's underwear. Derek nodded, groaning quietly when Stiles slid his hand inside and curled his fingers around Derek, humming happily at the feel of him. Stiles slowly jerked him to hardness, until Derek was panting into his neck, his hips twitching under Stiles' weight. That was when Stiles let go of him, shimmying backward. Derek made a confused noise, his hands gripping at Stiles, unwilling to let him go.

"Let me go," Stiles grinned. "I want to give you your present."

Derek's brow furrowed, but he reluctantly let go of Stiles, who shifted off Derek to kneel on the floor. "Okay?" Stiles asked again. Derek's eyes widened in sudden understanding; he nodded again, spreading his thighs so Stiles could settle between them, pushing his boxers down his hips. "I'm gonna leave you something to remember me by," Stiles told him, grinning darkly at the way Derek's eyes went red and stayed that way.

He started slow, kissing his way up the inside of Derek's thigh before wrapping his hand around the base of Derek's dick and dragging his tongue across the tip. Stiles kept his eyes on Derek's face, smiling when Derek tilted his head back, mouth open. He watched Derek's chest heave as he took him deeper into his mouth, the weight of Derek's dick heavy on his tongue, skin soft and warm. When Derek looked back down at him, his face was slack and punch-drunk, cheeks pink. Stiles had to shut his eyes for a minute, his own dick hard and pulsing in his boxers.

Derek put his hand to Stiles' cheek as his head bobbed up and down, fingers tracing the line of his jaw, brushing against his throat before settling in his hair — not tugging, but just resting there, solid and comforting. Stiles liked the weight of it, how Derek's spread fingers encompassed his skull. He dipped down further to reward him, fighting not to gag at the feeling of Derek hitting the back of his
throat. Derek groaned, his thighs tensing under Stiles as he fought the rise of his hips.

"Jesus," Derek hissed, his hands slipping down to Stiles' shoulders, forcing him to stop. "Your dad just got home."

Stiles lifted his head with a slick noise, eyes unfocused as he caught the sound of the front door closing. "Don't worry," he slurred, writing two runes in the air. They hung there for a second, glittering faint gold, and then disappeared. A moment later, a gentle breeze swung the door shut, the latch catching with a click.

"You're too clever for your own good," Derek told him, amused.

"Mmm," Stiles agreed, leaning back in to take Derek's dick in hand, lips still slick with spit and precome. "Don't pretend like you don't like it."

"Caught me," Derek said, his words breaking off into a faint groan as Stiles got his mouth back on him, settling back into the task at hand with renewed vigor. Stiles was quickly rewarded by Derek's increasingly harsh breathing, his hips rolling under Stiles' mouth despite his effort to keep still. "Stiles," Derek warned, hips stuttering, the muscles in his thighs flexing.

Stiles grinned up at him, tapping encouragingly on his leg. Derek groaned, crimson eyes squeezing shut as he came down Stiles' throat, head tipped back. Stiles waited for Derek to lift his hand from Stiles' hair before pulling off him slowly, licking his swollen lips.

"You gonna remember me?" he teased, voice a little hoarse.

"Come here," Derek said fiercely, tugging Stiles back up and into a rough kiss, hands squeezing at his hips.

"God," Stiles moaned, getting a hand between them so he could touch himself, so hard it kind of hurt. Derek, though, made an angry noise and pushed him backward, putting room between them so he could slide off the bed, kneeling before Stiles. Stiles could feel his orgasm building low in his hips; he swayed, hands flying out to anchor himself on Derek's shoulders.

"I'm gonna," he tried. "Derek — "

"Go ahead," Derek said roughly, and he closed his eyes, mouth open as he continued to jerk Stiles off.

"Fuck," Stiles gasped, hips jolting forward as he came on Derek's face, heavy white drops of come splashing against his skin. He shuddered, legs shaking and bloodless. "God." He sank to the floor as Derek opened his eyes, looking pleased. "It got in your hair."

"Don't care," Derek replied, licking his lips lazily. "I'll smell like you now."

Stiles laughed weakly. "Laura already said we reek of each other."

"So I'll reek even more," Derek retorted, nuzzling Stiles' neck. "I don't mind."

"Yeah," Stiles agreed, dragging his fingernails through Derek's hair and thinking of the three t-shirts belonging to Derek that were folded up in his dufflebag. "Me either."

They sat on the floor for a while, Stiles tucked up against Derek's side as Derek absently rubbed his cheek against Stiles' neck. His eyes began to grow heavy, body warm and sated and relaxed. He
barely noticed when Derek stopped and said, "You need to sleep."

"Mm," Stiles agreed sleepily, letting Derek pull them to their feet and crawl into bed. He immediately turned on his side, lips curving up in a smile when Derek curled an arm around him and pulled him close. "Gonna miss you," he mumbled.

"I know," Derek murmured, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck. "I'm going to miss you too."

Stiles fell asleep with Derek curled around him, their fingers entangled. He didn't dream of anything that night, safe behind a wall of love and contentedness.

That morning, Stiles rose to find the bed next to him empty, the sheets cool. He shrugged and went off to shower, though when he went downstairs, lugging the duffle bag full of the last of his things, he found his dad in the kitchen making breakfast, but no sign of Derek.

"I think he went on his run around the boundary," his dad told him, dropping a plate of eggs and sausage in front of him. "Eat up."

