Home

by TheTypewriterGirl

Summary

January seventh. Seven days since the start of 2015, and seven days since his father’s death.

The bastard, he thinks bitterly. The past year Derek Hale had made it blatantly obvious that he hated his scrawny guts, taking every given opportunity to shove him up against a wall, growl threats in his ears and roll his eyes whenever he stepped into the room, muttering some snide comment about how spastic or idiotic he was.

So why did he fucking volunteer to take him in?

- Inspired by A Little After Midnight, January First by TheTypewriterGirl
Chapter 1

IMPORTANT NOTES: The entire Hale family died in the fire. Peter and Derek are the only survivors. Peter never went catatonic. Derek (an alpha) still lives in the mansion. Time-wise this fic replaces 3b.

Stiles stares down at the ivory bistro mug he holds loosely in his hands, the untouched coffee inside long since gone cold.
It's January seventh. Seven days since the start of 2015, and seven days since his father's death. His eyes and throat are raw from crying, his insides numb. He blinks, unfazed as he watches another tear fall to the dark liquid below and break the surface in a plethora of tiny ripples.

Happy fucking new year.

He'd been living at home the past week, although it had been too much of a blur to really recount how he spent it. There were tiny snippets of crying softly in his dad's bed, pressing his face into the sheets as if the fabric could smother the reality of the outside world. Wretched panic attacks that reduced him to a quivering, hyperventilating mess on his bedroom floor until he passed out and woke up a few hours later on the carpet with gooseflesh and a headache, wondering if he would be able to endure another one the next day. Sometimes he would sit down in front of the TV and stare at it for lengthy periods of time before realizing that he never even switched it on.

Also, he's pretty sure he hasn't brushed his teeth since last year.

Ms. McCall had stopped by a lot, knocking softly at the porch and reaching out to wrap him in a warm hug when he opened the door. She would cautiously step into the house and glance around the living room, eyes going misty before she quickly reeled in her gaze and offered her best smile for him, as if his dad's absence didn't make the air thick and heavy and wrong. Then she usually murmured a stream of hushed, comforting words before leaving tupperwares of home-cooked casseroles and meals on the table. They had stacked up in his fridge, untouched. He felt bad for wasting her food.

Scott texted him every day. Lydia and the others too, just not as excessively. It was all they could do, since he refused to answer their calls. His phone buzzed from dawn until dusk, the cracked screen lighting up with short phrases of 'how are you?' and 'I'm here if you need me' and 'come over for dinner, we'll pick you up' again and again until he couldn't take it anymore and finally turned the device off, because he knew that seeing any of their faces would only make it worse. They would look at him differently now, with pity etched in their features and eyes filled with uncertainty. They would speak to him as if he were made of glass, ready to shatter at the slightest touch.

The description wasn't too far from the truth.

The plastic clock on the wall behind him ticks softly, but each secondhand stroke cuts through the silence like a booming countdown. He slowly turns his head to glance at it, heart sinking a little when he sees the hands: 2:01pm. He blows out a shaky breath, clumsily wiping a sleeve across his damp eyelashes as he reluctantly turns back to his cold coffee.

It's time.

He slowly pushes his chair out away from the table, hauling himself to his feet before quietly trudging over to the door where his suitcases are. The walk feels like he's dragging himself through water, body heavy and uncooperative as if dragging a fifty pound weight behind him.

John Stilinski had been a man of sacrifice. He had sacrificed his sleep the countless number of nights Stiles had nightmares or panic attacks in the early hours of the morning, when his dad would stumble into his room with crummy eyes and rub small circles against his back until he fell asleep. His dad had sacrificed his integrity every time he fabricated a lie for the department in order to cover up some crazy, supernatural-related bullshit that Scott's furry side had dragged him into. His dad would have sacrificed his badge for him, if it had come down to it.

But seven days ago, he had ended up sacrificing his life instead.
Apparently they had been in more financial trouble than he thought; his dad had given up his life insurance policy in order to keep the house a few years ago, to pay off his mom's hospital bills. Risky, yes. His dad was planning on paying it back within a few years, but fate never gave him the chance, which left his son with a small chunk of savings in a house that now belonged to the bank. Stiles wanted to stay longer, but Melissa McCall had won that argument. She won a lot of arguments, really. Today, the house was to be foreclosed.

Stiles clasps the cold door handle, dragging his suitcase behind him as he shuffles past the frame and onto the front porch. He pauses, fingers curling loosely over the brass knob as he turns back and drinks in the last view of the living room he grew up in, savoring the tiny details in hope that they'll embed themselves in to his memory for at least a little while. His features are taut and expressionless as his gaze flickers from the ugly beige couch he and Scott used to sit on for movie nights, the pale blue wallpaper dotted with tiny periwinkle flowers his mother had picked out long ago, and his dad's old leather reading chair, now forever unoccupied. His coffee cup is still on the table, where it would stay until one of the realtors came in to sweep through the house and place sticky notes on everything that needed to be 'improved.'

"Thanks for the memories, I guess," he mutters quietly, and surprises himself with how hoarse his voice is. Then he swings the door shut, biting his lip as the hinges creak in agony against the weathered frame, protesting against the movement. He never thought he could resonate with a door.

He makes his way over to the jeep on autopilot, tossing his trunk in the passenger seat. The familiar sound of the engine roars to life as he twists his keys in the ignition. The clutch vibrates beneath his cold fingers. He was always cold now. It's a kind of chill that no number of layers seemed to fix.

He casts one last look at the house before finally ripping his gaze away, rolling out onto the pavement before tearing down the street. He doesn't look back. Despite the chilly temperature, he refuses to roll the windows up as he flies down the road, letting the frigid wind cut through his hair and ruffle his brewing thoughts.

His dad is dead.

If he earned a buck for every time the phrase had echoed in his mind the past week, he'd have enough to pay back the mortgage himself, and then he wouldn't have to spend his Thursday afternoon driving to his new 'home.' The McCalls would have taken him in (God knows Melissa felt terrible), but since Isaac moved in the house was crammed. Melissa nearly worked herself to death with double-shifts every night, and with finances overstretched already they just couldn't afford to feed another mouth. Lucky for him, his only local relative had passed away last year, and his remaining family members were located out in nowhere-ville Ohio and wanted nothing to do with him. Thus, he'd been forced to move in with someone else.

But of all the people, it had to be him.

He doesn't remember that much from that night, aside from the pale, shocked face of his father just before he crumpled to the ground in a bloodied, lifeless heap. It was the face that haunted his dreams, showing up in reflections during the day and leaving imprints in his vision when he blinked. Vaguely, he recalled collapsing boneless and screaming in Scott's arms after it happened, sucking in wretched gasps of air as the rest of the pack hovered uneasily by his side—but he had simply stood there, wide-eyed and stony from afar.

_The bastard_, Stiles thinks bitterly. The past year Derek Hale had made it blatantly obvious that he hated his scrawny guts, taking every given opportunity to shove him up against a wall, growl threats in his ears and roll his eyes whenever he stepped into the room, muttering some snide comment about how spastic or idiotic he was.
So why did he fucking volunteer to take him in?

Sure, Stiles wasn't sleeping much. He could hardly stand being in his old house at all since it happened, but he was pretty sure that sleeping there or even living on the streets would be more comfortable than residing in some giant, burnt-out mansion with a grumpy scowl-enthusiast whose main talent was flaring his nostrils in annoyance. God knows his dad would be rolling over in his grave if he knew, but for some inexplicable reason Melissa had held him by the shoulders and pinned him down with those big brown eyes that looked so much like Scott's, and made him promise to take the grump's offer.

"Good for you," she had said. Living with Derek would be good for him, apparently.

He huffs, curling his fingers tighter around the steering wheel. When Melissa McCall suddenly started trusting Derek Hale? He didn't know. But one thing for certain was that he didn't need to be coddled, especially not by an oversize grump who, last time he checked, didn't even have 'comfort' in his vocabulary. But maybe that was a good thing, because truthfully, he just wants to wallow in his grief.

Alone.

A symphony of fallen leaves crunch beneath his tires as he pulls the jeep up to the house. His eyes grow wide as he kills the engine and gazes up through the window: it's huge, a towering silhouette of outdated gloom against a foggy grey backdrop littered with barren trees. Intricate details are carved into the structure's frame— tiny spiral patterns that look like the triskele tattoo on Derek's back, only these ones are covered in a layer of grey ash and dirty rainwater tracks. The windows are blackened and cracked in places, mirroring the charred wood splintering on the support beams and banisters. It looks like something out of a horror movie: ugly and dark and lonesome, the perfect mirror to the broody soul living inside.

Well. Aside from the 'ugly' part. He'll give him that.

Stiles takes his time getting out of the car, stealing nervous glances at the weathered mansion. The place looks like it needs to be condemned, or at least commissioned as a haunted mansion for some horror flick. Werewolves were even included.

He blinks hard, rubbing a heavy hand over his features as if ironing out a wrinkly shirt. Hopefully the introductions wouldn't last too long because he hadn't been sleeping well, and conveniently it was catching up with him now. His limbs feel heavy as he trudges up the weathered front steps, and he cringes inwardly as the burnt wood creaks noisily under his weight. When he reaches the massive oak door he hesitates mid-knock, knuckles hovering over the wood as he debates wether or not to bolt and live a life of peddling on the streets, promise be damned. Lucky for him, he doesn't even need to decide, because then the door suddenly swings open, revealing a scowling Derek Hale.

So much for that.

The alpha stands tensely in the doorway, looking unusually casual in a plain black tee and faded denim jeans. A few awkward moments slip by as Derek observes him, eyes narrowing a touch as they sweep curiously over his frame, features almost taking on a look of concern. Stiles uneasily shifts his weight on his heels, grip subconsciously tightening around the handle of his suitcase. Derek seems to notice and immediately snaps his expression back into an extra-broody scowl, stepping back so that he didn't block the doorway.

"You coming in?" He states bluntly. The words are spoken carefully, like he's trying to bite back the harshness in his tone. It doesn't work very well.
"Hello to you, too," Stiles mutters, but he wipes his feet on the beaten-up mat anyway and cautiously pokes his head inside the doorway. He can't help but gape as he steps foot into the living room, faintly registering the door swinging closed behind him with a rough squeak.

He had never actually been inside the Hale mansion before, but judging from his collective glimpses of the shoddy outside appearance, he never would have guessed the interior would look like this. An intricate glass chandelier hangs from the ceiling, illuminating the spacious loft in a warm glow. It's missing a few crystals, but it sparkles like sunlit diamonds. A rustic brick fireplace and large flatscreen are embedded in the wall across a cushioned leather couch and matching armchair, from which a simple maroon rug rolls out over the weathered hardwood floor. The windows are plentiful, smudged with a light film of smoky charcoal residue that filters the outside light into scattered patterns on the faded buttercream walls, which have a few simple pieces of black and white photography placed over the larger cracks in the paint. There's a small dining table situated by the kitchen, which is old-fashioned and cozy with peeling pinstripe wallpaper and a white tile counter. The place is spotless and oddly beautiful despite it's rough edges, and the shabbiness is subtle, barely peeking out behind a layer of carefully-arranged furnishings.

He dazedly walks to the center of the room, feeling slightly dizzy as he cranes his neck around, gazing at his surroundings. It's… Nice. Way nicer than he expected. Derek wordlessly side-steps him from behind, motioning for him to follow with a small jerk of his head.

"Bring your stuff. Follow me."

Wow, five whole words. He usually voiced such sarcastic thoughts, but lately he couldn't muster the energy to summon the phrase to his lips. Instead he just silently follows Derek down the hallway, suitcase dragging heavily behind him. Derek glances back at him, eyebrows twitching a fraction before he turns away again, pushing open the first door with the palm of his hand. Stiles wearily peeks into the room, which is spacious and bare. Empty white walls frame a double-paned window, from which the overcast skies spill a cool light onto a large bed set with fresh pillows and a navy comforter. It smells clean, with a faint scent of shampoo wafting from the plush ivory carpet that looks too white not to be new.

"This is your room," Derek states. "If you want the walls a different color, just let me know. I'll get you the paint."

Stiles blinks, nearly choking on his disbelief. He jerks his gaze from the room to stare incredulously at Derek, who avoids his stare and spins on his heels to lead him back down the hall. Maybe he had hallucinated. Trauma could do that to you, right? Because there was no way that Derek rip-your-throat-out-with-my-teeth Hale just offered to buy him paint for his beautiful new bedroom. Honestly, he had expected to sleep on the couch. A mat on the floor, maybe.

"Hurry up."

He blinks again, not realizing that he had just been standing there staring at the room. His room, apparently. He quickly snaps his mouth shut, letting go of his suitcase to hobble after him. Derek leads him to the kitchen, which is just as warm and well-poslished as it had looked from the front door.

"Help yourself to whatever is in the fridge and cupboards," Derek announces, reaching up to open one of the wood cabinets for emphasis. Stiles spots several boxes of pasta, beef jerky, protein bars, pretzels, and even a half-empty jar of Nutella inside, which surprises him. He doesn't know what he was expecting (fresh rabbits, maybe?), but crackers and hazelnut spread just seemed so…

Normal.
"If you want anything specific, just let me know before I go to the store," Derek adds nonchalantly, bending down to swing open a rolling drawer beside the sink. "Pots and pans are in here, this is where I keep the dishes. You eat on a plate, you clean the plate. The dishwasher isn't there for show."

Stiles nods, struggling to combat his fatigue. His mind reels over Derek's words. It's almost too much for him, the way Derek was addressing him without a growl or barred fangs, offering to buy him paint and food of his choice all while maintaining that signature (annoying) monotone phrasing. His lips twitch as he thinks about blurting, "inflection is a thing, you know," But the words die again before they even reach his throat.

Derek gives him another funny look, but the expression only lasts a second before the default scowl clicks into place again. Much to his dismay Derek starts heading towards the living room, although Stiles really couldn't care less about the layout of the house. He has a headache, the same one that had stuck with him chronically the past few days, making sleep impossible while simultaneously reducing him to a sack of exhaustion. He thinks of the tempting navy comforter on his new bed, and nearly drools at the imagery.

Somehow, he manages to make it through the majority of the tour without falling asleep on his feet.

Derek takes him to most of the rooms, all of which have the same tarnished beauty and rustic design. The fire had left scathing burns on most of the floors and wall space, but it looks like the guy had invested quite a bit of time artfully repainting and refurbishing the worst of the damage. There's even a study, equipped with a large armchair and several shelves of antique books that were probably magical/supernatural encyclopedias or some sort of ancient werewolf whatnot. Derek is stiff and formal throughout the entire trip, speaking no more than what little words are needed. He's blunt, even harsh in some of his phrasing, but surprisingly courteous. It isn't until they finally make it upstairs when Stiles blows out a quiet sigh, tiredly pressing his fingers to his temple before he can stop himself.

"What is it?"

He jerks his hand back down to his side, neck shrinking into his hoodie a bit as Derek scrutinizes him, eyebrows drawn together in a curious line.

"Oh, nothing much, Stiles thinks, a sudden frustration flaring in his chest. Only that I've slept a total of twelve hours the past week because I'm plagued with nightmares and visions of blood, advil and coffee make up most of my current diet, there's a constant chill clinging to my bones and most of the time my head feels like it's been bashed in with a jackhammer, which is really inconvenient considering how I apparently live with your furry ass now, which should be miserable at best but hey, look on the bright side, the only home I've ever known was just claimed by a bunch of suited assholes at the bank, and oh, yeah, my dad is fucking d—"

"Sorry," he mumbles, voice cracking on the low register. "I'm just... Tired."

Derek studies him, his expression infuriatingly impassive as ever.

"If you want to go to bed, I'm not stopping you," Derek says flatly. "We're done, anyway. This is my room. I'm not in it much, but try knocking if you need me."

Stiles observes the closed door through half-lidded eyes, briefly wondering what the space looked like on the other side. He envisions chin-up bars and a double mirror. A pile of bones for snacking, perhaps. Derek steps forward to lead them back down the stairs, but Stiles pauses, frowning a little as his gaze wanders down the dimly-lit hallway and catches on something.
"What about that room?" He asks, staring at a battered wood door nestled at the end of corridor. It isn't renovated like the other doors of the house, instead splintered with scaly black burn marks.

Derek halts, shoulders tensing slightly. A stretch of silence stings the air, and Stiles feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. This is it, he thinks. He figured that the stubbly jerk would eventually follow through with one of his werewolfy death-threats, but he just didn't expect to have his throat torn out this soon.

Derek doesn't turn around to face him when he finally speaks, his voice low and dangerously calm.

"You're never to go in there. Ever. Got it?"

Shit.

Stiles swallows nervously and quietly steps back, wondering what sore spot he accidentally poked.

"Yeah… Got it."

"Good."

When they reach the bottom of the stairs Derek breaks off towards the living room, pausing briefly to address him.

"There are extra blankets in the closet. Your bathroom is the next door down."

"'Kay… Thanks."

"Kay… Thanks."

Derek pauses. His features do that funny twitch again before he nods and walks away, adding, "If you have any questions, I'll be in the living room" over his shoulder. Stiles watches him go, thinking that yes, he did have questions. For starters, "if you can't stand my existence, then why the fuck did you take me in?" He turns back to his room, shoving his suitcase inside before softly shutting the door behind him.

It's even more spacious from inside, and every new detail he observes is like a slap in face. It's brighter, cleaner, and bigger than his old room. A mahogany desk sits across from the window, marked by a simple blue halogen lamp that matches the color of the curtains. The carpet squishes softly beneath his feet, reminding him of a cloud. But he doesn't want a cloud for a carpet. He wants his old rug, cheap and faded and marked with the grape soda stain from seventh grade. He wants his old room small and shabby as it was, and he wants his old house.

He wants his dad.

His temples pound as he sucks in a deep breath and forces himself to count to four, forcing his emotions down. He fumbles with the outer zipper of his suitcase, fishing out the bottle of Advil he'd stashed there and knocks a couple pills back, swallowing them dry. Dazedly he stagers over to the bed and gingerly sits down on the edge, noting how the mattress compresses softly under his weight, undoubtedly memory foam. Fingers trembling, he carefully slips his hand into his sweatshirt pocket until his fingers brush up against the cold metal of his father's badge.

A small hiccup worms past his lips as he screws his eyes shut, willing the sobs in his chest to die before they escape and Derek hears him.

He angrily bites down on the inside of his cheek. Get a grip, he scolds himself, but it doesn't help, and within a minute hot tears are slipping down his cheeks, dripping off his chin to the plush carpet below. Reluctantly he lets himself fall back and sink into the mattress, and hates the memory foam
because his old bed had been a crappy box-spring. He doesn't even bother kicking off his shoes as he curls into a fetal position, stomach clenching painfully as silent sobs wrack his frame. The dented metal of his dad's badge digs painfully into his palm, but he only clenches it tighter, pulling it out in front of his face to examine it as if it were a piece of gold.

*Beacon Hills Police Department: Sheriff John Stilinski*

Stiles traces his thumb over the engraved words, feeling the minuscule nicks and dents in the brass. His lips quiver as they part, and he tastes salt as fresh tears slip between them and onto his dry tongue. The cracked whisper escapes before he can stop it.

"I hope you say hi to mom for me."
Derek sits stiffly on the couch in the living room, absentmindedly rubbing his thumb over the page of one of the yellowed books he was pretending to read.

He could hear Stiles crying softly from the bedroom, breaking the usual silence of the house with tiny, muffled sobs. It had started just as soon as he sat down against the leather, and hadn’t ceased in the twenty minutes that had dragged by since. It was agony—not because the noise was irritating, but because of the internal storm each quiet hiccup exacerbated.

He thinks about going in. To offer a glass of water or mutter ‘there, there’ or something, but he keeps beating away the thought. What was he going to do—Console him? Hug him? Read him a bedtime story? He wouldn’t know how to comfort if the step-by-step instructions punched him in the face. He’d proven that to himself within five minutes of Stiles walking though the front door, demonstrated
by his inability to address him like a normal human being, especially someone who just lost their father. Instead of soft condolences and sensitive affirmations, he'd just spat out blunt, choppy sentences and instructions, like the big heartless brute Scott and the others thought he was.

He never even said "sorry for your loss."

_Idiot._

He huffs dourly, gaze stationary and unfocused upon the small print of the page. He would probably just embarrass Stiles, anyway. They were hardly even on speaking terms let alone a friendship level, and every time he tried to talk to him the words always just turned into harsh growls the moment he set eyes upon that stupid face.

So why did he fucking _volunteer_ to take him in?

He had invited spastic, smartass, too-selfless-for-his-own-good _Stiles_ to come live with him, and he wanted to kick himself for it. For blurting, "I'll take him" in front of the McCalls at the funeral last Tuesday, after overhearing Melissa brokenly explain to Scott that they couldn't afford to have him move into their house. He'd watched her squeeze him by the shoulders in the corner by the door, eyes going glassy as Scott protested and pleaded with frustrated whispers — _but mom, no! They're going to take his house! He isn't eighteen yet, they're going to send him away to_ — and the next thing Derek knew he was standing in front of them, jaw tense and eyebrows drawn together with the words jumping out between his lips before he even realized it.

_I'll take him._

Like Stiles was some kind of damn pet up for adoption.

The pair had stiffened, jerking back slackjawed and bug-eyed as if he had just slapped them. A few agonizing moments trickled by where they stared at him like that, speechless while he internally panicked, willing himself not to twitch and betray his consternation or break away from their gazes. Good thing he had that down to an art.

He sighs, softly snapping his book shut before setting it down in his lap. He guesses it was the way Stiles's face had crumpled after the Sheriff dropped lifeless and bloodied in front of him that day, followed by the agonized scream that tore from his throat immediately afterwards, as if it were his own chest that just been ripped open. The others — Lydia, Allison, Isaac — quickly flocked to him and Scott, faces pale and eyes glimmering with hands clamped over their mouths in horror. 

The _appropriate_ reaction.

They had approached Stiles stiffly, like nervous deer hesitant to wander out into the open, but ventured closer anyway because Stiles needed them by his side. But _him?_ He had just stood off awkwardly in the middle of the wooded clearing, unable to make his legs move. He could only stare at the wailing teen in silent shock, too much of a coward to take even one step forward.

Because he knew what it was like to lose his entire family, and seeing Stiles lose his chilled him to the bone.

He'd seen the way Stiles looked at his father. How his eyes went wide with fear whenever John was in danger, or the little disapproving lines that spilled out across his brow whenever he caught his dad eating fast food at the station. Comparably, he'd noticed the same crinkles run across the Sheriff's forehead whenever he looked at his kid, because John had eventually realized that there was no stopping Stiles from flinging himself into danger if it meant saving his friends, despite being the most mortal of them all. If that made John feel as helpless as he suspected, then it was something he and
the Sheriff had in common.

But the truth was, the Sheriff never trusted him. Not even after he stopped his reckless behavior after the fire, because the man equated Derek with the reason his son came home late beat-up and injured after crazy brawls with other packs, and he hated him for it. For dragging his beloved, human son into all the dangerous supernatural bullshit he and the pack got tied up in. And Derek didn't blame him, because a part of him hated himself for it too.

He blinks down at his hands, perturbed as he remembers the blood that had saturated them a week prior. In a way, he declared himself at fault. He was an alpha, older than Scott and more experienced, and therefore should have been able to reach Kali in time, before her claws raked through the Sheriff's ribcage like razors to a sheet of silk. If he had just been faster. Stronger. Better. Then he could've hauled himself up from the ground and slashed her throat before she got to him.

Not after she did.

Regardless, Stiles's dad would probably rise from the grave and wring his neck if he knew he was housing his son.

Peter had looked at him in disgust when he found out, which was nothing unusual, except for the harsh, barking laugh that accompanied his sneer. The cold, wild grin, as if the notion of his nephew housing Scott's human friend was biggest joke he had heard since discovering that Derek was the only other survivor of the fire.

"You're letting the little hyperactive toothpick stay with you," Peter had spat incredulously, amusement twisting the corner of his lip. "You'll break his neck within a week!" Then he had looked to the side, the laughter in his face fading into a canvas of bitter disappointment. "At least I hope you do, for your own sake. You're running dangerously close to turning soft… Well, softer than you already are," and eyed him up and down as if he were some fallen piece of trash that someone had kicked to the gutter.

The description wasn't too far from the truth.

And he had stood and taken his uncle's scorn in silence like he always did, unable to find any words to bite back with. A part of him knew that Peter was right— he was an alpha who ran around with a pack of misfit teenagers, lived in his family's old crispy-fried house because he didn't have the heart to move out, and as of late offered to take in a broken kid without any parents in hope that maybe — just maybe — he could help somehow.

He was soft.

"You'll break his neck within a week"

The question was whether or not he wanted to be.

He had asked himself again when he heard the soft rumble of an engine slowly make itself known from the distance, followed by the squeak of car tires grinding to a halt in the driveway. An unexpected apprehension had struck him just then, while he got up and strode over to the door, listening to Stiles slam shut the jeep and slowly make his way up the front porch. He had waited there, hesitating when he didn't hear a knock from the teen standing on the other side, and an equally unexpected twinge of hurt pinched him when he realized that Stiles was debating wether or not to bolt.

As soon as the thought crossed his mind he had grabbed the brass handle and yanked open the door,
making Stiles jerk back a bit in surprise. Derek couldn't help but stare. Stiles looked like he had been left out in the rain for a week and then stuck in a toaster to dry. He was pale, rumpled, and had dark bruises staining the crescents beneath his sunken eyes. That was the first thing he'd noticed, was his eyes. They were dark and blank, red-rimmed from crying and lack of sleep instead of the warm amber they usually were. It was…

Strange.

It made him look wrong.

Throughout the short tour of the house, it became clear that the Sheriff's death had bruised Stiles in more ways than one, subtly worming into his mannerisms and overshadowing his aura like a dark cloud. Normally the human brandished his ADHD status with pride, and lived up to the reputation: a constantly-moving, blabbering idiot who was always twiddling his fingers and bouncing on his heels and twitching his nose as if an electric current ran through him—only now his posture was slack and still, moving sluggishly like a machine rusted over by his own salty tears.

Something else Derek had come to notice about him was his perpetually perturbed face, and the way his mouth always hung open a little bit, as if very life perplexed and startled him. But today his lips had been still and closed, as if life had startled him in a way where nothing else could shock him again. It disturbed Derek, and he struggled not to let it show as he led Stiles to all the rooms, stealing curious glances at the teen's half-mast gaze, trembling fingers, and unruly hair, which was even messier than usual. He kept getting whiffs of his breath, and it smelled like he hadn't brushed his teeth in a week.

But most disturbing of all was that Stiles was quiet. Not a single sarcasm-laced comment or witty jest was jabbed in his direction the entire time, which was unsettling considering how the kid's pride and joy was his ability to wield sass, particularly towards him. A couple times he thought he saw his lips twitch with the thought of a sardonic response, but then his eyes would dim and his shoulders would deflate a little, as if he didn't see the point. Derek found himself suddenly regretting all the times he had ever barked at him to shut up. Until today, he never imagined that he would be dismayed by Stiles's lack of incessant jabbering.

And he would never admit it.

He's yanked from his thoughts as he registers the returned silence of the room. The crying had stopped.

Hopefully Stiles had fallen asleep, considering how drained he'd looked upon arrival. Throughout the entire tour he'd been dead on his feet, blinking heavily and swaying slightly with every step, as if he would tip over with the gentle push of a breeze. Derek remembers how he had been the same after the fire, unable to catch a wink of sleep for weeks after it happened. To this day, he still got nightmares once in a while—horrible visions of neon orange flames and thick black smoke that would wrap around him like long fingers, suffocating him until he jerked awake in a cold sweat, the harsh wheeze of his lungs still ringing in his ears.

He looks down to his lap, flipping over the book in his hands so that the cover stared up at him. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. He frowns, absently chewing on the inside of his cheek. How symbolic, that he happened to grab this book off the shelf before sitting down. He felt like he had lived one hundred years of solitude in the six years he had resided in his family's empty mansion, trying in vain to erase the echo of the silence in his ears and pretend that the rooms upstairs weren't really vacant. But wasn't it ironic, because Stiles had also been living in solitude the past week, probably trying to do the same in the unoccupied hallways where his father used to walk.
Only when Stiles walked through his front door, they weren't really in solitude anymore.

They both had company.
Chapter 3

Life at the Hale house was kind of dull, to be honest.

Stiles spends most of his time in the room Derek gave him, which (despite his stubborn efforts to remain loyal his old room) was starting to grow on him. It was quiet, spacious, and the bare atmosphere seemed to dampen his anxiety much more than a paper bag ever could. In particular he took a liking to the bed, which was like like a plushy nest of downy feathers wrapped up in what he estimated to be seven-hundred thread count sheets. He thought it was weird because before he left home it was impossible to get some sleep, but now sleep was impossible to resist. The ultra-soft pillows Derek provided him with only encouraged his droopy eyelids, and for the most part he would just knock back a couple of Advils, crawl beneath the comforter and conk out for most of the day. It was easier that way, instead of being left awake with his grief.

He cleaned up his messes, wiped the fallen toothpaste from the sink and all that jazz (after he caught Derek wrinkling his nose upon his arrival, he figured he’d better start brushing again). Outside of bed kept to himself, which was fine because Derek kept to himself, too. In fact they hardly even saw each other outside the couple times a day when he would drag himself out from underneath the covers and stumble to the bathroom or wander into the kitchen for a glass of water, often passing the inscrutable werewolf on the couch or doing chin-ups on the bar by the front windows.

Derek would always stiffen upon hearing him, often pausing briefly to glance back at him with those stupid furrowed eyebrows, but never uttered a word in his direction. It both pleased and infuriated Stiles at the same time, because he never felt much like talking anyway, but it would still be nice to know what the hell the stubbly grump was thinking once in a while.

Writing words, however, was apparently something the werewolf could deal with. Sometimes Stiles would come out to kitchen and discover little notes on the counter, scrawled in messy all-caps like his dad used to do.
They always amused him, making him huff out little humorless chuckles that sounded more like perplexed sighs. He didn't know why the guy bothered, but a small part of him liked the notes anyway.

It continues like that for about a week. He becomes accustomed to his daily routine of sleep, Advil, take a piss, repeat. Numb away the world, block out the surly werewolf brooding down the hall. The silence filled the halls like an empty dream, stark in contrast to the vivid night terrors that plagued his mind during sleep, although for whatever reason those hadn't been reoccurring as often since he moved in. He thought maybe it was the memory foam, because it certainly had nothing to do with the guy in the other room, who acted like there was an invisible wall between them.

The yellow sticky notes keep appearing, and each time Stiles would shortly debate if he should actually take up any of the offers, but always shied away from the thought, leaving them untouched on the counter before quietly returning to the bedroom. If he came out again later they would be gone, added to the discarded pile in the kitchen wastebasket. Derek never mentioned it and Stiles never brought it up.

He was just starting to accept the fact that they would never interact when the creak of fast, heavy footsteps sound from down the hall, interrupting his thoughts as he lays in bed, absently watching the late afternoon sun cast grey fingered shadows across his comforter.

His gaze shoots to the door, perplexed as they quickly thunder closer. It reminds him of a coming storm, and distantly he realizes that something is wrong— that Derek never goes out of his way to seek him out, or walks with such tenacity, that he must be angry— and then the door swings open and slams against the wall with a loud ‘bang’ as Derek suddenly barges into his room, looking pissed off and ready to break something.

"Whoa, h-hey! Ever heard of knocking!" Stiles cries, scrambling backwards against the headboard as he frantically ransacks his memory for what he could have done to condemn himself to death by werewolf fury, because Derek is clearly about to kill him. Did he forget to put away some dishes? Leave his socks on the couch? But that was impossible, because he hardly stepped foot outside his—

"H-hey—Hey! What the hell, dude!" He squawks, heart hammering wildly as Derek strides forward with nostrils flared and eyebrows drawn, making a beeline for his bed.

"What the hell is your problem!" He screeches angrily, absolutely bewildered as Derek haughtily kicks the comforter to the floor, just out of his reach. He tries to sound intimidating, but his voice is raw and crackly from lack of use, and it's kind of hard when a big muscly werewolf is suddenly all up in your space ripping away your warm blankets.

"That's it. Get up," Derek spits flatly, eyes hard and scrutinizing as they sweep up and down his huddled figure on the bed, which makes Stiles feel very uncomfortable. "You reek," he adds bluntly, nose wrinkling a touch. "I can smell you from the other room. You need to take a shower."
Stiles blinks at him from his fetal position, face flushing violently. Okay, rude.

He wills the tremors in his body to die down (because hey, having Derek Hale unexpectedly barge into his room is mildly terrifying), but then he curls his fingers tighter into his sheets, clamping his lips together as a flood of defensive anger overrides his embarrassment. Sure, his hair was a little greasier than what he was comfortable with and had started to stick to his forehead, and he may or may not be able to smell something sour whenever he stretched out his arms, but his hygiene was his business. He would get up and shower when he was good and ready—that was no excuse for the asshole to invade his privacy and demand it.

"I do not smell!" He protests, biting his lip angrily as Derek's eyebrow shoots to the ceiling. It's a weak lie, even to his own ears, but he glares deeper anyway. "You can't just flash your alpha eyes and boss everyone around because your little wolf nose is in distress," he snaps challengingly, shocking himself with the level of spite in his voice. He knows he's putting himself in dangerous territory by daring to taunt the guy like this, but the attitude spills over anyway like an uncontrollable gush from a blocked off waterline.

To his surprise Derek's fuming gaze actually lessens a fraction at the remark, and Stiles forces himself to hold eye contact before turning over so that his body faces the other direction. Feeling thoroughly ruffled, he buries his face back into his pillow and adds a muffled, "go away."

There's a small pause. Stiles holds his breath. He can practically feel Derek's glare burning a hole into his back. For a split second, he thinks that Derek will simply turn around and leave, and they'll go back to their daily routine of mutual silence and occasional side-glances, one wolf and one human living together in solitude under the same barbecued roof—but then a calloused hand wraps around his ankle and yanks his leg off the bed, sending him sprawling to the carpet with a very manly yelp.

"DUDE—!"

"No. It's time," Derek cuts in firmly, voice clipped and definite as he stares down at him. "Get your ass out of bed."

Stiles clumsily scrambles into a sitting position, wincing as he presses a hand to his lower back. He glowers and opens his mouth to throw out another protest, but Derek narrows his eyes and flares his nostrils in warning, which is enough to make him clamp his lips back together and bite his tongue. He's too tired to argue anyway, and quite frankly he prefers his face unmarred by a fist.

"Alright, I'm going."

He scowls as he pushes himself up from the ground, using the edge of his mattress for leverage. Derek wordlessly bends down to grab the crumpled sheets and blankets on the floor, scooping them up into his arms. As he straightens up his eyes flicker briefly to his suitcase, which is sitting rejected in the corner by the closet, yet to be unpacked. Stiles swallowing nervously, pushing away a small pinch of guilt. Derek turns away and strides back towards the door, pausing only to repeat "take a shower," over his shoulder in a tone that isn't quite as harsh as the first time. Then he walks out taking the bundle of sheets and blankets with him, and Stiles wonders if it's because he's going to wash them.

Slowly, he straightens up and shakily rubs the back of his sleeve across his nose, feeling the pounding in his chest gradually die down. He stares at the spot where Derek stood a few seconds earlier, and tries to figure out what just happened.
He's still brainstorming as he steps out of his sweats, listening to the rush of the running water fill the bathroom and and kiss the mirrors with steam.

It's a nice bathroom, clad with fluffy blue rugs and a smooth granite sink. He figures Derek must have put new tile floors down, because he can't find a single smudge anywhere betraying the fire. He wonders how much the guy had spent refurbishing everything, and why he didn't use the money to move in to a new place instead.

He tugs off his shirt, tossing it on top of his crumpled pants before stiffly stepping foot inside the stall and closing the glass door. He flinches as the jet stream hits his shoulders, not expecting the pleasurable pelt of the hot water on his skin. Dolefully it occurs to him that the past couple weeks had been so entirely composed of heartache that the small sensation of comfort feels foreign and strange.

And good.

Stiles shudders, tipping his head back as his eyes flutter close on their own accord. He lets the shower envelop him, wrapping him in a warm shroud of wet that slips over his muscles and irons out all the painful kinks that he wasn't even aware of. A heavy exhale escapes his lips, and it's like like he's spewing out half the empty bitterness that had built up over the past couple weeks. Then he inhales deeply through his nose, relishing in how the hot steam fills his lungs and tickles his throat.
He stays like that for a while, allowing the liquid to lick down his spine and wash away the outer layer of his grief. He knows that not even a thousand showers could clean him entirely from the memory of that day, but in this moment it's nice to let go — just for a little bit — and let the water strip away the physical grime. Small tremors ripple down his belly as the shower jets nibble his hairline and run through his scalp, cascading down his shoulders in watery ribbons that absorb the painful knot in his chest and take it down the drain. Soon he realizes that his own tears add to the wetness on his face, mixing with the dewy beads sticking to the fuzz on his cheeks before rolling off his jawline. But these are good tears, the first of their kind since last year.

Tears of relief.

He lets himself cry, feeling oddly comfortable with the way his body jerks with deep, dizzying sobs that expel the bottled up anguish he'd been repressing the past couple weeks. It doesn't dislodge all of the pain, but it lessens it just enough so that he feels like maybe he would be able to wake up and endure it again tomorrow. Gradually his blubbing runs its course and dies down, leaving him lose and pliant like a wrung-out rag. It's a nice change, he thinks, instead of the rusty, machine-like
quality his muscles had acquired.

So maybe Derek had a point about taking the shower. Stiles sighs, rubbing a damp palm across his cheek. He wonders how long he was going to stay here. The school had given him the semester off, but the winter months would soon bleed into spring, which would then stretch into summer before reaching the next school year, and that was a long time to spend around the house with Derek Hale, whose primary method of communication was eyebrow-furrowing and cryptic expressions. He wasn't sure how long he would be able to stand it before the tension and the silence and that stony, stupid face would get to be too much, but still— despite how they hardly uttered a word to each other, there was a small comfort derived from knowing that the guy was just down the hall. They had each other's company, but how much did that really matter if they never acknowledged it?

He had inherited a nice chunk of retirement funds from the department, but he wouldn't be able to sign the lease on any rental until he was eighteen. At seventeen he was powerless, a mere infant in the eyes of the law. He sighs again, feeling the cool rush of his breath brush over his damp chest. It isn't even much of a decision.

As soon as he turned eighteen in March, he was moving out.

He blinks his eyes open, feeling beads of water break apart on his eyelashes. He glances to the small shelf to his left, noticing the colorful lineup of soaps and shampoos. There are several bottles, all of which are notably nice brands of conditioner, shaving cream, body wash, and something called 'l'essence de citron' body butter, which looks very fancy and also very tasty but probably wasn't for eating. There's even a loofah sponge hanging from a small hook to the side, and he'd never used one but he's pretty sure he had heard Lydia and Allison talking about them on more than one occasion.

Tentatively he reaches out and picks up a slim bottle of mint shampoo, tightening his slippery grip as the weight tugs his hand down. It's full, unopened. They all are. Derek must have gone out and bought them for his stay.

Huh.

He tips the bottle upside-down, snapping the cap open with a slight push of his thumb. Green gel oozes out onto his fingers, releasing a sharp scent of mint that stings his nostrils and reminds him of chilly mornings and fresh air, and he sucks in a deep drag of it before scrubbing a dollop into his scalp. The shampoo lathers his hair and leaves it squeaky and smooth as it rinses away, and he selects the body butter next, because why not. The drain slurps and sputters with the influx of soapy bubbles that slip down his calves and cover his feet like foamy shoes, spraying the air with the scent of oranges and cinnamon and clean.

And he loves it.

He finally turns off the tap when the water starts to run cool and he catches himself swaying slightly, flirting with the idea of falling asleep in the stall. When he steps out and dries off he glances at himself in the mirror, thinking that he looks different somehow from when he first undressed. He can't figure out what it is at first, but then it clicks that his cheeks are now flushed with color, and his eyes shine with a brightness he hadn't seen since before New Year's. The change isn't that significant, but it's enough to make him mentally note to take more showers in the future.

He shuffles out of the bathroom with a plush white towel wrapped around his waist, and another one draped over his arm that he used to rub the wetness from his hair. His nose and cheeks are still hot and blotchy from the steam, and he sniffs a bit as he shakes the damp bangs from his eyes, noting with a frown how the freckled skin over of chest is pink as well. Upon reaching his room he wraps a
pruney hand around the doorknob, but stops instinctually and looks up, catching Derek staring at him from the kitchen. The alpha's gaze is guarded and impassive as always, but this time his lips are parted just a little bit and his eyes are wider than usual, and Stiles offers him a tiny nod of thanks, because he wants to say 'thank you' for the shower but words aren't Derek's style.

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Thus, when Derek actually speaks to him the next day, Stiles nearly craps his pants.

"You should eat something."

Stiles chokes, spitting out a small spray of water that dribbles down his chin and splatters to the kitchen tile below in a chorus of wet slaps. Charming. He hastily wipes the liquid off his skin with his sleeve, swiveling around to face the werewolf in the corner, whose nose is tucked firmly into a thick yellow-paged novel. Stiles didn't notice him sitting there in the chair by the bookshelf, clad in what looks like a comfortable grey v-neck and sweats. That wasn't fair. No one should look good in sweats.

A flat "What?" is all he can manage as his toes curl into the laminate floor, fingers clamping tighter around the glass in his hand.

"You haven't been eating any of the leftovers," Derek states matter-of-factly, eyes still glued to his book. "You should eat something."

Stiles stiffens. It's true, that he isn't eating much aside from the occasional protein bar he fished out from the cupboard. His trips to the kitchen were almost always solely dedicated to fetching glasses of water or a Dr. Pepper if he was in the mood, but he didn't think Derek had noticed. Food just hadn't appealed to him lately, making his stomach twist uncomfortably whenever he thought about the tastes and textures of anything more exciting than white rice. He hadn't even been bothering to open the fridge— God knows what kind of leftovers Derek was referring to? But oh, what if he thought he was being rude? He probably—

"Calm down."

Derek's sigh slices into his thoughts and catches him off guard before he remembers that right, werewolves can hear heartbeats.

"I'm not angry," Derek continues, peeling his eyes up to look at him, and Stiles stops breathing for a second because this is the first time Derek has really looked at him without his pissy eyebrows on, and it's striking how open and smooth his expression looks without them. "But you should get a meal in you," he concludes, returning to his book. "Come out for dinner later."

"Uh...'Kay," is what finally pops out of his mouth before he breaks his puzzled gaze away to go back to his room, where his bed is waiting for him.

He must sleep for a while, because when he wakes up the sky is bruised with dusk. A cold blue light rains down upon the scattered trees outside his window, and the smell of something savory and
delicious is leaking into his room. The scent triples in intensity as he pushes open his door and follows his nose into the kitchen, where he finds Derek sitting at the dining table, digging a spoon into a heaping pile of buttery mashed potatoes, which steam beside a perfectly trimmed T-bone steak drowning in its own juices. Stiles’s mouth falls open, because the rest of the potatoes are in a crock pot on the counter, and another steak sizzles in a frypan on the stove, still hot.

"You *cook?*" He blurts out, and he feels his eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. By 'dinner,' he expected takeout. Instant ramen, maybe— but a home cooked meal?

Derek stops chewing a moment to shoot him a deadpan look.

"What, do you think I just eat fast food all the time like you used to?" He states calmly, shoveling another mountain of potatoes into his mouth. Stiles bites his lip and carefully inches closer to the stove to confirm that the steak in the pan isn't actually freshly killed rabbit flanks or something. It isn't, and it smells even better up close.

"I dunno, I just figured you… Cooking is just so… Normal," He mutters weakly, glancing back at Derek, who's sawing into his T-bone. It cuts away like butter.

"I know this may come as a shock to you, but werewolves don't kill and eat rabbits," Derek replies wryly, voice thick around the chunk of meat in his mouth. Stiles purses his lips as he side-glances the potatoes in the crock-pot, because that had totally been his firm suspicion ever since first learning about werewolves. He knew Scott would never, but Derek...

"Sit down and eat."

Stiles hesitates, but cautiously eyes the spot at the table across from Derek, where a plate has been set down for him. Derek doesn't look up as he takes it and carries it to the stove, mouth watering as he observes the seared flank in the pan. It looks tender and well-seasoned, medium rare and a rich pink in the middle around the bone, saturated in red juice that looks like...

**Blood.**

He takes a step back. A hand flies to his mouth with the sudden nausea because the meat looks just like *flesh*—his father's flesh and bone when his chest was sliced open— and suddenly he's back in the woods that night, where his dad's sightless gaze and bloodied, lifeless body flash before his eyes like a tape on rewind. The empty plate in his hands drops down onto the stove with a jarring 'clang' and Derek's head snaps up in his direction, undoubtedly picking up the spike in his heart rate.

Stiles whirls around, nearly tripping over his feet as he shakily backs towards the hallway, silently cursing himself because he must look like a spooked horse. He feels a blush creeping up his neck as Derek stares at him, looking like he's putting something together and is about to stand up and announce it, but Stiles doesn't want to hear it.

"I…" He starts, but his voice cracks on the word as another image of carnage strobes in his mind. "Sorry, I c-can't."

And before Derek can summon a response he bolts back to his room, his hunger long forgotten with the empty plate on the stove.

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After that, Derek doesn't mention dinner again. Stiles takes it as an excuse to continue his routine of
hiding in bed, using sleep to fast-forward through the days. His lack of appetite runs rampant, manifesting in his steadily declining diet of painkillers, tap water and protein bars. His energy levels plummet with the decision, but his grief seemed stubbornly intent on preventing a fork from reaching his mouth, even when his hunger pushed through and pestered.

Nothing compared to the inner turmoil he faced upon wandering out to kitchen, on instances when Derek was there eating at the table. The guy was always tucking into some sort of mouth-watering pasta or filet he threw together in a pan (Stiles still couldn’t believe he actually cooked), and if not then it was some kind of fancy sandwich or jerky. Regardless, he would always pause to glance up at him, and Stiles would always avert his eyes in embarrassment. One morning it was an orange, and Derek peeled off a few sections and wordlessly held it out to him, but Stiles refused, like he always did. Instead he grabbed a Cliff bar from the cabinet above the counter and returned to his room, not wanting to repeat the incident with the steak.

He doesn’t think much of it until he catches sight of himself in the mirror one day before stepping into the shower.

Faint fog marks spill out against the glass as he leans forward, peering at the thin figure reflecting back at him. His cheeks are hollow beneath his sunken eyes, like someone had taken a chisel to his flesh and accidentally chipped off too much. The sallow pallor of his skin looks ghostly beneath the fluorescent lighting of the bathroom, like the saturation had been sucked away and redistributed beneath his eyes, where the circles were far too dark for the amount he slept. He brings up a hand, delicately tracing his fingers over his collarbones and down to his navel, where his ribs protruded sharply beneath his pale skin. It shocks him. He’d noticed how his clothes had started to hang looser in places, but he didn’t think his disinterest in food had taken that much of a toll.

Still, it doesn’t really hit him until he collapses in the living room.

He wakes up that afternoon feeling ill, even more so than usual. His head had taken on a certain ache as of late, one that no amount of pain relievers could take away, and he was running low on those. With a groan he squints at the clock by his bedside and blinks the numbers into focus, wincing as he reads a fuzzy ‘4:05pm.’ Shit. He’d been sleeping later than usual, but this was exceptional. He tries to think back to what time he fell asleep the previous night (or was it this morning?) but lately time and events had been bleeding together, leaving his memory strung along in blurry fragments.

The world spins as he lurches himself into a sitting position, and the pounding in his head doubles with the change in altitude. With a grimace he quickly presses a cool palm against his temple, willing the painful jackhammering to subside. Damn, was he sick? The sheets wrinkle beneath his grip as he reaches over and fumbles for the bottle of Advil on his nightstand, frowning when he doesn't hear a rattle upon picking it up. A quick shake confirms that it's empty.

Great.

He chucks it miserably across the room, digging his fingers into the mattress as a wave of nausea rolls over him with the movement. He blinks hard, dry swallowing as he runs a clammy hand across his forehead. This was stupid. He didn’t even go outside, and Derek was incapable of carrying viruses. For a moment he thinks maybe he ate something bad, but that can't be right because he hadn't been eating much of anything lately. Maybe if he got some fresh air— people do that when they feel like death, right?

Somehow he manages to stumble to his suitcase and dig out a pair of jeans and a jacket without falling over. He takes his time getting them on because his muscles aren't really working right, they're all tight and shaky and his movements are uncoordinated as he fumbles with the laces on his sneakers. Eventually he gives up and lets them go untied.
The trip out to the living room isn't much easier, and his vision swims as he staggers forwards. He nearly pitches to the side before he clumsily flings out his arms and grabs onto the couch for balance. It doesn't help, and a wave of cold sweat ripples across his flesh as the small tremors in his limbs intensify. A slap of fear strikes him just then, as he hunches there catching his breath, because he really doesn't feel well and he doesn't know where Derek is— hell, Derek was probably out getting groceries or burying a bone or doing some other werewolf crap while he's doubled over the couch dying, because that's sure what it feels like.

He forces himself to breathe through his nose as he presses a hand to his queasy stomach. Just get outside, he urges himself. And do it without barfing all over Derek's ancestral rug, he adds as a grim afterthought as he eyes the expensive-looking stretch of patterned carpet at his feet.

He straightens up and manages to take a couple shaky steps forward, but that's as far as he gets before the room darkens around the edges and he realizes too late that oh fuck, he's about to pass out, just as the world tilts and his legs buckle beneath him. The last thing he registers is his cheek slamming painfully against the cold hardwood floor, and then everything disappears.

When he comes to, there's warm, rough hands on his face and they're slapping his cheeks. There's some shouting too, but it's all warbled and far away and he can't really decipher it. He blearily manages to crack open his eyelids, and if he had the strength he would flinch, because Derek's face is way too close to his own— and he looks positively livid. Slowly he realizes that Derek is the one who's yelling, and Stiles is glad that he can't really make sense of the words because judging by the angle of his eyebrows it must have been some pretty hardcore cussing.

"—iles! Answer me!"

His hearing finally kicks in and catches up to the movement of Derek's lips, like someone turning up the volume on the TV. It's loud— too loud, so he shuts his eyes against it, stomach rolling dangerously. 'I'm gonna be sick,' is what he means to say, but the words don't come out very well and slur into something more like "m g'nnuh b'ick.' Consciousness is lose and slippery like a bar of soap in his hands, but he's lucid enough to register that he's absolutely drenched in cold sweat, which is totally gross. And great, this is just great, because Derek is really going to kill him if he hurls on the rug.

A voice barks at him to stay awake, and he tries, he really does, but he feels his eyes rolling back and his eyelids rebel doggedly against staying open. He's just so damn tired— and suddenly there are strong arms hooking underneath his armpits and hoisting him up, dragging him backwards until they release him and plop him down heavily on the couch.

"Fucking idiot," he hears, and then Derek must leave him for a moment, because it gets quiet. What seems like only a second later the hands are back on his cheeks again, forcefully tapping away like they're punching out morse code.

"—ake this. Come on."

The distinct, crisp click of a can of soda being opened slices into his awareness, followed by something cold and smooth being shoved into his hand. Good luck, he thinks distantly, because his fingers are slack and useless and the drink nearly falls out of his grip before he hears an exasperated sigh, and then there's another set of fingers prying open his own, wrapping firmly over his knuckles so the can stays in place. A warm, calloused palm appears beneath his jawline and tips his head up, holding it in place as the soda is brought up to his mouth.

Stiles blearily and somewhat bitterly wonders why the werewolf even cares— why he doesn't just leave him be and let him starve, because what was the point of eating? Why should he bother trying
to keep himself alive, when the two people he'd loved and cherished the most were now gone, ripped from his grasp without so much as a goodbye? They were never coming back, and knowing that left a pit in his stomach deeper and more painful than any skipped meal ever could.

But the sharp aluminum edge brushes against his bottom lip, and he feels Derek nudge him a little with his thumb, and Stiles is aware enough to know that he should probably take a few sips.

Derek stays by his side and supports him for a few minutes until he finishes half the can and is able to hold it on his own. Somewhere in the back of his mind it occurs to him how weird this is— how Derek's never been this close to him before, let alone held him in place like some incompetent baby. It reminds him of last Halloween, when he discovered the alpha splayed out and unconscious on the floor of the hospital elevator, and how in that moment the invisible wall between them shattered. How easily and without second thought he'd sprinted over and grabbed the werewolf's stubbly cheeks, desperate in his attempts to wake him up and ensure that he wasn't dead.

"Stay awake," Derek growls before spinning on his heels and marching off, leaving Stiles with warm imprints on the skin where his hands were.

Stiles doesn't answer, letting his head rest back against the couch as the effect of the drink fizzes beneath his fatigue and dampens his nausea. He doesn't catch the sharp, peruse looks Derek shoots him over his shoulder as he dozes in and out, vaguely aware of distant sounds coming from the kitchen; pots clanging and the click of stove burners flickering to high heat, and the muffled clattering of dishes. He figures he must check out again, because suddenly Derek is there a second later, shaking him by the shoulder and snapping his fingers in front of his face. Stiles blinks a pair of steely emerald eyes into focus, and takes the opportunity to observe the werewolf's features. His expression is hard and determined, lips pressed into a thin line, but there's something different in his eyes. It looks an awful lot like concern, but Stiles dismisses it as a trick of the light.

"Up. Get up," Derek commands, and wraps a strong grip around his elbow before pulling him to his feet. Stiles teeters unsteadily as the alpha walks (drags) him over to the kitchen table and practically throws him down in a chair, scooting him in with a firm shove. Stiles sways forward a bit with the movement, but manages not to face plant onto the table. It's a good thing, too, because there's a steaming plate of spaghetti in front of him, freshly cooked and saturated in a generous helping of marinara sauce. He blinks in surprise and glances to the stove, where an empty jar of Rao's Homemade tomato sauce sits beside a large boiling pot on the front burner. Then it clicks. That's what all the noise was, Derek was making him spaghetti.

Derek made him spaghetti.

Oh.

"Eat," Derek commands, and Stiles looks up as the werewolf takes the seat opposite him, setting down his own plate of pasta. He's eyeing him sternly from underneath his eyebrows, so Stiles obliges, tentatively wrapping his fingers around the fork in front of him. He pokes the prongs into the pasta, watching a tendril of steam curl up past his face as he lifts a small roll of noodles to his mouth.

The first bite settles in his stomach uncomfortably, and he worries that he might not be able to keep any more down, but as soon as the second forkful hits his tongue his appetite rapidly awakens, and he nearly cries with the sudden surge of hunger that erupts from the empty pit in his belly. The instinct to eat quickly overpowers his grief, and he eagerly plunges his fork into the pasta with increasing enthusiasm, relishing in the way his tastebuds respond to the sharp tang of the tomatoes and the chewy texture of the noodles. He's aware of Derek pausing to observe him, but digs in shamelessly anyway, overjoyed to finally be able to feel and taste food again.
He's only a few bites in when he starts to feel full, but when he moves to put his fork down Derek stops chewing and glowers at him until he takes another bite. This continues until Stiles forces down the last of his spaghetti, leaving his plate clean and devoid of a single strand of pasta. He puffs out his cheeks and places a hand on his belly upon finishing, slouching back against his chair as his stomach protests against it's new volume. He's uncomfortably full, but pleased to note that the jitteriness in his limbs is gone, and his headache has subsided considerably. Now only a residual tiredness remains in his bones, but a sleepiness that is warm and muzzy— not the sore ache he's used to. He’s just about to rise and return to his room when Derek speaks up, finally breaking the silence.

"Don't do that again," he states quietly, as if Stiles fainted on purpose. He keeps his gaze down as he twirls a final bundle of noodles around his fork. "No more protein bars. No more skipping meals. You will sit down and eat what I serve you from now on."

Stiles observes him wearily, without any words on hand to respond with, but struck with the sudden urge to laugh. He thinks it's rather forward, the way Derek phrased it. Grunted it out, like a part of him preferred the words to be left unsaid, but another part of him released them anyway, without so much as a 'please.' Stiles decides not to hold it against him, because 'please' wasn't exactly Derek's favorite word.

He nods, standing up on much stronger legs as he stifles a yawn and places his plate in the sink. Briefly he contemplates staying to wash it, but the call of sleep nags at him, weighing heavily on his shoulders. He decides to leave it for Derek, because he knows that Derek will wash it for him, just this once. Before rounding the corner to the hallway, Stiles pauses and looks back, catching a pair of green eyes.

"Thank you," he says quietly. He's not sure how intelligible it is, but he knows Derek caught it. Werewolf hearing, and all. Then he breaks away and returns to his room.

He goes to bed feeling uncomfortably bloated, but the best he's felt all year.
The day Derek comes home and finds Stiles passed out on the floor is a day he never wants to repeat.

He knows something is off upon approaching the door, keys in hand as he trots up the porch steps. Lifelong experience as a werewolf had taught him that a sudden chill up his spine usually indicated that something was amiss, but when he bursts in and discovers Stiles crumpled face-down in the middle of the room, he can't say it's much of a surprise. The stubborn idiot hadn't been eating half of what he should've been, and apparently it had finally caught up with him. But upon catching sight of Stiles's lifeless form, dread like no other seizes Derek anyway, because for a split second he thinks that Stiles might have done something else—
Something worse.

The paper bag of groceries in his arms hits the floor with a crumpled 'smack,' spilling out oranges and denting a carton of milk that spurts across the hardwood as he bolts forward and drops to a crouch, quickly grabbing his shoulders to roll him onto his back. Stiles flops over like a wet rag doll, limbs lolling limply with the movement. He's passed out cold, unresponsive and absolutely drenched in clammy sweat. Dark tousles of hair cling to his damp forehead like strands of seaweed strewn across an ocean shore, which makes his drained complexion pop out like bleached alabaster. He's pale, too pale, even for Stiles, and his heartbeat is weak and fluttery, like it's trying desperately to escape his ribcage but lacks the strength or knowhow to break through. There's also a small bruise on his left cheekbone, presumably from where his face must have slammed into the floorboards.

A string of curses slip through his teeth in vicious, tight-lipped mutters as he shakes Stiles by the shoulders and slaps his cheeks in an effort to rouse him, perhaps a little harder than what was necessary because he's so damn angry—angry at Stiles for not caring enough to eat anything more than a stupid protein bar, but even angrier at himself for not stepping in sooner. He had seen the way Stiles shied away from the cupboards, eyeing meals as if the food was laced with arsenic and crafting excuses to avoid eating as if it were his career. Meanwhile the leftovers Derek put aside for him had stacked up in the fridge, untouched. He had decided not to push and let Stiles have his space, hoping that sooner or later he would snap out of it on his own.

And now the kid was sprawled out on the floor in hypoglycemic shock, all because his new coward of a housemate didn't try hard enough to make him sit down and eat a fucking meal.

Finally Stiles comes around, if just barely. Derek manages to drag him up onto the couch, noting with a frown how light he is. The harsh curve of his ribs sticks out from beneath his jacket as he plops him down against the cushions, and his gaze strays instinctually to the chiseled edges of the teen's cheekbones.

He mentally kicks himself all the way to the kitchen and back, sighing in vexation when getting the can of soda down Stiles's throat proves no easy task. The human's head lolls listlessly to the side, fingers slack and useless around the drink, and Derek is convinced that somehow in his half-lucid state Stiles is testing him; challenging him to see how far he would overstep the invisible wall between them to get the liquid past his lips.

But he doesn't even need to lift a toe, because the barrier shattered back at the front door. Derek doesn't hesitate to take Stiles's cold hand in his own, cupping a palm beneath his face to hold him upright. He reeks of exhaustion and sick and sweat, but then the acrid scent of grief hits the air like a freight train, overpowering them all as the can is brought up to his mouth. Tiny, distressed crinkles spill out across Stiles's brow as he weakly clamps his lips together against the sharp edge of the aluminum, and something small and horrified snaps in Derek's chest, because he knows what the small gesture meant:

Stiles was starving himself, and he knew it.

It was on purpose.

And a dark, raging, storming anguish flares up with the realization, something so wild and desperate and painful that Derek draws blood biting down on his cheek to suppress the urge to slap him again, because Stiles wasn't allowed to do this—Stiles couldn't just give up and throw away every brilliant, courageous, stupid move he had made to save the pack over the past couple years, not after all the strokes of luck where his human ass narrowly scrambled out of death's way at the last possible second. It was like all the life had left him, leaving him hollow, dead-eyed and quiet, which was something Stiles was never supposed to be.
It terrifies Derek.

And that terror unravels a small, quiet seed of sadness at the very depth of his core, because looking at Stiles now as he lies gaunt and neck-high in sorrow is like facing a mirror; a mirage of himself from nearly six years ago, when he was a sixteen-year-old shattered by the loss of his family.

It was eerie how similar he had been after the fire, sleeping away the pain and refusing to take showers, robbed of all drive to eat or take care of himself. For months the grief ate away at him, ripping into his flesh like a pair of razor-sharp canines that never ceased feasting, not even in slumber when his dreams soured into nightmares. The only difference was that back then he had been forced to live with Peter, who couldn't have cared less about his miserable existence. The man had disregarded him entirely, but that invisible wall had been composed of resentment, which his uncle reinforced with every eye-roll and merciless sneer whenever Derek broke down and cried, claiming that werewolves were 'not bred to be soft.' In the end, it was the thought of his mother that had saved him, because he knew that it would break Thalia Hale's heart if he turned his back on life.

So Derek stays there, shoving aside his initial lividity to hold Stiles upright as he slowly takes sips of Seven-Up, because he isn't about to let the guy destroy himself like he had nearly done all those years ago. His hands come away sticky with cooled sweat when Stiles is conscious enough to drink on his own, but he doesn't flinch as he wipes his palms on his jeans because he knows how much it sucks to be drenched in your own feverish perspiration.

From the kitchen his neck seems to swivel around on its own accord as he prepares the spaghetti, he guesses to make sure Stiles hadn't stopped breathing or anything. Stiles doesn't seem to be listening to his order of 'stay awake' very well, head lolling back against the couch with eyes closed and his mouth hanging open like a gutted fish. The can of soda balances precariously on his lap, wobbling slightly in his loose grip with every breath. It isn't long before the questions begin creeping into his mind— how long had Stiles been lying unconscious? How long would he have lied there if he hadn't come home sooner? How long…

But Derek quickly shoves the thought away, focusing instead on the small hint of color that had returned to Stiles's cheeks as he strains the pasta over the sink.

If the fire had taught him one thing, it was that throwing around 'what-if's' never did any good.

Derek officially makes the decision when they sit down at the table, after seeing the way Stiles plunges into his meal. Six years ago he didn't have anyone to drag him out of bed by the ankle to get him to bathe, or anyone to wash his sheets for him while he wallowed in his grief, and when he passed out himself after weeks of skipped meals, he had to stagger to his own two feet and choke down a handful of saltines, because no one had been there to cook spaghetti for him.

But he was going to be there for Stiles.

That's why subconsciously or not, Stiles wasn't allowed to give up on himself.

Derek wouldn't let him.
The lamp by his side buzzes dimly as he sits at the dining table by the front window, thumbing through one of his mother's old cookbooks he'd dug out from the top cabinet.

It was dusty and yellowed, discolored in places with what looked like oil stains from long ago, but it had been her favorite. He had spent the last fifteen minutes scouring for meatless recipes that would be enticing enough to encourage Stiles to eat, because after a week's worth of grilled cheese and pasta he was fresh out of ideas. After seeing the way Stiles eyed the steak that day, he'd been careful to avoid cooking up beef or any similar meats that could trigger him; he'd looked like a spooked horse that night, and Derek had a feeling that the reflected terror in his eyes ignited from seeing his
father's flesh in the flank on the stove.

But now, Stiles was…

Better.

Derek noticed the change a little bit more every time the teen quietly padded out of his bedroom to join him for meals, which he did regularly now. He refused breakfast, insisting that his appetite wasn't really there in the mornings, but for lunch and dinner he would shuffle out and shyly take a seat at the table, eyes downcast and plaintive as he waited patiently for Derek to set a plate of food in front of him. It was then, when Derek would seize the opportunity to slyly observe his pallor, making mental notes on any returned saturation to his complexion, the softening contour of his too-sharp cheekbones, or the slightest sign of a returned spark in his eyes.

They ate in silence for the most part, aside from Stiles's occasional, 'this is pretty good' and mumbled, 'thanks for the food.' Sometimes Derek would find the courage to pose a tentative, 'how are you?' To which Stiles would always glance up curiously at him, as if he thought he'd misheard the question. The answer was always a halfhearted grunt, but last night Stiles had replied with a quiet, "okay."

The extra meals appeared to be regulating his sleeping patterns as well, for the dark bruises beneath his eyes had been steadily receding. Derek also knew because he had been checking up on him at least once a day, quietly pausing by his bedroom door on the way to the garage or laundry room to tune into his heartbeat. Slow and steady when he was asleep, or accompanied by the soft clicks of his laptop keyboard when he was awake. When he'd first arrived Derek seldom heard the latter, but now they were just about even.

Derek licks his thumb and peels off a post-it note, sticking it to the top of a page with an eggplant parmesan recipe. Tonight there was a pan of garlic potatoes in the oven, which was due to be taken out any minute. With a stretch he snaps the cookbook closed and tucks it on top of the fridge, then walks down the hall and knocks on Stiles's door, stating "dinner" as his knuckles rap against the wood.

After a few minutes of the usual silence at the table, he decides to take a risk.

"Scott's been asking about you," he states cautiously, poking a fork into a cheesy potato wedge. "He says you aren't answering his texts."

Stiles stiffens, a flicker of fear crossing his features. He lets out a tepid grunt.

"Mm."

"I'm meeting with him and Isaac Monday," he continues carefully, avoiding the teen's eyes as he nonchalantly shovels the spuds into his mouth. "You should come."

He watches as Stiles squirms a bit in his seat and slowly chews a mouthful of potato, eyes downcast.

"I'll think about it."

Derek nods, returning to his meal. He can tell by Stiles's tone that he has no intention of going, although it would probably do Stiles good to see Scott; to regain a sense of normalcy and see that his dad's death wouldn't undermine their friendship, because he suspected that was the root of the human's hesitancy. Stiles undoubtedly missed Scott just as much as Scott missed him; the younger alpha had been bugging him relentlessly the past few weeks with text messages and even a couple phone calls, which spoke volumes for his concern because Scott had never dared dialing his number before. Each time the teen would bombard him with questions on how Stiles was doing, and he
would always fail to drum up a sufficient answer.

"Why do you put so much effort into your kitchen?"

Derek blinks up in surprise, pausing mid-chew. He must look confused, because Stiles gestures his fork in the direction of pantry shelves.

"The cabinets," Stiles provides plainly, glancing over at them. "They're new. Looks like you had the counters reinstalled, too, and the wallpaper. But you left it alone throughout the rest of the house. Also, your cookware is probably more expensive than my jeep and we're eating roasted garlic potatoes, which isn't exactly instant ramen… So why all the effort?"

Derek stares at him, silently stunned. The kid was observant, he'd give him that. If anyone else had asked he probably would have retaliated the question with a death-glare and a snarled warning, but that was the most Stiles had uttered in one sitting since his arrival. So he takes his time chewing, thoughtfully constructing his answer.

"My mother used to cook a lot," He starts quietly, and some invisible force holds his gaze down and away from the teen as he speaks. "Mealtimes were… Something we did, as a family. I wanted to continue that as best I could."

A pause. He can feel Stiles studying him, perhaps surprised with his open answer. Then he hears the teen scrape his fork across his plate, scooping up the last of his potatoes.

"Mm… My mom used t'make macaroni and cheese," Stiles murmurs, mouth half full. "Put little bits 'f sausage in it. Stuff was like heaven in a pan."

Derek eyes him cautiously, unsure of how to respond. He settles for a short nod and wipes a napkin across his mouth, folding it on his plate before scooting out his chair.

"You finished?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

He stands up and clears the dishes, sticking them in the washer before heading to the living room. There he plops down on the couch, but looks up in surprise as Stiles follows, quietly sauntering over to join him instead of retreating to his room. For a moment he internally freezes, unsure of what to do as Stiles takes a seat a couple of cushions over, giving plenty of space between them. The kid had been avoiding him like the plague since his arrival, but years of practice enable him to smother his bemusement beneath a vacant mask as he reaches for the remote, switching on the TV as if the two of them sitting on the same piece of furniture wasn't new or strange or awkward at all.

The silence is palpable as he absently flicks through the channels, hyper-aware of the fact that Stiles was only a few feet away from him. He had been living alone for years, just him and his thoughts to fill the empty house and the passage of time, and apparently that solitude had been so deeply ingrained within his routine that actually having company by his side settled awkwardly on his shoulders like a foreign ailment. His unease manifests in the rapid-fire rate in which he passes by the stations, making the screen flash with quick snippets of trashy reality shows and wrestling matches, spanish soap operas, a steamy movie make-out scene, a game of golf—all far too awkward to be watching with—

"Dude, you're worse than Scott," Stiles mumbles airily beside him, stifling a yawn. "Pick something."

Derek shoots him a scowl, giving the clicker a final push before setting it down in his lap. The
channel lands on an old Jackie Chan film. It's one of the earlier ones, in the middle of a cheesy fight scene set to an eighties' soundtrack from hell. The choreography is atrocious, comprised of ridiculous twirls and unrealistic kicks and jabs that would do little more than knock the hero off balance.

"Hah... You could punch better than that," Stiles jests tiredly, absently flicking his hand towards the television. His lip twitches a little with the comment, as if it intended to quirk into a smile but exhausted itself halfway there and fell flat. Derek side-eyes the action but doesn't say anything, swinging his view back to the screen.

No other words are exchanged after that, enabling the corny sound effects to fill the silence as the sun disappears completely behind the horizon, blanketing the room in darkness. As the night stretches on he notices Stiles slowly sinking back against the cushions and jerk with a couple of false starts, but it isn't until the film finally ends and the credits start rolling that he glances over and sees that Stiles has actually fallen asleep, head slung heavily over the side of the couch with his cheek smooshed into the crook of his arm.

Great.

Initially Derek grits his teeth in mild annoyance. He didn't expect this.

He tries reaching out to shake his shoulder, but his fingers halt a few inches short of Stiles's skin, unable to make contact. Instead his eyes trail somewhat pensively over the curled figure, snagging on the human's slack face. It's strange to see his features so placid and ironed out, devoid of the tense lines that had found permanent reside on his forehead; he actually looks at peace for once, free from the desolation of his conscious world.

Derek sighs heavily, rubbing a hand over his face as if he was trying to wipe away an invisible layer of preemptive skin. There's no way he's carrying his skinny ass to bed— but Stiles looks uncomfortable at best, folded awkwardly against the leather with his neck scrunched in the crevice of his elbow. His other arm hangs listlessly off the edge of the seat cushion, brushing against his tucked-up knees, and Derek feels sore just looking at him. He casts his gaze upwards, at war with the ceiling.

He'd leave him on the couch, but he at least owed the guy a pillow.

Pitch black envelops the room as he quietly pushes open the door, but his eyes adjust immediately. The space smelled of Stiles; clean sweat, laundry detergent, and the acrid tang of grief, all laced with slight undertones of mint shampoo. A few socks and pajama bottoms were strewn carelessly about the floor, but his classic red hoodie had been folded gently over his desk chair, forever his prized article of clothing. Aside from that and the rumpled comforter, the room was just as clean and barren as it had been the day before he arrived, almost as if no one had moved in at all. A quick glance to the left confirms the suitcase still tucked away in the corner, yet to be unpacked.

He shoves the last observation aside as he approaches the bed and grabs the nearest pillow, but halts as the lowlight glints off of something in it's place. He swivels back around, gaze narrowing on the small object by the headboard, and feels his features sag with the weight of what he spies on the sheets.
It was the Sheriff's badge. Dented and nicked from years of duty, dull and worn down from fingers that had seldom ceased caressing the brass since the new year.

And Stiles had been sleeping with it under his pillow.

Derek glances at the downy cushion in his hands, suddenly compelled with the urge to put it back. If he took it to the couch, Stiles would know that he had seen the badge, and for some reason that didn't seem right. He felt like he had invaded a sacred secret of his; something that he imagined the human would probably prefer to keep private.

So he sets the pillow back down over the medal, sealing it away until Stiles chose to uncover it. Then he grabs the pillow on the right side of the mattress and heads back to the living room, shutting the door behind him with a soft 'snick.'

Stiles rouses slightly as Derek gently slips a palm beneath his head and tips it forward, hastily tucking the cushion in from behind so he can retract his hand and minimize the amount of time his fingers spend in the human's hair. An unintelligible mumble escapes Stiles's lips on a subdued exhale as he sinks back into it, eyelids fluttering briefly before sleep reclaims him and drags him back under. The thin cotton of his t-shirt glows softly beneath the cool light of the window and illuminates the small
goosebumps peppering his freckled arms, and as an afterthought Derek snatches the wool blanket draped over the back of the armchair and drops it onto him before trudging upstairs to bed, the imprint of the Sheriff’s star still engraved in his mind's eye.

The next morning Stiles is still asleep on the couch when he comes out to make breakfast.

Derek observes him amusedly throughout the day as he passes by the living room, each time huffing out a snort at the human’s increasingly ridiculous positions. At nine he’s curled up tight in a fetal position, the top of his spidery hair barely peeking out from underneath the wool blanket, but at ten he’s spread out on his stomach with arms mimicking the folded wings of a chicken. An hour later his
body is draped over the cushions like a swooned maiden, long limbs stretched out and tangled in the grey quilt, half of which had been kicked to the floor. His head is tipped back and buried in his pillow, cheek stained by the thin trail of drool leaking from the corner of his wide-open mouth. Derek's never seen anything dumber.

He's assembling a sandwich in the kitchen when Stiles finally wakes at noon and rolls over onto his back, slinging a floppy arm across his eyes with a low groan. Derek watches as the sleep drains away from him in tiny increments, replaced immediately with the return of discontent lines across his brow. It takes a few moments for the teen to realize where he is upon blearily blinking the world into focus, and when it hits him he jerks upright, bumping the crown of his head against the side of the couch in the process.

"About time," Derek mutters from the counter, voice thick with drawl as he piles slices of pastrami on a cibatta bun. Stiles's head snaps in his direction so fast that Derek hears his neck crack, and his eyes stretch wide as they dart wildly from the TV, the blanket on his lap, back to Derek, finally skittering to a halt on the pillow squished beneath his elbow. A bubblegum hue bites his cheeks as he connects all the dots.

"What—" Stiles croaks, licking his lips nervously. He doesn't seem to know what he should address first, or address at all. "Is this… Is this my pillow?"

"Yes."

"Oh…” Stiles swallows, hands curling into the case. "Did youuu…?" His eye twitches as he trails off and peers at him, too perturbed to finish the question and give anything away. Derek meets his gaze, quirking his brow like he has no clue where the kid is going, and doesn't care what the destination is.

"Did I…?" He parrots for emphasis, pushing his eyebrow up further until Stiles presses his lips together and looks away, satisfied that he didn't see the badge.

"Nevermind," Stiles mutters. He swings his legs off of the couch and throws him another confused frown as he bends down to pick up the blanket, but doesn't say anything as he folds it up and places it back over the armchair. Just as he spins on his heels to meander back to his room, there's a knock at the front door— three short raps against the soiled wood.

"Wow, solicitors must be desperate if they're willing to come all the way out here to try this place," Stiles drones, but Derek speaks up before he can walk down the hall.

"Get it," he commands idly, adjusting the swiss atop his sandwich. "It's for you."

Stiles stops mid-stride, swinging his head back around with a slightly terrified look on his face, as if he's assumed Derek called the child protective services on him, and that the hand behind the knock belongs to a man in a suit who's come to take him away and hand him off to a couple of foster parents.

"W-what?" He stammers, head jerking anxiously between the Derek and the front entrance. "Who —"

"Answer the door, Stiles."

It takes the teen another moment of perturbed staring before his bare feet unstick their stance on the hardwood and cautiously tip-toe over to the door. Derek keeps his gaze glued to his sandwich, bracing himself as he hears Stiles unhinge the lock and wrap his fingers around the handle, slowly
pulling it open. The splintered wood parts from the frame with a low groan; the same sound effect used for suspense in horror films, only this time it was twice as scary.

"Stiles…"

Scott's greeting is warm and breathless, kindled from weeks of withdrawal from his best friend. His smile is audible, but there's also the slight edge of hesitancy in his voice, betraying his uncertainty for what the future holds for their friendship, and whether or not Stiles will accept his desire to be there for him. A thread of sadness weaves the two together, undoubtedly spun upon catching sight of the grief that weighed heavily on his brother's shoulders, breaking his posture and snuffing out the spark he feared wouldn't be present anymore.

"Scott…" Stiles states, and disbelief renders the name so soft that his voice cracks on it. His heartbeat skyrockets, rabbiting along at a pace that carries the terror in his chest up past his lips and molds it into an emotionless, "What are you doing here?"

Derek feels the slap of the words from his spot in kitchen. There's a stiff pause.

"W-what… What do you mean?" Scott stammers, tone immediately deflating as if flattened by a truck. "Derek texted me saying you wanted me to come over today."

More silence—this time of a variety so intense it shatters time, and it takes everything he has not to glance up, because he knows the pair of them are staring at him now. He hears the wet 'pop' of Stiles's mouth as it falls open into that stupid, toothless gape it does when he's taken aback, and knows that Scott is studying him, putting it all together. He hears Stiles lick his lips, chew his bottom lip as he figures out what to say, heartbeat stuttering like it's going to give out, and for a moment Derek thinks that he's about to tell Scott to go home—but then there's a rustle of fabric, the squeak of shoes against the floor, and another startled blip in the teen's pulse as Scott steps forward and pulls him into a hug.

"Well it doesn't matter," Scott says quickly, voice thick and muffled behind the cotton of his friend's shirt. "I'm here and I brought red vines. Star Wars is on at eight… Not sure what episode it is, but I figured you would know."

The air stills. Not a single move is made, nor a single exhale expelled. Scott is holding onto Stiles like he's terrified the human will run away if he lets go, and Stiles is stiff and rigid in his arms like he wants nothing more than to do just that—

But then there's a shift.

The sound of breath snapping in a tight throat.

A hiccups.

And that's when Derek looks up, watching as Stiles tries and fails to repress the barrage of unspoken emotions that have built up over the past three weeks. They break free in a single, deep, desperate sob that bursts forth with such startling ferocity that his legs buckle beneath the strain of it, but Scott only latches on tighter and falls with him, dropping the pack of red vines as their knees hit the floor. Stiles clings to him like an octopus, hands scrabbling madly at the back of his friend's hoodie while ugly, shuddering gasps ransack his frame, and Scott's own eyes well up and glint with tears as he squeezes back. They're both caught off guard when breathless, hysterical laughter suddenly bubbles from Stiles's throat and merges with his bawling, as if his friend's words obliterated his worst fears and left him drunk with relief. It's unexpected, infectious, and the first kind of laughter to grace his lips since last year, and Scott joins in too as they kneel there swaying, half-crying, half-laughing,
desperately drinking in their starved embrace.

Derek turns away.

He tells himself the reason is to give them a moment of privacy, but really it's because it hurts too much to watch. The pair were inseparable, joined by a level of mutual endearment so unbreakable that it could easily be interpreted for something romantic; they expressed their affection so effortlessly, like it was second nature to playfully punch the other's shoulder or wrap their arms around one another— and Derek looked somewhat bitterly upon it, because deep down he wished it could come just as easily to him.
After what seems like an eternity they finally break apart and untangle their limbs from one another, but their fingers are reluctant to withdraw from each other's shirts. There's a few residual sniffles and a couple embarrassed throat-clears. A clap on the back.

"Come on," Scott says quietly. His eyes flicker to Derek over Stiles's shoulder. "Show me your room?"

Stiles wipes his nose and nods, and Derek knows it's because they need to go somewhere without him, where his presence can't leech the intimacy from the atmosphere.

Scott keeps an arm firmly wrapped around his brother's shoulders as they straighten up and stumble towards the bedroom, passing him by the counter on the way. The younger alpha takes the chance to peer curiously at him, but also throws in a tiny, appreciative nod. Stiles eyes him longer and more unabashedly, expression wide open and perplexed as if Derek is a puzzle he can't really figure out. It makes Derek look away, and he takes a large bite out of his sandwich to convey how he couldn't care less.

The boys spend the day together in Stiles's room, watching movies on his laptop and mulling through comic books. It's quiet for the most part, but throughout the afternoon Derek picks up a few low murmurs of dialogue, what seems like casual commentary on whatever film they're watching. Once or twice he briefly hears Stiles crying quietly, but it's okay because Scott is there crying with him. Later on they come out to watch Star Wars when he's in the garage working on the Camaro. He knows when they spot the two burritos he left out for them on the counter, because Scott nearly busts a vocal chord expressing his shock.

"Whoa, he cooks?"

"Yeah, I know," Stiles responds passively. "This is nothing, you should see him on a day he actually has groceries to work with. He's like Rachel Ray, minus the cheery smile."

Derek frowns in response from his crouched stance in front of the hood, but he's never been so relieved to be the butt of a joke. He imagines the pair take the burritos to the couch, because a minute later the brassy score from the movie fills the air with mild vibrations. Derek doesn't know what episode it is either, but he hears snippets of Stiles mumbling small lines of explanation. Another minute passes before Scott pipes up again.

"Dude, how come these don't have any meat in them?"

A pause.

"I... He must not have any."

"Huh. I didn't think Derek would ever let a day go by where he doesn't have some kind of beef on hand."

They almost make it through the whole movie before Stiles starts yawning and Scott takes the hint, declaring that he has to study for a math test tomorrow. Derek is upstairs in his room when he hears the boys rise from the couch and click off the TV, and he quietly emerges to stand at the edge of the banister to watch them say goodbye at the front door.

"I love you, man. Call me if you need anything."

"Thanks, I will. Bye, Scott."
They clap out another hug and Scott departs. Stiles shuts the door after him, after which he dazedly
spins around and lets his back flop heavily against the wood, running a hand through his hair. His
fingers tug absently at his bangs as he blows out a long exhale, one that turns into a bewildered
chuckle of sorts. He looks up and notices him then, meeting his gaze without a single ounce of the
usual apprehension. Derek stares back, noting how much brighter his eyes look without it. Then
Stiles flicks a hand up to his forehead in the gesture of a half-hearted salute, and the corner of his lip
tugs up in the closest stretch yet to a smirk.

"Night, Derek."

Derek offers a short nod in reply, but this time he doesn't avert his eyes and turn away. Instead he
lingers to watch the human tread down the hall and disappear into to his room, thinking about how it
was the first time Stiles had addressed him by his first name since moving in.
Stiles awakens to the loud 'bang' of his bedroom door bursting open, followed by the 'thunk' of his head hitting the headboard when he jerks up in alarm.

"Wha— oh my god, do you ever knock!"

Sleep renders his outburst hoarse and crackly as he flails in his sheets, floundering to cover up his batman pajama bottoms while Derek barges into the room, looking way too fresh and alert for the ungodly hour of the morning. The werewolf ignores his disgruntled squawk, purposefully striding over to the window and yanking the cord to open the blinds, which releases a flood of harsh sunlight upon his bed that paints the inside of his scrunched eyelids a burning orange.

"Nope. Get up."

Derek's tone is impassive as ever, if not a bit amused. Smug, maybe— but whatever it is Stiles doesn't have the mind to be curious because his eyes itch with sleepy crusties and Derek Hale is suddenly in his room uninvited for the second time in a month, which is annoying at best and frankly a little creepy.

"What the hell, dude, it's the crack of dawn!" He moans indignantly, rolling over to shove his face into his pillow. The cotton presses cool and soft against his sleep-flushed face, but it does nothing to relieve the sour taste of being yanked from unconscious bliss by an overgrown, privacy-invading furball.

"It's nine-thrity," Derek states, somewhat condescendingly from somewhere on his left.

"My point exactly," Stiles grumbles, voice muffled and irritated against his pillowcase. "What do you want?"

He swivels his neck around and cracks open an eyelid to scope out what Derek is doing, but immediately regrets it when he's smacked with a face-full of red hoodie, chucked in his direction from the desk.

"Hey—!"

"Come on, up. You're going outside today."

Well. That was new.

Surprise briefly captures his tongue, but he quickly recovers and scrambles up on his elbows, vehemently ripping the jacket from his hair so he can gawk wide-eyed and cynical at the werewolf, who was bending down to pick up his converse.

"Um, no? I'm perfectly content here, thanks. Bye."
With a flourish he grabs a fistful of his comforter and yanks it over his head as he dives back into his pillow, huffing out an irritated sigh. He thinks he does a good job of drenching his flat riposte with 'fuck off,' but apparently Derek isn't ruffled in the slightest, because next thing he knows the shoes are dropped on his head, clunking against his skull on the same spot the headboard had assaulted him. The sneakers bounce off the mattress and tumble to the carpet as he whips over onto his back, cussing with another yipe of protest.

"Dammit, go away!"

"No. Get dressed, you're getting out of the house," Derek states, infuriatingly nonchalant in tone and expression as he bends down to pick up an empty gatorade bottle by the foot of the bed. He casually tosses it into the wastebasket across the room, winning a shot in any basketball game. Stiles seethes, feeling his mouth contort into an ugly pucker.

"You can't just—!"

But he breaks off mid-breath, halted by the deadpan expression Derek is pinning him with. His eyes skim over the alpha's folded arms and land on his quirked brow, and the rest of his unspoken retort whooshes out his nostrils in a sigh of defeat, because yes, Derek can. If Derek can get him to shower, eat, and see his best friend, then it probably wouldn't hurt to humor him and get out of bed for a few hours, although he's secretly convinced the guy is using his alpha persuasion powers to do it. He lets his muscles go limp and flops backwards onto the mattress, slinging an arm over his crummy eyes in surrender.

"Fine..." He groans softly. "Where exactly am I going?"

Derek pauses by the door to swivel his head around, and Stiles swears he catches a twitch of a smirk.

"We're going grocery shopping."

He drags his limbs out to the kitchen fifteen minutes later, after managing to brush his teeth and pull on a pair of khakis. Derek is waiting for him at the counter, perched on the edge of a barstool with his legs folded up on the rungs. A pair of dark denims hug his calves, tucked into a pair of beat-up black doc martens. Stiles's eyes trail up to the werewolf's soft navy henley, and he frowns a little because his own clothes feel like sandpaper after a month's worth of sweatpants, rumpled from imprisonment in his suitcase. He wiggles his toes in his converse, irked by how cold and stiff the soles feel against his feet. Derek swings his legs off the chair and fishes out a ring of keys from his pocket, twirling them around his finger before snatching them in his palm. He grabs two silver thermoses from the counter, and shoves one of them into Stiles's hands.

"What's—"

"Coffee."

"Oh, no, it's okay—"

"Take it. You'll want it."

Stiles bites his lip and wraps his hands around the stainless steel, which radiates a pleasant warmth against his icy fingers. A small curl of steam drifts up from the opening and tickles his nose with the aroma of deep french roast, persuading him to take a small sip as he follows Derek to the door. It's
sweet and earthy and even better than it smells.

'Really fucking cold' is what springs to mind when they step outside. The sun glows faintly behind an overcast sky, but it's not fooling anybody. February seldom touches the county without leaving a trail of bitter frost upon every surface, and this morning a crisp chill breaches the air like a wintery plague, saturating the porch and nearby trees in a cold dusting of dew. Stiles blinks rapidly against the harsh grey light, lungs seizing with the influx of fresh air. It's overwhelming compared to the stuffy warmth and familiar colors of his bedroom, but underwhelming because 'outside' isn't as bright as he remembers.

He shivers and pulls his hood up with a yank, clutching the thermos close to his chest as they walk out to the Camaro. The car gleams with a beautiful black shine, glittering like polished onyx in the frostbitten air. It makes him think of his jeep; dull and chipped and worse for wear, but beautiful just the same. The passenger seat squeaks stiffly beneath his weight as Derek ducks behind the wheel, igniting the engine with a twist of his keys. It rumbles to life with a sound startlingly similar to an alpha roar, and Stiles wonders if that's part of why Derek likes the car so much. The radio flicks on with the motor, vibrating the speakers with the soft harmonies and syncopated drums of a melodic rock song; according to the screen beneath the dashboard, apparently it's 'Waiting on Words' by The Black Keys, track eight out of eleven.

Stiles takes another sip of coffee, teeth chattering a little as they bite the lip of the canister. Derek switches on the heater. Stiles steals a glance at him, and the werewolf glances back, something a little different about his features. More relaxed maybe. There's a peculiar casualty in the brief exchange—far from the tense, guarded filters that plagued their gazes a few weeks ago. He doesn't know what to think of it, so he turns away and shrinks back further into his hoodie, opting to sulk a bit as he stares out the window. It doesn't take long for the lull of the engine to coax his grainy eyes closed, sanding down the fatigued throbbing in his temples as he mulls over his sour thoughts.

If they were playing the honesty game, this was stupid. He longed for his bed, safe and warm and sheltered from the sights and sounds of the real world—but no, instead he's awake and sitting on a sore ass next to the king of mope himself, because the guy insisted that it was more important to go grocery shopping. He could see where Derek was coming from if he let himself dwell on it long enough, but stubbornness deemed intention irrelevant. Plain and simple, he didn't want to be out, certainly not to go push some lame cart around at Lucky's with the biggest grump in Beacon Hills.

Thus, he's a bit thrown off when the tires squeak to a halt next to a small park fifteen minutes later. He rubs his eyes and sits up, squinting as he peers through the window. They're in a tiny car lot, shaded by a stretch of tall trees that lead to a patch of grassy field. A strip of white booths line up along the green, covered in tarp and strung together by small lines of fishing wire, from which tiny, pastel paper lanterns wobble in the breeze. The sound of live folk music filters in through the car windows, mixing with the distant chatter of people walking idly from tent to tent, bustling with bags of groceries slung over their shoulders. The scene looks out of place against the cold chrome sky; vibrant, energetic, and much too cheerful for Beacon Hills.

"Okay, uh… This isn't Lucky's," he deduces intelligently, frowning as his breath fogs up the glass.

"No," Derek replies, something akin to amusement in his tone. He pulls the keys out of the ignition. "It's the farmer's market. First and third Saturday of every month."

Stiles chews on the words, subconsciously drumming his fingertips against the thermos in his lap. This was unexpected. In fact it was probably the weirdest thing to happen thus far, which said a lot considering all the weird things Derek had done since his arrival, like cooking and watching TV and arranging for Scott to come over under his nose, but he never would have guessed that a hippy-dippy
farmer's market would make the list. He swivels his head around with a handful of questions dancing on his tongue, but Derek was already stepping outside. Stiles hobbles after him, sneakers crunching over the gravel beneath his feet.

He sticks close to Derek's heels as they near the white booths, passing several individuals along the way. People stop and stare at them, some exchanging hushed whispers as their gazes sweep up and down their figures, most of the women's lingering on Derek. Stiles doesn't blame them; he realizes they must look quite the pair—an awkward, raggedy teenager (he can't even remember the last time he combed his hair) shuffling beside a ruggedly handsome, intimidating older guy with a scowl indicative of a hardened criminal. They're too different to be siblings, too rigid in body language to be friends. Derek doesn't seem to notice the way some mothers clutch their children and pull them away as they walk by. Either he doesn't notice, or he's used to ignoring it.

The density of the crowd increases as they step onto the grass, and Stiles reels as he takes in the vibrant visage and sound of everything up close. Long tables of colorful fruits and vegetables—rainbow carrots, strawberries, winter squash, leafy greens, ripe purple cherries and every kind of fresh produce imaginable gleam like candied gems beneath the tarps, on display to be picked over by choosy fingers. Stacks of jams and jellies with checkered lids make a pyramid beside loaves of crusted sourdough, from which a burly man's serrated knife slices sample-size chunks. His ears track the source of the music to a pretty woman in a long skirt, who brandishes a dazzling smile as she tickles a fiddle for a small crowd of onlookers, two bearded men strumming guitar at her side. Large white buckets of wildflowers in every color of the spectrum line the isle like soldiers; massive golden sunflowers and tiny peppered bluebells with fuzzy mint-green leaves, violet curly orchids and fiery tiger lilies that put sunsets to shame. There's enough food to feed a small country—hot homemade tamales steam at a booth for five dollars, throwing the savory scent of chorizo and pulled pork into the air to tangle with the salty sweet aroma of popped kettle corn, which is being scooped by the bucketful into pink paper bags. There are vegan cupcakes with swirled snow-white icing and drizzles of raspberry syrup, ten different kinds of hummus, chutney and olive tapenade set out beside falafel and hot crab cakes, sweet wines, soft cheeses, and glittering trays of crystalized honeycomb that sparkle like gold jewelry on sticky chain.

It's beautiful.

And it hurts, because he had forgotten what beauty was.

Striking as it is, the clamor of it all begins to pound against his eardrums, wriggling uncomfortably into his lungs. He feels dizzy, can't quite catch his breath because it's a lot—a lot of people, a lot of noise, channeled into stimulation five times the intensity of what he's used to. It bombards his senses at a rate faster than what he can handle, and he instinctually stumbles a little closer to Derek, who pauses to glance back at him.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," he manages, dry swallowing a little as he hides his shaky fingers in his pockets. Derek reverts his attention, but slows his pace considerably so Stiles doesn't have to fight to keep up. For whatever reason the close proximity helps quell his hammering heart, and his legs carry him close enough to the werewolf's side that their arms nearly brush against each other. Derek's eyes dart down and notice, but if he minds he doesn't mention it.

His furry tour guide leads him to a tent with an impressive spread of garden vegetables, where neat stacks of bright green zucchini and plump, shiny tomatoes lounge beside bundles of fresh herbs on white cotton cloths. A short, stocky man with a roll of dough around his middle and a double chin to match adds branches of rosemary to the pile, handling the sprigs like they're his children. A
weathered brown duckbill hat sits atop his receding hairline, close in hue to his leathery, sun-kissed skin and whiskery handlebar mustache, and tiny wrinkles emboss the corners of his brandy eyes as he catches sight of Derek, face immediately lighting up with a rosy grin.

"Derek, amico mio!" He exclaims, voice warm and gravelly as he steps forward to give Derek a firm handshake.

"Pietro, how are you?" Derek returns, and Stiles nearly chokes on his coffee when the werewolf actually smiles.

"Ah, good, good!" Pietro says, and his eyes twinkle like he really means it. He claps Derek on the back and notices Stiles then, crow's feet deepening with enthusiasm as his eyebrows disappear beneath the bill of his cap. "Che fortuna! This must be your little friend!"

Stiles stiffens and swings his gaze to Derek, who looks like he just swallowed a bug. There's a bit of an awkward pause, because they aren't exactly friends— Stiles doesn't really know what they are, but it's hardly worth contemplating compared to how Pietro phrased the words, which indicated that Derek had mentioned him before.

Derek clears his throat. "This is... This is Stiles."

"Stiles!" Pietro proclaims, like his name is a word to be celebrated. "Good to meet you!" He reaches out for a handshake and Stiles shyly steps forward, nodding his head in greeting. The man's calloused palms clasp firmly over his cold fingers, and up close he can see a spray of freckles decorating his ruddy nose and cheeks. He gets a whiff of his breath, which smells of coffee and tobacco. Stiles decides he likes him.

"What have you got for us today?" Derek asks, folding his arms as he eyes the spread of produce.

"Ah, come, I show you!" Pietro announces, waddling over to the vegetables with a giddy spring in his step. His fingers flutter over the colorful items as he speaks. "This morning I pick fresh zucchini, eggplant, pepper— Very hard to grow this time of year, but I do it! All fresh herbs the same, picked right before I drive here... And ah, che bello," he says, eyes dancing as he gingerly picks up a large tomato and holds it up between his thumb and forefinger, as if it were a ruby. "Ripe romas! Beautiful harvest this time. Molto dolce, very sweet, very good for soup."

Derek picks up a tomato from the stack, squeezing it gently as he swivels it around.

"These look good, as always," he comments, nodding in approval. "We'll take a dozen, and some basil, too."

"Ah, what will you be making this time?" Pietro inquires, pulling out a paper bag from behind the table. He hands it to Derek, who starts plucking tomatoes from the pile on the table and sticking them inside.

"Lasagna."

"Ah, you like my idea! You need sausage? Giada made some fresh this morning, rolled with rosemary and paprika, eh?" Pietro gestures to a display by the herbs, grabbing a package of pink Italian links from a bed of ice. Derek glances at it, but shakes his head.

"No, thank you. We'll—"

"No, let's get some."
Stiles holds his ground as they pause and look up at the sound of his voice, perhaps because they forgot he was still there. Derek's eyebrow twitches, like he doesn't really believe it, or maybe it was just his way of asking, 'are you sure?' Stiles shrugs, giving a tiny nod, and Derek's lips do a funny twitch that make him suspect it's an effort to suppress a smile. Maybe not a smile, per say, but something.

"Alright," Derek says. "Two packages then."

"Ah, see? *Il tuo amico* knows what is good!"

Pietro collects the items and places them on a scale, adding up the prices with a calculator. The total is $26.25, and Derek hands him thirty and tells him to keep the change. The appreciation in the old man's laugh lines are genuine as he bids them goodbye.

"*Grazie mille! Buona giornata, boys!*"

"*Arrivederci!*" Derek replies good-naturedly over his shoulder, waving in departure, and Stiles decides that the day can't possibly get any weirder. They walk in silence for a few paces, footsteps heavy with unspoken questions and quiet apprehension until Stiles picks at a crack in the wall.

"I like him."

"He's an old family friend."

"You've been coming here a while, huh?"

A pause. Derek nods.

"Since I was younger… Yes."

Stiles twiddles with a piece of lint in his jacket pocket, thinking about that. He can hardly imagine a time when Derek was anything other than his stormy older self, but he must have been a kid at some point. He tries to visualize a young, chubby-cheeked Derek with awkward innocence and a carefree smile, but the imagery crumbles before it even forms, because 'carefree' and 'Derek' cancel each other out when they're in the same sentence.

"Come on, you can carry the bags," Derek says, and hands the groceries off to him before taking the lead to another booth. Stiles fumbles for a grip on the handles, watching him stride ahead. He shakes his head before following after him.

They parole the entirety of the market, weaving around chatty couples and colorful display tables throughout the stroll from tent to tent. They hardly say a word to each other, but Stiles doesn't mind. He's too busy watching in quiet fascination as Derek speaks openly to the vendors, engaging in polite smalltalk and biting wholeheartedly into samples like he truly appreciates the taste, eyes alight with more expression than Stiles has ever seen in them. He uses 'please's and 'thank you's with every purchase, and fishes out crisp green bills from his wallet without batting an eyelash; clearly, the guy was loaded. Stiles had been trained to shop by sale, but Derek doesn't even spare the price tags a glance.

More bags are added to his arms as they buy garlic, onions, apples, collard greens, handmade pasta tied up with green twine, and a wedge of gourmet cheese from a booth selling goat products (which included bars of soap, believe it or not). Stiles rearranges the parcels in his hands, flexing his fingers as a blonde woman rings Derek up for a sack of tangerines. His gaze wanders out across the grass, distracted by a savory-sweet aroma so alluring that he steps away, following his nose to a small set-up where a chef is ladling yellow batter onto a steaming black griddle and spreading it around with a
wooden stick shaped like a car squeegee.

He observes shyly, entranced as the batter bubbles and turns golden-brown and crispy at the edges, thinner than a pancake as the man expertly flips it over with the flick of a silver paddle. A generous dollop of Nutella is heaped on top and smeared across, glistening like liquid velvet as the hot pan melts it down. The buttery scent of hazelnuts and milk chocolate assault his nostrils, triggering an unexpected flood of saliva in his mouth.

"You want one?"

With a jolt he whirls around, sucking in a startled gasp. He loses his grip on the bags in the process, but Derek snaps out an arm and catches them before they hit the ground, slinging them over his shoulder like twenty pounds of produce wasn't weighing down the handles. Stiles tugs anxiously on the hem of his hoodie as the pounding in his chest recedes, baffled by how a guy of supernatural size and build could be so stealthy.

"N-no, it's okay," he stammers, under fire of a pink flush creeping up his neck. He licks his lips and drops his gaze to the grass, but the alpha just rolls his eyes.

"We'll take two," Derek tells the man, who nods and pours another ladle of batter onto the griddle.

"How do you guys want 'em?"

"One with banana and walnuts," Derek voices. He turns to Stiles, tipping his head expectantly.

"And…" Stiles clears his throat. "Uh, just plain, please."

The crepes are wrapped in paper and handed to them two minutes later, hot and dripping with gooey strings of hazelnutty goodness. Derek pays the man and they start walking again, side-by-side this time. Stiles blows on his breakfast, hesitantly nibbling at the corner. The pancake is moist and chewy between his teeth, and he's pleased to find that his appetite actually sticks around enough for him to continue grazing. It's messy but incredibly satisfying, and a few globs of chocolate ooze out and drop to the grass when he sinks his incisors in for a bigger bite. He glances at Derek, and can't help but stare as the werewolf rips into his own crepe, canines barred as he licks off a frilly ribbon of whipped cream. Some of it sticks to the stubble above his upper lip, and his tongue darts out and nabs it with a quick swipe before he continues chewing, cheeks full. It's intriguing and oddly breathtaking to witness Derek actually enjoying something, and in that moment he doesn't look like a werewolf; he looks normal. Human, almost content—and there's something sad about how unusual it is.
Derek catches him staring then, and his eyebrow twitches in either amusement or distaste, Stiles can't tell.

"You've got chocolate on you," Derek says matter-of-factly, gesturing to his chin. Stiles wipes an arm across his jaw and pouts at the smear of brown on his sleeve.

"Yeah, well so do you," he scoffs, eying the thin line of Nutella decorating Derek's bottom lip. Derek wipes it away with his thumb and sucks it off with a wet squelch, and Stiles looks away before his knees give out.

They slow to a halt as they pass by the woman playing the fiddle, and stand to watch for a little while. Stiles makes it through half his crepe before his appetite suddenly falters, but he tries to finish it anyway to be polite, because Derek did spend money on it after all. He manages to force down two more small bites before he starts to feel ill, fingers hovering over his mouth.
"You don't have to finish it," Derek mentions quietly, apparently noticing his struggle. Stiles purses his lips, embarrassed as he stares at the half-eaten dessert in his hands.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

"Don't be. It's fine."

He stumbles over to a small trash bin a few paces behind them and tosses the crepe inside, but looks back with a start when he realizes that Derek had already finished his and thrown away the paper, and the folk group was playing a song different from the one when they had initially walked up. He didn't even notice. It wouldn't be the first time he had spaced out and skipped over a chunk of time, but it was a bit scarier when it happened in public. Rattled, he makes his way back to Derek, who asks him if he's ready to go. He nods, and Derek picks up the bags at his feet and drops a five into the fiddle lady's open case before departing, which earns him a wink.

When they make it back to the car Stiles practically collapses into the passenger seat on jello-like legs, suddenly weighed down with fatigue. They couldn't have walked around for more than an hour, but it was the most physical activity he'd done in five weeks, and he was drained. His 'amico' seems to notice as he climbs in behind the wheel.

"I have more errands to run," Derek states, eyeing him diagnostically. "Do you feel up to it? Or do you want me to drop you at home?"

Home.

Stiles can't help but flinch at the last word. Derek catches it, jaw immediately tightening like he wished he could take the phrase back, but it was too late. The temporary latch holding back his woes had already snapped like a twig, releasing the familiar flood of heavy gloom and unwanted memories upon his mind and body. It drowns his thoughts and washes away the lingering taste of chocolate from his tongue, seeping back into his bones with a chill that no amount of thermos-coffee can heat. His eyes fall to his lap and stay there.

"...I'd like to be dropped off at your place."

There's a stiff moment before Derek finally gives a curt nod and looks away, features hardening as the wall snaps back up in place. Stiles keeps his gaze chained to the window during the ride back, this time without The Black Keys to drown out the roaring echo in his head.

.o0O0o.

Cheery sunlight greets him upon opening the door his bedroom, spilled in from the window. He goes over and shuts the blinds, concealing the space in the usual blue-tinted darkness. His spine bends into a slumped curve as he perches on the edge of the bed, letting his head dangle between his knees. He takes the opportunity to untie his shoes, which hit the carpet with a dull 'clunk' as he pries them off, kicking them over to his suitcase. He thinks that maybe he should unpack it, but unpacking is something people do when they move into a house.

A home.

He closes his eyes, forcing himself to breathe in for four seconds, out for four seconds, and repeat before opening them again.

When he does he spots the half-eaten box of red vines on his desk, down to just a few now, but they
had gone stale from being left out for a week. They make him think of Scott—Scott, and his puppy
dog eyes and good intentions and less-than-sharp demeanor, and how none of that had changed; how
good it had been to engage with someone who actually spoke to him, who hadn't been afraid to
reach out and touch him, *embrace* him. It makes him think of Derek, and how Derek wouldn't touch
him unless he absolutely had to, certainly never for something as sappy as a hug. How Derek
probably thinks it stupid that he and Scott express their affection so freely.

But he thinks of Derek, and how he'd texted Scott to make it happen anyway.

He thinks of shampoo, spaghetti, pillows and crepes.

Stiles peels off his hoodie and scoots up to the headboard, wiggling his legs beneath the comforter.
He shudders and rearranges himself, trying to get comfortable, and once he does he fishes a hand
underneath his pillow, wrapping his fingers around the cold metal of his dad's badge. He drags it out
and blinks heavily, peeking at the chipped lettering between his slim fingers.

He falls asleep thinking about how he left his coffee in Derek's car.
It's the muffled racket of plastic bags and glass jars that finally yanks him into awareness, prompting him to kick off the covers and wander out into the kitchen, where he finds Derek emptying the contents of the fridge onto the counter.

"Hey," he croaks, stifling a yawn as he teeters to the cupboard in pursuit of a gatorade.

"Good, you're up."

"Mm," he hums half-heartedly.

Derek ducks back inside the fridge, reemerging with several types of cheese in his hands. He adds
them to the growing collection of ingredients on the counter.

"Isn't the point to keep food inside the fridge?"

"Not when you're going to cook it."

"Mm... 'Kay, well uh," Stiles pauses to take a swig of gatorade, making a little twirly gesture with his finger. "Have fun making your lasagna or whatever."

He pivots on his heels to return to his room, but Derek swings a hand out and grabs him by the arm, making a spurt of lemon-lime dribble over his lip and splatter to the floor. Gross. He was really going to have to work on keeping beverages inside his mouth, perhaps sometime when a massive werewolf hand wasn't clamped around his sleeve.

"Nope, come back," Derek states, tugging him backwards towards the counter. "You're going to help me make it."

Stiles wipes his chin and spins around, both surprised and a little afraid.

"Whoa, okay, uhm... I'm not really the 'cooking' type, so I'm gonna have to decline," He says slowly, timidly swatting at the hand on his arm until Derek lets go. The werewolf looks at him like he's expecting more, so he keeps talking to fill the space between them. "Like it's nice and all that you should think me capable of anything more than instant ramen, but, uh, these guys don't have much experience with anything outside of that," he wiggles his fingers in a jazz hands type gesture, halting when he realizes the implication of what he just said. Derek's eyebrow rises a little further.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean— I mean of course I've done things like that... Okay, well no, maybe I haven't. B-but like, not because— " He blushes furiously, unable to stop the spew of babble from his mouth because Derek won't stop fucking looking at him with his stupid sky-high eyebrow. "—Look, either way it doesn't matter when cooking food. Which I'm not good at. Which is why you don't want my assistance, see? So... yeah."

Derek crosses his arms and watches him patiently, rubbing a thumb over his stubbly chin with a small twinkle in his eye, like he finds it secretly hilarious that stupid Stiles thinks he can talk his way out of helping. When he finally stutters to a stop the werewolf grabs a large colander off the counter and shoves it into his hands.

"You can start with washing the tomatoes."

Stiles stares blankly at the stainless steel. Derek looks at him expectantly, forever one without verbal communication. Stiles secretly curses him and the little smug twitch in his jaw as he takes the colander, huffing out a sigh.

"Fine. Just in the sink?"

"No, in the bathtub."

Stiles shoots the deadpan this time.

Derek drizzles a stream of olive oil in a pan, heating it over the stove while he unwraps the sausages they bought earlier that day. He crumbles the pink meat with his hands, dropping it by the chunk into the hot liquid where they hit the surface with wild sizzles, popping and filling the air with the aroma of italian herbs and sweet pork. Stiles doesn't dare look over as he rinses the romas, but is pleased to find that the smell of the meat doesn't bother him. When he's done he sets the clean tomatoes on the counter, standing awkwardly while Derek drags a stool over with his foot and shoves a large knife in
his hand.

"Good," the alpha notes. He places an onion onto a wooden cutting board. "Now you can chop
this."

Jesus Christ, the guy could win an award for blunt conduct.

"Yes, your highness," Stiles mutters under his breath, but takes the seat anyway. Derek looks at him
but doesn't say anything, plucking a leaf of basil from the plant by the sink and sticking it in his
mouth before returning to the stove. Stiles takes his time peeling the onion, partly because his mind
and fingers aren't used to the fine motor skills and partly to annoy Derek, but the werewolf doesn't
seem to be bothered by it.

"Uh, how do you want this thing cut?” He asks, knife cocked over the chopping board. Derek looks
up from where he's shaking the pan over the stove, dusting the sauté with a pinch of salt.

"Check the recipe."

Stiles swivels his head around in five different directions, expecting to find a printed instructions
from online or something, but instead he notices an aged, old-fashioned cookbook on the counter,
open to a lasagna recipe. He reaches over and drags it closer with his fingertips, and a quick skim
down the page reveals that the onion is meant to be finely chopped. Alright then.

The aroma of garlic and rosemary drifts past his nose as he sets to work, somehow making the
mixture on the stove smell even better. He can see why Derek likes this; in a way it's kind of
calming, just the slow repetition of slice and dice in the warm atmosphere of the kitchen, pleasant
enough that he doesn't even feel the urge to scurry back to his room anytime soon. His gaze keeps
wandering to the cookbook as he chops, particularly curious about the yellow sticky notes stuck at
random between the pages. He wonders what they're for, and how often the werewolf dusts off the
spine to access the recipes. The book looks just like the edition his mom used to have, and he
suspects it probably used to belong to Derek's—

"Ow— shit!"

He hisses as the knife slips and slices his palm, dotting the floor with a small fleck of blood when it
clatters to the tile below. He winces, both from pain and sheer 'how stupid are you?' Derek flicks off
the stove and is at his side in an instant, eyebrows back in the usual 'v' shape.

"What did you do?" Derek demands, and grabs his wrist to inspect the cut. Stiles thinks the action is
a little grabby, but he hops off the stool and reluctantly straightens out his fingers so the werewolf
can see. The gash is long and semi-deep, an angry line stretching across the skin between his thumb
and forefinger all the way to his pinky. It stings like a bitch and is bleeding way too much for him to
be comfortable with, blood already pooling in the crevices of his palm. Derek lets out an exasperated
sigh and pinches the bridge of his nose, as if Stiles's mere existence pains him.

"Do you ever pay attention?"

The unspoken 'idiot' in Derek's words rings clear as a bell. He grumbles something else but Stiles
isn't really paying attention, because he's staring at the red running down his palm. It's a lot of blood
for such a stupid injury, streaming heavily from the flap of skin and cascading down his arm in
glistening crimson lines. The smell of copper hits his nose, and that's all it takes for him to sway to
the side, eyelids fluttering. Derek curses under his breath and steadies him by the elbow.

"Don't you dare faint on me," Derek growls through gritted teeth, clamping down harder around his
injured hand, but his head feels a little top-heavy and he can feel the blood spilling down his skin, down to his elbow now. It's slick and warm and wet, and Derek has four eyes before he has two again.

"No promises," he mumbles, and then the world jerks a bit as Derek pulls him by the arm down the hallway towards the bathroom. Somehow he manages to stay upright (albeit not very gracefully) throughout the journey until Derek plops him down on the edge of the tub, fingers still wrapped around his bloody wrist. He blinks as the alpha snatches a washcloth from the sink and presses it over the cut, not seeming to care at all about how his blood is about to soak the fluffy white towel beyond repair.

"Keep pressure on it," Derek orders, and retracts his hold to go over to the sink.

"M'gonna ruin your towel," He mumbles.

"Shut up, Stiles."

Stiles makes a little raspberry sound with his lips at that, because he can't seem to recall the last time Derek told him to shut up, which is funny because it used to be the guy's favorite catchphrase around him. Come to think of it, this was the first time Derek had told him shut up at all since last year.

He watches as the alpha swings open the compartment under the sink and sticks a hand inside, reemerging with a small first aid kit. The case gleams with unscathed plastic, and when Derek opens it all the supplies are present and in place, never before used.

"Why do you have that?" He questions, puzzled and dizzy. "You're a werewolf, you grew up in a family of werewolves. You heal yourself."

Derek swings his gaze to the ceiling and huffs out a short breath through his nostrils. Stiles looks too, but nothing is up there.

"Yes, but you don't," Derek huffs impatiently, proceeding to tear open a packet of disinfectant wipes with his teeth.

Stiles does shut up then, silenced as it occurs to him that Derek must have gone out and bought the first aid kit for him when he moved in. He's surprised, a little heart-warmed, partially skeptical. He can just imagine the werewolf humdrum and scowling as he scrolled through Amazon in search of one, muttering obscenities to himself because he was about to take in a human accident-prone enough to maim himself cutting an onion.

It's a talent, really.

The werewolf pushes his hand aside and snatches the washcloth from his cut, now spotted with bright red blotches. Stiles stares at the blood, the blood on the towel, his arm, where it's smeared on his wrist from Derek's fingers, and sees the blood of his father's veins every smudged pattern. He sucks in a shaky breath, feeling the color drain from his face as crimson images from that night assault his mind and steal the steady rhythm of his heart. His head dips and he sways forward a little bit, but Derek quickly presses a palm to his shoulder and steadies him, looking up sharply, and Stiles can see the moment understanding clicks in his eyes.

"Hey, you're fine," Derek says, the gruffness in his tone suddenly watered down. He uses the washcloth to wipe away the blood running down his arm. "Don't look."

Stiles obediently turns to the side, gluing his gaze to the white towel hanging on the wall to his left. It doesn't distract him from the sensation of blood trickling down his palm, so he tries looking to the
mirror (shit, he's really pale), then the ceiling (whoa, bad idea), a stain on the floor (toothpaste, probably), but nothing seems to work. He settles for looking at Derek instead, who's fixated on cleaning his cut, face less than a foot away from his own. From this angle Stiles can practically count his eyelashes, and watches them twitch, casting little feathery shadows on the werewolf's cheeks. He can see the indentation of the cleft on his chin, the smooth slope of his cheekbones and the way his mouth is tensed ever-so-slightly like it always is, never free from the internal storm of his past. He feels a strange urge to reach out with his good hand and brush his fingers along the werewolf's stubble, just to see if it's as scratchy and rough as it looks, and wonders if there would be dimples there if the guy ever smiled.
The cut stings as Derek dabs at it with the antiseptic wipe, but Stiles blinks through it, transfixed as he picks out more and more details on the face before him. Once or twice Derek's eyes flick up and meet his own for a split second before darting back down. He doesn't say anything. Stiles feels him unwrap a strip of gauze and wrap it around his palm, but he doesn't look down until Derek snaps the kit closed and stands up.

"There. You're fine."
Stiles rotates his hand, examining the white layers of soft cotton. It's surprisingly well-done.

"Thanks," he mutters, carefully standing up as Derek tucks the kit back under the sink.

"Wouldn't have been necessary if you actually paid attention to what you were doing once in a while."

"Hey, I warned you cooking wasn't my forte. Not my fault your knives are so friggin' sharp."

They step out to the hallway, where a trail of crimson droplets leads to the kitchen. Oops.

"Sorry," he mutters.

"It's not the first time blood's been on the floor," Derek says simply, and bends down to clean it up with the washcloth.

When they return to the kitchen Derek jerks his head in the direction of the stool, motioning for him to sit. Stiles does so without complaint and watches as the werewolf turns the stove back on, finishing all the preparations in the blink of an eye. He throws the remaining ingredients together like it's second nature, dicing the onion three times faster than his human aid, and Stiles wonders why he wanted his help, because clearly he just slowed the guy down. Regardless, Derek places the basil plant in front of him when he's stirring the sauce, and Stiles picks off leaves with his uninjured hand makes a little pile for him to chop.

Once the pan is in the oven Derek heads to the living room, and after a short hesitation Stiles follows after him. They watch TV on the couch while they wait, and this time Derek doesn't flip rapid-fire through the channels before picking a station. He settles for a Seinfeld marathon, and although neither of them join in with the laugh track, the atmosphere isn't uncomfortable. When the timer goes off Derek rises, but tells him to stay when he shifts to get up as well. A few minutes later the alpha returns with two steaming plates of lasagna and hands him one with a fork before sitting back down. It's delicious, hot and gooey with strings of mozzarella that cling to their forks in long strands.

Stiles digs in and doesn't think twice about the sausage.

Outside the sun sinks behind the trees, casting pastel shadows across the floor as they watch George and Jerry joke their way through ironic turns and shenanigans, occasionally getting a shove in the chest and a 'get out!' from Elaine. It's refreshingly simple, and he loses track of the number of episodes that go by before Derek gets up and takes their plates to the kitchen. Stiles follows suit and stands by the sink as Derek hand-washes the pots, drying them best he can with a towel when they are set aside. After they finish he stifles a yawn and claps his good hand against the werewolf's shoulder, mumbling "g'night, Derek" before returning to his room.

He falls asleep to the realization that he clapped Derek on the shoulder, and Derek didn't do anything about it.
Darkness.

For a foggy night in the otherwise tranquil woods, it's chaos.

The whizz of Allison's arrows whistle incessantly from somewhere on the other side of the dark clearing, scattering high-pitched echoes off the trees in syncopation with the vicious snarls and roars that rattle the air, courtesy of Scott, Isaac and Derek as they take on their alpha foes in violent battle of bloodied claw and barred fang. The moonlight bathes their figures in an eerie blue glow, illuminating the crimson on their skin and making the unnatural glint in their irises pop out like burning flames. Kali and her pack dance around their blows with startling speed, but every time one of them gets too close Lydia chucks a molotov cocktail at their feet from her hidden position on the outskirts, alighting the woods with a loud 'bang' and a flare of neon orange light.
He clutches his bat, twisting his body sharply as another arrow whizzes over his crouched stance behind the jeep, where Lydia had dragged him for safekeeping after he was brained against a tree. He reaches up and dabs at his temple again, fingertips coming away slick with a red smear. Another howl of pain rips through the air —Scott's this time— and he decides to fuck it; a concussion was no excuse to sit on the sidelines and look pretty while his friends risked furry limb.

He lurches upright, sparking fireworks in his vision as he sways against the jeep, leaning heavily against the passenger door for balance. After a round of wild blinking the kaleidoscope blotches fade away, but two blurry white dots remain in his vision, growing bigger by the second. He squints in confusion, eyes stretching wide with horror as the lights grow closer and squeak to a halt a few yards behind his jeep, revealing the silhouette of a 2005 Crown Victoria police cruiser.

No.

He pushes off and staggers forwards, stumbling towards the car as quickly as he can. His dad steps out from the behind the wheel and races to meet him, catching him just in time before he face-plants into the dirt.

"Stiles! Stiles, are you okay? Jesus Christ…"

His dad demands sharply, too loudly as he grips him by the arms and holds him upright. He smells of aftershave and newspaper ink, and Stiles wants nothing more than to shove his face into the man's uniform and breathe it all in until he fell aslepp, but instead he shakes his head stubbornly and resists because his dad can't be here —shit, his dad is here— thirty feet away from a raging supernatural battle with alphas and arrows and too many claws that could rip a hole in his chest and stop his—

"D-dad," he breathes, eyes darting wildly over his father's face, as if trying to find a wrinkle out of place to indicate that it isn't really his dad— that it's all just a hallucination from hitting his head and the man he loved most is actually at home on the couch watching the New Year's ball drop in Times Square, safe and sound and probably eating more potato chips than he should.

"How— w-what are you doing h-here?" He stammers, cursing the waver in his voice.

"I'm here to help protect my son," his dad replies grimly, hardly getting the words out before thrusting forward and pulling him into a fierce hug, only to wrench back a second later and look him over, frowning as he examines his soiled appearance. "You're hurt!" He states sharply, forehead wrinkles scrunching even deeper as he zeroes in on the gash on his temple and clamps a palm around his cheek to get a better look at it. Stiles squirms as his dad prods a gentle thumb at the wound, as if that would help.

"Dad, d-dad I'm fine," He insists, stubbornly pushing the hands away. "Dad, you can't be here," he presses breathlessly, fear mounting as more shouts and growls sound from the other end of the clearing. "You need to go, now— these are werewolves, very dangerous werewolves, okay? Normal guns won't—"

"—Won't work?" His dad cuts in, raising an eyebrow. "Stiles, I may be new to the whole supernatural thing, but as soon as I heard that you kids were intercepting an alpha pack headed for Beacon Hills, 'you kids' including you? Of course I came," he says fiercely, squeezing him by the shoulders. "As for the firearms, I borrowed a toy or two from Argent." His dad smirks a bit, swiveling his torso to the side to reveal a silver gun in the holster of his belt. "Wolfsbane bullets, apparently."

Stiles can't help but feel a pang of admiration for that last one, but he shoves it aside, opening his mouth to protest further.
"Dad, cut it out. You could get—"

"Stiles, when has safety ever been a concern of yours when you run out to do these crazy stunts?"
His dad interrupts with a touch of impatience, clearly over the heroics. He looks tired, grey eyes
framed with more tiny crinkles than Stiles remembers. Even in the pale lowlight he can pick out the
silver hairs peppering the man's receding hairline, and can't help but feel responsible for it. But then
his dad sighs, eyes softening as he reaches out to ruffle his hair, and Stiles sees that his laugh lines are
more prominent than before too.

"I'm sticking right by your side, kiddo."

He swallows thickly as his dad retracts his fingers from his hair, giving in to a tiny a smile before
perturbation steals it away.

"Alright..." He finally mutters. "But promise me when we get home you'll lay off the fast food for a
month."

"Only if you promise to find something better than a baseball bat."

"Never."

"Exactly."
They pull each other up and Stiles quickly leads them around the outskirts of the clearing to Lydia, who's crouched behind a tree assembling more firebombs. Her hair is wild with flyaways and her makeup is smeared, but she still looks just as beautiful as ever, if not a little scary. She looks up sharply, disapproval clearly written on her face as she eyes his head injury, but doesn't argue because she knows he won't listen, and there's no time for arguing anyway. Then her eyes land on his dad, and she freezes and does a double-take, something fearful flickering through her features. Before Stiles can ask she snaps her battle expression back into place, shoving a couple of glass bottles into their hands.

For a few glorious minutes everything plays out like a dream, almost in slow motion as their counterparts flawlessly meld together, filling the atmosphere with orange explosions and the sharp 'splunk' of when one of Allison’s arrows hits their target. Scott and the others seem to be taking the lead, having taken out two of Kali's pack members with a final, messy slash to the throat. Now only Ennis and the she-wolf herself remain, bloodied and seething, the animalistic rage in their eyes visible even from their stance behind the trees.

It isn't until Scott is knocked down and Ennis sprints towards him that Stiles charges forwards into the battle, last cocktail in hand —it's stupid, but that's his point in the pack— to run out and do stupid things when his friends need him, and right now he needs to get close enough to make the shot.
"Stiles!"

"Scott! SCOTT!" He screams, panic shredding his shouted warning as Ennis swings a massive fist at his best friend, who twists to the side just in time. Scott sucks in a gasp and blinks up at him, spotting the bottle in his grip, and quickly rolls onto his knees and scrambles away from the alpha. Scotty boy — dim as a thirty-watt more often than not, but blessedly coherent in life-threatening situations.

He throws his arm back and chucks the cocktail at Ennis with everything he has. The momentum knocks him off balance, sending him sprawling hard onto his stomach as the bottle hurtles through the air and shatters a good teen feet to the left of the alpha, erupting in a ball of flame that does little more than toast the werewolf's sideburns.

He never was a very good lacrosse player.

"STILES!"

Lydia shrieks again from somewhere behind him, snapping him into focus. He wrenches his head up and coughs, sucking in a shallow wheeze in a desperate attempt to get air into his lungs. When the spots in his vision subside he freezes as he meets the sight of Ennis, rigid stance and clawed fists silhouetted by the flames, staring right at him with a murderous glint in his eyes.
Then without warning Ennis bellows and shoots forward at impossible speed, lunging straight for his throat. There's another scream, a blur of motion as he squeezes his eyes shut, bracing for the painful slice of claw to his flesh—

*Bang.*

The gunshot tears through the clearing like a sonic boom, slamming his ears with a painful ringing. The blast draws everyone's attention, locking all sound and movement into a shocked silence as Ennis jerks back with a spray of blood, gagging soundlessly while crimson gushes from a gaping hole in his chest, right over his heart. The werewolf crumples heavily to the ground in front of him, convulsing briefly as the wound turns black, and then with a final spasm his head flops to the side.
and falls still, eyes wide open and unseeing.

Stiles scrambles onto his back and whips his head around, eyes stretching wide when they land on
the figure standing with face set in stone, gaze grim and steely upon the motionless figure on the
ground. His arm is still outstretched, the cocked gun in his hand still smoking.

Silence.

And then a howl, one so tortured and enraged that it shoots straight through his bones.
"DAD—!"

His own gasp slaps him into reality, roughly yanking him awake in an icy chokehold.

The remnants of the dream are slow to fade away, strangling him in gory imagery that exacerbates the lingering chill in his bones. He wheezes and trembles in his sheets, fumbling under his pillow for the badge, but not even the texture of the cold metal can help— he's too far gone, rapidly succumbing to the steel jaws tightening around his lungs. The terror bludgeons his gasps into strained staccato breaths— there's not enough oxygen in the room, and with a wave of despair he grips the sheets and squeezes his eyes shut, because no— this couldn't be happening, he had been doing so well with keeping them under control.

Crimson
Howling

Screaming

His dad didn't even have time to scream before her claws had ripped through his ribcage, slicing through flesh and bone with a sickening squelch and a shower of blood. He couldn't erase the image, or how he had seen the pale grey irises scream with everything left unsaid when they'd locked eyes for the last time. The way the light had faded from them a second later, and the small red bubble that had glistened on his dad's lip, spilling over in a single bead when he dropped lifelessly to the ground, shock still etched onto his face.

Reality was slipping away from him with each shallow, scratched-up breath, making him feel light and hazy as he twists in his sheets, trying desperately to suck in a full lungful of air that stopped short each time. His thrashing grew weaker as panic weighed down his limbs with pins and needles, a deadened storm aside the hammering rhythm of his heart. It was like he was drowning, sinking under waves of dread and dizziness spurred from pathetic coffee-straw lungs.

God, he couldn't breathe—

He was going to die—

Breathe, breathe

He couldn't—

A vignette of darkness crowds the corners of his vision just as he faintly registers the sound of a door slamming open, a slight sagging of the mattress to his right, and then—

"—iles, Stiles, breathe!"

Suddenly there was a hand on his chest, and another on his shoulder. He weakly tries to arch his back but they hold him down, firm and warm against the fabric of his shirt. A strangled squeak catches in his throat like nails on a chalkboard, and the hand on his shoulder moves up and cups his forehead. Stiles wilts a little beneath the touch, chest loosening enough for him to suck in a breath a little deeper than the others. The oxygen burns sweetly in the back of his throat, and almost immediately he spits it out again with a jerk and greedily sucks in another.

"—hat's it. Good, again. Breathe in. One… Two..."

The voice continues to count up to four and repeat, and each round Stiles makes it a little further before losing the battle to exhalation. It takes a while, but when he's finally able to make it to four and back without interruption he goes limp, exhausted and trembling beneath the oddly calming hands over his heart and brow. Panting, he blinks against the dark, faintly making out the soft edges of the room and the figure looming over the side of his bed. Derek's grey-green eyes stare back at him, almost luminescent in the pitch black surroundings. Stiles swallows stiffly, suddenly hyper-aware of the cold sweat slicking his back and forearms, and is embarrassed to note that his cheeks and eyelashes are wet as well.

He flinches involuntarily, immediately regretting it when Derek takes it as a sign of discomfort and quickly retracts his hands. Dizzy and more than a little self-conscious, Stiles scoots up onto his elbows, realizing that his dad's badge is still gripped tightly in his fist. Derek's eyes flicker down to it. He quickly shoves it back under his pillow.

"H-how did you..." He starts, dry swallowing when his ragged voice putters out.
"I heard your heartbeat."

Right. Stiles drops his eyes to the sheets, wiping the sweat from his chin with the back of his hand. Panic attacks. He recognized the symptoms like old friends, and despised them like his worst enemies—the way his chest grew tight and stung as if his heart was about to explode, paired with an overwhelming sense of impending doom that rattled him to the core. His dad used to be the one to pull him out of them; Stiles was convinced that the man must have hidden baby monitors in his room somewhere, because he always seemed to know when he was getting one, even in the early hours of the morning when they hit in the middle of writing a school paper. His dad would burst in, eyes crummy with sleep and drag him over to the bed, rubbing small circles into his back with a small sigh until he fell asleep. The next day the Sheriff would never utter a word about how he should have started the essay earlier instead of cramming it in the night before.

"Are you okay now?"

Derek's voice is calm, low and gentle against his thoughts.

"Yeah, just… Yeah."

"Do you need a glass of water?"

"No… No, thanks."

Derek lingers a moment before nodding and turning away. He almost makes it to the door.

"Wait," Stiles blurts, craning his head up a little higher. "Counting to four. You had me breathe in for four seconds," he murmurs, licking his lips as he studies the werewolf's back. "That's an anxiety technique. H-how did you… How did you know to do that?"

Derek pauses. He's barefooted, wearing a pair of black sweats and a dark cotton tee, looking almost human as he stands by the door. He doesn't turn around when he answers.

"Because I had nightmares, too. After the fire."

Stiles stares at him, eyes wide. The whisper slips past his tongue before he thinks to stop it.

"When… When do they stop?"

"After you let go."

"…When did you let go?"
"I haven't yet."

And the werewolf leaves, shutting the door softly behind him. Stiles stares at it for a long time, feeling like he'd just picked at a lock he didn't really have the keys to. Finally he lays back down, head aching with the leftover dregs of the attack as he allows his cheek to sink back into the pillow. He wraps his good hand back around the badge, and flexes his bad hand in front of his face, thoughtfully examining the gauze wrapped around his palm before letting his eyes flutter closed.

He falls asleep to the heavy lull of his thoughts, wondering if it was just another dream, or if Derek Hale really just confessed that he still got nightmares.
The next morning Derek is nowhere to be found.

There are two sticky notes on the counter, the first to appear in a long time.

Stiles feels his lips twitch a little bit. It's not quite a smile, but close.

With a yawn he shuffles to the refrigerator and cracks it open, absently noting how it was the first time he's ever even touched the handle. He spots the quiche sitting on the second rack in a glass pyrex, the same dish Melissa used for her famous pumpkin pie every Thanksgiving. He lifts up the foil and picks off a piece of crust, stuffing it inside his mouth before shutting the door.

He makes his way to the bathroom, halting when he spots himself in the mirror. He goes up to the glass and pokes his cheeks with a couple fingers; there's more color to them now, and they don't stick out so razor-sharp anymore. A quick lift of his shirt and prod to his navel confirms that he's put on weight, cushioning his ribs in a more comfortable layer of flesh. His eyes dart back up and meet their reflection, looking oddly bright without the dark ring of purple beneath them, almost like they did last year. His hair could use a trim, but other than that he looks….

Better.

Huh.

He grabs his toothbrush and fishes out the toothpaste from behind the mirror, frowning when he finds the tube is empty. He tosses it into the wastebasket, making a mental note to ask Derek to put it on the shopping list as he pulls out the drawers and searches for another, scratching his head with a sigh when he finds none. Then he realizes that duh, he lives with a werewolf with a pretty impressive
set of pearly-whites— the guy was bound to have toothpaste upstairs.

Stiles treks up to the second floor, toothbrush in hand as he reaches the hallway. It takes a few wrong guesses of closet doors before he finds and pokes his head into Derek’s bathroom, feeling rather invasive. In some ways a bathroom was more personal than a bedroom, and right now he was a little weirded out knowing that he was standing in the same space that his housemate took a piss. At least the area is clean, laid with pale blue tile and a shiny granite sink. An electric razor sits by the soap, undoubtedly for trimming the werewolf’s perfectly-sculpted stubble. He swipes a tube of Crest from the sink, squeezing a glob onto his brush before screwing the cap back on and hastily departing.

He almost makes it back to the stairs before he pauses, sight and mind snagging on something at the end of dim hallway. Slowly he turns around, eyes locking on the battered door nestled at the end of corridor. It was the room he’d asked about on the day he arrived— the one Derek had warned him never to go in.
The air seems to still. Even the birds outside stop chirping as he takes a cautious step forward, entranced. He inches across the hall until he reaches the door, rationale muffled by the pull of his curiosity. Up close the wood is battered and splintered, marred by ugly black scorch stains. It's the only door in the house that hadn't been repainted. He reaches out a hand, tracing his fingers delicately down five long slashes in the wood.

Stiles bites his lip, nervously stealing a paranoid glance over his shoulder. The house was quiet, the halls empty. He turns back to the door, eyeing the rusted handle. He knows he shouldn't, knows that Derek might really kill him if he ever finds out— but the mystery behind the room had been eating away at him since day one.
And Derek wasn't home.

The door unsticks with a rough squeak, like it hadn't been opened in a long time. His hand hovers over the wood as it swings away from the frame, creaking a loud warning to turn around. He ignores it and takes a step forward, skin prickling with gooseflesh.

Pale grey light from a broken window skims the dim room with ghostly fingers, staining the edges of the wreckage that litter the floor. Glass and ash blanket the floor like a carpet, on which tattered, blackened curtains lay crumpled in limp strings, matching the chipped peel of the moldy walls. It's barren except for a few pieces of broken furniture—a chest of drawers, warped bookshelves, a toppled chair—all of which lay scattered in ugly splinters around the space. Deep gashes mark the soot-stained walls where pictures have been torn down, just like the claw marks on the outside of the door, and scaly obsidian burn marks cover it all, poaching the air with the acrid sting of charred wood and tragedy of the past.

Every hair on his body screams to turn around and go back, but Stiles creeps closer, beckoned by a dusty frame face-down on the floor by the nightstand. He bends down and carefully picks up the photo, lips parting a little as he examines the picture behind the cracked glass. A man and woman smirk at the camera, both beautiful and sultry with dark hair and sharp canines. Three kids stand in front of them—two girls, one older and more serious than the other, and a boy that looked to be about his age, with familiar eyebrows and a carefree smile on his face.

*Bang.*

He jerks as he hears the front door slam shut, cringing as the photo slips from his fingers and hits the hardwood with a loud clatter. There's a tense pause as it grows quiet downstairs, in which he holds his breath like his life depends on it—but a second later footsteps are thundering up the staircase, and this time Stiles knows he's going to die, because he's about to be caught red-handed breaking the one rule of the house—

The rule that happened to protect the werewolf's most personal secret.

He stumble backwards, heartbeat jackhammering in his ears like a booming countdown. He has about two seconds to panic before the footsteps reach the top of the stairs and round the corner of the hallway. A second later the door slams against the wall, making ash rain from the ceiling as Derek bursts into the room and lets out a terrifying roar, fangs barred and eyes blazing.
Fury.

It consumes him, burning through his veins and shrouding all other senses in a curtain of red.

Stiles is in the room.

The room.

Derek just got back from a run, trotting up the porch with the cool air of the woods still clinging to his sweat, but the euphoria dissipates as soon as he walks through the door and hears a loud clatter from upstairs, accompanied by a panicked heartbeat. He halts for a split second, nearly crushing the doorknob in his fist because he knows exactly what dropped, and exactly which room it came from.

And there was only one other person in the house to wander inside.

In a blink he's at the top of the stairs, stomach twisting into something ugly when he sees the door open a crack— invaded for the first time since the fire. Another blink and suddenly he's barging inside, roaring and standing amongst the wreckage for the first time in nearly six years. The space looks almost the same as it did back then, when he had raked his claws through the burnt furnishings in a grief-stricken rage after the funeral. It had been his parents’ bedroom; once spacious and beautiful with his father's desk chair and his mother's antique vanity, the purple comforter that Laura liked to steal and the closet that he and Cora used to crawl in as kids for hide-and-seek, now soiled with mold and blackened with soot. It wasn't how he wanted to remember it, which was why he had vowed never to step foot inside again, locking away his grief behind the closed door.

But now the door was open.

And in turn, ripped off the band-aid and reopened his wound.

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It hits him all at once —the broken window, the toppled dressers and smashed lamps and shredded curtains, the way the seasons had raided the wreckage with wind and rain and left behind moss doilies and damp leaves on every surface— and Stiles standing in the midst of it all, doe-eyed and quaking like a scared rabbit. Before Derek can even form a thought his wolf lunges to the forefront and seizes control, and in a flash he's grabbing the human by the collar and slamming him up against the wall with enough force to make him yelp, shaking dust loose from the ceiling.

"What the fuck. Do you think you're doing in here?" He demands through clenched teeth, nose wrinkling above his jagged canines. Each word oozes out through a wall of rage so thick that it physically pains him, more so than it does to see Stiles flinch and rear his head back against the wall, as if trying to disappear into the chipped paint.

"Shit— I-I'm sorry, I was j-just—" Stiles stutters, clearly terrified as he squirms in his grip, sneakers scrabbling uselessly over the broken glass on the floor from when he had punched through the window. The teen's heart rate is through the roof, but Derek bears no pity, blinded by the torment of his uprooted grief.

"I told you never to fucking go in here!"

"I k-know, I know, Derek, I'm sorry—"

"SORRY ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH!" He screams— a sound at such shredded decibel that he even
surprises himself, because he hasn't yelled like that since the fire. Stiles flinches again, squeezing his eyes shut against the volume, and Derek whips his gaze to the floor. A toothbrush lies in the rubble beside the familiar photo frame, which is face-up and staring right at him, a smear of toothpaste smudged on the corner.

And everything snaps.

He roars, releasing Stiles's shirt to lunge for the wall. He rakes his claws through the enamel in a violent swipe, sending a shower of dust and wood splinters into the air. His wolf pillages all instinct and snatches the reins, driving him in storm throughout the room just as he had done once before as a broken-hearted teenager. Wood cracks like thunder as he knocks over what's left of the dresser, kicking through the drawers with a crunch and then taking his boot to the closet door, which gives way like plywood. Another swipe of his claws and the ruined mattress tears open with a flurry of blackened feathers and mildew, swirling in the air as he rips out the springs and chucks them at the spot on the wall where Laura's artwork used to hang. The grief ravages him, digging up repressed memories and fueling the drive to destroy as much as he can, because if he can destroy the physical remains of his past then maybe the pain will crumble with it—and he whirls around to lunge for the nightstand beside Stiles, who flinches and throws his arms up to shield his face—

And immediately Derek snaps out of it, nearly losing his footing as he jerks backwards because—

Oh god, Stiles thought he was going to hit him.
The effect is instantaneous. He blinks and the red drains from his vision, the fury falling from his stature. He blanches, forgets how to breathe, feels his mouth drop open as he takes another clumsy step back. Stiles looks scared out of his wits, pressed up against the wall like his life depends on it. His chest rises and falls rapidly as he stares at him, eyes two impossibly huge brown orbs. The sudden silence is deafening, interrupted only by the gentle caress of the breeze through the window, which softly stirs up the ash at their feet. A few feathers from the mattress settle to the ground and float across the floor.

"I..."

Derek starts, but the words die before they even form, leaving him to trail off pathetically. He's at a complete loss of what to say, how he can fix this. Stiles just continues to stare at him, so betrayed,
which somehow makes everything worse. But then there's a shift; a rift in the tension as the amber irises darken and narrow into slits, and Stiles's mouth compresses into an angry pucker.

"What? What is it, Derek?" Stiles spits viciously, pushing forward off the wall with his hands, which immediately take position as tight fists down at his sides. "Are you sorry? Sorry for being such a big, fucking brute, because that's all you'll ever be! A big, violent jerk who destroys everything in your path!"

Derek freezes at the words, taken aback. Stiles bravely strides forwards, pushing well into his personal space, and up close Derek can see the thin lines contorting the teen's brow; smell the lividity radiating off of him, and distantly thinks how this was the most expression he'd seen in the kid since January first.

"You spend all this time moping in your giant empty mansion, repainting the walls and putting pictures over burn marks, but guess what?" Stiles snarls, stretching out his neck so that their faces are less than a foot away from each other. "They can't cover up the fact that your family died, or the fact that you're too much of a coward to let it go! You can't hide your tragic past underneath coats of paint, Derek!"

The words sting. They sting because they're true, and he's horrified yet far from surprised that Stiles was able to pick out and decipher it, only to spit it back in his face like an ugly slap. He tries to think of a comeback, a denial, anything—but he can only stare as the teen continues.

"And FUCK you for trying to hide it!" Stiles screeches, impending tears shredding his voice to smithereens. Derek can see him losing control, beginning to crumble beneath his emotion, but Stiles pushes on, eyes pinched and glimmering with pooling rage. "FUCK YOU for having a hissy fit over it, because I lost my family too, and I don't go around trashing your house over it! My dad was killed in front of me, Derek! He fucking died for me! ME! He was the greatest man I ever knew, and I'm Never! Getting! Him! BACK!"

And a sob breaks free as Stiles abruptly lashes out with the last statement, landing a sharp punch to Derek's stomach with each word. It's unexpected, intense, laughable in any other situation—but it catches Derek off guard, snapping something beneath his ribcage that he didn't think was still there. The blows hardly make a dent; Derek's first instinct is to simply step to the side and let the kid fall on his face, but he can't. Instead he simply stands and lets Stiles wail on him, because he can take it and because Stiles needs it. Derek had been just as angry after the fire.

"Fight back, you asshole!" Stiles screams desperately, skin flushing an ugly red. His punches grow weaker and more uncoordinated as his rage erodes to wretched frustration, but Derek doesn't move.

"No," he says. Calmly. Quietly. Which only makes Stiles rip his hands away and shriek with frustration.

"Why not?" Stiles throws back, a thin string of spittle flying out with the demand. His face shines wet with tears and there's a thin line of snot dripping over his top lip, but he doesn't seem to care. "I can recall more than one occasion where you threatened to rip my throat out, don't you? You've made it clear enough in the past that you can't stand me!"

And that's when Derek lashes out his arms to grip Stiles by the shoulders, bucking his head forward so they're eye-to-eye.

"Don't say that!" He spits with more intensity than anticipated, and Stiles rears his head back and blinks, startled with the ferocity in his voice. "Do you really think I would offer to take you in if I hated your guts? Did you think I would hold your half-conscious ass in place while you downed a
can of soda after you passed out from your own fucking idiocy? How about wrap up that stupid cut on your hand, huh? Cook meals for you instead of letting you dick around on an empty stomach? It's about time you pulled your head out of your ass and started thinking again, Stiles!"

For a split second Stiles looks humbled into silence, but spite quickly overrides it.

"Get my head out of my ass?!!" Stiles wrenches out of his grip and takes a step back, incredulous. "Says the guy who refuses to say more than a couple words a day! Prior to this whole shitfest you treated me like dirt, Derek—and you expect me to accept all your sudden cordiality without a grain of salt? How the hell am I supposed to know what you're thinking when all you ever do is knit your fucking eyebrows together? How the hell am I supposed to understand why you just stood there and did nothing after he died, Derek! You just stood there with your dumb scowl and then ran off, and you expect me to believe that your intentions are all sunshine and roses?!!"

"You don't get it," Derek snarls, the outburst jumping out on it's own accord. "If I had just— If I had just been there a second sooner—"

"Is that why you took me in?" Stiles interrupts softly, eyes growing wide with hurt before narrowing again. "Because you felt bad? Because you've assigned my dad's death to your own guilt complex?"

"No!"

"Then why!"

"Because—"

Derek breaks off, suddenly jerking back as if the words had burned him. There it was. The question he didn't even fully know the answer to himself, phrased by the human who conjured an onset of emotions he typically didn't like to get too comfortable with. His eyes dart over Stiles's face like a tape on fast-forward, emotions flickering rapid-fire through what seem like twenty different reactions: surprise, anger, uncertainty, fear—but then there's something else, something warmer that only flickers for a split second, but it makes Stiles blink in surprise.

His lips twitch on the verge of saying something, but then he clamps them together and clicks the default scowl back into place, locking up whatever was inside behind a dark facade.

"Because." He states flatly, and drops his eyes to the floor. "Just because."

Stiles stares at him, eyes almost comically wide as they jump wildly over his face, desperately searching for an answer that wasn't there—begging him to keep talking and prove his point wrong. Derek can't. He can see the moment Stiles gives up, and crumples inwardly as the teen shakes his head a little and takes another step back, allowing room for the wall to swell between them. Time stretches on painfully between them, grating against Derek's skin.

"You know, I don't know why I ever agreed to move in with you," Stiles mutters quietly. He chuckles softly, lip twisting as if the laugh leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. The fire in his eyes dims to a dull flame; the kind of anger that is left when passion flickers out, leaving only hopeless resignation. It translates into tone as he delivers the last line, eyes daggering into Derek's own.
"This place will never be home."

And Stiles shoves past him, storming down the hall without another word. Derek stands silently and lets him go, listening to the human break into a run as he reaches the bottom of stairs and sprints across the hardwood, slamming the front door shut behind him.

Solitude once again.

Derek doesn't move, letting the familiar silence embrace him like an old friend, although now it feels more like his worst enemy. After some time he lets his gaze wander across the room, taking in the destruction. Without context, it looks like a gang of robbers had ransacked the place and destroyed everything in spite when they couldn't find anything of value. He turns to the wall, remembering when his mother had picked out the color of the paint: 'honeysuckle.' But now the hue was washed out, barely recognizable beneath the charcoal smudges from where the fire had licked the surface. His eyes travel slowly across the spiderweb cracks, halting when they land on the five long gashes
where he had just swiped his claws through the enamel. From his stance they suddenly look monstrous, like the nails that did it belonged to a savage beast. He moves forward and slowly reaches out a hand, tracing his fingers delicately down the deep slashes.

It's a perfect fit.

*You'll rip his throat out within a week*

Peter's words echo in his mind, taunting him with how close he had come to doing just that. Disgusted, Derek steps back, startled when something cracks under his boot. He lifts his foot up and glances down, freezing when met with the sight of photo frame.

After some hesitation he slowly bends down and gingerly picks it up off the ground. He brushes a gentle thumb over the cracked glass, hungrily drinking in the sight of his family. His sisters—how they hadn't wanted to take the picture that day because Cora's hair wasn't right and Laura never liked smiling for the camera, but they did it anyway because Talia had wanted it done. His father, who he never got a chance to really know, and his mother—beautiful, wise, and a little scary at times, but always equipped with a warm smile for the family. Something cracks inside of him when he sees his own self, mid-laugh with an arm wrapped playfully around Cora, who was nine, no, *eight and a half* at the time.

All remaining anger drains away, leaving behind only an empty, familiar sadness as he stares at her face—all of their faces—frozen in time a week before the fire, back when smiling wasn't something foreign.
He bites his lip, chin puckering with dimples.

*You're running dangerously close to turning soft*

The phrase worms into his conscience, voiced in his uncle's revolted tone. He swallows thickly, setting the frame back down gently on the nightstand.

That's what it always came back to. The question of being soft. For years Peter drilled into him how emotions like love, sympathy, and compassion only bred weakness and set him up for failure; a detriment to a werewolf's strength. "Power stems from the fear you elicit in others, Derek," his uncle had spat. "Do you want to be soft? Because if you think you'll earn anyone's respect like that, you're only fooling yourself."
But Stiles.

The name pops into his mind unexpectedly, pushing his gaze to the fallen toothbrush by his foot.

Stiles was the epitome of soft. Stiles, who cried without shame and got panic attacks and fainted when his squeamish bone was tickled. The pale, breakable human in the pack who always stuck his neck into danger anyway, forever armed with a baseball bat and a stash of dog jokes as he saved the pack again and again, figuring things out and demonstrating that perhaps being 'soft' wasn't so bad after all. And it flipped Derek upside-down, because Stiles disproved and deemed irrelevant everything Peter preached: power, lack of emotion, even brute strength if it meant coming out on top.

*Power stems from the fear you elicit in others*

But Derek thinks of Stiles. Stiles, with his skinny limbs and expressive features and clumsy feet; hardly someone who provoked fear, but just how powerful the human had been while holding him up in a pool for two hours, facing off Matt at gunpoint when his father was held hostage, or sprinting into the line of fire to chuck the firebomb at Ennis. The way his hands trembled before a mission — not with excitement, but with fear— and how that made him the bravest of them all.

And Derek thinks of Stiles. Because he, the intimidating, brooding alpha only got shifty, nervous glances and scowls from others. Mothers pulled their children away from him on the streets, Peter didn't give a damn, Isaac and the others avoided him like the plague and even Scott kept him at arm's length during conversations— but Stiles was the one person who actually had the guts to tease him, yell at him, touch him.

And now Derek had just scared him away, just like he scared away everybody else.

*you're only fooling yourself*

Derek clenches his fists, gaze jerking from the gashes on the wall, to the picture frame, the toothbrush on the floor, and back to the gashes. He listens to the cold howl of the wind as it gushes in through the broken window, stirring up the feathers at his feet.

"Fuck it," he mutters, and steals one more glance at the photo on the nightstand before bolting into the hallway. He doesn't even realize that he leaves the bedroom door ajar behind him.

*Do you want to be soft?*

The question echoes again as he grabs his jacket off the banister and shoots down the stairs two at a time, but the phrase stops repeating after that.

Because after years of mulling it over, he finally realizes what his answer is.
Grief.

It consumes him, chilling his bones and shrouding all other senses in a curtain of washed-out indigo.

Stiles wraps his arms tighter around his knees and shivers, absentmly watching a small black beetle crawl along a blade of grass by his foot. The sun had yet to warm up the morning and dispel the silver fog saturating the woods, and his breath billows out white in front of his face. He was really starting to wish that he had thought to grab a jacket before dramatically bolting off into the forest like some scorned lover in a chick flick, but hey, one doesn't really think straight after being slammed up against a wall by an angry werewolf.
There was no single word to describe the weeks of watching Derek cook and pad around the house in sweats, eating crepes, doing laundry, and looking unnervingly human. Definitely reallyfreakingweird at first (still weird, really) and agonizingly tense at times, but life with Derek had provided a cozy atmosphere of safe; restored a sense of normalcy to the point where he'd actually forgotten that Derek was still a werewolf at all. His pride would never allow him to admit it, but he had actually started to feel… Comfortable. Comfortable in the Hale house, the quiet of his bedroom, and at Derek's side. And that's why it had been so terrifying to see the wolf suddenly leap to the forefront and transform Derek into something so violent— rage akin to the beast of his species, claws gnarled with tenacity, irises awash with a crimson eerily similar to Kali's that night.

He sighs, rubbing a palm against his cheek. His skin sticks with dried tears. He had known that Derek wasn't really going to hit him, but all it took was a blink. One blink, one split-second register of glowing red eyes barreling his direction and a fist mid-swing, and his first instinct had been to fling his arms up in front of his face in a pathetic attempt to stay in one piece. But oh, his momentary panic had been nothing compared to the streak of horror on Derek's face— the way he'd jerked backwards as if scalded by his own action, irises switching back to guilt-ridden green in a single blink. He had looked absolutely wrecked: mouth agape, eyes stretched wide, the whole shebang. Hell, Stiles had never seen the guy so expressive.

He watches as the beetle reaches the tip of the grass blade and promptly slips off, landing on it's back in the dirt. It's legs pinwheel frantically in the air, failing to find leverage. Yeah, well serves you right, he thinks bitterly. That's what happens when you don't think about the consequences of your werewolfy actions and end up falling on your ass.

He swipes a twig from the ground and fiddles with it between his cold fingers, pausing when he notices the white gauze still wrapped around his palm.

"Why do you have that? You're a werewolf, you grew up in a family of werewolves. You heal yourself."

"Yes, but you don't."

The memory nudges into his mind without invitation. Slowly he turns over his hand to inspect the bandage, remembering the small first aid kit Derek had pulled out from under the sink. He swallows, recalling how Derek had rolled his eyes and muttered a string of obscenities, but wrapped the cut anyway with surprisingly gentle hands— and those same hands pressing warm against his chest last night, pulling him out of panic. He thinks of Derek giving up meat for weeks after he took one look at a steak and fled for the hills, and Derek going out of his way to have Scott come over under his nose. Derek dragging him out of bed to get him outside, tucking a pillow behind his head when he fell asleep on the couch, standing still and letting a human punch him in the stomach when he easily could have stepped to the side to let him fall on his face. And Derek, who must have known the impending challenge present in living with a sarcastic depressed teenager yet volunteered to take him in anyway, proceeding to metaphorically hold his hand throughout all the angst without a single complaint.

That's all you'll ever be! A big, violent jerk who destroys everything in your path!

Stiles closes his eyes, biting his lip.

Shit.

Congratulations Stiles Stilinski, for winning the 'jackass of the year' award.

He glances back down at the beetle still twirling around helplessly on it's back. With a sigh he leans
forward and uses the tip of the branch to flip the bug back right-side up, watching as it opens its wings and flies off with a buzz, zig-zagging through the misty air.

_Crack._

A twig snaps somewhere from behind, reminding him that he's sitting alone in the middle of the forest as perfect, human-seasoned bait for all the supernatural were-whatevers roaming Beacon Hills. He whirls around so fast he nearly falls off his tree stump, whipping the stick out in front of him like a sword. His anxiety somehow doubles when he sees that it's Derek, who's standing stiffly in his trademark leather jacket, stature unusually tentative against the backdrop of the woods. He glances to the twig in his hands, and his eyebrow twitches like it wants to mock him but thinks better of it. Stiles releases a breath and chucks the stick to the side, uneasily observing him. Derek keeps his distance, face unnervingly open as he stares back. He looks perturbed. Frightened, even.

"How did you find me?" Stiles blurts, because he needs something to fill the awkward silence. Also because Derek just tracked him down to a random rock in the middle of the woods, which is kinda sketchy and suggests some microchip antics.

"Your heartbeat is loud," Derek states. His fingers twitch down at his sides, like he's not sure what to do with them. A pause. "And I followed your scent."

"Well that's just creepy," Stiles mutters, an automatic attempt at humor to mask the icky mass in his stomach. That, and he needs to buy some time while gathering his wits. Derek doesn't say anything, which only increases the awkward eighty percent. His heartbeat _thu-thumps_ obnoxiously in his ears for one beat, two beats, three—

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

They blurt it at the same time, startling each other. It's bizarre to hear their voices together; his own tumbles out loud and fluid, like he's used to apologizing. Derek's is lower and quieter, as if ground out through a machine that hasn't been oiled in a while. Both share the same level of authenticity.

"What?" He states weakly, at a loss of how to handle this. Usually he would seize the opportunity to milk this beautiful moment of out of character submission, except that Derek Hale had just uttered the actual 's' word.

"I'm sorry," Derek repeats, a little louder this time. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, taking a pause. "I… I shouldn't have done that. I didn't mean to scare you. I wasn't going to…"

He trails off, looking to the side. There's something haunted about his expression that makes Stiles wilt a little in the inside, the same way he used to when his dad had his hand wrapped around the bottle of Jack.

"I know you weren't," Stiles finishes for him. He says it quietly but with conviction, looking Derek in the eye so he knows he really means it. His hand creeps up and rubs the back of his neck. "Look, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I… I was a real dick. I invaded your privacy, like, _really_ invaded it. I just— I'm a curious person! Odds are if you tell me not to do something, I'm gonna do it, but that's… No excuse. You told me not to go in that room, and I should have respected that."

He finishes with a sigh and wipes a hand down the side of his face, bracing himself for a lecture or an angry tangent. A punch across the jaw maybe, which he totally deserved. But instead Derek
studies him for a moment and takes a step closer, slipping his hands into his jacket pockets.

"Yeah. You should have," Derek admits calmly. "But I'm glad you didn't."

He looks up in bewilderment as Derek treads over and takes a seat next to him on the tree stump. The werewolf tucks up his legs and rests an arm on his knee, running the other hand through his hair. Stiles does it too when he's nervous.

"That room…" Derek treads cautiously, like he's venturing someplace he'd never gone before. He looks out across the clearing. "It used to be my parent's room. There were a lot of memories in there. Things I was hiding from that were actually… Good to see again. And I never would have seen any of it if you hadn't walked in there."

Stiles stares at him, unable to summon a response. He remembers to blink when his eyes start watering and looks away, recalling the photo of Derek's family on the nightstand. _That you dropped_, his mind supplies helpfully.

"The picture?"

Derek nods.

"Yeah."

It's quiet, but a different kind of quiet than before. Somewhere in the distance birds banter in the trees, throwing chirps and whistles into the clearing. Stiles reaches down to pick up another twig and starts peeling away thin curls of bark with his thumbnail. His breath shakes a little as he blows out another puff of white air.

"Listen, I didn't mean what I said about you being a brute," he mentions quietly. "I mean, you're actually kind of the opposite, which I never expected because, you know, this," he gestures to Derek's body with the stick in an elevator type motion. "Can be kind of intimidating, but you're like one of those chocolates that's all hard on the outside but caramelly on the inside, which is really cliche, but when I first got here I totally didn't think you were a caramel. Or even chocolate. More like a rock."

"Stiles."

"Right. Point is, I misjudged you. And I actually appreciate you taking me in, despite what I said earlier." He frowns and stops fiddling with the twig for a moment, opting instead to stare at a fascinating pebble by his foot. "I made it sound like my dad's death was somehow worse than you losing your family, which is horrible and isn't what I meant. I was just really angry, not even at you, really. It was like everything since New Year's just kind of… Exploded. What I said about your family, it was…" He chews on his lip, struggling to find the right word. _Horrible. Insensitive. The worst thing someone could possibly point out to Derek Hale_ spring to mind. "A low blow."

More quiet. He trembles against the cold, awaiting but not really expecting a response. He's surprised when he gets one.

"It's okay… You're right. I needed to hear it."

Stiles steals a glance at him. Derek doesn't mirror, purposefully keeping his gaze glued to the foggy horizon. Stiles dips his head down so his chin nestles in the warmth of his arms again, wondering just how long the werewolf had spent without someone to talk to. Maybe that was why talking wasn't really his thing.
"I never blamed you, you know," he murmurs. "If anyone I blame myself, since I'm the reason he was out there in the first place. Sometimes I think about how he might still be here if I had actually thrown a decent shot, or tried harder to make him go back home. But I never blamed you."

The words spill out on their own accord, eager to escape the confines of his scull. Why he was telling Derek? He didn't know. Then again he didn't really have a reason for punching the guy in the gut either, but he'd done that anyway too. Hormones, probably.

"Stiles, it's not your fault." Derek says. He pauses as if rolling a set of words on his tongue, contemplating if he should let them go. After a while he adds quietly, "It's nobody's fault."

Stiles remembers a time in english class when they were discussing character development.

"I…” He chokes out, swallowing the lump in his throat. He looks up to the sky like his dad used to do, wondering if the man ever found any answers up there. "How do you do this?" He babbles softly. "How have you managed all these years without letting it eat you alive? When… When does it stop?"

Derek is quiet for a moment.

"It hurts. Mostly in the beginning, and keeps hurting until the day you die. It's up to you how long you'll let the hurt stop you from living life."
They stare at the view for a long time. The birds continue singing in the background, and that's when he finally gets it.

Derek had gone through this all before— he had asked the same questions, maybe even cried the same tears, and that's how he knew the answers and insisted that he do things like take showers and get out of the house. How could he be so self-absorbed to not even think of it before? It must be so painfully obvious to anyone else, probably why Melissa had been so adamant about convincing him stay with Derek in the first place. The guy may not be as huggy as Scott or have Lydia's endearment, but he knew exactly what it was like to lose a family.

"Can I ask you something?"
Derek hesitates, like he's not sure where this is going. He nods.

"Why do you still live in the mansion?" He asks tentatively. Derek stiffens a little. "Don't get me wrong, it's a nice place, but if I can smell the mold in the stairway I know you can, and I'm guessing the pots in the hallway underneath the pipes aren't for decoration. It's kind of falling apart, but beyond that, I mean... It must hurt. Before I moved in with you I couldn't even sleep in my house because I knew it was empty. And if you have the money for a new place... Why not move out?"

Derek is quiet for such a long time that Stiles starts to get dizzy from holding his breath. He's about to apologize for bringing it up when Derek finally speaks.

"I can't."

The words are small, spoken with something he recognizes from long ago. To anybody else it might seem cryptic, but he knows. Derek doesn't meet his eyes, so Stiles starts talking.

"My mom used to wear a necklace," he says. He doesn't know why he says it, but he thinks that Derek will understand. "It was a little silver heart, nothing really fancy but apparently my dad gave it to her for their one year anniversary. After she died he used to wear it underneath his uniform every day, even eight years later. I don't think he knew that I knew, but I saw it sticking out underneath his collar after the funeral. I thought maybe it was just a temporary thing, but I kept catching glimpses of it over the years, even last Christmas." He pauses. "I do the same thing with his badge. Keep it under my pillow to help keep away the nightmares. Sometimes I take it out anyway just to look at it. I guess sometimes we're just not ready to let go."

And Derek stares at him so long and hard that Stiles wipes his chin, thinking that he has dirt smudged on his face. His hand comes away clean.

He curls his toes against the soles of his shoes as the necklace spurs other memories of laying sprawled on the carpet with Scott and a pile of comic books, sniggering over some joke coach cracked about Greenberg that day. Splitting a Reese's with Lydia while mulling over his dad's old cases, and shooting her a death-glare whenever she found an excuse to insult the jeep. He thinks of his life last year and his life nine years ago, before he knew what death was. He thinks of his mom's macaroni and cheese, and how all three of them used to sit down and eat it as a family on special occasions— everything from birthdays to when he learned how to ride a bike, or when a bad day called for the calories. They had eaten it when his dad had been promoted to Sheriff, back when the badge gleamed shiny-new and far fewer wrinkles framed his father's smile. He gets so lost in it all that he doesn't catch when his train of thought swerves off the tracks and slips out in a whisper.

"I miss him."

"He was proud of you, Stiles."

Derek's response is quick, like he's stating a simple fact. It wasn't any false affirmation to ease his ego, but a statement spoken with such firm belief that Stiles snaps his head up to look at him. The question of his father's admiration haunted him daily like a dark cloud, forever nagging at the back of his mind. His dad had once called him a hero, but the praise always just came back around and drove the guilt in deeper. Stiles Stilinski: the 147-pound blabbermouth who's best defense against a pack of werewolves was a baseball bat. The wimp who cried without shame and got panic attacks and fainted when his squeamish bone was tickled. The idiot who chucked a firebomb and missed an alpha by half a mile, at the cost of his father's life.

"He called me a hero, Derek. But I'm n-not."
His teeth chatter pathetically on the last word, either from emotion or the cold. He's pretty much cried-out at this point though, so he guesses the latter.

Derek sighs.

"You are to the pack, Stiles. Not every human is stupid enough to run with wolves."

And Derek pushes himself to his knees and stands up. For a second Stiles thinks that he annoyed him into leaving, but then something warm and heavy is dropped onto his shoulders, and his mouth falls open when he sees that it's Derek's leather jacket. He whirls around but the alpha was already treading back in the direction of the house, fog dramatically illuminating his broad shoulders like a scene from *The Right Stuff*.

"Come back to the house when you're ready," Derek throws over his shoulder. "We can order pizza later."

Stiles gawks and curls his fingers over the rough teeth of the zipper, convinced that this was illegal or a fake or something because Derek's jacket was like his soul, yet here he was, wearing it. He tentatively slips his arms into the sleeves, giving the collar a gentle yank to cover his shoulders. Immediately the warmth of the worn leather envelops him, wrapping him in the scent of what was apparently Derek Hale: earth and redwood, with slight undertones of musk. Oh, how he wanted to be angsty and prove his point and not be bribed with the promise of pizza, but that sounded a hell of a lot better than sitting out here in the cold.

(Even if he did have Derek's jacket).

"Hey, wait up!"

He hops off the tree stump. Derek glances back at him, and slows down a bit before turning around again. Stiles catches up and slips a hand into the jacket pocket, intrigued when his fingers brush against a crumpled piece of paper. His fingertips twitch, wanting nothing more than to take it out and peek at what it is, but he makes a fist instead. Apparently Derek Hale was more of an oyster than a wolf, clamped shut like the tightest crustacean in the ocean— and everyone knows that it's near impossible to open one of those by force.

The only way to get the pearl is to wait for the oyster to open.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for all the kudos/kind words *hugs*
Derek wakes up to a sticky note on the counter.

He stands in the kitchen and stares at it, probably longer than necessary. It's Sunday morning and he isn't sure whether to laugh, scowl, or be worried because Stiles was usually a zombie before 10:00am, let alone up and out of the house before him. He goes over to start the Keurig and contemplates texting Scott, but stops when his ears pick up faint rumblings from outside and what sounds a whole lot like a sneaker kicking the bumper of a jeep. A glance out the window confirms that Stiles never made it out of the driveway.

The front door opens with a creak like it always does, but apparently Stiles is too preoccupied bending over the hood of the car muttering profanities to notice. February was drawing to a close, marking the peak time of winter for Beacon Hills. The year had yet to see any snow, but regardless a crisp chill breaches the air like a wintry plague, leaving a trail of bitter frost upon every surface that coats the porch and nearby trees in intricate sewings of icy lace. It's cold, evidently cold enough to cause car trouble.

"Come on, don't do this to me," Stiles mutters and drops to a crouch, shoving against the bumper with his shoulder and then his hands when the jeep doesn't budge. "Fucking fuckity fuck, you useless piece of junk, fuck you. Fuck winter, fuck everything!"

Derek leans against the doorframe and watches for a minute, amused as Stiles switches from colorful curses to cooed apologies and strokes a palm soothingly over the hood, as if the car were a fussy infant. He chews his thumb and bounces on the balls of his feet, fingers drumming against the back of his head as he studies the front tires. Derek tries to roll his eyes but ends up repressing a tiny smirk instead, because Stiles looks so much like his old self.
It had been a couple weeks since their little heart-to-heart in the woods, an event that seemed to have shaken lose some of the slump from Stiles's shoulders. He had been more animated recently— just subtle quirks like scratching his cheek or twitching his nose, but the small actions spoke volumes. In addition the sass level in the house had jumped from nearly nonexistent to full on sarcasm war, almost like old times. The only difference was that the invisible wall of tension seemed to have crumbled in more ways than one, which was new and unexpected but not uncomfortable.

It isn't until Stiles kicks the bumper and grabs his foot with a yelp, hopping and cursing colorfully that Derek decides he should probably get in there before the kid hurts himself.

He comes down the porch and the steps creak obnoxiously, although the noise is lost beneath Stiles's muttering.

"I'm sorry baby, I didn't mean it. Please move for me? Come on, I'll take you on a nice drive, yeah? Fill you up with that expensive deluxe gas just the way you like, if you'll just fucking—"

Derek clears his throat.

Stiles squeaks and snaps up like a jack in the box, whirling around with flailing arms and his mouth a little 'o' shape. Derek doesn't think he'll ever get tired of the way he startles.

"Ohmygod, we have got to get you a bell," Stiles doubles over in relief, whooshing out the words in a single breath that billows out white in front of his face.

"Need some help?"

"Uh," Stiles jerks his up head towards the jeep. The hand clasped over his knee moves up and rubs the back of his head. "Yeah, actually. Yes. Your biceps could totally come in handy right about now."

Derek steps closer, sweeping a glance up the exterior of the car. The tires are inflated and engine is running, a low rumble against the stillness of the winter air. The temperature turns the exhaust from the tailpipe into a plume of fog. He doesn't see a problem.

"What's the problem?"

Stiles wrinkles his nose and rubs his hands over his cheeks, which are stained pink from the cold. "Fun thing about cars from the seventies is that they have no problem giving up on you in times of crisis. The clutch is stuck in park and I can't get it to move."

"So you tried shoving the car backwards with your hands?" Derek asks slowly, in more of a statement than a question.

Stiles pouts and leads him to the driver's door, grumbling something about "shut up" and "desperate times call for desperate measures."

Wordlessly Derek steps forward and sticks his head into the Jeep. Considering the age of the car it's in decent condition, if not a little shabby. The seats are worn and faded in places, dashboard peeling near the wheel and equipped with a radio set that looked like it was pulled from a science fiction movie. It's weathered and chipped but charming in it's own kind of way, although he would shout it's ugliness until he was blue in the face. He wonders why Stiles likes the car so much.

He hops up behind the wheel, pretending not to notice the black stain on the mat in the passenger's seat, which was undoubtedly his own poisoned blood from when he sat there one year prior with a wolfsbane bullet in his arm. Experimentally he jiggles the clutch, which doesn't budge. He's still in
his sweats with hair mussed from his pillow, and Stiles's eyes dart down to his bare feet as he gently pushes down on the break, coaxing the clutch backwards as he does so. There's a bit of resistance and then a click as the gear shifts back into reverse.

"Wha— dude!" Stiles breathes as Derek hops down from the driver's seat. "How'd you do that?"

"Hit the breaks next time," Derek replies with a shrug. "That way you lessen the pressure on the release so the gear can unlock."

"I didn't know car matinence was on your list of werewolfy talents," Stiles muses, and claps a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks."

"You're up early," Derek comments. Stiles swings a leg up into the jeep and melts into the seat, blowing out a sigh that puffs out his cheeks.

"I know," he mutters, sounding less than pleased. "But the first Batman Ultimate comic comes out today and Scott wants me with him so we can be the first to buy it when the store opens." His fingers come up in tired jazz hands. "But believe me I would so rather be asleep right now."

Derek nods. He's actually slightly impressed that Stiles is pushing himself out of the house on his own. He had been heading over to Scott's house more often recently, and each time he would return a little brighter than before, painted with color in his cheeks and a relaxed spring in his step that usually carried over to the next day.

"Want any coffee before you go? I just put on a pot."

Stiles pulls a wan smirk and lets his scull thump back against the headrest.

"Nah, I'm okay. Thanks though."

"Alright. Wait here a second."

"Uh, kay… Why?" Stiles shifts up a bit, eyebrows knitting suspiciously. Derek waves him off as he trudges back up the front steps.

"Just hang on. I'll be right back."

He ducks into the house and reaches an arm around the front door, grabbing what he's looking for off the nail on the wall. When he returns Stiles is sitting in the jeep chewing the string of his hoodie, some pop song blaring obnoxiously from the radio. Derek doesn't comment on the volume because he's guilty of doing the same thing.

He takes the small device off his ring of keys and tosses it. Stiles scrambles to catch it, managing to trap it between two fingers before it tumbles outside the jeep, but only just.

"Wait, is this…?" The teen holds it up so close in front of his face that his eyes cross a little.

"Remote to the garage. You can park next to the Camaro."

The hoodie string falls out of Stiles's mouth. He looks to Derek, eyes round and bright.

"Wait, really?"

"Deluxe gas won't do a thing if your baby freezes," Derek suggests wryly, raising an eyebrow. Stiles pinks slightly but taps his index finger twice to his nose and then points it at Derek. 
"Very true. See ya later, sourwolf."

Stiles backs out of the driveway and drives off. Derek winces when the breaks squeak and makes his way back up the front steps, cracking the sleep from his neck. It was the first time in a long time he had heard the nickname, and the first time he doesn't really mind it.

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It's almost six o'clock when a pair of wheels pull into the driveway.

Derek glances up from his Reddit article, fingers pausing over the mousepad. He listens to a pair of feet treading up the front porch, but it isn't Stiles. The steps are too light and tentative, and the jeep's sputtering engine usually provided at least a couple miles of warning. He rises and strides to the door, genuinely curious (if not a little nervous) because the only visitor he gets is Peter once in a blue moon when the man decides he fancies an argument.

He swings the door open before the mystery guest has a chance to knock, and there's a moment of stunned silence when he sees who it is.

"Derek?"

"Ms. McCall," he states bluntly, feeling his face break into something surprised.

Melissa stares back at him with a tight lip and uncertain eyes, and Derek can see that Scott got his big browns from her. She's in a pair of lavender scrubs, messy curls fighting loose from a ponytail pulled back with a matching hairband. He can smell the shampoo she used, the faint whiff of a bagel on her breath, and the unmistakable tang of unease beneath them both. Her knuckles are wrapped white around the shoulder strap of her purse, as if she feared that he might lash out and try to take it. He doesn't expect the observation to hurt as much as it does.

"Is Stiles okay?" He blurs, because that's his first assumption as to why Melissa McCall would be standing on his doorstep. They had never actually spoken face-to-face, aside from their brief interaction at the funeral and formal greetings whenever they happened to cross paths. Her casseroles and baked goods had been sent with Scott to hand over at pack meetings.

"Stiles?" She repeats, momentarily confused before her eyebrows settle back down. "Oh no, he's fine. He's still with Scott back at the house. I'm just on my way to my evening shift," she says sheepishly, glancing down to her watch. "But I wanted to stop by. Sorry, I probably should have called, but uh... I don't have your number."

"Oh," he states dumbly, mouth suddenly dry. He has no idea why she's here, and almost doesn't want to find out. He steps back. "It's alright, come in."

"Thanks."

Melissa bites her lip and pokes forward, shoulders hunching a bit as she steps past him into the house. Derek closes the door and watches as she cautiously looks around, eyes darting from the blackened windows to the old chandelier, the burn marks on the floor and the kitchen table where a Spotify playlist is playing softly from his laptop. He can tell she's trying not to stare at everything. Trying not to seem nervous, but her arms are stiff against her sides and her forehead is creased, and he doesn't even need to smell her fear to know that she doesn't want to be here.

"We got your quiche," he states, trying to fill the awkward silence. He could face all the alphas in the
world and not bat an eyelash tearing their throats out, but when it came to smalltalk with a human nurse he was terrified and lost.

"Oh good, Scott gave it to you at your… Meeting, then," she says, as if holding the word 'meeting' at the end of a ten-foot pole. Derek remembers that she had only found out about the supernatural a few months ago, and probably didn't have much of an idea on what her son did for 'werewolf training.'

"Yeah. Thank you," he replies, and leads her to the kitchen so he can retrieve the glass pie dish from the cabinet. He hands it out for her to take. "Here's your dish."

She hesitates a moment before taking it, giving him a tight smile.

"Thanks. I know I'm not the best cook, but I wanted to do something."

Her smile fades and her eyes dart down to his hands, like she expected a pair of claws to pop out. He flexes his fingers and hides them in his pockets.

"Listen, I uh. I know I've been sending Scott with food, but I wanted to stop by in person." She clears her throat and glances nervously to the side, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. "I've… I've noticed Stiles coming over more recently to hang out with Scott, and he looks… Better. After how I saw him at the funeral, well," she looks to the side again, frowning a little. "I was worried. I guess what I'm trying to say is… I don't know what you're doing, but thank you."

Derek stares at her. Of all the things he expected to hear, 'thank you' was not one of them. It was the same two words the vendors at the market told him twice a month, but Melissa's meant something more, and he had forgotten how good it felt to hear. He thinks he should probably say something in return, an expected phrase like "you're welcome" maybe, but that felt wrong. It was hardly something to be thanked for; taking Stiles in didn't feel like a favor or a chore. Apparently he takes too long to decide on a response because Melissa raises an eyebrow and clears her throat again.

"I uh, wrote out a list for you of things I thought might be useful, Scott was supposed to give it to you a few weeks ago I think. Did you get it?"

He snaps out of his thoughts and rubs a palm over his stubble, to hide what he had a sinking feeling was a creep of pink up his face.

"Uh. Yeah, it's right here."

He's relieved to turn away and walk over to the kitchen table for a moment, where his leather jacket is slung over the back of his chair. He dips a hand inside the pocket and retrieves the paper, unfolding it as he returns to Melissa. Doctor names and phone numbers stare back at him as he uses his thumb to smooth out the creases, written neatly in the bubbly handwriting of a careful hand.

"I picked up a refill for his Adderall prescription a couple weeks ago," he starts, moving his thumb down the list. "And called the doctors' offices to update his address. Dr. Schmidt for his primary physician, Dr. Clarke for his psychiatrist, and Dr. Wendall for the dentist, although I kept getting an 'out of service' recording when I tried Sarah Weiser… His therapist," he says, and his voice must bend up at the end because Melissa raises an eyebrow and clears her throat again.

"Oh, yeah," she mutters, and tucks another curly tendril behind her ear. "He saw her for a few months after his mom died. That was when he was eight though, so she's probably moved or isn't working anymore. But I thought I'd stick the number in there… Just in case."

Derek nods and returns to the list, glancing at the last bullet point.
"I uh…” He quirks an eyebrow and looks up at her. "I didn't know he was allergic to strawberries."

Melissa smiles nervously, releasing a breathless laugh. "Yeah, and it's kinda my fault, I hate to say. When he and Scott were in Kindergarten I made them some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with strawberry jam, I had no idea. He puffed up like a chipmunk. Good thing I'm a nurse."

She chuckles nervously. Derek joins in.

He moves his thumb and glimpses at the cell number scrawled at the bottom of the list. He hadn't given it a call because he hadn't needed to so far, but deep down he knows that he had also been too apprehensive to reach out. He decides not to mention it and tucks the list into his pocket.

"Does he still have the badge?"

Derek blinks up at Melissa. He's curious as to how she knows about it, and uneasy about what 'still' implied.

"Yes, he does," he replies carefully.

"Thank god for small blessings," Melissa murmurs, and a hand drifts to her chest. "You know they were almost going to reclaim it? Technically it belongs to the station, city property or some crap like that."

Derek looks at her sharply. Losing the badge would crush Stiles. "Really?"

"Yeah," Melissa says grimly, like she had a mind to punch whoever had the idea. "But I managed to sweet-talk the department Personnel Director into letting him keep it. You know… Since it's basically all he has left of his dad." She looks down, voice waning at the end.

"Right," Derek mentions quietly, unsure of what else to say. Melissa bites her lip, seemingly on the edge of speaking up. A few new crinkles decorate the corners of her eyes.
"Listen," she murmurs, looking at him earnestly. "After Claudia died, it really pulled John apart. Stiles had to grow up really fast… But they got through it together, and it brought them really close. Losing his mom was really really hard on him, but losing his dad… He… He and John were…"

She trails off, betrayed by the crack in her voice. Her eyes fall to the floor and she presses the back of her hand to her chin, and Derek can see the sparkle of tears welling beneath her lashes. She doesn't need to continue, because he understands what she meant to say. Stiles and his dad had loved each other, maybe even more than they loved themselves. That had been plain for anyone to see, and difficult for anyone to forget.

Wordlessly he steps back and plucks a napkin from the stack on the counter and holds it out to her. She eyes it with surprise and releases a little shaky breath, taking it. She dabs at her eyes.
"Thank you," she mutters, and laughs something hollow in embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," he says, which also seems to surprise her.

"You know, if it had been the other way around, I don't know if John would've been able to handle losing both of them," she confesses quietly, balling the napkin in her fist. "But I know Stiles is stronger."

"He is. He just needs some time."

When Melissa glances up Derek can see how much she wants to believe him, and he can see fear—for once not fear of him, but fear for Stiles. The worry of a mother for the teenager who was like her second son, whom she had watched grow up through thick and thin. He knows how hard it must be for her to stand back and trust him with getting Stiles through the thickest yet, let alone the subtle scent of grief he can smell clinging to her scrubs. Only a fool would fail to notice the way John and Melissa had looked at each other; grey and brown had never painted a clearer picture upon locking, sidelong glances that made one wonder if there was ever something more between them.

Melissa's gaze flickers to the pan on the stove, which was wrapped in tin foil to keep warm until Stiles got home. Her mouth falls open a little bit as she realizes what it is, and of course she would know, since Scott and Stiles had been friends since at least kindergarten. She turns back, staring at him with an expression that makes him look away in embarrassment.

"Is that…?" But she can't finish, words faltering.

"He mentioned it a few weeks ago," he says quietly. He doesn't say why he decided to make it.

Melissa presses her fingers to her lips, expression melting. She stares at him, eyes dancing over his face like he's a puzzle she can't really figure out. Derek still isn't used to it.

"Look, Derek. I know John and I… Well, we never exactly showed you the kindness we should have, but it's really generous of you to take him in. Truth is, Scott's a good kid. But he can't help Stiles in the same way you can."

Her eyes are earnest, and Derek still can't bring himself to meet them to save his life. He feels too warm, uncomfortable being under so much praise, and struggles to make his mouth work.

"Scott does a lot for him. He's his best friend, which is something I can't give him."

"Honey, I think you help Stiles more than you think."

She says it with a faint smile, stealing a glimpse back at the dish on the stove. Her fingers hesitantly unwrap from her purse strap and hover in the air for a second before she slowly reaches out, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. She squeezes lightly, and before Derek can even think of how much it reminds him of his mom she withdraws, taking the remainder of his composure with her. All he can do is stare at her, chest in knots that she had the courage to reach out and touch him.

Silence ticks by.

"Well," Melissa bites her lip, awkwardly checking her watch. She absently tucks a curly tendril behind her ear, the same one that she had tucked back three times already. "I should get going, don't wanna be late. There could be some old geezer in need of an enema."

The way she says it makes Derek suspect that it had happened before, and she chuckles nervously again as he walks her out.
"If you need anything, let me know. Maybe shoot me a text so I can have your number?"

"Sure. I will. Have a good day, Ms. McCall."

"Oh, and Derek?"

She turns around to look at him on the front porch. Her hands loosen around the straps of her purse. She offers him a tiny smile.

"You can call me Melissa."

"Melissa," he corrects. He raises his hand in a single wave, which he hopes doesn't look as dorky as it feels.

He shuts the door.

His back hits the wood with a soft thump as he turns around and leans against it, skin tingly beneath his sweater from where she'd squeezed his shoulder. He looks out across the living room from the blackened curtains to the old chandelier, the burn marks on the the floor and the kitchen table where the Spotify playlist is still playing softly from his laptop. He realizes he probably should have offered her a seat or maybe a place to put her bag, but he didn't have a lot of practice with houseguests and never really had anyone to teach him basic etiquette.

The paper crackles as he takes it back out of his pocket, unfolding the list so that Melissa's number revealed itself again. He doesn't need to think too hard about why it took her so long to stop by, because it's the same reason he hadn't put the number into his phone yet. It must have taken a while to work up the courage to visit the house of a shady werewolf by herself, which illustrated just how much she cared about Stiles. The Sheriff had looked at him much in the same way others did, eyes slanted into disapproval and distrust—but Melissa's had always been different: laced with uncertainty and fear, a lining of pity underneath.

He takes out his phone, punching in the digits to his contacts. After several indecisive rewrites, he hits send.

It's Derek

A few seconds later his phone buzzes.

:)  

Then a pair of tires back out of the driveway, the rumble of an engine fades into the distance, and Derek thinks about how different her eyes had looked in his kitchen.

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It's not long after when he hears the rattle of a CJ-5 motor echo off the trees, followed by the yawn of
the garage door.

"Hey," Stiles greets, raising his hand in a wave as he shuffles into the kitchen. His cheeks are flushed and his hair is wild and wind-blown, which makes Derek suspect that he and Scott had been practicing throws outside.

"Hey," Derek returns. "You get your comic?"

Stiles makes a noise somewhere between a grunt and a sigh and goes straight for the fridge, pulling out the gallon of milk. "Turns out people take Batman comics very seriously, even in this town. They started lining up like two days ago, overzealous chumps." He takes down a large glass from the cupboard and fills it nearly to the brim, sloshing a few white drips onto the counter. "By the time we finally got up to the front they had sold out, so we just went back to Scott's and hung out for the day."

"Movie marathon?"

"Yep. Then practiced a few throws out back."

"Only broke a few windows, I hope."

Stiles ducks back the glass and takes a swig, eyes narrowing over the rim. It leaves a little ring of white on his upper lip.

"Hey, it was one window and that was one time," he quips, wiping a sleeve across his mouth. Then he fishes a hand inside his pocket and holds out the garage opener. "Here, thanks again."

Derek shakes his head. "Keep it. I've got a spare."

"Oh. Really? Thanks. I promise not to sideswipe the Camaro when I pull in."

Derek suddenly regrets his generosity.

"Hey, did you eat?" Stiles asks, working to put the remote on his key ring while simultaneously trying to take another sip of milk. Derek watches warily as the cup teeters precariously between his knuckles and the edge of the counter. They had lost three glasses already.

"Nope, dinner's still hot. Take a seat."

"Aw yesss, I'm starving," Stiles declares, rubbing a hand lengthwise up his belly for emphasis. He takes the milk to the table and unzips his hoodie as he slides into a chair, revealing a faded Star Wars tee underneath. "Whatcha got? Bacon?" He guesses, sniffing hopefully at the air.

"Is bacon all you ever think about?"

"When I'm not pitying all the people who've never tried bacon? Pretty much."

Derek keeps his expression blank as he sets the dish on the table. He sits down and takes off the tin foil.

It takes Stiles a second of fidgeting before he glances up and notices it, fingers mid-wipe across his nose. He stills, hand slowly drifting down to his lap as he stares at it, mouth falling open so that Derek can see the tiny row of teeth peeking out behind his bottom lip.

"That's…" Stiles trails off, gazing at the dish as if the pasta were made of gold. "Macaroni and cheese," he states softly, slowly rolling the words off his tongue. "With little bits of sausage…"
Derek wordlessly holds out the serving spoon. Stiles looks up at him, expression similar to someone who just got handed a Christmas present, and takes it with a careful hand.

"Just like my… I didn't think you'd actually make it," he murmurs, staring at him with the biggest set of amber eyes Derek had ever seen. They make Derek look away, and he hides behind his can of San Pellegrino as he takes a sip.

Stiles tentatively pokes the tip of the spoon into the dish. The pasta gives way with a curl of steam, then he digs in deeper and pulls out a generous helping, tearing the macaroni away from stringy tendrils of hot cheddar cheese. A few clumps fall to the table during the journey to his plate. Derek doesn't say anything, thinking about the night Stiles had mentioned how his mom used to make it, back when the wall was higher and the human was a shadow of what he was now.

Stiles hands the spoon back and waits for Derek to get a scoop on his plate before gingerly taking the first bite. Derek takes a bite too, observing him from underneath his eyebrows. To him it's nothing special, just some meat and cheese and pasta thrown together, but to Stiles it's evidently something so spectacular that an actual smile wobbles on his lips, one that somehow warms Derek on the inside too.

But then Stiles hesitates, mirth falling from his face as he as he chews slowly, fork still held loosely in his fingers. Then he stops altogether, and Derek internally panics when he catches the glitter of tears quickly welling beneath his lashes.

His stomach flip-flops unpleasantly— shit, what did he do? He made the one dish Stiles would associate with his mom, undoubtedly reconjuring painful memories of his dead parents. It was a terrible idea, and he was an idiot for thinking it might actually cheer him up.

"Stiles, I'm sorry," slips out, and he blinks, realizing that he just apologized— something he had only done once in the past six years. "We'll order takeout," he continues, and starts to stand up to clear the plates, but Stiles stops him with wide eyes.

"No," Stiles says quickly, holding a hand up. A single tear spills out over his eyelashes and plops to the table, leaving a wet circle on the wood. He quickly wipes it away with his sleeve, tongue darting out over his lip in a little nervous swipe before he swallows.
"I love it. It's... I love it."

They eat the rest of the meal in silence.

Derek watches, fascinated as Stiles carefully shovels the food into his mouth like he hasn't eaten in days, chewing each spoonful like he's savoring every molecule. A couple more quiet tears slip down his cheeks as he chews, intermittent with tiny sniffles. Derek remembers the first time he worked up the courage to make his mother's brownies, and how he had been struck with nearly the same reaction when he stuck one in his mouth. Somehow it had tasted better than just flour and chocolate; it had tasted like Saturday morning cartoons with Laura, watching Cora open presents on Christmas Eve, monthly movie night and games of tag in the rain.
It had tasted like when his family was still alive.

Stiles doesn't look up at Derek once, either out of embarrassment or too lost in prior years to tear his attention from his plate. A faraway look melts his features into something soft and pliant, a welcome change from the tense creases that too often held his brow in a pinch. He goes for seconds and then thirds, and Derek could go for more too but sits back and takes his time finishing his drink, letting Stiles take the last scoop.

Outside the wind brushes against the side of the house, mixing creaks with the soft clinks of fork kissing dish. When Stiles finishes he sits back and stares at his plate, almost like he was reliving the memory of eating it. Derek stands up. He moves to clear the table but Stiles rises too and reaches out a hand, curling his fingers over the back of his wrist to stop him from taking the plates. Before Derek can even look up Stiles tugs him forward and wraps his arms around his waist, pulling him into a hug.
Derek stiffens, blinking in stunned astonishment. His first instinct is to pull away— to remove himself from such a tender act because he had worked so hard to lock tender acts away with memories of life before the fire, but Stiles clings to him like his life depends on it, face nestled into his chest so that his nose is squished into his breastbone, and Derek can't find it in himself to move.

"Thank you," Stiles murmurs.

Derek can feel the warmth of his breath through the soft knit of his sweater, the light of the sunset spilling in from the window, and an odd pull in his chest he doesn't know how to handle. His hands hover hesitantly over Stiles's back, unsure of what to do, but for once his own pulse is fast enough to match the steady drum of Stiles's heart, and that's all the direction he needs to remember how to hug someone back. Hesitantly he lets a palm drift down to rest on top of Stiles's hood, and allows the other to fall against the curve of his spine. Then he tips his head down a bit, just enough so that Stiles's hair tickles the stubble on his chin, and breathes in a whiff of mint shampoo.

"You're welcome."
Chapter 9
Murphy cracks one deep right field, going, go— caught by Blanco! Wow, what a catch! Looks like he hit his knee right up against the outfield wall over the warning track, he is somethin' else...
—to Cambell, to Murphy, who throws the turn out to Clarke at third and he is— Out! The Mets for a triple play...

—and what a grand day it is for twirling the ol’ bat. Next up rookie of the year, Jacob deGrom steps up to the plate...
Torres throws a sharp pitch and— Oh, a swing and a miss from deGrom! That's three strikes for the Mets, score now 2-4 Phillies

as we enter the bottom of the seventh...
Stiles pokes a fork halfheartedly into his container of Easy Mac, only half listening to the baseball commentary.

He can't help but wrinkle his nose as he prods a limp elbow-shaped noodle, which squelches with neon orange cheese akin to the natural color of Cheetos. A glance to the side confirms that the Sheriff isn't enjoying his meal much either, resorting to pushing the contents of his container into a small mountain of pasta. His dad looks over and catches his eyes with a pair of heavy grey irises, pulling a wan smile.

"Not exactly your mom's, is it?"

Stiles shakes his head, gazing glumly down at his container. Easy and delicious his ass.

"Can't really go back after having hers," he mutters, setting the cup down on the coffee table. He nudges it further away with his foot. "All other macaroni just tastes like spray-painted whale blubber
in comparison."

His dad chuckles softly beside him, letting go of his fork with a resigned sigh. He leans over and deposits his macaroni on the table, utensil abandoned inside.

"Can't say I disagree with you."

Stiles leans back against the couch, eyes glazing over as he stares at Freddy Galvis sliding into second base on the screen. The pitter-patter of raindrops tap softly against the window behind them, appropriate weather conditions for how he feels inside.

"Reporting to you live September seventeenth, 2014, the one-hundred-fifty-seventh game of the season for the New York Mets! If this game is a victory, the team will go on to play…"

He lets his gaze fall to his lap, where he proceeds to pick at a hangnail on his thumb. Not even a shot at The World Series could do a damn thing to lift his spirits, which was saying something considering how they hadn't seen a trophy in nearly three decades. He's pretty sure not even a kiss from Lydia Martin herself would get him to smile today— September seventeenth always came with a shadow of gloom, a numerical reminder of how well he knew the layout of Beacon Hills Monroe Cemetery.

Nine years.

Nine years since his mom had passed, and only a lifetime left to endure without her.

Sometimes he still felt her. Just a ghost of her fingers on his forehead when he was sick, or he would swear he'd catch a whiff of her shampoo walking down the hall. It still felt like she had been in the kitchen just yesterday, singing Abba songs over the stove while cooking them all a real dinner. Afterwards she would always motion him over to the couch and eat a caramel with him from the little tin she kept in the coffee table drawer, but only once his dad was busy washing the dishes. Otherwise the man would see the candy and the box would be empty by morning.

"Hey."

Stiles glances up from his hangnail. Apparently he looked gloomier than he thought, because his dad is staring at him with that sentimental glimmer in his eyes that only happens when his son looks pathetic or on Thanksgiving when Melissa puts the turkey down in front of him.

"Get over here." His dad jerks his head a bit and pats his sweater, gesturing to his chest. Stiles pulls a face somewhere between a wince and smelling something pungent.

"Dad…"

"What, you're too old to give your old man a hug? Not until I say so, kid."

He hesitates, peeking at his dad's open arms. If he got a nickel for every time the man subtly implied his disarray over him growing up, Stiles could take a bath in coinage. He was a little past the acceptable age window for cuddling with pops, nevermind the social ridicule he would get if the guys on the lacrosse team ever found out, but he scoots over anyway until their shoulders are touching and tucks his feet up on the couch, which is okay because his shoes are off. He gives his dad's stomach a couple of pats and moves to escape, but then his dad swings an arm around his shoulders and traps him, squeezing him close in a suffocating side-hug.

"Daaad—" he protests, attempting to squirm away but his dad just holds him tighter, a victorious smirk on his lips.
"Nope, you're mine now. I'm your father, I get to smother you as much as I want."

"Pretty sure this counts as child captivity somewhere," he mutters, but surrenders anyway. Sometimes it was nice to pretend he was eight again.

Eric Campbell swings and misses on the TV. Stiles lets his head flop against the worn wool beneath his cheek. His dad's sweater is old, nappy and scratchy and probably in need of a wash— it smells of newspaper ink and coffee, and he's disappointed but not surprised to catch a hint of whiskey, too. His dad had been wearing the sweater last night while working late on a case, and anytime past midnight was secret booze time with Jack and John— especially the night before September seventeenth. Stiles swallows down a lump of guilt for falling asleep over his desk at eleven instead of staying up to take the bottle away.

"Now listen," his dad says, breath tickling the hair by Stiles's ear. "Your mom wouldn't want us to get all teary-eyed every time we sit down to eat pasta. Us Stilinski men are stronger than that."

Stiles rolls his eyes at the TV.

"Says the man who has zero willpower when driving by a Burger King."

"Hey," his dad warns, shaking him a little by the shoulder. Stiles doesn't look up, but he can hear a smile playing in his tone. "I've seen you wolf down their curly fries like a starved animal. Don't tell me you'd pass up a whopper if it jumped out at you on highway nine."

"Yeah, but my cholesterol numbers haven't gone to shit."

"Language," his dad warns, this time without the tease in his voice.

"Shitake mushrooms," Stiles corrects quickly. "My numbers haven't gone to shitake mushrooms. Which you should eat more of. Without the accompanying bun and burger."

"Jesus, kid. You're killin' me."

"Trying to do the opposite, actually."

His dad's thumb stops tracing over his shoulder. A pause hangs in the air, filled by the stadium cheering on the TV and the ambiance of rain against the window pane. Stiles hears him sigh, catches a whiff of macaroni as his breath spills down, and looks up to steal a glance at his face. From this angle he can pick out the two-day stubble on his dad's chin and the little capillaries decorating the tip of his nose. Have his wrinkles always been that deep?

"Stiles, if you dedicated half the time you spent worrying about your old man studying, you'd be top of your class."

Stiles thinks he tries to say it condescendingly, but it hits affectionate along the way.

"I do study! I've just been... Distracted."

The word slips out easier now that his dad knew the truth about the wonderful world of werewolves. He had avoided spilling as long as he could, because telling dad about the supernatural meant that dad would have to become involved with the supernatural, which meant becoming involved in snapping jaws and bloodthirsty canines and Stiles couldn't have that. He didn't know how many more nights of coming home late, blubbering excuses about late nights playing video games with Scott he could stand, but luckily it had all come to a head a couple months ago when he'd stumbled in the door at midnight after a scrimmage with some pixies.
He had nearly crapped himself when he noticed his dad's silhouette sitting in the shadows of the living room, arms crossed and expression more disappointed than it was angry. "Your phone was off," his dad had stated, four words that were too flat, too calm. Stiles had mumbled something about "sorry it died" and "lost track of time studying at Mel's Diner," then staggered up to his room when his dad didn't say anything else. He found out later that Mel's actually closed at 9:00pm on Sundays. Their hours and menu were actually taped to the fridge, which he noticed the following morning when he went to grab the milk. His dad knew he was lying. He had just given up on asking questions. After that Stiles had called Scott and they made an agreement to tell their parents everything that night after dinner.

"So I've been told," his dad mutters. "And the sooner you stop getting distracted battling were—" His dad lifts a hand and twirls it in a vague 'bah humbug' gesture. "—Whatever it is you kids battle, the sooner I'll be a man without a head of greying hair. I'm just glad it's not a gang."

"Dad, I can't just stop. Their furry butts need me," he counters. Even if they don't realize it. "Seriously, you've seen how awkward Scott is with girls, and girls are people. You should see him face supernatural creatures. It's a mess, sometimes literally. Trust me. He needs my help."

His dad huffs. "Well I need you in one piece." He lifts a finger to the TV, where a Philly swings and misses. "See that? Remember when baseball bats were used for playing baseball?"

Stiles chews his lip. He does. He'd probably trade an entire stadium's worth of season tickets to go back to life before Scott got furry, back when lacrosse was the most important thing in the world and cryptic veterinarians were just veterinarians. But he sighs and thinks about tomorrow's field trip instead, because if September seventeenth taught him one thing, it was that wishes to go back to the past never came true.

"Well, now they're used for clobbering werewolves," he mentions quietly. Then somewhat stubbornly, "I'm not giving up on my friends. Giving up is the only way to make sure everybody loses."

Above him his dad blows out a heavy breath. Resigned, like he knows there's no convincing otherwise. It takes two pitches before he says anything, low and pained and fond all at once.

"You're just like your mom."

Stiles blinks as the words pluck a heartstring, conjuring old memories. His mom had said something similar when she first got sick— stubbornly vowed that she wouldn't give up and stop fighting, even though they all knew it was already a lost battle. She had been defeated in the end, but not by surrender. Her valor was something she had left him with, a final parting gift. He just wished that she was still around to remind him when life seemed impossible.

"I miss her."

The three familiar syllables slip off his tongue, and he regrets it as soon as his dad sighs. A long, drawn-out noise that sounds like nine years of sleeping alone. Then his dad's hand comes up, subconsciously or not, and fiddles with the collar of his shirt. Beneath it Stiles catches a tiny glimpse of silver chain, and knows it's the one with the heart at the end of it.

"I miss her too."

The words are heavy, heavier than his own had been.

He melts a little into his dad's side, suddenly struck with a fear that the man might float out of his
arms. An unexpected surge of affection squeezes him in a way that's both painful and warm, and suddenly the rain doesn't sound so forlorn. He squishes his cheek into the ugly sweater, curling his fingers into the knit around his dad's stomach. The pilly wool scratches his nose as he breathes in a deep drag of newspaper ink and coffee, not even minding the faint undertone of Jack. He feels his dad stiffen and glance down at him. Stiles keeps his eyes on the TV, but he knows exactly what the startled expression on his face looks like.

"Don't go anywhere anytime soon, 'kay pops?"

A pause. His dad's thumb resumes rubbing tiny circles over his arm, this time a little slower than before.

"Don't worry kiddo, I'll be around for a while."
Stiles keeps his eyes closed even as the dream fades away, hoping to catch the last blurry images of his dad's face. The gentle warmth of the morning sun on his face eventually coaxes his eyelids open, tickling his lashes with gold light when he blinks awake. He only allows himself a minute to be sad about the irony of the conversation on the couch, then swings his feet out of bed and tries to be thankful that for once his dream was a pleasant memory.

Outside the usual group of birds chatter away in the tree outside his window. He yawns and promptly gets a whiff of his own breath, which still smells a little bit like macaroni.

Right.
His stomach does a little flip-flop as he remembers the events of last night, starting with the steaming heaven-in-a-pan and ending with crawling into bed with the elastic on his sweatpants stretched to full-capacity. Somehow it had tasted better than just pasta and cheese; it had tasted like after-school cartoons with Scott while their mothers chatted over tea, Sunday morning pancakes with his mom, monthly movie night and listening to the police scanner with his dad.

It had tasted like when his family was still alive.

And apparently eating things that reminded him of mom and dad triggered the urge to reach out with grabby-hands and latch onto people in fuzzy grandpa sweaters, because that was exactly what he did.

To Derek.

He hugged Derek, which was probably the touchiest, snuggliest, anti-Derekish thing someone could do to Derek, and Derek didn't bite his face off. Derek had actually hugged him back, and Stiles didn't even need to hug a bear to know that broody werewolf hugs were so much better. Better than Scott's, even, although he would never tell Scott that.

Afterwards he had spent a long time sitting in bed surfing Reddit but not really reading any of the articles, wondering just when was the last time the guy had actually hugged anyone, and decided that it must have been a while based off his heartbeat. Not that Stiles was listening on purpose, but his ear was right there over Derek's chest and he could hear how fast it was thumping along, right in sync with his own heart.

But knowing them, they would never bring it up. Bringing things up just wasn't a 'them' thing, at least not until a couple weeks ago.

Maybe 2015 would be a year of progress after all.

The cold hardwood nips the soles of his feet as he saunters out to the kitchen, where he finds Derek at his usual spot at the table. He's dragging his thumb across his stubble contentedly, sipping coffee and reading the newspaper like some archaic grandpa in a henley. For someone with an electric pepper grinder Derek could be incredibly old-fashioned, although The Beacon Hills Gazette was probably the best way to scout for anything supernaturally fishy going on in the county.

"Morning," Stiles yawns, plopping down in his seat at the table. Derek had already set aside the funnies for him, which he takes and immediately scans for Garfield.

"Hey." Derek glances up at him over the rim of his mug. "Sleep well?"

Stiles thinks about this. His cheek still feels tingly from where it was smooshed up against his dad's sweater.

"Yeah… Really well, actually," he mumbles. "You?"

Derek nods and licks his thumb, turning the page of his paper.

"I'm meeting with Argent today," he mentions. "Probably won't be back until later. You can come if you want."

Stiles clumsily rubs the sleep from his eyes. "Nah, I just kinda feel like staying in today."

"Alright."
Derek's eyes skim over the paper for a second, then flick up towards the top of the staircase. An incident. They flick up again a minute later—a coincidence. A third time when he flips to the back page, and Stiles calls a pattern.

"What is it?"

Derek blinks at him, then brings his mug up to his lips and takes a sip. "Nothing."

"Don't hide behind your coffee cup," Stiles tells him, which seems to surprise Derek a bit. Seriously, they hugged it out last night. They were past this. "You were looking at that room. Your parents' bedroom," he continues, probably not as afraid as he should be bringing up the subject.

Derek bristles slightly, shoulders stiffening in more of a cat-like gesture than anything canine. He sets down the mug and swallows his coffee, although Stiles thinks he'd rather spit it out. His eyebrows seem undecided on whether or not to scrunch together in defense, his mouth trying to scowl but it doesn't really click right. Eventually he settles for casting his eyes down in surrender and subconsciously bringing the mug back up to his lips.

"...Yeah."

"Have you been back in there?" Stiles asks quietly. He rolls the tip of his newspaper in between his fingertips. "You know, since...?"

Derek glances at him.

"No."

"You could, though. If you wanted to."

"I know."

"I could help you clean it up, if you want."

Stiles keeps his eyes down, pretending to read Blondie. To his left he can feel Derek studying him from the corner of his eye, hears his coffee cup clink softly as he sets it down on the table after a long sip. Stiles can practically hear the gears turning in his head, thinking of the mold-peppered walls, the broken furniture, the leaves and overgrown foliage strangling it all. The room was more of an overgrown greenhouse than a sanctuary of locked up memories. Derek folds up his paper.

"Maybe."

Stiles nods, satisfied. He looks at Garfield hiding under a blanket, declaring that Mondays were better never. He would have agreed with the cat once upon a time, although now Mondays just felt like any other day of the week since he didn't actually go to school. Without heading papers ten times a day, the date just became a number. Beside him Derek stands up and grabs his jacket from the back of the chair.

"Have you seen Freaks and Geeks?"

Stiles glances up. "Isn't that the show with like, Seth Rogen before he became Seth Rogen?"

Derek nods. "You should check it out," he says, yanking his jacket up over his shoulders. "It's a bit dated, but you'd like it."

"Sure, I'll see if I can squeeze in a couple episodes between brunch and my massage."
"Right. With the president?"

"Nah, that was last week. I've got a date with Scarlett Johansson today," Stiles jests leisurely, folding his hands behind his head.

Derek snorts. "Try to keep the place in one piece," he tosses over his shoulder, and goes to grab his keys form the hook by the front door.

"I couldn't happen to convince you to make me eggs before you go?" Stiles tries. Derek shakes his head.

"Nope. You know where the frypan is."

"Yep. Right next to your kibble bowl."

"Goodbye, Stiles."

"See ya."

.o0O0o.

He spends the day living out the golden trio of teenage dreams: snacking, online streaming, and pajamas.

For breakfast he grabs the milk and pulls out the Fruit Loops, which Derek had wrinkled his nose at in the store but Stiles caught him eating a bowl of them last week in the afternoon. He takes them to the table and nabs the blanket from the couch, wrapping it around him like a fuzzy burrito before plopping down to begin his day, laptop planted firmly on his lap, butt firmly planted on his chair.

The clink of cereal is a little like music to his ears as he fills the bowl high with a pile of sugar-frosted goodness. A slash of moo juice and he shovels a spoonful into his mouth, leaving the spoon there as he pulls up Netflix, since Derek made TV show suggestions now. Lo and behold *Freaks and Geeks* is on instant, and he burps and tastes the rainbow, actually feeling quite content. He's not really in the mood to see anyone, so a day to himself is perfect.

He gets through six episodes before he's interrupted by a knock at the door.

*Rap rap rap.*

He glances up from the screen, fingers jumping to hit the spacebar. His heart rate picks up a few ticks as he stares at the door— he didn't order any pizza, and the only other reasonable deduction is that the mystery guest is bad news, because realtors would have to be desperate to wander out into the woods on a Monday afternoon to see a creepy, burnt-out mansion.

But he figures if some supernatural badie wanted to kill him they wouldn't have bothered knocking politely on the door, so he wiggles out of his blanket and hurries across the hardwood, nearly slipping in his socks as he does so. He tiptoes up to the peephole and tries looking through it, but it's coated in black film and he can't see shit, so he clasps the handle and pulls. The door swings open with a creak, and there's a moment of stunned silence when he sees who it is.
"Hello Stiles."

Lydia Martin in all her strawberry blonde glory, eyeing him warmly from behind a tousled curtain of spun auburn.

Her lips are painted pink today, two crescents of juicy watermelon pulled into a dimpled smile. A long-sleeved cranberry sweater dress hugs her curves, stopping mid-thigh over a pair of dark patterned tights. It looks softer than the fluffiest puppy Stiles can think of, and it matches a little knit beret slouched artfully on the crown of her head. Her book bag is perched on her shoulder, two shiny white packages clutched in her hands. She must have come straight from school.
"Lydia," he blurs, suddenly breathless. His fingers tighten around the doorframe. "What're you… Doing here?"

"I thought it was about time I paid a visit. You've been ignoring my messages long enough," she replies breezily, cocking her head to the side. Her tone isn't accusatory, merely pointing out how she had given him his space, and now it was time to step forward and break the isolation.

Stiles licks his lips guiltily. It was true, that he probably should have given her a call or at least answered some of her texts, but every time he thought about seeing her, memory of New Year's night held back his thumbs. Regardless her gesture warms him a little on the inside, because while a
part of him still shied from seeing anyone other than Scott, he's grateful that Lydia Martin had the nerve to seek him out and make him cut the crap.

"Well," she states softly, arching a perfectly-shaped eyebrow. "Are you going to invite me in?"

"Oh, uh." He blinks, hastily snatching his hand away from the door. He clears his throat awkwardly and scratches his nose, then splays his fingers towards the living room. "Right, yes. Yeah, come in."

"Thank you." Lydia smiles and looks at him from underneath her eyelashes, and god, they're long enough to walk the tightrope on.

She steps past him into the house, the heels of her boots making little click-clacks against the hardwood. She holds her head up high and looks around, eyes sweeping analytically from the blackened windows to the old chandelier, the burn marks on the floor and the kitchen table where *Freaks and Geeks* is paused on his laptop. She squints and tilts her head a bit as if the room doesn't quite meet her approval, but she doesn't say anything about it when she turns to face him. He's relieved to see that her eyes are just as sharp and bright as always, and don't contain an ounce of the pity he feared they might.

"This is for you," she announces primly, holding out one of the boxes in her arms with a pretty manicured hand. Her eyes dance as he takes it.

"Oh… Uh. Wow," he manages, although the word feels heavy in his mouth. He remembers a time when receiving a present from Lydia Martin would have made his week, his year even— given him life and confidence to tide him over until he was an old man reading newspapers like Derek, but for whatever reason the elation isn't there. His skull is just as empty as his chest, which was weird because hello, Lydia just gave him a gift, which would have called for a mountain of celebratory curly fries a year ago. Still, he forces himself to slap on a smile for her sake, to look like something other than a sad sack of bones.

She watches patiently as he fumbles with the silver ribbon, balancing the box on his knee to unwrap it. A layer of white tissue paper peels away, revealing a soft red beanie underneath.

"Imported from Paris for the chilly days to come," she declares dreamily, picking an invisible piece of lint off her dress. "The next few weeks are supposed to be the rainiest in ten years. Not that I ever believe the weatherman, but it was a nice excuse to get these for you. This one is for Derek, only his scarf is blue," she continues, walking over to place the other box on the table. A few tendrils of auburn tumble over her face as she tilts her head. "Better for his skin tone."

"Wow," Stiles states dumbly for the second time, and he could punch himself. "Um. Thanks."

He takes out the beanie and holds it up, feeling the soft knit between his fingers. He likes it. Although he's not much of a hat person, but he really does like it and it's a present from Lydia Martin after all, imported from Paris and damn, what was his problem? The past couple weeks had been so much better, at least he thought so if his returned interest in stepping foot outside the house was anything to go by. Apparently he was wrong, because he tries to paste on a smile for her but it doesn't really stick, cracking his cheeks like porcelain. He tries meeting her eyes, but there's just something in the way he's not sure if he's ready to address.

Lydia's smile falls slightly as she stares him, because she can read him like a book. She could read everybody like a book, actually, which was impressive and a little scary considering how quickly she tore through novels. With her power she could chew him up and spit him out, but instead she reaches out and slips a hand around his fingers, making him glance up at her. He can only hold her gaze a
second before he pinks and looks down again, pressing his lips together.

"Ah, Lydia, I'm sorry," he mutters, eyes still glued to the floor. "I like it, I really do, and I'm happy, really happy to see you, it's just... I'm just... Sad."

He struggles to find the right word and finishes lamely. He definitely doesn't score any points for fancy vocabulary, but somehow the three letters manage to sum everything up.

Lydia studies him. Her lips purse slightly, the same way they do when she's working something out. She lifts up a hand and pushes back the hair from his forehead, maybe just to better see his face but her fingers are cool and comforting against his skin. Her eyes soften, but to his relief it's not so much pity as it is understanding, almost like his fallen expression confirms something she hoped she wouldn't see in his face.

"Stiles, there is nothing to apologize for," she announces softly. "It's okay to be sad."

He can't drum up a response. For whatever reason the dream drifts back into his mind, swimming through his thoughts like ripples in a pond. Lydia sighs and withdraws her hand to cross her arms, perching a finger on her chin.

"Alright, where does Derek keep the blankets?" She inquires, nostrils flaring determinedly.

"In the hall closet," he replies automatically, then snaps his head up when it dawns on him how un-typical that question was. "Wait, why?"

"Because we're going to build a fort," she explains airily, spinning on her heel to traverse in said direction. A waterfall of strawberry-blond swishes over her shoulders with the movement, narrowly missing his nose. He's hit with a gust of vanilla conditioner, although he thinks if he did get bitch-slapped by Lydia's hair it would be one of the better things to happen to him in his life. But seriously — a fort. What were they, nine?

"A what? Lydia, that's—"

"Stiles, don't give me that nonsense," she interjects, somehow already knowing what he was going to say. "You are never to old to make a fort."

He trots after her down the hall. She pries open a couple closets full of towels and jackets before she reaches the one with the proper fort supplies, and starts peeling out blankets and sheets and shoving them into his hands, because apparently he's a shelf.

"Here, take these. I'm thinking over by the couch? We can drape them over that lamp to make a tent."

Stiles struggles to get a grip on the blankets, grimly wondering how happy Derek will be to find they've emptied the entirety of the closet onto the floor of his living room. For a fort. His mouth opens, falters, clamps shut again with a click of his teeth when he realizes he doesn't have an argument at all. He sighs in defeat, and Lydia smiles and ruffles his hair.

"That's the spirit."

...0000...

Ten minutes later they've constructed a rather impressive tent of blankets stretching from the coffee
table to the window. He stands back and studies it dubiously as Lydia adjusts the bottom of a sheet draped across the top of the couch, pulling it taut.

"That should do it," she says with satisfaction and straightens up, clapping her hands together as if dusting them off.

"I still don't get why we're doing this," he mumbles wearily, chewing his thumb as he eyes the blanket flap they deemed the entrance. Lydia sighs, rolling her eyes as if it's obvious.

"Because it's just what you need. Now get inside."

Stiles knows better than to oblige, and pouts but gets on his knees to crawl in. Lydia shuffles in after him, wiggling around a bit until she has her legs folded neatly to the side like a deer. They take a moment to observe their handiwork, which Stiles has to admit isn't too shabby. Big drapes of fuzzy walls surround them on all sides, a squishy patchwork quilt beneath their butts. The front of the couch provides a nice backrest, equipped with throw pillows Lydia snatched from the cushions. It's cozy. Unexpectedly calming. A bubble of warmth apart from the outside world.

"Well, what do you think?" Lydia asks, in a way that suggests she already knows he likes it.

"Not bad," he admits, observing the pink quilt serving as the ceiling. He wonders if it belonged to one of Derek's sisters. "So uh… What happens now?"

"You're going to go get your laptop."

He frowns. "Why?"

"I take it you haven't gotten started on your schoolwork." Lydia replies simply, twisting to the side to open her bag. She pulls out a stack of school books.

Oh.

Stiles feels his stomach drop uncomfortably. Right. His schoolwork. BHHS had given him the semester off to 'recover from trauma' or something like that, because apparently watching your dad get slaughtered earned you a ticket out of the hallways for a while. But that just meant he would have to keep up with courses online to make up his credits until he returned in the fall, a task which he had ignored entirely. He hadn't even set up his account yet.

Lydia knew him well.

"Aw, Lydia," he groans, because he is so completely not in the mood to scroll through pages of US history.

"Don't you 'aw, Lydia' me," she scolds. "You don't have to like it, but we're going to study together."

"Lydia, you're you. You don't need to study," he protests, gesturing to the literature book in her lap. "You could rewrite that book better than the author."

She cocks her head and looks up, tapping her pencil eraser to her chin as if considering this. "True," she admits. "But you're still going to sit and work with me."

"Look, not that I don't appreciate the whole 'lets make sure Stiles doesn't fail' thing, but just because you're Lydia Martin doesn't mean you can—"
"Stiles you will march your skinny little legs over to that laptop and study with me for an hour or I will personally introduce my spiked stilettos to your precious car," She threatens, voice dangerously nonchalant. Her gaze doesn't leave the page of her book as she narrows her eyes a bit, purses her lips and adds, "And I would hate if my Jimmy Choo's got ruined."

That's all the motivation he needs to scramble to his knees and duck back out to the living room.

"Alright! Okay I'll do it, look here I go, see? Keep your cute little feet calm and inside the fort please."

The next hour is filled with the quiet clack of spacebars and tiny squeaks of Lydia's highlighter. He manages to get through the first two chapters of American History, which means he only has eighteen left to go and twenty each for geometry and chemistry. Plus the finals. Yay.

He asks a couple questions intermittently, things like "how's Prada?" and "What's the haps at school?" She tells him that Prada is a pampered princess, the cafeteria 'meatloaf' made half the school sick last week, and that Danny says hi. Then she asks him "so how is Derek?" With something funny in her voice, and it takes Stiles a minute before he can decide on how exactly to answer that.

He starts out awkwardly with "he's good," but realizes how terrible that adjective is and thinks that he should elaborate, and ends up telling Lydia everything from how Derek cooks and their trip to the farmer's market, even about how he made his mom's macaroni and cheese. Eventually he dwindles to a stop, skipping over the parts where he fainted and the blow-up in Derek's parents' room and finishes with, "I mean, he actually treats me… Good." Because proper english was failing him now too, apparently.

"Well. And of course he is," Lydia responds, like this is obvious. Stiles isn't sure what to comment when he can't detect an ounce of sarcasm in her reply. Like she's not surprised at all, which is weird because it's been over a month and he's still surprised by Derek's niceties. Also how he does things like wear socks and eat Fruit Loops.

They continue working for a while. Every time Lydia turns a page something eats away at him, and he keeps stealing little side-glances at her until he can't hold it in any longer.

"Hey Lydia…" he says slowly.

"Yes, Stiles?"

"I've been wondering… I mean. About New Year's…"

Lydia stops highlighting and turns to face him, eyes suddenly not as bright as before. Her face is almost that of a condemned soul, like she knows what's coming.

"That night, right before my dad died," he continues, swallowing nervously. "You looked at him a certain way, like you… Like you knew he was going to die. A-and after he did, you… You screamed. Did… Did you know?"

Lydia looks down, hair falling over her shoulder and hiding her face. Outside a gust of wind tickles a low groan from the side of the house.

"Yes." She says quietly. "I felt it when I saw him."

Stiles nods slowly. His gaze falls to his lap, where his hands are folded together, unusually still.

"And I'm so sorry I didn't tell you," Lydia looks up at him then, and he's alarmed to see that her eyes
are suddenly sparkling with pooling tears. "But how could I? I couldn't just say something like that, I just—I just thought…" Her breath hitches in her throat, cracking her next few words as her head droops back down. "I was hoping that maybe just once my intuition was wrong. But the urge to scream never is."

The last line is barely above a whisper, laced with something sad and haunted. And that's when it hits him over the head how guilty she must feel for this, and how huge the burden of a banshee must be. He had been avoiding her because he had been too afraid to hear her answer, but in that moment he sees right through Lydia Martin—yes, Lydia waited a while before coming to see him to give him space, but it was also because she was scared of facing him. And suddenly Stiles feels guilty for ignoring her messages, because she must have thought that he blamed her for his dad's death.

"Hey. Hey," he says, and places a hand on her shoulder to make her look up at him. "Lydia, it's not your fault. It's nobody's fault," he says automatically, thinking back to when Derek had told him back in the woods, and realizing that maybe there was some truth to it. "I don't blame you, if that's what you think."

Lydia gazes at him with two huge seas of green, even bigger-looking in their glassy state. Stiles thinks he could drown in them, just as a trail of broken hearts had before him.

"Oh… Stiles."

She murmurs his name in a small voice, one that pinches her lips together and pokes half a dozen tiny dimples in her chin. She blinks and a fat tear plummets to her lap.

"Aw, no come on, don't start crying," he voices quickly, hands fretting in front of him. "You're gonna make me cry, and that will just ruin my manly image. Here," he offers his shoulder, gesturing to his sleeve. When she looks at him funny and raises an eyebrow he adds, "I know you're not gonna wipe your tears on your dress. What is that, wool?"

Apparently his guess is way off because it wins him a smile and a halfhearted eye-roll. "Cashmere," Lydia corrects, and carefully dabs at her eyes with the back of her hand. But then she scoots closer and rests her cheek on his shoulder anyway, hair tumbling down over his shirt. It teases a smile out of him, and he brings a hand up and places it on top of her beret, which is just as soft as he suspected. When she pulls back she's smiling too, and Stiles feels a sudden rush of appreciation for her. Lydia Martin; beautiful, smart, mildly terrifying, but always there with a smile and a not-so-gentle nudge when he needs it.

"Thanks, Lydia."

"For what?"

"For being Lydia."
Her smile falters before broadening, like for once she didn't expect his answer. Then she leans forward and pecks him on the cheek, just a quick brush of glossy lips against his skin. It thaws him from the inside-out, melting his ceramic features into something more malleable. A smile spreads across his lips, a real one this time that doesn't crack with the effort.

"Wow, girl of my dreams kisses me on the cheek?" He mumbles, suddenly too shy to look her in the eye. "Definitely feeling better."

Lydia reaches out and gently catches his jaw inbetween her fingers, lifting his face up so that he looks at her. Her plump lips are tugged upwards, pushing into the rosy apples of her cheeks. When
she speaks her voice is soft, almost motherly.

"Stiles, we both know you haven't liked me like that for some time."

Stiles feels his smile slowly fall. His eyes dance over her face as he stares at her, really looks at her—and that's when he realizes that her eyes don't seem as sparkly as before, there's a few hairs sticking out of place by her ear, a smudge of mascara on her right cheek. His palms rest on his knees, dry as a bone. His face isn't hot or flushed, and then it hits him that his heartbeat has been steady and quiet as a metronome from the minute she walked in the door.

He thinks she's right.

Before he can respond there's a jangle of keys, the harsh creak of the front door, and the sound of Derek's boots against the hardwood as he steps into the house. Lydia turns to Stiles with a twinkle in her eye, lips pulled up contentedly.

"That's my cue," she whispers, and actually winks at him. She pats his cheek twice and neatly slides her books back into her bag, slinging it over her shoulder with all the grace of a woodland nymph or something equally ethereal. Then she shimmies towards the blanket door, and Stiles is so stunned that he forgets to steal a glance at her ass as she crawls out.

He pokes his head outside the fort just in time to catch Derek's double-take as Lydia struts up to him. He blinks and freezes in the middle of shrugging off his jacket, head rearing back in a little startled twitch that Stiles finds hilarious because even Derek Hale is secretly intimidated by Lydia Martin.

"Lydia," Derek states bluntly, eyebrows squishing together in confused-but-still-a-scary-alpha expression #3.

"Good afternoon, Derek." She nods pleasantly in greeting, swiping the other white box from the table and handing it out to him. "This is for you. Report back to me if Stiles refuses to wear his."

Derek eyes the box a little bit like it might be a trap but he takes it from her, eyebrows struggling to maintain their indifferent stance. Stiles wonders just when was the last time Derek got a present. Lydia nods in satisfaction and flips her shiny mane with practiced expertise, flashing him a smile over her shoulder.

"Goodbye, Stiles," she says sweetly, wiggling her fingers in a little dainty wave. "I won't be expecting any more ignored messages in the future."

"You got it, Lyds." He raises two fingers to his forehead in a salute.

Her smile broadens so that he even gets a little flash of teeth, and then she spins on her heels and strides out the front door with her head held high, sun-kissed waterfall of bouncy waves billowing after her. The door swings closed behind her and some of the color drains from the room, leaving a confused Derek standing at the kitchen bar with the box in his hands.

He turns to where Stiles is camped out on his stomach and elbows on the floor, peaking out from behind the blanket.

"We made a fort," Stiles informs him.

Derek's lips do a funny twitch. He quirks an eyebrow.

"I see."
"That's a scarf," Stiles says, lifting his jaw towards the box in Derek's hands. "A blue one. For your skin tone." Derek's eyebrow jumps a little higher. "Lydia's words, not mine. I got a beanie. A red one, because I'm special."

Derek makes a kind of affirmative grunt and sets the box back down on the counter. Stiles ducks back inside and pulls his laptop onto his lap. He saves his progress on the course website and pulls up a tab for Netflix, but is interrupted when Derek pokes his head into the fort half a minute later, looking (puns aside) like a dog sticking his nose into something new.

"Hi," Stiles says. He sticks in his earbuds and watches as the werewolf observes the space.

Derek's eyes trail over the blanket walls, the couch pillows currently being used as Stiles's headrest, eyebrows twitching when they land on his striped socks. The edge of his lip curves up like he's amused in spite of himself, and Stiles fights to keep his own smile under wraps because the guy looks so damn tickled, which is a word he didn't think he'd ever associate with Derek. He wonders why they don't let themselves laugh.
"Looks cozy," Derek comments.

"Like sitting in a field of bunnies," Stiles confirms. After a heartbeat he adds, "You can come in if you want."

Derek's eyes sweep around the space again. He shakes his head. "I'm good," he replies, in the same way one might politely decline an offer to stick their head into a bucket of pickle juice. He pulls his head back out and treks up to his room.

Stiles snorts and swings back to the computer screen, because the guy who washes his henleys on delicate thinks he's too cool to sit in a house of blankets. He was probably snickering up the stairs over how two teenagers spent the afternoon in something most commonly crafted by children. Stiles
decides to throw his head back and shout the cold, hard truth.

"You're never too old to build a fort, Derek!"
"Hey, where'd you put the trash bags?"

Derek nudges the box with the tip of his boot, sliding it across the floor. Stiles stops it with his sneaker and tugs out a bag.

"Thanks."

The sun is actually out today, casting a stream of pale yellow through the shattered window even as...
it dips below the trees. Dappled light filters in and kisses the wreckage of the room, making the pieces of glass on the floor sparkle like diamonds. The mattress and broken furniture have been hauled out to the driveway and the ash is mostly swept away, leaving a large stretch of blackened hardwood behind. Stiles is kneeling in the corner, picking up the last few dead leaves. The walls have been scrubbed down, the mold and blackened paint chipped away. Derek stares at it all, stunned with how empty it looks.

He doesn't know what made him decide to finally do it.

But this morning he had stood at the bottom of the stairs with the box of trash bags in hand, staring up at the room with his feet nailed to the floor. After a while Stiles had quietly risen from the couch, come up behind him in his batman pajama bottoms and said, "let me put on some jeans. I'll come help you."

Derek hadn't said no.

Now five trash bags are stacked up by the door, tied off and bulging with dead foliage and ash and wood splinters. That's mostly accredited to Stiles, who had stuck to cleaning up the plants and soot, letting Derek deal with the more personal items like picture frames and soiled clothing on his own. They had been working almost all day— Stiles had left a couple times to bring up more cleaning supplies and grab lunch, but Derek had insisted that he wasn't hungry, because he thought that if he left the room he might not be able to walk back in.

Stiles had brought up a sandwich and a bottle of water for him anyway. The sandwich sits untouched by the door, the bottle of water empty in one of the trash bags.

Derek drags a hand across his brow and pushes himself towards the corner of the room he had been avoiding. He hasn't said much the whole time; his voice seems to have abandoned him since walking upstairs, but Stiles had been filling the air with a gentle stream of babble, reciting everything from the logistics of lacrosse to the plots of all seven Star Wars films. Derek couldn't have been less interested, but he listened anyway. He's grateful for the noise, because he knows otherwise the silence would have drowned him in his thoughts.

His knees crack as he bends down and picks up the blue toothbrush abandoned amongst the broken glass.

"So. Why did you have this?" He asks, holding it up.

Stiles looks over and winces. "I was out of toothpaste, so I went to find some in your bathroom… And got distracted."

Derek nods and tosses the brush into a black bag. It's almost funny.

He reaches for the the photograph on the nightstand next, which he saved for last. He takes it over to the small pile of blackened possessions he set aside to be kept —his mother's perfume bottle, a pair of his father's cufflinks, a little ceramic wolf Cora had made for Mother's Day in Kindergarten— but he can't put it down. Instead he stands and stares at it, unable to rip his eyes away from the faces behind the cracked glass. He must not move for a while, because he hears Stiles come up behind him.

"You okay?"

Derek blinks at the question. He instinctively holds the picture a little closer to his chest to hide it, feeling his features lock into a hard mask. Stiles stands awkwardly with cautious doe eyes locked on his, fingers fidgeting with the hem of his shirt as he waits a few feet away. The tips of his sneakers
are moving slightly like he's wiggling his toes, probably wanting to come closer but unwilling to overstep any boundaries. His eyes flicker to the photo.

"Mind if I see?"

Stiles phrases it timidly. Quietly, like he's afraid Derek will bite him if he speaks too loudly. Derek hesitates, pressing his fingertips into the cracked glass. One heartbeat, two heartbeats, three—

He moves the frame away from his chest, tilting it so that faces Stiles.

Stiles steps closer, peeking over Derek's shoulder to see it. Derek stands exceedingly still to keep himself from jerking away or doing anything weird on reflex, because his stomach feels like it might try to jump out of his throat and he doesn't know if he trusts himself to steal a glance at the face beside him. He feels oddly exposed, uncomfortably vulnerable beneath the breath on his sleeve, knowing that another pair of eyes are drinking in the photo. No one had ever seen his family before, and he wonders why he's able to show Stiles now.

"They're beautiful," Stiles breathes, and it strikes a cord in Derek how sincere he sounds. He runs his eyes over their faces, his mother's smile and his father's strong jawline, Laura's mole that she hated so much and Cora's rosy cheeks.

"I know," he says quietly.

"Is she your sister? The one behind you."

"Yeah… Laura."

"Your mom and dad."

"Mm."

"And your younger sister?"

"Cora," he says softly.

A few moments pass. Neither of them move, quiet and grounded beneath the empty echo of the room. He can practically feel Stiles struggling to repress a million questions, biting his tongue to keep from saying anything that might prod a sore spot. Derek almost wishes he would voice them, but the smell of mold and soot is thick in his nose and the trash bags by the door seem impossibly big.

"Let's call it a day," he says, more clipped than he means to. He's tired, unexpectedly exhausted.

Stiles pauses a millisecond before nodding, and Derek hears him go back over to the corner he was working.

"Oh. Okay, yeah. Cool. That's just about the last of these, anyway," Stiles says, tossing a final handful of dead leaves into a trash bag. He nudges the plastic with the tip of his sneaker. "Mother nature ain't got nothin' on us."

Derek doesn't say anything. He sets the photo down with the rest of the saved items and looks out across the room. Not a single dead leaf or vine of ivy was present, just a few pieces of broken glass left glittering beneath the taped window. The soiled mattress had been hauled out to the front yard along with the rest of the furniture, leaving only the warped nightstand behind. It wasn't empty by any means, still messy with strewn debris and cobwebs, but the walls smelled of bleach, discolored and dull where the mold had been scrubbed away. Now only the burn marks decorated the surface,
ready to be sanded down and painted over.

But that was for another day.

They leave the trash bags stacked up against the wall as they walk out. Stiles goes first, and Derek leaves the door open as he follows, because after handling all the soot he knows that he'll be able to walk in and finish the job later.

"Grilled cheese?" Stiles suggests as they come down the stairs.

"Sure."

They round the bend to the kitchen. Derek moves on autopilot to take out the frypan, but stops when a hand closes around his wrist. Stiles shakes his head, jabbing his thumb towards the couch.

"Nah, nope, you sit down. I'll make 'em."

Derek nods. But for whatever reason his feet bypass the couch and take him through the front door instead. The deck creaks beneath his weight as he sits down heavily on the porch steps, running a grubby hand through his hair. He just needs to get out of the house for a minute.
His eyes close on their own accord as he breathes in the woods. Pictures of Cora's smile and echoes of Laura's sarcastic prose fill his mind as he listens to Stiles clamoring in the kitchen — the drawer to the pots and pans, the plastic crinkle of the bread bag, the click of the stove. His hands are stained dark grey with soot, and he pretends not to notice how his fingers Tremble as he stares at them, eyes tracing the black lines in his palms. Behind him the front door creaks open a bit. He doesn't turn around, but imagines it's Stiles poking his head outside.

"Hey, uh, we're out of your fancy cheese. Swiss okay?"

"Yeah. Tomato, too."

"Gross," he hears Stiles mutter. Then, "here, catch."

Stiles tosses him a wet wipe and ducks back inside the house. Derek catches it and blinks at the door. He slowly wipes the ash from his fingers until his hands are clean.

Beyond the veil of mist lining the edge of the woods the sun sinks below the horizon, dousing the
front of the house in silvery light. He glances up and eyes the splintered roof and sagging gutters, and they bother him more than he remembers. Inside he hears the sizzle of oil in a pan, the knock of a knife against the cutting board, a mutter of "who the hell eats tomato with grilled cheese" and then "ow, fuck, that's hot!" following what sounds suspiciously like the wet slap of a grilled cheese hitting the floor. Idiot, Derek thinks.

Ten minutes later Stiles comes out to the porch balancing two plates and a couple cans of soda in his arms. One of the sandwiches is hanging out of his mouth, crust clamped firmly between his front teeth. He tosses Derek a Pellegrino and clicks open a can of Dr. Pepper for himself, sitting down next to him on the steps. A steaming grilled cheese on a plate is handed over, glistening in oil and more than a little crispy.

"Sorry, might be a little burnt," Stiles informs him, voice muffled behind a mouthful of sandwich. "Kinda hoping that you'll have smelled so much mildew today you won't be able to taste it."

Derek takes a large bite. The toast crackles and the swiss is hot on his tongue. He can definitely taste the burnt, but keeps chewing anyway. It doesn't taste as bad as it should.

Stiles looks out across the woods and sinks his teeth into his sandwich. A string of steaming cheese snaps and clings to his chin, and he picks it off with his fingers and tips his head back to put it in his mouth. There's a smear of ash on his cheek, a film of dirt on his arms, and his pant legs are blackened from where he was kneeling on the floor. He smells of sweat and mold and his sneakers are filthy, red canvas barely visible beneath a layer of soot. Derek stops chewing as it occurs to him how much effort Stiles put into helping him clean up; he hadn't even asked him for help— Stiles had offered, and worked all day with him without even asking for a break. Derek doesn't understand it.

"Thanks," he says quietly around a mouthful of bread. It's a word he's getting used to, re-learning how to say. He doesn't specify wether it's meant for the sandwich or the room clean-up, but he thinks Stiles knows.

"Hey, no problem, man," is Stiles's reply. "It's uh… It's cool that you did it."

Derek takes another bite so he doesn't have to think of a response. He wipes some grease from the corner of his mouth with a clean thumb.

"So you've lived here your whole life?" Stiles asks, eyes set lazily on the horizon. He's got one leg propped up on the steps, the other stretched out in front of him. His sneaker waggles idly in the dirt, laces flopping over the hem of his pants. Derek watches.

"Yes."

"Just you and your family?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me about them," Stiles says. He pulls off a piece of crust and pauses before putting it in his mouth, adding nervously, "I mean, If you want to."

Derek side-eyes him. He chews thoughtfully, thinking a long time about this. When he finally speaks, his answer is crafted carefully, and he shares it slowly.

"My mother was one of those people who was born to be a leader. She was tough, but she put family above everything else. My dad was... He and Laura were best friends, so I didn't really... He tried his best. Laura was a couple years older than me, and loud. Liked to swear. She scared a lot of the kids at school, I think. Cora…"
He trails off, getting stuck on her name. It's a little more painful than the others. Stiles waits patiently while he figures out how to make his mouth work again.

"Cora had this laugh, and it was the kind of laugh that could cheer you up no matter how bad your day was. She used to drive my mother crazy because she was always running off and getting lost in the woods, and bringing bugs home in her pockets… Laura used to get mad at her for tracking dirt into her room, but I always thought it was funny."

His eyes fall to the sandwich in his hands, almost dizzy from spilling so much. Stiles nods beside him, dragging a thumb across his lip as he looks out at the woods.

"Sounds nice," Stiles comments.

Derek nods. "It was."

He comes close to not voicing anything else, but then he does.

"Tell me about yours."

"My what?"

"Your family."

"Oh. Um…" Stiles blinks, caught off guard. A beat of silence, and then he shrugs and jumps into it.

"Well, my mom was a florist. She was really artistic like that. She had a garden with practically every flower on the planet, and occasionally she'd cut some and make little bouquets for the table. For their anniversary my dad would always get her yellow tulips because they were her favorite flowers, but they were like the one thing she was never able to grow."

Derek listens.

"She also wore lots of dresses," Stiles continues thoughtfully. "Just like really girly stuff, and then these really clunky old lady shoes because she said they were so comfortable. And she used to dance a lot, too. Just for fun, and sing. Jesus, the singing. Every Abba song was her jam," he says, wrinkling his nose a bit. "Sometimes she'd try and pull me and my dad up to dance with her in the kitchen, and we'd try to run away but then we kinda ended up getting into it… Really she was just the biggest dork."

"That must be where you get it from."

Stiles elbows him in the side. He doesn't say anything else, so Derek asks.

"What about your dad?"

Stiles's foot stops waggling in the dirt. He grows unnaturally still, like Derek caught him trying to escape from something.

"Oh. Well, um…" Stiles mumbles, taking another bite of his sandwich to stall for time. "I mean, you kinda know my dad. Knew my dad," he corrects quietly.

"Tell me about him," Derek prompts. He takes a sip of Pellegrino and looks away, maybe to make it easier for him to speak. Stiles swallows, rubbing a palm over his cheek. His other hand rests curled on his lap, absently pinching the crust of his grilled cheese. His fingertips are shiny with grease.

"Well… He was, um… A sergeant. In the war," Stiles starts, voice lower and more tentative than it
had been talking about his mom. "Which was like his thing. I mean it was probably his favorite topic to talk about, like always. In his mind, every problem could be solved with the moral in a war story… And he had this sweater, oh god, it was the ugliest excuse of wool you've ever seen. I told him once that the moths in our house were so big because they had that piece of crap to feast on, and he was so offended that he captured all the moths he could find in a jar and set them free in my room."

Somewhere across the woods a mockingbird whistles.

"And for someone who claimed to love animals, he sure loved stuffing them between a bun and eating them," Stiles adds, studying his sandwich. "Red meat was that man's best friend. You know what his blood pressure numbers were? I'm not gonna tell you, because it'll give you secondhand cardiac arrest. I could've gone to all the fast food joints and steakhouses in the county and shut them down, and he still would have found a way to get a burger in his belly."

Derek thinks he finishes, but then he keeps going after a moment, this time with less qualm.

"When I was seven he took me to get tested," Stiles says. "And when they told him I had ADHD, he took me out for ice cream and told me that it didn't make me any different from the other kids, which was a little overkill because it wasn't like a disease or anything, but I think he saw how I was moping on the way home. And then when I was thirteen he dropped me off to take the high school entrance exam, and this kid named Ricky Santiago called me a retard because I had to go to a special room for extra time… My dad got out of the car and told him that if he ever heard him say that word again he'd call up his mom and get him grounded for a year."

Derek can smell the faint tang of Adderall in his blood now.

"His fingertips were always a little black in the morning," Stiles continues, a little more serious. "Like smudged with dirt or soot, maybe. At I first I couldn't figure out why, but then I realized that it was from handling so many newspapers the night before, when he was trying to piece together articles for a case. For someone always complaining that I should go to bed earlier, he sure liked to burn the midnight oil… Sometimes with a bottle, but that's a whole other story."

The mockingbird stops singing.

"He loved his job," Stiles murmurs, quieter still. "Being the Sheriff, I mean. He really took care of his badge, I think because it represented so much to him. He used to say that sometimes we're required to step up to the plate and do things that scare us, but for him it was easy if it meant protecting the innocent. Still scared the shit out of me when he had to go pull his glock out for a robbery or a chase, but his job was the most important thing in the world to him. At least that's what I thought, until he risked getting fired by calling in sick to see me play my first lacrosse game."

The silence that follows speaks volumes.

Stiles finishes with a weird sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh, like he's surprised he spilled so much, embarrassed he talked so long, amazed he made it this far without his voice cracking.

"Sounds nice," Derek comments.

Stiles nods. "It was."

They finish their sandwiches in silence. Although it isn't silence, because Stiles's body is a juxtopotion to the stillness of the woods, skin buzzing with restless energy— his sneaker taps against
the dirt, fingers drumming absently on the side of his cheek. His knee bounces like a jackrabbit, coaxing tiny squeaks from the wood of the porch steps. Derek stares at it pointedly.

"Keep it up and you'll shake loose the gutters."

Stiles stops abruptly. "Oh. Sorry. I'm just kinda…"

"What."

"I dunno, like…"

"Nervous?"

"What? No."

"You want to get out of the house?"

Stiles's fingers stop drumming. He glances up, eyebrows twitching. "Well, I think… Yeah," he blurts, like he's surprised at his answer. "Yeah, I do."

"You can call Scott," Derek suggests.

"Scott's studying for midterms."

"I thought Scott never studied."

"Mm, well those days are in the past now," Stiles drawls idly, letting his head hang back. "Melissa found out he was failing and said that if he didn't get his grades up, she would drop him off at school every day until graduation."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"Yeah, if she didn't promise to roll down the window and yell, 'don't forget, I packed your spare undies in the outside zipper!' Each morning in front of everybody."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Derek looks to the woods again and studies the trees, amused by Melissa's tactics. He thinks about going back inside to do the laundry— he has gutters to clean out before the rain, Argent's weaponry index on his desk he needs to read through and firewood he should probably go collect, although the monotony of it all makes his head ache in a way it doesn't usually. He thinks maybe he wouldn't mind getting out of the house either— after today, he's had enough of it.

"We could go downtown," he suggests.

Stiles perks up slightly, rolling his head forward to look at him. "Downtown," he parrots. "Where there's a Walgreen's and a gas station."

"I meant downtown Cloverdale." It was a few towns over, bigger with a better night life. "Could be fun."

"I'm not sure you know what fun is."

Huh. Derek remembers a time when he did know, but thinks Stiles is probably right. He also thinks
that Stiles may have forgotten what fun is, although he doesn't say that aloud.

"Then let's go find out," he states bravely, and shoves the last of his sandwich into his mouth.

"Oh. Wow, really?" Stiles blinks at him, can of Dr. Pepper halfway to his lips. "Uh, yeah. Okay yeah, cool, we're going downtown."

"But go take a shower first. You reek."

Stiles scoffs and tips his head back to drain the last of his soda, looking mock offended. "So do you, asshole." He crushes the can in his hand and pushes himself up, then grabs their plates and trots up the steps. Derek stays behind, milking another minute or two before he has to go back inside the house.

"Put your towels in the hamper when you're done. I want to run a wash before we go."

"Yeah, yeah, fine. Hey, we're taking the Camaro, right?"

"Yes."

"Yesss. Can I drive?"

"No."

"You know replying with more than one syllable is a thing, right?"

"I know."

.o0O0o.

*When I was young and moving fast*

*Nothing slowed me down, oh slowed me down*

*Now I let the others pass*

The drums of 'Tighten Up' blast from the speakers as Derek pulls into the parking garage on Vincent Street, the heart of downtown Cloverdale.

Stiles sits beside him in khakis and red plaid, fiddling with the controls to the seat warmer in wonderment as if the buttons belonged to a spaceship. Derek eyes the checkered button-down over his t-shirt— the first appearance of plaid since he moved in. Lydia's red beanie sits slouched over his messy hair, which actually seems to suit him, and Derek tugs uncomfortably at his scarf.

"Quit tugging on it, it looks great."

Derek scowls. Stiles had insisted they wear the damn things, claiming that Lydia would scratch up his jeep with her shoes if they didn't. She must have gotten both pieces at the same place because the
knits match, making them look like a couple or something stupid like that.

"I look like Isaac," he mutters, because he does.

"Yeah, if Isaac ever hit puberty and was able to grow a face full of scruff," Stiles drawls, and lifts up his phone to point it at Derek.

"What are you doing."

"Sending a snapchat to Lydia. She wants picture proof. Say cheese."

Derek scowls.

"Yeah, okay, or do your brooding thing. That's good too."

They hop out of the car and make their way over to the parking ticket dispenser. Stiles chatters at his heels, but grows quiet once they step into the elevator and ride up to the ground floor. He has a feeling it's because the last time they were in an elevator together he had been unconscious on the floor, awakening to a fist three inches from his face.

Ding.

The doors slide open, and downtown greets them with a flurry of sound and color as they step onto the sidewalk. The street sings with distant honking horns, people gabbing, the clink of glass from restaurants and the chirp of a pedestrian crosswalk signal, all dissonant beneath the pale purple twilight above them. Down the street red tail lights sit before a crosswalk and cast a pink glow on the pavement, and white winter lights wrap around the trees lining the sidewalk. The air is thick with the smell of smog, salty cheese from pizzerias, perfume samples from the saleswoman parked outside of Macy's, hot chocolate from the Ghirideli's down the block and spray paint from an artist on the corner. People swarm past them in droves of sleek women on cellphones, businessmen in crisp suits, squealing flocks of girls in short dresses, and bustling workers racing to go home and change for a Friday night of fun.

Compared to the muted greys and quiet echo of the house, it's a welcome change.

"Wow, dude," Stiles mutters, blowing out a whistle as he swivels his neck to drink it all in. "It's like Chicago and San Fran had a baby."

They turn left and walk down the block, passing a sweep of small boutiques, coffeehouses, and bakeries. They don't really have a plan of action, but Stiles doesn't seem to mind or bring it up. A strung-out man on the corner offers them weed and the diners outside Perichini's don't spare them a second glance, and Derek breathes easy. The nice thing about a big city was that there were too many people who were too busy to know him or his history, unlike Beacon Hills where everyone crossed to the other side of the street when he passed.

Neon store signs buzz above them as they cross over to Charleston Ave, and Derek looks at a jacket in a window display while he waits for Stiles to tie his shoe.

"Hey, have you ever been to Killer Chuck's?" Stiles asks, glancing at the mannequin.

"No."

"Oh, dude, really?" He straightens up and they keep walking, and Derek knows that Stiles is about to stretch one sentence into five. "You are totally missing out. It's next to this sushi place on Maple, all they sell is leather jackets. Well, okay, belts and shoe polish and stuff too, but their jackets are like
top-notch, fancy quality cow hide. And they come in all different colors and patterns and things, you name it. You'd be like a kid in a candy store."

"I haven't been."

"Well, where'd you get your partner in crime?"

Derek doesn't understand what he's referring to at first, but then realizes that Stiles is gesturing to his leather jacket.

"My father gave it to me when I turned sixteen."

"You fit into that at sixteen?"

"Took a few years to grow into it."

The sky bruises into a dark violet as they walk by a bar, and a squealing flock of girls in short dresses tumble out onto the sidewalk and nearly crash into them. One of them has a little pink tiara on her head with a sparkly '21' on it, who stumbles into Derek on sky-high stilettos and almost face-plants on the sidewalk before he catches her on reflex, nearly gagging on the smell of liquor.

"Whoa, hey, watch—!" She starts, but then her eyebrows jump when she straightens up and gets a look at him. She's pretty with big blonde curls and a pointed chin, lips shiny with peach gloss. "Oh my god, I'm such a klutz!" She laughs, high-pitched and drawn out. "Thanks so much for catching me."

Behind her the other girls chatter obnoxiously in a little herd, some nudging each other and giggling when they notice him. Stiles stands to the side and watches, raising an eyebrow.

"No problem," Derek tells her, and turns to leave but she grabs his arm.

"Hey! We're on our way to grab some dessert," she smiles, manicured nails still on his sleeve. Then she eyes him up and down and adds coyly, "You wanna come with us? Not that I need a spoonful of sugar to swallow you."

Derek clears his throat, officially uncomfortable. Behind him he hears Stiles slap a hand to his forehead and mutter, "oh my god."

"No, thanks," he bites out as politely as possible, and takes his sleeve back.

"Not ready for this? Suit yourself," she chirps cooly. She turns to leave with the other girls, but not before eyeing him up and down and adding, "nice scarf, tough guy."

Derek hates the scarf.

"Oh, come on!" Stiles exclaims once they start walking, aghast. His mouth hangs open as he stares longingly back at the girls over his shoulder. "Does everyone hit on you? Man, how come no one ever hits on me?" He says, apparently very exasperated at this. "I mean hello, I'm here too. I know I don't have the whole chiseled jawline thing going on, but I've got a hipster beanie, which Lydia tells me is very adorable. Rude."

"Maybe they're intimidated by people fluent in Klingon," Derek tells him.

"Well they should be," Stiles concurs. "I could talk circles around Worf himself."

A little ways down the block they pass a museum with a long line of people waiting at the door to
buy tickets. A large banner hangs over the entrance that reads, "Renaud Legacy Museum: Exhibit of Modern Art."

"Wow, people actually pay money to see that?" Stiles mutters, eyebrows shooting up. And then in a voice that Derek assumes is supposed to mimic a suburban housewife, "Yes dear, let's go blow eighty bucks to go stare at a wheelbarrow painted yellow. For culture!"

Derek slows to a halt, looking thoughtfully up at the sign for the exhibit. Stiles snaps his head around and backpedals, arching an eyebrow.

"I mean… Unless you like colorful gardening equipment? Don't tell me you want to stand in line for tickets."

"No," Derek says, and motions for him to follow. "I have a better idea."

He doubles back and leads Stiles around the bend of the museum to a side alley, where a security guard is on his rounds patrolling the perimeter. He has broad shoulders and a wide nose, and Derek doesn't even blink.

"Oh good, excuse me, sir?" He larks in his best adult voice, which isn't too hard because he looks the part. He's wearing a scarf, after all.

The guard glances up and buys it, walking over to meet them. "Can I help you?"

"I just thought you might like to know there's a couple of kids hanging around the back entrance," he says seriously, rubbing the back of his neck like he's just your average, nonthreatening Joe. "They're probably just fooling around, but I think they might be trying to cause some damage."

"Yeah, looked like they could've had a couple of spray cans stashed on them," Stiles chimes in, clearly not knowing where Derek was going with this but playing the part beautifully, which makes Derek wonder how much practice he's had with lying.

The security guard nods his thanks and quickly rounds the corner out of the alley, and Derek strides forward towards the dumpster against the back wall.

"Sooo. Mind telling me why we had to allude a security guard?" Stiles asks, twiddling his thumbs. "Because usually such precautions are needed for doing something illegal."

Derek jumps up and pulls down a rung ladder from the side of the building, unfolding a tall iron staircase leading up the brick.

"We're going on the roof."

"So, something illegal then. Cool." Stiles shrugs, with a nonchalance that suggests illegal activities are nothing new to him.

They climb up and swing their legs over onto the roof, revealing a twinkly horizon of the city over the edge of the building.

"So, uh… Why exactly are we up here?" Stiles asks, tugging his beanie down over his ears against the wind. "Not that I have anything against cold gusts of wind at towering heights, but I'm assuming you have some kind of point with this."

"Over here," Derek directs, walking over to the skylight by the air duct. Stiles follows him, cocking his head when Derek gets down on his stomach next to it.
"Oh," Stiles quips, clearly confused. "It's a... Skylight. You've brought us to a window. Yay?"

"Lie down," Derek instructs.

"Well now look who's giving dog commands," Stiles mutters, but gets on his stomach and flops down next to Derek anyway.

They peer down through the glass, where almost the entire stretch of the third floor stares up at them. Long white walls curve along the exhibit, decorated with odd pieces of art—a lineup of multicolored glass marbles, a deconstructed sewing machine mounted to the wall with silly string, a statue of iPhones resembling a human man, a giant white canvas with a single dot of red paint in the middle. Mills of people glide slowly from one piece to another, gazing at each setup for long periods of time with fingers posed on their chins.

"Wow, look at all the little cultured swine," Stiles muses, mouth agape. "Damn, you can see almost the entire floor from up here."

"Yep."

"Oh my god, this is hilarious, they actually have a wheelbarrow!" Stiles claps a mouth over his mouth and points to a wheelbarrow filled with multicolored water balloons. "I mean it isn't painted yellow, but if only we had those water balloons, right? How fun would it be to drop them on unsuspecting snobs from up here?" He breathes, eyes dancing with the notion.

"You'd probably get arrested," Derek points out.

"Yeah, but it'd be so worth it."
"Wow, look at that lady," Stiles says, pointing to a stylish woman by the far wall gazing at the marble lineup. "She even has the little chic bob going on. I bet her name is something like 'Veronica,' but she goes by 'V' because it's more mysterious."

"I bet her coat is actually skinned from stuffed bears instead of mink, because it's more ironic."

Stiles snorts and turns to him, raising an eyebrow.

"Hold up, did you just make a joke?"
"I can make jokes," Derek frowns. He totally could.

"Well I don't see what's so funny about that pink urinal, Derek," Stiles murmurs seriously, jerking his head down below. "That's real art, and I find your derisive comments completely offensive. You just don't have the mature eye required to see the depth of what these masterpieces represent. Clearly something about how you should probably see a doctor if your piss is pink."

Derek's lip twitches despite himself. Stiles catches it and smirks, and rests his chin in the crook of his arms as he gazes down through the glass. An airplane flies over them, and time stretches on. They exchange artistic reviews on more of the pieces and craft life stories for the onlookers. It's decided that the bald man in the corner has an entire closet dedicated to holding his beret collection, and the woman gazing at the empty pickle jar relates to it because she stress-ate all the pickles in her fridge after finding out Firefly was cancelled.

"Hey," Stiles says after a while. "How did you know this was up here? The skylight, I mean."

"I used to come up here when I was about your age."

"What, you just scaled buildings and hung out on rooftops for fun?"

Derek hesitates. He did a lot of things back then, but never for fun. After the fire he had spun a drastic one-eighty from submissive and depressed to wild and reckless, just to try and feel alive again. Did stupid stunts to test life— to flip off the universe by escaping dangerous situations and cheating death.

"More for the thrill," is what he finally decides on. "I used to get into some trouble."

Stiles turns to him, lopsided smirk falling from his lips. He has the suspicion that Stiles probably already knows what kind of 'trouble' is on his track record, considering how much the human got involved with digging up old police records for his dad's cases. The Sheriff had deemed Derek untrustworthy for a reason, and more than likely shared his qualms with his kid. Stiles didn't seem afraid of him much anymore, but his eyes still darken with apprehension, almost like he's nervous Derek will claim he killed a few people.

"Care to elaborate?"

"I used to play chicken with a train," he admits. "Parkour the buildings. Speeded, things like that. Just kind of a way to forget about the fire, I guess."

Stiles grows quiet. His eyes fall back to the skylight, almost looking guilty. Derek thinks he probably thought he had just been a bad kid. A punk who stirred up trouble for fun, or reckless adrenaline junkie. Derek doesn't blame him, because that's what everyone else assumed.

"When did you stop?" Stiles asks. He wipes a smudge of dirt off the window with his finger.

"The day I hopped up here and noticed this was here. Discovered it was more satisfying to sit and observe rather than try and tear through life too fast."

He expects to have qualms saying it, but it slips out easily. He's oddly comfortable, even laying on his stomach on the roof of a museum, back brushed by the cold breeze, black sky above them quiet with dark purple clouds. It's going to rain soon.

"That's very poetic," Stiles says suddenly, grabbing his arm and pointing through the glass. "But I don't think they'd take it into consideration while shoving you into the back of a police cruiser."
Derek follows his finger down below to where a security guard is looking up at them, speaking rapid-fire into a walkie talkie. That's their cue.

"Time to go, then," he announces, and quickly rolls to his feet, grabbing Stiles by the arm to help haul him up.

"Whoa, hey, Derek! Staircase is that way!" Stiles yipes as Derek leads him across the roof, skirting towards the other end of the museum.

"They have guards posted inside right next to the alley," he explains, pulling him along. "The side staircase is the first place they'll go, there's probably already someone climbing up to meet us. We need to cross over to the next building before we come down to be safe."

This seems to alarm Stiles, who's voice jumps an entire octave.

"What?" Stiles hisses, throwing a desperate look over his shoulder. "You better be leading me to a bridge, because no, no way, I am not jumping over to the next roof!"

"It's not that far, you can make it," Derek assures him, moving faster still.

"Maybe you can with your ridiculously unfair werewolf mojo—!"

"Hey! Stop right there!"

Behind them the same guard from earlier peeks his head over the top of the building and hops onto the roof, looking pissed.

"Don't have much of a choice," Derek growls, and grabs Stiles's wrist as he breaks into a run. "We'll jump together. You'll make it, just trust me."

Stiles barks a laugh, high-pitched and hysterical. Maybe out of fear, maybe because the notion of trusting each other is hilarious. Probably both.

"I said stop!" The guard bellows, and charges after them with what looks like a taser in his grip.

"Jump on three," Derek says as they near the end of the building. The apartment on the other side of the gap is in full view.

"Derek—!"

"One—"

"Fucking—"

"Two—"

They reach the edge of the museum. Stiles cringes and whispers a rapid-fire stream of "I'mBatmanI'mBatmanI'mBatman" under his breath, and Derek tightens his grip around his wrist.

"Three!"

They push off from the building's ledge, throwing their legs forward over the alley. There's a moment of free fall as they fly over the gap between buildings, wind whipping around their faces and clothes, black pavement glittering up at them from three stories below— but then their feet hit the gravel on the next roof with a heavy smack, sending up a spray of pebbles. Stiles stumbles but Derek yanks him up and leads them to the right wall of the apartment, where there's an outdoor staircase.
leading down the side.

They quickly hop over the edge and noisily clamber down to the pavement, startling a woman smoking a cigarette on her balcony. They reemerge on the streets through an alley, where Derek quickly pulls them onto a stopped bus and yanks out a couple bills to feed the ticket machine. The wheels part from the curb with a squeak and they plop down by a window, catching a glimpse of two museum guards unsuccessfully searching the sidewalk.

"Oh my god, we almost died!" Stiles pants, eyes wide. A few people on the bus glance over at them curiously.

"We did not almost die," Derek says calmly.

"Well maybe you didn't!" Stiles snaps, then lowers his voice when the bus driver eyes them from the mirror and hisses, "But I'm human, remember? With very breakable human bones that would have most certainly snapped like two-hundred and six twigs from a three story fall!"

"I wouldn't have made you jump if I thought you wouldn't make it," Derek dismisses.

Stiles sucks in a breath to say something else, but can't seem to summon a retort and just ends up puffing his cheeks and blowing out a whoosh of air. He settles back against the bus seat and folds his arms in front of his chest, shooting a lady across the bus a "what are you looking at" expression.

Derek leans back, turning his head to look out the window. The bus engine whirrs as the street flies by in a streak of neon lights from passing restaurants and stores, and the first few raindrops fall against the glass from outside and smear the colors into watery fireworks. A glimpse of a street sign reveals that they're on Taralinda Ave, heading back up towards the heart of downtown. Derek's stomach vies for attention, and he can't even taste the burnt grilled cheese on his tongue anymore.

"There's a pretty good restaurant coming up on Elm," he suggests. "You hungry?"

"Yeah, sure. Although I doubt they'll have anything better than my grilled cheese," Stiles adds, drumming his fingers on his stomach.

The lady watching them rolls her eyes. Derek joins her.

When they reach the end of the block he pulls the cord and the bus screeches to a stop at the curb. They hop out onto the sidewalk, raising their arms against the drizzle as he leads them down a block to a cozy hole in the wall between a nail salon and an antique shop. "Minton's Bar&Diner" glows above them in pink and green neon lights, accompanied by a little blinking martini glass.

The restaurant greets them with a blast of heat as they duck inside, a welcome change from the frigid rain outside. Warm lighting bathes the space in a golden glow, accenting the dark maple chairs and tables surrounding a small hardwood dance floor. In the back an old-fashioned band performs a swing mashup of a pop song, music mingling with the buzz of chattering couples dining by frosty windows, all of which are framed with hanging white lights. A big black chalkboard with the drink menu hangs above the bar, orders scrawled in pink and green chalk with another illustration of a martini glass. Baristas shake cocktails behind the counter and chat with the diners, who are cleaning plates of everything from fish and chips to burgers, grilled sandwiches and fat slices of berry pie.

"This place is cool," Stiles comments, eyes sweeping the atmosphere with interest. "So it's a diner… And a bar… With dancing?" His eyebrows jump as he eyes the dance floor, where a few couples are swinging it out.

Derek nods. "Live music every Friday night."
Their waitress comes and asks them if they need seating for two and leads them to a small table by a window. She looks about Derek's age, wearing thick glasses and red lipstick with dark hair swept up into a ponytail. She hands them their menus with a perky smile, revealing a large set of white teeth.

"Hi, I'm Amy and I'll be your waitress this evening," she chirps. "Can I start you guys off with a couple of drinks?"

"I'll have a beer," Stiles says casually, eyeing the bar.

Derek clears his throat.

"A root beer. Float. Root beer float, please. You guys have those, right?"

The waitress smiles and scribbles on her notepad. Derek orders a lime Pellegrino and she goes off, returning a few minutes later with the drinks. The float comes in an old-fashioned frosty glass, and Stiles carefully slurps the foam off the top and gets some on the tip of his nose, then immediately unwraps the straw only to start chewing on it. He wiggles the tip of it between his front teeth, making it bounce as his eyes scan the menu. Derek watches idly as it twitches up once, twice, smacks his nose and falls to the table. Wordlessly he reaches over and picks it up, placing it in the drink with a deadpan.

"Dude, look at all their drinks," Stiles muses, nose buried deep in his menu. "What's a 'sex on the beach'?"

"It's a cocktail made with vodka and peach schnapps. Some lime too I think."

Stiles wrinkles his nose. "Gross. Sounds like something Lydia would drink."

Derek looks out across the restaurant, observing the atmosphere. Outside the rain drums against their window, forming pink and green streams down the glass from the neon sign outside. He picks up snippets of conversation from tables across the diner, things like "I'll have another, he's driving tonight" and "while she knew he was married." His eyes trail from the band over to the kitchens, but snag on a pair of beady eyes watching him from the bar. The man returns his stare coldly, irises just as icy blue as Derek remembers.
Just as quickly as they make eye contact the man looks away again, and Derek's stomach settles uncomfortably. Unfortunately he waits half a second too long before turning back to his menu, because Stiles notices and glances up.

"Who are you..." Stiles trails off, following his eyes to the hunched figure. "Hey, hold on, that's what's his face... Richard I think?" He scratches his jaw, making a face like he's smelling something unpleasant. "He's an officer at the station. Nasty guy, never liked him. Wanna know something?" Stiles leans in close, lowering his voice like he's relaying a piece of neighborhood gossip. "He used to be Sheriff, but then he was charged for using unnecessary force and got fired. Apparently he tried to punch some teenager a few years back. Total jerk. My dad replaced him after that, and he's been pretty bitter about it ever since."

Derek reads the description for the teriyaki burger. He can still remember the shape of the bruise on his jaw.

"Wait, hang on, do you know him?" Stiles asks, eyebrows dropping in concern.
"Remember how I told you I used to get into trouble when I was younger?"

Stiles's eyes click with understudying. "Oh." He blinks, swinging his gaze back to Richard. "He's the one who knows your track record, huh?"

Derek nods. "He was the Sheriff back then, so every time I was brought in they ran it past him. After the third infraction he didn't take much of a liking to me."

"You guys ready to order?"

Their waitress returns, pen poised and ready to scribble. Derek decides on a pastrami sandwich, and Stiles orders a burger and asks if they have the same band every week.

"Usually we have a local group play, but tonight we have these guys," she answers, smiling at the musicians. "They had a song in a Target commercial a few years ago, so we're super lucky to have them. You guys picked the right place for date night!"

Beside him Stiles chokes on his float, a small spray of root beer dribbling over his lip. Derek clears his throat uncomfortably.

"Uh, no," he says quickly. "We're not… We're just… Friends."

The girl looks confused. "Oh, sorry," she apologizes sheepishly, gesturing her pen from Stiles's beanie to his scarf. "It's just that you guys have matching gear."

Derek hates the scarf.

When she walks away he immediately pulls off the offensive accessory and drapes it over the back of his chair, shooting an I-told-you-so deadpan to Stiles, who has the audacity to look amused and blow bubbles in his root beer.

The food comes ten minutes later. Both meals come with a side of fries, and Stiles nearly cries when he sees the trays.

"Dude, no way! Your fries are curly," He exclaims, like this is the best news since the Star Trek reboot.

"So," Derek states.

"So!" Stiles protests, sounding offended. "Do you know how hard it is to find curly fries? And everyone knows curly fries taste way better than normal fries. Trust me, I've been testing them my whole life. You picked the right place to work," he tells the waitress, who looks amused and like she might even agree with him.

The music takes over for a while as they tuck in. Derek’s sandwich is toasted to perfection and drips with pastrami juice when he bites into it. Stiles digs into his food like he’s tasting a burger for the first time, sucking the grease off his thumb and carefully selecting the perfect curly fry before bringing it to his mouth. His fingers tap the glass of his float and bring the straw to his mouth, but he misses on the first try because he's looking at the band, and at one point he takes a fry and dips it into the ice cream, looking pleased with the decision when he pops it on his tongue.

Derek shakes his head. Long gone were the days Stiles had lost interest in food; now his appetite was back full swing, and processed junk was his best friend. Trips to the grocery store ended up with a cart full of chips and ramen, and Stiles had a special love for sugary cereals. Derek had tried some of his Fruit Loops a couple weeks ago when Stiles was out of the house, and it had tasted like
cavities and rainbows and childhood.

*Just know you're not alone*

*'Cause I'm gonna make this place your home*

The singer's voice tickles his ears, accompanied by the excited drums of whatever song it is. His eyes roam the atmosphere, but ultimately keep going back to Stiles. He's distracting, moving his head in minute little bobs, blinking around the restaurant like he's never seen one before, eyes alight with more life Derek has seen in them since last year. His eyes look browner than usual— maybe just the lighting, but they aren't even really brown like Derek thought, more warm and coppery and too gold to be brown. The glow from the bar dusts his eyelashes with taupe, making them look like little feathers as he tucks into his burger, and Derek's gaze skirts over his moles and realizes that there are more of them than he initially noticed. Stiles was really kind of funny-looking, almost impish with his upturned nose and messy tufts of hair sticking out beneath his beanie, grown a long way from last year's buzz cut— but there was something about his face that made it hard to look just once.
Stiles glances up at him suddenly, catching him staring. His fingers fly to the corner of his mouth and his tongue flicks out in a little swipe and searches for a presumed smear of food, and Derek swallows uncomfortably and quickly looks away.

"What, do I have ketchup on me?"

Yeah, let's go with that.

"Other side," Derek says. Stiles wipes his sleeve across his mouth and shrugs.

"Did I get it?"

"Yeah."
Soon their plates are clean and Derek's stomach bulges happily. Stiles bobs his head to the music, which is a strange mashup of fifties-era swing and modern pop. He asks if Derek is going to finish his fries and Derek scoots the basket over to him. Other people go up to the dance floor as they finish their own meals, and Stiles watches them with interest and taps his feet, subtly inching out of his chair. Finally the temptation grows to be too much and he jerks a thumb over his shoulder.

"Hey, I'm gonna go dance, okay?"

"Fine."

Stiles hops up but stops halfway out of his seat, drumming his fingers on the table.

"I'm probably just wasting my breath, but I don't suppose you'd want to come too? Bust out those werewolf moves? You know, minus the claws. And fangs."

"I don't dance." Derek dismisses flatly.

"Yeah, didn't think so," Stiles sighs, exchanging a glance with the ceiling. "And I'm like ninety percent certain you don't do kittens or rainbows either, but you'd probably love those if you gave them a chance, just sayin.'"

And Stiles spins on his heels and bounces to the dance floor, nearly tripping over a chair leg on his way there. Derek takes a sip of Pellegrino and rests his chin on his knuckles. This should be good. He thinks that not having a partner would hinder Stiles substantially, but the human just makes a beeline for the front of the band and jumps straight into it solo. It's almost painfully awkward how he shuffles his feet, jerks his elbows and swings his head—Derek thinks of the Peanuts cartoons Cora used to watch. Some couples on the floor glance at him and raise eyebrows, but Stiles just winks or waggles his fingers at them or something equally ridiculous each time, seemingly not caring. It's comical, because off the dance floor Stiles moves his feet like he's sorry for stepping into other people's lives.

Two songs later he's still going, and Derek multitasks between checking email on his phone and watching him. A few diners have taken notice of the lanky kid dancing solo (now flapping his elbows like a chicken), and he overhears comments like, "wow, look at that guy go" and "shut up, Val, he's adorable. I like his beanie."

At one point Stiles spins and nearly loses said beanie, and Derek watches him awkwardly laugh it off before feels the hairs on his neck stand up. Instinctively he looks over to the bar and locks eyes with Richard again, who's staring at him over the rim of a beer. Just as quickly as they make eye contact Richard looks away again, leaning in to murmur something to one of the two men sitting beside him. Before Derek can get a chance to listen in he's distracted by laughter on the dance floor, and looks over to see that Stiles had found not one, but two partners. A pair of women who look to be in their late twenties are doing the macarena with him, which all three of them seemingly find hilarious.

Derek exchanges a glance with the ceiling, because only Stiles could make new friends while being a complete embarrassment. He crosses his arms and leans back, watching the trio. They're by no means graceful, but Stiles's lack of self-consciousness and I-don't-give-a-fuck demeanor is almost charming in a way, and Derek is so amused by it that he forgets to look away.

Which is his fatal mistake.

Stiles catches his eye and bows to the girls, leaving them to make his way over while smirking mischievously. Derek realizes what he's about to do and tries to switch to a 'don't-you-even-try'
scowl, but he feels backed into a corner and thinks he ends up looking mildly terrified instead. Before he can make a break for it Stiles grabs his sleeve and grins, tugging him up to dance.

Fuck.

"Stiles," Derek warns. He tries to sound intimidating, but is horrified when it ends up sounding nervous. "Cut it out—"

"Don't be such a sourwolf," Stiles interjects, still refusing to let go of his sleeve. "Just come with me."

"Stiles—"

"Derek," Stiles squishes down his eyebrows and growls out his name, in what Derek realizes is supposed to be a (terrible) impression of him.

At the surrounding tables people notice and look over, chuckling in amusement. A few ebb him on with comments like, "come on, dance with him, dude!" And in particular, a burly man with a beard calls out, "Go on, pretty boy!"

Derek scowls at him.

"Come on Derek," Stiles grins, enjoying his mortification way too much. "Listen to the man, don't be rude."

Somehow Stiles manages to drag him to the dance floor. Derek would rather swallow a wolfsbane sandwich, because then at least he would only be dying and not secretly terrified out of his wits. Social recreation has never been his strong suit— he was the awkward teenager who stood in the corner at school dances and it was no secret that he generally didn't move facial muscles or limbs unless he had to. Stiles decides to ignore this pre-knowledge and faces Derek, snapping his fingers and twisting his feet in a laughable attempt to get him to join in, and Derek stands rigid as a rock. He feels the tips of his ears grow hot as people at surrounding tables chuckle at them, his wolf uneasy and whiny. The music is louder on the dance floor, making the lights seem twice as bright.

"Stiles," he bites out. He turns to leave but Stiles catches his wrist, still with that stupid smirk on his face.

"No, wait, come on," Stiles pleads. "Stay, you're already up here! You said tonight was supposed to be about fun, remember?"

"Yeah, well standing awkwardly with ten pairs of eyes on me is not what I call fun," he growls through tight lips, eyes flicking nervously to a table where a group of women are giggling at them.

"Then stop standing awkwardly and dance," Stiles teases, wiggling his hips for emphasis, but his smirk falters when Derek doesn't twitch. He stops dancing and looks to the side and back again, biting his lip. He hesitates, then—

"Here, just..."

Stiles reaches forward and cautiously slips his fingers around Derek's own, raising their arms up to the side. Then he does the same with the right and Derek stiffens, staring at their linked hands. Stiles swallows and raises an eyebrow, looking for a reaction. There's a tense moment where they lock eyes and wait for the other to protest, but to his surprise neither of them do. Stiles licks his lips nervously.
"Okay. Uh, yeah, so just," Stiles says, a little awkwardly, and starts to rotate his shoulders. "Just do what I do. Yeah? Follow my lead."

Derek locks his jaw, stiff and awkward as Stiles makes little motions with his body, twisting his waist and moving his feet in tiny steps like he's squishing bugs on the floor. He thinks it's stupid — doesn't understand why people dance, can't believe that he's actually doing this— but he figures he's made it this far, and he's only going to look worse if he doesn't oblige.

Begrudgingly he mirrors Stiles, looking anywhere but the pair of not-brown eyes in front of him. He doesn't speak with gestures and generally operates like a rusty robot when he's not doing backflips over evil alphas, and he knows his lack of body language translates painfully to the dance floor. He stiffly tries moving his shoulders and Stiles bites his lip and his eyes pinch at the corners, and Derek is certain he's doing it to keep from laughing. He's tempted to pull away, but then Stiles gives a tiny nod and breaks into an amused smile.

"Yeah, okay good, there you go," he says, and Derek thinks they're probably hitting the mark for every cliche movie trope ever. They do the ridiculous shoulder movements for another minute, music happily rabbiting behind them from the band. Around them other couples dance, looking dumb in their own ways but defiantly not as dumb as them.

"This is stupid," he grumbles.

Stiles sighs. "Do you ever stop being grumpy for like, two seconds of your life? Come on, loosen up a little."

To demonstrate Stiles rotates his shoulders exaggeratedly and guides their hands in front of them, making Derek take a step back. Then he pushes them out again and places a foot forward, mimicking a swing-type motion so they step together again. Derek swallows, eyes flickering to their linked hands.

Stiles studies him, smile fading a little. His grip slackens.

"Hey, is this okay?" He asks, a little more seriously. "If you're really that uncomfortable you can go sit back down, I don't mean to keep you here."

"No," Derek says, surprising himself with how quickly the word slips out. "It's just… I haven't really done anything like this. Dancing, I mean."

An interesting look spreads over Stiles’s features. The smile bleeds back into his expression and his fingers tighten again around Derek's own.

"Oh, okay. No that's fine, you're doing great!" Stiles assures him. "Trust me, there's no way you can do worse than me at winter formal Freshman year. I tried doing the sprinkler to impress Lydia, and it was catastrophic. I ended up knocking the punchbowl with my elbow and the whole thing spilled onto her dress, it was totally drenched."

Derek closes his eyes for a second, because the imagery is just that painful. Stiles's grin broadens as he moves their hands up and down.

"Yeah, I know. She made me pay for the dry cleaning and it took two months of working in the station mailroom to pay it off. Lucky for you, I'm not wearing an original Versace, and there aren't any punchbowls around."

Derek chuffs despite himself. "I like how you assume I'd be spastic enough to be in danger of knocking it over."
Stiles waggles his eyebrows. "Oh yeah? Let's test that then. Get ready, I'm gonna spin you."

"You're not going to spin me."

"Why not? Scared you'll fall on your face and dent your stubble?"

Derek narrows his eyes. Stiles stares back amusedly, the edge of his lip quirked up in the most annoying little challenge. The music kicks up in pace from the band, and Derek decides to fuck it. Tonight was supposed to be about fun, after all.

Might be nice to figure out what that is sometime.

He catches Stiles off guard by letting go of one hand and raising the other with a twist, sending Stiles into a spin. Stiles blinks in surprise but goes with it, twirling in a circle and clapping their hands back together when he stops three-sixty. He raises an eyebrow, almost looking impressed.

"Well, look who's getting into it."

"I don't take competition lightly," Derek says simply.

Stiles smirks. "You're on then, sourwolf."

Their feet take them in a circle, hands linked with cautious distance between their chests. They size each other up, calculating when to make the first move. Stiles is smirking and Derek is pretty sure he's smirking too, although for once he can't find a reason to hide it.

Stiles steps forward, twisting his shoulders so that Derek steps back. Derek mirrors the action, a little less stiff than before. He figures if Stiles can dance like an idiot and not give a damn, then anyone could. More people step up and join the dance floor, jumping and teetering to their own awkward moves, and he and Stiles move their hands back and forth and squish invisible bugs with their shoes. The motions get easier as they go along, their arms branching out into wider swings and more languid gestures. At one point the beanie does fall off, and Derek lets go of one hand and raises the other so Stiles can drop down and get it, which elicits a guffaw from Stiles who apparently finds the move hilarious.

It's that, which strikes Derek the most. At the house Stiles joked, fist-bumped the air when he found something of value on Netflix, even pulled the occasional smirk—but now Stiles is grinning like he's eating joy, high off dancing and pink with warmth, sticking out his tongue to perfect his moves and being so completely Stiles that Derek can't fight it down anymore. He cracks a smile despite himself, just because the whole thing is ridiculous but exhilarating in a warm, silly kind of way that he hasn't had since his sisters were in the house. They're not perfect dancers but it doesn't matter, Stiles's pure lack of self-consciousness is infectious and Derek finds himself glancing less and less at the surrounding onlookers. He gets drunk off the grin of a mole-peppered face, the warm lighting and the stupidness of it all.

He doesn't realize when the diner bleeds away, taking the last of his rigid composure. Along the line Stiles raises his arm to spin Derek, which ends up being a little less graceful because Derek has a couple inches on him. In response Derek swings him out just for fun, maybe because he knows Stiles will go with it. He does, and when he twirls back in Derek catches him by the waist, palm splayed over the dip above his hips.

There's a split-second pause where the grin momentarily flickers on Stiles's face, gaze jumping to Derek's hand. They lock eyes for a tense second, evaluating each other for unspoken answers, music bouncing in time to their heartbeats. Derek is about to remove his hold when Stiles smirks, slips his
fingers up to Derek's shoulder and gives their linked hands a squeeze, an indication to keep going.

The music fills the air around them, brassy and joyous beneath the warm lights and distant clinks of glasses. They spin, playing off of each other's movements. Stiles steps forward, Derek steps back. Derek guides him to the left, Stiles follows and swings his shoulders to the side. It's an unspoken game, a mutual conversation as they tiptoe circles around one another, hands locked together like pieces of a puzzle.

It grows warm; the pink flush in Stiles's cheeks has worked down his neck now, a thin sheen of sweat clinging to his temples. Derek swings him out, pulls him close again. Their palms are warm and sweaty and he hardly notices when they lace their fingers together for a better grip, tightening the gap between them. Neither of them register that the song has changed four times, the night drawing on. They get lost in time, leaving the past in the past as they weave circles into the floor together.
"Thank you Minton's, have a great night! Drive safe!"

The diner breaks into applause to thank the band, and they both freeze.

Their hands are still laced together, fingers entwined in a way that is much more intimate than Derek wants to admit. They're much closer than they were when they started, chests less than a foot apart, both rising and falling faster than usual. A tense second passes where they lock eyes, Stiles's big and unreadable as they bore into his, lips flushed and agape. Derek clears his throat and loosens his grip. Stiles slips his fingers away and lets go of his hands, breaking the tension by huffing a high-pitched laugh.
They both pretend that it works.

The band packs up as they make their way back to the table and sit down. Outside the rain stopped pouring sometime while they were on the dance floor, leaving the window covered in sparkly pink dewdrops. The busboy had come around and cleared their plates, leaving their table shiny with rag tracks. Stiles blows out a breath and pulls off his beanie to run a hand through his hair, still flushed from dancing, and Derek glances back towards the bar, breathing a silent sigh of relief when he sees that Richard is gone.

"Hey, nice moves!" Amy greets them as she comes back over, checkbook in hand. "You guys have amazing chemistry."

"We're not a couple," they say in unison, and shoot each other frowns when their voices harmonize.

"Right," she says, studying them over the rim of her glasses as she hands them the checkbook. "I just meant that you guys danced well together… I'll be back in a flash for the bill."

Derek fishes out his wallet to pay for the tab, but Stiles pushes his hand away and throws down a credit card.

"No, nope, put that away. Let me get it, you pay for everything."

Derek cocks an eyebrow but doesn't object. He had just assumed Stiles didn't have much in his wallet.

"It's fine," Stiles insists, reading his thoughts. "I uh, inherited a nice chunk of my dad's pension, so I can totally cover a dinner. I just can't use the money for anything substantial yet."

Derek shrugs into his jacket. "Substantial?"

"Yeah, you know, like housing and stuff," Stiles answers, and flips the receipt around on the table to read it. "Technically I can't sign a lease on any place until I turn eighteen next month, but I'm thinking an apartment down by Forton Square. Supposedly the area's cheap and a window facing the park would make a nice view."

Derek watches dumbly as Stiles scribbles out the math for the tip. Of course. Of course Stiles wanted to move out, he was going to move out eventually anyway— apparently he had already been looking into it. And yet, he's surprised at the faint pang of something in his stomach when he thinks about how silent the halls would sound again once he left. He had actually started getting used to having him around; hearing the faint hum of the TV on downstairs, Stiles brushing his teeth in the morning or the quiet clack of another set of fingers a keyboard. An extra voice, an extra heartbeat, the occasional sticky note on the counter when he got back from errands. Trivial as it all was, it erased the loneliness.

"Hi, sorry to interrupt, but I almost forgot," Amy is suddenly there again, pulling him from his thoughts. She points her pen towards the door. "There was a man at the bar who said he's an old friend of yours? He's waiting outside to say hi to you once you're done."

Stiles looks up sharply. Derek keeps his face placid.

"I will, thanks for letting me know."

The waitress smiles and walks off, and Stiles furrows his eyebrows concernedly. "Dude, that's gotta be Richard, right? Don't tell me you're actually gonna go talk to him."
"It'll only take a minute."

Derek gets up. Richard probably just wanted to throw some shade, and it was best to get that out of the way without Stiles there to hear what the man has to say.

"Hey, wait, is that really the best idea? Do you want me to come with you?" Stiles offers uneasily, already fumbling to cap the pen.

"No. Finish the tab, I'll be right back."

Derek walks away before Stiles can ask any more questions. The door jingles when he steps outside, and he's greeted by a dark street sleepy with the late hour. The parked cars are wet, the pavement painted and glittering with the reflection of the few stores across the street that were still open. Apparently it had been raining for some time while they were inside, and the ominous rumble from the sky overhead indicates that it isn't finished. Derek looks down the street uneasily. The neon Minton's sign buzzes obnoxiously above him, blanketing the sidewalk in a pink glow.

"Ah, there he is, gentlemen! The psychopath who lives in that old crispy-fried mansion, right?"
Derek freezes, shoulders tensing. The man's voice sounds the same as it had a few years ago, if not a little more worn down with cigarette smoke. Derek glances over his shoulder before he can stop himself, meeting a pair of cold blue eyes peeking out from the shadows.

"Yeah, Derek Hale, isn't it?" A thin smile stretches over Richard's lopsided jaw, revealing a set of yellowed teeth as he steps forward into the light. He's acquired a roll of fat over his belt in the last few years, hairline grayer than Derek remembered. Two beefy men about the size of golf carts stand at his side, arms crossed with eyes fixed curiously on him.

"Looks like you've been hitting the gym since I last saw you," Richard adds. "Although considering your track record, I wouldn't be surprised if you've been hitting the juice."

Derek flares his nostrils. He gets a whiff of cheap liquor and tobacco as the men step closer, eyeing him up and down like he's the biggest cut of meat in a butcher shop. He forces himself to stay neutral, just so he can get this over with before Stiles finished figuring out the tip and came looking for him.

"What do you want," Derek states curtly, keeping his voice even.

"Hey now, no need to get defensive, can't a man say hello?" Richard feigns, raising his hands in mock innocence. His eyes harden. "I just wanted to check in and make sure I don't need to arrest you for statutory rape anytime soon, after seeing you dancing across the restaurant with your hands on John Stilinski's little bastard."

"Sheriff Stilinski to you."

Derek's heart sinks. The door jingles closed behind him and Stiles strides up to his side, eyes dancing with a devilish glint Derek hasn't seen in a while.

"Richard, isn't it?" Stiles chirps, arching an eyebrow. "Mind if I call you Dick? Suits you better."

Richard's eyes narrow. "Nice to see you're still alive and well enough to run that mouth of yours. Too bad I can't say the same for your old man."

The smirk falters on Stiles's face, but his stare remains hard and biting. Derek glares at Richard, who continues casually. "I heard about his little failed shootout on New Years, I guess some men are just a little too trigger-happy for the job. Sorry to hear about his untimely passing," he finishes, in a way that suggests he isn't really sorry at all. Stiles's expression darkens several notches.

"Save the falsities for what you tell your wife in bed," Stiles spits, wrinkling his nose.

"My, looks like someone's been picking up manners from the local psychopath," Richard says coolly, shooting a stare at Derek. "Tell me Stiles, are you aware of the rocky past your dancing parter has gotten into?" He smirks and nudges one of the men at his side, jabbing a thumb at Derek. "This one used to get in all kinds of trouble. Jumpin' rooftops, speeding tickets, you name it. One time I found him passed out drunk on the curb during my night shift. Remind me Derek, how old were you? Sixteen, seventeen? Little young to be knocking back the liquor."

Derek bites his tongue, almost embarrassed as he feels Stiles side-eye him. That had been on the one year anniversary of the fire— he had mixed wolfsbane with the bottle that day hoping to achieve some kind of high, but had just ended up making himself violently ill instead. Still, he remains silent; he doesn't want to make a scene, which would only push them further onto Richard's bad side. He opens his mouth to announce that they should go, but Stiles beats him to it.

"Hey pork chop, hate to burst your midlife crisis bubble, but you look like the one who's been
putting away one too many beers," Stiles retorts, shooting a glance at the man's gut. He takes another step towards Richard, sizing him up. He looks fearless, almost like he's enjoying the standoff.

"Stiles," Derek warns. He steps forward and puts a hand on Stiles's elbow. "We should go."

He eyes Richard's muscular friends, who look like they would have no trouble beating them to a pulp, and he couldn't pull anything wolfy out in public unless he wanted a death sentence. Stiles had ruffled their feathers, but if they got out now there was still a seventy percent chance of making it home without stepping into trouble.

"You should listen to your friend, Stiles," Richard murmurs darkly. "I may be off duty tonight, but I never forget encounters with little juvenile shits like you. Don't fuck with me, kid."

"I'm pretty sure the only person willing to fuck you is yourself," Stiles says hotly, not missing a beat. "To pictures of Betty White, I bet."

Twenty percent.

Richard and his friends visibly stiffen. Derek clenches his jaw and drags in a breath through his nose, vowing to kill Stiles if they got out of this in one piece. Richard's expression darkens as he takes a slow step forward in front of Stiles, lip curling.

"Have you always been a little shit?"

"Yes. Have you always been that ugly?"

God dammit.

"Listen," Richard sneers, "If you think I'll have any problem finding an excuse to throw you in the slammer with that delinquent lowlife next to you, think again."

"Stiles—" Derek tightens his grip on Stiles's elbow as a warning, although it slips out more like a plead not to say anything stupid. Stiles ignores him and yanks his arm back, pushing his neck forward into Richard's space.

"Call him a lowlife one more time," Stiles challenges, eyes blazing.

Richard barks a laugh. "Or what? You'll take a swing at my jaw with those toothpicks you call arms? Ten bucks says you'll miss."

At the last word Stiles abruptly stiffens and tilts his head a little bit, and Derek stops breathing for a second because that's exactly what Stiles looks like when he gets an idea. A low roll of thunder rumbles overhead, and a raindrop lands on the pavement next to his boot. He watches tensely as Stiles's expression relaxes. Stiles smiles calmly.

Too calmly.

"Nah, your face is already pretty deformed as it is," Stiles shrugs, and even brings a hand up to casually examine his cuticles. Then he flicks his eyes up at Richard, gaze sharp and glittering. "And my aim is actually pretty good. On my lacrosse team they call me Bullseye, because I can hit even the smallest of targets."

And then Stiles rams his leg forward and kicks Richard in the balls.

Zero percent.
Richard goes down with a surprised yelp, attracting the attention of several passerby's across the street. There's a split second where several things happen at once —Derek opens his mouth to cuss the living daylight out of Stiles, the skies unleash a terrific downpour of rain, Richard's two goonies gape and lunge for Stiles's collar, Richard grunts out an angry "get him!" and before Derek can even twitch Stiles grabs him by the hand and yanks him forward down the street, yelling,

"RUN!"
They tear down the sidewalk at top speed, shoes slapping loudly against the pavement as the rain picks up, following another crack of thunder overhead. Behind them Richard's meatheads charge after them and shout threats at their heels, moving surprisingly fast for their size.

"Sorrysorrys'excuse us comminthrough—!"

Stiles shouts the warning in a single breath as they reach a strip of sidewalk where chatting couples are filing out of a theatre, oblivious to the four people sprinting towards them. They barrel through and dodge past them, roughly bumping into several elbows and even knocking a lady to the ground in their haste to get by. Stiles throws a high-pitched "sorry!" over his shoulder as Derek grabs his arm and yanks him faster down the street, ignoring the startled shrieks and curses behind them. The two men easily jump through the crowd, keeping up at their heels.

"You two are dead!" One of them shouts, and Derek wonders if Richard would be above turning a blind eye if his buddies beat up a seventeen-year-old.

" Fucking fags!"

Probably not.
They round the bend of the block at top speed and Stiles nearly scores himself a concussion by running face-first into a telephone pole, but Derek yanks him to the side by the collar at the last second and shoves him ahead. They charge past a restaurant where tired waiters are folding up the outside tables to bring them in for the night, and Derek pivots around one of them and yanks over a chair behind him, hoping to create an extra obstacle for the men on their tail. He adds an extra burst of speed and catches up to Stiles's side, wind and rain wiping his jacket as they tear down the street.

"We gotta lose them!" Stiles yells, throwing a look over his shoulder.

"No shit!" Derek bites out, in a tone that sounds horrifically like Stiles.

"Really, sarcasm now!?" Stiles exclaims shrilly, but cuts off with a yelp when his foot snags on a divot in the sidewalk. Derek grabs the back of his shirt and hauls him upright before he can face-plant, and they skirt around a peddling saxophone player who narrowly jumps out of the way with a shrill, off-key note.
They run down two blocks, weaving around startled pedestrians and jumping over fire hydrants, even parkouring around a homeless man bumbling down the middle of the sidewalk. The men keep up with them, and Derek wonders how much farther they can go before running into a cop car.

"This way!"

Stiles suddenly twists to the side and leaps off the curb into the street, sending up a spray of rainwater when his sneaker tracks through the gutter. Derek leaps over the hood of a Honda and streaks past him to take the lead, making a motorcyclist screech to a stop as he darts into the crosswalk.

Car horns honk angrily at them as they race across the pavement, a large intersection blaring with late night Friday traffic. Derek's heart hammers as the signal light burns green above them, and an onslaught of oncoming headlights illuminate beams of rain in front of their eyes. He shakes the drops from his lashes and puts on a burst of speed, thankful when most of the nearing cars see them and screech to a stop, kicking up cloudy plumes of rainwater. The sidewalk is only a couple yards away, but he throws a look over shoulder when he hears one engine still zooming forward amongst the blaring chorus of angry horns.

The oncoming Toyota isn't rolling to a stop, and Stiles isn't going to cross the street in time. Derek digs his heels into the pavement and spins around, lunging forwards—

"Stiles!"
He grabs Stiles by the waist and yanks him out of the way just as the car flies by, spinning them in a circle. The momentum makes Stiles's legs swing out into the air and his sneakers hit the ground with a splash as Derek drops him back on the pavement.

"Holy—"

"Go, GO!" Derek yells, and pushes Stiles forward to keep running as they leap up onto the curb on the other side of the street. Incredibly the men are still on their tail, albeit currently stalled by dodging the traffic. Derek moves to turn right but Stiles grabs his arm and tugs him in the opposite direction, barking "Wait, no, left! Left! Go left!"
They leave the screech of tires in the distance and tear down the sidewalk. Once he blinks the rainwater from his vision he sees why Stiles chose this direction—there's a burnt-out streetlight a few buildings down, bathing the street in darkness. He gets it. He sees a cloud of steam drifting out from an alley behind a laundromat, and that's their ticket out.

They pummel down the sidewalk and Derek yanks them sideways into the alley at the last second, clamping a hand over Stiles's mouth to muffle his yelp. He whips around and presses his back flat against the wall, and flings an arm out over Stiles's chest to pin him against the brick beside him. The teen's heart hammers beneath his elbow as they hold their breath.

In the darkness the men don't see their move, and keep sprinting past the alley down the street. Derek doesn't move until he hears them make it to the end of the block and round the corner, during which the rain tapers off to a light drizzle. Once he's sure they're long gone he lowers his arm and steps forward, and Stiles nearly collapses as he releases the breath he's been holding, sucking in huge gulps of air.

"Oh my god," Stiles wheezes, bracing his hands on his knees as he doubles over. "Oh holy god, sweet fucking baby Jesus, I thought jumping the museum roof was wild, but— Aah!"

He cuts off with a squeak as Derek whirls on him, eyes flashing crimson as he remembers his vow to murder the human.

"You," Derek hisses, jaw taut as he pushes towards Stiles, whose shoulders hit the wall again as he scrambles backwards. "Are a fucking Idiot!"

Stiles actually relaxes a little at this, huffing a high-pitched chuckle. Derek's glare intensifies.

"That was the stupidest, most impulsive, reckless, fucking stupid—" He cuts off, mouth hanging open as he decides where to even start, and there are way too many options. "You accused him of jacking off to Betty White!" He barks, and is horrified when his lips twitch up as he says it. It goes unnoticed by Stiles, who's too busy flailing and bouncing on his heels.

"I know!" Stiles barks high pitched and breathless, like he's proud of himself. "And that was totally on the spot, too!"

Derek watches, dumbstruck and speechless as Stiles shakes his hands and paces, making weird little noises somewhere between manic giggles and hyperventilating. He's wind-blown and panting, cheeks flushed red with adrenaline. They're both drenched, pant legs sodden from the splash of rain puddles, shirts soaked with sweat and water from the skies.

"Fuck, that was awesome! Terrifying, but awesome. Whoo!" Stiles runs a hand through his hair in a sweeping gesture, wet flannel sticking to his arms. "I mean like—Dude, what a jackass! Did you see those meatheads he had with him? And that car! Ha!" He barks out a laugh, high-pitched and hysterical, eyes stretched wide in residual panic as he remembers how he nearly ended up a pancake on the pavement. "That car, dude! It almost hit me, but you—" he breaks off and whirls around, blinking when his eyes land on Derek.

"You… You're smiling," Stiles says softly, disbelieving, and his grin stretches even wider. "Like with teeth."

Derek realizes that yes, he is smiling. He's chuckling in fact, which he can't figure out because half of him wants to slam Stiles up against the wall again and yell at him for being so reckless and clumsy and nearly getting hit by a fucking car, but instead he's chuckling like an idiot, because Stiles kicked an asshole in the balls and then sent them sprinting for their lives downtown like some cheesy action
movie chase, and before that they were dancing. The sound of his own laugh sounds strange to his ears, like music from a long time ago. It's foreign in his throat, almost painful in how it cracks his cheeks but deliciously pleasant in how this warmth swells in his chest and bursts forth, and for the first time in a long time he thinks he actually had…

Fun.

"Oh my god, you're laughing!" Stiles exclaims, and slaps both hands to his forehead. It makes a wet smack, which is way funnier than it should be. He gapes at Derek, eyes two disbelieving amber saucers. His grin is huge, the biggest Derek's seen in a long time. Derek wipes his nose and straightens up, biting his lip as he musters the closest thing to a compliment he can manage.

"That was… Not bad," he admits.

Stiles's mouth drops impossibly further. Derek sighs and turns around to lead them out of the alley and figure out how far from the parking garage they are, because he knows there's a very slim chance Stiles will let it slide.

"Whoa, hold on, did you just compliment me?"

"Don't push it, Stiles."

"Oh, hell no, no way am I dropping this. Derek Hale just dished out actual praise! Somebody better check hell, because I'm pretty sure it just froze over. I mean you could have done better, but sure, I'll take it. Hey, does this mean you'll let me drive the Camaro sometime?"

"No."

"Not even if I bribe you with some fresh deer hide?"

"Stiles."

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

Stiles doesn't shut up about it all the way to the Camaro. He trips over a crack in the sidewalk and barks a laugh when a string of spit flies over his lip from talking so fast, and only changes the subject when Derek tosses him a blanket from the trunk and tells him to dry his shoes before getting in.

They're buckled in and halfway down the freeway when Stiles jerks up from dozing off, eyes snapping open.

"Crap, I left the beanie at the restaurant!" He slaps a hand to his mouth and looks to Derek, eyes widening further when he spies his bare neck. "Aaaand you left your scarf. Oh man, Lydia's going to kill us. No, correction. Lydia's going to kill me."

Stiles runs a hand through hair and slumps in seat, pouting like he'd been handed a death sentence. Derek is secretly relieved. There's a beat of silence, then Stiles lolls his head over to look at him.

"Oh my god, you're happy about this, aren't you?" Stiles snorts. He sets his head back down against the window and closes his eyes. "I knew it. You hated that scarf."

Derek keeps his eyes on the road, switching on the blinker to merge into the lane that will take them home. The windshield wipers bounce in time to The Black Keys, and a satisfied smile tugs at his
lips.

He fucking hated that scarf.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for waiting for this chapter! It was a doozy. Don't forget to check out Home's companion piece, "A Little After Midnight, January First." See you for chapter 11 in 3-4 weeks :)
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
"I'm just saying, anyone who owns three blowdryers clearly has something to hide."

"Yes, your body in case you break another one."

The afternoon shines grey through the window, diminished by the warm lamps of the living room. Derek is currently on the staircase setting new buckets (twenty-two of them, Stiles counted) beneath the leaky spots in the ceiling, and Stiles is working on drying the last of the books. They had gotten back from Minton's last night to a house soggy with flooded puddles, result of Derek never getting around to setting up the apparently needed 'rain prep' before last night's downpour. They had stayed up past midnight mopping it up together, and Derek had gotten up at five to switch out the buckets. For such a shitty, falling-apart house, he sure treated it with care.
"I dunno, man. Do you even read these?" Stiles asks, and switches the setting to low when one of the lighter novels slides across the hardwood.

He's sitting cross-legged on the floor by the living room window, waving a blow dryer back and forth across the final lineup of damp books. An hour ago they noticed that the bookshelf had the unfortunate location beneath a particularly nasty new leak in the ceiling, subsequently drenching the odd collection of titles Derek owned overnight. Derek had slid the shelf over like it weighed less than a feather and put a plastic cement bucket (from the closet of designated leak buckets) down in it's place. The pages flutter back and forth in little papery yellow fans as he waves the dryer over them.

"A couple." Derek scoots a plastic sand pail over on the bottom step, craning his neck backwards to line it up with a stain on the ceiling.

"A couple," Stiles parrots, and glances over to the small tower of dry books he had stacked up by the wall. It's like looking at the bargain box at a garage sale; a few random new paperbacks amongst a collection of shabby novels with singed edges and blackened spines. He imagines the mansion probably had a full library once, although these were probably the only books that were left salvageable. He starts reading off the titles, which are all over the place.

"The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe, California Wildlife Index, Ghandi's autobiography, The Catcher In the Rye, Medicinal Herbs... The Call of the Wild, really? For someone always complaining about my dog jokes, you really just set yourself up for them, dude."

"It's a classic," Derek points out, almost sounding offended.

"Okay, so you definitely read that one then," Stiles mutters, and cocks his neck ninety degrees to read off some of the others. "So what's the other one? Encyclopdia E? The Athlete's Guide to Calisthenics? Heh. No, wait, I found it. Camaro Care 101."

"One Hundred Years of Solitude."

Oh.

Well that's... Unexpected.

"Really?" He scans the piles for the title. "Scott and Lydia are reading that right now for English, supposedly it's pretty dry. Why that one?"

Derek shrugs from the stairs. "Just kind of jumped out at me."

Stiles turns off the dryer and sets it down. He starts flipping over the books he has lined up on the floor until he finds it, a battered red novel with a faded cover. The inside hits his nose with the lovely odor of mildew and charcoal as he skims through it, eyes grazing over the tiny text.

"Huh. Did it jump at you or fall on you, because the spine on this thing is shot to pieces," he observes, and adds it to the dry stack.

"Those are old books," Derek states.

"I bet. Most of them smell like grandma Stilinski, and she's been dead for years."

He gathers the books in his arms and scoots across the rug, situating himself before the emptied bookcase. He starts putting the the titles back on the shelf, noticing that some of the copies are shiny and devoid of burn marks, clearly bought after the fire.
In particular he finds a title called "Dealing with PTSD," and stares at that one a moment before stealing a glance over his shoulder at Derek. The cover is shiny with glue from the Barnes and Noble sticker still on the front, spine broken in with what looks like more than one read. He pretends not to notice as he shelves it.

"Hey, uh…” He starts, because he's been wanting to ask for a while and now seems like a good time. "How come you haven't made me get a job?"

Derek dumps the rainwater from one of the buckets into the sink. "Why would I?"

"I dunno. It's just that you pay the bills and buy extra food and stuff," he shrugs. "I essentially live here for free."

Behind him he hears the spray nozzle to the sink, imagines that it's Derek washing away the gritty bucket water. The tap turns off with a squeak, and a pair of heavy boots stride over to the leak by the couch. Stiles is too nervous to turn around and meet his eyes.

"You're not a charity case, if that's what you think," Derek voices calmly. "You can get a job if you want. If you're ready for that."

Stiles thinks about that. He licks his lips, shelving a musty title called "Finding Balance in Meditation."

"Well. I mean Scott and the others are in school, and I'm just… Here. I don't really do anything."

"You do the dishes," Derek points out.

"Yeah, but that's hardly worth putting on a resume."

"Maybe not, but some people don't get up and do dishes."

Stiles frowns. He doesn't have an answer for that. He glances backwards at the kitchen sink, wondering what doing the dishes had to do with anything.

Once the books are shelved he hoists himself up and returns to the kitchen table, where the polish is just about finished setting.

He sits down in the chair by the window, takes the rag in one hand and the badge in the other, and starts rubbing tiny circles into the metal to wipe away the Brasso. Derek sticks the last bucket beneath a leak by the fridge, fishes out a pack of batteries from a drawer, and comes over to join him. There's a parade of flashlights lined up like soldiers on the table, which he starts taking one by one to change their triple A's.

"Are we gonna go explore some caves later?" Stiles suggests idly.

"They're for when the power goes out."

"Don't you mean 'if'?"

"When. The electricity shorts out when there's a storm."

Stiles glances up. That added to the long list of apparent disfunctions around the house. They had duct-taped the edges of the windows this morning, because the fire had rendered the glass so brittle that sometimes water leaked in through the frame. The gutters had been cleaned out (what a fun job that had been) and forty minutes ago they had dropped everything and hauled the sandbags back
out to the front deck, after Derek had shut his laptop and claimed that the downpour would start soon. Those sandbags were needed because the porch was warped and therefore prone to flooding, and the gutters were so worn that they couldn't hold the extra water weight if clogged.

Stiles thinks of how much easier it would be if Derek just moved out, but doesn't bring it up.

He flips the rag over to a clean corner and glances outside. Overcast, but no where near ominous enough for thunderclouds. Lies.

"Are you really sure there's gonna be a storm?" He raises a dubious eyebrow to the window. "Like I can see a little drizzle maybe, but I dunno about the whole thunder and lighting thing."

"It's going to storm," Derek states, sounding definite. "I can sense it."

"Okay, so back up," Stiles interjects, and leans back in his chair to get a better view of the werewolf. "Since when did that even become a thing, anyway? Because I'm pretty sure meteorology wasn't on the list of superpowers Deaton rattled off when Scott was bitten. And speaking of my bro-dude, if you guys can sense the weather, then why does Scott always forget a jacket on days it turns all nippy?"

"Scott likes to show off his tattoo."

"Mm. True."

The dishwasher hums idly in the background as they work at the table. Derek sets the old batteries in a little pile by his left, and Stiles takes his time rubbing the polish into the metal in tiny circles. They talk about Argent's new weapons and Game of Thrones, and when he finishes he holds up the badge, unable to hold back a grin.

"Yeah, look at this baby," he declares softly, satisfied with the way the light glints off his dad's name. Derek glances up. "Nice work."

"You can blind someone with this shine," he murmurs idly, titling it back and forth to catch the light. "Hey, what happens if this was made out of silver? Would it burn you if you touched it?"

"You shouldn't believe everything you read about werewolves on Wikipedia," Derek replies wearily. Stiles makes a "psssh" noise, as if the notion of him using Wikipedia is ridiculous (it's not: that site is his best friend). "Yeah, check your email. That article I sent you is from a website with a dot org. Org, Derek. That's what Lydia uses."

"Yes, I got that one," Derek sighs. "And about three quarters of it was wrong. I'll remind you again that if you want accurate information on werewolves, the internet is not the place to look."

"Well last I checked, BHHS doesn't offer a course called supernatural shenanigans 101. Which they should really look into organizing, based off all the crazy Buffy showdowns that go down around here. And I don't exactly hear you giving any informative lectures on werewolf history."

"All you have to do is ask."

"Alright then mister wolf expert," Stiles chirps, and folds his arms leisurely behind his head. "What else can werewolves do besides shift into weathermen? Like I've seen the pain-sucky thing, that's cool. And super-speedy healing is fun too, but I'm curious. You got anything else up your sleeve?"
Derek clicks a battery into a flashlight. He pauses, eyes flicking up to study him before swinging back down. A beat of silence. "You want to know?"

Stiles stops twiddling his thumbs, a little perturbed by the sudden dramatic turn. But he feels adventurous today. "Yeah, hit me with it."

Derek glances to the window. For whatever reason his eyes fall to Stiles's hands next, hovering on the badge. He takes his sweet time changing the last of the batteries, then abruptly stands up.

"Grab your shoes. We're going out."

Stiles blinks. He nearly loses his balance and the front chair legs hit the hardwood with a heavy clunk. "Uh. Okay, but I thought you were gonna tell me—"

"I'm going to show you. But I want to take you somewhere first."

He watches curiously as Derek takes the old batteries and tosses them into a ziplock. That's a first. He recalled "get your ass out of bed" once upon a time and "I'm going out, come if you want a say in the groceries," but he'd never slipped the word 'want' in there.

Stiles raises an eyebrow, sticking his hands into his pockets. "I thought you said it was going to rain? Remember that whole storm you broadcasted?"

"It is. But not for another hour or so."

"Righhht. And do I get to know where we're going?"

"Nope. Bring a jacket."

"Your ambiguity is unrivaled," he declares, and stretches his arms backwards to get out the kinks. He hoists himself up from the table and admires the badge one more time before sticking it in his pocket, wiggling his best magic voodoo fingers at Derek. "Alright, but I'm going to be unimpressed if you take me to some bone you buried in the woods."

...0000...

Ten minutes later they're trekking through the woods.

Apparently the mystery destination required walking and not the Camaro, which was disappointing. Derek has a backpack slung over his shoulder for collecting firewood, and Stiles may or may not have already stepped on a banana slug.

"Sooo," he tries again, because Derek is quiet (even for him) and it's making him antsy. "Is this, uh… Deep enough into the forest for you?"

Derek slows to a stop in front of him. He patiently observes the trees around him as if surveying the area, then glances over his shoulder. His eyes look more grey than green against the misty backdrop of the woods.

"If I show you, you can't tell Scott. He'll never stop bugging me to teach him, but only advanced werewolves can do it."
Stiles raises an eyebrow, officially intrigued. He claps his hands together and gives two thumbs up. "Okay, deal. Hit me with it, I'm ready."

Derek studies him a moment, just the smallest twinkle in his eye. Then he steps forward and shrugs off the backpack, holding it out for him to take. Stiles frowns, a little confused but sure, he'll play along, and takes it. But before he can ask anything Derek grabs the hem of his henley and pulls it off over his head, and Stiles inhales some of his own spit and chokes a little.

"Whoa, hey— uh, what are you doing?" He asks calmly. Very calmly, in a voice that is definitely deep and manly and not squeaky with terror at all.

Derek ignores him and wordlessly hands him his shirt, then bends down to untie the laces of his boots.

"Wow, okay, am I gonna need safety goggles for this? A polycarbonate shield, maybe?" He stammers, because hey, hello, Derek is stripping down in the middle of the woods and he thinks he may have had a dream like this once, but irrelevant. Totally irrelevant.

Derek doesn't even glance up at him, just slips off his boots and stuffs his socks —and it's still so weird to know that Derek Hale wears little feet sweaters— underneath the tongue and hands them off by the laces, then starts undoing his belt.

"Whoa, whoa, dude!"

Hello internal panic, and Stiles fumbles to hold everything in one hand because the other stupid hand is currently busy shielding his eyes (which he can't figure out because he maybe kinda wants to look, okay?) but to his relief Derek just pulls out the leather strip and hands it to him, looking annoyingly amused. Then he turns around and strides over to a large tree, and Stiles watches him go, trying not to stare (but totally staring) at the tattoo on his back. And the back muscles. Derek disappears behind the tree, and Stiles is at a loss.

"Fold it up," he hears Derek say, and blinks before he gets it and starts folding up the henley. Such a neat freak.

"Is this your big act?" He calls out, fumbling to get a grip on Derek's Docs before he gives up and drops them to the ground. "The ability to strip down to your pants and make innocent bystanders do your laundry?"

"Catch."

Derek peeks his head out from behind the tree and tosses Stiles his balled up pants.

Yep. Not arousing at all.

He catches them and holds them out like a hot potato, mouth dropping to the floor. He doesn't dare fold them because he's almost positive a pair of boxers will fall out if he does, and frankly he's not sure he's ready to handle that. They did laundry, sure, folding clean undies was one thing, but— no. Just nope. Derek is just going to have to deal with wrinkled pants later.

"Oh my god," he mutters, and stuffs the wad of clothes into the backpack. "Gotta say, if you're going for suspense you're definitely succeeding. You know, with the whole disappearing behind a tree thing, and the cryptic silence thing. Not that that's too out of the ordinary."

Derek doesn't say anything. Stiles zips up the backpack and glances up curiously, straightening up in alarm when he hears the unmistakable cracking of bones, then silence.
"Derek?" He says tentatively, and stares uneasily at the tree. "You okay?"

No response. He takes a cautious step forward, fingers tight around the strap of the backpack. "Derek, you better not have died on me behind there, because there's no way I'm dragging your naked, two-hundred-something-odd body all the way back to…"

But the words die on his tongue as a massive black wolf comes trotting out, tall and rippling with shiny onyx fur.

There is a distinct possibility he almost faints on the spot.

His jaw drops to the ground as Derek gracefully strides over to him, the picture of majesty. He stares, gaping as he takes in the rippling muscles, powerful frame and large paws, meeting glowing red eyes that stick out like two rubies in a black sea. He barks a breathless laugh as Derek plods closer, paws pressing into the earth as he walks a little half circle around him, tail swishing back and forth as if to say, _here I am._

"Holy shit, dude, you're a wolf!" He crows, throwing his arms out wildly for emphasis and clapping his hair with his hands because Derek is an actual living breathing gigantic wolf, and this may be the coolest thing to ever happen to him apart from that time he flung a jelly doughnut at Scott in Econ and it hit the fan and exploded.

He stands and cranes his neck around to watch the massive form circle him—massive, because the tip of Derek's ears reach his elbows. Derek observes him intensely, huffing a snort through his nostrils as he calmly slows to a halt in front of his feet. Cautiously, Stiles drops to a crouch to get a better look at him, and gazes at his wet black nose and the tiny bristle-like hairs trailing up his snout, the way his fur races down his back and swirls at his flank, and the downy, softer fluff on his chest.

"Wow, look at you," he breathes, and there's this silly grin on his face that he isn't sure what's doing there. "You've got the fur and everything."
He crouches on the balls of his feet, arm balanced on one knee. His fingers hover in the air, but thinks twice when he sees the huge set of jaws in front of him and decides he should probably ask permission before losing a hand.

"Can I…?"

Derek huffs softly, dipping his head in allowance. He peers unblinkingly at Stiles with deep red eyes — the same color as Kali’s in his nightmares, yet entirely different. Stiles stares right back as he
cautiously raises his hand, presenting it like a peace offer because he isn't exactly sure how to approach this situation, but it feels a little bit like that scene from *How to Train Your Dragon*. To his surprise Derek gently nudges his snout forward and sniffs his palm, nostrils quivering with tiny, minuscule breaths until he abruptly snorts out an exhale and pulls away, dousing Stiles's fingers in a spray of wolf snot.

He laughs in surprise (although seriously, gross) and Derek turns to the side to present his back, standing still aside from the slight rise and fall of his ribs. It takes a minute to compute that *oh*, he's allowing Stiles to *pet* him. Which is unexpected but also very exciting, so he carefully reaches out a hand and brushes his fingers against the fur of Derek's back, which is rough like wool but somehow still velvety soft.

"Dude, you're so soft," he mumbles, and gently runs his palm along Derek's spine, smoothing down his thick pelt. "Hah! Look at me, I'm petting a *wolf*. This is insane. This is awesome."

Derek stands patiently as Stiles strokes his back, ears swiveling in seemingly random directions, occasionally turning his head to observe him. His tail actually wags a bit when Stiles hits a sweet spot in-between his shoulders, but then catches itself and stops. Stiles watches it twitch, sway back and forth like some wondrously feathery swiffer-sweeper of fluff, and it's too tempting not to poke it. Experimentally he touches the tip of it with his index finger and Derek goes rigid, snapping back to growl a warning at him.

"Whoa, okay. No tail. Gotcha." He raises his hands in innocence, then tries to resume the petting but Derek turns and leaves before he can, trotting off to the side.

Stiles watches with interest as Derek locks his jaws around a sizable fallen tree branch and waltzes back over, standing in front of him expectantly. Stiles takes the stick from his mouth and immediately chuck across the woods, thinking that he wants to play fetch. Derek's eyes snap wide and his ears perk up as his head follows the stick, tail going rigidly straight before he turns on Stiles and *barks* at him, one strong, low yip. Stiles snaps back, flinging his arms up in surrender.

"Oh my god, did you just bark at me? Rude!"

Derek tracks backwards and jerks his head down and up again, growling another soft yip.

"What, you brought me a stick," he explains, bringing his hands up innocently. "Usually when a dog—pardon, *wolf*—does that, I assume they want to play fetch."

Derek rears back and makes an ugly sound somewhere between a snort and a sneeze, as if the mere idea of playing such a ludicrous game is an insult to his wollyhood. He rushes Stiles's side and butts his nose against the backpack, nipping it between his teeth. Stiles spins around in a circle, peeking at the zipper, and then it clicks.

"Oh. Oh, you want me to put the sticks in here?" He questions, and then remembers why they have the bag in the first place. "For firewood, right. Heh."

Derek doesn't have the eyebrows but somehow still manages a deadpan, flicking his tail to the side like a whip.

The wolf brushes past him and butts his head into Stiles's knees as if to say, "idiot" before trotting ahead. He doesn't go back and pick up the stick Stiles threw, probably because he'd rather die than get caught playing fetch. Stiles watches him and grins, because it's too difficult not to.

He shrugs and stands up, brushing the forest dirt from his pants. Then he ties the laces of Derek's
boots onto the back handle of the backpack and breaks into a jog to catch up to the beast pacing ahead of him.

"Alright, just lead the way then, Lassie."

The backpack is filled to the brim with wood by the time they run into two hikers walking their dog, a yellow lab that lets out a high pitched whine when it sees Derek. The man has a goatee and a fanny pack (not even kidding) and the woman is dressed in a matching track suit, both the poster couple for REI. The lab stops walking entirely as they get closer and starts backing up against the woman, who glances anxiously at the apparent wolf approaching.

"Wow, kid, that's quite a dog you got there!" The man greets, reeling in the lab's leash. He says it nicely enough, but his forehead is creased and his smile looks nervous. Derek slows to a halt, stands tall and stares at him, ears swiveling pointedly. He eyes the lab, snorts, and turns his head the other direction. Stiles pleads a silent prayer that Derek won't eat any of them.

"Er, yeah, right. Yep, this is my dog," he quickly plasters on a grin, although he's sure it just looks like he has gas. "Good… Doggie. Sit, boy."

Derek continues standing, because he's a little shit.

"Are… Why are his eyes red?" The man asks, cordial smile falling away.

"Oh. Right, yeah," Stiles clears his throat, scratching his jaw as he peers at Derek. "They are red, you see, because this specific breed is prone to genetic errors. You know, with DNA copying and cell… Mutations. So sometimes their eyes turn out to be weird colors. Like red."

He thinks they buy it. The woman peeks out from behind the dude's shoulder. "Er, what kind of breed is he?"

"A uh… German, spaniel-teese… Hound… Mutt," he settles on awkwardly.

Derek rumbles deep in his throat, like he's highly offended by this breed choice. The lab cautiously noses forward and tries to sniff at him, and Derek stares it down like he dares it to come smell his butt. The lab is an idiot, apparently, because it decides to stick it's snout up by Derek's bushy, fluffy tail of wonder, and Derek curls his lip and snaps at it. The lab lets out a high-pitched yip and scrambles backwards to tremble behind the couple, who look alarmed.

"Derek!" Stiles scolds, nudging the wolf with his foot. "Play nice, boy. Don't worry," he tries to assure the REI people. "He's all bark, no bite."

Derek bares his teeth smugly. The couple doesn't look convinced.

"Shouldn't he be on a leash?" The man asks, frowning. He and the woman inch a few steps backwards. Derek takes a step forward and licks his chops (on purpose, Stiles is like ninety-nine percent sure), which doesn't do a very good job of convincing the couple that he doesn't want to eat them.

"Oh, yeah. Well Derek here doesn't really do leashes. He's like, really stubborn," Stiles tells them,
shooting a look to the wolf in question. "Like we're talking mule-levels of stubbornness, think toddler petulance status. Sometimes it's almost like he's more human than dog."

Derek whips his tail and thwacks Stiles's calf.

The couple exchange a glance and skirt around them in a wide circle, reeling in their lab's leash so only a foot of freedom is available. They mumble something about "oh I see" and "well we better be going" and hurry off, and once he and Derek continue walking he hears the woman whisper, "who the hell names their dog Derek?"

Once they're out of earshot Stiles whirls on him.

"Dude, are you always so mean to other dogs?"

Derek snorts.

"I know, lemme guess. That lab had it coming, right? What, is that breed like, below you? Don't be a snob, Derek."

In response Derek chuffs and suddenly cuts in front of him, slapping his legs with another swipe of his tail. Stiles stumbles and nearly trips over it, and Derek prances ahead huffing what sounds suspiciously like a laugh.

"Fleabag."

Five minutes later they're nearing the top of an incline that's about thirty degrees too steep for his liking, and Stiles is ready to write a strongly-worded email to whoever decided that hills in forests were a good idea. A shy breeze has picked up, one that tickles his eyelashes and teases the occasional clump of wildflowers they pass. The scenery is actually kind of pretty, but he'd be able to appreciate it a lot more if he wasn't currently sweating like a pig while Derek strides ahead of him fresh as a daisy, ears perked and tail held high.

"So, uh, where exactly are you taking me, big guy?" He pants, narrowly overstepping a rock rudely posing as a tripping hazard. Jerk.

Derek ignores him and gracefully hops over a fallen log. The same fallen log snags on Stiles's pant leg, because apparently trees favor stuck-up wolf people.

"Silent treatment, huh?" He muses. "Real classy. So, I'm just gonna hope wherever it is we're going is at the top of this lovely hill we're climbing. That would be excellent, considering how I have half a forest worth of lumber on my back. Really not good for my spine, dude. I was one of those kids who preferred juice over milk, so I'm likely to snap in half sometime before I'm forty. Ergo, there better be an exact replica of the Millennium Falcon waiting at the top or something…"

His words die as they reach the top of the slope, stolen away by the view. Before them lies a small grove overlooking the city, a tiny nook of nature nestled on a cliff. A ring of trees surround a small patch of dewy grass peppered with dandelions, bathed in a periwinkle glow from the wall of silver clouds overhead. A sea of tiny houses litter the horizon, window lights barely visible behind the veil of mist hanging in the air. It's like something taken from a painting, blues and greens and greys illuminated by the soft smudged sky.

"Whoa," he breathes, because he has no other word to describe how unexpectedly awesome it all is. He raises his hands, neck swiveling to take it all in. "Come to think of it, the Falcon model was purchased in 2001 by some dude in Canada anyway, so this will have to do."
Derek strides past him, padding out onto the little field of grass. Surprisingly he just kind of goes over towards the edge of the cliff and plops down on his stomach, much in the same way a human would. Stiles walks over to join him.

"What, you're not gonna spin around in a little circle before sitting down?"

Derek looks at him and thumps his tail once against the ground, ears flattening backwards against his head.

"Okay. Right. Dog thing. And you're a... Wolf, apparently," He muses, gazing unabashedly at Derek's furry black form.

Little golden dandelions litter the grass around them, and about two dozen get squished when he slips the backpack off his shoulders and sits down. Derek sniffs curiously at the dirt beneath his paw, and Stiles stares at the tiny patterns of fur on his snout, the low rumble of his lungs as his ribcage expands, the downy tufts of hair inside his ears. A pair of red eyes turn to him, catching him staring. Derek huffs pointedly.

"Sorry, dude, don't mean to stare," he offers meekly, scratching at his nose. "Just that I don't know a whole lot of people who can magically transform into a majestic animal. Except for Sirius Black, but you know, fictional character discrepancy."

Derek lays his head down between his front paws. Stiles watches as he blinks, ruffling the grass when he blows a sigh out through his nose. His eyes fall half-mast, tail twitching lazily behind him.

"Dude, you're so zen. Is that a wolf thing?"

Derek stares at the horizon and flicks his ear.

Stiles fights back a smile, eyeing him amusedly. He stretches his legs out and plucks one of the dandelions by his knee, twiddling with it as he observes their surroundings. The trees behind them sway gently, the edge of the cliff a few yards in front of them. It's pretty, pale with a kind of peacefulness that's different from the mansion, and the air is crisp with the clean scent of dew. Yet, it's nothing out of the ordinary or particularly special, and he can't figure out why Derek brought him here.

But he doesn't dwell on it, because he has a wolf by his side and cool grass under his legs, and a fuzzy kind of content bubbling inside from all of the above.

Tiny yellow confetti falls onto his pants as he pulls out the dandelion petals. He plucks another after he flicks the stem to the side and glances at Derek, who's still blinking lazily at the view. For fun, he casually drops one of the flower heads onto Derek's back, just to see what happens. Derek twitches and swivels an ear back, but then seems to change his mind and slumps a little more against the grass, sighing like he's too bored to care. Stiles tries his luck by gingerly putting another one on the crown of his head, but that crosses the line because Derek flicks his ear and gives his head a little jolt to shake it off.

"Okay, stickin' to the back, then," he announces, and tries not to laugh as he picks more of the flowers and artfully drops them onto Derek's fur.
Soon Derek’s back is dotted with dozens of little yellow dandelions, and Stiles is thoroughly amused. He admires his work, waggling his sneaker back and forth in the grass.

"I should start calling you 'flowerwolf,'" he mutters satisfactorily, and smirks when Derek's nose twitches.

Derek stares straight ahead through half-lidded red eyes, watching a dandelion sway in the breeze before his nose. His eyes blink sleepily like he's trying to keep awake, the fine hairs twitching where his big furrowed eyebrows would be. He looks so chill that Stiles decides to reach out and gently scratch the little well behind his ear, because it's practically begging for it. A red eye cracks open and glances back at him, blinking once before it closes again. Stiles bites his lip to keep himself from grinning like an idiot.

"This place is nice. I like it," he declares.

He removes his hand from Derek's ear to reach back and pluck a fluffy white dandelion. It spins like a ballerina as he twirls the stem between his fingertips, seeds scattering and swirling away in the
wind when he makes a wish and blows. One of them does a loop-de-loop and lands on Derek's nose, and Derek twitches before his tongue comes out in a sweep over his nostrils, taking the seed with it.

"You know, I'm starting to think you haven't changed back yet so you have an excuse to get out of talking," he jests lightly. "And you don't even say much to begin with, but a little practice wouldn't hurt. Soon you'll be saying whole complete sentences. In a row, even."

He looks to Derek, who ignores him. The wolf's eyes are closed, head resting in the grass, sides expanding and falling with slow, deep breaths. It looks comfy, so Stiles scoots around and lays down on his back, setting his head in the grass next to Derek's. Something hard and pointy digs into his hip, and he wiggles his hand into his pocket and closes his fingers around the badge, forgetting that it was there.

The brass greets him cheerily as he takes it out. He holds it up against the sky, and it gleams even more radiant in the soft light. He tucks an arm behind his head, and lets his hand fall to rest on his stomach, looking up at the overcast sky.

"If only my dad could see us now," he murmurs. "He'd probably have a stroke. Never really got over the supernatural stuff, werewolves were one thing but I don't think he'd be able to handle people turning into full-on animals."

He lets that hang there, because it would take too long to explain the other half of it.

He flops his head over and glances at Derek, looking for a reaction. The wolf simply breathes, eyes still shut into two little lines. Stiles looks up to the sky again, bringing up a leg to rest an ankle on his knee.

"I think he would've liked you," he announces thoughtfully. "If he had gotten a chance to know you, I mean. He really just judged you based off what was on your record, but I think you guys would've been pretty okay with each other. Friends, even. You actually had a lot in common with him, like you both have a strong opposition to salads, and like old grandpa sweaters… You take your coffee black… Both overly-sensitive to people putting shoes on the coffee table."

Derek flicks his ear.

"What's funny," he continues, and traces his thumb over the starred points of the badge. "Is that it's the little things like that I remember the most."

He huffs a little laugh, bringing the medal up to study it again. "Two months ago I had no idea how much this thing would mean to me. And now here I am, still sleeping with it under my pillow like a baby. I feel like a baby, you know that? Last week I saw Greenberg at Walgreen's, and I hid behind the diapers because I didn't want him to see me and ask questions about what happened that night… I'm not in school because I couldn't get my emotional shit together to sit though a class without having a panic attack, like how pathetic is that? Apparently the only thing I can handle is washing the dishes."

He stops talking, and everything is too quiet. He chews his lip.

"And no, I'm not ready for a job," he admits, thinking back to their conversation earlier. "I mean I could do it, probably. Like find an Olive Garden that's hiring and just get out and do it—" He gestures his arms brazenly to the sky, stretching out his fingers. He fights a silent battle with the clouds and loses, letting his arms flop back down onto his stomach. He frowns.

"But I dunno… I just… Life just kind of scares me right now," he confesses quietly. "I think maybe
because he's not here to walk me through it."

He licks his lips, lolling his head to the side. Derek's eyes are closed, one ear swiveled his direction. He huffs a small laugh.

"I don't even know why I'm telling you this. This was your whole plan, wasn't it? Turn into a wolf and let me blabber on and spill all my secrets? Hm? I thought so."

Derek doesn't say anything.

Stiles blinks and turns back to the sky. He pulls a wan smile, brings the badge up to his lips, and plants a kiss against the cold metal before sticking it into his hoodie pocket. He steals another look at Derek, who appears to be asleep.
"You know, I'm kinda glad Melissa convinced me to move in with you," he mentions quietly. He doesn't know if he's high off nature or what, but he says it anyway. "Honestly I'm not sure how long I would have lasted living alone, or with aunt Carol in Ohio... But I like having you around. So thanks."

As soon as he says it he wishes he hadn't, because it only reminds him that he'll just have to move out in a few weeks.

Just a couple months ago he had been dead-set on moving out as soon as he got the chance— and yet, he's surprised at the faint pang of something in his stomach when he thinks about how alone he'll be again once he leaves. He had actually started getting used to having Derek around, even his old man traits like not liking candy and vacuuming under the couch. It was kind of nice to hear the faint hum of The Black Keys in the morning, the clink of someone putting away the dishes, or the quiet clack of another set of fingers a keyboard. An extra voice, an extra heartbeat, the occasional sticky note on the counter when he got out of bed. Simply knowing that someone else was just down the hall.

Trivial as it all was, it filled in the little hole New Year's left in his chest.

But a part of him knows that he can't stay forever. Derek was already generous by letting him stay this long, and he doesn't want to throw away how far they've come by overstaying his welcome. His birthday was right around the corner, and with that came the obligation to get out of Derek's hair.

Stiles lolls his head to side again, stealing the opportunity to look at the wolf by his side. His nose is about a foot away from Derek's head, close enough to count the thin whiskers sprouting from his muzzle. At this distance he can see the feathery tips of his ears, the tiny pores on his wet nose, the dirt on the massive paws tucked by his side. Coarse, inky fur streamlines the ridge of his back, but the hairs by his nose are short and almost grey. His eyelids are still, nostrils quivering minutely.

"Dude, did you fall asleep on me?" He mumbles, and watches the little whiskers on Derek's brow twitch. "You're pretty fried then, huh. I would be too if I got up at five."

Maybe he speaks too soon, because he cuts off with a yawn that makes his jaw crack. He smacks his lips and brings a finger up to scratch at his temples, and little pieces of dandelion stick to his sleeve and rain down onto his hair. He guesses it makes sense that he's tired too, yesterday had been a wild ride and today they had been prepping the house all afternoon. He blinks up at the sky, eyes drooping. The wind brushes over him gently, slowly lulling his lids closed.

"Gotta say, Derek... You take pretty good care of your house," he mumbles. "I just wonder if that's best for taking care of you."

His mind wanders. He thinks about his dad and root beer floats, wet books, dandelions, and dancing last night. The sky rumbles softly overhead, and he wonders if Derek's storm prediction isn't that far off.

He must doze off a little, because next thing he knows there's suddenly a trail of drool across his cheek and something cold and wet is nudging his hand.

He jerks, thinking it's some sort of killer slug (shut up, he's in nature) and blinks a wolf into focus. Derek is up and nosing his fingers, huffing wetly into his palm and swishing his tail back and forth.

"Mmgh, gross, dude," he mumbles, and scoots up onto his elbows to wipe Derek's snot off on his jeans.
Apparently he napped longer than he thought, because the sky is significantly darker now, pressing in with ominous grey thunderclouds. There's a pile of dandelion heads on the ground from where Derek must have shaken them off, although there's still a couple stuck in his fur. He trots back and forth, butting the backpack with his forehead to nudge it closer.

"What, you want some firewood chew toys?" Stiles can't help himself. Derek rumbles deep in his chest and kneads his front paws impatiently into the grass while he slips open the zipper. He takes out an entire cabin's worth of assorted twigs before he reaches the clothes at the bottom, and lays them on the grass before re-loading the wood.

Derek's tail drops when he sees the ball of wadded up pants, and spares a moment to throw a low growl at Stiles before taking the bundle in his teeth and trotting over to a tree.

"Yeah, sorry, dude. Not folding up your delicates. Wrinkly pants won't kill you."

The house keys fall out of Derek's pants, so Stiles picks them up from the grass and pockets them, stifling another yawn as he unties Derek's boots from the handle. He glances over at the tree and winces when he hears the bones pop, but a minute later there's a quick "zrrp" of a zipper and Derek reemerges, looping his belt back through the waist of his jeans.

"Yeah, okay, hi," Stiles quips, and rocks back on his heels. "Dude, that was sick! How come you've never done it before?"

Derek looks down as he pads over onto the grass, lips pinched like they do when he's trying to hide a smile. He's shirtless and barefoot and there's a single dandelion head left stuck in his hair, and he looks like the walking Budha or something, a hero in a martial arts movie, maybe. He rubs his neck and cracks it like it's sore, and sits in the grass near the edge of the cliff to tie on his boots.

"I have, just not in a while," Derek says. "It can be kind of stiff shifting back." Stiles notices that his voice is a little rougher, like he had a cold, if werewolves got colds.

His back is bare and facing Stiles, and he can't help but stare as he loads the last of the wood into the backpack. Derek must sense him creeping or something, because he pauses and turns around, eyebrow pulled up like he knows what Stiles is thinking.

"Yes?"

He chews his lip, but he's too intrigued to be embarrassed. "Nothing, it's just, um… Your tattoo."

Derek turns back around and continues lacing up his Docs, hiding his face.

"What about it?"

Stiles zips the backpack closed and stands up, cautiously inching closer. "Well, what does it mean? It's just that Scott got his because he thought having two lines on his arm would be cool. Although I'm assuming you probably have a more interesting reason for yours."

Derek pauses for half a second. He patiently ties up his laces and doesn't say anything for a length of time, to the point where Stiles thinks that he isn't going to answer.

"It's a Celtic symbol," Derek starts. Stiles comes over and sits down a couple feet behind him, surveying the black swirls radiating between his shoulder blades.

"Three spirals are called a triskele, representing past, present, and future. In ancient lore it's used as a symbol of continuous motion, like wheel of time. I got it after the fire as a reminder to keep moving
forward."

Stiles stares at the back of Derek's head, wishing he could see his face from his position. He glances back to the tattoo, eyes sweeping over the branches of ink. Before he's even half-aware of his movements he lifts up a hand, fingers hovering in the air until he realizes what he's about to do—what he wants to do, and Derek swivels his neck around and eyes the action, eyebrow twitching. Stiles curls his fingers in embarrassment and quickly tries to save it by scratching behind his ear, suddenly very interested in staring at the grass.

Derek returns to tying his boot, only this time his fingers don't move. He sits, thumbs stuck in the loops of his laces, and Stiles gets about two seconds away from blurting an apology, until—

"You can touch it, if you want." Derek says quietly. Almost shyly. "It's not magic or anything… But you can."

Stiles blinks. Oh.

He scoots forward on the grass until he's centered behind Derek, nose just a couple feet from the triskele. After some hesitation he reaches out, gently kissing two fingers to the the center of the symbol. There's something so compelling about it, enough to encourage him to ghost his touch across the design, lightly tracing two fingers over the spiral. The skin is warm and smooth beneath his fingertips, impossibly soft.

Stiles can't see his face, but Derek sits and lets him, shoulders melting a little, head falling forward just a hair. His hands are still halted over his boots, laces looped around his thumb. The contact almost tickles, like tiny sparks beneath his fingertips as he slowly traces the swirling black lines, fingers skating softly over the spirals.
"It's beautiful," he says simply.

Because it is. The tattoo is beautiful, but he really means the word for Derek. Beautiful on the inside, which is a kind of beautiful he didn't see in him before.

It hits him completely out of left field, whatever mawkish mood swing compels him to utter something so nauseatingly Hallmark-worthy —Maybe it's the oncoming rain, or the peaceful nature of the overlook— but in that moment Stiles sees Derek in his entirety: a broody, blunt, stubborn-ass werewolf, but only to cover up the scars of his past. The same scars that rendered him so much stronger than just a pair of supernatural biceps, because it was Derek's inner strength that was truly impressive, even though no one knew to look there.

But the past couple months Stiles had seen first hand just how big Derek Hale's heart actually was. And it was nothing like the cold, shriveled thing he initially thought.

His fingers slow to a halt just below the center of the tattoo. He realizes he stroked too far, fingers starting to trace down Derek's spine. He immediately snaps his hand back, afraid that somehow the werewolf would hear his thoughts, and Derek twitches, as if startled by the sudden absence of contact. Stiles hears a tiny click of teeth, but it doesn't come from his own mouth— he knows the noise well, because it's the sound of someone snapping their lips closed after realizing they were hanging ajar.

Before he can read into that Derek clears his throat and reaches for his shirt, pulling it down over his
head. Stiles worries that he overstepped too far, said something he shouldn't have, but then he catches a glimpse of Derek's eyes as he stands up, and sees something soft and confused that wasn't there a minute ago.

"We should get going. It's going to rain soon."

He glances up, craning his neck around as Derek rises and moves towards the backpack.

"Wait, hey, hold on. Now that you've got a pair of human vocal cords, why did you take me up here?"

"What do you mean."

"I mean why did you take me up here? You said you wanted to take me somewhere, which kind of implies something special about this little slice of Middle Earth. I can't imagine the whole point was just to take a couple of cat naps, so…?"

Derek slows to a halt, shoulders slumping a little like Stiles caught him in a trap.

"This is where I used to go. After the fire. Still do, sometimes. My… Peace place, if you will."

Stiles studies the man before him, cocking his head minutely to the side.

"And you… Thought I might find peace here?"

Derek takes a moment, kicking a small rock to the side. His eyes flicker to where the badge is sitting in his hoodie pocket, then turns to the edge of the cliff.

"I thought you might like the excuse to see the view."

Stiles glances to the horizon, where the town below is barely visible beyond the veil of fog. He looks back to Derek, who now has his back turned to him. Before he can think of anything to say a low rumble of thunder moans above them, and a drop of water lands on the tip of his nose. He blinks and looks up, mouth dropping open as the clouds release a torrent of rain.

"Oh my god, you weren't bluffing," he blurs, and throws an arm over his head as the skies take a piss.

Derek swings the backpack over his shoulders in one fluid motion and strides forwards, clapping a hand to Stiles's shoulder as he passes.

"Race you back."

And the alpha breaks into a jog, taking off down the slope back into the woods.

"Come on, that is so unfair!" He hollers.

Derek throws a smirk over his shoulder and goes a little faster, and Stiles scrambles to his feet before he's left in the mud. He throws in a "showoff!" before putting on a burst of speed and tearing after him, sneakers kicking up damp leaves in his wake.

The rain is unforgiving, heavy, and wet, and by the time they make it back to the house they're panting and drenched, soaked through like a couple of sponges. Derek leads them around the porch to the side door, which enters into the garage, and starts fishing for his keys.

"Oh, no here, I have them," Stiles remembers, and quickly digs into his pocket from when they fell
out earlier. He hands them off, fingers slippery over the keys. Derek takes them, pauses, and holds out his palm again.

"The Camaro, too."

Drat.

He wrinkles his nose and slaps the key into Derek's palm, which closes tight and secure around it (he's never going to see it again, he just knows it). He scurries beneath the edge of the roof, bouncing impatiently as the rain continues to pummel them.

"I wouldn't stand so close to the rafters I were you," Derek warns, without even glancing over his shoulder. "The gutters tend to—"

He's interrupted when a bucket's worth of rainwater spills from the roof, splattering on Stiles's head with all the charm of a Nickeloden slime award.

"—do that," Derek finishes, and has the audacity to look entertained.

"Really? Then what was the point of cleaning them out?" Stiles groans, screwing his lids shut against the fucking ocean in his eyeballs. "You," he wipes his face and jabs an accusing finger at Derek. "You did this. I don't know how, but you planned that."

They burst into the garage sopping wet, dripping water all over the concrete floor. Stiles sees why they entered this way when Derek makes a beeline for the dryer, which has a little blinking red light to announce the finished clothes inside. The werewolf ducks a hand inside and pulls out a couple towels, tossing one over.

Stiles catches it and immediately presses it to his face, moaning into the hot terrycloth.

"Aw, yesss, hot out of the dryer!" he renounces. The fabric muffles his voice, warm against his face and lips. Beside him Derek bends over to dry his hair and shimmies it over his boots to lick away the mud. Stiles skirts around the Jeep, giving it a loving pat as he peeks inside the dryer to find some dry clothes, and pulls out a pair of sweatpants.

"Are these yours or mine?" He asks, and flips them around to inspect. Derek glances up.

"Yours."

Stiles spots the ketchup stain on the right knee.

"Ah. Mine."

He throws them into the basket and ducks back inside in pursuit of his batman pajama bottoms, which are blessedly part of the load. He presses them into his face too, and the remaining cold bleeds away from his nose. Derek opens the door to the kitchen and steps inside the house, but spares a disapproving frown at Stiles's feet when he tries to follow.

"Hey, shoes off," Derek warns, jerking his chin to the offending converse.

Stiles rolls his eyes and hops on one foot to pry his sneakers off. "For someone who just stripped down in the middle of the woods, you're sure oppositional to dirt."

"Wanna see what happens if you track mud into the house?" Derek suggests, and strides over to the fridge.
"I imagine it'll have something to do with furrowing your eyebrows and tying me to the chandelier, right?"

"Actually, I was just going to hide all of your pop tarts," Derek replies. "But that works too."

Stiles drops his shoes by the garage door and hops onto a barstool, expressing a sigh of relief as he peels off his wet socks and wiggles his toes, eager to get some feeling back into them. Derek does a quick scope of the cupboards and loops back to the fridge, grabbing the orange juice and throwing his head back to take a large gulp. Stiles stares him down, mouth dropping in offense.

"Oh, I see. So it's cool if you slobber straight from the carton, but when I do it it's unsanitary?"

Derek side-eyes him, dragging a sleeve across his mouth. "You did it with the milk after eating a peanut butter sandwich. That gallon tastes like Skippy now."

"Aw, poor you with your superhuman senses. Life must be so tough."

"I heard you singing to Mariah Carey this morning," Derek points out calmly.

"You sing along to The Black Keys in the shower," Stiles shoots back, just as nonchalantly.

Derek stiffens, clearly caught off guard, and Stiles waggles his eyebrows triumphantly to rub it in. He's been saving that one for a while. "What, you think I can't hear you? Gotta say, you're not half bad. Those solos are pretty hardcore."

Derek can't seem to think of a comeback but plays it off with a scowl, which are starting to look less and less menacing these days. Stiles calls it a win.

"I'll be right back."

"Hey, where are you going?" Stiles calls after him, spinning around on the stool as Derek grabs his jacket and moves for the door.

"We're out of eggs, and bread. Just going to pick some up."

"In the rain? Just stay inside, dude, we can live without them for a day."

"Unless you want beef jerky for breakfast tomorrow, that's about all that's left. I'm not going out tomorrow morning," Derek states, and swings open the door, letting in a gust of cold air. It's funny, because Stiles has seen Derek demolish an entire bag of beef jerky in one night, and the guy would probably love an excuse to substitute it for a meal.

He hums in agreement. "Good point. Bring back bacon, too?"

"Only if you don't eat it all in one day."

"No promises."

Derek steps foot outside, but right before he closes the door he pauses and sticks his head back inside the house, staring Stiles down.

"You didn't hit any of the high notes."

And closes the door.

Stiles ducks his head and rubs the towel over his hair again, but it doesn't do a thing to wipe the grin
off his face. He glances down at his soaked pants and chuckles, running a hand over his forehead because it's just water, it's really not that funny, but everything seems a little brighter anyway. The clock on the stove reads 7:02pm and the rain patters against the kitchen window, and that weird fuzzy feeling from the overlook is still buzzing warmly in his chest.

Peace place. Huh.

He rises from the bar stool, huffing a laugh at the the damp imprint his butt leaves on the seat. Out of curiosity he goes to the fridge and uncaps the milk, giving it a whiff (it smells like milk). He puts it back and moves for his pajamas to go change out of his wet clothes, maybe take a shower, but is interrupted when the door knocks.

*Rap rap rap.*

He rolls his eyes and hangs the towel back over the stool, because Derek *would* demand that Stiles let him in instead of fishing for his keys. He walks over and opens the door, halfway through clucking, "forget your wallet, big guy?" when he sees who's standing on the porch, and the words are strangled in his throat.
"Good evening, Stiles," Richard greets cheerily, in a way that suggests he hopes Stiles won't have a good evening at all. The rain falls in a sheet of silver behind him— he's clad in the department uniform and holding a clipboard, with a smug smirk on his face and a twinkle in his eye that Stiles doesn’t like at all.

"It was, until your face showed up," Stiles replies coolly. Probably not the best thing to say, but contempt currently overrides the nervous qualm in his gut. It's a common problem.

Richard smiles tightly, seemingly unfazed. "Still have quite the mouth on you, then. I'm sure that
criminal friend of yours gets quite the use out of it."

Stiles wrinkles his nose, and decides he's never met a bigger asshole. "Yeah, well Derek's not here, so you'll have to come back and throw cheap shots at him some other time," he retorts, and moves to close the door.

"Oh, I appreciate the offer, but it's actually you I came to see!" Richard smiles, and his teeth look extra yellow against the grey backdrop of the woods. It makes Stiles's stomach churn uncomfortably, but he narrows his eyes and leans casually against the doorframe to hide it.

"You see," Richard continues. "After last night's little blast from the past, I thought I'd dig through the archives to see where you were staying. Lo and behold, I find out that your Aunt Carol in Ohio granted permission for you to stay in California, and as of—"

Richard glances at his clipboard, skimming his thumb down the top page.

"—January eighth of this year, you've been living in this old dump with none other than the town criminal, Derek Hale." He looks around the porch and wrinkles his nose, taking in the sand bags, blackened window panes, and splintered wood. "Gotta say, I'm amazed they haven't condemned this place yet, but I suppose it's a pretty good fit for a black sheep."

"Alright," Stiles dismisses coolly, officially fed up with the insults. "Are you gonna stand there and fire off lame one-liners or do you have a point?"

As soon as the words slip out he wishes he could take it back, because the smile creeps back onto Richard's face with a mirth that chills him to the core.

"I'm so glad you asked," Richard replies, eyes glittering. "Originally I was going to report you for physically assaulting a man at a diner last night, but then I see a side note here stating that you have your old man's badge, and thought it'd be so much more fun to come and reclaim it."

Stiles stares at him. His bare feet suddenly feel cold against the hardwood, heart plummeting to his stomach.

"You can't do that," he states bluntly. "It belongs to me, the department gave it to me."

Richard smiles, triumphant.

"Technically, it belongs to the State," he clucks. "Aparently some little nurse friend of your father's sweet-talked the personnel director into letting you keep the damn thing, but that's really a no-no when it comes to law enforcement. All it took was a file complaint to point that out, and I've got the official papers here stating that we have the right to take it back. As much as Parrish—pardon, Sheriff Parrish didn't agree, the station doesn't really have the option not to follow the law."
The air suddenly tastes too thick.

Stiles fights down the urge to be sick, tightening his grip around the doorframe. The badge burns in his front pocket.

"You—" he spits out, but bites his tongue. He can't throw any sort of insult without risking getting arrested, and Richard raises an eyebrow and smirks like he knows exactly what he was about to say.
"That's right," Richard warns, running his tongue over his teeth. "Can't kick me in the balls again either, unless you'd like to get arrested for assaulting an officer in uniform. Now I suggest you hurry along and get that shiny little medallion, or else I'm going to have to write you up for resisting orders."

Stiles stands in the doorway, stock still. His heart crawls into his throat, hammering too loudly in his ears as he desperately racks his brain for a loophole, but he's already lost the game, and Richard knows it. There are no options to weigh— he could lie and say that he doesn't have it, but all Richard had to do was glance down and spy the lump in his hoodie pocket, and then he'd be booked for false reporting. The worst part is that he'd gladly jump into a jail cell if it meant landing a blow to the man's lopsided jaw, but he'd lose the badge anyway, and Derek would have to bail him out.

"I'm waiting," Richard says calmly, eyes two pools of ice. His hand drifts to the handcuffs on his belt. Stiles swallows thickly, forcing himself to have a calm front. But his hand twitches sunconcioulsy by his pocket, and that's his fatal mistake.

The man's eyes flick down, spying the lump there.

"Don't tell me it's in your pocket," Richard drawls quietly, smirking. "I know some people get attached to their mementos, but carrying it around with you twenty-four seven is a bit much."

Stiles's nostrils flare soundlessly. He doesn't trust himself to speak, becuase the vice around his throat suddenly tightens to impossible measures, making his head spin. For once he doesn't have anything to say— he can feel his composure cracking as his toes curl against the floor, desperate to stall for time. He wants to scream at the thought of Richard's filthy paws on his dad's badge. Richard sticks out his hand expectantly, slim fingers a spiral fan around his upturned palm. He smiles coldly.

"I'll take that."

Stiles swallows thickly. Slowly, painfully slowly, he fishes a hand into his pocket, fingers trembling as he wraps them around the familiar shape. The metal feels cold and heavy in his palm as he lifts it up, lets the outside air kiss his dad's engraved name. He stares unblinkingly at the letters, and it feels like saying goodbye all over again.

Richard reaches for it but he jerks it back before he can stop himself, face slackening in panic, breath hitching in his throat. But he bites his lip, refusing to crumble. He owes his dad that much. It takes everything he has to harden his features into a straight face and stare Richard down, but he does it. He stiffly places the badge in Richard's palm, and the man's fingers wrap around it like a steel jaw trap.

"Thank you, Mr. Stilinski. Looks like you even got it polished for me," Richard chirps, and holds it up to the light, just out of Stiles's reach. Stiles digs his nails into his palms, and Richard sticks the badge in his pocket and turns on his heel, throwing one last satisfied smirk over his shoulder.

"That'll be it for today. Stay out of trouble, young man."

The porch steps whine as he descends the stairs, shaking out an umbrella to hold against the rain. Stiles watches him go, feet glued helplessly to the doorstep. It isn't until the man steps foot into the cruiser that he finally manages to rip his eyes away and shut the door, feeling impossibly numb.
He blinks at the living room, knuckles still locked white around the doorknob, but the floor and couch suddenly look grey again, like the rain somehow got inside the house and washed away the color. His legs take a step forward to move, do something, go to his room maybe—but he doesn't make it past the kitchen before he needs to stumble over to the counter and steady himself against the storm of thoughts in his head.

He lost the badge.

He lost the badge.

He lost his dad.

He sucks in a gulp of air and blows it out, but it's just as shaky as his trembling fingers. He's dizzy, overwhelmed with the obnoxious staccato of his heart as he hunches over, and dry heaves a couple times over the sink before his legs decide to give up on him. His back hits the cabinets with a thump as he clumsily slides to the kitchen floor, unwilling to even try and make the journey to his room.

The rain thunders hard against the house, pummeling the windows and making the ceiling weep over the leak buckets. He half expects to have a panic attack, but it never comes. What he feels now is almost worse, like the strings have been cut from his limbs, the stitches ripped from the hole in his chest, his whole world collapsing all over again—thrown back to New Year's night, the funeral, the first day he arrived here, when everything was painted hopeless.

A shiver courses through him, whether it's from his damp clothes or not he doesn't know, but it chills him from the inside out. He sucks in another shuddery breath, curls his fingers into his hair, and squeezes his eyes shut against the hot prick behind his lids. No, no he will not lose it, he had made it so damn far, and he refuses to let Derek come back and find him on the floor in a pathetic mess. But no matter how many times he demands himself to

get up,

get a grip,

it's not the end of the world—

He still can't move, because it's almost as painful as losing him the first time. The badge had been his anchor, the band-aid keeping him together, but worst of all, now that it's gone—

The nightmares were going to come back.

And that scares him the most, because as of January first, his new worst fear was reliving that night.

In one last desperate attempt to keep it all in he clamps a hand to his mouth, but the action is futile. All the muted darkness he had expelled suddenly wells up again out of nowhere, bubbling and ugly and heavy just like last time, and the time nine years ago. It snaps his heart in half and he cowers from it, ducking his head against his knees.

Soft shadows of rain stream across the tile at his feet, and he cries for the first time in not long enough.
Chapter End Notes
Chapter 12 is my personal favorite. See you in 1-2 weeks :)  

As always, thank you all so much for the support! Your kind words make all the effort worthwhile <3
Derek knows something is wrong when he reaches the porch.

It's just the subtle way his neck prickles when his boot hits the first step, the tiny knot in his stomach
— but it's enough to make him pause and barge into the house a little faster than normal.

Stiles jerks when the door opens, eyes wide and glassy as they fly up and meet Derek's own. He's sitting on the floor by the kitchen sink, arms wrapped around his knees, bare feet curled against the tile. He quickly drags an arm across his lashes and shakily fumbles to stand up, but his knees don't seem to work and he just plops back down against the cabinets.

"Stiles," Derek blurts in alarm, abandoning the 7-eleven bag on the counter. He quickly drops to a crouch and scans for injury, but he doesn't see or smell any blood, and the sharp tang of grief is thick and heavy.

"Hey, hey! What happened?" He demands, and grips Stiles's shoulders to make him look up.

Stiles furiously wipes his cheeks and digs his teeth into his lip, blinking at him with pained eyes. He's still damp from the rain in his wet clothes, arms pale and cold with gooseflesh beneath Derek's fingers. Sour notes of embarrassment roll off of him in waves.

"They—" Stiles bites out, clamping a hand over his mouth to quiet a hiccup. "They took it back."

Derek's heart sinks like a stone. Stiles doesn't even need to specify— there's only one thing "it" could be.

"What, who took what back?"

"Richard," Stiles stares at his knees and licks his lips, which are angry red and shiny with moisture. "The department. The badge, they— they took the badge back."

The kitchen pitches into heavy silence apart from the rain outside. Derek grows still, mouth falling slack before he clamps it shut again. His nostrils flare soundlessly.

"What?" It slips out quietly, soft and dark. He studies Stiles intently, who bunches his hands into fists and picks at his thumbs.

"He came here, right after you left," Stiles explains, eyes jumping between Derek and his knuckles. He twitches with little residual sniffles, mouth pinched tight. "Payback for last night, I guess. He said it belonged to the station and filed a complaint to get a warrant, and he... I c-couldn't do anything. I didn't have a choice."

The last line is barely audible, like his lungs ran out of steam. He wipes a hand down his face and rubs his forehead, as if trying to erase the wrinkles there. It doesn't work, and it's eerie how similar the action is to what the Sheriff used to do. Derek looks to the floor, quiet with rage. He releases his grip on Stiles's shoulders, gently leaning back to rest his weight on his heels.

"Jesus. I'm sorry," Stiles mutters, and immediately tries to wipe his eyes and turn away. He huffs an empty laugh, but it comes out thin and scared. "This is so stupid, I didn't mean for you to come in and find me like this. I'm sorry. I'm fine."

"First of all, stop that," Derek says sharply, and latches onto Stiles's wrist to stop him from hiding his face. "Stop apologizing. You have nothing to be sorry for. And secondly, you are not fine. You don't need to pretend that you are."

Stiles stares back at him with perplexed, watery doe eyes, and Derek hates everything. The teen glances down, making fists over his knees, but even that action screams with a fragility that Derek hasn't seen in nearly three months.
"I just… That was all I had left of him," Stiles utters quietly. "And now, I just… I don't know what
to do."

With the last line Stiles curls into himself a little more, and Derek watches the shadows from the
window stream down the crown of his head.

He locks his jaw, inconceivably angry. First and foremost is his anger, it's always his anger, this time
directed at Richard. He has a mind to drop everything and go out to wring the man's slimy neck, but
shoves the urge aside. Because even worse is looking at Stiles, no longer moving or fiddling or
babbling, shoulders slumped like he doesn't see the point in sitting up straight, which is way to close
to when he first moved in for Derek to be comfortable.

He stands up abruptly, nostrils flaring.

"I'll tell you what we're going to do," he announces sharply. "We're going—"

Stiles blinks and looks up at him, eyes glimmering and confused, almost a little hopeful at what
Derek has to offer. Derek locks his jaw and looks out the window, because he doesn't know what
he's going to say either. He quickly runs over options in his head, and comes up with absolutely
nothing because he has no idea where to even start with this—

But of all the things to pop up, he remembers Lydia. Lydia Martin with her clicky boots and her fire
eyes and her stupid knit presents, and how she had last stepped out of his house leaving Stiles in a
golden glow.

He frowns, glancing to the living room couch. His lips compress to a thin line and he sighs, because
god, he's going to say it. He's really about to say it.

"We're going to build a fort."

Stiles stares at him likes he's grown another head.

"What?" Stiles croaks, utterly confused. Derek doesn't understand it either.

"You heard me. Come on," he mutters gruffly, and holds out a hand to help haul him to his feet,
looking to the side so that he doesn't have to see his expression. After some hesitancy Stiles takes it
and is pulled upright. His fingers are ice, and Derek notices that he's actually shiverering slightly,
clothes and hair still damp from the rain, and when the gutters spilled on him like only Stiles can
manage.  

"Change into something dry, you're dripping water all over the floor," he grumbles, and turns around
to put away the eggs and bacon on the counter.

Stiles sniffs and eyes him with a weak smile before turning down the hall, almost like he knows
what Derek really means.

.0000.

Stiles shuffles back out in batman pajama bottoms and a soft blue pullover. His eyes are puffy and
dark, and Derek is in the midst of trying to build a fort, which isn't going well because he doesn't know what the hell he's doing.

Stiles of course, finds it fit to just sink down and sit criss-cross-applesauce in the middle of the floor to watch him fail, like his legs don't see the point in holding him up anymore. He twiddles absently with the cuff of his sweatshirt, occasionally glancing up to observe Derek with vacant amber eyes. His lips are tight and small and scared, and a few ringlets of damp hair flop over his forehead in random directions. He looks unusually small sitting on the hardwood, back hunched over and hands tucked into his hoodie like he's chilled by something colder than the temperature.

Derek hates it.

Outside the rain picks up, making the ceiling weep above the leak buckets. The sky churns a dark indigo and half the hall closet is emptied onto the couch, a big pile of quilts and bankets that he hasn't needed to dig out for years. Derek glares at a sheet and struggles to keep it taut over the couch.

"Lamp."

Derek turns to him, eyebrows pulled down in a scowl. "What?" It comes out muffled around the chip clips clamped between his teeth.

"The lamp," Stiles mumbles, and picks absently at his sleeve. "Drape it over the lamp to make a tent."

Derek glances to said floor lamp. He sighs quietly and carries the edge of the sheet over, securing it to the neck with one of the clips. Then he goes over and drops the remaining clothespins onto Stiles's lap, muttering, "hold these."

Eventually he steps back and decides it's good enough. He glances at Stiles, who's still blinking glumly at the floor.

"Alright. There. Get in," Derek orders, and strides past him to grab their laptops from the kitchen table.

The rain taunts him heavily on the other side of the window, tapping furiously against the glass. The storm has finally arrived, howls of wind already starting to shove at the house. He swipes a lantern from the pile of flashlights.

When he returns he half expects Stiles to still be sitting on the floor, but he's already crawled inside the fort. Derek takes a second to observe the exterior: an assortment of messy but otherwise passable draped blankets, overseen by the dewy light of the chandelier. It looks cheery and safe, two things that aren't meant for him.

He peeks his head inside. Stiles seems to have made himself comfortable, legs crossed indian-style, back slumped against the couch. He glances up at Derek, like he's curious to see if he'll really come in. Derek hands over the lantern, grits his teeth, and crawls forward, taking a seat next to him because there's not a whole lot of room.

Big drapes of fuzzy walls surround them on all sides: cotton sheets, a red quilt, the old couch throw. They're just blankets, maybe not as nice as what Lydia constructed. He doesn't understand what the hype is about, but it's not entirely repulsive. Cozy springs to mind. A bubble apart from the outside world.

Stiles peers silently around the space, eyes looking owlish in the dim light. "Thanks," he mumbles. "It's nice."
Derek sits stiffly. They don't say a word. He counts the eyelets on his boots, feeling awkward. He isn't sure how to proceed so he stares at Stiles for a hint, but Stiles doesn't show any indication that he can see past the thumbs he's twiddling. Derek clears his throat.

"So... What do people do... In these?" He asks, frowning a bit. Stiles shrugs.

"I dunno. Sitting's good."

Derek studies him. He listens for sarcasm but doesn't hear any, and it appears that Stiles genuinely seems okay just sitting there. Which is fine, except for the jarring absence of noise. Aside from the storm outside the silence presses in loudly—silence, because Stiles isn't talking. He's said less than a dozen words since reemerging from his room, which is unsettling at best.

"Here. I brought your laptop," Derek tries, and sets the computer down in front of him. Stiles doesn't twitch.

"Thanks."

Even his tone is off. When Stiles first arrived he had fought back with a kind of intrepid anger, wielding sarcasm that bit harder than his usual lighthearted jokes— but now even that tenacity is absent, leaving his words hollow as he sits with hands cowered in his sweatshirt, staring blankly at the little yellow bat signals on his pajama pants. His eyes are haunted in a way that Derek used to see in the mirror, and Derek watches him and frowns, because he's come too far to sink back into this.

"So you're just going to... Sit there," he says slowly, just to make sure.

"Yep," Stiles mutters, softly popping the 'p.' "That's the plan."

Derek stares down the quilt-wall in front of him. Great. Now he's sitting in a blanket fort next to a near-mute teenager, and he has never felt so completely out of his element.

He knows better than a lot of people what sadness felt like, but he had spent so long needing to be cheered up that the act of cheering other people up was lost on him. That was a Scott thing, a Lydia thing. Except that they aren't here— it's only him and his eyebrows, and bleakly, Derek realizes that he's going to have to be the one to do it this time. The problem is that words are not really his forte, especially not nice ones— but then he remembers the one person who was always able to make him smile, even on the worst of days.

So he opens his mouth and talks, because if anyone could cheer Stiles up, she could.

(Even if she wasn't here).

"Cora had a stuffed rabbit," Derek starts, and settles back more comfortably against the couch. "She named it Pig."
Stiles turns to him and blinks. "Pig… The rabbit?"

Derek nods. "She was really into the movie Babe. The one with all the farm animals."

Stiles wipes his nose, eyes still glued on him. "Yeah, I know it."

He nods again, continuing. "She used to take it with her everywhere. On errands, in the woods. Even hid it in her backpack when she went to school. One time some kid stole it from her, and my parents were called in to pick her up because she punched him in the face."

Stiles's lips twitch. A hand emerges from his pocket to scratch his chin.

"I see where you get it from."

Derek can't help but feel pleased at the comment. "Yeah… Well. She used to do this thing. Where, when any of us were in a bad mood, her solution was to get Pig and essentially nudge it in our faces
until we laughed… And then she would tell it, 'that'll do, Pig.'"

"That'll do, Pig?"

"Yeah." He shrugs. "I guess it was some quote from the end of the movie."

Stiles plays with the ends of his sweatshirt strings, lips fighting to turn up. "That's…" He huffs a small laugh. "That's adorable."

Derek runs a thumb over his stubble, remembering the fleecy brush of the rabbit's fur. "It was always annoying at first," he admits. "But none of us could ever keep a straight face for long. She… She was good at that. Cheering people up."

Stiles rests his elbow on his knee, chin on his knuckles. He looks at Derek, eyes shining with a hint of newfound mirth.

"Sounds like a pretty cool sister."

"She was."

A minute or so trickles by, filled in by the soft applause of the rain. A low roar of thunder echoes overhead, but the silence isn't so painful anymore. They both sit, legs criss-crossed, hands in their laps, simply breathing for a moment, until Stiles slowly reaches forward and drags his Mac onto his lap. He peers at Derek, a tiny, appreciative light in his eyes.

"…Have you seen the video with the sneezing panda?"

"I have not. And I don't plan to," Derek replies, and opens his own laptop to pull up his email. Stiles chuffs softly, fingers taking position over his mousepad.

"Archaic, you are. I bet you haven't seen keyboard cat, either."

"I haven't. And I'm proud of that."

Derek calls a victory when Stiles shakes his head, lips quirking in an almost-smile.

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Ten minutes later Derek has seen the sneezing panda and the keyboard cat.

The cat was stupid. He refuses to let Stiles believe he thought the panda was actually kind of funny.

Sometime after that Stiles asks him if he wants to listen to music. Derek says sure, and Stiles pulls up a tab for youtube and types "The Black Keys" into the search bar. Derek tells him to try the Brothers album. Stiles chuckles when he sees that "Howlin' For You" is track number four.

The rain drones on. They don't talk much, but it's nice.

For a while Reddit posts and science articles are emailed back and forth. Somewhere between the Buzzfeed video and the Donnie Darko analysis Stiles sends him a grumpy cat meme he stumbles
upon, and titles the subject "your doppleganger." Derek googles a picture of the derpiest cat he can find, captions it "You" and hits reply. He knows when Stiles opens it because the teen snorts a breath of laughter, eyes crinkling at the corners.

Soon the living room is dark and it's nearing eight-thirty, and Derek is pretty past hungry. He fishes his phone from his back pocket, pulling up the Little Hunan menu on his laptop. "How does Chinese sound?" He asks.

Stiles nods absently, nose about three inches from his Mac screen, which displays a picture of a Yeti. "You go ahead, I'm not really hungry."

Derek orders two orders of everything anyway, because he knows Stiles will get one whiff of fried rice and change his mind.

The door knocks at 9:05.

He grabs a flashlight and slips out of the tent, and hands the delivery guy a fifty for coming out in the rain. The wind nearly slams the door shut when he closes it. Next he grabs some napkins, a couple sodas, and a fork from the kitchen, because he has a feeling that Stiles doesn't have the coordination required for chopsticks. He checks the leak buckets (half-full) and runs a quick perimeter of the room to check that the window duct tape is holding before heading back inside the fort.

Stiles glances up. "Wow, they're really sending people out to deliver in this weather? They'd better be getting some pretty impressive raises. How's the porch holding up?"

"Good."

Derek doesn't mention the left length of gutter that fell.

He unloads the food. Tiny beads of water cling to the plastic bag as he takes out the boxes, which release hot waves of savory aroma. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Stiles's fingers pause over the keyboard, slyly glancing over as he gets a whiff of the food. Derek checks the containers until he finds the orange chicken and digs in once he does, setting the box in his lap and unsheathing a pair of chopsticks. He side-eyes Stiles, who side-eyes the chicken.

Keeping a straight face, Derek pops another ball of poultry into his mouth and wordlessly holds out the fork. Stiles takes it, then slowly creeps a hand forward and grabs the fried rice.

"Guess it's a good thing I ordered two of everything, then," he mentions quietly, once Stiles has plowed through half the container. He can't resist.

The human eyes him, cheeks full with grain. There's a twinkle there. "We both know you could easily eat all this yourself," he drawls, and then more seriously, "thanks."

The lights go out before they make it to the pot stickers.

A crack of lightning flashes too close to the edge of the woods, and the house lights surge with a noise akin to swarming flies before abruptly shorting out, plunging the living room into darkness. In the blink of an eye pitch black envelops the fort, and Stiles stiffens beside him, heartbeat skipping as a tiny, "whoa" slips out.

"It's fine, it's just the power," Derek provides calmly, and feels around for his lighter in his back pocket. "That's why I brought the lantern."
He flicks the lighter on, illuminating their faces with a dim amber light. They share a glance. The flame dances in Stiles's wide eyes, bleeding orange into the usual copper. Derek pulls the lantern forward and dips the lighter inside, catching the flame to the wick. The fort blooms with a golden glow as it kindles. Stiles licks his lips, eyes darting from the lantern to the lighter, back up to Derek's face.

"Nice lantern," Stiles comments.

"I got it at a garage sale," Derek tells him.

Blink 182 accompanies them quietly as they eat, courtesy of the "Still-blink-ski" playlist via spotify. Stiles eats Chinese food like he's dissecting a frog: he picks the bean sprouts from the chow mein, eats around the broccoli in the broccoli beef, pulls the cabbage out of his egg rolls and piles it onto a
reject napkin. He makes a noise of mourning when he finds out that the delivery guy forgot to include fortune cookies, which are apparently "the most delicious excuse of a cookie since biscotti's."

The rain howls. Beyond the music the ceiling cries, providing a steady trickle of *drip, drip, drip* into the leak buckets scattered about the floors. It's even louder than the storm outside, to the point where Stiles looks up and cocks his head at one point, clearly listening to the noise. He tries to catch Derek's eye several times but Derek focuses on his chow mien and pretends not to hear, unwilling to acknowledge it.

He's forced to, however, when a dull patter sounds from the sheet above them, followed by a darkening stain that starts to drip water over his boot—a new new leak over the fort.

He sighs inwardly, and shovels a final, wistful mountain of chicken chow mein into his mouth before setting the container down and scooping it beneath the drip. The water slowly puddles atop the food with a dull, *tap, tap, tap*, and Derek chews and stares at it bleakly, subconsciously flicking out his lighter again. Stiles watches the action and lowers his fork, glancing between Derek and the sacrificed noodles.

"Sooo…" Stiles starts, and creeps a hand forward to grab an egg roll. It crunches loudly as he takes a bite. "You really have to do all this every time it rains?"

Derek flicks the lighter on with his thumb, watching the flame spark to life. Stiles is referring to the leak buckets. The sandbags, the gutters, the flashlights, and the million and one other things he does to keep the house alive.

"Yes."

"Doesn't it get kinda… Annoying?"

It does.

But.

He caps the lighter shut with a click, extinguishing the flame. "It's not the worst thing about this house."

Stiles studies him, chewing slowing to a halt. Derek watches him pick out the cabbage from his egg roll from his peripheral vision.

"Then what is?"

He flicks the flame to life again. It wobbles and shimmies above his fingers, looking laughably harmless in his fist. Tiny, soft, almost beautiful. It dances slowly for him as he toys with the answer in his head. The truth—he could repaint the walls and scrub away the ash, but his wolf forbid him from forgetting entirely.

"It still smells like smoke."

Undetectable to any human, but for his nose a daily reminder of his past. His failure to save his family, which was maybe why he tried so hard to save the house.

He stares at the flame of the lighter, sees in it memories of the fire, the screams, the lick of hot smoke down his throat. He gets lost in it for a minute, until Stiles quietly reaches out and gently puts his hand over Derek's own, flicking the cap shut with his thumb. The flame disappears, and Derek blinks, meeting a pair of soft brown eyes before he looks away.
He sticks the lighter back in his pocket.

"You blame yourself a lot, don't you?"

Derek is caught off guard by this. He doesn't answer.

"Well you shouldn't, you know," Stiles adds, as if reading Derek's thoughts.

"I was there," Derek says quietly, to justify it. "The fire. I burned with them, but I wasn't strong enough. A better werewolf could have saved them."

Another thing he's never admitted it out loud. Stiles takes a bite of his egg roll, chewing thoughtfully.

"Who told you that?"

"Peter."

"Your uncle?"

"Technically."

"Well, he's wrong," Stiles says simply, and dips his egg roll into the sweet and sour sauce. His lips are a thin frown all of a sudden, like he's smelling something unpleasant. "Has he always had a thing for being an asshole?"

"He had a thing for power. Still does."

"I can tell," Stiles comments, eyebrow jumping. "Anyone who wears v-necks that deep clearly enjoys making people uncomfortable. Does he still live around here?"

"Medina County. He has an apartment."

"Do you guys keep in touch? You know, since… You killed him?"

Derek stares at his hands. In the dim lighting they almost look red. Killing Peter had been one of the most terrifying things he had done, but back then he had swept his claws across the man's throat without second thought. He was a different person last year, blinded by rage and fear and thirst for power—he thought that becoming an alpha would somehow make the past easier, and he had been willing to kill for it. But red eyes didn't fix the leaks, or take away the nightmares, or give him the power to walk into the room upstairs. They were just a pair of red eyes, and more often than not Derek found himself wishing that they were blue again.

"Not to talk about the weather."

And Stiles leaves it at that.

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They decide on Ferris Bueller's Day Off, because apparently it's Stiles's second favorite movie after Star Wars and Derek doesn't mind it either. In fact he's the one who suggests it, and Stiles doesn't even raise an eyebrow, probably because at this point he knows that Derek's taste in movies isn't as dark and explode-y as his scowls suggest.
Derek's PC is elected because Stiles's Mac has twelve percent battery left. The Chinese food is pushed aside to make room, and the computer is set down on the floor in front of them.

As it starts Stiles wastes no time indulging his habit of spewing movie trivia. His cinema knowledge is impressive, although Derek should have guessed based on how eighty percent of his t-shirts had some kind of old film reference on them. He mumbles whispered commentary throughout the scenes, leaning his head closer to Derek's ear to babble some fun fact he thinks Derek cares about, like "did you know John Hughes wrote the script for this in two days?" and "see the 'TBC' on that license plate? That's actually a reference to The Breakfast Club."

He's close enough that Derek can smell the egg rolls on his breath, and Derek doesn't want to examine how okay he is with that.

Soon Ferris is lip-syncing Twist and Shout atop the parade float, and Stiles taps his foot along contentedly. Derek watches the crowd on the screen jump and swing into dance like a sea of dumbasses, and it makes him think back to last night, when he and Stiles had danced just as carelessly at Minton's.

"I had a lot of fun with you last night," Stiles says suddenly, maybe remembering the same thing. "Thanks. For that, I mean. I didn't think I could really have fun again."

Derek pauses, watching a construction worker clap his hands and spin. "I had fun too," he admits.

"Your dance moves were pretty killer," Stiles continues, and smirks a bit as he nibbles on the last egg roll. "Literally, I might add. You nearly took that one lady's eye out with your elbow."

"She was in the way," Derek dismisses.

Stiles actually barks a laugh at this, airy and surprised, one that makes a few strings of cabbage flop out over his chin. Derek looks down to hide his smirk.

"You um… You should smile more," Stiles adds, more seriously. He brings a hand up to his mouth as he chews, studying Derek earnestly. "I've never really seen you smile except for last night. Or laugh, like, at all. You actually have dimples, did you know that?"

He seems to add the last line on afterthought, eyes dropping to where said dimples would be on Derek's face. Then he backpedals a little, eyes flicking up to meet Derek's before hastily dropping to his lap. He clears his throat, continuing.

"All I'm saying is, every time I can get you to do that little smirky thing you do, you always try to hide it. Like you look down or turn away or something, but you don't have to hide it."

Derek stares at him, feeling a little like he just had a bandaid ripped off. He doesn't know why he hides it. It was just something that happened automatically. Laughter was something that hadn't visited him in a long time, and he thinks maybe he just forgot how to do it without being afraid of letting people glimpse his emotions.

But.

He glances at Stiles's lips, two pink little flaps that broadcasted his feelings like a billboard. How easily they smiled—a whole breed of smiles from that little sarcastic smirk, joy-eating grin, to that pinched, nervous quirk. Even now the corners twitch contentedly, and Derek wants to know what the secret is.
It isn't until Stiles's tongue darts out in a little swipe that Derek realizes that he's staring, and quickly pulls up to look him in the eye. He isn't sure what he sees flicker there, but he doesn't miss the way Stiles's gaze dances over his face, catching on his lips and hovering there before flicking back up. He pretends not to notice how the dim light of the lantern dances in Stiles's eyes, catching on his lips as they fall the faintest crack ajar.

"Finish your egg roll," Derek tells him, and turns back to the movie.

Stiles smirks, eyes mirthful, and noisily shoves the rest of it into his mouth in one go.

It's a little later when Derek chickens out entirely.

Ferris is rewinding the odometer on the Ferrari, and Stiles yawns and readjusts his position, tucking his leg up to settle further back against the couch. In doing so the sleeve of his sweatshirt grazes the arm of Derek's henley, and Derek stiffens, suddenly aware of how just how close they're sitting. Stiles's head droops down against the couch, not quite on Derek's shoulder, but near enough for Derek to notice. It's casual. It's something friends do. He and Stiles are… Friends.

He doesn't really know what they are.
This is what he gets, he thinks grimly. Let his guard down for one dance in a diner, and now Stiles found it fine to breathe all over him in a fort, boundaries be damned.

He swallows thickly, glancing to the side. It's been a long time since he's had any physical touch, and a long time since he's felt this comfortable with someone. He doesn't even know how it happened, but all of a sudden he doesn't mind the close proximity— it's a kind of interaction he hasn't tasted in nearly six years, and he isn't sure how to handle it. It's comfortable, sleepy, warm— it reminds him of family, and it reminds him of home in an entirely different way than the house did. And it terrifies him, so he does what he does best with things he doesn't want to face:

He runs from it.

Derek slowly shifts his legs away. "Hey." He nudges Stiles, who glances up, breath spilling over Derek's shoulder. The movement is slow and comfortable, unlike the usual startled jerk.

"Yeah?"

"We should call it a night," he states. The movie still had maybe half an hour left, but the battery is almost out, and it's getting late.

"Oh. Yeah, okay," Stiles blinks, then seems to realize how close they're sitting and quickly scoots away, knocking over an empty chow mein container in the process.

They clean up.

Derek shuts the laptop and shuffles outside the fort, swapping the computer for the flashlights on the table. He clicks a few of them on and stands them face up on the ground, to provide some light from the beams shining on the ceiling. They take down the blankets and pile them on the couch, decided that they'll deal with folding them up in the morning. Stiles scuttles to the kitchen and puts the leftover Chinese food boxes in the fridge, wielding a flashlight like a sword, and Derek changes out all the leak buckets and dumps the old water in the sink. The soggy chow mein is dumped down the disposal.

"That everything?" Stiles asks once they're done. Derek surveys the living room, watching the ceiling drip.

"Yeah. If you hear rattling, don't worry about it. It's just the rafters."

"Kay... G'night."

Stiles clutches his laptop to his chest and shuffles down the hall to his room, lighting the way with a flashlight. He seems just a little off, shoulders too hunched, feet too stiff in their placement against the floor. Derek almost points it out, but decides against it and trudges up the stairs instead. He takes the lantern with him.

"Night."

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His bedroom greets him with a small puddle on his floor and a dull pat, pat, pat.
He sighs, irritantly dumps the pencils out out of the mug on his desk, and slides the cup beneath the leak. He stares at it, watching the water accumulate at the bottom of the ceramic.

The house was dying.

It should have died six years ago, but instead he insisted on keeping it alive, pushing and repainting and doing everything in his power to preserve it— but deep down he knows it's a lost cause. Every year more leaks popped up, the gutters fell, the windows cracked and the walls warped a little more, and he was powerless to stop it. He hadn't missed the way Stiles had eyed him throughout the afternoon while doing all the rain prep. He knows Stiles thinks he should just move out, and deep down he knows it too— but he still isn't ready to let go.

He strips and pulls on a pair of sweats, pausing when he passes the mirror.
Somehow he can see his thoughts in the eyes staring back at him, which catches him off guard because emotional repression was something he thought he had mastered. He clutches his shirt in his hands as he approaches his reflection, twisting around to peer at the triskele on his back. His stare skates over the spirals, thinking back to when Stiles had touched it, and the cool trace of his fingers against his skin. How Stiles had called it beautiful, even though Derek had always viewed it a symbol of weakness.

Stiles also said that he liked having him around, and probably thought Derek was asleep when he admitted it.

He tugs his shirt on. When he resurfaces he's too afraid to check his eyes again in the mirror.

The lantern flickers dimly atop his desk, casting yellow shadows across Argent's weaponry index. He sighs. Since New Year's Chris had been developing new weapons in preparation for whatever Beacon Hills had in store for them next. Derek had promised to look it through and make corrections if there were any inaccuracies regarding werewolf properties, since he was the local expert.

He plops down at his desk, pulling the stack of papers over in front of him, and turns to page one. He tries to stay focused, but his pen keeps wandering off to doodle mindlessly in the margin, eyes reading the same line over and over. His mind drifts to thoughts of trotting through the woods and laying on his belly in the grass, the smell of dandelions, and the taste of Chinese food.

He thinks about how he can get the badge back for Stiles.

Outside the storm rages, eliciting deep groans from the house walls. A crack of lightning illuminates the room with an eerie blue flash, following a roar of thunder that shakes the rafters. The mansion made storms sound twice as loud, the empty rooms amplifying every rattle, boom, and mournful howl of wind.

Derek is used to it. But even louder is the rapid *bu-bump* *bu-bump* beneath it all, emanating from downstairs. He watches the lantern flame wobble, listening to Stiles toss and turn in his bed downstairs. He remembers how it used to hit him like that after the fire— how he could have the grandest day, only to have the positivity derailed when he turned off the light at night. That was when the painful memories flooded back, in the dark while he lay in bed, with only his thoughts to keep him company.

He absently clicks his pen and looks over his shoulder, glancing back towards the shoebox he knows is in the closet.

It takes five minutes before Derek hears the quiet footsteps, clumsy and uncoordinated as they pad up the stairs in the dark. They trip once on the bottom step and knock over the tin bucket, followed by a muttered "shit" and the muffled sounds of putting it back in place.

Two soft knocks against his door.

"Derek?"

Derek glances at the digital clock on his nightstand: 11:50pm. He sighs.

"Come in."

Stiles cracks open the door and peeks his head in, eyes blinking owlishly around the room before landing on Derek. He stands awkwardly in his pajamas beneath the doorframe, one hand fidgeting with the hem of his sweatshirt, the other clutching his phone. He stands there and babbles a quiet, nervous stream while wringing his fingers, scratching behind his ear, shifting his weight on his feet.
"Hey, um, I know this is really stupid, but um. I was wondering, maybe, if I could hang out with you, for a little bit… Like you're working there, obviously, so I'll be quiet. It's just that, you know, my dad's badge is gone now, and I can't… Sleep."

Another crack of lightning strobos outside and Stiles jolts, hiding his trembling fingers inside his pocket. Derek turns back to his desk and drags a palm across his brow.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's fine, come in."

Stiles mutters "thanks" and tiptoes into the room, closing the door with a quiet 'snick.' Derek hears him shuffle around a bit, the creak of the hardwood, and then silence. He glances over his shoulder. Stiles is sitting cross-legged in the middle of his floor.

"What are you doing."

"I'm… Sitting?"

"You can sit on the bed, you know."

The teen blinks, eyes large and dark in the dim lighting. "Oh. Yeah, okay, thanks." A few seconds later Derek hears the the slight squeak of the box spring, the sigh of the comforter as Stiles settles atop the mattress. Another crack of thunder and his heart rate jumps again.

Derek gives it three seconds before Stiles starts talking. He counts in his head, one, two—

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

His pen slows to a halt mid-underline. He'd heave a sigh, but there's something in his voice that's a little more tentative than usual.

"My answer has never seemed to stop you before."

"Do you still get nightmares?"

The question catches Derek off guard. He draws a spiral in the margin.

"Sometimes," he admits.

"Like of the fire?" Stiles continues, quieter still. Derek stops drawing.

"Yes."

"Are they bad?" Stiles asks, voice unusually small and crackly. "Like really vivid, where you swear you're actually awake, reliving it… And you're convinced that it's real, but then you wake up, and you kinda feel like you're drowning… And then the worst part is that same dream just happens again the next night, and you're kind of powerless to stop it?"

Derek knows exactly. His chair squeaks as he slowly cranes his neck around to glance at Stiles, who stares back nervously.

"Yeah," he says quietly. "Like that."

Stiles licks his lips, glances down. He sits tightly compacted in the middle of the bed, bare feet tucked beneath his knees, fists fidgeting idly with his hoodie string.

"Because that… That happens to me," Stiles murmurs. "Not every night anymore, but I go to bed
feeling like I'm playing Russian Roulette. The badge usually kept the panic down when I woke up, but..." He swallows, trails off. "And today, when we were setting up and I was drying the books, I saw some of your... Well, books. And I noticed you had one, about..."

"PTSD," Derek finishes for him.

Stiles bites his lip, giving a small nod. "Yeah... And I was wondering... I mean, I couldn't help but think..."

"That you have it too."

A beat of silence.

"Yeah."

Derek puts down the pen and slowly spins the chair around so that he's facing the bed. He clasps his hands and rests his elbows on his knees, and Stiles watches him nervously, waiting on him like he holds the difference between his wildest dreams and his worst fears. He thinks back to when Stiles had first arrived, how jumpy and exhausted he had been. The day he had glanced at a steak and fled from the room, and when he cut his hand and stared at the blood like he was reliving that night. The panic attacks, the constant tang of anxiety, the small trembles in his hands that didn't used to be there before. Depression was a given. Although in terms of grief, it hurt the same regardless of diagnosis.

"Maybe," he says. "You've come a long way already."

"Have I, though?" Stiles says softly, and glances at his hands. Slight tremors race through his fingers. He flexes them to make it stop. It doesn't work.

"I used to be just like you, when you first got here." Derek meets his eyes. "I slept a lot, didn't take care of myself, isolated myself. I was really quiet, and then I was really angry. Some people get past it, some people don't. It took me a year before I was able to light the fireplace. I'd say you've made pretty good progress."

Stiles stares at him with huge brown eyes, lips cracking ajar at the last couple lines. Derek watches his adam's apple bob beneath the collar of his sweatshirt.

"Still hurts though," Stiles mutters quietly, looking down to inspect his fingers again. "Every time I see a police cruiser I still look to see if he's driving, but... He's not. It happened almost three months ago, and I still wake up every morning with "my dad isn't here" as my first thought. I guess I was just hoping that would go away by now."

"It doesn't really go away," Derek tells him honestly. "But it gets easier."

"How?"

"Time."

Stiles blinks at him. He nibbles on his thumbnail, eyes faraway.

"It's scary, not having a family anymore," Stiles voices. "It's like you don't realize how intimidating the world really is until they're... Gone. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever look at Scott and Melissa and not feel bad that I don't have that any more."

The words strike the secret Derek holds closest. It's then, when he realizes just how the same he and Stiles are.
"You know, I'd let him eat all the hamburgers in the world?"

"I'd give Cora all the piggy back rides she wanted."

Stiles blinks at him, lips twitching in an almost smile. Derek is surprised he said it too.

"I think about that a lot, too," Stiles continues. "Like things I would have done. Should've done… Mainly I just remember all the good stuff, but sometimes I remember things like when we fought, or yelled at each other. I used to lie to him a lot…"

He trails off, lips falling slack. Derek waits.

"…And that's not so easy to think about. Thing is, I don't want to forget about the good times, but I'm scared of remembering the bad times. I just wish I knew how to stop being afraid of the past."

The last line hangs in the air, spoken with an honesty that dulls the rain and stirs something at the depth of Derek's core.

"I'm still figuring that out." Derek admits.
Stiles looks down. A wan smile hangs on his lips before it falls flat.

"I don't know what to do," he says quietly. "The badge was like my… I felt safe with it. Like even with the nightmares, it was always right there under my pillow when I woke up, kinda like how my dad was right there for me, in a way. And now it's gone and I just…” He huffs a thin laugh. "I'm scared. I wasn't ready to let go of it."

Derek studies him. His eyes trace the thin lines creasing Stiles's brow, and sees his sixteen, seventeen, eighteen-year-old self, and his twenty-two-year-old self half an hour ago when he caught himself in the mirror. He glances down at his hands, and remembers the soot that had covered them yesterday afternoon. Again at Stiles— the thin fingers curled in his lap, and the rabbity thump-thump of his heart, and the dark smudges under his eyes, still a little red-rimmed from earlier.

He makes a decision.

The desk chair squeaks as he rises, making his way over to the closet. Stiles's gaze follows him, and he quibbles something about "sorry, I'm fine, I'll let you work," and Derek ignores him, reaching for
the dusty shoebox sitting on the shelf atop his clothes. He pulls it out, reaching for the item he hasn't needed to fish out in years.

A small film of dust rains to the ground as he opens the cardboard lid and sets eye on the battered object inside, and it's like looking at an old friend. Gingerly he takes it out, sets the shoebox down on his desk, and takes it over to Stiles.

Stiles grows unnaturally still, mouth falling agape as his stare falls to the stuffed rabbit in Derek's hands.

"Is that… Pig?" He asks softly, so delicately that his voice cracks. His eyes are huge and questioning on Derek's own.

Derek nods, glancing down at the charred fur. It sits perfectly in his palm.

"I used to sit it on my nightstand after the fire, to keep the nightmares away. It's not a badge, but…"

He hands it out to Stiles, whose gaze flickers wide-eyed between him and the rabbit. Hesitantly the teen reaches out to take it, holding it gently in his hands like a treasure, a glass that might break, the same way he held his dad's badge. He stares at it in wonder and gently touches a finger to it's blackened nose, cradling it in his palms as if it were a living, breathing baby animal.

"Wow, this… Are you sure you're okay with me… Touching it?" Stiles questions, fingers halting over the fur.

Derek nods. A year ago, a month ago— no. But now he's able to hand it over without second thought.

"Wow, um… