Seeing Wolves (Where There Are No Wolves)

by MellytheHun

Summary

Or otherwise known as "Derek Goes to the Doctor," wherein Derek gets the therapy he so desperately needs and gets healthy. The clearer his head gets, the more room it seems to have for Stiles.

Notes

There is a lot of triggering subject in this piece. Derek's sessions in therapy are in vivid detail and he will be recounting traumatic events, such as sexual abuse and emotional/psychological abuse. He has panic/anxiety attacks, experiences discomfort and his symptoms are written about in great detail.
I will put specific notes as trigger warnings when something in particular will be addressed. I will give examples of where a good place to start reading from is, if it is heavy in triggering content.

I'm super glad you're interested in reading, but be careful! Take care of yourself first! <3
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning
TRIGGER WARNING
TW:

In this chapter Derek is in therapy and he experiences anxiety, talks about depression and has symptoms of post traumatic stress.

Death is spoken about at length while he summarizes his life up to present day.

Canonical trauma is addressed.

Happy is not something you postpone for the future; it is something you design for the present.

Jim Rohn

Song for this chapter is And If My Heart Should Somehow Stop, by James Vincent McMorrow

Dr. Leanne Lundy's office is an even, neutral beige tone and the mild lighting comes from a single lamp on her desk and three different candles. An outdated CD player sits adjacent to her desk and she, herself, sits cross-legged on her rolling chair. Her couch isn't all that comfortable and seems to shrink under Derek's hulking image. She has a blanket strewn over the back of the couch and the miniscule end table that rests against the right arm of the couch balances a box of tissues, a miniature Zen garden and one of the burning candles. They smell like cotton and vanilla and some kind of flower. It's all a little overwhelming to Derek's hypersensitive nose, but he doesn't let it show. He never does.

She has a clipboard in her hand and she seems, at the same time, passive and engaged. He can tell she is focused and he appreciates it, in a weird new way. She wears muted colors, fake jewelry and her hair is swept back behind her ears. She is maybe a little over forty years old. The CD player has the time on it and it's five minutes behind; the sound is some kind of soft rain with plucked string instruments playing on top of it.

He feels cornered.

"So," she begins.

"So."

"Before we get started, I need to tell you a few things. That okay?"

"Yeah," He utters.

"I just need to tell you that confidentiality means that anything you say in this room will be kept strictly between us. Your private affairs, thoughts and feelings are between us only, unless I feel you
are a danger to yourself, anyone around you or you confess to me you know something about a minor or elder being abused in some way, shape or form. If you were to end up in any kind of legal trouble, information you give me here can be legally asked of me to disclose. If I feel that you are in immediate danger from yourself, I can and will Baker Act you, which means you will be held in a hospital until you're deemed no longer a danger to yourself or anyone around you. That make sense?"

"Yeah," Derek repeats.

She shows him the clipboard and tells him, "sign here," with her pen touching an 'x' beside a line titled 'signature'. "All that means is that I told you about confidentiality, under what circumstances it's broken and my obligation to take action if you're in danger or someone around you is in danger, or you're plotting the assassination of the president, so on and so forth."

"Right," Derek replies stiffly and signs.

"This is a safe place," Dr. Lundy assures him, "I've worked for many years, in this very room, making this a place that keeps secrets and reduces shame and provides comfort and safety. Trust in that. This is a safe space. This is your time and we can use it however you want. If you want to sit in silence, I won't make you talk and if you want to work hard, I will help you. I'm here to help you, whatever that might mean."

He says nothing to that and once she turns the page on her clipboard, she leans back in her chair and says, "now a few questions, if you don't mind. Would it bother you if I took notes while we talk?"

"No," he says, "that's fine."

"Alright," she readies her pen on her paper, "I know that you found me through your parents' records. So, we can address the elephant in the room and just say that we both know you're a lycanthrope. Right?"

"Right," Derek nods.

"Alright. So, I know you aren't taking any medications and probably haven't seen a psychiatrist or psychologist before and you put in your own notes that you don't have an Emissary either."

He hums agreeably.

"Are there any names or pronouns you prefer?"

"No, I mean – you can just call me by my name. That's fine."

Her pen is pressed so delicately against the paper and she says, "it's a beautiful Saturday morning, the sun is out, the sky is clear, the town is alive with hustle and bustle, yet instead of being at the beach, lazing around, or enjoying time off, you're here with me."

He thinks that sounds kind of pathetic.

"So, why are you here?" she tacks on conversationally.

He hadn't considered explaining it, really.

He sort of hoped she'd just look at him and instinctively know everything and then give him a shot or some sage advice and he'd be on his merry way.
He thinks about saying, 'I'm an Omega and I was never meant to be alone, but it's becoming apparent to me that I'm not supposed to have anyone in my life either,' or 'Peter makes me feel like I go about everything wrong and I'm scared I don't know between right and wrong.'

He thinks about saying, 'I'm twenty-five and my life is a shit show that is taking the form of a never-ending downward spiral,' or 'A bunch of teenagers have been joking about me needing therapy and I don't know where to draw the line.' He considers telling her, 'I don't remember the last time I was genuinely happy and I'm terrified that this only gets harder,' or 'Everything I touch is destroyed and I just don't want to hurt anyone anymore,' or 'Love scares me, I can't have any joy without guilt and I hate myself.'

He thinks, 'I have nightmares before I even fall asleep,' and 'I'm passively suicidal, I feel exhausting anxiety more often than not, I have flash-backs and tremors.' He thinks he might tell her, 'My fourteen year old self would be so disappointed to see what I've become,' or 'I am always letting myself down and allowing the people that trust me to be hurt.' He contemplates telling her, 'I don't know.'

Just, 'I don't know.'

He feels so trapped, so cornered and so stressed that he ends up saying nothing at all.

So goes his first appointment with Dr. Lundy.

And so goes the second one too.

That hour includes a lot of him twitching and readjusting his posture and playing with the sleeves of his jacket. He opens his mouth a few times and shuts it, uselessly. When the hour is up, he asks her to open the window next time, because the smell of the candles is making him tear up. (It's not and she knows that, but she keeps the window open the next time he comes in anyway)

The third session is three weeks after his first and then he finally knows what he wants to say.

"I want to change," Derek announces bluntly and he feels a bit sick when he does, "I don't… really know how. I don't know what I want to change. I need… help. I've wanted to change for a long time, but I was never able to talk about it. Verbalize it. I think I'm ready to talk now."

"Alright," she says, scribbling down in a quiet and fluid motion, "Where would you like to go today?"

Derek's brow furrows a little curiously, but he says steadily, "I guess I should start from the beginning."

"Sounds good to me," she smiles casually and gestures for him to go on.

He sighs and stares at his hands in his lap, "I… okay. Well, I guess I'll start with my family. I was born into a big pack. My mother, Talia, was the Alpha. There was my grandmother Penny, my father Andrew, my uncle Peter, my aunt Danielle, my little cousin Rose, my older brother Liam, my older sister Laura, myself and my younger sister, Cora. We all lived in one house."

"Sounds a little crowded," she jokes lightly.

He nods and twiddles his thumbs, "yeah."

He thinks, I liked it that way. There was always something to do, always somewhere to go, always someone to talk to.
Then he thinks that he's meant to share those thoughts here.

He remembers her saying that this was a safe space for him and his secrets.

It takes a gulp, a moment for him to gather the strength and resolve, but he says it out loud.

"I'm sure," she says casually and it doesn't minimize his sharing, but doesn't put pressure on him either and he breathes for a second, "Did you have a good relationship with your family members, growing up?"

Derek remembers sitting on the living room couch, frustrated tears in his eyes, just about to condemn himself to a life of Velcro shoes when Laura stepped in and helped him learn to tie his sneakers. He is able to recall the breeze in his hair where he sat atop his father's broad shoulders; he can feel the swipe of his mother's hand on his forehead when she checked him for fever after he'd happened upon wild wolfsbane.

He can hear Liam chuckling at him at the dinner table, telling their parents about how Derek had asked him when he'd be able to grow chest hair. He remembers Peter pushing him on the swings at a playground, he remembers his grandmother smacking his hand with a wooden spoon when he snuck into the kitchen to steal a taste before dinner was ready.

He swallows tightly.

"Yeah," he answers, his thumbs rubbing together, and he thinks to himself, talk, idiot, talk.

He adds, "yeah. Liam was a few years older than me and gave me a lot of grief, but we always loved each other. I was closest to my uncle Peter and my sister Laura."

"Uncle Peter belonged to what side of the family?"

"He's my mother's brother."

She writes down again and looks up, to cue him into talking again. He's startled by it at first, wishing he could stay silent and she could just understand everything that's happened to him without having to actually explain. He eventually says with a measure of nervous impatience, "look, this… all of this started going wrong when I was around fourteen."

Dr. Lundy tilts her head curiously and asks without inflection, "what happened when you were fourteen?"

"Paige."

"Paige," she repeats and he thinks that she hasn't said that name with nearly enough reverence, "Tell me about Paige."

"She was my first love," he begins evenly, reserved and he feels the nerves he was so frightened of feeling crawling up his arms and making the back of his neck feel cold and sweaty, "She was so unimpressed by me and I couldn't get enough of it. I wanted her to want me and once she did, I didn't want to know what it was like to be wanted by anyone else, ever again. She looked at me and
the world stopped spinning. She was sharp as a tack, beautiful, talented and a little dangerous."

"Dangerous to a werewolf?" Dr. Lundy smirks.

Derek smiles shyly and replies, "dangerous to a hormonal, teenage boy with impulse control issues. She liked pushing the envelope."

She chuckles a little and says, "tell me more."

"I… was fine. I was fine with how things were, but Peter kept pushing me…"

"Pushing you to do what?"

"Give her The Bite," Derek answers, "Or, rather, get another Alpha to give her The Bite."

He feels his hands fiddling, but can't really stop it. He continues, "he kept trying to convince me that we couldn't be together unless I had her Bitten. It didn't feel right, but I didn't know why it felt wrong, so I blamed paranoia. I couldn't think up why he would be wrong, why he would steer me in the wrong direction. I couldn't imagine how wrong…"

He remembers the feel of Paige's hand in his, the way the sunlight bounced off her eyelids and nose and how her voice was such smooth, easy music to him. He remembers her moles and freckles, her attached earlobes, her shy laughter, the way she couldn't roll her tongue or her 'R's' in Spanish. He remembers her constant craving for filleted salmon, sweet potato pie and horseradish sauce (exclusively, never together, but she always wanted one of those at any given time). He remembers what her laugh sounded like bouncing off the walls of his family room and how her profile looked so perfect when she stole sideway glances at him during class. Her shy hugs, light as a feather around his waist. Her pink, small palms.

"What went wrong, Derek?"

He looks up to Dr. Lundy, guilty, then back to his hands and he's blaming them. "I… tried to save her. But I was too late. It didn't take. The Bite. The Bite didn't take. I had to…she begged me to, I mean…"

"You saved her from the pain," Dr. Lundy finishes knowingly.

Derek's heart lurches and he feels he's being given credit where none is due. He feels selfish and guilty and it's hard to breathe under the weight of it.

Under the weight of a fourteen year old girl, dying and bloody and scared in his arms.

He can see her glassy eyes, foggy with faraway's and gone's and he feels her sobs. He's fifteen again, cradling her in the dark, wanting more than anything to wake up or start over or take it all back. He is so frightened of living without her, so frightened that she won't believe at the end that he loved because if he loved her, how could he do something like this and that the end is in front of him, the end is coming for her and he's the harbinger of it.

He shuts his eyes and breathes in slowly.

When he opens his eyes again, he only nods.

Dr. Lundy writes more down and says, "do you mind if we talk about Paige for a bit?"

Her young, freezing body is on his lap.
The room is warm and full of warm colors, but she is blue and dark in his arms and she's not moving and she'll never move again.

"No," he lies, "I can talk about it."

She seems to be able to detect his hesitation, but he scents her respect, her focus.

She's zeroing in on him and he feels unarmored. He irrationally worries that she's able to see Paige's dead body in his lap.

"Tell me what your five favorite things about Paige were," she instructs nonchalantly.

"I don't think I can choose just five."

He wants to stroke her hair. He always does, but he knows by now that when he lifts his hand, it will fall on empty air.

"Tell me any five things, then," she amends, "Any five things you loved."

"Her motivation," he starts easily enough, "I don't think will-power exists, because I don't believe it can be measured, but she had drive. I liked that."

He gets lost, looking off and unfocusing his eyes. He sighs and says, "she was dangerously curious and insatiable that way. She was adventurous, she was loyal and…"

After an empty beat, Dr. Lundy asks, "And?"

"She loved me," he says plainly and sadly to the space between his feet; he can see one of her bluish hands dangling limply there, "She loved me and never asked me to change. She never told me I was too much of something or too little of something else. She just…wanted me the way I was. The natural, or supernatural… the rawest way I came, she wanted me that way. Unfiltered. Uncensored. Untamed. Before I knew shame."

While she's writing, Dr. Lundy asks, "what did Paige mean to you then?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you were – what age was this?"

"I was fourteen when I met Paige."

"Well, when you were fourteen and thought of Paige, what did you feel? What did she mean?"


There's a pause while Dr. Lundy looks at her paper and scribbles until she inquires, "and what does Paige mean to you now? What do you feel when you think of Paige?"

His brow furrows and he feels that sickly, cornered animal fear. He answers, "guilt. Anger. Idiocy. Suffering. Loss."

"Would I be right in thinking that you blame yourself for this?"

"It's my fault," he growls irritably, "Of course I blame myself. If it weren't for me, Paige would still be alive. My family would still be…"
"Be what?"

"Here," he concludes quietly.

"How is that?" Dr. Lundy asks clinically.

"I was dumb," he starts, sounding and feeling exhausted and fearful of voicing the eternal, broken record of his inner monologue, "I was hurt. When I lost Paige, I lost everything. My family looked at me differently, my eyes were different from everyone else's and I was vulnerable. I was easy prey. A hunter…"

His throat closes up and his head doesn't feel right. He doesn't feel like his blood is flowing properly. Like his blood flow has changed direction and it's making his limbs feel weak and his stomach is churning. He wants to be swallowed up by the ground. He wants to die before he has to finish the sentence.

"Keep going, Derek," Dr. Lundy encourages gently, "Tell me what happened."

"She was a substitute teacher at the high school," Derek says without breathing, "She got into my head. She used me. I was fifteen. It was my first sexual relationship, it was too soon after Paige died, I was too dumb and fucking sad to see any of the red, blaring fucking lights. She killed them."

"Killed who?"

"Everyone," Derek chokes, feeling the terrifying sting of isolation he hadn't felt since he was newly orphaned, "Everyone but Peter and Laura. Laura was at school with me. Peter survived. Barely. The house was set on fire. They were all locked in the basement. I never told anyone…"

Dr. Lundy probes, "until now?"

"I'm not totally sure. Last year, a…" he almost says 'a kid I know,' but thinks that sounds way too creepy. He considers saying, 'a pack member,' but Stiles isn't pack, because Derek doesn't have a pack anymore. He winds up settling on, "A guy I know said something that sounded…"

He remembers the green, flashing on-and-off of the hospital lights. He remembers the fiery look in Stiles' amber eyes and how sharp his human teeth looked when he shouted,

"Me be quiet? Me? Are you telling me what to do now? When your psychotic mass-murdering girlfriend - the second one you've dated, by the way – has got my dad somewhere, tied up, waiting to be ritually sacrificed?"

"…he implied that he knew about her – Kate. Kate was the woman's name, and he implied that he knew what happened between Kate and me."

Dr. Lundy seems a little wary when she asks, "is there any way for this 'guy' to know about that?"

"No," Derek insists, but softens before he adds, "Well, I don't think so. He's got sharp investigative skills, he's smart. He might have figured it out for himself. Otherwise, the only other person, still alive, that knew who killed them is Peter. But Peter doesn't know what happened between Kate and me."

"I see," Dr. Lundy says, "Would you like Peter to know?"

"No," Derek chuckles darkly, "No. Peter's the last person I would want knowing."
"Why is that?"

Derek makes a frustrated noise, but doesn't elaborate, so Dr. Lundy rephrases and redirects, "what's the nature of your relationship with your uncle Peter, Derek?"

"The nature? I don't know. He's the bane of my existence," Derek offers.

"I thought you said you were quite close with your uncle Peter?"

"I was, but the fire changed him," Derek tells her, anger and regret boiling in the pit of his stomach, "He was always an ass, but the fire made him lose his mind. He's a power-hungry psycho. He killed Laura two years ago, to take her place as Alpha. I killed him. A banshee brought him back to life. Now he has an apartment outside Beacon Hills and fucks with me by setting my DVR to record shows I don't like and drops ambiguous hints about what I should be doing."

"…uh-huh," Dr. Lundy replies, a little strained, "What happened to Peter after the fire? And what became of you and Laura?"

"He wasn't healing correctly. He stayed in a hospital for years. We left. Laura would visit him sometimes. I visited him twice after the fire, but I just couldn't bring myself to see him like that again," He imagines Laura's face and her constant understanding whenever he said he didn't want to go with her to see him. He sighs a little longingly for her and then says, "Laura was stronger that way. She saw him regularly, about once or twice a month. She hadn't been down here to see him for months when she heard rumor of a rogue, feral werewolf terrorizing Beacon Hills. So, she came down to see what was happening, because Beacon Hills is still, technically, Hale territory. It was Peter and he killed her. I came looking for her when she didn't come back. I've been here since."

"I see," she nods and looks up from her paper, "And you blame yourself for these events too?"

"If I'd followed Laura down here when she left to follow up on the rumors, it wouldn't have happened. I shouldn't have let her come alone."

"She came to Beacon Hills alone many times before, though, right?"

"Yeah," Derek grumbles argumentatively, "but never to go looking for a rogue Omega. I shouldn't have let her go alone."

Dr. Lundy writes more down and Derek begins wondering if it was a bad idea to tell her he didn't mind her taking notes.

She questions, "what's happened since that? You said Peter killed Laura two years ago. What's happened since then?"

"While he was an Alpha, Peter Bit a kid named Scott. Scott was only sixteen; he's a good kid. He's also naive and incompetent and a lot like me when I was his age."

Dr. Lundy cocks a curious brow at that and asks with genuine intrigue, "what does that make you feel?"

"About Scott?"

"Yes, about Scott."

"Fear," Derek answers frankly, "I feel fear for Scott."
"Are you involved in Scott's life?"

"I wouldn't say that," he confesses regretfully, "I wanted to be. I wanted to help him, but he didn't want my help."

When Dr. Lundy makes an expression that wonders why Scott wouldn't want his help, he says, "I didn't make myself easy to be around or anything; I don't blame him. I made a pack, after killing Peter. I was scared without Laura. I was too scared to be an Omega. I turned four kids. Boyd, Erica, Isaac and Jackson. Jackson's Bite didn't take at first. He turned into something else and I almost had to put him down. Erica and Boyd are dead. Isaac belongs to Scott's pack now."

"Isaac left you?" she inquires.

"I pushed – forced - him away," Derek admits.

"Why?"

"To protect him," Derek promises, a distinctive ache in his chest; "I care deeply about Isaac. I'm just a goddamn black cat. I was in danger at the time and I pushed him away to keep him safe. It was all I could think to do," Derek rationalizes.

"Erica and Boyd?"

"Boyd killed Erica when he became feral. They were being tortured and kept prisoner by an Alpha pack. One of those Alphas used my hands to kill Boyd."

"Jackson?"

"He was dead, then the banshee brought him back to life too. His family panicked and sent him away. He's somewhere in Europe now, in some boarding school," Derek explains.

"Who is this banshee you keep mentioning?"

"Lydia. Part of Scott's pack."

"Is that all of Scott's pack? Lydia, Isaac and Scott?"

"Kira, a kitsune. Malia, a were-coyote. And Stiles."

"And what is Stiles?"

"A human," Derek answers proudly, looking Dr. Lundy in the eyes for the first time in the hour, "He's a human. His father is in law enforcement and he's more curious than is good for him. He's Scott's best friend. He's been there since Scott was first Bitten."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds to me like you envy Scott and his pack. Would that be accurate?"

Derek shrugs, looking away again, "I guess. A part of me is definitely…envious, I guess, but I'm more worried. And I'm more sorry than anything else."

"Sorry for what?"

"Sorry that I ever spoke to Paige," he says while shaking his head, "Sorry that made me love Paige. Sorry I killed Paige and that she was received as a sacrifice to the Nemeton."
"The Nemeton?"

"The Nemeton is an ancient magic in the woods, where my family lived. It draws a lot of creatures. Ones not so friendly. And because I killed Paige there, it stirred. Its awakening meant disaster for Scott and I'm sorry for it."

Derek starts rubbing his knees with his open palms, nervous and fitful. "Scott wanted to kill Peter, in the hopes it would cure the lycanthropy. I didn't let him. I was too angry. I killed Peter. I took it away from him and I'm sorry for that. I was cruel to Stiles because I would see Paige in his eyes and it made me want to kill myself. I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry that Peter causes his pack so many issues and he does – he really does. And if I'd never spoken to Paige, I'd have never tried to change her. If I hadn't tried to get her changed, I wouldn't have had to kill her and if I didn't have to mourn her, I wouldn't have been vulnerable to Kate and if I hadn't been vulnerable to Kate, my family wouldn't have died. If my family didn't die, Peter would've been kept in check and if Peter had been kept in check, he never would've been Alpha and never Bitten Scott. If Peter never Bit Scott, he wouldn't have to deal with all of this. The pain and the loss – he just lost his first love to all this evil shit and it's my fault. It all comes back to me."

"You blame yourself for everything that's unfolded, then?"

"Of course I do."

"Alright," Dr. Lundy says, finishing a sentence in her notes with a loud tap.

Derek quirks a brow and his hands stop moving. He asks, "alright, what?"

He expected her to tell him it wasn't his fault, how he was only a child. He expected her to tell him that he didn't need to feel so sad, so guilty, so angry with himself, but she hadn't. She's staring passively at him and he realizes that he wouldn't have listened to a single word she'd said if she'd started a sentence with 'it isn't your fault.' He feels validated; for something awful, but it helps him feel entitled to his feelings.

He swallows thickly and she asks, "so. Blaming yourself. How is that working for you?"

Derek drops his head in his hands, elbows balanced on his thighs when he replies, "not so well."

"So, what if you didn't blame yourself anymore?"

"What do you mean?" Derek grumbles.

"I mean, what if you stopped blaming yourself. What would happen?"

Derek's fingers twitch and he knows he probably looks furious, but he's just feeling open and raw and confused. He doesn't know. He tries to imagine life without the guilt and he thinks words like selfish, heartless, undeserving. He knows he's taking too long to answer and Dr. Lundy smiles a little sadly.

She leans forward and looks him in the eyes when she prompts, "what purpose does the guilt serve, Derek?"

"I don't… it's my responsibility," he insists, his shoulders rolling up higher and higher, his back arching.

"To who?"
"To myself. My family – those kids – " he's panicking and the knowledge of the panic is only making it worse, "if it weren't for me, they'd still be here."

She backs up a little, gives him space enough that he no longer feels like he's being hovered over.

"You know, humans are the only animals that feel guilt," she says simply.

"That's not true," Derek glares at her, dropping his fists against his thighs, "Dogs feel guilt. You've seen dogs with tails between their legs, their ears down when they're being yelled at."

"Yes, but that dog isn't thinking about having shit on the carpet two weeks after the fact."

Derek pauses and Dr. Lundy smiles again, "humans are the only ones that torture themselves with guilt. We are the only self-punishing creatures. So, if nothing else in the animal kingdom uses it, what kind of use do you think it has?"

"Not a lot…" he guesses half-heartedly.

"Not a lot," Dr. Lundy agrees, "Humans are flawed animals. If it doesn't serve a purpose, or its purpose is harmful, it's maladaptive. You said you want to change. You stand by that?"

"Yes," Derek answers readily, always more open to a new challenge than mulling over old feelings.

"Then we have to change the way you think. It won't be easy."

"Nothing ever is."

She smiles at him and it's encouraging.

She announces, "our time is almost up for today. Should I put you down for the same time next week?"

"Two, if you can. Back-to-back. It's a long drive out here and… if we've got work ahead of us, I guess I should spend a little more time here than an hour a week."

"That's fine by me," she says and starts penciling in her agenda.

Before he leaves, she stands by the door and tells him, "remember, Derek, when you feel discomfort or are experiencing unpleasant emotions, ask yourself where it's coming from and whether it is serving a purpose. Madness is trying to get a different result from the same things; don't stay idle."

He nods and drives home in rush hour. It takes him an hour and a half to get home and he spends most of it biting the inside of his bottom lip until it bleeds.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

(Derek's hair; http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m8jmodLGTP1qhsnkdo1_500.png)

It's never too late to start over. If you weren't happy with yesterday try something different today.
Don't stay stuck.

Alex Elle

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Song for this chapter: My Body, by Young The Giant

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Stiles groans in objection in the general direction of his buzzing phone.

He gets that summer vacation is prime time for staying up late and partying and having fun, but he really loves his sleep.

Last year's trauma with the Nogitsune really taught him to appreciate being peacefully unconscious.

He had been having a pleasant, foggy dream about touching and being touched and he'd been languidly grinding against his mattress, mostly asleep. It had been the best kind of mostly-asleep because it was the kind of mostly-asleep that you can enjoy when you know you don't have anywhere to be or any time you need to wake up. It was calm and quiet and private in the best way and then his damned phone started vibrating.

He blinks at the time on his clock rapidly until it comes into focus and it reads 3:22 a.m.

He groans again and picks up his phone,

"Someone better be on fire."

"Hey, Stiles!" Scott sounds breathless and Stiles can feel his anxiety racking up.

"It's the ass crack of dawn, Scott, what do you want?"

"Is it still protocol to call you first when there's a dead body? Or is that only for pretty, red-headed girls?" Scott teases.

"Dead body?"

"Mhm. In the woods. Your favorite kind."

"Why are you in the woods at three in the morning?" Stiles doesn't say it, but the 'without me' is heavily implied.
Then Stiles hears Kira's voice on the other end, tinny and cute, asking what Stiles is saying and he rolls his eyes.

"Hanky-panky in the woods has to get tired after a while, Scott."

"Hanky-what? No, dude! Kira's parents are gone for the weekend, she was bored, so we're training with her katana on the trees."

"Kira's parents are gone for the weekend, so instead of doing the no-pants-dance in her empty house, you thought it'd be cute to cut up ancient, moldy trees in a cold, dark wood known for being a dead-body-dumping-ground?"

Scott doesn't respond to that, so Stiles adds, "I didn't raise you this way. Where did I go wrong?"

Scott chuckles and says, "You didn't raise me at all, Stiles."

"How could you say that to me?"

"Stiles."

"Honestly, I am wounded."

"Stiles."

"Seriously, just stick a knife in my heart, Scott, it'd be more merciful."

"Would you just come down here?" Scott laughs.

"Alright, alright. I'm going to bring Dad. Do Derek, Isaac, Malia and Lydia know yet?"

"No. I figured Lydia wouldn't appreciate her beauty sleep being interrupted —"

"And you didn't think I'd appreciate the beauty sleep? Christ, I need it more than she does!"

Scott continues, as if Stiles hadn't said anything, "I haven't seen Derek for weeks and I just haven't called Isaac or Malia yet. Have you guys been talking?"

Stiles casts his tired eyes down and replies, "I had an existential crisis two weeks ago. The outcome was unfortunate for her and her feelings for me. It's been weird."

What he means is that she asked him to explain evolution and he realized she never actually went to school after being turned at nine, never had a chance to learn or mature. He means to say that it made him contemplate if she knew the meaning of consent or romantic love or dating or sex and all he could think is Oh, God, she's nine and told her, in a mess of mostly stuttered consonant sounds, that he couldn't date her. She was none too happy, but the only guilt he really feels has more to do with the idea that he crossed a terrible line while under the influence of mood altering drugs and the paralyzing fear of being possessed.

"Oh," Scott clears his throat a bit awkwardly, but mercifully doesn't press for more details, "Well, then, I'll just leave you to call Lydia or Derek, if you want. I don't think we'll need them. Especially if your dad is coming down, I don't know what they'd be able to do."

"Alright," Stiles starts, already knowing he's going to call in help because Scott underestimates everyone's use, "Come to the No Trespassing sign, so you can walk me back to wherever this body is. I refuse to wander aimlessly in the dark woods with my father. I hear it's full of werewolves."
"Sure," Scott answers with the sound of a smile and they disconnect.

Stiles sighs and stretches lavishly, enjoying it until he's pulling a muscle in his foot and falling unceremoniously to the floor with a thud. It's been a few seconds and he's chanting, "oh, God, this is it, this is how it ends," and gripping his seizing foot when his father opens his bedroom door. His father is in pajama pants and an old robe, looking vaguely concerned.

"You okay, kid?"

"Something funky is happening in the woods," Stiles starts, sounding strained and seething, "You wanna come with? We're just gonna call the cops once we gather all the things we need to know, anyway. You could have a head start."

"Scott just call you?"

The "you betchya," he says to his father sounds like it's being dragged out of him across gravel. Stiles starts breathing like a woman in labor.

"Alright," Sheriff Stilinski agrees begrudgingly, "Alright, be ready in five. We'll take my car."

"Okay," Stiles replies, trying to spread his limbs in some useful way.

"And if you straighten your foot, like you would against a tile floor, you stop the cramping."

Stiles flattens his foot and the cramping quickly melts away. He smiles, wiggles his toes experimentally and says, "huh. Wonders never cease. Thanks, Dad."

"No problem. Drink more water, kiddo. And call Derek."

"Why?" Stiles asks out of curious surprise.

"Because from what I understand between what Scott, you and Isaac tell me, Derek is good at tracking and scenting and Scott still borders on useless in that department. If I'm getting a head start on finding some kind of person of interest, I'd like a quality supernatural nose on my side."

"Yes, sir," Stiles salutes and his father rolls his eyes and walks back to his room.

Stiles fumbles for his phone again, still on the floor, spidery fingers dancing along the bed until he finally lands on his phone and grabs it. He looks up Derek's contact and admires the ID photo for a second. He was able to snap a silent photo of Derek with his phone camera a little more than a month ago.

In the picture, Derek is looking down and away, so there's no glare and the picture is at a strange angle, but it captures most of Derek's profile and it's painfully handsome.

Stiles clicks it and it rings twice before he hears Derek's bizarrely charming morning-voice scratch with worry, "Stiles? Where are you? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Der-Bear, I'm fine – your readiness to be concerned on my account is touching, though. Listen, there's a dead body in the woods and we might need your help. You game?"

He can almost feel Derek's angry eyebrows.

He smirks to himself.

"At almost four in the morning? Helping you isn't exactly what I feel like doing."
Stiles realized about two months ago that if he piled on sentences after calling Derek a terrible nickname, Derek would elect to ignore it, but still be mad about it. Stiles finds it endlessly amusing and has been trying to use that knowledge as much as possible since.

"Dead body, Derek," Stiles starts as he clambers up from his bedroom floor, "Woods. Your woods, remember? 'This is private property, you hooligans get off my lawn', etcetera, etcetera? Derek. Help."

Derek sighs long-sufferingly and replies, "I'll track you. Expect me in fifteen minutes."

"Perfect! Thanks, Big Guy!"

"Shut up, Stiles."

Stiles ends the call and dresses quickly. His father and he are in the woods, at the No Trespassing sign less than ten minutes later. Scott is waiting there with Kira and he leads them fairly deep inside. When they come to a small opening, Derek is waiting there.

"Your hair is long," Stiles says in frozen fascination that sounds like he's offended. It's been a few weeks since he's seen Derek and apparently that makes a big difference.

Derek makes some noncommittal grunt and the Sheriff asks Stiles why Derek is shirtless and shoeless in sweatpants by a complicated sequence of eyebrow and eyeball movements. Stiles is able to silently communicate that he doesn't know why Derek wouldn't bother putting shoes or a shirt on before running through the woods, but doesn't question the werewolves and their affinity for nudity.

Stiles tries to lose interest in Derek's long hair and sleepy eyes. He wonders quickly if maybe Derek had been lying in bed, thrusting lazily against his own mattress; hard and content in privacy like Stiles had been. He decides this is an inappropriate time to get hard again and so halts that line of thought.

He remembers therapy after his mother's death and how, in an exercise, he and his therapist built him a superhero alter ego, who was, according to nine-year-old Stiles, 'stronger in every way'. He would pretend to be his alter ego whenever things became overwhelming, because he could believe in the power of his alter ego more than 'plain old Stiles.' He wonders if he can channel that into a different kind of alter ego; like maybe he can pretend to be a person that's not wildly attracted to Derek Hale.

Then he wonders if any people like that actually exist in the world.

*People who are asexual,* he answers himself.

*Too bad I'm on the completely opposite end of that sexual spectrum.*

Derek gives him Eyebrow Combo #12, meaning he's confused and a little concerned for Stiles. He waves it off and starts looking at the ground for clues. Nothing like a cold, dead body to quell any form of warming arousal, after all.

There are footprints where Kira and Scott were sparring and moving around, among dead leaves, some long indents and dying grass. There are a few rocks near to where Derek is standing and Scott points to the largest rock in the small formation, saying, "it's behind there."

Derek is the first to look, but the Sheriff and Stiles make their way over too and they’re all looking at a very tiny skull sitting on top of a pile of small bones.
"A baby?" Stiles asks, brows curved in sadly.

"Looks like it," the Sheriff replies gruffly with a resigned combination of sadness and anger only a parent can express when faced with images of such immature bones, "It's been here a while."

"Why do you think that?" Scott asks, nearing with Kira.

"It's almost totally decomposed; just skeleton," Stiles explains.

"No," Derek interrupts, crouching closer to the bones, "It's new. The flesh and organs have been eaten. The skeleton is just what's left."

"How do you know?" Stiles wonders, getting momentarily distracted with the shadows of the overhanging trees playing across Derek's face and shoulders.

Derek's back is beautiful.

Stiles smacks himself inwardly.

Backs aren't beautiful. Stop.

"No marks on the bones, meaning scavengers haven't been picking at it yet – probably because it was dumped here without anything to pick off. It smells fresh. It couldn't have been here for more than a day or two."

I like when he sounds so sure of himself. Confidence is sexy. Derek is sexy.

Stiles glares at his feet, as if they planted the thoughts in his brain.

Stop. It.

The Sheriff looks strangely impressed and Stiles looks up again and says with his signature quality of sass, "no, Creep-Nose, how do you know the organs and flesh were eaten?"

"Saliva," Derek answers, standing and straightening again, "I can smell the saliva on it."

"Oh, okay, you can smell spit, fantastic, that is - that's disgusting," Stiles stammers manically.

"I don't smell it," Scott confesses sadly.

Scott seems worried that he can't and Derek thinks, he should be worried. Saliva is easy to smell.

A weird stress comes over him and he feels a little put on the spot and a little like he's missing an opening.

He doesn't know where the stress is coming from, but he thinks to himself, this is the shit Dr. Lundy was talking about. Maladaptive behaviors, not serving a purpose – don't be a dick. Stop being a dick. It never works. Help him.

"Here – come here, Scott," Derek instructs, stepping aside to make room for Scott to stand in front of him.

Scott and Stiles share a glance and the Sheriff looks between them, then back to Kira, who shrugs with wide eyes. Scott looks to Derek and takes a place in front of him.

"Close your eyes."
"Don't punch me."

"What?"

"Don't punch me once my eyes are closed."

"I'm not going to – why would I punch you?"

"I don't know, but Stiles has done that to me before."

The Sheriff looks to Stiles, whose shoulders are rounding innocently and he's gaping in exaggerated offense, as if he's being unfairly portrayed. Scott closes his eyes and Derek stands behind him, placing his hands on either side of Scott's jaw. He is positioning Scott's nose to be a little more downwind and toward him.

Derek doesn't realize, but Stiles' eyes are fixed on his hands and he's bubbling with jealousy. Derek's hands look strong and rough in a good way, his fingers are long and look just slightly calloused. He's got these veins that run from his knuckles upward, veins on his wrists and on the underside of his arms. They're beautiful to Stiles.

Derek leans over Scott and down a little, so that his mouth is by Scott's ear. Stiles nearly turns green with envy.

"Can you focus on my scent?"

"Yeah."

"What does it smell like?"

"Lavender. Kind of like a garden."

"That's my Pack Scent. It's not my Individual Scent."

Scott's eyebrows do a sad little dance that expresses his miserable confusion, "what?"

"There are different kinds of scents one person can have?" Stiles asks curiously.

Derek nods, "everyone has layers of scents. There's a Pack Scent, Individual Scent and scents that are more indicative of intentions. Lavender and Earth is what my whole family smells like. We all have – " he clears his throat suddenly, catching himself and finishing gruffly, "— had that scent. Focus on me, alone."

Stiles thinks immediately that he could easily focus on Derek alone.

"I don't know how," Scott admits, opening his eyes and his heart aches a little for Derek and how quickly he readjusted his words.

Derek lets his feathery grip on Scott's jaw go to allow him to turn around. They're very close together and Scott feels a little nervous in Derek's looming presence.

Derek's just inherently intimidating, he knows Derek can't help his resting face but Scott senses something else from Derek too. Something new. Something more approachable, a little more open. A door left slightly ajar, a light left on.

"Here," Derek offers and he stretches his neck for Scott.
Scott's surprised and he looks at Stiles again, as if to say, 'do you believe this?' Stiles crosses his arms and gestures vaguely to do whatever Derek wants him to do. Scott leans forward and sniffs the crook of Derek's neck and the Sheriff and Kira are looking equally confused while Stiles tries not to pull a Watson and offer baby names.

He realizes he's scowling, but he can't really help it. No one is ever this close to Derek and Derek is never so amiable. Stiles just doesn't think it's fair that after all the life-saving he's done for Derek, that Scott gets to be the first one to be so friendly with him. And that's totally all he's mad about. That's totally it.

"You got it now?"

"Yeah."

"It's different from the Lavender, right?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Scott quickly considers how nice and how patient Derek is sounding and acting, and so quickly adds, "it's nice."

Scott isn't entirely sure why, but it's an olive branch he wants to extend.

"What's nice?" Derek asks.

"Your scent. It's nice. It's a nice smell."

Stiles' heart drops; a little in jealousy, a little in despair, a little in desperation and he feels himself sink deeper into a painfully familiar hole.

Derek wonders at how different this interaction feels from all the rest he's had with Scott. His senses are telling him that Scott is receiving him more openly. The feeling spreads warmly across his chest and stomach; humble success feels like swallowing a sweet, hot tea. He hides his smile.

"Thanks," Derek says softly, sounding reverent and flattered.

"Yeah, man," Scott brushes off.

"You could go to Fiji."

Scott looks at Stiles over his shoulder and Derek cocks a brow.

Stiles shrugs under the collective stare of everyone and continues, "you know. If you're thinking about the honeymoon."

*I pulled a Watson*, Stiles chides himself and wants to bleach his brain to escape the embarrassment. He can feel his father's inquisitive gaze.

*He pulled a Watson*, Scott thinks and he wonders why. He glances back at Derek, who is focused on Stiles and he connects the dots in record time. *Oh.*

Scott scoffs in an effort to diffuse Stiles' anxiety and, reading off his cue of nonchalance, Derek rolls his pretty eyes.

*Ugh. His pretty eyes.*
Stiles wants to die.

"Now, close your eyes," Derek instructs Scott, "When you do, I'm going to lick my finger and put it under your nose. Have you ever had an IV? In the hospital?"

"Yeah," Scott replies readily.

"Remember how it felt when they hooked it up?"

"Yeah."

"Well, when you catch the scent of my saliva, it's going to feel like a saline solution in your veins. You'll taste it in the back of your throat – you'll be able to tell it apart from the rest of the scents right away."

"Okay," Scott says warily.

The Sheriff leans into Stiles with his arms crossed and shoulders hunched, looking young and entertained and says, "this stuff is fascinating. Weird - I mean, real weird, but fascinating."

"Yeah," Stiles grumbles, thinking up better uses for Derek's apparently fragrant saliva, "Fascinating."

"Is it always like this when Derek teaches the wolves new things?"

Stiles tilts his head and says with no small measure of wonder, "he's never actually done this. Not... at least, not in front of me."

"Hm," is all the Sheriff says back.

Scott closes his eyes and Stiles watches with an irritated, tapping foot as Derek sticks his middle finger into his mouth and moves his tongue around. He removes his finger, then places it horizontally under Scott's nose. They're all able to see Scott's nostrils flare and then he has a sharp intake, opens his eyes and touches his neck, "whoa!"

Derek smirks and takes his hand back while Scott exclaims, "wow! You were right about the back of the throat thing!"

"Now you'll forever know the scent of saliva. Focus your energy on the bones and breathe in deep. You'll feel it and smell it again."

Scott follows the instructions, crouching down to the bones again and inhaling deeply through his nose. He smiles broadly at Derek and announces proudly, "I can smell it now."

Derek feels his face twitching and decides to let his smile show. It's small and brotherly and Scott's eyes sparkle like a Disney prince when he says, "thanks, Derek."

Kira proclaims, "that was pretty cool, Derek!"

Derek scratches the back of his neck, feeling strange in this new social situation. He feels kind of exhausted from it. He points to one of the long indents in the ground, redirecting the attention of the group and declares, "that's unnatural."

"They're not tire tracks," the Sheriff notes.

"What are they from?" Kira asks.
"An animal," Derek answers.

"An animal-animal, or a mythical-creature-animal?" the Sheriff dreads.

"The latter, probably," Scott mutters, smiling goofily at Kira. Stiles can tell he's still riding the high of his newfound skill.

The Sheriff gives Scott a dry look, to which Scott says, "what? With our luck? In these woods? We're probably looking at something supernatural."

The Sheriff sighs in resignation, then announces, "alright, guys. Do whatever or smell whatever it is you need to and let's get out of here. I've got two more hours before my shift starts and I'd like at least ten minutes of sleep."

"Go ahead without me," Stiles offers off-handedly, "I'll be the one to call you in a few hours, because I was out gallivanting in the woods with my friends like the uncontrollable rascal I am."

Derek can't tell if the Sheriff's fondness is outweighing his fatigue, but he surrenders and wishes them all luck in their sniffing and spit.

"It's nice to have an adult in our group of supernaturals," Kira mentions.

Derek cringes and scowls, "thanks."

"Oh, no!" Kira rushes apologetically, "I didn't mean – it's just, you know, you're not a parental figure, you know? The Sheriff is very fatherly, so it's nice to have that added to – I'm sorry. I didn't mean - I'm just... uhm... sorry."

Derek shakes his head and mumbles, "don't worry about it."

Kira frowns, but doesn't say anything more.

Scott looks to Derek and asks, "can I watch how you start tracking a scent?"

Derek looks at the long indent in the ground, then back to Scott and nods, saying "yeah, sure. I'll show you."

"Is this cool, tattooed werewolves only? Or can I join?" Stiles asks.

Scott gives him a look to try and communicate that he isn't making a move on Derek, but because it's an unfamiliar block he's never had to overcome before, he doesn't know how. He has never had to communicate such messages to Stiles before, because he never realized before what Stiles was feeling. He knows there's a long conversation ahead of them, sometime soon, and he'll learn his cues then. He decides that now isn't the time to angst about it.

"I don't see why not," he says, looking to Derek.

_It's an opening. Take it_, Derek thinks to himself.

"Yeah," he agrees, looking to Stiles and sensing a peculiar bashfulness, "You can come with."

Stiles and Kira walk beside each other and behind Derek and Scott. Kira is whispering about how she shrieked when she happened upon the bones, but Stiles is very distracted by Derek's back muscles.

_Can they even get that big? How do they even get to that size?_ He thinks to himself, and he thinks,
Holy Lord, those indents in the small of his back are sacrilegious, I'm going to Hell for looking at them.

Derek kneels, then runs his fore and middle finger into the dirt affected by the indent. He lifts it to his nose, sniffs, then offers it to Scott's scrutiny.

"Don't tell me what you smell at first. Tell me what you sense. What feeling does it give you?"

Scott looks pensive for a moment, then says, "I don't know. It's eerie. It feels dangerous. Like bad intentions. Anger. Greed."

"You're right, that's good." Derek encourages, "Think of your hands now. If you could translate the scent into a physical feeling, what would it feel like?"

Stiles and Kira are entranced while Scott focuses and eventually answers, "slimy. I think? Kind of... slick."

"That's really good, Scott," Derek approves and he brushes the dirt off on his sweatpants.

Scott grins at the praise, but shies away when he inquires, "what does it mean?"

"Sounds like a reptile to me," Derek states frankly.

"Not another kanima?" Stiles worries.

"What's a kanima?" Kira asks.

Scott and Stiles reply in unison, "you don't wanna know."

"No. Not a kanima," Derek assurs, "You'd have recognized the scent and we would've seen some of its clear venom near the victim. Plus, killing and cannibalizing children isn't the kanima's M.O."

"Right," Scott agrees.

"I'll start looking into it. I'll get back to you if I find anything," Derek shares, then stands.

Scott follows suit and brushes off his jeans.

"Uhm, okay," he says, "I'll make Lydia and Stiles start looking into the bestiary. Maybe ask Deaton a few questions."

"Alright," Derek responds.

He turns to leave and Stiles' voice stops him.

He looks over his shoulder at the boy and Stiles just says, "sorry for waking you so early for all this."

Derek thinks that this newfound bashfulness, while cute on Stiles, is foreign and it's stressing him out. He is unprepared for a Bashful Stiles; he didn't know it was a version of Stiles that existed in this plane of reality.

Derek nods in acknowledgement and then, before he can turn to leave again, Scott includes, "and thanks for the help, Derek."

Derek nods again and says, "sure."
He makes a small hand gesture to signal his awkward departure, then sprints off into the darkness of the woods like a flash.

When they're sure he's far enough away, Stiles and Scott look to each other curiously.

"That was weird."

"Weirdly nice," Scott amends, "I'd like that weirdness to continue."

Stiles looks off into the dark woods, thinking he might see a single sign of Derek having been there at all, but he's long gone. He thinks that Derek and everything supernatural about him is beautiful, dangerous, wild and unattainable. The stuff Stiles' dreams have always been made of.

He wonders if Derek's made some kind of change, turned a new leaf. Or maybe he was just too tired to be a huge dick.

Maybe there's a chance he'll turn kind eyes to Stiles one day. Maybe it's dumb to hope that men like Derek can or even want to change. A voice in the back of his mind tells him that he doesn't really want Derek to change. That Derek's not broken; doesn't need repairs or replacements like a doll or a car. Just a person with wiring different from Stiles' and perhaps, if Derek were to rearrange some of them, there'd be some part of Derek wired to smile at Stiles. To look at Stiles for long moments, to ask Stiles personal questions, to press close into Stiles' space. To wonder long nights on Stiles, the way Stiles does for him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning
TRIGGER WARNING
TW:

In this chapter Derek is in therapy and he discusses a lot of triggering material! There is depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and he discusses past sexual abuse. Triggering language is used throughout. Please be careful!

But don't forget who you really are. And I'm not talking about your so-called real name. All names are made up by someone else, even the one your parents gave you. You know who you really are. When you're alone at night, looking up at the stars, or maybe lying in your bed in total darkness, you know that nameless person inside you.

Louis Sachar

Song for this chapter is Big Hard Sun, by Indio

"And he received you well?" she interviews.

They're an hour into his two-hour session, in which he has already confided in her the events of the last two years. He has spoken about Jennifer, Scott and Stiles' several heroic rescues and Cora.

Dr. Lundy had seemed intrigued by his willingness to trust Jennifer and Cora so readily and Derek had begun to wonder if he had some kind of unfair distribution of trust.

When he mentioned that Stiles had placed a comforting hand on his shoulder after he'd killed Boyd, she smiled and he thought it was suspicious. She only told him that she was smiling because, for the first time in many stories, it sounded as though there was someone who cared if he was emotionally tended to.

He had felt his ears get hot and brushed past the comment.

He's just told her about teaching Scott how to track and what saliva smells like.

"Yeah," Derek answers, leaning back into the uncomfortable couch, "Really well. Really, uh... receptive. He wants to learn more, but..."

"You need to be the one to offer it?"

"I guess," he shrugs.

"Do you think you will?"

"Yeah," Derek nods and says readily, "Yeah, I will."
Dr. Lundy stops writing for a moment and asks with caution, "do you mind if we talk more about Kate today?"

_Don't say her name_, he fumes inwardly, hands twitching, wanting to curl and punch and gums itching, hoping to unleash fangs and taste blood. Anything to distract him from the pain he can't kill. It coils in his chest like a poisonous, parasitic worm, attaching itself with hooked teeth onto the part of his heart that bleeds the most.

"No, I don't mind," he says instead; he loses his sense of comfort and sits on the edge of the couch again.

Dr. Lundy notices.

"How, if at all, do you define your experience with Kate?"

"I don't know what you mean," he responds coolly and quickly, looking away, "There's nothing to really… she was there for me while I was mourning, she seemed mature, she was 'grown up,' and I felt special because she was 'choosing,' me and I trusted her – she was an adult and a hunter. I slept with her, my family died for it."

"You were a minor at the time."

"Yeah," Derek reluctantly admits, "So?"

"So, technically speaking, that was illegal. What she did with you is considered statutory rape," Dr. Lundy expands.

"You want me to say I was raped?" Derek sneers, scowling dangerously at her, "Because I wasn't. I consented and, no matter what the law says, I was mature enough to know what I was agreeing to."

"Do you believe that consent is valid if you don't know who you're consenting to have sex with?"

Derek stares with hurt and defensive eyes.

Dr. Lundy rephrases and redirects, "you trusted someone who could not be trusted when you consented. She was disguised as someone trustworthy, someone whose motivations you thought you had a handle on, but those motivations were a lie. Do you blame her at all for what crimes she committed?"

His palms start to prickle with clammy sweat and he glares, "she was doing what hunters do. _Hunting_. I was dumb and thinking with my dick."

"I disagree," Dr. Lundy replies easily, leaning back into her chair.

"What do you mean 'you disagree? It's _my_ experience."

"I disagree that you were 'thinking with your dick,'" she clarifies, "When you shared your story with me, I heard the story of a young, impressionable and heartbroken boy, seeking comfort in whatever form it came in. With your family feeling estranged, with the change in your eyes and your recent trauma, I think that what you were doing was actually quite healthy. You were seeking comfort and company, connection."

"I was _ignorant_ and my ignorance cost my family their lives!" Derek barks, hands making white-knuckled fists.
Dr. Lundy puts her clipboard down on her desk, folds her hands on her lap and asks frankly, "how could you have known she would kill them, Derek?"

"Don't say that shit to me," he growls and he feels his fangs pinching his gums, "That shit is meaningless. I should have known. People's lives depended on me not being a blind dumbass and I – I should have known."

She starts telling a story, "a few years ago, there was a man killed by a great white shark on the coast of Australia. His wife was on the shore and saw it happen. A man in his fifties ran out into the water and tried to rescue him, but he bled out in the water before he could make it to shore."

Derek's forehead is a crease of frustrated confusion when he asks, "and?"

"The man that ran out into the water to rescue him didn't know him," she comments and Derek's interest is piqued, "The man that ran out into the water was willing to face off a man-eating, fifteen foot long great white shark for a stranger, while hundreds of people remained unmoving on the shore."

"He was brave," Derek intercepts, trying to guess at the moral of the story.

"Not if you asked him," Dr. Lundy corrects, "He was asked the same question we ask all people we consider heroes; 'what possessed you or gave you the courage to run out into that water?' And he gave the honest answer that 'heroes' give when they're being sincere about it – he said, 'I don't know.'"

Derek's brows furrow more tightly and she explains, "in our lives, we are introduced to conflicts that give us the tools and skills we sharpen and keep the rest of our lives. In that man's life, there had been a series of situations that taught him what he needed to know to try to save that man being eaten. The people on the shore that didn't move aren't evil people or cowardly people – his wife, a woman that loved him dearly, was unable to help, not because she didn't care enough or love him enough or she wasn't brave enough. She and all the people on shore were unable to help because they didn't have the tools the rescuer had. The events in their lives have given them a different set of tools. Whatever the rescuer has been through in his life prepared him for that moment and allowed him to say 'I know what to do' when that situation arose."

Derek nods slowly, half-understanding.

"You were just telling me about teaching Scott how to smell saliva, right?"

"Yeah," Derek's brows curve, worried and uncertain.

"He couldn't smell it, because no one taught him what it was meant to smell like. He'd never smelled it before in his life, couldn't identify it, even though it was right in front of him."

"Don't," Derek objects, seeing in what direction she's taking the conversation.

She doesn't listen.

"You couldn't have known," she insists, "There was literally no way for you to know, Derek. You had never encountered an evil like that before. There was no possibility of you knowing what it looked like, acted like, smelled like – you probably didn't even know that kind of evil existed in the world."

"No," Derek argues, "No – there were signs, there were signs."
"In a language you didn't speak," she reasons, "If you've never seen a stop sign before, don't know what a stop sign means, how in the world can you expect to understand it?"

Derek shakes his head and crosses his arms over his chest, hunching and practically throwing his weight back into the couch.

Dr. Lundy continues, "you were only fifteen, Derek. A fifteen year old boy that had no way of being able to identify evil like that. You can say there were signs, but if they were signs in a language you couldn't read, then what good did they do you? You didn't have the tools then."

Derek breaks eye-contact and doubles over, scrubbing his head and forehead with his hands. His entire body is tense and he wants to rip something apart.

Dr. Lundy asks softly, "what are you feeling?"

"Like I want to kill someone. Or have someone kill me."

Dr. Lundy sounds calm, but contemplative when she asks, "have you thought about killing yourself before?"

"Yes," Derek confesses in a frustrated groan.

"Recently?"

"Not too seriously."

"If you were to contemplate it more seriously, do you have a plan? Is there some specific way you would try to kill yourself?"

Derek's eyes are wide, burning and unfocused. He doesn't want to cry. He's been slowly accepting Dr. Lundy's office as a 'safe space', but no space has ever felt safe enough to cry in. Not even in Laura's embrace.

He tightens the force of his nails in his scalp and breathes out shakily, "I guess. I've tried in the past. When I was sixteen, when Laura and I left for New York. I ate wolfsbane. I survived it. Obviously."

"And you think that, if you were more serious about your suicidal thoughts, you would attempt that way?"

"Maybe. I would probably have better luck being shot."

"Shot by who? Yourself?"

"No. I could attack Chris Argent. He's a hunter; Kate's brother. Lives near me. Armed to the fuckin' teeth. If I attacked him, he'd put me down."

He hears her scribbling and it grates against his nerves. He feels too exposed and the exposure hurts like a gust of icy wind against tender, warm flesh. He exhales again and he's frightened by how shaky it sounds.

"Am I crazy?" he asks uncertainly.

"For having suicidal thoughts?"

"Yeah."
"No," Dr. Lundy comforts, "You're not crazy, Derek. A suicidal person is not crazy. You are not crazy for wanting to escape guilt and pain."

"Am I crazy for everything else?"

"Certainly not," Dr. Lundy reassures.

"I know I mentioned Chris, but...I wouldn't," Derek amends with a sigh, sounding somehow defeated, feeling his heart rate come down minutely, "I really wouldn't."

He lifts his head and drops his hands on his legs, looking Dr. Lundy in the eyes again, "he's a good man. He very recently lost his daughter and he's been trying to atone for what Kate did. He's not like her. And he wouldn't want to kill me, even if he had to."

"You know, Derek," Dr. Lundy begins conversationally, "You sound like a very forgiving person until it comes to yourself."

"Do I?" he asks blandly, disbelievingly.

"When you blame yourself for what happened to your family, do you blame yourself as you are, or as you were when you were fifteen?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, in your mind's eye, do you picture yourself as fifteen and blame that fifteen year old? Or do you blame yourself, picturing yourself as you are today?" she elaborates.

"I guess as I was at fifteen," Derek answers, touching at and twisting his wrists.

"Do me a favor, then, Derek," she starts, "Close your eyes and imagine yourself at fifteen. As if your fifteen-year-old-self were standing in front of you right now."

Derek closes his eyes and has to breathe deeply a few times before he can push the rush of anger and suicidal thoughts aside enough to focus on conjuring a specific image. He can see it easily, though. He spent so much time in the mornings of his pre-teen and teen years scrutinizing his face in the bathroom mirror while getting ready for school. He knows that face much better than the one he has now.

So, he sees it. He sees fifteen-year-old Derek and he's got a bit of baby-fat around his face still, a boyish frame, not yet grown into his ears or limbs really. Particularly aware of his lack of body hair. He recalls his brother using those specific words and his response had been, 'it's not like I don't have any! I got some! Just not on my chest yet!' and he smiles a little to himself.

"Can you see him?" Dr. Lundy's voice comes.

"Yeah," Derek says softly.

"Is Paige on his mind?"

Derek sees that the image he's conjured is smiling and so he says, "yeah. Definitely."

"Let time pass."

Derek imagines it as a wind passing by, blurring the image of his old self.

"Has he lost Paige?"
The image of himself greys and his eyes glow blue; he loses his baby-fat and grin.

"Yes."

"What is he feeling?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"I - it - I don't know! Alone. He feels alone."

"What else?" she interrogates.

"Isolated, unworthy."

"Unworthy of what?"

"I don't know."

"Love?"

"Yes."

"Life?"

"Yes," Derek emphasizes.

"If he were able to speak, what would he be saying to you right now?"

Fifteen-year-old Derek's eyes brim with tears, his nose turns reddish and he's shaking a little. He smells like so much fear.

*I'm so, so, so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.*

"He's sorry."

"Do you blame him for the death of your family?"

Derek's shut eyes scrunch tightly and his brows furrow. He wants to blame young Derek. He wants to feel rage, he wants to feel the urge to kill young Derek, but he doesn't.

His face is so boyish, his features so immature and muscles so small, he thinks it's a wonder that he ever tried to fight Ennis and survived. He hears his parents calling him 'pup,' and he agrees. He looks pitiful and tiny. He was unprepared, unequipped, confused and alone.

He imagines how young Scott and Stiles looked when he first met them and how terrible he would feel for them if they blamed themselves for the loss of their loved ones. He remembers Stiles' tears when he thought he was about to lose his father and how frightened Scott looked when he thought his mother was in danger. He sees his young self standing beside those two and knows they only did everything they could with the tools they had.

He struggles to open his mouth and confess, "no. I don't blame him. It's not his fault."

"So, does it make sense then, Derek, to blame yourself as you are now, when who you are now
"Didn't exist then?"

"No," He admits, opening his eyes, "It doesn't make sense."

"Animals in the wild protect their kin ferociously – you know this, that if you were to attack a bear cub, its parent or sibling would come and slaughter whatever was hurting its family, right?"

"Right," Derek agrees.

"Well, after the threat has been destroyed, the bear won't be ferocious anymore. Whatever damage is done to its loved one is done, and it no longer feels the anger was the threat is neutralized. The anger is what allows the bear to have strength enough to protect and fight for the safety of its family. Once the threat is gone, the damage done, the anger is gone because it no longer serves a purpose. The flaw of humans is that we stay angry. We stay in a suspended state of anxiety and guilt and anger, when, in truth, it doesn't serve a purpose anymore, because the danger has passed. There is nothing we can do now."

Derek follows Dr. Lundy's eyes and she can feel Derek's concentration on her. She chooses her words wisely, in the hopes that it will resonate with him.

"Kate is no longer hurting you. Kate is no longer hurting your family. Kate is gone. Kate is only a memory, no longer a present danger. When she was present, you had no way of protecting and fighting against her. Living in the suspended anxiety and anger does nothing but hurt you now. There is nothing you can do today that will eradicate the danger of ten years ago. There is nothing you can do today. Now is the time to let it go, Derek."

He feels his eyes getting glassy and he swallows down a hot lump in his throat, "I can't let go of my family," he confesses barely audibly.

"Your family will always be with you, Derek," Dr. Lundy assures, "The guilt, anger and anxiety of fifteen-year-old Derek is what you need to let go of. You have held a decade of anguish close to your heart and it's been killing you. You can let go of the pain now. You don't need to punish yourself anymore."

Derek stays silent and drops eye contact again. Dr. Lundy instructs gently, "repeat after me; there is nothing I can do today."

"There is nothing I can do today," Derek mumbles.

"There is nothing I can do today."

"There is nothing I can do today."

"There is nothing I can do. I can't save Paige now. I can't stop Kate now."

"Fuck," Derek chokes, cupping his face again.

"There is nothing I can do. I can't save Paige now. I can't stop Kate now."

"Fuck, fuck," Derek breathes out sharply into his hands, "There's nothing I can do. I can't... I can't save Paige now. I can't stop Kate now."

"Say it again," Dr. Lundy pushes.

"There's nothing I can do. I can't... save Paige now. I can't stop Kate now."
"One more time. Hear it. Listen to your own voice. Believe in it, Derek."

He takes one deep, shuddering breath and repeats, meaningfully, "there's nothing I can do. I can't save Paige now. I can't stop Kate now."

"You've been hurt. You're an animal in a big, wild world and you're wounded. What is there left to do?"

"Heal," Derek answers.

Dr. Lundy smiles at him and he looks at her, sensing pride and cautious optimism. He doesn't feel the warm spread of humble success like he had a few days ago when he succeeded in a new social situation. This success feels broken and iced. It is a success, though. He knows that, he can feel that. All that's left to do is heal.

"What do you do when you feel low?"

"Read. It doesn't help, but it distracts me from it."

"Is there somewhere you can go? Someone you can talk to? Anyone that can help?"

Derek contemplates this briefly, but replies, "not really."

"What about Stiles?"

Derek quirks a brow, "what about Stiles?"

"Stiles seems to care about your emotional well-being. If you were to spend time around him, do you think he'd help you to feel better?"

Derek's jaw twitches a little and he scratches his neck awkwardly, "I guess? It's a crapshoot with Stiles. He'll either want to help me or mock me."

"Do you think confiding in Stiles about the seriousness of the situation would help?"

"He went looking for my sister's mutilated dead body in the woods for shits and giggles, I'm pretty sure he's strictly immature about only serious matters."

"Pity," Dr. Lundy comments regretfully.

That word rings in his head for his entire drive home.
"Some people live in cages with bars built from their own fears and doubts. Some people live in cages with bars built from other people's fears and doubts; their parents, their friends, their brothers and sisters, their families. Some people live in cages with bars built from the choices others made for them, the circumstances other people imposed upon them. And some people break free."

— C. Joybell

Song for this chapter is Sweetest Thing by U2

Stiles objects to the ringing of his phone with a scratchy, verbal, "nooooo!"

His room is pitch black except for the goddamn laser light show of his flashing phone on his bedside table and the soft glow of the streetlight outside his window. He scowls sleepily at the vibrating phone and demands, "no! Stop!"

It could be an emergency.

He looks at the clock and it reads 2:14 a.m. and he grumbles to himself, "it better be an emergency because I am legitimately dramatic enough to make it one."

Angrily, he grabs his phone and accepts the call without looking at the ID photo, assuming it's Scott and another dead body or weird sex in the woods that Stiles doesn't get to have any part of, which is criminal, but whatever, it's not like he's bitter about it at all.

His vision is still a little blurry with sleep, so he stares into the middle distance dispassionately and when he picks up, he says first, "Scott, if this is another dead body, it will wait. I am only accepting calls at this hour for bodies that are about to be dead."

"Not Scott," the gruff voice answers.

Stiles pouts curiously, moves his phone to look at the screen and sees Derek's unfair scruff and long lashes glowing back at him. He places the phone back against his ear and asks incredulously, "Derek?"

"And here I thought my impression of Lydia was spot-on."

Stiles smirks and snorts and then realizes that Derek has cracked a (successful!) joke and he's not sure what to do.

"Are… wha – okay, wait, what are you calling for?"

"I'm coming over."

Stiles' eyebrows do this complicated dance so that his ceiling can know how distraught he is.

"What? Why? Did you find something on our mystery baby-killer?" Stiles quizzes and sits up.

"Not yet."

"So, everyone is alive and not in any danger of being anything other than alive right now?"
"Everyone is fine."

"Don't say that, you'll jinx it."

A frustrated sigh, "everyone is fine to my knowledge."

"And you have no new developments for me in regard to our new baby-killing resident in the woods?"

"No. Not yet."

"So what do you need?"

"I don't need anything."

There's a thick silence that Stiles eventually breaks by asking with quiet awe and incredulousness, "you wouldn't be... I mean... you aren't... unless you are...? Are you asking to come over... just for the sake of hanging out with me?"

There's no response and Stiles is too confused to even smile about it.

"You're asking to hang out with me," he states more than asks.

"I'll be over in five minutes."

"You know, asking usually includes the use of words arranged in question-form."

"Five minutes, Stiles."

"Question phrases, like 'Can I,' or 'Would you mind if.' Vocal influxes, to indicate that it is, in fact, a question..."

"Unlock your window," Derek resigns, ready to hang up.

"You're such a fucking creep, use the front door."

"I don't want to wake your father."

"You're a fuckin' creep, Derek."

Derek hangs up and Stiles is left staring at the dull light of his phone in abject bewilderment. His mouth is open and he can feel his hair going in every direction. He looks at his Angry Beavers pajama pants and feels as unprepared as possible for Six Feet of Hot Like Burning to come climbing into his room like some Shakespearean romantic.

"Why is this my life?" Stiles asks the night in his room, "Obviously, every choice I've ever made has been wrong, because I am here and this is my life."

He gets out of bed, unlocks and opens the window to his room. His face is warm from being draped by his comforter and feels sensitive in his new wakefulness. He's swept with the night air and it smells sweet. He breathes in deeply and it feels like it branches over his chest and into his stomach and he feels it beat in his heart. He mutters to himself, "doesn't wanna wake my father – pfft – doesn't mind waking me up balls early, though, huh?"

He considers whether or not he has enough time to change into jeans, but he finds the risk of being caught naked from the waist down is too high. Derek has an uncanny ability to walk in just as Stiles
is getting ready and Stiles' life is a study in Murphy's Law. Luckily, he's never seen more than Stiles' dotted, lithe spine while he's been putting a shirt on, but Stiles would like to keep it that way. Odds are if he starts getting out of his pajamas now, Derek will be climbing through the window just in time to get a good look at Stiles' pale, freckled butt.

He sits down on his bed with a huff and turns on the lamp in his room to give them some light. Less than a minute passes and Derek lands with the grace of a cat on his windowsill.

Stiles is giving him a tired, dry look and Derek's glad that Stiles isn't a wolf. If he were, he'd be able to sense how nervous Derek is, hear how fast his heart is pumping. It's been three days since his last appointment with Dr. Lundy and he's contemplated her words so closely and carefully, he's barely thought of anything else. He is so worried this will be a bad idea and despite Stiles not having preternatural powers, Derek's still inclined to believe Stiles can tell.

"What's going on, Derek?"

_I've been talking about my past a lot and it's been triggering. I've been having passively suicidal thoughts all night. I'm supposed to be healing, but I'm scared that I might be too f*cked up to heal. I wanna talk to you about it, I wanna know if you can be there for me like that... I feel so low. I shouldn't even be here. What am I doing here?"

"I should go," Derek barely utters. The anxiety is too high, the concern in Stiles' voice is too true and the chance that Stiles might actually care is too real.

He turns to go and Stiles' hand is on his arm faster than a human should be able to move. He knows that hand as soon as it touches him, the same hand that held him back in the Jeep two years ago, outside the police department. It's the same hand that smacked him into consciousness on the floor of Deaton's back room and again in the hospital elevator. The same hand that gripped him and fought to keep him afloat when he would have otherwise drowned. The same hand that touched his shoulder to let him know he was not alone and not blamed for Boyd's death. The same hand that threw him to the ground while possessed by the Nogitsune. He wonders if Stiles used that hand to place Derek's name onto his King on the chessboard. He hopes it's the same hand.

He hopes that Stiles' freckled, veiny, spidery hand knows the feeling of Derek under it like he knows the press of it.

He thinks a teenager's hand shouldn't mean that much to him.

The self-loathing mounts.

Derek looks at that hand and hears Stiles say, "no – dude, what's going on?"

_What if I can't heal, Stiles? What if I'm not as strong as you and Scott? What if everything is too broken to fix? What if I'm turning into something someone will need to put down?"

"Nothing. Nevermind."

"Derek," Stiles urges, "I'm not really pissed – I'm sorry, about being sarcastic before. I didn't mean it, it's cool that you're here. Come inside."

Derek finally peels his gaze away from Stiles' hand and looks into his eyes. Unfortunately, he finds that he's only more intimidated.

Stiles' eyes make him feel so much more.
As Derek studies them in silence, he realizes he's seen those eyes when they're infuriated, when they're judgmental, teary and crying. He's seen them sparkling with pride and happiness, softening with hope and safety, losing focus with anxiety and illness and brightening with the knowledge that he was right. He knows Stiles' hands and Stiles' eyes like he used to know his mother's voice and his sister's heartbeat.

"Please," Stiles adds with unfamiliar eyes.

Derek takes a deep breath in and lets it go, then comes into the room. He shuts the window behind him and stands awkwardly, unsure of what he should do with his body. He would like to take up a little less space, appear a little softer, just a little less rough around the edges, but he can't help the way he is.

Stiles looks at him expectantly for a few moments, but when he realizes that Derek isn't going to talk until he's absolutely ready, he sighs sleepily and sits down on his bed again. He gestures to his desk chair to offer Derek a seat and Derek takes the offer. A few silent minutes pass and Stiles finally asks, "are you okay?"

Derek looks him in the eye and exhales deeply through his nose. He feels sort of nauseous. He shakes his head.

"No… like, no, you're not okay or no, you don't want to talk about it?"

"I…"

He stalls, but he can see that Stiles is surprised that he's made any sound at all.

"What?" Stiles asks patiently.

His mouth hangs partially open in a fashion that's more like Stiles' than his own, but only for a moment. He finally decides to answer; "I just want to be here."

Stiles can hear additions in the constant disquiet of his overactive mind.

I just want to be here...

Safe. (here)

With you. (here)

Where it smells like you. (here)

And keep you company. (here)

And be in your company. (here)

Stiles nods dumbly and contemplates how important those words are.

I just want to be here.

I just want to be.

Here.

I just want to be, (where you are.)
And Stiles has a million questions running rampant through his brain. He wants to pick apart Derek's head, because he feels like the space is more open than Derek has ever made it before. He wants to ask questions and pry, but he can feel the precariousness of Derek's comfort. He can feel how delicate the environment is and he knows prying would ruin it. He thinks to himself that Derek is like a skittish cat that always sits just out of reach. He feels like he's walking on a tightrope.

He clears his throat and tries to sound aloof, "so, uhm, you ever seen the movie Moon?"

"I haven't been to the movies in years."

"It wasn't in movie theaters. It was an Indie film I downloaded when it got good reviews at the Sundance Film Festival. I follow those things, you know? I like the new stuff that doesn't make it to mainstream. Not to be too hipster, but mainstream ends up miscasting and having problematic actors and junk for popularity, so the film festivals are super cool for seeing stuff that doesn't actually make it to the theaters, since – "

"I haven't seen it, Stiles," Derek interrupts, sounding uneasy.

There's a pause where Stiles bites his bottom lip and then he asks,"you want to?"

Derek appraises Stiles until he must see the lack of threat and shrugs.

Stiles' heart rate is up and Derek is struggling to understand why.

*Am I really so stressful to be around?* Derek wonders.

"You don't have to," Derek assures, looking about a moment away from jumping out of Stiles' window.

"No, no, this is good – it's trippy and I really like this movie and I've been wanting to re-watch it."

Stiles curls over and pulls his laptop out from under his bed. He enters a (to Derek, surprisingly) short password and then pulls up his Downloads folder.

"I'm the Sheriff's kid, but I illegally download music and movies so much that I've almost forgotten it's illegal."

Stiles doesn't hear so much as a noncommittal grunt and it makes him nervous again. He looks up at Derek and sees Derek's stare stuck on his Angry Beavers pants. He chuckles nervously and says, "oh, uh – yeah, this is embarrassing…"

*They're dumb*, Derek thinks of saying, just for the sake of pissing Stiles off, but then he chants to himself, *Don't be an asshole. Don't be an asshole.*

"Don't be embarrassed," Derek tells him gruffly and simply, "I… was just thinking I used to have pajama pants with I Am Weasel on them."

"Oh my God, are you serious?" Stiles grins manically.

Derek is worried that this is where Stiles' sensitivity ends and the mocking begins and won't stop. Derek hears 'Oh my God, you're so old,' and 'Oh my God, too much information,' and 'Oh my God, what's wrong with you?' and his muscles are already tensing to stand up and leave when Stiles breaks out into song.

"You don't need pants for the Victory Dance, cause Baboon's better than Weasel! I. R. Baboon is
Derek's eyebrows spring up and his lips twitch and threaten to express the melting sensation in his chest. Stiles sings on without his help, shamelessly,

"I.R. Baboon reigns king in his mind, he's just as good as the Weasely kind,
but 'round every corner he's likely to fiiiind – I Am Weasel! I Am Weasel! I Am Weasel!"

Stiles laughs gently at himself, embarrassed in advance for judgment he was sure would show on Derek's face. He's moved deeply to find the beginnings of a humble smile spreading there instead. Derek's eyes are sparkling and it's so obvious he's trying not to smile that Stiles can't help his own grin. The tightrope feeling is starting to crumble away and he feels glad that Derek is there. He's suddenly so grateful that he's so sensitive to the sounds of his phone, even in his sleep.

He is so suddenly glad to be present.

"I have a Two Stupid Dogs shirt," Stiles adds, feeling proud and hoping to impress Derek.

Derek snorts and Stiles is thrilled by it.

Holy God, Stiles thinks, I'm actually entertaining Derek Hale! What is my life?!

Derek's looking down at his boots when he shyly replies, "I had a Rocko's Modern Life shirt. It had a huge hole in the back after years of wear and I refused to get rid of it. My mother kept trying to destroy it with violent wash cycles, hoping it'd finally be too torn up for me to wear anymore. But it was immortal."

Stiles laughs heartily and it lightens the weight on Derek's shoulders. He starts saying, "oh my God, no – no, you don't even know, my mom did the same thing! I had a Ren and Stimpy sweater and she kept trying to make me think I lost it, but I'd keep finding it before it got tossed out!"

Derek chuckles and Stiles keeps laughing loudly.

Derek's eyes are traipsing along his figure and Stiles doesn't know. He doesn't know that Derek is noticing his Adam's apple bobbing, his upturned nose, his pink lips and that he's admiring them.

When he's able to stop laughing, he sighs, clears his throat again and says with a smile, "I really shouldn't laugh that loudly. My dad's asleep down the hall."

"Right," Derek recalls apologetically, "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, this is hands-down my favorite interaction with you."

At that, Derek smiles and supposes he should put on the act that he's offended by that, but he doesn't have the energy for it. He feels like an animal of prey, finally comfortable enough to flop over and show its belly. The threat of danger keeps his ears and nose on hyper-vigilant awares, but he feels good.

The scent of Stiles is overwhelming in this space, but he thinks that it's that exact trait that gives Derek his remarkable sense of safety. Smelling Stiles has always meant that rescue had arrived.

It's then that he realizes, through rigorous trials and demanding misadventures, he's been conditioned to associate Stiles with shelter and finding comfort in Stiles' bedroom loses its sense of surprise. He understands. He understands why he feels safe with Stiles, that there's this tie between Stiles'
presence and comfort following closely behind. He thinks about saying that to Stiles, saying out loud
that he associates Stiles with rescue and shelter and safety, but bites his tongue.

*Don't come on so strongly. He's just barely getting used to you.*

The back of his mind supplies unhelpfully, *is coming on to Stiles what we're doing?*

He rationalizes in his head, *No. No. No. No, we're not. That's not what I'm doing. Just here for
safety.*

"Come here," Stiles says, patting the space next to him on the bed.

"What?" Derek chokes a bit; his throat is very suddenly dry.

"We're gonna watch Moon on my laptop, come sit next to me," Stiles replies in a tone of 'don't be
shy.'

Derek smacks himself inwardly and climbs onto the bed. He's drawing his legs up when Stiles
chides, "Eh-eh-eh! No shoes on the bed. You *animal.*"

Derek gives him an unimpressed look and tries to stare him down, but learns quickly that Stiles isn't
backing down. He sighs, rolls his eyes and leans over to untie his boots. He slips them off and then
allows his legs to drape along the bed. Stiles seems pleased and he smells vaguely of arousal (that's
constant in Stiles, though), nervousness and giddiness. Derek decides it's eustress that's making
Stiles' heart rate so jumpy. He eases and takes pleasure in causing an agreeable reaction and scent in
Stiles.

The dark hairs above Derek's ankles are showing by the hem of his old jeans. His skin looks smooth
and it brings a human characteristic to Derek that isn't usually there. The idea that maybe his feet are
ticklish, delicate, that maybe he has flat feet or a defined arch. Maybe he's paranoid about his toes
being seen, like Stiles is. Stiles watches Derek's toes wiggle a little in his socks and thinks, *nope.
Nope. Feet shouldn't turn me on. Everything is bad. All of this is bad. Everything about me is rude.
My body is rude.*

Something in the back of his mind answers back; *It's just that it's Derek's feet. (I bet no one ever sees
his feet – I wonder if they're ticklish – there's something cute about them.)*

*Ugh.*

"You don't have any pictures of Malia around," Derek comments off-handedly.

Stiles shrugs, "why would I?"

"I don't know. I always kept pictures of whoever I was dating in my room," Derek answers casually.

Derek is hit first with a shallow wave of discomfort, followed by a sad scent. He turns to face Stiles
while the beginning credits roll down the screen. Stiles sighs and says, "well, we're not dating, so…"

"Oh," is the only useless thing Derek can think to say.

There's a long, pregnant pause and Derek thinks to himself, *you were doing well. He was laughing.
You succeeded with Scott, you can do this. You can do this. You can befriend Stiles.*

"You, uh… wanna talk about it?" Derek offers.
Stiles' eyes are wide and his brows are high when he turns to Derek.

"Are you serious?"

"You don't need to – you know that, I mean…I'm just…"

"You're offering confidence."

"I… yeah," Derek settles nervously.

Stiles' smile is kind and his eyes soften when he answers, "I… don't really wanna talk about it, but thanks, Derek."

"No problem," Derek says with about as much ease as Atlas.

Stiles' smile turns a little mischievous and he bumps his shoulder playfully into Derek's. Derek knows this is a sign of camaraderie among Stiles and Scott, remembers the last shoulder bump given to him from his sister, remembers the affection and he breathes easier for it. He feels like he's building new bridges where there were burnt remains. He smiles awkwardly back at Stiles and despite the movie having started, Stiles interviews, "so, you've always been a creeper?"

"What?"

"You said you kept pictures of the people you were dating in your room. You've always been creepy? It's just, I always imagined that the creepiness was something you'd grown into."

He can sense how funny Stiles thinks he is. A part of him wants to burst that bubble, but at the same time, he would like to continue the pleasant line of dialogue they've had. Stiles must think he's declining to answer, because he starts to turn to the screen before Derek replies, "yes, I've always been creepy."

Abruptly, Stiles starts cackling and tells Derek, "I don't know what you smoked before coming over here, but smoke it more often, because this has been the most fun."

Derek gives a humored huff and shakes his head.

Stiles steals sidelong glances at Derek through the movie. He thinks that Derek's profile is so captivating and his eyes are so many colors, it's hard to describe them. He wonders to himself if he'll ever have such handsome facial structure like Derek and he sort of hopes he does. His gaze gets caught on Derek's mouth at one point and Derek catches him. He asks with his eyebrows what Stiles wants, but Stiles only shakes his head and turns back to the movie.

He steals more looks until he can't keep his eyes open anymore. Stiles isn't sure when he falls asleep, but when he wakes up at 10 a.m., he's tucked in bed, his laptop is shut and underneath it and his window and curtains are shut. He thinks to himself that Derek is a creep for visiting through bedroom windows and for keeping photos of crushes in his bedroom in the past. That he's a creep for sneaking so silently out into the night, but that he is, apparently, a very sweet creep.

"That loves I Am Weasel," Stiles adds to himself as he rises out of bed.

He grabs his phone and texts Scott.

To: Scott

Dude, you won't guess who visited me last night
A minute later he receives,

From: Scott

Tooth fairy? Don't tell me if I'm right. I'm only just getting used to werewolves

Stiles snorts and rolls his eyes.

To: Scott

Derek

His phone beeps back in just seconds.

From: Scott

I wish that were more surprising

Stiles actually chuckles at that.

To: Scott

He was actually super nice. Does he want something from us?

Scott replies,

From: Scott

I don't know. I don't think so. His heart beat is clear and even when he's been with us. Maybe he's doing drugs?

Stiles writes back,

To: Scott

Whatever drugs they are, I hope he keeps taking them. Btw where can I get quality 90's cartoon merch?

From: Scott

Fuck if I know dude

Stiles hums thoughtfully to himself and thinks to himself that he has research to get done, then.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning
TRIGGER WARNING
TW:

Derek does attend therapy in this chapter and he discusses anxiety and thinks more on death and past sexual abuse, although it is not done in much depth.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.

Barbara Kingsolver

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Song for this chapter is Zinc (Zoe Keating Remix) by Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble

Stiles is on his phone, skimming down pages on Etsy and he can (kind of) hear Deaton talking, but isn't really picking up anything. His brain is still busy analyzing and overanalyzing 'Derek came over,' 'Derek came over,' and 'Derek came over.' Scott is nodding seriously in his periphery and making solemn grunts intermittently. Stiles is picking up whatever Deaton says at the end of his sentences and just repeating them back to him. Stiles has been told it's a good way to pretend you're listening without actually listening. (If Stiles were at all good at it, people would think he was listening.)

"Ancient dark magic, hmm? Mm. Bummer."

Dim background noise follows.

He barely hears Deaton ask Scott, "is he listening and writing something down, or is he completely ignoring me?"

Still thinking about the ring, Stiles nods slowly and absentmindedly, thinking of a Starship ring that he's not sure is overpriced, even though it's quality. Where do people get money to spend so frivolously? Does Derek like Star Trek? If he does, Derek strikes Stiles as the kind of guy that judges anything other than the Original Series as undeserving and offensive. He's probably a Trekkie Snob. He smirks a little to himself, hoping that Derek is exactly like that.

He wonders if Derek will have opinions on the new Star Trek reboots. Then he recalls Derek saying that he hadn't been to the movies in years and gets this image in his head of watching them with Derek on the couch and Derek being disgruntled and offended and maybe kissing Derek's face. His heart flutters and he tries not to smile to himself.

"Uh-huh, Greek myths, go on..."
Scott's stare runs over Stiles' heavily distracted, unconvincing, 'serious business' face and he tells Deaton flatly, "he's completely ignoring you."

"Mind getting him into the conversation?"

Scott nods dutifully and clears his throat before shouting in exaggerated confusion, "sex!?"

Stiles' head shoots up and around so fast, he's fairly sure he gets whiplash.

Scott snorts and says, "you make it too easy. I always wonder why you look up. Like, are you expecting to find the sex? Like, it's somewhere in the room?"

"What? What the hell's going on?" Stiles asks helplessly.

Deacon shakes his head and sighs, "this is important information, Stiles. I'd appreciate your attention."

Stiles at least has the decency to look guilty for a moment, then puts his phone into his pocket. He leans against the counter and says, "sorry. What were you saying?"

"Derek came to me with some interesting information."

"Derek? You didn't say it was Derek that found this out," Scott interjects.

"Wait – Derek did something useful?" Stiles asks with hopeful, engaged wonder.

"Derek stole his uncle's laptop and found some information, yes. He says his working hypothesis is Lamia."

"Did he use that phrase? 'Working hypothesis'?" Stiles asks dreamily.

Scott rolls his eyes before emphasizing, "lamia."

"Is this the ancient-dark-magic-Greek-mythology bit?" Stiles inquires.

Scott snorts and shakes his head humoredly.

Deaton looks like he briefly considers walking out on everything and probably never helping them again.

"Yes," he answers simply.

"So, what is it?" Scott asks.

"Lamias have been described as half-serpent women. The bottom half of their bodies are like snakes'. They've been painted and written as having no eyes and long, spindly arms."

"Why is this a suspect again? I mean, I feel like we would've noticed a snake lady," Stiles interrogates.

"Because Lamia eat the flesh of infants."

"That makes sense, then," Scott starts, turning to Stiles, "We have the skeleton in the woods surrounded by marks that were made by something serpentine. There's a specific monster that actually does this specific thing."
"Are you trying to tell me that this is the only baby-eating monster in the whole book-o’-baddies?" Stiles asks skeptically to both Deaton and Scott.

Scott turns to Deaton, who shrugs, "I can't claim to know everything that's out there. I've seen a lot, but the more I see, the more I know there is so much I haven't seen yet. I've never seen Lamia, I've only ever heard about it through myth and art. Derek felt very certain that it was what he was smelling there."

"How do we get rid of it?" Scott asks.

"Derek asked Lydia, actually," Deaton smiled with a parental kind of pride and surprise, "She did some research with him and they came up with two documented ways."

Stiles pouts and imagines Derek and Lydia poring over books together and feels immediately envious. He wonders why Derek wouldn't want to have Stiles research for him. He's always been good for that, hasn't he? His research has always ended up being useful. He begins to worry if he's being replaced and isn't as good at it as Lydia is.

Scott is smiling, though, looking proud of Derek and Stiles knows he has no right to feel so turned off. He feels a rush of competition in its place and Deaton goes on to explain, "from what they found, Lamias should be killed by silver knives, blessed by Priests, or it needs to be covered in rosemary, salt and then set on fire."

"Meaning we need to get close to it," Stiles infers grimly.

Deaton nods, "I don't want to guarantee to you boys that either way will work. I've never encountered a Lamia before and I know very little about it."

"Can you get us a good supply of rosemary and salt? So I can give enough to carry to everyone in the pack, in case we…uh… bump into her, I guess?"

"You wanna do the rosemary, salt and fire route?" Stiles asks Scott with anxiety.

"Yeah. I mean," Scott starts, beginning to feel doubtful in the face of Stiles' insecure voice, "I feel like that will be easier than getting close enough to it to stab it? At least you don't have to be as close to throw stuff on it…right?"

"I just… I feel like it's not going to work," Stiles worries, looking between Deaton and Scott, "I mean, our solution is usually to set it on fire. How many times can that work before it doesn't work?"

Scott gives him a dry look at his lack of rational argument and he defends, "what? Statistically speaking, if it's always what we choose, it will – no, don't look at me like that, listen, like, it's like picking rock every time you play rock, paper, scissors!"

"Stiles," Scott places a friendly (if a little belittling) hand on Stiles' shoulder, "if the fire doesn't work, we stab it, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," Stiles brushes off Scott's hand and is mostly absent for Deaton giving them enough bottles of rosemary and salt to give to everyone in the pack.

As they're leaving the animal hospital, Scott gives Stiles the side-eye while he skims his phone again. Scott catches the phone in his hand with supernatural speed and Stiles panics.

Scott looks at the Etsy page and sees Pinky and the Brain themes on personalized mugs.
He quirks a brow at Stiles and asks, "this is what was distracting you?"

Stiles shrugs self-consciously, "I'm just…"

"Looking for something for Derek," Scott finishes.

Stiles' heartbeat speeds up and his face turns pink.

Scott smiles and begins, "I guess it's time to talk about this?"

"Do we have to?" Stiles groans, slouching.

"Yeah," Scott replies, "We have to talk about it."

"Ugh," Stiles complains, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets.

"When did this start?"

"I dunno! The beginning of time? I don't know. I was always…" Stiles makes strange, indistinguishable hand gestures and struggles to say, "attracted to him."

"When did you start caring about him? That way?" Scott asks patiently.

Stiles shrugs again and says quietly, more reflectively, "I don't know. I'm not sure, ever since you got Bit life's a fucking blur. Somewhere between the time he tossed you your inhaler and asked me to cut his arm off?"

"Wow," Scott says, scratching the back of his neck, "That's a while, huh? What about Lydia?"

"After Jackson, I didn't see the point in holding onto…everything. I didn't even realize I had started caring about him until way later. Not til he left Beacon Hills. That's when I realized I cared about him, but looking back, I know I started caring way sooner."

Scott nods and asks, "and you know I couldn't be less interested, right?"

"In Derek?"

"Yeah."

"Oh yeah, I can't imagine you would be."

"And you know I support you?"

Stiles smiles shyly and pushes Scott's arm, "yeah, yeah, I know."

Scott cringes a little and asks, "if you ever end up with him, will I have to hear about the sex?"

"Are you kidding?" Stiles smirks, "I'm going to write memoirs about my sexual encounters with him and you're going to be my personal editor. I'm going to write odes to his pecs, sonnets about his chest hair and you're going to hear gruesome details you never wanted to know."

Scott laughs and shakes his head, "I guess I deserve that much, huh?"

"Definitely," Stiles says without mentioning Allison.

Scott asks with sensitive curiosity, "are you going to tell him?"
"What?" Stiles chokes, "Tell him? Are you out of your mind? No. Derek Hale doesn't talk about feelings. I don't even really talk about feelings. None of us talk about feelings except for you. You're the only feelings-talker. It's a trend that isn't catching on and I am not taking part in it."

Scott chuckles again before handing Stiles' phone back to him and saying, "Alright. It's all you, man, but I think you might change your mind. Derek sounds like he's making changes. Good changes. Maybe he'll become a feelings-talker."

Stiles laughs manically and then exclaims, "forever the optimist! That's what I love about you, dude. Always optimistic to the brink of delusion."

Scott smiles and starts talking about lacrosse to ease the embarrassed, frantic beating of Stiles' heart.

"Self-forgiveness is essential to self-healing."

Derek groans in frustration, "I can't. Not about – not about that."

"What about enjoying your time with Stiles was so disturbing?" Dr. Lundy asks.

"That I enjoyed it, that's the disturbing part," Derek growls.

"Can you explain that?"

Derek huffs, as if she should just understand, "it makes me feel like…"

Derek doesn't finish his sentence and by his pale face and pained expression, Dr. Lundy surmises and inquires gently, "would I be right in thinking that you seem to feel like you are to Stiles as Kate was to you?"

Derek's brows furrow, but he nods and his shoulders relax a minute amount. He's glad to not have been forced to say it.

Dr. Lundy nods back and asks, "well, what are these fears based on? What in your past interactions with Stiles makes you believe that it is similar to what happened between you and Kate?"

"I'm older. I shouldn't be around kids his age. I should be able to operate among people my own age."

"Was Kate unable to connect with people her own age? Did she exist under the circumstances that you do?" she interviews easily.

Derek sighs and shakes his head, "no, but…it still makes me feel like I'm dangerous to him."

"You know I specialize in anxiety disorders?" Dr. Lundy asks conversationally.

Derek shakes his head and she continues, "in exposure therapy, which is used for a lot of phobic disorders and panic disorders, we use F.E.A.R as an acronym. Can you guess what it stands for?"

"Fuck Everything And Run?"

Derek notices that it takes Dr. Lundy effort not to laugh and to try to look disappointed. He takes a small amount of pride in it. She answers back, "False Evidence Appearing Real."

"And what is that supposed to mean? That fear isn't real?" Derek asks skeptically.
She shakes her head and tells him, "certainly not. Just that the evidence supporting the fear is usually unfounded."

Derek's eyebrows communicate that he doesn't understand so she explains, "when a rabbit in the woods sees a wolf, it panics. Its heart rate sky-rockets, its nervous system prepares for flight or fight and rabbits even defecate while they run, to make themselves lighter in order to move faster. Everything in their body instinctively tells them to run away from the danger of a wolf and it's completely natural. Anxiety is there to protect us. An anxiety disorder is when a person sees wolves where there are no wolves."

"But there's false evidence that suggests there is a wolf," Derek guesses.

Dr. Lundy nods approvingly and says simply, "yes. I think that when you describe yourself to me, you describe a wolf that isn't actually there."

Derek looks at her softly, his expression and shoulders gentle as she expands, "I think when you look in the mirror, you see a wolf where there is no wolf."

He looks down at his hands, feels the strings of everything supernatural in him tuning themselves like an orchestra before a concert. He looks back up at her, the double basses drumming lowly in his stomach, the cello strings shaking under nimble fingers in his chest and he admits, "I associate Stiles with safety. I didn't even realize it until I was there. Until I admitted to myself that I felt rescued. I associate myself with danger, because whenever I start to care about someone…something terrible happens."

Dr. Lundy leans forward and tells him, "you have learned from mistakes, though. You are not the person you were when Paige was hurt, when your family was hurt, when your pack was hurt – there are wolves out there, but you are not one of them."

Derek can feel his heart being pulled tightly while the fingers of his soul dance along the tuning pegs of it. There is music in him ready to start playing that has not played in many years and he doesn't know how to voice that. There's a humming from deep inside him, like the waking of a dormant volcano, like the quakes preluding the tsunami, like flowers bursting into bloom and butterflies breaking out of their cocoons. Her words are sinking into him more than they have before.

He moves his eyes across her face, along his own hands, down to the floor.

He inquires, "how do you know I'm not a wolf?"

"Those wolves – the wolves of the world – they don't want to change. They don't want to learn. They mean harm. They do not have kindness in their eyes or softness in their hearts. They do not love selflessly or sacrifice for love."

She smiles in a paternal kind of way that makes Derek's blood pressure rise. She adds, "you've sung Stiles' praises many times, particularly his wit and cleverness and you've said he always knows the bad people – the wolves – when he sees them. Stiles knows you're not one of them. Otherwise he wouldn't let you come climbing in and out of his bedroom window."

Derek smirks a little to himself and mutters, "no. I guess he wouldn't."

He feels the connect in himself. Something clicks into place and he doesn't want to punish himself.

The desire, the urge to serve a life sentence for wanting to be in Stiles' company dissipates.

That orchestra rises in him at the image of Stiles in his mind's eye and he knows what's growing.
He knows.

He knows what's already grown.

There's a steady silence until Derek asks, "what's exposure therapy?"

"Exposure therapy is when someone has a severe fear or phobia of something specific and they are gradually exposed to the thing they fear until they overcome the fear."

"Can that… can we do that?"

Dr. Lundy tilts her head in interest and asks, "what kind of fear are you looking to overcome?"

"Affection," Derek answers with difficulty.

Dr. Lundy smiles encouragingly and says, "we can certainly work on your fear of affection. Do you feel okay talking about affection?"

"Yeah," Derek replies, "Just not…very seriously, in regard to myself."

"Your fear is being the focus of affection?"

"Something like that," Derek grumbles, "Yeah."

"Well, what does affection look like to you?" Dr. Lundy interviews, taking out her clipboard and paper.

"I imagine my family," Derek tells her, "I think of running with my family on full moons. I think of going out to eat with Laura. I remember the way Paige made me feel."

"That's good," Dr. Lundy says while scribbling on her paper, "These are all very good examples. I'm curious, though – are you fearful of being the focus of affection, or are you concerned that whatever affection is focused on you is false?"

"I don't know. I haven't been the object of real affection in a long time. I don't remember if real affection makes me nervous or not. I don't even know if I'd be able to tell the difference now," Derek admits sadly.

Dr. Lundy nods and asks, "well, tell me what you think real affection is."

"Wanting to… give, I guess. Wanting to give to another person without expecting anything in return," Derek answers.

Dr. Lundy thinks for a moment, looks at Derek and inquires, "would it be fair to say that Stiles is someone who is affectionate? Does he expect things of you in return for his help or companionship?"

Derek's brows furrow as he tries desperately to recall a time that Stiles betrayed him.

He tries to summon a memory where Stiles gave him some kind of help and demanded something back.

All he can remember is the swimming pool in the high school, though.

All he can remember is telling Stiles that they don't trust each other and that Stiles only wanted his protection.
All he remembers is drowning for his accusation.

He nods and says, "yeah. That'd be fair to say."

"So, you have an example of someone in your life who is genuinely affectionate. Do you feel anxiety in Stiles' presence?"

"Yeah, but it isn't usually..." Derek struggles for a few moments before finishing, "I guess my anxiety isn't about Stiles lying. I haven't felt that anxiety about him for a long time."

"What is your Stiles-associated anxiety, then?" Dr. Lundy asks easily.

Derek pouts in concentration, scratches around his fingernails, looks at the ground.

He eventually tells her, "that I've ruined his life."

"You're fearful that you've hurt Stiles?"

Derek nods and his chest constricts painfully at the admission. His fingers focus on a patch of dry skin around his thumb and he picks at it relentlessly without looking at it.

Dr. Lundy takes note of it.

"Have you spoken about this with Stiles?"

"No."

"Is that something you'd consider?"

"Maybe."

"If this isn't something Stiles has said to you, why are you experiencing this fear?"

"Because I ruin all the good things in my life."

"What evidence is there to support that?"

Derek cocks a brow and looks at her when she elaborates, "what evidence in your life is there to support that claim?"

"Paige died because of me," Derek says.

"Paige died because an Alpha Bit her and it didn't take," Dr. Lundy reasons.

"An Alpha Bit her because I requested it."

"An Alpha Bit her because your Uncle Peter requested it."

Derek's hands make fists and he says, "yes, but it was – he made me think I wanted it. I asked Peter and Peter asked Ennis."

"There is nothing you could have done to save Paige, Derek."

Derek drags his eyes up from his fists to look at Dr. Lundy when she says, "you didn't know the signs when they were showing. You know the signs now and there's nothing you can do now."

"Will I know the signs of false affection now?"
"I have every faith that you will," Dr. Lundy says honestly.

Derek feels a swelling in his chest and sits in a heavy quiet until Dr. Lundy suggests, "why don't you tell me what they are? You can prove it to yourself that you know them. What signs did Kate give you that you didn't understand then, but understand now?"

Derek scowls at his wrists again and touches at them absently.

He answers, "she kept me a secret. She made me feel responsible for her. Her eyes were always shut when she let me touch her. She was only affectionate if she needed something."

"Now, does Stiles do any of those things to you?"

"No," Derek replies readily.

"Do you do any of those things to Stiles?"

Derek pauses and contemplates that.

He decides that no, he has never done those things to Stiles and so shakes his head.

Dr. Lundy asks, "so, does it make sense to compare yourself to Kate when it comes to Stiles?"

"No. It doesn't," Derek smiles weakly.

Like a pebble skipped across calm water, he feels that small wave of relief come over him. A thin, brief and somehow enormous loosening of the guilt.

When Derek leaves her office that day, she stands by the door and reminds him thoughtfully, "be kind to yourself, Derek."

Chapter End Notes

I'm just putting this chapter up for now, because I'm in NY for Rosh Hashanah, so I've been busy! The next chapter is ready to post, but if I do post it, I won't update next week but the week after because it's a very long chapter! Let me know what you think in the comments (if you want the next chapter posted tonight or next week) otherwise, I'll assume no one cares and just post it next week. XD Shanah Tovah, everyone! <3
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Wowie! You guys really wanted the next chapter! (I am absolutely thrilled that those that are reading this are really enjoying it, I seriously can't even -- thank you so much for your kudos and comments and bookmarks oh my gosh)! So here it is! Hope you enjoy!

The roots of loneliness are very deep ... They find their food in the suspicion that there is no-one who cares and offers love without conditions, and no place we can be vulnerable without being used.

Henri Nouwen

Song for this chapter is Furr, by Blitzen Trapper

A week has passed since Derek's late night visit and Stiles has spent it surfing the internet for something he hopes Derek will like. He is currently considering ordering a mug with I Am Weasel on it and another matching one that has Loulabelle on it. He isn't exactly trying to say anything by getting I Am Weasel's girlfriend on his mug, but he certainly isn't going to be I. R. Baboon in this relationship.

He's also contemplating getting The Angry Beavers sweaters, but he can't decide who would be Norbert and who would be Daggett. He sees himself being more of a Daggett, but he doesn't want the coolness of Norbert to insinuate that Stiles thinks Derek is cool. He knows all too well that Derek is not as cool as his leather jacket implies.

He smirks to himself while he stares at his AOL inbox and is about to wander off to another tab of Society6 before the door opens.

He looks to the front hall from his spot on the living room couch and sees his father coming in. He looks grim and so Stiles drops his smirk and rises to greet him.

His father explains that two infants have gone missing from local families and Stiles nods solemnly, shutting his laptop and following his father into the kitchen. The Sheriff sits down at the kitchen table with Stiles and asks exhaustedly, "can't the Nemeton attract pleasant supernatural things? Like fairies?"

"I'll have you know Faeries are no laughing matter," Stiles tells him while he taps distractedly on the tabletop, "There's a gigantic variety of them and they're known to be more violent than this Lamia we're dealing with."

"Lamia?" the Sheriff starts his interrogation while pouring a glass of water and sitting across from Stiles at the kitchen table, "Is that what this is? What is it?"

Stiles shrugs and replies, "we're not totally sure. Derek did some research with Lydia and they came up with 'Lamia.' It's a good theory, but none of us have seen it, so we can't be sure."

"Derek and Lydia?" his father asks with emphasis.
Stiles' eyebrows do this strange sequence of motions before he nods and the Sheriff asks, "is that, uh - a thing now?"

"Is what a thing now?"

"Derek and Lydia?"

"Are they a thing?"

"Yes, are they a thing?"

"A thing…?"

"A thing."

"A thing like…"

"Like a thing, Stiles."

"Like, as a unit?"

His father rolls his eyes, "yes."

"No!"

"No?"

"No!" Stiles exclaims with a pounding heart and broad hand gestures, "No! Definitely not. No. No. No. The most no. All of the no. The largest concentration of no in the universe is right here, right now, with that idea."

"Just seems strange," the Sheriff comments off-handedly, "You're usually his go-to-guy for research. I thought you both liked it that way."

"Yeah," Stiles mumbles, playing with the hem of his flannel sleeve, "I thought we did too."

His father pats his shoulder and tells him, "don't sweat it, kid. I'm sure he was just looking for second opinions."

Stiles doesn't believe him, but nods anyway. Lydia is An Actual Goddess and Derek looks like a Greek God. Derek could have anyone in the world he wanted and Stiles considers Lydia included in that spectrum. He knows Derek lacks some serious social skills, but he's obviously capable of wooing.

_He's probably a closet romantic._

The Sheriff asks conversationally then, "why doesn't Derek ever come over here? Does he not like me?"

"Dad, you arrested him for murder," Stiles says incredulously, "Twice."

"Which _you_ accused him of," his father fires back with a smirk, making Stiles look a little shameful, "Well, I'd like to have that kid over for lunch sometime. The way he's put himself in danger for you and Scott in the past, I owe him at least some food."

"Don't offer to feed a grown werewolf. It's a rookie mistake. You feed them once and they keep
coming back."

His father laughs and says, "I mean it, let him know he's welcome here and I won't be arresting him if he drops by."

"Alright," Stiles tells him, pulling out his phone.

He opens his contacts and sets up a new conversation thread.

**To: Sourwolf**

**My dad feels bad for arresting you and wants to compensate you with food**

While Stiles is still typing, his father asks, "now, you're all hunting this llama?"

"Lamia, Dad."

"That's what I said."

"You said 'llama.'"

"…what is it?"

"Lamia."

"Lamia. Right. Are you all hunting it now or what?"

Stiles sends the text, then looks back up at his father and says, "we're not exactly *hunting* it. Deaton gave us some weird shit to throw at it if we see it."

The Sheriff gives him this expression that's a severe cross of disbelief and dry disappointment. Stiles sighs heavily, "Scott wants to set it on fire."

"That follow up really isn't helping to support your first answer, Stiles."

"Okay," Stiles scrambles defensively, "Okay, so Lamias can either be killed when they're stabbed with a silver knife blessed by a Priest, or it needs to be covered in rosemary and salt and then set on fire. I voted for stabbing it, but Scott doesn't want anyone to have to get that close to it, which like, I get, but I still think it's gonna be our best shot at killing it. He figures throwing rosemary, salt and a petrol bomb on it will be less risky than getting close enough to fatally stab it, though and I was out-voted on the stabby-stab versus flame thrower issue. I get that my platform is a little more conservative than usual, but still, these youngen's should have recognized my wisdom. Anyway, everyone in the pack is carrying around a Molotov, lighter and a bottle of salt and rosemary."

The Sheriff rubs between his eyes and says, "I just… look, Stiles. You see, getting older, I worried more about being technologically illiterate. That you kids would be talking about organic wifi or something and that's what I emotionally prepared myself for. For feeling old and un-hip. And I'm feeling pretty betrayed that now I have to sit here and listen to you kids talk about supernatural creatures and Molotovs like it's yesterday's news."

Stiles chuckles a little and apologizes, "sorry, Dad. The times are moving without you. And what in the world is organic wifi?"

"I don't know!" his father huffs, "You're all hipsters these days, right? Hipsters care about things being organic, right? Right?"
"Oh, God," Stiles massages his forehead.

"You Hipster Kids are all busy being cynical and jaded beyond your years and reading Kant, right? That's what kids are doing nowadays, right? Twittering at each other about being jaded?"

"Oh my God, Dad, stop," Stiles groans into his hands, but his cheeks are puffed up, hiding a smile.

"You see? This – this is what I'm prepared for. This I like," the Sheriff insists happily.

Stiles' phone dings and he glances at it to see Derek's unfair face glowing on his screen. He swipes his thumb over it in a way that's more reverent and appreciative than when anyone else's contact photo shows up and sees,

From: Sourwolf

Thank him.

He eagerly types back,

To: Sourwolf

You gonna come over? He's worried you don't like him

He's encouraged when the ding comes back immediately.

From: Sourwolf

He wants me to come over? Why does he care if I like him?

To: Sourwolf

He wants you to know he appreciates you constantly martyring yourself for his precious baby boy. Come over. We'll feed you

From: Sourwolf

You're so weird.

Stiles smiles dumbly, like it's a compliment.

To: Sourwolf

Me? Says the rl furry that wears leather in the summer and commits B&E's on like a bi-weekly basis?

From: Sourwolf

I'm not from Rhode Island?

To: Sourwolf

What?

From: Sourwolf
You said R.I. furry.

To: Sourwolf

Lol no, you uncool dingus. R-L, real-life. AND YOU KNOW WHAT A FURRY IS PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT THE DAY YOU LEARNED ABOUT FURRIES

From: Sourwolf

I hate you.

To: Sourwolf

Lol no you don't. It must be so embarrassing to like me. You don't hate me and I'm gonna tell all your friends about it

From: Sourwolf

What friends?

To: Sourwolf

Don't be dumb. Come over and let me feed you

From: Sourwolf

Is there any point in fighting this?

To: Sourwolf

Not really

From: Sourwolf

I'll be over in 15.

Stiles grins at his phone and then looks back at his father who is smirking at him knowingly. He quirks a brow and asks, "what?"

"Nothing," his father says in a way that definitely means 'something.'

"What?" Stiles presses, "What is it?"

"Nothing," his father shows his palms in surrender, "Absolutely nothing."

Stiles rolls his eyes and orders, "whatever you're thinking, stop thinking it."

"I'll go get the barbeque out and ready. I'll send you and Derek to the store to get meat. Tell him he can get whatever he wants."

"Wait," Stiles starts as his father rises from his seat, "How did you know he agreed to come over?"

"Because," the Sheriff smirks and taps the kitchen table with his knuckle, "Back when we were still dating, I used to make the same face you just made whenever your mother agreed to go out for
dinner with me."

Stiles' face goes bright red and his heart starts bumping loudly. The Sheriff smiles and says, "relax, Stiles. We don't need to talk about it if you don't want to talk about it."

"I can't even describe how much I don't want to talk about it."

His father laughs and smiles at him when he says, "I know you know everything I want to say already, so I won't say it. Just remember that I love you and I'm here if there's anything you want to talk about."

"I guess there is something…" Stiles starts.

"Go ahead," his father encourages.

"Can I dig a hole in the backyard?"

The Sheriff's brow furrows and he asks, "why?"

"To throw myself in."

"Stiles –"

"It needs to be deep."

"Oy," his father says, massaging his temples.

"Like deep, Dad. Big 'ole hole. Just toss me in."

"You didn't get this flair for dramatics from me," his father sighs fondly and walks out to the backyard.

For the next few minutes, Stiles is only solely aware of the sounds of his father dragging a bag of coal onto the back patio and readying the area.

He looks down at his Hulk shirt and purple, white and black flannel, his low-waisted dark jeans and converse.

He wonders if he should change.

His heart rate goes up again and he mocks himself for thinking he should try to look nice for Derek when this is something casual between semi-not-even-really-friends, at his own house when Derek has shown up in his bedroom barely clothed, covered in blood.

He shouldn't change. That'd be silly.

He wonders if his hair looks okay.

Maybe he should text Derek and tell him not to dress nicely so that he doesn't have to worry that Derek might.

*No. Derek never dresses nicely. It's fine. I shouldn't change. Changing would be silly. Manic fashionistas like Lydia change twice in a day for changes in audience. Not me.*

He sighs anxiously and starts bouncing his leg and tapping his fingers along his knee.
He checks his phone to see if it's been fifteen minutes since Derek last texted.

It hasn't.

His father knows what's going on now. His dad knows about his stupid crush; what if his dad thinks he's not trying hard enough? Or that he's bad at flirting or courting?

*That's absurd.*

He's sure his father doesn't even think that way. He's probably *relieved* that Stiles isn't actively trying to woo Derek. That he's so *understated.*

At that moment, Stiles remembers a mean girl in middle school looking at him and really passively aggressively saying, 'I love how you just wear anything.'

But that happened when he was in the seventh grade.

And Derek isn't like that.

Derek doesn't care what Stiles wears. He probably doesn't even notice when Stiles goes out of his way to look nice.

So, it'd be silly to change.

He shouldn't change.

He checks his phone again.

A minute has passed since he last checked it.

He groans a little and surrenders to himself, running up the stairs. He goes into his room and starts looking through his closet.

All he can think while frantically shoving shirts aside in his closet is, *have I always had this much plaid? Why do I have so much plaid? Where did I get all of this? This is gratuitous, at this point.*

He strips out of his Hulk shirt and flannel and picks up his jeans a little more. He glances at himself in the mirror against his wall and looks at the curve of his back and ass. He thinks to himself that his jeans are fine, they don't accentuate anything really, but he's fine with that because he isn't sure if he has anything to accentuate to begin with.

He imagines Lydia and how she dresses. He realizes a pattern then, that she usually wears something loose on the bottom if she's wearing something tight on top and vice versa.

He imagines her blue little crop top then and inwardly drools a little, but then imagines himself in it and everything feels weird. He shakes his head to snap out of it. Plaid might be a problem for him, but he's not going to start wearing crop tops.

Yet.

Maybe.

Whatever, he doesn't have any, anyway.

This isn't even *a thing* to be thinking, *oh my God.*
He looks at his jeans and can't even decide if they're tight or not.

They hug his legs and anyone can see that he's got scrawny, long legs, but he does need to pick them up a lot, so he wonders if that makes them loose. He wears a belt with it, but they're purposely low-waist. He decides he'll try to wear something more fitted. If he owns anything fitted.

He digs around in his closet and his drawers until he finds a simple black t-shirt. No designs on it, no superheroes on it, just a plain black T-shirt. He hasn't worn it since freshman year and it fits just tightly enough that it hugs him, but it isn't uncomfortable.

He goes to pick up his red jacket, but pauses in his motions to put it on.

He stares at it, draped over his computer chair for a moment.

Then thinks, *what if... I didn't wear a second layer?*

He looks at himself in the mirror and runs a hand through his hair. His arms are bigger than he remembers or usually imagines them as. He thinks that maybe lacrosse practice has done him some favors (not that he'll ever thank Coach for anything).

He checks his phone and suddenly it's getting very close to being fifteen minutes since Derek texted.

He looks back at his mirror and feels naked from the slight chill on his arms. He examines his arms closely and wonders if he's considered 'hairy' or not. Should he be covering that up? Is his arm hair gross? Or is it manly? Does Derek like manly guys? Does Derek even like guys?

This is a nightmare. Stiles vows to never invite anyone over again for any reason ever.

It's right then that the doorbell rings and he springs down the steps, jacket and arm hair forgotten, answering the door just as his father comes into the kitchen to look for a lighter.

Stiles can feel his heart in his throat and he really, really hopes Derek doesn't bring it up. He thinks it's safe to say that Derek won't, since he's more allergic to talking about feelings than even Stiles is.

When Stiles pulls the door open, he wonders at how strange it is that Derek is actually using it. He prepares to say something sarcastic about that, but he ends up staring at a dusting of chest hair showing from the point of Derek's dark grey v-neck. He's not wearing his leather jacket and his hair is quaffed perfectly and Stiles is quickly wishing he had his own jacket to hide in. He swallows and it's deafening to himself. He starts feeling self-conscious and wishing he'd stayed in his original outfit. That he'd stayed understated. Fuck Meagan O'Connor for making that passive aggressive comment five years ago. She's ruined everything.

"Are you going to let me in?"

Stiles' mouth is open and seems to be distracting Derek. Stiles thinks he must look ugly when he does that and he should learn to stop gaping at pretty people.

*His arms have gotten strong,* Derek notes to himself; his eyes are caught on Stiles' lips and he knows it, but he can't stop it or look away. They're full and pink and he's hardly registering anything outside them. He tries to imagine what it might feel like to press his thumb against those lips. Press his own there.

*He looks good in black.*

He wonders what Stiles would look like in his leather jacket, what he would smell like draped in
Derek's scent. Again, Derek is monumentally glad in that moment that Stiles isn't a Were and can't hear his heartbeat.

He thinks he shouldn't be so excited about seeing a teenager, that this is bad and wrong and so is he. He punishes himself inwardly, seeing Kate's face, feeling his stomach drop.

He knows his brow is furrowing as he imagines it, but he's able to think clearly to himself, you aren't Kate. You're being irrational. You'd never hurt Stiles. You're nothing like her.

He still feels jittery despite his rational thinking and cocks an impatient brow at Stiles again in the hopes of escaping the cruelty of his mind.

Stiles shuts his tempting mouth and then stammers out, "yeah – I – sorry, come in."

Derek walks in and shakes the Sheriff's hand. The Sheriff looks at Stiles while he shakes Derek's hand and quirks a humored brow at his change of clothes. Stiles rolls his eyes and feels his face heat up until his father says to Derek, "good to see you, Derek. Don't get too comfy. I'm sending you boys out for meat."

Derek nods and says, "we'll go do that, then," he looks to Stiles and asks, "should we take your car or mine?"

Stiles shrugs and answers, "I – uhm – I'll drive. You're the guest, right? I'll drive."

Derek's mouth twitches in a way that Stiles thinks might turn into a curious smile if he gives it a minute. The Sheriff interrupts that development unknowingly, though, by handing Stiles a debit card and telling him, "don't let him pay for anything."

Stiles salutes his father dutifully and leads Derek out to Rosco.

He glances over at Derek once they're in the car and asks, "where's the jacket, James Dean?"

"I left it in the car," Derek grumbles simply as he clicks his seatbelt into place, obviously refraining from hurting Stiles for calling him James Dean.

"And you're wearing a seatbelt?" Stiles teases in mock surprise.

Derek rolls his eyes and tells him exhaustedly, "I'm literally in the driveway of the Sheriff's house with his underage son driving. That and I have seen and experienced firsthand how you drive."

"You know, pretty soon I won't be underage anymore," Stiles chooses to specify.

Derek's eyebrows spring up and Stiles feels a rush of déjà vu, thinking back to the multiple times Derek's eyebrows have mocked him in his car. It brings him some joy, considering his brain usually forces him to recall Derek bleeding out in the passenger seat whenever he's in the Jeep. It's a nice change of pace.

He shrugs as nonchalantly as he can and mutters, "just saying."

When they make it into the store and start browsing the pre-made burgers and chilled meats, Derek asks, "you prefer hotdogs or burgers?"

"Not that burgers aren't great, but my loyalties lie with swine. I'm a hotdog guy," Stiles answers readily, thinks he's glad he didn't say 'wiener guy' and then starts laughing nervously.

Oh my God, why is this happening? Stiles thinks to himself as his laughter bubbles out of him, I am
being so weird and there is no reason to be so fucking weird.

Derek turns to him when he starts laughing a little manically and Stiles laughs out, "I'm sorry!"

At Derek's apparent confusion, Stiles laughs more, wondering why in the world he's started acting so strangely, "I'm sorry! I'm a pervert and going to Hell, I'm sorry!"

Derek smirks and asks him, "What? Why are you going to Hell?"

"Phallic thoughts. Sorry, I'm – I'm being quiet now," Stiles admits with a clearing of his throat before he settles down.

Derek snorts in humor and shakes his head, choosing chilled pre-made burgers and putting them in the basket. He turns the corner and grabs a package of hotdogs and American cheese. Stiles walks happily beside Derek, eventually deciding to ask, "you didn't want steak? You strike me as the kind of guy that likes bloody steak."

"Your father is insisting on paying, I'm not about to make him buy me steak."

"He's giving you a repayment-for-saving-my-delinquent-son-dinner! Of course you can have steak if you want!"

"I really don't mind," Derek tells him.

Stiles shrugs and, then, to Stiles' surprise, Derek asks him out of the blue, "have you been sleeping okay?"

Stiles tilts his head, intrigued. He shrugs again and says, "I dunno. I guess I've been sleeping fine. I'm not having as many nightmares as I used to. When I have a rough night, Dad's super merciful about me sleeping in, so I've still been getting sleep. Summer break has been great for me to catch up on it."

Derek nods and they're mostly quiet as they go through the check-out and head back to the Jeep.

At one point, Stiles catches Derek staring at his shoulders and arms when he takes the bags from the cashier. He feels himself get hot all over, wondering if Derek is admiring him or thinking that he's scrawny. Liking people is exhausting and fries his nerves. He'd probably un-install Liking People altogether if he had the choice. How does anyone function in the world? He's barely getting by.

He clears his throat and asks, "hey, Derek?"

"Mm?"

"Can I ask you a kind of personal question?"

Derek's jugular jumps and Stiles can see it. They're beside each other in the car and Stiles knows he's made Derek anxious. He expects Derek to tell him 'no,' or push his face into his steering wheel, but Derek just nods once.

Stiles swallows his shock and inquires, "how - uhm - how do you take care of yourself? Like, financially? Are you doing okay?"

Derek relaxes visibly and answers lowly, "I'm fine, Stiles."

"How, though?"
Derek looks away from Stiles when he admits, "life insurances and what was left for me in wills. Money isn't something I really have to worry about."

"Why do you squat?" Stiles interviews, interest piqued.

Derek sighs deeply and says, "I don't want to waste it."

"Yeah, I mean, who would want somewhere safe and warm to stay? Total waste of money."

Derek rolls his eyes and commands, "drive, Stiles."

"Yeah, yeah."

The evening rattles on in a similar fashion. Derek doesn't talk much, but he answers questions when Stiles asks them and Stiles' questions are generally benign. He can tell Derek is somewhat on edge and he knows his father can tell too.

When they've eaten all and settled in the living room, the environment is easier and Stiles talks about how great his senior year is going to be and how he's determined to graduate a lacrosse star (by which he means, he wants to play a game at some point). Derek mentions that Stiles should focus on his grades, because he'll be applying to colleges this year and the Sheriff asks Derek, "speaking of, Derek, did you go to school in New York?"

Stiles is fascinated by Derek's ear-tips turning pinkish when he nods positively, prompting the Sheriff to ask, "what did you study?"

"I double-majored in engineering and anthropology."

Stiles forces himself to swallow a big, burning gulp of soda so he can choke out, "what?! Bull shit! That's badass, man!"

Derek slants his mouth to say silently 'eh, this isn't a big deal,' but Stiles can hardly wait to tell Scott about it. He's already imagining what Scott's face will do when he finds out that, despite seeming socially inept, Derek is (apparently) highly educated.

The Sheriff looks mildly impressed and comments, "that is pretty interesting stuff. You finished your degree? What school did you go to?"

"No. I have my bachelor's, but I didn't finish my master's. I went to N.Y.U."

"You went to N.Y.U?!!" Stiles looks positively astonished and the Sheriff smiles at him, clearly finding Stiles' spluttering humorous. He gives Stiles a moment to shut his mouth, but it doesn't look like Stiles is conscious of his exaggerated expression, so he lets it go. He turns back to Derek, who's sitting on the opposite end of the couch from him and he asks, "do you plan on finishing your master's someday?"

"If I were to, I'd probably go back to N.Y.U," Derek replies in a way that implies he's thought about it already.

Stiles' heart sinks a little and he really hopes his father's goal isn't to talk Derek back into school. The thought of Derek leaving Beacon Hills again makes his heart feel like it's being wrung out. His face falls and Derek notices. He glances at Stiles through the corner of his eye, then looks back to the Sheriff when he says, "I probably won't go back, though."

Stiles smiles meekly when Derek looks at him, as if seeking Stiles' approval of his answer. Derek's
eyes flit to his chest when his heart bumps loudly and Stiles tries not to be embarrassed.

Okay. So, Derek knows I want him to stick around. That's not so bad.

"Why not?" the Sheriff wonders harmlessly.

Derek scratches at the back of his head and says simply, "that's not my life anymore. It's just not what I want anymore."

The Sheriff replies, "fair enough. You know, if you ever wanted a job at the station, I'd support you in pursuing that. We could use help like you."

"Like me?" Derek asks and he's hesitant. He thinks he knows what the Sheriff is getting at, but the Sheriff tells (and surprises) him,

"Good like you. Moral like you."

Stiles grins in place of Derek, who looks like he's got a misfiring circuit.

The Sheriff pats Derek's shoulder and rises from the couch, announcing, "it's late enough for me, boys. I'm gonna head to bed. Don't stay up too late, Stiles."

Stiles nods and sends a flippant hand at his father, assuring him, "yeah, yeah, g'night, Pops."

The Sheriff shakes his head fondly, then looks at Derek and says, "you have a good night, Derek. Thanks for coming over. Don't be a stranger."

Derek nods uselessly and when the Sheriff has gone to his room, he looks at Stiles, looking totally bewildered.

Stiles' shoulders reach his ears and he's got his palms up when he mutters, "I dunno. He's decided you're cool."

Stiles gets up from the armchair and moves to sit on the couch, against the arm across from Derek. He stays quiet for a short minute, admires the strength that sits on Derek's broad shoulders and chest. He watches Derek's pulse in his neck, wonders if Derek has ever allowed anyone to kiss him there or bite there. He wonders what he'd have to do to ever get that close to him. To ever be that trusted by him; how many pools would he have to tread, how many arms would he (almost) have to saw off, how many rescue plans would he have to form?

He remembers the hospital elevator, the feeling of Derek's strong hand clasping his wrist and the look of defenselessness on him when he woke. It was so grounding.

He admires Derek's scruff then and his masculine jaw. He unconsciously touches at his own, feeling self-conscious, wanting to look like a better match for Derek. Wanting to look more adult.

His eyes wander along Derek's cheekbones and he's admiring Derek's long lashes when he realizes that Derek's eyes are honed in on him. He tries not to look guilty when Derek asks, "what?"

"What?"

"What are you touching your face for? Do I have something on my face?" Derek asks, touching at his own jaw.

Stiles drops his hand and says, "oh – no, no! No, I'm just. I just have…uhm…I…hands, you know?" Stiles chuckles nervously, "Just touching. My face. No reason. Wasn't thinking about it."
Derek nods slowly and suspiciously eyes Stiles. Derek's been resisting taking long looks at Stiles all
evening and he's surprised by how much effort he has to put into not ogling him like some lovesick
school kid. He didn't realize how much he liked looking at Stiles until he was in a social situation that
required he not. He couldn't just ogle Stiles in front of his father.

*I shouldn't be ogling him at all.*

He imagines reaching out and touching Stiles. He wonders what Stiles' hands would feel like twined
with his own so casually. He wonders if Stiles would like that. He thinks on how sad Stiles smelled
when he said he'd go back to New York to finish school and he feels hopeful. He lets his heart
 pound in his ears a few times before he finally asks, "are we friends?"

The question is so delicate, so sweet and unsure that Stiles' nerves tingle and alight at it. He tries to
tell if this is a trick or not, but he knows that Derek isn't one for illusions. Derek is too
straightforward and honest to ask something like *that* sarcastically. He likes the way Derek's brows
are drawn in, the way his mouth is soft and the white of his teeth are showing a little.

Stiles nods slowly and it gradually becomes a vigorous nod when he realizes the question is totally
genuine and he says, "y-yeah! Yeah, man – we're totally friends. You and me, wolf brothers from
other mothers, mutual life-saving duo, Norbert and Daggett."

Derek smirks and asks, "which one of us is Norbert?"

"You," Stiles answers, abandoning his earlier stance on not allowing Derek to believe he's cool and
likable, "You're totally Norbert."

Derek smiles, looking down at his own hands and he mutters, "thanks."

Stiles stares longingly at him for a while, wonders why Derek looks and feels so open, so fully
present, so approachable. He considers briefly if Derek is under a spell, if he's been threatened or
something – but he dismisses it quickly. Derek feels too genuine. Stiles can feel that it's sincere.

He asks curiously and quietly, "what are you thinking?"

A typically harmless question and it feels so suddenly intimate once it's past his lips and in the air
between them.

Derek thinks about Stiles' eyelashes, about his pink lips and smooth skin. He thinks about his beauty
marks and the veins in his arms and the hug of his shirt around his torso. He thinks about the
pounding in his chest and the wild, dramatic rushes Stiles' glances give him. He exhales deeply and
says, "I…it's stressful to try to explain what's going on in your head when you don't even understand
it yourself."

Stiles nods and simply tells him, "yeah. I understand."

And Derek knows he does.
Note: The Eternal Recurrance/Return is a concept by Friedrich Nietzsche that in an infinite universe, with no god to direct it, the finite experiences of human existence must necessarily repeat themselves eternally. Meaning that we will live our lives the same exact way we lived them, eternally. We will make the same mistakes, we will be unaware that we lived this life before and we will never evolve. (If you look into it, you'll see a lot of different interpretations of this concept, but for the purposes of this story, this is the interpretation I will use.)

Trigger Warning
TRIGGER WARNING
TW: Fairly descriptive flashback of a nonconsensual sexual encounter with Kate. It's at the very beginning. If you'd like to skip this part, a starting point would be for you to begin reading at the stand-alone phrase, "That's right."

"Today I choose to feel the pain of sitting through a feeling, the terror in realizing that I am powerless over so many things, and the joy in knowing that I do not experience these things alone. I fight my feet when they beg me to run and battle my mind in its attempts to protect me from remembering the things I worked so hard to forget. Today is a constant war for healing. It is filled with promise and potential."

— Renee Yohe

Song for this chapter is, My Sweet Prince by Placebo.

Her hands are smooth and sure and they're feeling at his abdomen and sides like she might be checking for ripeness. Her eyes have no gleam, no sparkle or light, no glow. She smells turned on, but it's removed, like it's not about him. And it's not. It wasn't about him. It never was.

He cringes; the frustration and humiliation of his wrongness manifesting like physical pain behind his eyes, pinching his lungs shut.

She runs her nails down his chest and he's so nervous, so insecure, he's so sure he can't impress or please a grown woman and he's not even sure he's ready to try. He's fifteen.

He's fifteen, he's fifteen, he's fifteen, he's fifteen.

She touches him like she knows that, like she knows precisely how fragile he is, how newborn to the universe he is and she's ready to trample over him like fresh fallen snow.

There's a gentleness in her hands that belies her intentions.

She is warm against him, like a human might be.

She is allowing him to forget, briefly - to forget what he's done and who he is and what he's
becoming. Because when he's preoccupied with how wrong this pleasure feels, he doesn't think about Paige. He doesn't feel the sick drip of blood down his arms. He doesn't hear that bump, bump, bump – silence. He doesn't hear that last soft sigh. He doesn't hear himself crying. Not when he feels like he's doing something dangerous. Like he's with someone dangerous.

She touches him the way a kind person might gently pat the soil against planted seeds. She touches him and he knows that Paige never would have touched him like that.

If Paige had ever touched him, there have been sparkling eyes and stuttering hearts and they would have both been nervous and laughed at the clumsiness of their hands.

He would've gotten to hold her hand.

Derek's brow furrows like he's in pain.

When he remembers Kate sinking down on him, even though he'd muttered a weak, quiet 'wait,' all he can think of is that he didn't say it loud enough.

Then he thinks that it wouldn't have mattered if he did.

When he remembers the colorless sound of her voice in his ear, all he can think of is how badly he'd wanted to hear something honest. Like a cello playing.

When he remembers that brief moment of physical pleasure, of that death without dying, that release, all he can think of is his family burning.

Flames lick up his legs and arms, burn his sinuses, melt the edges of the images in his mind.

"What is she doing?"

"Touching me. Using me."

"Stop her. Stop her from touching you."

"I can't," Derek growls.

Her perfume is strong in his nostrils, even though she never smelled overwhelming.

He can feel what her curls felt like, draping over him.

It's all still so real.

Still.

"Stop her from using you."

"I can't!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's done - it's not - I can't!"

"Why not, Derek?"

"Because she's not – it's not happening now."

"That's right."
Some of the tightly wound stress loosens.

The images blur a little.

His heart rate declines slightly.

Derek lies across Dr. Lundy's couch, tries to keep meditating on it, but can't relax enough now to keep his eyes shut.

He sighs irritably and she asks, "what is your level of anxiety?"

"Not unbearable. Just uncomfortable."

"Where in your body is the anxiety sitting?"

"What do you mean?"

She clicks her pen and offers, "as in, are you feeling the physical manifestation of the anxiety in your stomach? Do you feel sick? Is it in your chest? Is your heart racing, or does your chest feel tight? Is it in your neck? Do you feel possessed to touch around your neck, is it difficult to breathe?"

"My chest, I guess," Derek answers, fiddling his thumbs.

Dr. Lundy nods and breathes deeply through her nose and out through her mouth. Derek knows she's trying to inconspicuously set an example, but he's stubborn and doesn't want to breathe yet.

She asks then, "what are your thoughts looking like? What does it sound like in your head right now?"

"I dunno," Derek grumbles, feeling dumb, too large for her couch, "I feel like this is hokey and you're going to ask me to close my eyes and talk about my relationship with my father."

Dr. Lundy laughs a little softly and reassures him, "I am not a Freudian psychoanalyst, but we could do that if you wanted."

"I definitively do not want to do that."

"Noted," Dr. Lundy smiles and scribbles on her notepad, "Well, while we're on hokey-therapy, let's talk about A.N.T's."

"Ants?" Derek asks on a stressful sigh.

"A.N.T's. It's another acronym."

"If I'd known all my problems could be solved with acronyms, I'd have signed up for this a long time ago," Derek scoffs.

"It stands for Automatic Negative Thoughts," Dr. Lundy tells him, undeterred by his skepticism.

"Oh, God," Derek groans, shutting his eyes and running his hands through his hair, "Do we have to do this?"

Dr. Lundy contemplates him for a moment and then answers, "no. We don't have to do anything, Derek."

Derek sighs again.
"Alright," he concedes begrudgingly, "Tell me about A.N.T's."

"Automatic Negative Thinking is a learned behavior. Most people that have it live under very anxiety provoking circumstances."

"Yeah," Derek agrees with a sad kind of half-laugh, "You could say I live under anxiety provoking circumstances."

"The catch twenty-two of Automatic Negative Thinking is that it's caused by anxiety and only produces further anxiety."

"Okay," Derek tells the ceiling.

He turns to look at her and she says, while writing quickly, "there are ten major ways of thinking that cause anxiety. The first type of thinking is All-Or-Nothing thinking. When you don't allow for gray areas or any middle ground. Can you think of a time that you only considered a situation black-or-white?"

"Jackson," Derek admits readily, "When I thought the only solution was to kill him when the Bite turned him into the kanima."

"Mhm," Dr. Lundy agrees, scribbling away, "Right. The second type is Overgeneralization. When a person generalizes a concept from a single negative experience. Can you think of a time you thought this way?"

Derek tells her, "I guess... Kate? I don't trust women because of her. I don't really trust anyone because of her."

"Precisely," Dr. Lundy says, "That single event has fueled your entire idea about a general concept, like trust, and that is Overgeneralization. Good. The third type is called the Mental Filter, a lot like the definition of A.N.T's. Can you guess what it is?"

"Automatically thinking negatively about something."

"Kind of," Dr. Lundy nods, "It's about focusing on negatives and censoring out all the positives. Even going so far as to invalidate a positive experience by crediting it for something negative. Like, being able to save Scott from hunters and referring to it as an event of dumb luck rather than admitting your skill and loyalty is what saved him."

Derek bobs his head again in understanding and she continues, "the fifth type is Jumping, as in jumping to conclusions. A lot like F.E.A.R, making negative interpretations without evidence for it. When's a time you've thought like this?"

"Every day of my life?"

Dr. Lundy chuckles a little and says, "alright. Well, the sixth kind is called Catastrophizing. Worst-case-scenario thinking."

"Thinking that if I allow myself to care about Stiles, it will kill him."

"Yes," Dr. Lundy agrees readily, "The seventh type is called Emotional Reasoning. When you believe that the way you're feeling is a realistic representation of reality. Mistaking feelings for facts. Believing that because you feel scared, reality must be dangerous, or because you're sad, something
very sad will or already has happened."

Derek nods and she continues, "thinking in Should's and Should-Not's is the eighth kind of anxious thinking. Should and Should-Not thinking means you've made a set of rules in your head, not necessarily based in reality, that you have to follow, or you've failed. Like this belief that you should not spend time around anyone outside of your age range, because you should be spending time with people your own age and doing anything other than that is wrong or bad of you."

"Okay," Derek understands.

She teaches him, "the ninth type is Labeling. This just means that you've given yourself a title based on perceived shortcomings. Like when you call yourself a monster, in regard to your experiences with Kate or Paige or Stiles."

Derek looks away from her and to the ceiling when she finishes, "the tenth type of anxious thinking is Personalization. When you blame yourself or assume responsibility for things out of your control. Can you think of a time you did this?"

Derek shuts his eyes and replies, "blaming myself for what Kate did."

"Absolutely," Dr. Lundy says and it sounds like a pat on the back to Derek.

He hears her rip her paper and he turns to see what she's done. He realizes as she hands him the paper that she's written the list out for him, with the examples in perfect cursive. He looks up to her and she smiles politely and says, "for study purposes."

"Thanks," he grunts quietly, relaxing his head against the pillow again.

"Any questions?"

"How do I fix it?"

Dr. Lundy's eyes fill up with pride and she says, "we change the way we form our thoughts."

"How?"

"There are two things I'd like to give you for homework," Dr. Lundy starts, readjusting in her seat and turning to a fresh page, "The first is to pay close attention to what the sentences in your head sound like. When you have a negative thought and catch it, I'd like for you to reverse it in your head, into a positive, and repeat it a few times. I'd like you to log these, if you can."

"Okay," Derek agrees.

"The second part of homework is affirmations. We're going to write a list of affirmations and I'd like for you to say them to yourself every day."

"Oh, no," Derek rejects, sitting up, "No, no. No. Is this like an 'I'm pretty the way I am,' mantra bullshit thing? Because I won't do it."

Dr. Lundy appraises him and then says, "the problem with a lot of therapists is that they feed affirmations to patients that the patients don't believe. Saying something over and over again doesn't make it believable and people who don't believe they're something won't just start to believe it because they repeat it to themselves. So, you and I are going to make a list of five real affirmations that you can truly believe."
"Good luck with that," Derek tells her, then lays back down on the couch.

Half an hour later, Derek is looking at a short list that reads,

1. My experiences have made me a loyal, trustworthy person.
2. My trust is hard-earned and, when given, is a sign of growth.
3. I am focused on the success of myself and others.
4. I am pursuing happiness on my own terms.
5. I am committed to healing.

Derek stares at it for a while and considers himself.

He thinks of Paige and doesn't feel such an icy stab to his heart. There's pain, but it's not as severe, it's not as frozen. It's just a sadness, a withering guilt that's damp and dark and he can handle that.

The voice in the back of his head is still saying that he's the worst thing that could have happened to her, but another voice is reasoning that it is a part of his past and self-punishment will only slow and hurt him now. The second voice is telling him that he can't save her now.

He can't save her now. All that's left to do is heal.

A voice tells him that trusting Kate was easily the stupidest mistake he's ever made, that it was so easily avoidable and so obvious.

He's able to reason that he couldn't have known what she was going to do and that he isn't responsible for her actions.

He knows he can't take back what is done and it burns inside him, it stings but not as harshly as it once did. The ashy taste doesn't climb up his tight esophagus the way it used to. He knows there is nothing to be done.

He imagines Laura's face, imagines the last time he hugged her and scented her and spent an evening in her company. That niggling voice in the back of his mind tells him that he should have followed her back to Beacon Hills, that maybe Peter wouldn't have been able to hurt her if he'd been there to protect and save her. Maybe.

Maybe, says this newborn rational part of his brain. Maybe she wouldn't have died. But she did. And he can't protect her now.

He remembers Erica and Boyd, he remembers Biting Jackson like accepting a challenge, he remembers scaring Isaac out of his loft and he feels regret. He thinks that now he could better handle them. That if he had a second chance to be the Alpha, he could do a better job. That he's more grounded now. He's got his feet flat on the floor and he could teach them what he knows now. But the time has passed and now, he knows, he can only live with his lessons learned and do better for them.

He can only avenge Erica and Boyd by living richly in their stead, by fighting for them and bettering himself for them, in their honor. He may not be able to become the Alpha they deserved, but he can become the person they deserved.

He thinks of Stiles.
Stiles and his messy hair, his turned up nose, his rabbit lionheart. Stiles and his beauty marks, his strong arms, his slim waist, sharp wit, silver tongue. Stiles and his ironic, red jacket, Stiles and his appetite for danger and his drive for thrills and his busy mouth. Stiles and his scent like gingerbread and wind off the ocean, always with the fog of sugar and coffee and anxiety and sexuality.

He thinks of his hands on Stiles, he thinks of Stiles' precious, fragile glow of life cupped in his bloody, dirty hands and he feels like he's bound to crush it. He's bound to extinguish the happy light there and he thinks to himself, no. You can – you will be good for him. You will give him everything you're worth. He's genuine to you and you'll be genuine to him too. You'll be worth keeping. Loving. Saving.

He nods to himself, unaware of Dr. Lundy's steady stare.

His old brain tells him that he can't heal. That he's too broken.

You're going to heal. You will overcome. You will overcome.

He can feel his mother with him. He can almost smell her. He knows she would tell him this and he believes her. He can hear her in his head, crystal clear, saying how charismatic Stiles is and she's so glad his heart has picked Stiles.

That she's so proud.

That she was always proud.

Maybe it's wishful thinking. Maybe somewhere out there in the universe, his mother is shriveled with disappointment and looking over him with disdain and even anger, but something deep inside him tells him that she would still love him. He remembers showing her his new eyes and she'd still looked at him with the utmost love and he nods a little to himself. He accepts her love, difficult as that is to do.

She would tell him that he's doing so well. That this is exactly the help he needed and that the sweet-as-cinnamon, cozy-as-freshly-brewed-coffee, smooth-as-rose-petals, Stiles-shaped growth in his soul is good. She would tell him to pursue it, to care after it, to think of it and talk about it.

She would call it what he's scared to call it.

And she'd be happy to.

His heart swells and he breathes in deeply through his nose and out through his mouth, which makes Dr. Lundy smile and he scents the air, telling that she smells content with his breathing. She says, "you are not sentenced to the Eternal Return, Derek."

He thinks on that. On how much he believed that to be true. How since Paige, he's been convinced that his life was a dark paradox he would never be able to escape.

But he has hope now.

He wonders how long it's been since he has had hope like this, because it feels like new skin.

He looks up at her and asks, "could I ask for one more thing?"
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Lots of fluff and tomfoolery in this chapter! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Scar tissue has no character. It's not like skin. It doesn't show age or illness or pallor or tan. It has no pores, no hair, no wrinkles. It's like a slip cover. It shields and disguises what's beneath.

Susanna Kaysen

Song for this chapter is Harlem by New Politics

When Derek gets home from therapy, he puts his list of affirmations and A.N.T's on the desk that sits in front of his French windows, alongside the number of someone who would be able to give him some kind of mood alterer.

He takes the last list he asked Dr. Lundy for and unfolds it, to re-read it.

How to be Friendly

1. Smile and laugh (try to put others as ease).
2. Avoid distractions (make yourself present in the moment. A distraction may be like constantly checking your phone).
3. Keep your body language open (so you seem approachable. Work on your crossed arms).
4. Ask open-ended questions about other people.
5. Listen properly, and show an interest in what's said.
6. Maintain a comfortable level of eye contact (relax your brow when you can, try not to glare).
7. Practice making small talk (and stick to positive topics).
8. Compliment others and comment on their strengths.

Derek grimaces at the list.

He's fairly sure he's never done any of these things.

In his mind's eye, he sees himself dancing with Laura in the living room on her ninth birthday. He remembers a family barbeque and holding his baby cousin the entire day, because he didn't want her to feel left out, despite her being only a few months old.

He recalls his elementary and middle school yearbook superlative nominations and awards (biggest sweetheart, best smile, best shoulder-to-cry-on, most likely to cheer you up, most popular boy).
He remembers trying out for the basketball team, volunteering at the senior center (before finding out about volunteer hours programs) and he remembers approaching Paige in the orchestra room and he knows he's wrong.

He's just forgotten. He tells himself he can relearn.

And that he will.

He folds the paper and puts it in his wallet. His hand happens to slip into his pocket at the precise moment his phone vibrates. He takes it out and see's Stiles' obnoxious contact ID photo sticking its tongue out at him.

He wants to wrap his mouth around that tongue.

He puts his phone down and closes his eyes.

*Stop it. No. Bad.*

Derek sighs and takes a moment to breathe and clear his mind. He knows that having romantic or even strictly sexual feelings towards Stiles is its own death sentence for thousands of reasons and he should really make an effort to fucking *stop* that.

He smirks to himself when he thinks that he is Catastrophizing.

He doesn't know when he's going to talk about this warm, growing thing taking the shape of Stiles' face in his heart in therapy.

Maybe when he can admit to *himself* that Stiles makes him hard and makes him wonder about the person he wants to be, he'll try admitting it to someone *else*.

He opens his eyes again and looks at his phone. He swipes the picture (he drags his thumb directly across Stiles' pink tongue and refuses to think about it) and sees,

**Stiles:**

*Scott & I are going to the mall. Scott doesn't know what to get Kira for her bday. Wanna come?*

Derek stares in astonishment at the message.

He wonders if this was all it took; maybe just not being rude was all Scott and Stiles needed to reconsider him.

He types back quickly,

**Derek:**

*I am the least helpful person for this kind of thing. Why would you want me to come?*

His phone vibrates back so quickly, he wonders if Stiles even blinked after sending his text.

**Stiles:**

*We don't want your gift-giving advice, oh worldly Sourwolf Von-Angsting-ton. We just want you to come to the mall w us*
Derek smirks at the screen and contemplates the invitation. He tends to think he'd bring down the atmosphere with his general Derek-ness, but the invitation is enticing and sort of intriguing. He knows it'd be a good opportunity to practice being friendly again.

He remembers being fourteen and being the life of his friends' parties. He remembers his friend Sarah ("Sarah with an 'H'!" she'd always say) and how she wouldn't unwrap her presents at her 12th birthday party until Derek agreed to help her and do commentary like a news reporter on it as she revealed them.

He tries to believe that he can be that person again. Or at least something like that person. Enough like that person that he can be a fun companion to the Scott and Stiles.

He types back,

Derek:

You want me to drive or are you looking to pick me up?

His phone vibrates back excitedly and he even chuckles to himself aloud, thinking Stiles must be feeling hyper and he's looking forward to being around that frantic, positive energy.

Stiles:

We can pick you up! I'll be there in 10

Derek smiles and doesn't feel too stupid for it. He replies,

Derek:

Alright. I'll be outside.

Derek puts his wallet into his jacket pocket and turns back around, shutting and locking the door to the loft.

Stiles pulls up after ten minutes on the dot and Derek has to fight a charmed smile.

He goes to the backseat, but sees that Scott is already back there, waving with a cute smirk. Derek quirks a brow, confused by Scott not taking the passenger seat. He looks at Stiles through the open window and Stiles' cheeks are pink and he just pats the passenger seat eagerly and says, "get in, Sourwolf! I saved you a seat."

Derek gives him a dry look and Stiles grins devilishly at him. He opens the door but then hesitates and says, "oh – wait."

He goes to his own car and Stiles and Scott watch him retrieve his sunglasses. As he's headed back to the Jeep, he slips them on and he can hear Stiles' heartbeat speed up. He hears Stiles mutter as quietly as possible, "Jesus H. Christ, it's like everything he does is pornographic."

"Ugh," Scott groans, "Please be quiet."

Stiles smiles innocently at Derek as he gets back in the car, apparently unaware that Derek heard him and Derek, for the sake of both their prides, pretends not to have heard anything (despite liking what he heard; he wasn't meant to hear it).

The ride is quiet but not uncomfortable and Stiles rushes into the mall as soon as they're
parked. When they get there, to the actual building, Derek starts to feel nervous.

Suddenly, he's overcome with anxiety about not fitting in with the two of them, looking too tall or too old or too angry and he has to tell himself to stop. He takes the thought, reverses it and tells himself that he does fit among them. Because they're friends. He repeats it in his head a few times before calming down minutely and following them into the mall.

"Hate malls."

Scott looks at him and asks, "why?"

"It's a cesspool of sexualized, false advertisements, greasy fried food, rampant hormones, crying children on leashes and thousands of conversations going on at once. It's a cacophony of voices and smells, and most of those unpleasant."

"Dude," Stiles starts, sounding concerned, "if you hate it here so much, why did you agree to come?"

Derek looks at him, and then back to Scott, who shrugs, and he shrugs too.

He takes his sunglasses off once they're indoors, and he tells them honestly, "I don't know. You guys are here. You invited me."

Stiles' heartbeat picks up again, and Scott smiles broadly at his friend, then he looks at Derek and pats Derek's back.

Scott compliments, "you know, you're cool sometimes, Derek."

"Gee, thanks, Scott."

Scott chuckles and then asks, "now, do you have any idea what a 17-year-old girl would want for her birthday?"

Derek pauses, his eyebrows high and he sighs loudly.

Stiles recalls getting that exact expression when he asked Derek whether or not he was going to punch the female deputy at the front desk as a distraction tactic. He decides it's exponentially funnier when Derek's giving that look to someone other than him.

"I couldn't have any less of an idea, actually," Derek tells him.

Scott laughs again and Stiles' heart soars at the sight of them getting along. Scott shrugs again and agrees, "that makes three of us, then."

Derek tries to recall the list in his wallet.

He remembers the phrase 'ask open-ended questions,' and decides to inquire, "what does she like? What are her hobbies?"

Scott looks contemplative and tells him, "well, she likes to draw. When I was at her house for the first time, we had pizza in her room, and I saw her sketches on the walls. She likes manga a lot, but I don't know what genre she reads. I just know that her drawings looked a lot like that. She likes her katana too – she likes training with it and stuff. She's a badass, man, I don't know."

"Well..." Derek looks to Stiles, who looks surprisingly proud and interested in the exchange, then he finishes, "...let's look into art supplies, then. There's a Joann's craft store in here somewhere and we
can look at their illustrative art supplies or something."

Scott grins at him and compliments, "good idea, man! Let's go!"

He starts ahead of them to the Directory standing in front of the food court and Stiles falls into step with Derek.

He looks at Derek and smiles and Derek scowls at him.

It's his default.

He's working on it.

"What?"

"You're a big fuckin' softy."

"Shut up, Stiles," Derek mumbles.

Stiles' smile splits into a huge grin and Derek gets distracted by his beautiful mouth before forcing his eyes away. He huffs indignantly under his breath and it makes Stiles emit a pleased, humored sound. Then they both hear Scott ask, "Lydia?"

They look beyond the Directory stand and see Lydia standing beside Jackson.

"Jackson?" Stiles' voice is at a familiar, high octave; Derek smirks at it.

"Oh, great," Jackson mumbles.

Scott and Stiles both jog over to Lydia and Jackson, but Derek strolls casually behind them, eager but unsure of how to show that.

As they approach, Scott gives Jackson a once-over and exclaims, "dude, you haven't changed at all!"

"What the hell does that mean?" Jackson glares.

"You were in England. He was expecting you to come back with a top hat, fancy mustache, cane, and accent," Stiles explains.

Scott doesn't deny it.

Jackson looks at Derek like a knee-jerk reaction for empathy over Scott and Stiles' collective idiocy and there's a quiet, tense moment until Jackson says quietly and uncharacteristically, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was in town. Just wanted to spend time with Lydia before I got bombarded with people asking me where I've been and why."

Derek shows his right palm, to signify that all has long been forgiven and forgotten.

Jackson and Derek stare at each other for a long moment until Scott asks, "what are you doing back here?"

Stiles is alarmed and amazed that Jackson and Derek still don't break eye-contact and Lydia is forced to answer for him.

"He's here for summer break. Which would be why you haven't been hearing from me. I've been monopolizing him," she brags.
Jackson tells Derek conversationally, "your hair looks good like this."

Derek smirks a little, knowing that's high praise from an image-obsessed guy like Jackson, and he says back, "thanks. You look good too. Healthy," there's a pause and then he confesses, "I'm glad you're doing well, Jackson. I was worried about you."

The admission makes everyone stare at Derek with concern, like he might have a visible head injury or this is Mirror!Verse Derek and the real Derek is lying dead in a ditch somewhere. Derek inclines his head in a shy way, as if he says those kinds of things all the time and not to draw attention to it.

Lydia, Scott, and Stiles trade significant glances at it.

Jackson tilts his head and his nostrils flare. He mentions in confusion, "you're not the Alpha anymore."

"No. I'm not."

Jackson's stare drags over to Scott's pleasant, hopeful face and mumbles, "oh, for Christ's sake."

Derek remembers his list.

Compliment others and comment on their strengths.

"I was worried about it at first too, but don't worry. Scott's good at it," Derek reassures.

Stiles almost starts laughing at the stars and hearts that appear in Scott's eyes, which must be visible to everyone else, because when Scott looks to Derek and makes the sweetest smile he's humanly capable of, Derek is made very visibly uncomfortable by it, and gives this weird I'm-trying-to-look-as-pleasant-as-you-smile that doesn't entirely meet his eyes and definitely doesn't meet his eyebrows.

Stiles does laugh at that, and Derek glares at him for it.

Jackson speaks up, and says, "this is not what I was imagining when Lydia said things were going relatively well. Besides being slightly gayer than I remember, you're all the same idiots I left here."

"What are you guys doing here?" Stiles changes topic to Lydia.

Lydia throws some of her perfect hair over her shoulder and replies, "just clothes shopping. What are you guys doing here?"

"Shopping for Kira's birthday present," Scott tells her proudly, then asks, "Any idea what to get her?"

"I don't know," Lydia answers curiously, tapping her chin with her forefinger, "Why don't you come to Express with us? Maybe you'll find something she'd like."

"I don't know her sizes?" Scott half-asks uncertainly, as if he's a bad boyfriend for it.

Lydia rolls her eyes and says, "of course you wouldn't, but I can easily guess her sizes. I'm never wrong. Come on – come with us."

She loops her arm with Jackson's and walks off, heels clicking confidently, expecting the group to follow without a backward glance.

And they do, of course.
Going into Express, though, ends up being the downfall of all of (whatever was left of) Derek's dignity. He realizes fairly quickly that inviting them all along to Express was just a ruse to harass him into something other than his leather jacket.

He tries scowling Lydia into submission, but her glare is harder and colder than his and when he looks to the other boys for help, all of them shrug uselessly. Jackson warns him, while looking through piles of folded dress pants, "just do what she says, Derek. It's not worth trying to fight. Giving in early will only save you time."

"No," Derek growls.

He gives Lydia a dirty look when she hands him a pair of dark jeans and a collared shirt expectantly. She just stares him down like she's the predator in this duo (and he sort of believes it) and he hears Stiles say encouragingly, "do it, Derek."

"No," he says, twisting around to scowl at Stiles.

"Those pants will look great. Lydia won't steer you wrong," Scott supplies.

"I don't want to be steered at all," Derek complains to him.

"You should do it for all the men in here that want to look good in these pants and won't," Lydia tells him, "They are sad, little men with shapeless butts. These jeans were made for you. Try them on. For all the men that won't look as good in them."

"No," Derek grumbles, his ears turning red while Stiles smiles stupidly at them.

"Do it for them," Lydia presses, "Do you have no sympathy for the less aesthetically fortunate men?"

"No."

"Do it for the children, Derek," Scott pitches in.

Lydia smiles at him while Derek looks as betrayed as he feels.

"The children that dream about looking good in designer jeans."

"No!"

"Think about the children, Derek!"

"Do it for America, Derek," Stiles smirks.

His brows curve in dangerously while Scott laughs and Jackson tries desperately to look unamused.

"Where's your patriotism, Derek?" Scott joins in evilly while Stiles waggles his eyebrows.

Derek looks like an abandoned animal and can sense Lydia feeling the shift in power to her side.

Stiles starts chanting in gradually increasing volume, "U.S.A! U.S.A! U.S.A!"

Abruptly, Derek grabs the clothes out of Lydia's hands aggressively and storms off to the dressing room.

Stiles and Scott cheer approvingly and after Derek hears Stiles start singing 'God Bless America,' he hears the murmur of Lydia saying to Stiles, "you're welcome."
He doesn't exactly know what to make of it.

He spends about five minutes looking disgruntled in the mirror when he hears Lydia outside the door.

"I can feel your gloom from out here. Stop scowling. You're going to get wrinkles."

Derek only scowls harder.

"And don't you dare go in there and try them on without letting me see them. I'm making an investment here."

"You're not buying me jeans," Derek tells the door.

"I think it's really cute that you think you have a say in this."

Derek groans dramatically and it's so uncharacteristic that he feels them both pause. He tries to remember the last time he did that and all he can come up with is being in the New York apartment with Laura, groaning in annoyance that Laura had set him up on a date. He had to have been twenty or twenty-one.

To shake off the weirdness of the moment, he concedes and Lydia's air outside the door relaxes at the sound of his zipper. He hears her sit down on a bench outside the fitting room and he smells more than hears Jackson take the stall next to him.

He thinks all of this is surreal.

He eventually comes out from the stall to see Stiles and Scott standing beside Lydia. Stiles' heartbeat goes a little faster, but what Derek ends up distracted with is how mad Lydia looks. She stands up, sighing in bother and saying, "I can't believe you! You were in there for like ten minutes and you just put on a single pair of jeans?"

She goes behind him, takes the dark grey button up and gestures at him to take his jacket and shirt off. He feels his ears getting unbearably hot, but tries to look unbothered. He throws his jacket to Scott, then reaches behind his neck and pulls his shirt off.

As it's slipping over his stomach and up to his shoulders, he hears Stiles' heart do this deep, fast, hard thing he's never heard it do before. He pretends not to notice it. He doesn't know what to make of it, doesn't want to read into it and ascribe his own feelings to whatever hormonal thing might be happening in Stiles. Dr. Lundy says he has to unlearn his predisposition for projection.

He swats Lydia's hands away when she tries buttoning the shirt for him and does it himself.

When he's done, she smiles at him and announces, "I think this looks very good. What do you boys think?"

Scott nods and says, "yeah, man, you look good."

Lydia looks to Stiles and when Stiles' mouth moves without making noise, she just smirks like she's on a power trip. She looks back to Derek and smiles.

"Well? Turn around. Let me get a three-sixty viewing."

Derek looks at the ceiling, and breathes deeply. Some anxiety drains while he's contemplating what deity most likely has forsaken him that he finds himself in this situation. When he looks back down at
Lydia, he wonders if he's making the same mistake he's made over and over.

Maybe this is another opportunity for closeness.

She notices the changes in his eyes and her shoulders relax.

*She's not looking to embarrass me. She's doing this to be friendly. I should accept it. I should be friendly back.*

He makes a conscious effort to loosen the muscles in his face. He even gives her a timid smile, more exasperated fondness than defensive annoyance. Stiles' heart is making loud, unfamiliar noises again. He doesn't break eye contact with Lydia, though. Scott's face in his periphery is like a child's watching a magic show and Lydia's eyes are lit up and happy. Her lips pull into an honest smile and he just says, "okay."

He takes a step back and slowly turns; when he's facing her again, she's touching her chin like she's contemplating the jeans very seriously. She points to the other end of the fitting hall, where a collection of mirrors are. She tells him, "walk down there."

Then, she quickly and quietly amends, "please."

Derek nods and follows her order.

"Stiles – " he hears her say conversationally, "you're something other than heterosexual, come here and give me a second opinion."

Stiles' sputters and manages to windmill himself over to Lydia's side. Derek is watching Stiles' face in the far mirrors and he's red and smelling like he's embarrassed, aroused (as always) and somewhat sad. Which doesn't fit in, really. Derek wonders if his nose is trying to bury itself in business that isn't his. He cares about Stiles and Stiles' feelings, but perhaps he is caring too much.

Lydia asks Stiles, "do you think we should get a tighter fit, Captain America, or are we doing his ass justice?"

Stiles promptly starts choking on his own spit.

Chapter End Notes

My sister is visiting for the next two weeks, so I might miss updating next friday, because I'll be off being a delinquent! But updates will probably be back to normal once she leaves. Hope you enjoy your installments! Thank you for all comments/bookmarks/kudos thus far!! :}
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

The song playing from the iPod is ‘Just One Look,’ by Doris Troy.

No trigger warnings for this chapter.

This chapter picks up shortly after the events of the previous chapter, and it's very long. This chapter is very long, but the events it's going over happen in a very short amount of time. So, there are important revelations and events in this chapter, but it actually covers a very brief snapshot in time. For this reason, I may upload another chapter of equal length before the weekend is over.

I hope you all enjoy the latest installment! Thank you all for your support thus far!

"We receive and we lose, and we must try to achieve gratitude; and with that gratitude to embrace with whole hearts whatever of life that remains after the losses."

Andre Dubus II

"Song for this chapter is "How Deep is the Ocean," by Etta James."
Scott's so pleased that Derek is silently teasing Jackson with him that he has to put his hand in front of his mouth to keep from laughing. He tries to look like he's casually fidgeting his hand there, but he's obviously trying not to laugh. Derek's heart bumps when he vaguely recalls trying not to laugh at the dinner table, whenever one of his siblings' or cousins' scents gave away secrets.

He remembers Laura sitting to his right and Liam sitting to his left and his father, at the head of the table, asking Laura about the upcoming school dance. His parents had already known Derek had a date, so didn't ask. His mother had been pestering Laura all that week about Donnie Moran ("Donnie Moran," Laura would bite whenever Liam would call him, "Donnie Moron") and every time someone mentioned him, she gave off this dark chocolate and Gardenia scent that meant she was embarrassed, infatuated and a little aroused. The whole family knew she'd go to school functions just to watch him from afar with the same eyes she stared at her Backstreet Boys poster with. All anyone had to do was mention him and Laura's scents would spike and Liam and Derek would get kicked in the shins under the table by their aunt when they would start to snicker to each other.

Derek smiles to himself, because rather than the wash of cold sadness and distant nostalgia he's familiar with, he feels a warmth in recreating this lightheartedness with Scott.

Jackson's natural scent is somewhat clouded with expensive colognes, but when he looks at Lydia for long moments, he emits this unmistakable floral scent. Roses and Sweet Autumn Clematis. Something sugary like cherry-vanilla and warm and familiar like sun-beaten sand. Derek has noticed that Lydia doesn't produce a lot of scents (or the ones she does are muted), and maybe it has something to do with being a banshee, but her body gives her away in other ways.

When Jackson touches her, Derek sees the chills go up her arms and when Jackson calls her name, Derek sees how her lips tug up in the corners. Her hands swing close to his when they walk beside one another and she tucks hair behind her ears whenever he spends more than a second staring at her.

They smell like each other. Their scents are very blended, like most couples.

Derek envies them in a gentle, kind way. He doesn't feel bitter like he used to, he doesn't feel hopeless for them as he used to.

He thinks to himself that it's wonderful to have that with another person. That connectedness. That ebb and flow. And he's glad for them, that they have it, whether it's temporary or not.

When Stiles walks out from the back sliding doors, he notices Lydia's iPod speakers on a coffee table. He points at it, asking, "hey – can I play something out here?"

Lydia nods at him and says, "we have a pool time playlist."

Jackson is the only person, seemingly, who doesn't find that a little over-the-top. Stiles mumbles something about 'rich people,' and the ridiculousness of family working together to make a leisure/luxury playlist. Ridiculous or otherwise, Stiles sets it up to play and then walks over to where Derek is leaning against one of the columns keeping up the overhang of Lydia's back porch.

"Just one look and I fell so ha-ar-arddd,
In love… with you, oh oh!
I found out how good it fee-eel-eels…
To have… your love, oh oh!"
Derek doesn't know what to blame his reaction on at first. He's thinking about love and youth and adventure and caring for another person and letting them care for you - he's trying to remember what it feels like for sincere lips to grace his, trying to recall what it felt like to get rushes of adrenaline just because another person looked his way.

And then he intakes sharply when Stiles comes close.

"Aw, I love this song," Lydia comments sweetly, obliviously.

Derek can't smell the scent he's giving off, but the way Jackson's and Scott's heads twist around to look at him, it must be strong.

And probably telling.

"Say you will, will be mi-i-ine,
Forever... and always, oh oh!
Just one look and I knew-ew-ew...
That you... were my only one, oh oh!"

Stiles' torso is such a long, elegant expanse of skin, Derek really can't help but stare. He's all dotted with freckles and he's thin, his hipbones protrude a bit and on the incline of his left hipbone, there's a small smatter of lighter freckles.

Derek fondly remembers that Laura had marks like that. Café au lait spots is what their mother called them. Laura used to have them in such a design on her thigh that their parents said she was born with a world map on her. They warped in shape over growth and faded with time and she was always sad about that; she liked her spots dark and always regretted growing up.

"I thought I was dreamin' but I was wrong!
Yeah, yeah, yeah!
Oh, but-a I'm gonna keep on schemin'...
Till I can a-make you, make you my own!"

He gets entirely too focused on the trail of dark hair dusting down from Stiles' bellybutton. He wonders how that hair would feel under his fingers and his inclination is to rub his hands there. He wonders how oversized and coarse his hands would seem and feel against the tender and smooth flesh of Stiles' belly. And by the waistband of the trunks (the strings pulled way too tight around Stiles' small waist) hang Stiles' wrists, elegant curves attached to those life-saving, text-page-turning, bat-wielding, Spark-igniting hands.

His eyes traipse up and Stiles' arms are lanky, long on him like he's still growing into them, but he's strong. Derek spares a single second to imagine what Stiles' arms would feel like wrapped around his waist and he drops his gaze because the onslaught of feeling overwhelms him.

Jackson and Scott are trading significant looks (the old part of his brain tells him they're mocking him, they're judging him and they're fearful for Stiles) and he'd like to glare them down, to keep them quiet, but he knows it won't work. It never has.

The newer, healthier part of his brain tells him that it's irrational to believe Jackson or Scott feel any
ill will towards him, that they trust him with Stiles and anyone or anything else, otherwise he
wouldn't be in Lydia's backyard at all. He probably wouldn't be alive still.

The instinct to growl at them or glare at them is still strong, it still takes effort to change his behavior.
Dr. Lundy and he are trying to replace his reflexive anger with something more productive. So, he
doesn't glare at them.

He picks his eyes back up.

He keeps his eyes on Stiles.

"So you see, I really care-are-are!

Without you... I'm nothin', oh oh!

Just one look... and I know-oh-oh,

I'll get you... someday, oh oh!"

Stiles' throat bobs nervously under his scrutiny like it always does when Derek's staring too long.
That's usually Derek's cue to look away, because as much as he enjoys having an affect on Stiles,
that's not the kind he wants to have. Not anymore.

That thought comes very close to an admission he doesn't want to make. It's so close to the surface,
though and his walls are so disarmed, so low.

This is the kind of truth he usually likes to keep buried, where it can boil and fester into some kind of
mental illness to add to his impressive list. But the feeling, the secret he already knows bubbles up so
easily. He sees it come into clarity like watching a figure come into focus through the heat rising off
the desert road.

Inside him is his own childhood, a smaller, softer version of himself that only operates within his
adult body. This small Derek wears his grown body like blankets and hides in him like he used to
when he was seven and Laura was eight and they made pillow and blanket forts in the living room.
And, inside him, that seven year old is looking out from behind his eyes and sees Stiles, looks into
Stiles' eyes and he's so free and so in touch with everything, all he can do is jump and point and
shout, "Love! Love! Love! Love!"

"Just one look, that's all it took!

Just one look, that's all it took!

Just one look, that's all it took!"

Stiles starts biting the inside of his cheek nervously, but Derek doesn't look away. He's mapping
constellations across Stiles' collarbone (imaging spreading his palms over the space) and thinking
about how rounded his ears are (dreaming up what they'd feel like being gently pressed between his
teeth) and how long his lashes are when his eyes are downcast like that (and how they'd feel
brushing his cheek).

Stiles' heartbeat is a touch loud and while Jackson goes to hold Lydia in the water, Scott continues to
watch Stiles inch closer to Derek. Derek knows, he can sense Scott's stare, and he doesn't know
what Scott's looking for, if he's passing or failing some kind of test. He's so swelled up with the
choirs of Stiles-Stiles-Stiles in his head, he can't bring himself to care.
That orchestra in him is warming up again, vibrating with readiness.

There's something about Stiles – not just his handsome face, not just his pink mouth and skin-stars, not just his turned up nose and veiny, spidery hands. There's a grace about him.

_No, there isn't_, Derek thinks to himself.

His rose-tinted glasses must be getting foggy, because Stiles isn't entirely someone he would describe as graceful when he's clear-headed.

But maybe the _effect_ he has on Derek is what's graceful.

Maybe the instantaneous way Stiles' eyes set him aflame from spark to wild fire when he turns them on Derek is what is so magical. Maybe the way that Stiles' rolls his shoulders, breaks the lands and draws tsunami waves over Derek's head is the majestic part. Maybe the graceful part is how elegantly Stiles' energy sweeps around him and dances with his own without Stiles even realizing.

Stiles blinks and stardust falls off his lashes and Stiles doesn't know. Stiles breathes, his shoulders droop and the anxiety-stiffness of his back crumbles like avalanches across his shoulder blades, and Stiles doesn't know. Derek feels Stiles at night, in the loft when he thinks on him, when he's out grocery shopping, while he's running, when he's making dinner, he feels Stiles when he's reading on the couch – he feels Stiles when Stiles isn't there beside him and Stiles doesn't know.

"Are you not swimming?"

Derek's dazed and his heart is hammering.

These realizations are fat and swollen under his tongue, his jaw is lax, but his stomach is tightening with nerves.

Stiles is staring and waiting for an answer, so he says, "I don't have anything to change into."

Stiles' cheeks go pink and he swallows kind of loudly. He gestures vaguely in Scott's direction and offers, "well, you could always just go in your underwear like Scott."

Derek gives Stiles' this appraising look and Stiles' anxiety takes on this tart scent that Derek only occasionally and guiltily admits liking to himself. He slips his jacket off and lets it fall onto the bag of clothes he has on the ground. He bends and starts unlacing his shoes and while he does, he takes secretive pleasure in Stiles' blood pressure rising. He walks barefoot to the edge of Lydia's in-ground pool and rolls up his jeans. He sits on the edge there and lets his legs dangle. He looks over his shoulder to Stiles and points with his chin at the water, telling him to get in.

Stiles smiles and gets a running start so he can make an obnoxious splash when he canon-balls in.

Jackson ends up talking about London at Lydia's insistence. He tells Derek that he met the contact Derek gave him – which catches Scott's attention. Derek shrugs and explains that his mother was well traveled and had friends everywhere and he knew better than to let Jackson go overseas without any kind of support system. Scott grins at him dreamily and Derek starts feeling weird social pressure again. He says that it wasn't a big deal, but Scott's sparkling eyes and big smile tells him otherwise. Jackson explains that this contact, Leo and his wife Arianna, helped him through his first full moons and kept tabs on him. He describes their small pack and how he tried not to ruin their kindnesses by being himself.

Stiles starts treading water in front of Derek when Scott begins an animated interrogation about Jackson's London school. Lydia is floating beside Jackson, watching Stiles and Derek with intrigue,
Derek looks down at Stiles and his heart bumps in an unusual way. The high it gives him borders on panic, but it gives him pleasant shivers. He quirks a brow at Stiles and asks, "what?"

"Treading the deep end of the pool. Takes me back," Stiles jokes with dark-humored sarcasm.

Derek ducks his head in a bit of shame and kicks absently in the water. He notices how close Stiles is and reaches his foot out. Stiles looks at him and they catch each other's eyes; without saying a word, Stiles somehow understands him and grabs onto his feet.

Stiles is forced to make a strenuous effort to not rub Derek's feet, because the moment is intimate as is and he finds himself weirdly inclined to do so. Derek's feet are soft and big and kind of goofy and he wonders if anyone has ever touched Derek's feet. It's a strange compliment of trust that Stiles understands and receives and neither of them are sure if anyone else would have understood the gesture.

Derek nods minutely and mutters quietly, "thank you."

Stiles' brows shoot up and he twists his head up to look at Derek again (not having realized he'd been staring at his own hands on Derek's feet).

"What?"

"Thank you. For saving me."

Derek watches in fascination as Stiles' face and neck and chest get blotchy with blush and his heart starts stuttering. Stiles tries to scoff, like to brush Derek off, but it ends up being a weak noise that makes him seem more caught off guard than anything else.

Derek flexes his toes in Stiles' hands and explains to him, "this doesn't have to be a big deal. I just never thanked you. And you didn't need to save me."

"Yes, I did," Stiles amends, "I know… I know I acted big and whatever, but I was more angry than anything. You were right. I still needed you to survive, if Scott had never come."

"Just take the gratitude, Stiles."

Stiles stares wide-eyed at him for a moment, then nods. He smiles humbly and eventually murmurs, "y-yeah. Thanks. To you too."

There's a beat of semi-silence, where neither of them are speaking, but they're also not really listening to Jackson and Scott talking at the other end of the pool.

Stiles swallows nervously again and Derek leans over, shifting his weight onto his legs so he can lean in closer to Stiles. He notices Stiles' eyes dilate and he remains hyperaware of the sensation of Stiles' fingers around the arches of his feet.

"Why…" Stiles starts in a whisper, looking almost hypnotized by Derek's proximity, "…why did you go to Lydia instead of me for research?"

Derek's eyebrows express his surprise at the line of questioning. He shifts his eyes across Stiles' face to seek out why he might be asking that question, but he finds nothing given away.

He answers honestly, "just trying to be inclusive."
"Really?"

"Yeah, really. Why are you asking?"

Stiles looks sheepish when he drops eye-contact and shifts his hold on Derek's feet, "...just. When Deaton told us that you'd been researching with Lydia, I thought... I dunno. You usually come to me for research, so... I thought I... did something wrong, or something."

Derek knows that's half a lie, but he's not sure what else Stiles would feel in its place. He smirks at the wet top of Stiles' head briefly, then tells him simply, "don't be stupid."

"So, I'm still your number one guy, right?" Stiles asks in a much chipper voice; it's evident to Derek, though, that there's a serious undertone.

"Hey – Derek!" Scott interrupts, "Did you say that it's called a Pack Scent? Like, there are Individual Scents and then there are the scents that have to do with intentions and stuff – "

"Yeah," Derek answers, straightening up, feeling a weird wave of disappointment when he feels Stiles let go of him, "It's a Pack Scent."

"Teach me," Jackson suggests, as if he's offended that Scott was tutored and he wasn't.

Derek quirks a brow and glances to Stiles briefly. Stiles shrugs, looking vaguely surprised.

Looking at Stiles makes him think of Erica and Boyd. Of the promises for them that he made to himself; to be the person they deserved.

Derek nods at Jackson, scoots closer to the more shallow end of the pool and begins, "okay. Come here."

Stiles follows too as Jackson comes up and Scott and Lydia keep behind Jackson.

Derek reaches a hand out to Stiles and gestures for him to come closer.

Stiles does, without hesitation and he stands between Derek's knees.

Derek asks Jackson, "with everyone close like this, what does it smell like?"

Jackson's nostrils flare a little and he answers, "cinnamon? But sweeter. Kinda reminds me of banana bread."

"That's good – that's the Pack Scent."

"That's our Pack Scent?" Stiles asks, his nose wrinkled, "That's so lame."

Derek smirks again and admits, "it's actually a very nice scent. It's recognizable and it's not overbearing. My family's Pack Scent could be overbearing sometimes. This is a nice one, believe me."

Stiles nods, but makes a grumbled unconvinced noise.

Then Derek's hand lands in his hair and he asks Jackson, "now, what does Stiles smell like?"

"Idiocy."

Lydia rolls her eyes so hard it looks like it hurts. Scott gives him a dry look and Derek jokes,
"besides that."

"Hey!" Stiles protests.

"I don't know! He smells like the rest of the pack!" Jackson complains.

Derek tilts Stiles' head to the side, bearing his neck and Derek's strong, warm palm comes to rest against his exposed neck. Stiles feels blood rush there, making everything tingle excitedly. He has to fight the urge to curl into the touch, to curve his entire body towards Derek.

Derek tells Jackson, "you're going to smell here on him. You can pick up a person's Individual Scent by their wrists, their ankles and their upper torsos, but it's strongest by the jugular."

Jackson comes up to Stiles, looking at him clinically, then he leans in and inhales against his neck. As he's doing that, Derek says, "you should smell something like gingerbread and sea salt."

Stiles' heart skips a beat and he tries not to voice his curiosity that Derek knows his scent.

"That doesn't sound like a nice combination," Lydia comments.

Scott shrugs and says, "I like it."

Stiles smiles at Scott and he hears Derek add, "it's usually combined with coffee and sugar. It actually smells very good."

Stiles feels heat climb up from his neck to his scalp.

Derek doesn't say what goes through his mind first, which is that Stiles' Individual Scent is his favorite scent of anyone he's ever met.

The confession does tickle at the back of his closed lips, though.

Derek doesn't make confessions concerning how it makes him feel when he catches Stiles' scent touched by salted caramel when he's particularly happy. The adrenaline rushes it gives Derek when Stiles' aroused scent spikes and it's like the perfect gust of fresh, wild wind through the trees. He keeps to himself the exotic, tempting and unidentifiable scent Stiles gives off when he's alone with Derek for a while. He doesn't mention that Stiles' scent sometimes rubs off on him or his sometimes combines or rubs off on Stiles' or remains floating about in Stiles' room. He doesn't mention that their mixture drives him to the sharp edge of desire.

Jackson backs away from Stiles and confirms, "yeah. I can smell it."

"That's his Individual Scent. Once you have a scent, you never really lose it. Once you get the hang of scenting intentions or actions, then associating those with Individual Scents becomes second nature. It makes finding people a lot easier," Derek explains.

Scott mentions, "that's what you did during the whole Nogitsune thing. You tracked Stiles from the hospital and you were able to tell it was his scent and what he'd been doing up there."

Derek nods and Stiles turns around, unintentionally dislodging Derek's hand from his neck (and he only notices once it's gone that it had stayed rested there). Stiles says, "you never told me that."

Derek shrugs and says aloofly, "dion't seem important."

The fascinated twinkling in Stiles' eyes tells Derek that it must have been important. Maybe not important, even, but interesting to him; like Stiles wants to know the times he's on Derek's mind.
Stiles looks for a moment like he's searching Derek's face for something, like he's trying to decipher a code. Derek wonders if he's giving away, if there's anything there to read in his eyes. If Stiles can see floating around in his eyes, the secrets he keeps about those heart-bumping feelings. Then he realizes he can't decide whether or not he'd want Stiles to be able to see them.

"Well," Lydia starts conversationally, "I'm going to get soda. Does anyone want anything?"

"What kind do you have?" Scott asks.

"Pepsi, Sprite."

"Pepsi," Scott decides.

"Me too," Jackson tells her.

"Me three," Stiles interjects.

Derek nods, goes to stand and offers, "I'll help you bring it out."

Lydia leads him into the house, to the kitchen and when Derek crosses through the living room to join her, she asks, "so. Who are you seeing?"

Derek's heart jumps and he asks, "what?"

"Who are you seeing?" She repeats, turning to face him, "You're seeing a therapist. Or a psychiatrist. You're going to group therapy, you've found Jesus, you've been replaced with a Derek clone – something has changed. Who are you seeing?"

There's a few beats of stunned silence where he wonders how much he's underestimated Lydia's ability to read people until he admits lowly, "psychologist."

At that moment, outside, Stiles announces he has to pee and gets out of the water. He quickly towels his feet and quietly comes inside. He's hidden by the living room, outside the kitchen and he's able to hear Lydia saying, "I knew it. You're definitely showing it."

Derek asks her, "do you think the others know? Can they tell?"

"No, they're not as perceptive. I'm just good at this. Is she good with you? Do you like her?"

"Yeah," Derek answers readily, "She's great, actually."

Stiles' heart sinks, leaving his chest feeling empty and eerie. He inches closer to the wall, so his heart can lurch more accurately at the words being exchanged.

"She's obviously working well with you," Lydia starts, "You're like brand new."

"Yeah," Derek replies unsteadily, "She's helped me a lot. I'm thinking a lot more clearly. Prioritizing."

"Are you happier?" Lydia asks curiously.

Stiles doesn't realize he's holding his breath.

"Yeah. I'm getting there. She's helping me get there," Derek answers.

"That's good," Lydia deems, "I'm glad about this development. I'm assuming she's the reason you
came to me about your research and why you've suddenly been teaching Scott and Jackson things? She knows about the pack?"

"She knows about everything. I've told her everything."

Stiles' smothers his broken heartedness with panic at that.

*He's told some woman everything about his life?* Stiles thinks, *Doesn't he get that this is dangerous? He hasn't learned, even after Jennifer and Kate?*

Stiles bites his bottom lip and his brow is creased in disappointment. He feels tight and wound up, but like his insides have sagged. He hurries off to the bathroom, shuts the door tightly before locking it and then he looks in the mirror.

"That makes sense," he says solemnly to himself, "He's got a girlfriend. Of course."

He thinks about wearing his tight black shirt. He thinks about driving Derek to the grocery store and watching *Moon* with him on his own bed, and talking about 90's cartoons. He thinks about all the time he spent on Society6, Etsy and Amazon, looking for something perfect to give him.

He thinks about the daydreams he had about watching movies with Derek and kissing Derek and possibly holding Derek's hand. He thinks about the hairs and delicate skin around Derek's feet and ankles, about the artistic shadows that paint his back when he crouches or bends. He thinks about Derek leaning in close, touching his neck, his hair. Close enough to count his eyelashes.

"*So, I'm still you're number one guy, right?*"

He grumbles to himself, feeling horribly embarrassed.

But even more empty than that.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

This chapter is super long, so I'm only doing one update this weekend! Hope you all enjoy! Happy Halloween! :D

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning

TW: Stiles has a detailed, long panic attack, a creepy monster appears whose description could be disturbing and there is a death. The death itself is not described, but the victim is described and the imagery could be considered disturbing.

Another note (and possible trigger?) is that Stiles makes vague reference to having suffered from Trichotillomania.

"This is one more piece of advice I have for you: don't get impatient. Even if things are so tangled up you can't do anything, don't get desperate or blow a fuse and start yanking on one particular thread before it's ready to come undone. You have to figure it's going to be a long process and that you'll work on things slowly, one at a time."

Haruki Murakami

Song for this chapter; If I Had A Heart by Fever Ray

Stiles tries to enjoy the rest of his time at Lydia's, but he's heavily distracted by the stray thoughts of Derek falling in love with someone else. He's frustrated and let down. And like a sore scab, he picks at it just to further aggravate himself.

Every time he thinks on it, his stomach curls sourly and his brows knit tightly. He tortures himself with his daydreams that grow legs and run from him.

He wonders if Derek looks at her from under his eyelashes, if she makes him smile – if she makes him laugh, like Stiles has never been able to do. He wonders if Derek thinks about her all the time, if Derek has spent money on flowers for her, or dressed nicely for a date with her. He wonders if she's the reason why Derek has grown his hair out, he wonders how serious they are.

He wonders if she, this mystery woman that has somehow earned more of Derek's trust than anyone in the pack, looks more mature than him. Maybe she has lengthy, wavy blonde hair. Maybe she has light, glittery eyes with long, curled eyelashes. Maybe she's tall and strong, maybe she's petite and
thick. Maybe her skin is smoother than Stiles', maybe her teeth are whiter, maybe her voice is gentler. Maybe she's just as beautiful as Derek.

Maybe she is nothing like Stiles.

He consciously acknowledges that his own desires have never really been dictated by the desires of others. He pursued Lydia for a long time, despite her being obviously, very deeply in love with Jackson, after all. He never thought twice about it; he never doubted himself like this. He thinks that maybe he is being discouraged in this pursuit because success never felt likely with Lydia. There was never a time that he thought to himself, 'I think she's feeling what I'm feeling.'

But he's had very brief, terrifying, electrifying, dizzying moments of believing that with Derek. Fleeting moments where Derek was staring into his eyes, or cracking his knuckles nervously while Stiles' father barbequed or sitting on Stiles' bed, watching Moon like there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

Moments.

Moments when Stiles wondered if he was being allowed inside the secret garden of Derek's inner head space and in the most private, most shameful part of his heart, he thought maybe Derek was returning his feelings.

Scott asks him what's wrong at some point in the later evening, while Jackson is being taught by Derek how to track Lydia. Stiles shakes his head and leaves around seven, lying about his dad asking him to come home. If anyone catches the lie, no one says anything.

Once he arrives home, though, he throws himself on his bed and re-runs all of his recent memories with Derek through his head. He thinks about Derek calling him in the middle of the night to come over for no other reason than to have his company. He thinks about Derek hesitating to come inside, he thinks about Derek looking insecure and very small in the huddle of his leather jacket.

He tries to see where he slipped up. Where he read the signals wrong. Where his hopes were risen when they should have fallen. He tries to think about what he could have said or should have done to have made things different; to have made this hurt less.

He gets carried away in remembering. He remembers first meeting Derek in the woods. He remembers hurting his own fists on Derek's perfect face on the floor of Deaton's back exam room. He remembers Derek using his Alpha roar to make Isaac submit before hurting Stiles. He remembers Derek pushing him aside and telling him to run when the kanima had shown itself.

Stiles remembers how Derek went back for him when he went to attack Ethan and Aiden in the hospital.

Stiles remembers all the times Derek went back for him.

"Going back," is such a terrifying sacrifice in his life now.

"Going back," is not retracing his steps to wherever or falling back on bad habits. "Going back," no longer means turning around because he forgot something or Scott just got held up and swears he's on his way to their meeting spot.

The dangerous, supernatural world Stiles is a part of now doesn't work in such a simple way.
"Going back," means willingly turning back into the line of fire.

"Going back," means crossing No Man's Land a second time.

"Going back," means volunteering to run; to risk life and limb against Druids, kanimas, Lamia, werewolves, demons – indescribable, terrifying evil.

"Going back," means staring Death in the face and saying, "excuse me, I forgot this," and never really knowing if he'll make it out alive.

But Derek has gone back for him and he has gone back for Derek.

He realizes he will always go back for Derek a beat after it dawns on him that Derek always has and always will go back for him too.

He gets stuck on the memory of waking Derek in the broken down elevator, when Jennifer had knocked Derek out. He replays it over and over again. The way Derek's eyes searched him, how his face had been devoid of defenses and facades, the way his mouth had gone slack and his shoulders had dropped.

Stiles remembers the rush of relief that came over him when Derek's eyes opened. He remembers how Derek's hand had been painfully tight around his wrist, until Derek realized who had woken him. Until he recognized the eyes staring down at him.

Stiles remembers how Derek's hand had loosened then.

How, in that moment, Derek had silently said, 'oh… it's you. You won't hurt me.'

And it was somehow the most fulfilling and emotionally satisfying thing Derek had ever not-said to him.

He sighs loudly into his pillow and starts debating whether or not he should continue to passively pursue Derek in the weird, shy way he's been going about it, or if he should give up now before it gets awkward and desperate. Which should also be a line of deodorant and fragrance for men he founds; Awkward & Desperate.

As he's moping around, imaging how he can't measure up to all the beautiful women Derek's ever shown interest in, he's struck with a dark revelation. He springs upward and calls Scott.

"Stiles? What's up?"

"Are you home yet?"

"Yeah, Kira picked me up in her mom's car. We just got to my house. Is everything okay?" Scott asks.

Stiles barely waits for Scott to finish his sentence before half-shouting, "dude! – It's Derek's girlfriend! She's the llama!"

"What? Derek has a girlfriend? Is that why you started smelling sad?"

"Lamia, I mean – wait! Listen," Stiles rushes, gesticulating frantically to no one, "Derek has a girlfriend – I heard him and Lydia talking about it. He's happy and something always goes evil and wrong when Derek's happy and it's always Derek's girlfriend."

"You heard Lydia and Derek talking about Derek's love life?" Scott asks disbelievingly, "And you're
convinced she's the Lamia based on the fact that she's… dating Derek?"

Stiles pauses, "well… yeah. And, dude – Derek has a dick like a treachery-compass. He is always -
*literally* - sleeping with the enemy."

"And this isn't you being jealous at all?" Scott says with a smile in his voice.

Stiles scowls at his wall, "*dude*! When has the Big Bad *not* been casually seducing Derek?"

"I'm pretty sure Derek didn't sleep with Gerard."

"*Pretty* sure."

"Stiles," Scott laughs softly, "I mean, if you want to investigate, we should. But you said it yourself in Deaton's office – it's like choosing rock every time you play rock, paper, scissors. If it's always Derek's date, then odds are, it can't be this time."

Stiles lets out an outrageous, frustrated noise at his own logic being used against him. He throws his arms around uselessly for a while and flounders for a defense.

"Stiles," Scott says, before Stiles can make the start of a new tangent, "Derek would have recognized her scent at the scene."

"Not necessarily!" Stiles argues for the sake of arguing.

He can see in his mind's eye, the sympathetic and concerned look Scott must be making.

"You want me to come over? We can break stuff," Scott offers kindly.

Stiles sighs roughly and throws his head back in aggravation. He tries to smile and answers softly, "no, Scott. Go enjoy Kira. But thanks."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"Okay. If you change your mind, call me, okay?" Scott presses.

Stiles nods, despite no one being there to see it. He knows he won't call Scott for that and Scott knows him well enough to know he won't call.

Defeated, he mutters, "yeah," and hangs up.

He gets a text a beat later:

**From: Dad**

2yro boy just called in. Miles Coltier - been missing for just an hr

Stiles knows his father isn't trying to encourage him to go monster-hunting, but Stiles also knows what the message means. Because he sees the words written across his screen, but what he reads is;

**From: Fate**

**THERE IS STILL TIME. FIND THE BOY BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.**
Stiles practically hurls himself out of his bedroom, flies down the stairs and shoves himself back into the Jeep. He floors it to the woods and it's only once he parks the car hurriedly that he thinks to call Scott again. When he does, he immediately gets the voicemail signature and he figures Scott must be in the midst of getting action. He tries calling again while he's walking deeper into the woods, Molotov in his backpack that's slung over his shoulder, lighter and shaker full of salt and herbs in his pocket.

With the phone still next to his ear, he calls out, "Miles! Miles? Your friendly neighborhood Spark, Stiles is here," he sing-songs, "Miles?"

He gets Scott's voicemail a second time and makes a face at the blipping screen. He hangs up and hits Scott's contact again. As it rings, he listens to the cold crunch of the leaves under his shoes and the unsure sound of his own voice calling out for Miles.

The line keeps ringing.

It's an ominous disruption to the quiet night of the woods, the misty, cool air. As it rings, he grows more nervous and more aware of the danger he's putting himself in.

*There's a little boy out here, terrified and alone. He's relying on you to save him. You have to do this.*

He braces himself bravely, but a leaf falling into the back of his jacket makes him jump and flail in terror.

He sighs, gathering himself again while the ringing continues to break the eerie calm of the woods and his heart booms loudly in his ears. He stops walking, stands there staring at his phone and he wonders finally...

What if he finds the Lamia, after all? How big is it supposed to be? What if it's not a Lamia?

He curses under his breath.

He shouldn't have jumped to the rescue without backup.

As Scott's voicemail picks up again, he makes an irritated scoff and picks his head up.

It's then that he sees a figure move in the distance.

He freezes.

His heart thumps loudly.

What could have been mistaken for an extension off a tree, not far off from him, moves languidly.

The shadowy, deformed figure is only a few yards away from him.

Its spidery arms are bent, a dark, unidentifiable lump in its spindly hands. It straightens its posture to better look his way, drawing the syrupy lump away from its sharp teeth, strings of saliva glistening from its chin to its hands. Stiles can see the wet glare of the moonlight on the form in its hands and hear the dull drip coming from it.

He sees fingers dangling from a small, mutilated arm, looking bent in the wrong direction.

He drops his phone when his hands start to shake. He can't take his eyes away from the beast, too petrified to look from it. It moves into the moonlight, body language interested and intimidating.
Even from far away, he can see the holes where its eyes should be; the blood smattered across its face. Its long, needle-like teeth glistening white and red. Its neck is eerily extended and so are its arms, like a toy put together with mismatched parts.

Then he hears the slither.

He hears the leaves on the ground being shuffled by the fast, dry dig and swish of the snake-half of its demented body. It's rushing to him and when his brain finally comes online again, he turns and starts running.

He screams, without thinking, "help! Help!"

Chills run up his spine.

No one knows where I am.

"Scott! Derek!" his eyes water with panic as his voice grows louder and more frightened, "Derek! Derek! Derek!"

He hears the slithering getting louder, a wet, labored breath getting closer. His heart is beating so loudly, he's scared he can't even tell how close it is. He's running through thin branches, feeling things scrape against his face and arms and poke through his jacket and jeans.

He trips over a branch and falls, pain spreading through his ankle and calf. His backpack skids and slides from him and while the Lamia is closing the few feet of distance between them, he scrambles for his bag.

He throws the Molotov first, then the shaker and while the monster roars in pain, it doesn't look all that slowed down. It doesn't look wounded. Its flesh is waxy, its eye-holes are dark and bloody and he's petrified. He's petrified of it.

He struggles with getting back onto his feet and he knows immediately he's fractured his ankle. He starts running again despite the sharp pain, he hears it making terrible, gagging and growling noises behind him. He knows he can't run on the fracture for long, because the adrenaline will run out, the shock will drain and he'll feel the pain for all its worth. He knows he can't get far enough to be safe.

He screams for Derek again.

He screams for Derek again, and again, and again.

He mostly stumbles down a short decline, making his hurt ankle creak and grind at a disturbing volume. He lands almost on his feet at the end of the decline and then something hits him violently from behind. He topples to the ground, his vision going fuzzy while a hot, painful burst of sensation spreads across the back of his head.

He doesn't know how much time has passed, if any at all, when he comes to.

He blinks his eyes open as quickly as he can once he remembers what was happening before it went dark. He turns over from the dirt stuck on his face and front. Cool air on his forehead and the back of his head lets him know he's bleeding. He crawls backward, unsure of what he's about to look at, how close Death is.

His mother stares back at him.

He can't get a good breath into his lungs; nothing inside him will expand or relax. Shaking limbs and
watery eyes, he can hardly believe he's looking at her. But it is her. He knows it's her. He can smell her perfume. He can see that wisp of grey hair by her hairline. The pink, fake diamond earrings she never took out. The moles on her neck and cheeks that she gave to him.

"Mom?"

She smiles at him warmly, the smell of her laundry softener wafts past him; the one he hasn't let his father use since she passed.

He feels lethargy start taking the place of his panic, but not by much - like his body's rebelling against some intravenous muscle relaxer. It feels like blood draining from his brain and for all he knows, it is - head wounds bleed profusely, he remembers. It doesn't seem to matter. Nothing matters. Nothing feels as real as it did before.

He's scared he's losing his grip on reality - again. It's like being possessed again, this anxious uncaring, this inability to pilot his own body, this unreality. He's so scared that this is all a dream. He's scared he doesn't care. He's scared he may already be dead.

"Am I dead?" he asks almost inaudibly; his heartbeat drowns out the sound of his voice like rushing water.

She nods, looking sorry.

"Mom…"

As he's attempting to rise up and stand before her, she's torn down by a dark blur moving too fast for Stiles' eyes to catch. Stiles gasps and backs up again, scared and confused and feeling drugged. He watches a familiar silhouette attack his mother.

He tries to scream for it to stop, but he doesn't feel his voice. He doesn't hear it come out either. He tries again. He tries calling for his mother, begging her to help him - then Derek turns around, electric blue eyes sharp and fearful. The next thing Stiles knows is he's in Derek's arms and the woods are rushing past him on either side.

He finds it difficult to keep his head up of his own volition. He feels warm tears rolling down his cheeks, his face otherwise numb and hard to operate.

"Mom, mooooommm," Stiles weeps, trying to squirm out of Derek's arms.

"Stiles," Derek growls worriedly to him, nostrils flaring and brow drawn in tight.


"Stiles!" Derek barks.

Stiles blacks out in Derek's arms.

Derek calls the Sheriff when he gets Stiles to the hospital, where Melissa takes him onto a stretcher. Melissa reports back to Derek shortly afterward, saying Stiles is concussed and will need staples in the back of his head and that he has a small fracture in his ankle, but he'll be fine. Scott, Kira and the Sheriff arrive not too long after Derek is permitted to sit beside Stiles' sleeping form.

The Sheriff asks him what happened and Derek gives him his general idea; he says something along the lines of, "Stiles was obviously out there on his own, and like a dog chasing a squirrel, didn't
know what he would do with the thing once he actually caught it."

The Sheriff is about to respond to that when Melissa walks in and explains why Stiles is still unconscious. She says that she gave him an unnecessary but helpful narcotic to allow him to sleep, because he'll be terribly sore when he wakes up and she hopes the narcotic will allow him to wake up slowly, but not to worry that he's sleeping so long. Stiles' father asks her why Stiles' foot is wrapped up.

"He's got a lateral malleolus fracture," Melissa explains, "It's a very thin fracture in the fibula. He'll recover quickly and he can walk on it, he just can't go running or climbing. I wrapped it so that it, hopefully, won't swell up too much. I'll give him some pain killers. He's bound to complain."

While Melissa starts going over Stiles' patient sheet with the Sheriff, the others, (Kira, Derek and Scott), go back into the woods for Stiles' phone and backpack.

Among Stiles' belongings, they also find the remains of a two year old boy, only mostly devoured, being picked at by crows. They call it into the police department from the spot, and end up giving their reports, writing their witness statements and being interrogated all night by the county deputies.

The deputies look like they're itching to have probable cause against Derek, but with nothing to stick on him, they let him go. Once Kira, Scott and Derek are allowed to leave the scene, at around two in the morning, they return to the hospital, where Stiles is still unconscious.

While Stiles is prone and sleeping under the fluorescent lights, Derek notices the other wounds on him; scrapes along Stiles' shoulders and jaw and there's a red mark above his left brow where he hit his head on a branch when he fell. There are bruises on his forearms and there are scrapes on his elbows, neatly wrapped now, but Derek can sense that they'll sting.

Derek frowns deeply and he's surprised to feel Scott put a hand on his arm in comfort.

"He'll be okay," Scott reassures him.

"I know," Derek replies, looking at Stiles' feet under the hospital blanket, "He was scared."

Scott stares at Derek to encourage him to continue. He doesn't, though. There's no other way to describe how he saw Stiles.

He just repeats, "he was really scared."

"We're all lucky you got to him in time," Scott says with a heavy gratitude.

Derek smiles weakly when Scott squeezes his arm supportively.

_He's going to be a great Alpha_, Derek thinks to himself.

Eventually, Scott announces that he has to take Kira home, but will come back if needed and his phone will be on loud. The Sheriff nods and gestures for Derek to sit across from him, with Stiles separating them. Derek takes the proffered seat and he watches Stiles closely.

"How do I repay you?"

Derek's eyes shoot to the Sheriff, who is staring at his son.

"How do I… owe you my son?" the Sheriff asks, "I owe you my life here, Derek. And I know it's not the first time."
"You don't owe me anything," Derek assures.

"This is my fault," the Sheriff mumbles, stressfully rubbing at his forehead.

"You didn't hurt him," Derek says, moving his eyes to the pulse in Stiles' wrist, "It's not your fault. Stiles was being reckless. None of this is your fault."

The Sheriff doesn't look convinced, but he drops the subject and Derek Hale isn't precisely the icon of self-forgiveness; he has no idea how to assure the man that Stiles' predisposition for dangerous thinking and adventuring has nothing to do with him. Sheriff Stilinski eventually offers to get them both some coffee and leaves Derek in the room with Stiles.

While he's gone, the heart rate monitor crescendos and Derek all but leaps to Stiles' side, ready to physically fight even some imagined entity. When Stiles jumps into wakefulness, he's emerging from a nightmare, he's sweating and his heart is bouncing into his throat. He gasps when he opens his eyes and springs forward, his hands involuntarily grasping onto Derek's shoulder and forearm.

"Hey, hey," Derek says, gently touching Stiles back, "I'm here – you're safe. You're safe, Stiles."

Stiles shakes and starts glancing around quickly; his heart rate doesn't go down.

He's tortured by thoughts of what he may have done - did he hurt anyone again? Is anyone dead because of him? Did he lose time? His chest tightens up and his throat feels like it's filling up with clay.

He's having a panic attack, Derek thinks.

The healthier, newer part of his brain just knows what to do - instinctively, there's a voice in his head, telling him, let him know he is safe. Let him know you care. Let him know you want to help. Be present for him.

Derek answers that inner voice by asking, how can I help?

Give him an anchor, he hears his mother's voice say, give him an anchor.

"Stiles – I'm here. Look at me," Derek coaches, reaching out and turning Stiles' face to him, "It's me. I'm here, I'll protect you. You're awake. You're safe. You're in the hospital."

"N-no," Stiles stammers, sounding like he might be sick, "My mom – I saw – I was – "

Derek grimaces, then relaxes his face as much as he can so that he doesn't mistakenly glare at Stiles. He takes Stiles' hands in his and says, "I know you're scared right now. It's okay. It's okay to be scared. I'm here with you."

"Derek – you're n-n-not re-real -"

"We'll count your fingers, okay? Look," Derek starts, holding up Stiles' hands by their wrists, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Ten. See? You're real. I'm real. It's all real. You're okay."

Stiles starts taking on this bitter scent of shame, like burnt coffee beans, while he looks at his shaking hands.

Derek squeezes Stiles' hands encouragingly and says more than asks, "you're embarrassed."

"Yeah, I-I'm fu-fuckin' embarrassed," Stiles snaps without looking at him.
"Don't be," Derek offers.

"I really d-don't want to-to be… like th-this in front of y-you."

Derek doesn't really know what that means. He wonders if Stiles is trying to tell him that Stiles feels like a burden on him, or is embarrassed to be panicking in front of anyone. Or maybe Stiles is mad that he's feeling vulnerable and wants comfort and Derek just doesn't provide that. While he has more reason to believe in the latter, Derek hopes the case is the former.

To even the playing field, Derek decides confiding in Stiles might make him more comfortable.

Derek clears his throat nervously.

"I have panic attacks too," Derek tells him.

Stiles' eyebrows do something kind of silly and his heart rate goes down just slightly.

"Since w-when?" Stiles asks.

Derek responds quietly, "ever since Paige."

Stiles stares wide-eyed until Derek mumbles, "I know you know. It's okay."

Stiles goes to open his mouth and Derek knows he's going to ask questions about Paige, but he doesn't want to divulge that story just yet. He's not ready yet. So he asks, "when did you start having them?"

Stiles continues to look astonished when he utters, "Mom. When mom – "

"How did you cope?" Derek asks, with genuine intrigue.

Stiles shakes his head, tremors still wracking his limbs and he shrugs, "pulled my hair out. Trichosomething. 'S'why I buzzed it. Picked up a lot of compulsive s-stuff."

Derek nods again, taking one of his hands (now warm and a little moist from the sweat coming from Stiles' palms) and pushing Stiles' hair back. He stares at Stiles' forehead for long enough that Stiles gets a little more embarrassed. He likes the intensity of Derek's eyes, though. He relishes in the attention.

"You're going to want to buzz it again after this – after seeing her, aren't you?"

Stiles nods, the sounds of his body still gradually lowering.

"Okay," Derek says agreeably, "I'll do it with you."

Stiles' hands grip his tightly and he shakes his head, wrinkles his nose at the image in his head of Derek without hair. Derek smirks, drops his hand to the hallow of Stiles' neck and jokes, "what? I can't want some change in my life?"

Stiles huffs a laugh and his heart calms down significantly, though his body still shakes. His eyes are watery and he still struggles to catch his breath; all of his breaths coming in shallow and short.

"Did I really see her? What happened?"

"I think it's an illusion," Derek explains, "I called Lydia. She's been researching all night. She says that some of the myths she's found say that Lamia disguise themselves as mothers of their victims to
make them come willingly."

"So, when you – when you attacked her – it – wh-when you attacked it, y-you didn't see – "

"I didn't see what you saw," Derek answers solemnly.

Stiles nods, his throat looking and feeling synched.

"Can you get a breath into your diaphragm?" Derek asks.

Stiles shakes his head, brows pinched in concerned disappointment.

Derek's voice comes out careful and tender when he asks, "is it okay if I touch you?"

Stiles hesitantly nods.

Derek leans in close and murmurs, "I'm going to show you something I haven't shown anyone else."

Stiles' heart skips a beat. Hard. The silence in his chest is loud.

He remembers Derek talking about his girlfriend then.

He feels guilt. He feels more anxiety.

_I want him_, Stiles knows, _I want him. Why do I have to feel this?_

Derek pulls Stiles to his chest, cradling him there, with his hand still on Stiles' neck and one on his shoulder. Stiles hears a deep, satisfying rumble from Derek's chest. It vibrates through him like being too close to the speakers at a concert and the vibrations ease his panic. He puts one of his shaky hands against Derek's chest to feel it in his palm too.

"Try to breathe into your stomach. Take it slow."

Derek's heart beats evenly and loudly against Stiles' ear and the rumble practically moves through him, vibrating through his chest cavity and sweeping away the anxiety.

He starts to feel rescued, at long last.

He closes his eyes and a tear falls from either eye. He's not sure why he's crying now that he's starting to come down from the terror. Maybe the trauma is only just starting to hit him. Maybe he's getting too close to something beautiful and perfect that he can never have and some part of him knows that.

"That's good. Easy does it," Derek tells him.

_That's a lullaby_, Stiles thinks.

Stiles feels like he could fall asleep to that phrase on a loop. The low sweetness of Derek's tired voice, so patient, so kind and he could hear it forever and never get sick of it.

_That's good. Easy does it._

_That's good._

_Easy does it._

_That's good. Easy does it._
Stiles curves his face more into Derek's chest, getting a tingling sensation that runs from the contact point of his forehead, closed eyes and cheek across his entire body. Where he expected Derek's chest to be hard and somehow distant (maybe unattainable), he finds it's warm and while it's strong, it's soft. It's reassuring. It's human and it's available, it's there for him to pillow against.

"You're safe with me," Derek tells him, like a promise more to himself than Stiles.

"Yeah," Stiles agrees, curling his fingers a little into the cotton of Derek's shirt when he hears Derek's heart bump nervously, "I know. I know I'm safe when I'm with you."

Derek's chin comes to rest over the top of his head and Derek's hand on his neck moves to rest against where Stiles' staples are. Stiles can feel the pain being dragged away from the back top of his head.

Another tear drops and wets Derek's t-shirt; Stiles will be eternally grateful for Derek saying nothing at all about that.

"Thanks, man," Stiles says, his voice tremors wetly.

"Don't be stupid."

Stiles smiles weakly, heart finally calmed.

A few beats of silence pass, where Stiles soaks in the pleasure of being taken care of, and then he asks quietly, "what did you do? When you had panic attacks?"

"I still get them," Derek answers.

Stiles pulls away to look at him and asks, "really?"

Derek nods and says, "they've never gone away. Probably never will. Anxiety disorders aren't cured. They're just managed. I don't get them as much, but I still get them."

Anxiety disorders aren't cured. They're just managed.

Stiles can't help but feel that those choice words are being quoted. It sounds right, but clinical - not like Derek. Stiles nods and tries not to feel disappointed when Derek's hand slips away from the back of his head.

"I can teach you some Chinese meditation. Pressure points and tapping techniques. They help me sometimes," Stiles tells him.

Derek's mouth threatens to melt into a smile and Stiles' eyes fly to it. He doesn't consciously lick his lips, but it happens. Derek watches it too. He tells Stiles, "I'd like that."

They hear a throat clear and both of them start.

Derek turns around to see the Sheriff in the doorway with two steaming Styrofoam cups. He looks smug and he says, "looks like Stiles is awake."

"Stiles is awake," Stiles confirms.

Derek moves off the bed and accepts one of the coffees from the Sheriff. The Sheriff sits beside Stiles and asks, "how ya feeling, kiddo?"

"Better," Stiles answers softly, trying desperately to not look at Derek.
"Your face is red. Derek use is Magic Werewolf Morphine on you? We oughta be bottling that stuff and selling it," the Sheriff teases, smiling to Derek.

"Yup," Stiles smirks, "And he purred my anxiety away. Or growled. Did some weird animal vibration that stopped my brain from seizing."

Stiles sees Derek in his periphery, body language getting aggravated at his mockery. Stiles has to fight to keep from sticking his tongue out at him.

"So, if you're feeling better, Stiles, maybe you can answer a few questions for me," Stiles' father begins, a dangerous tone to his voice.

The humor in Stiles' eyes and mouth bleed away and he says, "I dunno, Dad. There could be a lot wrong with me still. Sure, I seem fine now, but... like, my bones have been stiff lately. I could have fibrodyplasia. I mean, we haven't even tested me for it. Speaking of my bones, I see I have wraps around my ankle – probably from me falling, right? And I've been thinking that my lack of coordination might not have anything to do with my ADHD or just generally doing poorly in the third dimension, but it might be Lesch Nyhan Syndrome. Have you even considered it as a possibility, Dad? Have you even brought it up to a physician? It's probably Lesch Nyhan Syndrome. I'm dying, Dad. I'm lying here, dying and you're going to interrogate me?"

The Sheriff looks to Derek, fond and entirely done in a way only a parent can be. Derek shows his palms to communicate, "I can't get involved in this," and the Sheriff looks back to his son. He sighs long-sufferingly and asks, "Stiles, why on God's green Earth would you think it's okay to go out look for that thing on your own?"

"I didn't! I tried calling Scott!" Stiles defends.

"And when Scott didn't pick up, you decided you'd go by yourself?"

"No!" Stiles starts, then pauses, "...except, yes. Yeah. That's. Well – I went there..."

He tries remembering the event, but it's blurry. He remembers parking the Jeep and his thumb on the keypad of his phone. He remembers calling out the boy's name, then his memory gets foggy. He knows he saw it. He saw the Lamia. It terrified him. He ran, he fell, he remembers his mother's face and thinking he was dead and then waking in the hospital.

He sighs and says, "the concoction to kill the Lamia didn't work. The rosemary and salt with fire – it didn't work. I thought I had protection. I just wanted to save him..."

Derek stares down into his coffee when the Sheriff touches Stiles' hand and replies, "I know, son. I know you always mean well. But you can't take risks like that. Don't do this to me again. Okay?"

Stiles knows he can't really promise that, but he nods anyway. The Sheriff knows he can't really promise that, but he nods back too; then he stands and announces, "now, I have tons of paperwork to fill out, as I understand. Derek – would you mind taking Stiles home?"

Stiles knows immediately that his father is excluding them on purpose. He feels his face get hot; Derek mumbles a, "sure," and the Sheriff salutes him and leaves.

Stiles looks to Derek and asks, "I guess we can tell Melissa to check me out?"

"Yeah," Derek says, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets, "You okay?"

Stiles nods while he moves his legs off the side of the bed, "I foresee gory, jump-scare night terrors
visiting me from some faceless-monster-nightmare-vortex-dimension every night for an indefinite period, but overall? Yeah. I'm okay."

"I can stay with you tonight," Derek suggests without thinking.

Silence spills over them.

Stiles' brows are high and his mouth is slack.

"What?"

"I can…" Derek is losing confidence fast, wondering where his ability to silence himself went, "I mean – If that makes you more uncomfortable, I won't – "

"You'll stay with me tonight?"

Derek pauses under Stiles' scrutiny. He feels loyalty to Stiles and Scott and their pack fill him up like water in his lungs. He thinks he can help, if he's there for the night. If Stiles panics, he can help again and if Stiles gets scared, he can provide Stiles with a sense of safety and protection. He can be useful - he can be Pack. So he gives a single, assured nod despite his nerves.

Stiles' responsive smile is charming and sincere and shy and spectacular.

Derek's stomach flips nervously like it did when he was fifteen and Stiles breathes out like a prayer, "yeah. Stay."
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

This chapter is largely a cock tease.
Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning
TRIGGER WARNING
TW: Stiles has symptoms and discusses symptoms of Trichotillomania, he has some anxiety and Derek discusses past anxiety and depression.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is an absolute human certainty that no one can know his own beauty or perceive a sense of his own worth until it has been reflected back to him in the mirror of another loving, caring human being.

John Joseph Powell

Song for this chapter is; "Cosmic Love" by Florence + the Machine

"...but I digress - anyway, that's why no one can know for certain when male circumcision actually became a regular surgical procedure – cause it predates written history."

Silence.

"Hey, Derek?"

A grunt.

"You think pigeons have feelings?"

"Stiles," Derek growls in the dark, "Go to sleep."

"I can't! Not when I know you're just sitting there, in the dark, watching me! It's creepy!" Stiles argues.

He hears Derek sigh, "you want me to leave?"

"No!" Stiles pauses to nervously clear his throat before continuing, "no. Don't do that. Can you come lie next to me?"

Stiles is scared for a brief moment that Derek is going to up and leave anyway. That Stiles' voice, his
request has crossed the line into creepy/desperate/obvious.

He wonders how many people have unsuccessfully come onto Derek, then. He wonders how many people Derek has let flail around uselessly in the general direction of his beauty with no real intention of sharing himself.

Derek's probably the type to let those people flail and not humiliate them with rejection, Stiles thinks.

Stiles pictures young girls in the high school, filling the seats of the gymnasium for Derek's basketball games, wearing his jersey number and distracting his sensitive nose with gleeful hormones every time he did something relatively impressive.

He pictures people in New York City, double-taking when they passed Derek on the sidewalks, probably wondering what brands of clothes and colognes he was wearing or if he wanted an agent or if they recognized him from a movie or fashion magazine.

He imagines people in bars (where Derek would be most likely to go sulking where he would be met with judgment for it), sending drinks Derek's way, not knowing they won't be appreciated because he can't be effected by them anyway and having their drinks sent back.

Stiles tries to imagine all the hoards of failed love-interest-hopefuls that Derek has walked past without a second glance. Then Stiles wonders if he'll join those (probably) extensive, unimpressive ranks.

There's no sound for a few beats, until he hears Derek stand and shuffle towards the bed.

Stiles allows himself a brief smile as he feels the weight of Derek indent his bed.

"You did take your shoes off, right?"

Derek doesn't answer; he just sighs long-sufferingly, moves into a sitting position and Stiles hears the unlacing.

Derek lies back down a few moments later and, for Derek, it's blissfully noiseless for all of twenty seconds.

"Derek?"

"Stiles."

"Are you going to kill me in my sleep if I ask you personal stuff?"

Derek considers this closely.

He knows that, by now, Stiles knows he won't really hurt him. So, he knows Stiles is not actually asking if physical harm will come his way.

He's asking permission, Derek decides.

He knows Stiles can't see his face in the dark, but Derek can see his. He can see the hopeful, intrigued but cautious look on Stiles' face as he squints at the ceiling. The darkness works in Derek's favor; he relaxes, knowing that Stiles can't read his face. Can't look for secrets in his eyes or insecurities around his mouth.

"I won't kill you," Derek answers, by which he means, 'you can ask me whatever you want.'
Stiles doesn't ask anything, though his heartbeat remains anxious.

Derek hears him huff in aggravation and he scents the air to get a better feel for what Stiles might be thinking. He gives Stiles a side-eyed glare in the dark, hopes Stiles can somehow feel it and asks, "Stiles, did you brush your teeth before getting into bed?"

"I had mint chocolate chip ice cream. It's basically the same thing."

"Stiles," Derek grouses, though there's a reluctant smile forcing his lips apart because of course that would be Stiles' course of logic.

**Why do I like him?** Derek wonders helplessly.

"Yeah, yeah, alright, sheesh," Stiles complains.

Stiles throws the covers off himself and gets off at the foot of the bed.

From the bathroom, Derek hears him brushing his teeth, humming and tapping his foot on the tile floor. He takes note that Stiles lets the water run while he brushes his teeth; he can practically feel his mother rolling in her grave. He remembers her flicking his cheek as he would brush his teeth beside Laura and Liam if he ever left the water running. He can hear his mother tsk-ing and see her wagging her finger, lecturing him, "only to wet your brush and to rinse! This family uses too much water as it is to not conserve some!"

After the water has stopped running, he doesn't hear anything for a while and his smile melts away. He calls out Stiles' name and doesn't get an answer, which ticks up some anxiety for him. He stands and pads out into the hall, acknowledging the strangeness of his circumstances, how naked and intimate it is.

His bare feet are moving across Stiles' floors, his belt is off and draped over Stiles' chair with his jacket like he's here all the time, like his clothes somehow belong there. Like there's a space for him in Stiles' home; in Stiles' life - like walking with bare feet through Stiles' house is something he shouldn't be alarmed by. And he isn't alarmed by it - that's what's alarming.

It's a dark, starry, early morning, no sun rising yet and he's awake with Stiles; withstanding the night beside him like a warrior to his lord. Keeping Stiles company, like Derek's company is any good. He shakes his head at the absurdity and stands outside the bathroom, raps twice against the door to let himself be known.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

Derek's brows pinch and takes a shot in the proverbial dark.

"…are you pulling your hair out?"

"Possibly."

Derek smirks and opens the door. Inside, he finds Stiles leaning on the bathroom counter, examining himself closely in the mirror with his fingers pinched at his hairline.

After a shocked gasp, Stiles scowls and asks in a hiss, "dude! What if I was lying, you ding-bat? What if I was in here, jerkin' off or something and you just waltzed in?"
The reality is that he’d hear, smell or sense that long before attempting to open the door and disturb Stiles, but Derek doesn’t dignify that with any answer. He only lifts a brow, which Stiles rolls his eyes at.

Stiles drops his twitchy hands and rants, "I can't. I can't rest. I can't sleep. It's not you, I just can't. I don't know. I'm - I close my eyes and – I just can't. I won't sleep tonight anyway. And it's itchy - my hair. There's too much of it. I'm too hot under the covers, too cold outside them and then you're here which is – I'll, I mean - I'll just stand here for hours plucking it out if no one stops me."

"Well, I'm here to stop you," Derek answers calmly.

Stiles eyes are focused and sparkling when he mutters, "yeah. You are."

"You have clippers here?"

"Yeah. In my dad's bathroom."

Derek nods and gestures with his arms for Stiles to direct him to their location. Stiles leads the way, rummages under the sink of his father's bathroom for a few minutes before pulling the clippers up with him and they return to his bathroom, where Derek tells Stiles to sit on the counter.

"What?" Stiles laughs, "No way. I'm doing it."

Derek quirks another judgmental eyebrow.

"Have you ever done it yourself?"

"Technically, no, but – "

Before Stiles can finish his argument, Derek's hands are grasping his hips and Stiles is effortlessly lifted onto the counter. He's just opening his mouth to start scolding Derek for manhandling him when Derek asks, while unpacking the clippers, "what size do you use?"

"Four."

Derek sets the blades in place and presses a firm, but gentle hand on the back of Stiles' neck. The buzzing sound fills the bathroom and Stiles sighs in relief as his hair falls off. He starts smiling to himself, the cooler his head feels. It's obvious to Stiles that Derek avoids where his staples are and Stiles thinks to himself, my life's aesthetic is disheveled, bed-head Derek Hale at four in the morning, buzzing my hair off into my bathroom sink.

He thinks that whatever Derek's presence means, he wants it to be an on-going theme in his life because it sort of rocks. He vaguely remembers his father calling his play-dates with Scott, 'The Scott and Stiles Show,' and how, until recently, if a person knew where Stiles was, they knew where Scott was and vice versa because they were never parted. Scott and Stiles' names were basically interchangeable, because they were a unit and one came with the other automatically. Even in thoughts.

He wonders if he could ever have that with Derek.

If one day, people won't see just 'Stiles,' but 'Stiles and Derek,' 'Derek and Stiles,' the team, the unit, the one, single thing.

His hands start fiddling in his lap as the clippers run up his head. He wonders if Derek's girlfriend knew where he was, if she'd be upset. He wonders if Derek has mentioned him to his new girlfriend
– if she knows everything. That's what Derek had said to Lydia, after all. If she knows everything, does she know about Stiles? What would Derek even say about him to a stranger? How would Derek describe him?

"And then there's Stiles, this hyperactive nutcase," "and then there's Stiles, this scrawny, insensitive little prick," "Stiles, he's a dweeby teenager I save from imminent death sometimes." "Stiles, he's a friend of Scott's that noses his way into my business on a daily basis," "yeah, Stiles is the weak link in the chain," "Stiles is the thorn in my side," "Stiles is the liability."

Maybe all the above.

Stiles' becomes distracted with the veins in his hands, feeling plain and human and small and useless.

"We're friends, right?" Stiles asks.

Derek nods readily and responds confidently, "yeah."

Stiles' brows pull together and he asks with sincere interest, "did you have a lot of friends here when you left? I mean, the first time. After the fire."

"Not really. I had two close friends. No one I couldn't let go of," Derek answers.

"What was life like for you?" Stiles wonders aloud, "After the fire?"

Derek gives pause, taking in the scents Stiles is giving off and the tempo of his heart. When he deems this a relatively safe stream of conversation, he resumes clipping Stiles' hair, and he mentions, "remember the movie Office Space?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember that scene when he says that every day is the worst day of his life? So, on any given day a person meets him, they are meeting him during the worst day of his life?"

"Yeah," Stiles huffs out in an empathetic half-laugh.

"That's what it was like," Derek finishes.

Stiles goes to nod in understanding, but remembers that there are blades close to his head and makes a nearly inaudible apology to Derek when he pauses. He clears his throat and asks, "were you super close to Laura?"

Derek shrugs, watching the flurry of Stiles' hair come down over his shoulders, land on the floor, counter and into the sink. He mutters back, "I like to think I was. I guess... we were as close as we could be, considering."

"Considering what?" Stiles asks curiously, staring at Derek's pale toes on his bathroom floor.

"All the things I didn't tell her." Stiles' shoulders shift nervously. He feels that intimate closeness; that sleep-sweetened, that happily-vulnerable, gentle, affectionate space-sharing that's unavoidable when one spends so much time with one person. He wants to run his hands over the delicate hairs by the base of Derek's neck. He wants to rub his thumbs over Derek's scruff and jawline. He wants to reach out and touch Derek, he wants to lean up and kiss Derek.

He wonders if Derek can sense all these things. If he's ignoring Stiles' desire, as he has probably
done to so many hopefuls, in silent rejection.

"She had to have known about Paige?"

"The family only knew because the same day I came home with different eyes, they stopped smelling Paige on me," Derek answers, "but I seriously doubt my mother told anyone the details."

Stiles inquires hesitantly, "so... wait... you never told her... about Paige?"

"No."

"What about Kate?"

"No. I never told anyone."

Stiles looks up to Derek from under his lashes and Derek lets Stiles' eyes move across his face. He can feel Stiles' suspicion and the heat from the inquisitive nature of his stare. He can almost hear the narrative in Stiles' head - he must be wondering why Derek's being so honest.

Derek doesn't really know why he's being honest, himself.

Maybe he's too tired from the day to put the effort towards lying. Maybe he's still recovering from the anxiety of nearly not getting to Stiles in time. Maybe he's trying to make a human connection. Maybe he's comfortable. Maybe he's just trying to break his old, useless patterns here and now and start something new. Be someone new.

"You never told anyone?"

"No."

"Jesus, Derek. Why not?"

"I... I didn't mean to not say anything," Derek starts, focusing his eyes on Stiles' scalp, "I just couldn't. The words wouldn't come out. Even when I tried. I didn't want to talk about it, anyway. I just wanted it to be over."

Stiles takes a thoughtful pause before asking very quietly, "did that make it over? Not talking about it?"

"No. It will never be over."

Stiles' eyes take on this glassy, scared look and Derek hears his heart pound. Derek clears his throat and as he moves to Stiles' other side, he explains, "it's an uphill battle, Stiles. It will always be that way."

"I'm sorry for digging up your sister."

Derek gives a dismissive kind of huff, as if to say, 'no big deal,' but Stiles doesn't let it stop there.

"No – no. If I'd just left it alone... Scott wouldn't have gotten Bit and you wouldn't have – "

"You thought you were finding justice for her. It's okay, Stiles," Derek placates.

"No. What I did wasn't okay. And it probably hurt you a lot," Stiles' insists; his voice taking on a watery sound.
Derek breathes in deeply, trying to ease the panic rising in his throat. Thinking about Laura is still not easy - he doesn't think it will ever be easy.

To show his appreciation for the seriousness of the moment, Derek turns the clippers off and puts them down. He has never been good at comforting people; he used to make a good listener, a good shoulder to lean on, but he's not even sure how to do that anymore. He's not sure how to be that person anymore, if he ever really was that person. His empathy is rusty from disuse.

He steels himself to face his own anxiety despite these facts because he wants to be someone new - the person Erica and Boyd and Isaac knew he could be. The person he should have been for them, the person they all put their faith in. He steps in front of Stiles and takes Stiles' face into his hands; he searches Stiles' big, auburn eyes for the right thing to say and, in an effort too, to make Stiles feel focused on. So he knows he's being heard.

When Derek's hands come around his face, Stiles' heart makes a loud, encouraging noise. Waves of nervous, excited sensation crawl up from the base of Stiles' spine, to his neck and stop at the hot spots of Derek's finger-tips. Stiles stares courageously back into Derek's kaleidoscope eyes, holding his breath.

"Listen to me, Stiles."

Stiles starts getting lost in the colors of Derek's eyes; how could he not listen? Derek's mouth is soft and parted, his brows are rested and his forehead is smooth. Derek's eyes flicker back and forth, his body emits this cozy, just out-of-bed warmth. He looks like he belongs in the frame of Stiles' life. Like somehow Stiles' life had a big, Derek-shaped hole in it and now all the color has rushed back into his vision after not realizing everything had been in grey scale.

Somewhere along the line, it became natural to have Derek Hale at his side, in his life. Somehow, Derek completes the picture of what Stiles wants his life to be - to look like and feel like.

He gives a small nod into Derek's hands and his heart pounds at the feel of Derek's palms against his skin. They're lightly callused, they're warm, they're broad, they're tender and God, his eyes.

"I'm thankful for every moment that has brought me to right here."

Stiles' eyes widen and he swallows loudly. He grasps the edge of the counter, as if the intensity in Derek's eyes and voice has shaken his foundation. Derek shifts even more into his space and says more closely, with more soul and with more meaning, "you hear me? I'm here with you right now because I choose to be; it's almost five in the morning. I could be asleep in my bed. Or even my car. I could be dead. I could be in New York. I could be home. I'm here with you, though, Stiles, and I don't want to be anywhere else. Okay?"

"You can't be serious," Stiles chokes; his nose takes on a pink color and his brow furrows, "Your family, Derek – everything – everything that's lead to all of this –"

"Everything has lead to you being safe," Derek interrupts, "It's all lead me right here. To you. To your pack. I wouldn't trade this for the world."

Stiles stares back into Derek's gaze for a long few beats. The ghosts and lights and currents in Derek's eyes force Stiles to believe him.

\textit{He wouldn't change anything. He really wouldn't change anything. He wouldn't change this if he could. He cares. He cares about me - about all of us. Enough that he wouldn't trade the living for the dead.}
All of his insecurities fall away and join his hair on the floor. His determination is reignited. No matter what girlfriend Derek has found, Stiles knows he can win Derek over. His faith is restored. With just a few beats of looking into Derek's eyes, he knows he can't stop now. He can't quit yet. Derek cares - more than he meant to and Stiles can get him to care more yet. Even if he has to implement some five-year plan or ten-year plan, he'll do it.

He will write, star in, direct and produce the *Derek and Stiles Show*.

"*My pack?* Stiles laughs, "Don't tell me you don't know."

Derek's eyebrows ask, 'what don't I know?'

Stiles rolls his eyes and moves his hands to rest on top of Derek's and he says, "our pack, idiot. You're really dense sometimes."

"I'm not –"

"Yes. You are."

Derek looks offended for a few seconds, then he shakes his head and smiles, which prompts Stiles to bite his lip and chuckle. Somehow, this leads to them both laughing quietly and closely, unsure of what they're laughing at. It's sweet.

Once the laughter dies out, Derek finishes buzzing off Stiles' hair, helps wash away the stray, prickly hairs left behind on his neck and shoulders and then tells him to get back into bed. Derek sweeps the floor of the bathroom and listens to Stiles pace restlessly around his room, clearly waiting for Derek to return. When he does return to the room, Stiles gets into his bed, lifts the blanket and pats the space next to him.

Derek lies next to him, shoulder-to-shoulder, then.

There's tired silence only broken by Stiles' occasional yawns.

"Derek?"

That can never last for long with Stiles, though.

"Yes, Stiles?"

"Your girlfriend isn't the Lamia, right?"

"What?"

"Nevermind."

Derek turns to face Stiles, though the darkness in the room doesn't allow Stiles to see him. Stiles asks almost immediately, "are you facing me?"

"Yeah," Derek replies; he takes Stiles' hand and brings it to his face, to prove that.

Stiles' heart skips again when his fingers brush Derek's cheek and Derek relishes in the sounds and scents of Stiles' body.

"I don't have a girlfriend," Derek says with a mild tone of confusion.

"You don't have to lie. I heard you gossiping with Lydia," Stiles admits; he yawns and then adds,
"You buzzed my head, man. You saw me have a panic attack. We can talk about the girls you like-like. We've reached that level of friendship. We're there. We have been to the Friendship Mountain Top and seen the Awkward Glory."

Derek shakes his head fondly and whispers, "I'm not seeing someone romantically, Stiles."

"You're seeing someone platonically?"

"I'm seeing someone professionally."

"What are you a professional of?" Stiles quizzes doubtfully, "Professional in brooding-by-French-windows? Have you been going to conferences for Lurkers Anonymous? Do you have a PhD in perfectly trimmed facial hair?"

Derek chuckles at that and he can feel the little shock it gives Stiles. He thinks back to the sad scent coming off Stiles at Lydia's house and he wonders if this is why he smelled it. It is the same kind of sadness that came off of Stiles when Derek had mentioned potentially going back to school in New York. He wonders if Stiles will ever be willing to say he likes having Derek around, because he's figured that much out.

He whispers back, "I'm seeing a psychologist, Stiles."

"You… are seeing a psychologist," Stiles mutters, more to himself than to Derek.

"Mhm."

Everything comes together in Stiles' head; teaching Scott and Jackson, wanting to be inclusive of Lydia, going to the mall, hanging out in Lydia's pool, helping him through his panic attack. It all makes sense except for one detail Stiles asks about; "why… why did you come here? That night? When we watched Moon together?"

"Hard to explain," Derek says around a yawn, "You want the truth?"

"Probably?"

"You're going to call me creepy," Derek says with a smile in his voice.

Stiles grins, his ears tingling, "hit me with it, man. Lay it on me. I'm ready for some creepy truth."

"I was in a dark place that night," Derek confesses on a sigh, "Had to escape my head. And you're my…" Derek trails off; hesitating. He feels raw and vulnerable, and even knowing that Stiles won't hurt him doesn't ease his anxiety; he senses Stiles waiting and bravely finishes, "...anchor."

"Me?"

"Yeah," Derek admits.

"You know I'm Stiles, right? It is me, Stiles, you are talking to? It's dark in here. You may have forgotten where you are. You are in Casa de Stilinski, talking to Stiles."

Derek turns his face more into Stiles' palm and simply says, "I know, Stiles."

"What makes me so special?" Stiles asks with a sarcastic tone, but Derek can hear the nervous flutter in Stiles' chest.

Derek replies, "what can I say? You're my number one guy."
Stiles laughs shakily and asks no one, "who knew you were so sentimental?"

Me, Stiles thinks, I called this. I knew you were a closet romantic. I knew it.

"Go to sleep, Stiles."

"So bossy," Stiles concedes.

As he falls asleep, his hand slips from Derek's cheek, down to the mattress where Derek's hand lies open. Derek clasps his hand around Stiles' and doesn't let it go. He enjoys a few quiet minutes in the dark with Stiles' hand in his, wondering how in the world he is ever going to let go of it.

He plans on going to Deaton's and acquiring blessed silver knives. He also plans on having the rest of the pack agree to not let Stiles out of their sight.

He thinks back to a session with Dr. Lundy, when she had asked him what affection looked like to him. He had answered her that he imagined running with his family on full moons and taking Laura out to dinner.

He decides that among his other tasks, he will take Stiles out for food.

Maybe invite him to spend the next full moon with him.

Chapter End Notes

I have been warned in the reviews that the line about pigeons having feelings has been created elsewhere. I was directed to the video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXp2ruZoxK8) and I've never actually seen it before! Despite this being an unintentional coincidence, I'd like to source it here just in case!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning
TRIGGER WARNING
TW: Derek talks about the loss of his mother in therapy. He does an exercise involving communicating to his mother and while it's not explicitly triggering for anxiety, it could be for depression.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

We are not meant to stay wounded. We are supposed to move through our tragedies and challenges and to help each other move through the many painful episodes of our lives. By remaining stuck in the power of our wounds, we block our own transformation. We overlook the greater gifts inherent in our wounds — the strength to overcome them and the lessons that we are meant to receive through them. Wounds are the means through which we enter the hearts of other people. They are meant to teach us to become compassionate and wise.

Caroline Myss

The song for this chapter is, "For The Widows In Paradise, For The Fatherless In Ypsilanti" by Sufjan Stevens.

Against all odds, Stiles sleeps through the night.

He wakes up at around nine in the morning, from a restful, dreamless sleep.

The unfamiliarity of having another person in his bed rouses him briefly.

He stares at Derek's sleeping face for ten minutes before falling back asleep.

But for ten minutes, he stares and thinks that Derek looks terribly young when he's asleep; the relaxation of his brow and mouth belies his grave awareness and aged soul. Stiles curls his fingers experimentally in Derek's palm, maybe to test how hyper-vigilant he is, even resting, but Derek doesn't even twitch in response. He looks at the softness of Derek's cheeks, the slack of his mouth and the delicate rest of his thick, dark lashes against his sleep-flushed skin.

For the first five minutes he's awake, looking at Derek, he wonders what he'll do if he falls in love with Derek.

For the last five minutes he's awake, looking at Derek, he knows he's already in love with him and that there's nothing to do about it.

He thinks he could stay awake and panic about it; he thinks that if he wants to, he can just think too hard about the realization and drive himself into a manic episode or a panic attack. The blankets are comfortingly hot, though and the hairs on Derek's strong arms are before him, he can see the indents around Derek's wrist and the swirl of his knuckles and it's all making him too comfortable and content. He thinks he can panic about it if he wants to, but he doesn't want to.
So he falls back asleep.

The Sheriff is awake before them (or he, perhaps, never went to sleep at all) and he makes the boys an oversized breakfast with low-fat, gluten free pancakes and fresh fruit. The Sheriff shares that he has more work to do at the station and won't be around much; he kisses the top of Stiles' head and ruffles Derek's hair before leaving. Stiles smiles at the fond, disbelieving look in Derek's eyes.

"So," Stiles starts casually after devouring a burnt pancake, "are there any rules I need to know? About being an anchor? We need a notary? Power of attorney shifted to me? Do we get like Life Alert necklaces, so you can hit me up when you need one?"

Derek's lips twitch as he looks down at his plate and he replies, "no, smart ass."

Stiles shrugs, smiling to himself and keeps eating, until Derek mumbles, "but you could give me permission."

"Permission for what?" Stiles asks around a mouth full of strawberries.

"To think of you. I know you think I'm creepy," Derek smirks like it's funny, but Stiles sees through the real insecurity buried beneath, "If you don't want me to think about you that way, I won't."

"Dude!" Stiles exclaims behind a gulp, "Don't even. I'm inadvertently being useful. I want in on the anchor business."

Derek's face melts into a defenseless, easy gratitude and he nods.

Later, Derek takes Stiles out with him to 'his,' salon where Stiles makes jokes about his cosmetologist fan club (a flock of thirsting young girls that all want to trim his hair and ask intrusive, personal questions thinly veiled as small-talk).

He cuts his hair in solidarity with Stiles, like he said he would.

Derek feels at ease, looking like his usual self and when Derek looks over to him, Stiles' eyes glisten with goodness, thankfulness and something unnamable.

They meet up with Scott shortly after and finally get art supplies for Kira. To Derek's surprise, Scott doesn't ask about Stiles' buzzcut. Derek asks with his eyebrows why he hadn't and Stiles responds with his own eyebrows and a head shake that Scott only cares that he's alright and doesn't pry. Derek gets the feeling that Stiles has fallen back on his buzzcut many times in the past. He doesn't ask anymore about it, silently or audibly.

They eventually leave the mall and go to Deaton's, where they're provided with four blessed, silver knives.

Stiles tries to ask Deaton why and how he had them ready, but Deaton, as per usual, declines a solid answer.

When Derek splits ways with Scott and Stiles, he knows they are planning a sleep-over and he lets go of his uneasiness, knowing that Stiles won't be alone for the night.

When Derek finally gets home and collapses into his own bed, he checks his phone out of habit, not expecting anything to be there, but having the compulsion to check anyway. He does expect anything to be there, but there is.

All that's there is a text that reads;
Stiles:

Thank you. For everything.

Derek falls asleep on top of the covers, holding the phone with that message open.

The next week is a bloodbath in the woods.

The pack goes hunting in pairs; Lydia with Jackson, Scott with Kira, Malia with Isaac and Stiles with Derek. Scott and Kira find the Lamia first, with a live child crying in its demented arms.

Scott howls and Derek's ears twitch. He crouches down and insists that Stiles ride on his back; with limited time to argue about it, Stiles eventually concedes and they find Scott just as he's capturing the child from the Lamia's hands. The Lamia roars and attacks Kira in response; Kira is able to electrocute it and send it flying backwards.

It notices Stiles then, focusing its no-eyes on him, so Scott distracts it by throwing another Molotov at it. Derek goes to guard Stiles by blocking him from view and inadvertently calls attention to himself.

The Lamia attacks Derek, screaming a high-pitched, wet and sickly animal scream in his face. It struggles with him as Scott attacks its back and Jackson shows up with Lydia, Malia and Isaac. Malia attaches herself to it's back, trying to crack its neck. Jackson and Isaac respectively take two blows meant for Derek while trying to divert attention to themselves and when Kira is finally able to intervene and stick her blessed knife into the creature, time slows for Derek.

Derek hears a human sob come from the monster.

He plunges his arm downward, makes the mistake of looking up and winds up sticking his own blessed, silver blade through his mother's chest.

The Lamia dies slowly and loudly until Derek beheads it with some gory difficulty. Scott and Kira take charge of returning the child to its family and addressing the police with a cover story. Derek, dripping wet with blood and shaken by seeing his mother's face, leaves without much more word to anyone.

Stiles calls him, but he doesn't pick up.

The next week finds him in Dr. Lundy's office.

"So, are you feeling any less anxious now that the Lamia is taken care of?"

Derek shrugs and replies, "there's always something else on the way."

Dr. Lundy smiles gently and says, "you know, there is a saying that people with depression live too far in the past, people with anxiety are living too far in the future and the happiest people live life fully in the present."

"How do you figure I manage to live in the past and future at the same time?" Derek asks rhetorically.

Dr. Lundy replies with another question; "how did it feel, seeing your mother?"

"It wasn't my mother."

"But seeing her face must have brought up some memories," Dr. Lundy offers.
Derek bites his lip and nods. He sighs heavily and confesses to her, "I still feel a lot of guilt."

"Would you be willing to try a new exercise?" Dr. Lundy asks, placing her pen and pad onto her desk.

Derek's brows curve, unsure of how uncomfortable the new idea might make him. He tells her they can try a new exercise despite this discomfort, though.

She stands up from her seat and rolls it in front of Derek, so that it is facing him. She instructs, "I'd like you to close your eyes and imagine your mother in this seat. Once you can feel her there, I want you to say anything you need or want to say to your mother. It can be anything at all. The weather, the pack, how you feel about her - anything."

Derek looks doubtfully at her for a few beats, but, as usual, she remains placid and patient in the face of his distrust. He eventually slumps a little in defeat and faces the chair again. He closes his eyes and struggles to breathe deeply. He lolls his head and lets his restless hands sit in his lap.

"Build her from your memory," Dr. Lundy's voice comes.

Derek's brows curve and his heart rate picks up. He grumbles beneath reluctant shame, "I… I've lost my memory."

"You're nervous," Dr. Lundy states evenly, "Try to relax. There is no pressure here. There is no rush. Try to build her from the last time you saw her."

Derek doesn't usually think of his mother when he remembers the morning of the fire. He usually thinks of being pulled out of class, of Laura's eyes taking on an Alpha red before anyone actually told them how bad it was. He remembers not being allowed to go to the house; he remembers the crappy hotel the county put him up in with Laura. He remembers the townscape rushing by through the windows of the car, he remembers the unreality of losing everyone at once, feeling unhinged and divorced from his own life. He remembers leaving.

He tries to remember the beginning of the day of the fire. How he woke up at 6:30, which was normal for him on a school day. He showered, he dressed, he went downstairs and most of his family was at the table.

Liam had come into town from university the night before and was grinning at him from the table. He remembers his father's back facing him from the sink where he was cleaning dishes. He remembers Peter helping his wife coerce the baby into eating her Cheerio's, he remembers his grandmother's silhouette from the back porch. Then his mother.

She's suddenly so clear.

Her hair was still looking slept-on, her eyes were warm and her smile was casual and familiar. She was in pajama pants and a dark blue cardigan that she wore too often. She had a steaming mug of coffee in one hand and she had said, "good morning, Derek."

He doesn't remember if she asked him how he had slept, but she may have (because she usually did). He doesn't remember if he was running late at all, but it's possible (because he usually was). He doesn't remember saying goodbye to her before walking out of the kitchen, out to the porch and across the lawn, into Laura's Camaro. He may have. He hopes he did.

He paints her, brush for brush, in front of him. The way her posture was straight while relaxed, the way the lines by her eyes and around her mouth had shown. He can see her firm, shaped brows, the line of her nose, the rounded point of her chin. He can imagine the aged freckles on her neck, the
thin, gold chain that sat in the dip of her collarbone. He remembers how her fingers looked around her mug, how her wedding ring glistened in the natural light of the kitchen.

"Do you see her?"

"Yes," Derek responds, still looking at his mother, "Yeah. I see her."

"Whenever you're ready, talk to her. Tell her what you need to."

He sees, or imagines, the focus of his mother's eyes on him. As though everyone and everything else in the memory is frozen, the sunbeams don't move, the water from the sink doesn't run, he hears only an imitation of what he remembers his mother's heart beat to be. The floating dust particles shimmer in the still, warm air. He is grown before her, standing in the footsteps of his former self, watching her ease her posture to make herself more open to him.

"Mom," Derek addresses.

His throat feels hot and tight around the word. He swallows and knows his mother is watching his jaw work. She is looking at him patiently, waiting for him to speak like she has all the time in the world — the way she always was with him. He could never take too much of her time. He was never asking too much of her.

"I'm sorry," he starts, stilted.

He moves through the memory to her, sits across the table from her and she's watching his every move carefully. He can see the twinkles in her eyes like streetlights passed by through the passenger-side window. He continues, "I didn't know what I was doing. I was too embarrassed to go to you — about Kate. And I should have."

He pauses under her stare and her eyes tell him that she knows it's not what he wants to say — or, at least, not all of what he wants to say. His heart bumps nervously and her brow twitches, like she's heard it. He begins to wonder if she's really there before him, like his dreamscape is seeping into his reality, like she's in that chair facing him and he can only see her with his eyes closed.

"I sometimes think about what it must have been like in the fire. I wonder if you were worried about me. If you were disappointed in me. If you were mad at me. If you were blaming me."

He clears his throat to keep his voice from cracking. His tone comes out wary and rough when he speaks again, "I never meant to hurt anyone. I wonder if you knew that or if…"

His hands curl up tightly by the sides of his thighs and he finishes unevenly, "I wonder if you'd still love me. If you were here. I can only hope — I hope you'd love me. I hope you'd forgive me. I think about it all the time. I…"

He doesn't finish his last thought, because he's not sure what it'd be, how it's supposed to go.

After he trails off for a few beats, Dr. Lundy's voice wafts through his kitchen of ten years ago and she asks, "what is she saying to you?"

Her question is like a volume switch and he's able to see and hear his mother shift towards him. She smiles and it's like a sweet summer evening, her eyes sparkle with honesty and affection and she assures him confidently and steadily, "I will always love you."

"She loves me."
"And?"

"I forgive you, Derek," she says, with a little tilt of her head, "Of course I forgive you."

Derek coughs again, his shut eyes squeezing more tightly, "she forgives me."

Derek shakes his head and asks, "is this wishful thinking? Does any of this even matter? This isn't really her talking to me. This is only what I want to hear."

"This is the woman you remember, Derek," Dr. Lundy explains, "This is your mother and what you know she'd say to you. Maybe she would have used different words, but you know how she'd make you feel. You know what she'd want you to know, to feel."

Derek stares into his mother's eyes, noting the way the warm rays of sunlight play on the floorboards and bleed through the window curtains. He gets caught on the halo it makes around her hair. He looks at her with his closed eyes and mumbles disbelievingly, "this is all in my head."

"This is where I still live, Derek," his mother replies, as if it were all so simple, "I'm a memory. I will always be here. I will always be loving you, I will always forgive you. I should have protected you. We all should have."

He throws his head down into his palms, fighting the unbearable heat behind his eyes. He shakes with the effort to not let go of his control.

"We should have protected you from her. I was your Alpha and your mother. We failed you. None of this was your fault, Derek, you were just a child. I love you. So does your father, so does Grandma, Liam, Laura, Aunt Danielle and Rose. No one blames you."

"I miss you," he chokes out, and it sounds like it's ripped out of him.

"I know, Derek," she smiles in this melancholy way he remembers her doing whenever she was commiserating with him and then she says to him, "The past is a pleasant place to visit, but not to stay."

He wants to ask her if he'll see her again. He wants to ask if he can stay with her. He wants to know how long it took to die, if it was painful, if it was lonely, if she'll come back to him on his last day and help him ease into his death the way she had eased him into life.

He wants to ask for guidance, for help, but he knows she's not really there; that she doesn't have the answers because he doesn't have the answers. He is out of words, questions still weighing heavy on his heart, but none that she can answer. He settles on saying the last thing he can think that he wants her to know;

"I love you, Mom."

She smiles broadly back and says, "I love you, Derek. I always have. I always will. Nothing you do can ever, ever change that."

He picks his head up to look at his mother again and he smiles at her the best he can.

"Derek?" Dr. Lundy's voice comes, "Feel free to open your eyes whenever you are ready."

He waits a few beats, just to stare at his mother for a few more moments. He knows he can revisit her here any time, in this private, sacred place in his memory.
He doesn't think he will, though.

So, he devotes the moment to memory, etching it into his neurons like braille into stone and it hurts, but it's good too. It's good.

When he opens his eyes, he takes several deep breaths before looking to Dr. Lundy for further instruction. She takes her chair and sits down in it again. She takes her notepad and pen, clicks it at the ready and asks quietly and calmly, "do you feel like that was helpful?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it was."

"How do you feel?" Dr. Lundy inquires.

"Different," Derek rejoins.

He hears his mother's voice in the back of his mind come again and it reminds him, different, but still beautiful... Just like the rest of you.

"Different how?"

Derek's eyes roam upward in search of the right words, until he finally answers, "like a part of me that's been awake for too long is falling asleep."

Dr. Lundy leans her head to the side and looks at him curiously when she asks, "are there parts of you that feeling like they're waking up?"

Derek considers that and nods, "yeah. Some."

"Can you explain that more?" Dr. Lundy asks, her pen pressed against her pad.

"Stiles," Derek counters simply, as though it offers a world of answers.

Dr. Lundy hums and clicks her pen again and she repeats with emphasis, "Stiles."

Derek's mouth starts to tug at just the mention of his name and Dr. Lundy takes notice. She smiles too and asks, "what can you say about Stiles?"

"Not as much as he can say," Derek jokes.

"Do you feel like Stiles is waking you up?" Dr. Lundy questions softly.

Derek's smile tugs a little more at the corners and he nods. He admits lowly and reflectively, "yeah."

"Is that something you'd like to talk about?"

Derek nods again and replies, "I think I need to."

"Why do you think you need to?"

"I'm worried I'm gonna fuck this up."

"Fuck what up?"

Derek's brows spring at her question. He lets his smile spread and he mentions, "I didn't know you were allowed to curse."

"Well," Dr. Lundy reasons, "you didn't say I'm worried I'm going to screw this up or wreck this or
ruin this.' You said 'I'm worried I'm gonna fuck this up,' and that is a sentence that has meaning to you. You have an idea, in your head, about what 'fucking this up' looks like and feels like. Wrecking something and fucking something up are probably different feelings for you. I only want to use what words you use, so that we're talking about the same thing."

Derek gives her an intrigued pout and concedes, "fair enough."

"What is it that you're worried about fucking up?"

"Our friendship," Derek replies with a strangeness; the word feels foreign to him, "It's new and it's real."

"So," Dr. Lundy starts while leaning forward, "what does 'fucking this up,' look like, in regard to Stiles?"

"At first," Derek begins, "I thought I had hurt him already. I thought I had already ruined his life, but... the other night, when I was buzzing his hair off for him, he said something about being sorry that he'd dug Laura up. He wanted to apologize to me and he was about to go off on a tangent about how, if he hadn't done that, Scott never would have been Bitten."

"So, he's insinuated to you that he blames himself for the events of the last two years as much as you have blamed yourself," she surmises.

"Yeah," Derek answers, "I think he does."

She nods, as though she had already known so and she asks, "what did you say to him?"

"I told him that I wouldn't want to change anything," Derek tells her as he leans back onto the couch, "I didn't say that I don't have regrets, because I do. I do have regrets, but I wouldn't change everything back, if I could. I can't, so it's useless to think about it anyway, but if I could, I wouldn't."

"That's an interesting thought," Dr. Lundy comments, "About something not being a possibility, and so 'useless,' to think about. Why do you feel that way?"

"I can't go back in time," Derek shrugs, "There's no way for me to not have done the things I've already done. So, it's dumb to think about it."

"But, what if it made life perfect?" she asks.

Derek quirks a brow in clear confusion and so she rephrases, "if you were to go to sleep tonight, and in the morning, you would wake up and your world was perfect, what would it look like?"

"If my world was perfect, what would it look like?"

"Yes."

Derek looks off to the side and contemplates. He tries to imagine what it would feel like, within reason. He could say there would be world peace, a home for all those without, food for all those starving, clean water, solar energy, justice for all. That's artificial, though. His world would still be small and private and largely unaffected - those thoughts are sort of disingenuous. He purses his lips while he's thinking and Dr. Lundy smiles at him and offers another rephrase, "here, close your eyes again."

Derek shuts his eyes and she narrates, "you're lying in bed, the morning is just upon you. You are rested, you are feeling warm and safe and at rest. A Genie has visited you in the night and granted
Derek imagines lying in his bed, the sunlight creeping through the French windows and warming his back. He imagines what excited fright he might feel before opening his eyes and he already knows. He feels the weight of someone else on his mattress.

He feels his arm curl around someone's thin waist, hears a light snore and a familiar heartbeat. He can smell a rich, sweet scent like gingerbread and a dark roast coffee with layers of sea salt and thick emotions. Arousal, affection. Contentment. Serenity.

He opens his eyes and looks at Dr. Lundy.

He shakes his head and breathes out a half-laugh while cracking his knuckles.

He mutters hopelessly, "God, I'm gonna fuck this up."

When Derek arrives home, there's a package outside his door. He takes it inside with him and when he unpacks it, he reveals to himself a black t-shirt that has only a white illustration of a ship in the center and a digital watch, which on the band has, in the cartoon's signature font, 'Ahh! Real Monsters!'

In the box is a picture of Stiles that he obviously took himself and printed, holding a thumbs up in a matching t-shirt that features, in the same stringy artistic style, an anchor in the center. On the back of the picture, it reads;

Yooooooo

So, you can't see it, but I'm wearing the same watch too! Get it? We both like the same cartoons, so I hope you liked Ahh! Real Monsters. It's funny. Cause you're a werewolf, and you're supposed to be scary, but you use Q-tips and just really, really, really like diners.

You're not answering my calls or texts and I'm worried about you. But you're a dude that needs space and I totes get that. I just want you to know I'm still here for you or whatever.

Stiles

Derek smiles at the note and feels bashful at the sudden and incessant pounding of his heart.

He takes out his phone and writes,

To: Stiles

How do you know I use Q-tips?

He hears a beep back almost immediately.

From: Stiles

I found them under ur bathroom sink bruh

Derek shakes his head fondly and types back,

To: Stiles

Make yourself free tomorrow night. I'm going to take you to my favorite diner.
He walks two steps and his phone dings. He sees,

**From: Stiles**

**I hope you get how much I love your aggressive friendship**

Derek sees the word and sighs, because while he feels gleeful, he somehow feels the dread of defeat mixed in with it.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, everyone! I'm so sorry this update took two weeks to finish! It's the end of the semester, so I've been inundated with work! The good news is that there's only four more chapters left to complete editing! That means we're just at the end now and you've held on this long! WOO HOO! My balancing act with school and writing is precarious, but I think I'll have the next chapter finished and up on time this upcoming week. Thank you all for the ongoing support, follows/kudos/comments/bookmarks/etc! You're all wonderful!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Since I was young, I have always known this: Life damages us, every one. We can't escape that damage. But now, I am also learning this: We can be mended. We mend each other.

Veronica Roth

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Song for this chapter is "Human" by Daughter

Burger Mary’s is relatively quiet, just a low buzz of several tables filling with conversation by daytime drinkers. Both Stiles and Scott have their phones face-down, in the middle of the table, having decided to give each other their undivided attention.

There’s a few quiet moments until Scott asks, "how was your date with Derek?"

Stiles gives Scott a dry look and, disregarding the ten curly fries he has hanging from his mouth, he answers, "it wasn't a date, dickhead. He just fed me."

At his favorite diner.

Scott smiles, looking completely unconvinced while biting into his burger. He says conversationally, "well, you've definitely been spending time with him."

"Stiles was sitting in the passenger's seat, watching the suburbs give way to highways and zip by. Eventually he asked, "dude, are we going out of state?"

"No," Derek answered, checking his blind-spot while he merged, "But close to. We're going to Lake Tahoe."

Stiles' jaw had dropped, "Lake Tahoe? Are you out of you're mind? That's like five hours away!"

Derek turned to him with a cocked brow and asked nonchalantly, "why, you got somewhere to be?"

Slack mouth and bumping heart, Stiles just shook his head.

Stiles rolls his eyes and swallows hard, then makes his most unimpressed face and counters, "yeah, and I spend time with you too."

"It's not the same," Scott teases.

"And how's that?" Stiles asks, feigning naïveté.

"Derek doesn't spend time with people," Scott says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

("Your favorite diner is in Lake Tahoe?" Stiles asked.

"Mhm."

"So, you are telling me that this diner is so bomb that you are actually, no joke, going to drive for
another four hours to take me there for lunch?"

Derek shrugged aloofly after merging into the left most lane and said matter-of-factly, "if you tell me to turn around, we can turn around."

Stiles shook his head and replied, "no – no, this is… I don't know what this is. But, it's fine. This is fine."

Derek focused on the road and was quiet for a few beats. His jaw worked a little before he announced softly, "I don't really remember how good the food is. My memory of it is old. It's a place that Laura and I went to, when we were on the road, moving away from here."

Stiles' heart must have made a noise that made Derek nervous, because his hands tensed around the steering wheel.

"We were emotionally drained. It was almost like a psychotic break we had in there. We ordered something like ten entrees and eight desserts and we were over-eating and reminiscing - just talking about everyone, everyone we loved and lost and were leaving behind and in retelling stories, we ended up laughing hysterically. I mean, we were loud," Derek smiled, "We were disruptive. People left because of how obtrusive our laughter got. I think we were both in shock."

"Why are we going there?" Stiles asked curiously.

"It might have been some kind of psychotic episode in the wake of losing my family, but honestly, cry-laughing with Laura in that diner - it's one of my favorite memories," Derek answered. It didn't really answer Stiles' question outright, but he understood anyway.)

Stiles rolls his eyes again and Scott doesn't mind, he only leans over the table more and asks, "what's changed?"

"What do you mean 'what's changed?' Nothing's changed," Stiles replies while shoving more fries into his mouth, "No things have changed. No changes have come to any things. No things have endured any changes of any kind. Changes have not been made to any things, negatory on the changes, no changes, nothing has changed. Reality has plateaued - no changes have happened, I don't know what you're talking about."

(When they parked outside, Stiles stretched loudly; his spine even cracked as he bent backward. After groaning and sighing into the fresh air and release of tension in his muscles, they walked inside. They were helped by a woman named Marge and had breakfast for lunch/dinner. When they're food arrived, Stiles said they should toast. He brainstormed some nonsensical reasons until Derek tapped his glass against Stiles' and said, "to making new memories."

Stiles nodded and replied, "to making new memories.")

Scott tilts his head and gives a knowing smirk until Stiles surrenders.

He gulps loudly, then sighs and admits, "you don't know this, okay? But he may or may not have told me who is anchor is. Hint: he did. And I'll give you another hint; it's not you, it's not Jackson and it's me."

Scott's eyes widen and he asks, "he said that to you?"

Stiles shrugs, embarrassed, "yeah."
"Dude, *when*?

"The night I came home from the hospital. He stayed over. He buzzed my head."

"**Dude,**" Scott whines in a way that Stiles knows translates roughly to, "**Comrade, I am feeling betrayed that you did not confide this pertinent information in me at an earlier time, it severely alters the schema I have of our mutual acquaintance.**"

Stiles begs skeptically, "what, man? Was I supposed to just tell you about his personal biz? Derek is a private guy. *Private* with a capital P-R-I-V-A-T and E in fifty foot tall, flashing red neon lights."

Scott's mouth slants, reluctantly agreeing. Stiles offers semi-apologetically, "I'm always game for telling you my secrets, man, but I can't tell you other people's business. It's not my secret to tell."

Scott nods and says, "yeah, you're right. It's okay. I just feel out of the loop."

"There's, uh… there's more he said," Stiles conspires.

Scott's eyes light up and he grins, "yeah? What else did he say?"

Stiles leans closer to Scott over the table and half-whispers, "he didn't know he was pack, dude. Also, I apologized for digging up Laura, but he didn't accept it. He told me he wouldn't change anything, even if he could."

"He didn't know he's pack?" Scott frowns deeply.

"I don't think it's through any fault of your own," Stiles eases, gesticulating vaguely with his greasy left hand, "He's just, uh… you know. He's Derek. He's bad at feelings and he's all… you know. The way he is."

"He knows now, though, right?" Scott worries sadly.

"Yeah," Stiles nods vigorously, "Yeah, I made sure he got it. He probably feels old, dude. He wants to be part of the Hale pack, you know? Like, I'm sure he thinks the McCall pack is super and all, but the guy had his own pack and lost it. He's still a Hale. I bet it's really hard for him to consider himself part of a different pack. Especially one made up of people almost a decade younger than him."

"We can call ourselves the Hale pack," Scott suggests eagerly, "I mean, that'll be misleading about who the Alpha is, but if it's easier for Derek – we can carry the name. Like how companies keep old names, even when they're passed off to new management for product recognition and all that."

Stiles smirks and coos, "oh, Scotty, my sweet summer child. You go ahead and tell that to Derek. I am just about one hundred percent sure he'll say absolutely not to, but he'll appreciate the gesture."

Scott's shoulders slouch a little and he sighs out, "well, I'll still try. Did he appreciate the apology for Laura, at least?"

"Yeah," Stiles answers, looking up and away to recall the conversation, "I was anxious and feeling sorry for myself and I started apologizing and he kind of brushed me off. Then he got all serious and in my face and told me he wouldn't change anything about his life, even if he could. That everything that's happened has lead to…"

"Lead to what?" Scott presses; the glint in his eyes change when Stiles shies away a little. He insists, "come on, you have to tell me now! Was it something *romantic*?"
"It was not romantic!" Stiles snipes, face going reddish.

Scott grins mischievously and asks, "so? What did he say? That everything that's happened has lead to what?"

Stiles looks down to his plate, pushing his fries around absently while he replies reluctantly, "he said that everything that's happened…" Stiles trails off again.

He remembers the glistening of Derek's eyes, the rough warmth of his palms around his face. He remembers Derek's messy hair, how Derek's eyes flickered back and forth into his and how sure and patient his voice was when he said,

"I'm thankful for every moment that has brought me to right here...I'm here with you and I don't want to be anywhere else...Everything has lead to you being safe...It's all lead me right here. To you. To your pack. I wouldn't trade this for the world."

"Stiles," Scott's voice interrupts.

Stiles' eyes snap up and he stops playing with his food. Scott's face looks wondrous and thoughtful.

"What?" Stiles asks.

"Are you in love with Derek?"

Stiles feels damning heat spread like wildfire from his chest to his hairline. He starts choking on air and he shakes his head vehemently while he goes to cover his mouth. He's further embarrassed and perturbed by the unchanged, astonished expression on Scott's face. He takes big gulps from his orange soda and takes a second to breathe. He eventually gives Scott a heatless scowl and mutters, "what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're in love with Derek," Scott responds surely.

"I'm not," Stiles urges, heat still prickling his face and neck.

"You're lying!" Scott replies almost hysterically, "Dude – you just got daydreamy about him and your scent changed!"

"My scent changed?" Stiles asks uneasily, "What do you mean?"

"Like, it changed. It got orange-y and crème-y. It was nice, it's just… it's different than how you'd smell when you were still crazy about Lydia. Like, you'd talk about her and some of your scents would spike or something, but it wasn't like that."

They stare at each other quietly for a while, until Stiles sighs deeply and announces quietly, "fine. Okay, fine. Yes. I'm in love with him."

Stiles' heart goes loud and fast once the words are in the air. The feelings are suddenly so real – not that they weren't before he said them out loud.

They were real and true when he woke up in the dark, early morning and stared on Derek, real and true when he curled his fingers against Derek's open palm.

They were real and true when Derek held Stiles' face in his hands, real and true when Derek saved him from the warped ghost of his mother.

They were real and true when Derek came over for dinner, real and true when Stiles called Derek
from his bedroom floor and Derek's first concern was getting to him, wherever and in whatever shape he may be.

Hell, they were true and real when Derek caught his fist in the elevator, true and real when Stiles treaderd water for three hours, holding Derek up.

It was truer and realer still when he caught Derek's stare and smacked Scott's arm to get his attention, because Derek Hale, Derek-Tall-Dark-Handsome-Tormented-Leather-Jacket-Pretty-Eyes-Hale was standing in front of them in the woods while they searched for Scott's inhaler.

"Dude, since when?" Scott interrogates, "Why don't you tell me these things?"

Stiles leans back in his seat, looking helpless while his heart pounds loudly in his ears. He runs a hand over his head, expecting longer hair to be there for him to compulsively rake through, but he's reminded that it's gone. He drops his hands into his lap, looking smaller and unsure.

"I only realized the morning after he stayed over. I wasn't exactly ready to say it out loud. It's not like anyone else knows," he reasons.

Scott asks softly, "so, Derek doesn't know?"

"Unless he can smell it? He doesn't know, in the sense that I haven't told him," Stiles answers, "But maybe he's been smelling all the gross feeling-smells I've been giving off and he's ignoring them so he doesn't have to reject me outright?"

Scott's mouth twists up unbelievingly and he rejects the notion quickly, mumbling, "no, that can't be it."

"How could you know? He probably makes all kinds of people make feelings-smells and ignores them."

Scott shakes his head and teases as a comment mostly to himself, "not with the feelings-smells he gives off."

Stiles' brows spring up and he stares wide-eyed at Scott, "what?"

"Nothing," Scott tries to amend, shoving as much of his burger as will fit into his mouth, "Nope, nothing. I didn't say that. You didn't hear me say that."

"You did! You did say it! You said a thing!" Stiles accuses, "You mother-trucker, you have been keeping smell-secrets from me!"

"You kept the feelings-secrets from me first!" Scott defends in a high-pitch around chewed meat.

Stiles' heart takes on a hopeful staccato while he stares pleadingly at Scott.

"You are so required to tell me this, Scott – you're my brother, dude, and you have a magical wolf nose and intel! Scott – does he make feelings-smells when he's around me?"

Scott looks like the proverbial dog with its tail between its legs. He swallows harshly and won't make eye-contact with Stiles when he mumbles, "Derek would kill me if I said anything."

"Did he say that?" Stiles asks excitedly.

"No – and you shouldn't be that upbeat about me possibly having my life threatened, Stiles."
"Why do you think he'd kill you?" Stiles presses.

Scott sighs again and replies, "it's just – he hasn't *said* anything, it's just been kind of... understood."

"Since when?" Stiles' voice practically cracks with the absurdity, "Since when have you and Derek had *understandings*? Understandings about *feelings* moreover? You think you're out of the loop? I'm so out of the loop, I've lost my orbit! I'm so out of the loop, I'm just floating aimlessly in space out here!"

Scott makes surrendering hands and confesses, "alright – okay. Yes. He makes feelings-smells."

"Jesus, Scott!" Stiles exclaims, too excited to be angry, "What kind? Don't leave me hanging!"

"*Serious* feelings-smells," Scott says with severe brows, "When we were at Lydia's? Lydia walked out in her bathing-suit and Jackson started giving off all his gross love-smells, right?"

"Okay," Stiles offers with an awkward-half nod that means, 'no, I don't know, but okay, continue.'

"So," Scott continues seamlessly, "Derek and I start laughing about it and it was nice – he was like, I dunno – he was teasing Jackson with me because we were both smelling him being a dork about Lydia. It was funny. But then *you* walked out and if Derek and I had been laughing about Jackson's scents being overbearing – he wouldn't even make eye-contact with us once you came out."

"Scott," Stiles insists, heart racing, "How could you not tell me this?"

"It's like you said – it wasn't my secret to tell. He seemed embarrassed," Scott reflects, "It was personal. It was more than arousal, though."

"He smelled *aroused*!" Stiles shouts in a tone about three octaves higher than usual.

Half the restaurant turns to look at them at that. Scott and he slump further in their seats and stay quiet until the rest of the restaurant's population has fallen back into the drone of fifty conversations at once. Stiles' heart is still immensely loud and rabbit-fast. He looks up at Scott with his wide eyes and asks again, much more quietly, "he smelled *aroused*?"

"*Oh* yeah," Scott drags, as if it's an understatement, "But it was more than that. He smelled aroused, but it was way deeper."

"Could he…?" Stiles starts, but is too afraid to finish the thought.

"I can't know," Scott admits, sorry, "But I'd say it's a very real possibility."

"A very real possibility," Stiles grins to himself, like it's a rave review.

He bites his bottom lip, trying to stop the enormous, bright smile splitting his face.

Scott shakes his head at Stiles, chuckling.

They both start laughing and Stiles is completely unable to focus on anything other than that phrase the rest of the night.

Because there's a *very real possibility* that Derek is in love with him too.

"What exactly did you need?" Derek asks drily.
Lydia is in pajamas, bunched up on one end of her gigantic living room couch. She gestures to the empty space next to her and pauses a live airing of *Dear John* to look at him.

He gets the uneasy feeling that whatever he is there for, it is serious and not necessarily good for him. He sits down beside her anyway, looking unsure and uncomfortable. She kicks him gently with a pedicured foot and orders, "stop looking like a skittish cat."

Derek resists the urge to say something contrary and tries to relax his shoulders a little more. He still looks large with his broad shoulders, dark with his leather jacket and generally out of place in Lydia's lavender colored living room. He's vaguely reminded of being on Dr. Lundy's couch, under Lydia's scrutiny.

He glances around and wonders, "where's Jackson?"

"Danny's," Lydia sighs, examining her nails, "They needed to have their overdue, conspicuously homoerotic reunion at some point."

Derek's brows do something kind of humorous and confused. Lydia thinks to herself that Scott and Stiles would have liked to see that.

"Why am I here?" Derek tries again.

"We have to talk about Stiles."

"Why? What's wrong?" Derek asks, genuine worry leaking into his voice.

Eerie, dimmed images and the peculiar unnamable trepidation of demons haunt the inner caverns of his mind. Stiles, with dark smudges under his eyes from his telling insomnia; his pallid, sickly skin, his unfamiliar scent, the recurring hospital hallways and all the subtle elements that came with the Nogitsune.

The unnerving sense that something was wrong, that something was missing or incomplete or just not completely right. The petrifying disquiet that effortlessly seeped into all the moments Derek was not near Stiles, not able to protect him, save him. More than that, though, the fearful dismay of living on that sharp edge of not knowing whether or not Stiles would be okay, whole and retrievable at the end.

The anxiety associated with the void of what Stiles had been during the possession slowly creeps up his neck and sets him on edge.

"We have to talk about Stiles," is easily one of the most anxiety-provoking sentences Derek can imagine hearing.

"Nothing's wrong," Lydia comforts quickly, recognizing the fear starting to flood Derek's expression, "Nothing's wrong with him."

"So, what is there to talk about?" Derek asks with a considerably slower heart rate.

"Your feelings for him," Lydia answers knowingly.

Derek's heart skips and he narrows his eyes dangerously at her.

"We're not doing this."

"We are definitely doing this," she assures.
"Why."

"Because Stiles was infatuated with me for years. It's only right that I pass the mantle."

Derek scowls at her and says, "I don't want to talk about feelings or Stiles or any combination thereof."

"No offense, Derek, but I don't really care what you do and don't want to talk about," she tells him loftily, "I need to know this is going to be okay. I need to know that the pack isn't going to fall apart, I need to know shit won't hit the fan when you both inevitably act like assholes, I need to do the obligatory friend-interrogation and stamp of approval shtick and I need details for the sake of my emotional investment in your love story."

He opens his mouth to object, but she intervenes again, "we're talking about this, Derek. I care about Stiles, I care about the pack. I'm part of this - part of him, part of you, part of the pack, part of the family and so I'm part of this decision and I know it's going to effect me, Derek. Whether you think it's my business or not, I'm making it my business, because I'm done with secrets, I'm done groping in the dark when shit goes wrong. I will keep your disclosures to myself, I have no reason or right to share them with anyone else and I won't. But we are talking about this."

Derek continues to look somewhat lost and unprepared.

She clears her throat and begins, "so. Stiles."

"Yeah," Derek grimaces, still tense and terse, "Stiles."

"You say it like a death sentence," Lydia says with a threat trimming the edges of her voice.

"I say it like I don't want to be talking about this with you," Derek retorts hotly.

He closes his eyes, his nostrils flaring while he musters his patience. He asks himself, why am I getting defensive? just like Dr. Lundy has taught him to.

He's able to answer himself, she's embarrassing me.

Dr. Lundy instructs him to consider the intentions of others during these sorts of encounters and he's able to tell himself; she isn't trying to embarrass you. She isn't trying to shame you. She isn't working against you. She's scared because she's been hurt before. She's scared of other pack members keeping secrets from her.

And he's able to conclude; you don't have to get angry. She isn't trying to hurt you. She's just trying to protect herself.

He opens his eyes and tries to relax his brow, deciding the anxiety he's feeling doesn't really have a place in reality - Lydia is a strong and reliable person and he knows she'll keep whatever he says to her, to herself. She's just trying to arm herself with information, should 'shit hit the fan,' and things go wrong, she wants to know where to begin and how to start rebuilding. He can't help but feel that if he were in her situation, he'd want the same information.

He looks at her and exhales slowly. He stands up and she goes to stand after him, worried he's walking out, but he presents his palm to her. He shucks off his jacket and drapes it haphazardly across the backing of the couch. He sits down again and crosses his legs and he leans back on the arm of the couch, staring at her. She gradually relaxes again and he says more thoughtfully, "Stiles."

"Yes," She agrees cautiously, "Stiles."
"I don't know what you want to know."

"You've got feelings for him, right?"

Derek bites his lip for a second, is tempted to snap at her, 'if you already know the answer, I don't know why you're asking me,' but that's something his old self would say and he's determined not to be that person. He squares his shoulders and dives headlong into the discomfort.

"Yeah. I've got feelings for Stiles."

"Serious ones?" she inquires, very obviously aware of the stress in Derek's posture.

"Serious ones," he echoes.

She nods and they're quiet for a few beats. She eventually asks, "are you going to do anything about it?"

"You mean, am I going to make a move," he assumes.

"Yes."

"No."

She frowns and her thin brows pinch; "and why not?" she asks.

"He's underage, first of all. Even if he were legal, he's young, he's hormonal."

"He's able to make this kind of decision for himself, Derek," she argues defensively, "It's not your place to make that decision for him."

"I don't want to be his phase," Derek replies gently, picking at a frayed thread on his jacket distractedly, "I'm changing. I'm making a lot of changes. In a year, I'm not going to be who I am now anymore. I don't want to amount to just a phase in his life. If he likes who I am now, he might feel completely differently when this year is over."

She stares at him contemplatively until he finishes, "and I don't want to be done in a year."

"Wow," she sing-songs, "You thinking of Stiles for the long-haul there, Derek?"


"Don't try to trip me up," he warns her, staring her hard in the eyes, "I don't know what the future looks like. I know what I want it to look like, but what I want it to look like now won't mean too fuckin' much when twenty years have passed and I'm someone else."

She quirks her brow expectantly and he sighs, feeling the pressure of honesty bearing down on him again.

"I think who I am can be good for him and that who he is, is good for me. I think that in five years, he's still going to be good for me. I think in ten years and fifteen years and twenty years after that, he'll be good for me," Derek explains, "But I don't know what he wants. I don't want to ask. I don't want to know the answer yet because I'm not ready for whatever it is. Okay? Is that sufficient enough an answer for you?"
When Derek meets her eyes again (not having realized his gaze had strayed away in his nervousness), she looks genuinely impressed.

She nods and tells him, "yeah, actually."

He nods once and says back, "okay."

"So, you're still in therapy, then?" she asks conversationally.

He nods again and answers more easily, "yeah."

"School starts next week for us," she mentions softly, "You doing anything with yourself once we're not available for play-dates everyday?"

"Don't worry about me. Spoke to the Sheriff recently, actually," Derek smiles humbly, "I'm going to become a deputy."

Chapter End Notes

Aha! SURPRISE! YOU DIDN'T THINK THERE WOULD BE DEPUTY!DEREK IN THIS FIC, BUT I SPRUNG 'IM ON YA.

There's three chapters left and then the fic is done, you guys. Seriously. Like, by next week I'm going to be done with this fic and I'm already having feels about it. The support has been amazing. :__: You guys have been so incredible.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

This is mostly bonding and Deputy!Derek goodness.
Only Trigger Warning here is Isaac making a vaguely homophobic comment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Progress. Just make progress. It's OK to have setbacks … It's OK to draw a line in the sand and start over again- and again. Just make sure you're moving the line forward … Take baby steps, but at least take steps that stop you from being stuck. Then change will come. And it will be good."

Lysa TerKeurst

Song for this chapter is; Reflections by Misterwives

To: Sourwolf

DUDE

To: Sourwolf

HOW COULD YOU NOT TELL ME YOU ARE GOING TO POLICE SCHOOL???????

To: Sourwolf

??????????

To: Sourwolf

???>????????????

To: Sourwolf

ITS LIKE I HATE YOU BUT I DON'T HATE YOU??????

To: Sourwolf

I WENT TO THE LOFT AND YOU WEREN'T THERE AND I GOT ALL PANICKED AND THEN MY DAD IS LIKE 'DEREK AND I HAD A BEER BLAH BLAH BLAH TRAINING ACADEMY BLAH BLAH BLAH' AND YOU ARE BEING GROOMED INTO ONE OF BEACON HILLS' FINEST???

To: Sourwolf

AND YOU NEED TO GET SNAPCHAT
To: Sourwolf

DO YOU NOT LOVE ME? IS THAT WHY YOU DIDN'T TELL ME? YOU HATE ME, DON'T YOU????

From: Sourwolf

Stiles, relax.

To: Sourwolf

OOOOHHH MM MYYY GOOOODDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDD

To: Sourwolf

YOU SHUSH. SHUSH. YOU. WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?

From: Sourwolf

Figured you'd appreciate an inside-guy to make sure your dad is following his diet.

Stiles grins at his phone like a loon; he feels confident that anyone passing can see the little cartoon hearts floating around his head and he can't possibly be the only person hearing wedding bells.

To: Sourwolf

STFU YOU ARE MY FAVORITE WEREWOLF

To: Sourwolf

DON'T TELL SCOTT

From: Sourwolf

Consider my lips sealed.

Oh, Stiles can consider Derek's lips a lot of things.

Derek's lips.

He gets entirely distracted with images of them in his head, full and pink and probably soft and delicious and talented. He imagines them parting, just to show the tips of Derek's fangs and he feels a sexual and dangerous thrill he's well acquainted with rush up his spine. He wonders if Derek planted that imagine in his head on purpose, if Derek is more aware of his diction than he seems.

He wonders if Derek is flirting with him.

He chuckles to himself and bumps into someone in the hall while his attention is glued to his screen.

He feels a familiar tug on his backpack and turns to see Kira. She smiles sweetly and asks, "what are you so pleased about?"

"Ahhhh," Stiles starts, fumbling with his phone to hide it in his jean pocket, "Nothing. I'm. Uhhhh, nothing. I'm always pleased. I'm pleasant. I'm so pleasant. I'm the most pleasant, always. Aren't I?"
"Sure, Stiles" Kira laughs.

He's asking her with his eyebrows to drop the topic when Scott glides up to them with Isaac and Lydia in tow. Lydia had been particularly quiet since school started and Stiles is working on the assumption that Jackson left for England again. He wants to ask her if or when he will be revisiting, but he doesn't want to start a conversation she could potentially be purposely avoiding. He gives her smiles without sympathy as often as he can manage them to try and ease the tension.

She flips her hair over her shoulder and loops her arm with Kira's, unaware of, or ignoring Stiles' silent support.

Lydia announces casually, "Kira and I have to talk about her birthday party. Ta-ta, boys."

Kira's caught off-guard and mildly concerned expression makes Scott grin and he slips a kiss on her cheek as she's tugged by him. Isaac and Scott and Stiles end up staring at each other uselessly for a few beats.

"So – did you find out where Derek is?" Isaac asks.

Stiles' grin spreads across his face again as he remembers finding out precisely where Derek is.

Isaac and Scott cock cautiously intrigued brows at each other when Stiles says, "okay – you guys are not going to believe this."

Kira's birthday comes and goes in a flashy party that she didn't entirely consent to; no one stops Lydia from bulldozing through personal boundaries, though. Focusing on other people allows Lydia to better handle her own anxieties and she doesn't harm anyone in the process. As weeks pass, Lydia gets better and eventually shares that Jackson will come back for Christmas break and that upcoming visit really keeps her spirits up.

Scott accepts tutoring from Kira, despite being mildly embarrassed to ask for it. Stiles knows Kira doesn't mind helping and that she's not passing judgment on Scott, which takes Scott a week or so to realize. The only times the tutoring isn't helpful is when Scott stares dumbly at Kira while she's talking because her prettiness is distracting for him. Isaac is attached to Scott's hip, as always.

Malia eventually starts sitting with them at lunch again, although for a while she pointedly ignores Stiles' existence. Stiles doesn't really mind, because during lunch, his eyes are all but physically attached to his phone. Derek does get Snapchat and immediately regrets it when he finds that it was all a ploy for Stiles to bombard him with alerts.

Derek doesn't send much back, but when he does, it's attached to beautifully dry humor. Stiles had sent him an insensitive one with a tasteless joke about Derek's exes (which he regretted as soon as he pressed send), to which Derek replied with a photo of a trashcan and the text read; "Look, Stiles. I found your home."

Stiles apologized and didn't share that Derek's response made him laugh until he was teary-eyed.

Derek comes home a few weeks later, pledges his loyalty and service to Sheriff Stilinski and Beacon Hills and Stiles hugs him in public.

The hug itself is spectacular for several reasons, as Stiles so eloquently explains to his father over dinner the following night;

1. Derek is now accepting physical affection.
2. Derek is accepting physical affection from Stiles.

3. The public display of affection did not cause Derek notable anxiety.

It's a magnificent milestone in their friendship and Stiles beams all day with the knowledge that he can hug Derek whenever he wants now and Derek won't throw him into a wall. Scott sneaks Stiles a low-five when Derek gets distracted with Lydia adjusting his tie.

More than all of that, though, when he actually gets to hug Derek, it blows his mind a little. It's not like it was in the hospital, when Derek held him.

Hugging Derek, to say congratulations, to just share a moment of joy is entirely different than Derek taking care of him while he's in a panic, as it turns out.

When Stiles wraps his arms around Derek, Derek's arms come up around him without hesitation. There's caution in how much pressure he applies, how wide his palms spread and how close he lets their faces come, but it could almost pass for effortless.

From the moment he hugs Derek that day, he's haunted by the faint, tantalizing scent of him. Up that close, he was able to breathe deep and take in Derek's scent and he wanted to roll his eyes back in pleasure. Stiles vaguely remembers his eyebrows turning in at his innermost sense of betrayal by his own body.

Despite Derek's clean, musky, manly, romantic scent literally haunting Stiles' dreams from that instant on, everything about the hug is great.

Life picks up an easy, familiar pace after Derek's return.

Derek works patrols with the Sheriff for a few weeks, until he's trusted enough to go about it himself; he even makes an arrest on Halloween. He goes to therapy twice a week, he finds himself at the Stilinski house with the pack more nights of the week than not. He sees more charges come up on his debit and credit cards, because he's suddenly finding himself treating hungry teenagers to dinners and Redbox purchases on a semi-regular basis. The financial security finally starts to make him feel glad, because he's able to extend the feeling - the money his family left for him finally means something and that leaves him feeling warm and good and like he's moving forward.

Stiles drops by the loft with Scott after school whenever Derek isn't working and enough snooping through Derek's DVR reveals to him Derek's secret love for Restaurant Impossible, Chopped and Love It or List It. (Derek says it's some algorithmic mistake his DVR is making, he never set those shows to record, but Stiles doesn't even need his best friend to be a lie detector to know it's bull)

Stiles' heart flutters a lot as Derek hones his social skills. He learns advanced interaction skills, like the just-right hair-ruffle and appreciative neck/shoulder touch, smiling while talking and he even starts talking about the books he's been reading without prompting.

Thanksgiving brings a Chimera-hunt and successful kill (and Derek's incredible sweet potato and brown sugar soufflé that he insists he didn't learn from his home/culinary improvement shows but definitely did), while December waltzes in with Faeries, which, shockingly, don't prove themselves a problem until two weeks after their arrival.

Before they cause trouble, the pack is on cautious awards, but mostly unthreatened.

By the tenth of December, Derek has moved onto therapy being once a week and after one week's session, he's walking into the Stilinski home, unannounced and hungry. He takes off his uniform-approved beanie and rubs his dry, unkempt hair as he walks in the door. He beats his feet against the
doormat and looks up to see Stiles gazing at him.

His heart bumps the way it always does when Stiles is there to greet him. There's something so familial, so intimate about Stiles being there to welcome him home.

Stiles has made such a warm, inevitable space for himself in Derek's life, there's a bone-deep \textit{rightness} to having him be the first thing Derek sees when he comes home (to Stiles' or his own.)

In the entry way of the home is a ceiling light that lights up the space between the stairs and the door and it always twinkles in Stiles' eyes.

His amber eyes glow mahogany and gold and molten auburn and when Derek sees them, they resonate deep in his heart with the sweet lilt of Stiles' voice;

"And you thought you'd never have this."

Derek doesn't say it out loud. He doesn't tell Stiles what goes through his mind this way. He doesn't really even know how he would go about trying to, but he feels it.

Maybe he'll never be perfect at sharing his feelings or sharing his feelings in a precise, cohesive way, but he'll try. That has to count for something.

He smiles easily at Stiles and greets, "evening."

"Evening, Deputy Hale."

Derek rolls his eyes, even though he really does like hearing Stiles call him that and he asks, "I've been off-duty for hours - where's the pack tonight?"

"Date night," Stiles answers, leaning against the staircase railing, "Jackson flew in last night, so he's with Lydia; Kira and Scott are at the movies, Malia isn't tolerating me alone and Isaac and I are cool and all, but we're totally uninterested in hanging out one-on-one. So. Just you and me, Brodius."

Derek cringes while bending down to brush off his shoes, "the hell did you just call me?"

Stiles grins and repeats, "Brodius."

Derek sighs.

"Right."


"Stop."

"Brotein Shake. Brodeo Cowbro. Brohan."

"Stiles."

"Broseph. Bromosexual. Profesor X. C-3P-Bro."

"Please," Derek pleads, looking pained, "Please, stop."

"I haven't found the right combination of werewolf and bro yet," Stiles says apologetically, "I'm working on it, though. When I find it, you can rest assured that it will be my special nickname reserved just for you, Der-bear."
Derek grunts unhappily and then glances around, still not moving from the doormat.

"Your dad still at work?"

"Yeah," Stiles sighs, "Called to say he'd probably be there all night."

"Oh. Should I go?" Derek asks, gesturing back towards the door.


Derek's brow quirks when he asks, "without the pack?"

"Unless you're fearful of my plainly human cooties?"

Derek gives him a dry look and, to prove a point, starts taking off his jacket. While he's unlacing and taking off his boots, Stiles walks down the rest of the steps and asks, "hey, would you wanna split a meat lover's from Anthony's and watch the Star Trek reboots?"

Derek's brows pinch and he asks, with what sounds like worry, "they rebooted Star Trek?"

Stiles feels positively gleeful when he hears the disturbed quality to Derek's question. For so many months, he's wanted to do this exact thing; watch the Star Trek reboots with Derek and figure out if he's an Original Series or Next Generation guy and pick on him for whichever one he chooses and maybe kiss him and kiss him and kiss him and

"Oh, Derek," Stiles chides, "If you didn't squat in train cars and abandoned lofts, you'd hear about these kinds of things."

"Are they any good?"

"I loved the first one," Stiles offers optimistically, "I do have mixed feelings about the second one, though."

Derek's brows pinch more, "there are two?"

"That's it," Stiles proclaims, "I'm ordering the pizza and getting the DVDs out. We're gonna have an epic night, Brohemoth."

"Stop that," Derek mutters as Stiles all but skips into his kitchen to get the house phone.

"I will not," Stiles says simply.

Derek sighs in faux defeat; he no longer denies to himself that he likes Stiles' attention, he just doesn't admit it out loud. He makes his way into the living room and lowers himself down onto the big couch. He sighs contentedly at the familiar smells and sounds that billow up when he drops his weight.

He looks over the backing of the couch and thinks back to a few months prior, when he had been over for some strange repayment for saving Stiles' life. He wonders how much he can milk that; maybe if he brings up how he saved Stiles from a Lamia and Chimera within just four months, maybe the Sheriff would make him more of his honey and teriyaki skirt steak. Stiles comes into the room and announces the estimated time of pizza arrival. Then he mentions, "you're looking pensive."

Derek shrugs.

"How was your session tonight?"
"Productive."

"Are you fixed yet?"

Derek smirks; it's Stiles' favorite therapy-related joke. Any time Derek comes out of a session, it's Stiles' first question. Derek brushes off nonexistent dust mites from his shirt to distract himself from getting lost in Stiles' eyes and he answers, "not quite."

"Well, what are we paying her for then?"

"We?" Derek asks, smirking more as he turns back to Stiles.

Stiles' ears get a little pink and his pulse elevates. He answers, "as in, the royal 'we,' dingus."

"Right," Derek agrees, glancing to the couch, "Come sit down."

"Right – give me a second, I'm gonna get the discs."

Derek listens to Stiles gallop up the stairs, trip, nearly stumble, recover, toss things around in his room and then bound back down the stairs. Once he has the cases out on the table, he says he'll wait to play them once the pizza is there, so they're not interrupted. Derek nods his agreement and quiet descends.

Stiles lies down, fitting his legs against the back of the couch so that they are pressed against Derek's. Derek curls his toes so that they crack loudly and Stiles cracks his own. Derek smirks, webs his fingers and extends his arms, cracking his elbows and knuckles. Stiles grins mischievously and repeats Derek's actions, then adds to it his neck by taking his palm to his chin and twisting his head either way until there's two loud cracks. Derek rolls his eyes, unimpressed, and grabs onto the backing of the couch to turn at the waist and to Stiles' horror and pride, Derek's entire back cracks like a xylophone.

"Ah, sick, man!" Stiles complains or congratulates, torn between being disgusted and impressed.

Derek smiles and it sets free a hummingbird in Stiles' chest. Stiles isn't really sure how to articulate the feeling Derek's smile gives him, so he only says, "I'm really glad you're doing better."

Derek considers Stiles and eventually replies, "thanks. Me too."

In an act of the utmost maturity, Stiles' response to his butterflies is to lift his left leg and gracelessly shove his foot into Derek's chest. Derek grunts in surprise and grasps Stiles' foot with an evil glint in his eye. He looks directly at Stiles and shows his fangs in a diabolical, manic and evil looking grin. Stiles shakes his head, silently asking Derek not to do whatever he's about to do. Derek doesn't listen, though and brings Stiles' foot to his face where he torturously rubs his scruff against it.

Stiles thrashes, flails and screams for mercy, laughing hysterically and pleading with Derek to stop. Derek keeps responding by asking softly, "what was that, Stiles? I can't hear you. You doing okay? You should really try to relax."

The upper half of Stiles' body is mostly on the floor when the doorbell rings. He tries to get up and go to the door, but he only gets one of his uncomfortable legs straight(ish) and Derek holds fast to his foot still. Stiles screams out, "PIZZA MAN, SAVE ME! PIZZA MAN!"

Derek releases his foot then and Stiles windmills into balance again. He points at Derek as the doorbell rings again and he threatens, "you are going to pay for that, Wolverine."
"Oh, am I?"

"Big time."

"Okay."

"You will!" Stiles insists.

"I'm sure I will."

"Yes, yes, you will, you asshole," Stiles swears with no idea how to back it.

The doorbell rings again and Stiles glares at the door.

"Yeah, yeah! You are useless, Pizza Man! You hear me? Ghandi said the worst evil is not doing evil, but allowing evil to be done! So, dishonor on you! Dishonor on you, dishonor on your family! Dishonor on your cow!"

Derek suggests lightheartedly, "how about you get the door, Stiles?"

Stiles points at Derek again and retorts, "how about you watch your back, butthead, cause I will be getting you back."

"You shot first, Han Brolo."

Stiles freezes on the spot, his heart making this strange lurching thing he usually only feels at the end of Homeward Bound. His eyes go wide, looking at Derek and that's apparently the wrong reaction to Derek trying to be funny, because Derek starts to look nervous for having said anything.

The doorbell ringing angrily, several times in a row, wakes Stiles from his daze and he finally opens the door. The guy is frustrated and while he's doling out Stiles' change, Stiles tells him, "dude, you just interrupted the funniest moment of my life."

"What?"

"You," Stiles says, gesturing at the pizza delivery boy, "The funniest exchange of my entire life just happened and you interrupted it."

The delivery boy's brow furrows and he asks sarcastically, "what, you want a discount for making me wait at your door for five minutes?"

Stiles closes the door on the guy's face without answering and walks, almost zombie-like, back into the living room. His hands are burning while he's holding the pizza, looking at Derek.

He suggests, "you should kill me."

"What?" Derek chokes.

"That was the zenith of my life. You making a Star Wars reference and calling me Han Brolo is literally the best sound that has ever entered my earhole. That is… that is literally the funniest thing that has ever happened to me."

"You don't look like it's funny," Derek observes with concern.

"I'm in shock. I'm having an existential crisis," Stiles tells him, "It's all downhill from here. The merciful thing to do would be to kill me."
Derek is decidedly unequipped for this interaction and mostly stares helplessly at Stiles, waiting for proper direction. Stiles puts the pizza down on the table and contemplates telling Derek that he's in love with him.

They stare at each other for a few lost moments.

Stiles goes to speak, just parts his lips, unaware of what might fall out when Derek unknowingly interrupts him.

"Stiles, come sit down."

Stiles follows the order, feeling nervous but somehow loose. When he takes his spot across from Derek on the couch, Derek reaches over and rearranges him so that his back is situated against Derek's chest. He looks at his legs lying between Derek's and blood rushes to his groin while his heart stammers anxiously. Derek hands the remote to Stiles and reaches with his free arm to flip open the pizza box that Stiles dropped onto the coffee table.

"Don't have an existential crisis," Derek requests, "My puns are much better."

Stiles twists his head around so fast he nearly gets whiplash. His eyes glimmer excitedly and he asks, "holy Christ, do you make puns? Can I hear one? Oh my God, do you have Dad Humor? You are so the kind of guy to have Dad Humor without being a dad."

"Well, I won't kill you," Derek offers, "You should live long enough for me to make a good joke, because I am funnier than 'Han Brolo.'"

"Oh my God, stop saying it, you're turning me on."

Derek shocks Stiles by chuckling. He catches himself, though and very obviously forces his face back into its dry, unmoved expression. Stiles still feels too in awe at the sound to be sad about it going away.

"You want me to start?" Stiles offers.

"Puns?"

"Yeah, I got puns. My pun game is on point," Stiles brags, getting chills at the feel of Derek's chest up against him.

"Sure, Stiles," Derek surrenders, "You start."

"Okay, okay, let me think of a really good one."

Stiles bites on his thumb while Derek grabs a slice of the pizza and watches him expectantly. He eventually picks one and says, "a steak pun is a rare medium well done."

Derek makes a vaguely impressed noise and Stiles makes this gloating kind of, 'aye' sound until Derek adds, "true, but if you over do it, they dry out pretty quickly."

Derek throws his head back and cackles. His head ends up somewhat nestled into the crook of Derek's neck and it's so pleasant and distracting that he can't even worry about how loud his laugh must be directly in Derek's ear. He's holding his chest and his stomach and shaking with how hard his laughter is coming out. He eventually smiles wide at Derek, picking his head back up and he says, "genius. Positively genius. Ten out of ten, would recommend."
Derek gives an eye-roll and passive snort, to which Stiles insists, "you have to give me another. Come on, man. You've been all 'I'm a werewolf,' and 'I can heal from almost all bodily injury within seconds,' and 'I can growl on frequencies that elicit serotonin production,' and 'I can transform into a thing that goes bump in the night.' And basically, all this bullshit, when you're real power all along has been the mastery of puns."

That's when Derek laughs.

Really laughs.

Stiles watches in reverence as Derek starts chuckling and, upon realizing he's laughing (for what must be the first time in years), gets embarrassed and starts laughing harder. Derek's hand rises to cover his face as he laughs hard enough that Stiles can feel Derek's abdomen bouncing against his lower back.

Stiles, with the quirk of a smile pulling at his lips, grabs at Derek's hand and lowers it from his face. Stiles shakes his head and mutters honestly, "no, no… I wanna see."

Derek's smile is so genuine and white, so foreign, yet so homey. Stiles wants to sear the image into his mind forever. The sound of Derek's laughter may also be his favorite noise ever; it's not boisterous, but it sounds like it could be and it's deep like his speaking voice.

Stiles notices he's still holding Derek's hand the moment Derek does. Stiles finds his eyes moving from their clasped hands to Derek's mouth. Stiles doesn't realize he licks his lips. He looks up into Derek's eyes and there's a question. There's this loud uncertainty flitting across Derek's eyes and Stiles can see it and he thinks he knows what the question is (or maybe only what he wants it to be.) He tilts his head just so and he starts chanting anxiously to himself, in his own mind,

"I'm going to kiss him. I'm going to kiss him, I'm going to kiss him, I'm going to kiss him..."

When Stiles doesn't move, Derek's gaze flickers down to Stiles' mouth and then back up to his eyes. Stiles' heart bumps loudly and Derek's brows move in response.

_Holy Christ, he's going to kiss me. Holy Christ. Holy fucking Christ. He's going to kiss me. He's going to kiss me..._

His heartbeat is so deafening and the knowledge that Derek can hear it loud and clear is making him more nervous. He hasn't breathed a word, but he knows that Derek knows what his heart is saying (or yelling.) Derek is asking with his eyes –

_Holy Christ, he's asking for permission to kiss me._

Everything Stiles feels for Derek comes on with a rush and he's swept up in the rip current of it. It all becomes far too overwhelming and he finds himself paralyzed, shaking hand frozen midair in Derek's. There's still the ghost of a smile around Derek's mouth and there's a sparkle in his kaleidoscope eyes while he looks at Stiles' mouth. The tense moment stretches over, gradually meeting a glaring boiling point, but before the peak can be reached, Stiles' phone starts singing loudly.

He scrambles over to the coffee table, grabs his phone and sees Isaac's ID photo. His brows curve inward and he answers.

"Isaac?"

"The faeries have Scott."
"What do you mean?"

"I mean that a Pride March came through and he crowd surfed away from me!" Isaac snaps sarcastically, "What do you think I mean? I mean that the faeries in the fucking woods kidnapped Scott."

Stiles makes an intrigued pout and mentions quietly, "weird. Why wouldn't they kidnap me?"

"Stiles," Isaac growls.

"Right, right," Stiles starts, "Okay. Call everyone. Where should we meet you?"

"We?" Isaac asks, "Who are you with?"

Stiles bites his lip and glances at Derek. Derek gives him an unreadable expression and while Stiles hesitates about what tone of voice to say Derek's name in to sound the most innocent, Isaac jumps, "oh my God, are you with Derek?"

"I'm – uhm…"

"You are," Isaac leers, "You're both so gross."

"What? He's never seen the Star Trek reboots!"

"Pfft," Isaac snorts, "I'm sure that's what you've been up to. Meet me at Scott's house – the pack will be here."

After Isaac hangs up, Stiles looks to Derek. Derek nods dutifully and says, "we're needed."

"That we are," Stiles mumbles.

Stiles stands first and awkwardly watches as Derek puts his boots and beanie back on. They get in the Jeep and head down the road and every minute that passes draws a canyon between reality and the intimate moment they had only just begun to share.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters to go, guys! We're almost at the end! :O
Thank you so much for all your support thus far! The reviews and comments and kudos and bookmarks have kept me going strong! You are all amazing and I love you! Next week will likely be the last update and it will be finished. I'll have notes on those chapters too with some specific last thoughts I have on this piece and junk. Until then, thank you and enjoy your installments!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

So, if y'all weren't aware, I started writing this before season four of Teen Wolf. That's why Liam is the name of Derek's older brother and this is totally canon divergent from the end of 3b. So, in this chapter, I describe Derek in his full wolf form, the way I imagined it. I know that there is a canon version of it, but this is how I pictured him, so, forgive the inaccuracies, please!

A healed life is always a work in progress, not a life devoid of all traces of suffering, but a life lived fully, deeply, and authentically.

Miriam Greenspan

Song for this chapter is; "(You) Go Down Smooth," by Lake Street Dive

Despite storming the woods wielding bats and spell books in all seriousness, the Faeries giggle and return Scott unharmed, if not a little bewildered. They call it a prank.

Scott tells the Pack that the Faeries forced him to teach them what Red Light, Green Light was and then proceed to play with them for two hours. He hadn't had his cellphone, otherwise he would've warned them that, while he was being held hostage, he wasn't entirely in danger.

Lydia scowls dangerously at everyone for forcing her out of her date night before returning to Jackson and the Porsche in a swish and flick of designer shoes and perfect hair.

He would laugh if it were any other time, but Stiles fumes over it; wanting so badly to bring up to Derek what was about to happen, but not being able to. He wants to say something, he wants to mention it, he wants to ask, 'what would you have done if we weren't interrupted?'

But he doesn't.

Every moment that passes is like another eternity between the now and that private, electric moment where they almost something'ed. Enough time goes by that Stiles feels strange about bringing it up and the window of opportunity passes.

It passes and is lost.

Weeks pass with more 'pranks,' by the Faeries.

Their pranks include a lot of summoning spirits and property damage as it turns out.

Eventually (and, inevitably) someone gets hurt and Derek convinces Scott to make a stand. Their fight against the Faeries, company including the Sheriff, is what sees Derek's first full-wolf transformation.

One Faerie holds a small, but sharp, gold blade to Stiles' neck as leverage and the shift comes over
Derek naturally.

Once Derek attacks, though, he winds up with the knife stuck in his own neck.

He takes down three of the Faeries before he's hit with a spell and he starts to lose his vision. He doesn't know what happens after that, but when he comes to, his muzzle his rested on Stiles' jean clad thigh while Stiles' hand works through some of his blood-matted fur. The knife is already tossed away from him (he has a vague memory of going in and out of consciousness and feeling Stiles pull it from his flesh), his wound is already closed and healing.

Derek is acutely aware of Scott crouched beside him and the pack circled around him.

He hears the Sheriff ask gently, "is he doing okay?"

"He smells okay," Scott replies, "He smells like he's weak, but he's okay. He's happy Stiles is okay."

Kira makes some kind of quiet coo that Jackson rolls his eyes at and Lydia smirks for.

Derek makes a huffing noise to show how unimpressed he is by their teasing and Stiles laughs while the rest of the pack makes agreeable noises.

Lydia mutters, "quintessential Derek."

Eager to heal and keep moving, Derek goes to stand and four lengthy, muscular legs extend under him. He towers above Stiles, obviously larger and considerably stronger than any natural wolf.

He smells at Stiles' scalp anxiously, making Stiles swat and giggle nervously.

"Dude, I'm fine, I'm fine, I swear!"

Derek huffs again when he's made sure for himself and he's satisfied with the general scent of health emanating from them all.

He looks among the pack and hears the Sheriff ask, "does he know how to shift back?"

"I don't know." Scott replies, tilting his head curiously at Derek; his eyes light up red and he asks the wolf, "Derek? You okay in there? Will you be able to shift back?"

Derek nods his head once, confirming that he knows he can and that he also understands them and then he walks through the semi-circle the pack has formed around him. He shakes off some stray dirt instinctively and curls his claws in the soil. The power of the full shift shakes through him; the oneness with the wilderness and the moon spreads over him like a warm quilt.

He feels close to his mother.

He feels like a Hale.

He swells up with pride and looks to Scott, showing a toothy, panting grin.

Scott grins back at him and asks, "what?"

Derek jumps eagerly, quite literally shaking the ground when he lands and Kira claps, giggling. Isaac looks to Jackson and they smile at each other, both smelling and looking proud and entertained.

"What?" Scott laughs, "Are you happy you can shift fully?"
Derek jumps again, making a yipping noise and the Sheriff's face melts into a smile as Scott and Stiles laugh heartily. Derek takes off in a run and sprints in circles around them, kicking up dirt and dust and leaves while Stiles stands and they all watch him celebrate.

When he's run in enough circles to burn off some of the chaotic, manic, but loving energy and his breath is coming short, his heart is pumping loud and heavy, but somehow light and sweet at the same time, he skids to a stop and howls gladly.

Scott, Isaac and Jackson join in immediately, their personal bonds to Derek drawing the noise from them almost involuntarily and Derek's draw to the moon and his unity with the nature around them makes them all feel willing and able to join him.

Kira and Stiles look at Scott, each other and then throw their heads back, howling too, which Malia imitates after them. Lydia even gracefully shuts her eyes and makes a gentle, singing howl-ish noise. The Sheriff smiles proudly on them, although he looks a little lost.

When Derek stops, he looks at the pack staring back at him, shifting his eyes around to all of them and share his happiness with them. He meets Stiles' eyes and yips at him. Stiles glances over his shoulder, then points to himself and asks, "me?"

Derek huffs again and comes trotting over to him. He's moved deeply when he notices not a single spike of fear comes from Stiles - it wasn't always that way between them and he doesn't know when that changed or how he deserved that from Stiles, but he's charmed to have that level of trust granted to him.

He lies down in front of Stiles then, presenting his back. Stiles looks helplessly at Derek's back (which reaches Stiles' waist, even lying down on the ground) and then to Scott. Scott, beaming and looking all too pleased, suggests, "I think he wants you to get on him."

"Yeah, Stiles, Derek wants you to ride him," Isaac teases in conflicting tones.

"Ride him?" Stiles asks.

"Just swing your leg over," Lydia instructs.

"I don't want to hurt him," Stiles whines.

"Hurt him? He's a horse," Jackson sneers, "And what are you, a hundred pounds? You're lucky as it is you don't slip through cracks in the floor or get blown away by breezes."

Even so, Stiles looks unsure while he goes to straddle Derek, but once his leg is over, Derek rises up again, eliciting a surprised noise from Stiles' throat.

Stiles grabs onto the fur of Derek's neck, fully realizing Derek's monstrous size as he's lifted far from the ground. He breathes out shakily, tightens his legs around Derek's torso and strengthens his grip in the fur. He meets Derek's eyes when Derek turns his head a little to glance over his shoulder. He
howls again and the pack howls back in unison. However, Stiles' howl turns into excited *screaming* when Derek erupts into a run nearly fast enough to take flight.

Stiles crouches lower to Derek's back, keeping himself close as the speed-wind rushes around his face and his heart leaps into his throat. He can hear the howling of the pack die out as they get further and further away. Derek makes long leaps over stones and a rumbling stream, giving Stiles the illusion of flying. The moonlight washes over the entire forest floor, patterned with the shadows of leaves and branches and it floods Stiles with wonder and awe.

The crackling of leaves beneath Derek's bearish paws, the fresh gusts of air combing through his short hairs, pushing back on the flustered skin of his smiling face awakes an animal part of him he hardly knows.

He thinks to himself that *this* is Derek; ethereal like the indescribable sight of the moonlight spilling across the winding, vast land. He's dark, easy to become lost within and complex with immense, unmapped oaks and intertwined roots, spiraling within and without him, but brimming with incredulity and magnificence that he inspires so organically, he is unaware he creates it.

There are lush, rare flowers bursting from the cracks of Derek's heart, there are songbirds composing in the overhanging secrets of Derek's memories. Devils dance in the starlight, mysterious fogs rise and mislead on stormy nights and the Milky Way is always visible here, speckling the sky and glistening fiercely. Reminding him always of his humanity and how insignificant and temporary and monumental and eternal he is.

A wild animal howls and cries in the secret garden of Derek's inner headspace, where Stiles has always wanted invitation to and now that he's there, he knows the creature does more than that. The untamed spirit in him gallops, cheers, it laughs, it grins, it leaps for joy and loves ferociously with a bleeding heart that leaves its doors swinging wide open.

And like a forest, no matter how many times disaster befalls Derek's land, no matter how violent the fires burn him, he grows back.

He grows back stronger, richer, more vibrant, more resilient, swinging his sword and bearing his fangs in a wolfish grin, ready for the next fight.

They come to another skidding halt at a hilltop Stiles didn't know existed, because he has never been so far into the woods before. He stares out and he can see some of the lights from the town over. He sits up a little straighter, feeling gigantic, powerful, wild and free. He breathes in through his nose deeply, runs his hands along either side of Derek's dark mane. He scratches a little behind the ears and Derek rubs his head back into the touch encouragingly.

Stiles breathes out shakily and says sincerely, "I'm so proud of you, Derek."

Derek makes a noise that's a cross of a huff and a yip and Stiles chuckles lightly. He rubs the top of Derek's head and expands, "you are the bravest person I've ever known. You're probably the bravest person I'll ever know."

*And I love you, I love you so much more than you could know,* Stiles wants to say. The words don't dare leave his throat, though.

Derek's incandescent eyes blink at him, confused and flattered and *loving*. Sort of overcome and dizzy with feeling, Stiles unthinkingly leans over and kisses the crown of Derek's head.

It's then they hear a loud whistle that Stiles recognizes as his father's. He pats Derek's side and shouts
with laughter, "homeward, valiant steed!"

Derek doesn't even fight him, doesn't buck or huff indignantly. He turns around happily and takes them downhill, soaring through the underbrush and jumping high over bushes and low under branches. While they travel downhill, Stiles bravely lets go of Derek's neck, reaching his arms up and out while he tightens his legs around Derek's torso to keep himself steady. He spreads his arms, shuts his eyes and yells out a long, "wooo-hooo!" – which dissolves into nervous laughter when he nearly loses his balance.

He hears the pack answer him back in howls and cackling and applauding.

When his arms fall back onto Derek, all he can feel is undying gratitude for the moment. For being alive, for having the night, the moon, the life he has. For the magic and the bringer of it; for Derek.

Mid-to-End-December, the pack starts filling out college applications.

One day in the loft, while Scott and Stiles are staring anxiously at online application pages and Derek cooks, (Restaurant Impossible playing dully from the television in the background), Lydia knocks on the door. She brings in a stack of papers and Jackson in tow; after Jackson explains he's already applied for school, Lydia expresses she wants Derek's help in picking what scholarships she should apply for.

The pack knows she's more than capable of making the decision for herself, but it's a gesture Derek seems to really appreciate. He sits down at the kitchen table with her and sifts through all the papers she brought, listing hundreds of scholarships she's eligible for. They pick out thirty together while Jackson complains about wanting to change the channel.

A little jealous of Lydia getting all of his attention, Stiles jokingly asks Derek, "yo, Derek, Berkley wants to know my greatest strengths. Have any suggestions?"

Derek comes over to the couch and Scott starts to smile, expecting Derek to lay out some sarcastic responses. He leans over the back of the couch, looks at the application from over Stiles' shoulder where there's a blank space, asking for him to type out a three-hundred word synopsis about his most notable, positive qualities.

Derek sighs in thought before deciding to advise, "talk about your reliability. Be honest that you're not always responsible, but even if it's the eleventh hour, you come through. Talk about how resourceful you are and how you never acquiesce or abandon your goals. Tell them how you don't compromise your morals for anyone or anything. And talk about how you always leave people better than you found them. Those are your strengths."

Stiles' heart is loud in the room to all the Weres. His eyes flicker across Derek's face until Derek's eyes slide to meet his and his heart bumps louder at it.

Stiles smirks at Derek playfully and says, "nice S.A.T word. Acquiesce."

"Shut up, Stiles," Derek smiles.

Stiles is too nervous to ask for more of Derek's input, thinking at any moment the confession of his feelings might just spit out of him involuntarily in front of everyone because his life is just that embarrassing. Derek returns to his seat beside Lydia and Stiles notices her smiling with her eyes at him.

Three days later, Kira joins them at the loft for application and study time and soon after that follows
Malia and Isaac.

Before Derek is fully prepared for it, the pack makes homes in his loft.

They have 'spots,' where no one else is allowed to sit except the silently-agreed-upon assigned person. Derek spends a lot of money on groceries and the pack repays him by regularly bringing him lunch when he's on shift at the station, or in his cruiser. Stiles home cooks his dinners and lunches, just like he does for the Sheriff. The Sheriff and Derek trade knowing looks sometimes and it makes Derek feel full and brimming.

Too much.

Stiles starts to notice that Derek paces the floors a lot, starts excusing himself from pack nights at increasingly earlier hours and talks a little less about the books he's reading, his casual touches withering away until he's nearly reverted back to his old self.

Worried, Stiles skips class one day to go to the loft on Derek's day off, only to find Derek sulking by the windows and reading disconcertingly existentialist philosophy. Derek scolds him for skipping class, but feeds him lunch anyway and makes him a cup of Earl Grey. When Stiles returns to school that day, he alerts Scott and Scott makes his own private visit later in the week.

When Scott sees Stiles in school again, post-intervention, he says simply, "he's sad."

Stiles' eye twitches with agitation when he shouts, "I got that, Scott! Why? What's happening?"

"He's sad, dude," Scott repeats, shrugging helplessly, "We're all leaving. He's just... sad."

Stiles' brows curve and he asks, "he's sad... about college?"

Scott nods and says, "yeah. I mean, he didn't say that in so many words, but I get it."

"What did he say?" Stiles asks.

Scott tells him, "I was just talking to him, asking him what's wrong and how we're worried about him. He said he didn't mean to make anyone worry and he's just 'liked this.' I asked him what he meant and he just kind of gestured at me and the room. He means the pack. He's liked having a pack again and he probably feels like he's losing it all over again."

Stiles frowns at his lunch and asks, "should we stay at home?"

Scott shakes his head and replies, "no, he wouldn't like that. He said he doesn't want us to grow to resent him and that's why he's trying not to guilt us – that's why he's started leaving whenever he's started feeling sad."

Stiles bites his bottom lip and nods, unable to think of anything to say.

Scott smiles and adds, "I did ask him if we could call ourselves the Hale Pack, though."

Stiles' head shoots up.

"Oh my God. What did he say?"

Scott's eyes sparkle proudly when he answers, "he said that 'the Hale era is over,' and that he's 'okay with that.' And he said that he's looking forward to the 'new chapter of the McCall Pack.' He told me we should be proud to carry my name and that he's proud of all of us."
Stiles' shoulders fall a little, unsure of what he thought Derek might say, but feeling proud and somehow disappointed. Stiles' inner voice answers him;

_You're sad because you want to be a Hale._

Scott tilts his head, sensing Stiles' shift in mood and asks, "are you okay? You smell weird."

Stiles nods and admits, "I don't want to leave him."

Scott's eyes soften and his body relaxes into seriousness.

"I don't either. I told him I'm staying."

Stiles' brows spring up and he exclaims, "you're staying? Here?"

"Yeah," Scott shrugs, "I'm going to B.H.C.C. I don't have the money for university or the grades, Stiles. I've only been applying for universities so Mom will get off my back about it. An A.A. is the same everywhere, anyway."

_Can I stay? Can I stay?_ Stiles' inner voice begs.

And all it really means is his heart is throbbing out,

_I want to stay. I want to stay._

Scott mentions heavily, "he offered to send me to university."

"He offered…" Stiles blinks in wonder, "he offered to pay for you to go to university?"

Scott nods, smiling in a reverent, sweet way that is often reserved for fond memories of Allison. Scott rubs his hand over his head and says, "he's really made a one-eighty."

"Yeah," Stiles agrees quietly.

But Stiles knows better. Derek hasn't changed at all, not the most genuine parts of him. He's still Derek. He's always been this person, just unable to express it. Derek has always been the guy to offer his Alpha a college fund, always been the guy to give stray, wayward teenagers a safe place to be themselves, to make their own spaces. To grow and make families and bonds. To offer magic where there was only loss and ordinariness and to offer opportunity where there was only drought.

He's only changed in his ability to make it happen.

Stiles nods anyway.

"Yeah."

"So," Dr. Lundy begins softly.

"So," Derek responds, a shy smile playing at the corner of his lips.

Dr. Lundy puts her notepad on her desk, folding her hands on her crossed legs. The window is still slightly open, the candles still fragrant and light instrumental music still playing from her outdated CD player. The couch is still small under him, the Zen garden remains unused by the tissues.

But he is someone else.
She bobs her head and asks, "where would you like to go today?"

"Stiles," Derek tells her.

Her hands readjust themselves and she asks, "where should we go with Stiles?"

Derek shrugs and says simply, "I don't know what to do."

"In regard to what?"

"I don't know whether or not to tell him about how I feel."

Dr. Lundy opens her mouth to pose a question, but Derek interrupts her; "can I ask you questions?"

She regains composure and tells him easily, "of course."

Derek repositions himself and asks, "why did my mother go to you?"

Dr. Lundy smiles and Derek watches the battle in her eyes. Her professional side wants to say that she can't break confidentiality, he knows that, but she knows he is an exception, that this secret world of the supernatural is an exception. She eventually decides and says, "marriage counseling. Your father came too."

He nods, understanding and asks, "was the marriage bad?"

"No," Dr. Lundy answers honestly, "It was very healthy. They came to me when they started considering Turning your father. They wanted a counselor to oversee the discussions, mediate and help them make the best possible decision. They came weekly, until your father became better adjusted to the shift. They visited about once a month after that, for couple's therapy. I think it just helped them to cope and manage their stressors, as a married couple with such a full house."

Derek nods and she mentions, "they were very proud of you."

Derek's heart thumps and he smiles at his knees.

He remembers how desolate he felt during his first sessions, how Paige was still heavy in his arms and how hot the fire still burned at his feet.

He says, "I want your advice."

Dr. Lundy inclines her head to cue him to go on. He tells her, "I don't know if I should tell him or not. And I mean that – this isn't like those times where I've said, 'I don't know,' and you've told me how I do know and worked me through to what I want. I don't know what's best here. If I tell him, he might feel pressured to stay here or pressured to run away – depending on what… what he wants."

Derek pauses, struggling with the words only just coming together for the first time.

"It could fuck up our friendship. It could fuck up the pack dynamics, it could…" he trails off, brow furrowed with worry.

Dr. Lundy smiles and says, "you know, I just had a discussion a lot like this with my own son."

Derek quirks a brow, looking up and professes, "I didn't know you have a son."

She gestures with her hand that she's not offended. She continues, "he's dating this girl – has been
dating for a long time. About two years now. Not many bumps in the road, they're compatible and fairly content. But he's met another girl. This second girl isn't as aligned with him, they haven't known each other as long, don't know as much about each other. But he wants to know more. He came to me a week or so ago and asked me what he should do."

"What did you tell him?" Derek asks.

"I'm his mother. I only want what's best for him and he knows that. I gave him the most honest advice I could and that's to do what sets him free."

Dr. Lundy uncrosses her legs and leans forward on her thighs, leaning more into Derek's space. She explains seriously, "love shouldn't make a person feel trapped or stuck. Love should be the thing that makes you feel free, that makes you feel like you can go anywhere, be anyone, do anything. And that love comes in different forms. Sometimes that love comes from another person, sometimes it comes from within us, sometimes it comes from a good book, sometimes it comes from the right song playing at the right moment. It's different for everyone. But I told him that if he feels love in one direction, to follow it. Because, at the end of it all, love is the truest compass we'll ever have. But this – this is the story at the end of the day..."

Her eyes harden a little and she finishes, "you will always wonder 'what if.' You will always wonder about what would have happened, what could have happened. If you pursue Stiles, you'll always wonder, 'what if I hadn't?' And if you don't, you will always wonder, 'what if I had?' There is no right way, there are no guarantees. Love is the compass in a dark, dark world, Derek. Trust it and, odds are, it will take you to the places you want to be. But you are plunging, make no mistake. Love requires a leap of faith. The question is not, 'what should I do so that I never wonder 'what if?'' The question is, 'what version of 'what if,' will I never mind asking myself?' For the rest of your life, would you prefer to ask yourself, 'what if I never had told him the truth?' or would you rather ask yourself, 'what if I had told him the truth?' That is your question."

Derek stares into Dr. Lundy's eyes, searching. She adds quietly, "all of us, in this life, are improvising. We're all without maps or guidelines. There's no knowing and there will never come a time that you can be positive of the road you've set before yourself. We will always be lost, but we are lost together. And the one definitive truth I've found is that love is, by far, the strongest compass to the places we are happiest."

Derek nods and Dr. Lundy sits back in her chair again.

There's a long, silent moment that passes before Derek asks, "how do I know when I'm done with therapy?"

"Well," Dr. Lundy begins clinically, "that depends on the initial goal. Your goal, when you came in, was to change. Do you feel you've met that goal? Do you feel changed, in a way you wanted to be changed?"

Derek thinks for a few beats; he imagines how grateful Scott was for showing him how to track a scent, how cautiously gentle Stiles had been when welcoming Derek into his room through his window. He remembers Lydia reversing her orders into requests to better respect him, he remembers Jackson's heartbeat taking on a thankful, sweetened rhythm when Derek told him how he'd been worried for him. He thinks of making his full shift, he thinks of how clearly he was able to feel his mother with him and he remembers the orchestra in his spirit, warming up at the thought of Stiles.

Those violins and cellos start. The drums rumble to life, the piano and harps sing and the trumpets join. He feels it in him, like trembling fingers along the strings of his heart and they're getting stronger, they're holding on longer.
It's hope and it's love and it's bravery and it all rides along the pulse in his veins.

"Yes," he tells her, nodding. "Yes, I feel like I've changed."

"So, you've met your goal," she tells him easily, like it was all that simple, "My door will continue to be open to you. Whenever you want to come back, if you ever do, I will be more than happy to see you."

Derek nods, smiling and feeling the thrill of the future vibrating through him.

When he leaves her office that day, she shows him to the door of the building. At the door, she says, "I'm proud of you, Derek. Be kind to yourself."

He smiles at her and moves in, hugging her.

Her arms come around him without hesitation and he promises her, "I will. Thank you."
Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning
TRIGGER WARNING
TW: There is explicit sex in this chapter! FINALLY, RIGHT?

Note: There's a Galaxy Quest reference in this chapter that not everyone will get. If you haven't watched it, it's a great Star Trek parody movie and it's recommended viewing for everyone forever.

This is it! Oh my goodness! This has been so much fun to write and this fic is honestly my baby, I'm so proud to have this completed work to call my own! I have grown a lot as a writer through just this piece alone and I have so many people to thank for that! Before we come to the very end, there are some people in particular I would really, really love to thank for all their helpful critiques and undying support! Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you to Mulder200, hexthejinx, ellie, Kiss_of_Death, denelian, VulpineVandal, GstarRoss and bigbootsmanofwar! You readers/reviewers in particular were so, so helpful in helping me to improve with detailed, consistent reviewing and providing me a kind, receptive and exciting support system! So, thank you so, so, so much! That being said, I'd also like to thank everyone that gave kudos, left comments/reviews/critiques, bookmarked and followed! Thank you all so much, this has been a blast to write and I hope you all enjoy the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"…wherever you are, it's okay. You can come back from it. Whatever happened to you down there, whatever the world looks like now, that's not how it always looks. That's not how it's always going to look. There's more. There's always more."

- Patrick Ness

Song for this chapter is; Oh Lord, by Foxy Shazam

Derek walks into the Stilinski house, wiping his shoes off on the welcome mat before stepping inside. He hangs his jacket and keys by the front door, as he's taken to doing and he breathes in deeply and knows the following immediately; Stiles has been masturbating, the oven is pre-heating, Scott just left, Stiles has been masturbating, the Sheriff is expecting to see Melissa at some point this night because his cologne was definitely used, the frequent raccoon visitor has been in the garbage within the past hour and Stiles has been masturbating.

Derek pinches the bridge of his nose, sighing.

_He doesn't even know how much control he requires me to have._
He focuses on his hearing and realizes that the door closing behind him must have disrupted Stiles' private time. He smirks to himself as he listens to Stiles scramble back into his sweatpants and come to the stairs, bat in hand. His arousal is hidden and he's obviously focusing his energy on making it go away.

He grabs his chest when he sees Derek and exclaims, "Jesus, Derek – I thought you were a burglar!"

"I am a burglar. I just finished my shift and I haven't eaten all day. I've come to raid your fridge," Derek tells him as he moves toward the kitchen.

He listens to Stiles rest his bat against the wall and come down the steps to follow behind him.

"Hey – you should wait, if you can. I'm making a baked ziti. It's gonna be bomb."

Derek resists the urge to laugh as he bends to see what's in the refrigerator. He takes out a liter of soda and gestures at Stiles with it, offering to pour for himself and Stiles. Stiles nods and Derek follows through, handing Stiles his glass and going to the living room with him.

"Hey – I never asked," Stiles starts as he moves to sit on the couch, "How did last week's session go? You came home and I was in the middle of studying – it slipped my mind."

*You came home.*

God, Derek swears to himself, *I am home. Even Stiles thinks of this as my home...*

"It was fine," Derek answers, "I don't know if I'll be going back."

"Oh?" Stiles asks, worry very thinly veiled, "Why not?"

Derek shakes his head a little, to dismiss Stiles' concern, "I think I just cleared up everything I needed to."

Stiles nods a few times with pinched brows and goes to ask more questions, but Derek stops him by mentioning, "we never actually got to watch *Star Trek*. You want to?"

Stiles' eyes light up and a grin spreads fast across his face. He starts in excitedly, "are you joking? I am *always* down for Trekking. I have to ask, dude, are you an Original Series fan? Cause you strike me as an Original Series dude. Or do you like Next Generation? I know there are more, but most Trekkies fall into either school. At least, the ones I've met. Have I told you I've been to Cons? Cause I've been to Cons. I've met Trekkies. Like, *real* Trekkies. The ones that make their own uniforms and get rubber ear extensions and shave their eyebrows that pointy way. Can you do that Spock thing? Can you do that Spock-eyebrow-thing?"

Once they're seated on the couch, the DVD menu displayed on the television screen, Derek holds Stiles' gaze for a long moment before springing up one eyebrow and muttering, "fascinating."

Stiles bursts out in laughter and tells him, "oh my God, phenomenal! Ten out of ten! I love it!"

"Have you ever watched *Galaxy Quest*?" Derek asks conversationally, letting his eyes fall into his glass as to avoid staring at Stiles' left hand, the fingers of which, Derek's senses tell him, were just inside him minutes prior.

"Oh my God, please tell me you do an Alan Rickman impersonation."

That's answer enough for Derek, so he makes his grumpiest face and mumbles angrily, "by
Grapthar's hammer... what a savings."

Stiles laughs until he's breathless, clutching his abs and Derek chuckles alongside him. Derek admires the red color climbing up Stiles' body, showing up on his collarbone and cheeks. His grin is so white and so broad, it gives Derek chills.

He allows himself to feel the want.

He doesn't punish or scold himself inwardly for it.

He just stares and wants and silences the shame, now died down and greyed out.

Stiles eventually calms down and starts the movie, thanking ancient deities for Derek's dry humor. About twenty minutes in, the oven dings and Stiles leaves to move the ziti into it. He comes back, nestling just slightly closer to Derek than he'd been before.

It's calm and it's cozy and it's tense. It's tense because Derek can feel something building in the air.

He knows he's reaching the summit of this - this enormous, unavoidable thing between him and Stiles.

He puts his arm over the back of the couch, behind Stiles' shoulders, experimentally. Stiles doesn't seem to notice outwardly, but his scent gets excited and sweet.

Every time Derek chances moving his eyes to look at Stiles, Stiles is watching the screen closely and he realizes he's paralleled the night they watched Moon together. He had felt Stiles staring at him all that night, waiting for the other shoe to drop. And when it hadn't, he'd fallen asleep against Derek's shoulder.

And now Derek is here, trying to see if Stiles will object to having his arm over him, sneaking sideways glances just to enjoy the beauty of Stiles' unashamed joy. Words are formulating in his head; things he wants to say, things he should say and things he should have said a long time ago. Those cellos and violins are shaking, coming to life inside him.

By the end of the first movie, the ziti is ready and they eat together on the couch as a type of intermission. Stiles asks for Derek's opinions and it's a long discussion about how Derek likes the take on this alternate reality and he would have chosen someone else for Spock, but liked Zachary Quinto's performance all the same.

Stiles gets hearts in his eyes when Derek starts talking about the logistics of running and repairing a damaged ship like the Enterprise and they talk about their likes and dislikes of the battle sequences and Derek brings up his favorite concepts in theoretical astrophysics. He explains relativity with the most eloquence Stiles has ever heard and it dissolves into conversation about Derek's studies in engineering at NYU.

Derek even discloses a story about his first boyfriend, who he met there and how it ended in embarrassment when he'd misread the seriousness (or rather, lack thereof) of the relationship. Stiles shakes his head and provides comfort when he tells Derek that his ex is paying for it now, because he's missing out on how spectacular Derek's five o'clock shadow is.

Once they're done eating, Stiles offers to clean the dishes and leaves Derek on the couch to do that. Derek listens to the water running for a while, nervousness spreading across his chest and making his heart race. His hands keep shaking and he's nearly ticklish with anticipation.

Now.
Now.

Now.

He rises.

*Love is the truest compass we'll ever have.*

He walks to the entryway of the kitchen, stomach swooping and limbs tingling. His heart is so loud in his own ears, he can't hear Stiles'. He sees Stiles' back, standing in front of the sink, his arms are moving, rustling his red jacket with the sleeves pulled up. Derek swallows thickly.

"Stiles."

"Yeah?"

"I have to tell you something."

Stiles goes to put the dish down and face him, but Derek objects.

"No – don't. Don't turn around," he begs, a hesitant hand in the air to stop Stiles, though Stiles can't see it.

Stiles stares intently down at the suds in the sink, wondering if there's a spider on his back.

Derek's voice is uncharacteristically nervous, almost unfamiliar to Stiles' ears when he says, "I think if you turn around, I'll lose the courage to say this."

Stiles is bolted to the floor at that and now Derek can hear Stiles' heartbeat, loud as his own. He opens his mouth and nothing comes out at first, everything he thought out in his head lost in the anxiety of actually doing this. There's a blinding pulse all over him, his stomach is tight with nerves, his ears are hot with embarrassment. He stares at the line of Stiles' shoulders and wonders when they got so broad.

Derek knows what question he wants to ask himself forever. He knows what version of 'what if,' he wants to ask himself for the rest of his life.

The diverged roads sit before him and in the darkness, he chooses.

"I want you."

He swallows roughly again and tries to will his voice not to give away how jittery he is, but it still shakes when he speaks again.

"I don't mean – I don't mean I want to fuck you. I mean, I do," he amends quickly, "I do, but it's more than that. Believe me, I want to fuck you on every available surface –"

Stiles makes an amazed, choked off noise before Derek continues, " – but I want more than that, Stiles. I want you naked in my bed when I wake up, I want you in your sweatpants on my couch while I make breakfast, I want you in the passenger seat of my car wherever I go…"

He flexes his hands, the words coming out of him feeling detached from him, like he hasn't said them at all. Like this is all a dream.

"Dr. Lundy asked me what my life would look like, if everything were perfect. If my greatest wish were granted in my sleep and I woke up to find that, what would it be and all I could think of was
feeling you curled up against me, happy and warm and I haven't gotten that image out of my head since. You're loyal to a fault and you're sharp as a tack and easy to be with. You make living easy and I've – I haven't had that in so long."

Derek can't hear the noises from Stiles' body over his own anymore, but he can see the back of Stiles' neck turning red. His stare turns hard, he squares his shoulders, his hands curl into fists by his sides; he steels himself.

"I could wax poetic about you forever, Stiles. You're my best friend."

He hears Stiles intake sharply at that and Derek pushes forward, heat prickling behind his eyes.

"You are. I trust you and I…"

He breathes in deep and continues bravely, "and I love you. I love you. I love you and it takes up everything in me. Every fiber of my being is entirely and completely dedicated to being totally in love with you. I don't want to fuck this up, though. I don't want to fuck up our friendship, I don't want to fuck up the pack, I love you and I want you to be happy. I don't know what you want and this might be too much to say – this might be scary to hear, but I want forever. I want forever with you."

Without Derek's conscious consent, a tear falls from either of his eyes and Stiles knows he's crying; Derek can somehow feel how Stiles feels it. He hears something happen to Stiles' heart when his voice comes out watery, "don't worry. I – it's good. Don't worry. This is good, my love is good; it feels good," Derek insists, "And it's not going away. It's never going to go away. I don't want you to feel like you have to stay because of it, or leave because of it, or even… or even feel anything back. I needed you to know it, though. I...I'm fucking crazy about you and I've got dreams about you moving in and me never having to be without you. And it's okay if those dreams don't come to fruition. It's okay. I just… don't want to lose you. That's the most important part for me. I want however much of you you're willing to give. I'll take it and I'll run with it, Stiles, no matter what you ever offer."

Stiles' shoulders have gotten wired and tense. Derek lets the tears from either of his eyes run down his face and drip off his jaw, because he hasn't felt tears in so long. He hasn't cried in so many years, hasn't felt nearly safe enough to let it happen - not since before the fire, not even in therapy and it's cathartic. He's grounded by it. The tears feel like a natural progression, like a good omen. Like a part of himself he needs to share.

"I'm going to love you forever," Derek vows, "Wherever you go, however long you're there, whatever you do or say. And I'm going to stay here, right beside you until you send me away, and even then, I'll fight to stay. I want you. All of you and everything you make me."

Silence falls like a skyscraper has collapsed and the dust is settling, falling from midair.

The silence extends and Derek still can't hear anything from Stiles over the booming of his own heart and the rushing of his blood and the crescendo of his inner orchestra. When Stiles remains quiet and doubt crawls up inside him, Derek concedes. He nods to himself and says, "I… I should probably go."

Just like that, he turns away from the threshold of the kitchen and takes his jacket and keys by the door.

He knows he'll back. He knows he'll still watch movies with Scott and Stiles on the Stilinski's couch, that the pack will still come over to the loft after school, when he's off-duty. He knows Scott will
hear about this and try to comfort him, he knows Lydia will be dying for details, even if they're sad. He imagines what it will feel like, when his body hits his bed to go to sleep. He wonders when he'll start to feel the aftermath of his confession and what it will be like when he does.

He's not made it ten feet down the driveway before he hears the front door swing open.

He turns and Stiles is standing there, heart pounding wildly.

"Derek," Stiles says and it sounds ripped from him.

A touch alarmed, Derek stills as Stiles rushes down the porch and over to him.

"I want you too," he confesses desperately and Derek's heart skips, "I want you too – I do, I want you – rugged heart, ridiculous eyebrows, leather jacket, bad puns, gold heart. All of it. Forever, Derek."

He shakes his head, like he's unsure if his words will be enough. He reaches out and his hand comes down over Derek's heart and his scents spike at the feel of Derek's heart racing.

"I thought this was a crush and – maybe it was. Maybe it used to be, but then it didn't go away. It grew and like, matured? It's evolved – it's not going away either. I'm in love with you. I've been – I have been. Longer than I really want to admit. I… you're everything to me, Derek," his eyes move across Derek's face, sparkling with leagues of feelings he's let remain unspoken, "I've loved you – before you were this healthy, before you were this happy and I want to keep you this way. I want you to be happy; I want to make you happy. You hang the moon, Derek…I-I want the forever. I want the big forever. I want – I think I want what you want. So, don't go."

Stiles' fingers curl in Derek's jacket and he takes a step closer to Derek. He studies the streaks on Derek's cheekbones closely, like fine art, admires the tears for the miraculous thing they are. He looks at Derek's lips and licks his own unconsciously. He meets Derek's eyes again and admits, "I want you to stay. I love you, Derek."

Derek tries to fight the smile curling on his face and the elated disbelief on Derek's face makes Stiles smile.

Stiles' eyes are shining and brimmed and his scents are nervous and loving and happy. He smells blissful to Derek.

Stiles laughs a little deliriously and repeats, "I love you. I love you."

Derek nods, trying so hard to comprehend what Stiles is saying and Stiles can see what's happening in Derek's eyes. So he beams excitedly still and takes Derek's face in both his hands.

"I love you, Derek. I am madly fucking in love with you."

Stiles says it in that unique way he can, like it's a prayer or a spell he's casting and it effects Derek's entire body and soul. He grabs onto Stiles' wrists and feeling raw and open, he says, "I'm going to kiss you."

"Thank God," Stiles breathes sincerely before his mouth his pressed against Derek's.

Every nerve alights, that crescendo in Derek's spirit climaxes with cymbals, trumpets and drums when his lips finally meet Stiles'. Stiles' grip moves to either side of his neck and it's rough, it's anchoring and it's so good, it's everything Derek needs - could ever need. Stiles' mouth opens to him, pliant and willing and eager.
Stiles' mouth is hot like a fever, lips full, just moist enough and velvety soft. Derek moans gratefully against Stiles and Stiles makes a hungry, pleased noise back, fingers curling around the base of his hairline. They kiss with dragging lips and sweet bites, starved for the contact until Stiles breaks away for air. The moment he does pull away, Derek mutters gruffly, "I should go."

Stiles' brows pinch worriedly, "w-what? Why?"

Derek's eyes open, glowing electric blue. Stiles' heart picks up a pace that Derek is familiar with; Stiles is feeling that thrill he gets and loves when he's straddling the line between stupid and brave, dangerous and daring.

Derek confesses, "I don't know how much control I can have."

"So lose control," Stiles dares him, nearly unable to believe he can have such an effect on Derek.

Stiles relishes in how wide Derek's pupils get.

"Don't say that," Derek warns.

"I want you to," Stiles tells him before gripping onto Derek's hair with his left hand and tugging.

The noise Derek makes lets him know he's reading the cues right and when Derek's eyes flutter open again, still glowing and blown, he asks, "you're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"You'll tell me to stop, if you're not okay with it," Derek requests, though it's delivered as an order.

Stiles nods, letting his hands fall, "we should get inside."

Before he's even finished the suggestion, Derek has hauled him up against his body. Stiles' legs wrap around his waist and his arms around Derek's neck.

When Derek smiles at him, he's got fangs showing and Stiles shivers with excitement.

Derek carries him into the house, shutting the door behind him and he climbs up the stairs while Stiles kisses him, rakes his fingers through his hair and bites on his bottom lip. Stiles eventually falls onto his bed with a dull thud, the blankets and pillows bouncing with his descent. He looks up at Derek from under his lashes, toes curling and smile turning like the Cheshire cat.

Stiles watches Derek take off his shoes, socks, jacket and his pulse gets faster with every article that pools on the floor. His eyes widen when Derek's hands come to the hem of his shirt and lift, exposing his chest. Stiles pushes up from his elbows and lets his hands land on Derek's sides. He's running his fingers over the smooth skin of Derek's pecs, admiring the ripple of Derek's muscles and the trail of dark hair that starts above his bellybutton when he's distracted by Derek's hands coming under his to grab at his belt.

Stiles takes his hands off and backs away enough to view Derek standing shirtless before him, unbuckling his belt.

*I want this image engraved on my tombstone*, Stiles swears to himself.

Derek unbucks his belt slowly, like he knows what it's doing to Stiles and –

*God, he probably does.*
Stiles swallows loudly, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Derek's eyes have flickered back to their natural green-gold-blue-grey, though his pupils are still wide and dark and his fangs are still descended. Derek's belt slides out and off, clicking against Stiles' bedroom floor. The sound brings such reality to what's happening, Stiles starts asking himself unknowable questions, like;

\textit{How did I get here?}

How did he capture Derek Hale's attention? How did he manage to be someone Derek wants? What did he do to make Derek fall in love with him? How is this real and happening? Before anxiety can ruin his mood, Derek's jeans pool on the floor and Stiles can fully appreciate the beautiful, lean lines of Derek's body. Derek's tall legs are strong, dark-haired and Stiles wants them \textit{around him}.

The outline of Derek's hard-on is pressed against his waist, head pressed beneath the waistband of his dark grey boxer briefs. Stiles' mouth waters, staring at him. Too shocked and fascinated to move, Stiles sits still while Derek moves into his space. He steps directly in front of Stiles, brings his hands around Stiles' face to tilt his head up.

When Stiles' meets his eyes, he combs a hand through the short hair Stiles has managed to grow back and asks, "is this okay, Stiles?"

Stiles nods, mouth slack and tells him, "it's \textit{way} more than okay."

To make Derek absolutely certain of his intentions, he all but tears his own shirt and jacket off. He pushes himself back on his bed to welcome Derek and Derek follows.

The only light coming in the room is from the streetlamp right outside and the waning Gibbous moon. The moonbeams coat Derek's entire figure and create a daunting, hypnotizing image when Derek moves above him. His shoulder and back muscles stretch and shift so gently and so exactly under the light, over Stiles. His hands come up to the rounds of Derek's upper arms once Derek is entirely on top of him.

He leans down and kisses Stiles gently, sighing like it's the sweetest dream come true. Stiles' fingers curl against Derek's skin as Derek's hands sweep beneath him, taking hold of Stiles' back and pulling him in closer. Stiles smiles into the kisses, feeling overwhelmingly happy, wholly protected and he feels Derek smile back. When he pulls away from kissing Stiles, his incandescent eyes casting blue light on Stiles' face, he whispers, "you're beautiful."

Stiles rolls his eyes and opens his mouth, but Derek stops him by dragging his lips over Stiles' and mumbling closely, "I'm taken with you, Stiles."

Stiles' heart bumps and his hands slide over Derek's chest, glide over his collarbone, eventually cupping either side of his neck. He mutters back, "I'm taken with you."

Derek's smile isn't just visible in the semi-dark, it's \textit{breathtaking} to Stiles. Devious, lusting, glad and amorous; poetry in motion.

He moves his hips against Derek's, eliciting a phenomenal moan from Derek. He bites lovingly on Derek's bottom lip and tells him, "don't stop. Don't stop."

Derek nods, kisses him again, a little harder and then moves along Stiles' face, his cheek, his jawline, his neck and he stays there, in the hallow of Stiles' neck, for a few long moments, sucking and biting and \textit{marking}. Stiles gasps under him when he bites, his hands having moved into Derek's hair to grip excitedly.
He keeps his hips moving, even as Derek's hips become unaligned with his while he moves down Stiles' body.

Derek kisses the beauty marks spanning Stiles' upper chest, licking at his collarbone and simultaneously running his thumbs over Stiles' nipples. The first time he does, Stiles takes back one of his hands to cover his mouth with it. Derek picks up his head to see that he's okay and Stiles laughs a little, breathless and he admits, "I've never – I didn't know that would feel like that."

Derek takes Stiles' hand away from his mouth, mimicking something Stiles once did to him and he says, "I want to hear it."

Stiles whines, more turned on than he thinks he's ever been before, feeling Derek's broad, rough, warm palms splaying across his skin and reverently touching every inch of exposed flesh.

Derek takes one of Stiles' nipples into his mouth while the thumb of his right hand rubs over the opposite and Stiles *wriggles* under him. His hips cant up and his hands grab at Derek's hair and neck; blood is fast leaving his skull, making him unbearably harder and when Derek gives a tender bite followed by the sweeping of his tongue, Stiles' moaning breaks off into a wanton cry.

"Oh my God, oh my God, Derek – Derek," he moans, "I want you to fuck me."

"I can do that," Derek offers with a smirk in a deep and sure voice that gives Stiles chills.

Derek gives a last flick of his tongue and thumb on Stiles' chest, watching in fascinated awe, Stiles' stomach muscles twitching and spasm-ing. He runs his hand down Stiles' torso, running the tip of his index finger through the dark hair trailing from the bottom of Stiles' bellybutton to below his waistline. When he reaches it, he curls his fingers around the waistband of Stiles' sweatpants and, knowing he's naked beneath, looks up to Stiles again, silently asking for permission.

Stiles nods vigorously and gasps out, "please."

Derek pulls Stiles' sweatpants down gradually and Stiles' notices that when his full, throbbing cock is brushed with the cool air of the room, Derek's tongue runs over his lips hungrily. When Stiles' pants are off and on the ground, Derek falls back over him. Stiles feels exposed, sensitive and the most intoxicating kind of elated nervousness crackles like electricity in his veins. His body moves when Derek's does, syncing with him unknowingly.

Derek's eyes cast their dangerous light down Stiles' body and back up to his eyes; Stiles bites his bottom lip nervously, searching Derek's eyes for approval. Derek growls and Stiles' brows spring up, unaware of how good that sound would be to his body. Derek's tongue runs over his fangs, extracting a breathy, short noise from Stiles' chest. He leans in closer, one arm propping himself up above Stiles and his other running down Stiles' body from his chest to the incline of his hip.

Stiles shivers and leans more into the touch, begging quietly, "Derek."

His human fingers rake through Stiles' pubic hair, wrist turning so that he can grip Stiles' shaft. As soon as he grips Stiles' cock, it throbs and Stiles moans high in his throat, throwing his head back.

"Derek," he pleads.

Derek falls back down his body and runs his tongue up the length of Stiles' erection, pressing the tip of his tongue against the beautiful veins on the underside. Stiles' gasps and groans fill the room, his shaking hands fist the sheets on either side of him. While Derek's tongue caresses the head, swirling up and around, so careful in avoiding his fangs, his hands hold both sides of Stiles' hips to keep him from thrusting, further frustrating the boy.
His right hand slides down from Stiles' hipbone, down his thigh, squeezing gently as he maneuvers his hand between Stiles' thighs and beneath him. He sucks on his finger before pushing it between Stiles' cheeks and against his hole that spreads for him so willingly. Derek moans, his forehead falling against Stiles' lower abdomen as he pushes his finger inside him. Stiles groans in time and somehow finds the ability to speak, "C-Christ, Derek – this is going to be over so fast. I want you to—"

"I know. I will," Derek promises, voice torn and growling and restrained, "I'm going to."

He hears Stiles' hand fumble along his bedside table and when he finds his bottle of lube, he puts it down on the bed, within reach of Derek's free hand. Stiles lets out a relieved sigh when Derek pushes a slick, second finger inside him and eventually a third. He confesses, "I was doing this – before you got here."

"I know," Derek tells him cravingly, licking a wide, wet stripe up Stiles' length, "I always know."

"Derek," Stiles prays, "Derek, please."

Derek nods, pulling his body away enough to slip out of his briefs. He leans back on his calves, his knees forward; before he can slick himself, though, Stiles' mouth is on him.

His hand comes down onto Stiles' shoulder for support, unprepared for Stiles' sinful mouth to wrap around him and swallow him down so readily. His body tightens up familiarly; he pets the back of Stiles' head and whispers, "Stiles – Stiles, you have to stop. I'm gonna come."

Stiles makes an agreeable moan that vibrates through Derek's entire body and he moans in return, letting his head loll back. He closes his eyes, lets himself melt into the feel of Stiles' dexterous hands groping at his hipbones and thighs, tongue swirling around him eagerly. Then he curses and pushes back on Stiles' shoulder until Stiles pulls away, keeping Derek in his mouth until it's entirely impossible to; a string of saliva links Stiles' glistening, kiss-swollen lips to the head of Derek's cock and it makes both their cocks bob.

When Stiles falls back against the bed, Derek spreads his legs and lifts him by the small of his back. He lets out a quiet, surprised noise before Derek's hot tongue finds the rim of his hole. Stiles bucks his hips against the flat press of Derek's tongue, his toes curl and his legs spread further apart without much intentional thought to do so. There's slaver wetting the corners of his mouth, his tongue feels thick and he can still taste the flavor of Derek's skin and he wants more.

His mind is going numb with carnal pleasure, he hardly hears himself making the urgent, shameless noises that are spilling from him.

Stiles' is only vaguely aware of the transition from that to being pressed against his blankets, legs pushed back towards his chest. He sees his calves framing Derek's shoulders, admires the glorious, firm, muscled form of Derek's body curling over him and then he feels the press of Derek against him, thick and hot. Derek's eyes are mostly their natural kaleidoscope colors, but they are flecked with electric turquoise, still fighting for control. He realizes that Derek is looking to him for consent and he nods again, unable to speak.

Derek's eyes, half-lidded, flit over Stiles' face and he asks, "can I kiss you?"

"Yes," Stiles smiles, "Yeah, you can."

Derek bends further down and takes Stiles' bottom lip between his. To Stiles, everything tastes dully of skin, sweat and a natural, aroused flavor that coincides with the male, musty scent that comes from
all their erogenous zones. For Derek, his nostrils and mouth are full of that, but more than that, Stiles' natural scents that drive him to that sharp edge of desire he's sliding over now.

When he breaks their kiss, he keeps his face close to Stiles', nose touching his and he slides inside. He moves in at an agonizingly gradual pace, vying for control over his instincts and wanting to be gentle. The clench and burning heat of Stiles' body tests his discipline, but once he bottoms out, Stiles' voice comes scratchy and lewd like a fantasy Derek has had, "Derek, fuck me, please."

"Stiles," Derek murmurs, sweat misting his back and neck. He makes his thrusts a little deeper, a little harder and the sounds Stiles makes are music to him. He moves his hands to Stiles' hips and adjusts him just a little, angles him just so and it extracts a loud "ah!" from Stiles' parted lips. Derek keeps at that angle, rolling his hips and focusing the last vestiges of his control on not coming immediately at the sounds Stiles is erupting with.

Stiles' sweating palms hold fast onto Derek's upper arms and he suddenly begins to stutter, "oh, God, oh, God, fu—w-wait, wait."

Derek stops all his movement, hips flush against Stiles' ass and he looks to Stiles' eyes fluttering open. There's a tear rolling from the corner of his right eye, but before Derek can worry, Stiles' asks, h-how are you doing that?"

Derek looks confused at the posed question and Stiles shows his throat, tilting his head back and moaning, "God, I've never… I've never felt something like this."

Derek's rough voice comes sweetly, "good, though?"

"So good, Derek," Stiles practically weeps, "So good."

After a few beats of steadying breath, Stiles tells him he can move again and he does, harder and faster than before until Stiles chants, "Christ, gonna – Derek, I'm gonna come, don't stop – don't stop."

Like Derek could.

When Stiles comes, untouched, the scent striping Stiles' abs and chest washes Derek over with a primal need and while Stiles is in the throes of his orgasm, he barely has the ability to ask, "can I come in you?"

"Yes, God, yes, Derek," Stiles moans.

Derek hardly lasts another thrust before he's coming, feeling Stiles' muscles spasm around him.

Stiles feels Derek shudder as he comes down from his orgasm and hears him sigh with gratification. They stay intertwined like that until their hearts slow down to a normal rate.

When Derek does pull out of Stiles, he watches Stiles' face for any sign of discomfort before leaving him to bring back a wet towel. He cleans himself off and wipes between Stiles' cheeks and over his torso where Stiles' cum landed. He tosses the towel aside when he's done and falls beside Stiles with a peaceful exhale.

He's still somehow unprepared for Stiles to curl his body against his, still surprised to hear Stiles sigh sleepily against his chest. He lets his arm come around Stiles' back and he gazes lovingly at the blush
still coloring Stiles' cheeks and ears. He turns his face to kiss Stiles' forehead and Stiles opens his eyes to look up at him. He smiles, looking sweet and satisfied.

"I love you," Derek tells him, calmly and now, like they have all the time in the world to say those words again and again.

Stiles kisses his cheek and replies, "I love you back."

Derek has the best sleep of his life (thus far), beside Stiles like that. He's awake before the Sheriff is home; Derek makes sure the two of them are decent before Stiles' father stumbles his way into the house, exhausted.

It's three days after that when Derek asks for formal permission to date Stiles and the Sheriff grants it gladly.

Scott gives his blessings with a friendly pat on the back and Lydia is highly disappointed when Derek refuses to disclose every detail of their first sexual encounter.

The pack rejoices in them being together and it brings Derek a special kind of pride he's never felt before.

He holds Stiles' hand in public, Stiles wears his jacket to school some days and dark marks on Stiles' neck become a regular decoration.

Derek takes him on dates every Friday night and when Derek's on-duty, Stiles will leave the pack waiting on the sidewalk to lean in through the driver's window of the cruiser and kiss him. He cooks in Derek's kitchen, even watches hours of HGTV beside him on the couch in the loft, despite his arguments that it's dorky and its target audience is menopausal women.

The same day Scott tells the pack he's staying in Beacon Hills, Stiles tells Derek he's staying for his A.A. also.

Rather than fighting him on it, trying to force Stiles to make a decision he might deem wiser or safer, Derek tells Stiles he has faith in Stiles to make the best decisions for himself and that he'll support him all the way, no matter what he decides.

Stiles marches away from him, making Derek think he's mad, but then he turns around, runs and jumps onto Derek to tackle him in an uncomfortably tight hug.

Isaac and Malia stay, though Lydia joins Jackson at a renowned university in the UK and she promises Derek she'll visit often and eventually come back.

He doesn't feel alone, though while Stiles is applying online for classes in the upcoming semester at B.H.C.C, sitting at Derek's kitchen table and biting his lip, Scott mentions from the living room couch, "it's still so weird to see you so Zen, Derek. I'm really proud of you."

Derek smiles to himself, turns away and accidentally meets Stiles' loving gaze. Stiles winks and Derek feels like he's finally made it home.

He doesn't see the burnt husk of his childhood home anymore, but a graveyard that he used to live in. He doesn't cringe when he thinks of Laura anymore, but he smiles and speaks of her whenever she comes to mind. He doesn't have visions of Paige dying in his arms anymore, but he does occasionally share a story or two about what trouble they'd get up to together. He doesn't hoard the memories of his family like a dark secret anymore, but bestows his parents' wisdom unto Scott whenever they have a heart-to-heart.
His loft gradually takes on the mixed scents of his pack members (most notably, Stiles'), his work as a deputy earns him a much better reputation in the community and his car's glove compartment ends up full of mixes Stiles makes him.

And sure, there are monsters still and darkness and confusion and things aren't always perfect, but they come pretty damn close. Derek supposes it's a matter of perception.

Because Derek doesn't see wolves again where they do not exist – flowers bloom where there was once barren land and while the light is dim and the path is narrow, he can read his compass clearly.

He knows where he's going.

Chapter End Notes

Artwork now exists for this piece! :DDD
Made by the always lovely CanisLupisx, you can view it here; http://canislupisx.tumblr.com/post/106273805735

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!