Stiles ate as directed, head caught in that bleary place that comes from not enough sleep. His father eyed him critically. "You gonna make it?"

"Just load me up with coffee," Stiles said sleepily, glancing at the time on his phone. He'd have to get on the road pretty soon if he wanted to get to L.A before sunset; once there, he'd still need to get all his stuff inside the apartment. Still, he dragged two cups of coffee out over nearly an hour, waiting for Derek to come back so he could say goodbye.

Derek didn't come back, though; Stiles watched the door, leg jiggling nervously, until his dad sighed and said, "You need to get on the road, son."

"I know," Stiles said, not taking his eyes off the door, a sinking feeling in his stomach. He'd rise for another fifteen minutes despite all the significant looks his dad kept casting him and when he did he moved slowly, dragging his bag out to the Jeep and looking anxiously to the woods the entire time.

"I'll make him call and explain himself when he gets back," his dad told him, patting him on the back. Stiles nodded, his heart hammering with anxiety. It's okay, he told himself. They'd had their goodbye last night, really. He'd said everything he needed to. Still, it would have been nice to see Derek one last time. Like, really nice.

Stiles gave his dad a long hug goodbye, promising he'd call once he made it to the city. He didn't say anything more about Derek, climbing into the Jeep and backing out of the driveway. It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, he repeated in his head over and over. His eyes were not burning. It doesn't matter.

Stiles drove slowly through town, returning the waves people tossed his way. Then he left the town proper and began heading for the highway, the houses giving way to trees as he approached the town line. He'd almost reached it when someone stepped out of the woods by the Now Leaving Beacon Hills sign and he slammed on his brakes so hard he almost smacked his head against the steering wheel.

"Fuck!" Stiles swore furiously, throwing himself out of the Jeep, ready to punch Derek's lights out. "You asshole!"
"Sorry," Derek said, so miserably that Stiles settled for punching him on the arm instead. It hurt; Derek was built like a brick house. "Sorry," Derek repeated.

"Where were you?" Stiles asked, some of his anger fading, the hurt settling in instead.

"I don't — I don't like goodbyes," Derek said haltingly. He took a step closer, then paused like he wasn't sure Stiles wanted him near. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, just come here," Stiles sighed, gesturing at him. Derek stepped forward and curled his arms around Stiles, who sighed and tucked his head against Derek's neck. They stood like that for a long time, Derek breathing slow and steady in Stiles' ear. Several passing cars honked at them before Stiles pulled away. "I've got to get going," he said.

Derek nodded, the corners of his mouth turning down. "I have something for you," he said. "Going away present."

"Blowjob?" Stiles joked wearily. "I don't have time, dude."

Derek gave him an exasperated look and reached into his pocket, pulling out the little stone wolf Laura had taken from the security deposit box. "Here."

"Oh, dude, no," Stiles protested. "That's like, a family heirloom."

"I want you to have it," Derek insisted, pressing it into Stiles' hands. Stiles curled his fingers around it reflexively, accepting its chilly weight.

"Thank you," he whispered, gazing down at it.

Derek leaned in to press a soft kiss to his cheek. "You should get going," he said gently.

"Yeah," Stiles agreed sadly, kissing Derek in return. "I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Travel safe," Derek replied, and he stood by the edge of the road, watching Stiles climb back into the Jeep. Stiles watched him in the rear view mirror until he followed a curve in the road and could see Derek no more.

It was early evening by the time Stiles got back to Los Angeles. He shot off a quick text to his dad — made it fine, will call tomorrow — and then he and his roommates spent the next couple of hours unloading the Jeep and trying to get the apartment somewhat livable. It was almost midnight by the time Stiles had a chance to shower and get ready for bed, his heart aching a little as he pulled one of Derek's shirts from his bag and tugged it on. He wondered what Derek was doing right now. They hadn't spent a night apart in a long time.

He plucked the little stone wolf from where he'd carefully wrapped it in a towel and set it on his nightstand, fingers slowly tracing over the cool stone. It was going to be a rough year, he was pretty sure.

Next to the wolf, his phone buzzed with a message from his dad: I'll talk to you tomorrow. Derek says check your Facebook.

Stiles smiled faintly. He'd have to try to get Dad to make Derek get a cellphone; it was going to get embarrassing real fast if Dad had to act as their go-between all the time.
He had two new notifications on Facebook; the first said *Derek Hale has accepted your friend request*, and the second — Stiles started grinning. *Derek Hale has changed his relationship status to "In a relationship with Stiles Stilinski."* Half the pack had already liked it. Maybe this year wouldn’t be so bad after all.

As Stiles curled on his side and began to drift off to sleep, the little stone wolf on his nightstand yawned, shaking out its fur and stretching each leg one at a time. It laid down in a tight circle, drawing its tail over its face as its obsidian eyes settled shut, utterly content.

End Notes

Thank you for all the support and kind words left on this fic over the years! As always, I am on [tumblr](https://tumblr.com) & [twitter](https://twitter.com).

Works inspired by this one: [podfic] What I Did On My Summer Vacation by [read by lunchee (lunchee)](https://archiveofour.org/work/what-i-did-on-my-summer-vacation), [What I Did On My Summer Vacation [FANART/GIFSET]](https://archiveofour.org/work/what-i-did-on-my-summer-vacation) by [Loup_Aigre](https://archiveofour.org/author/loup_aigre)

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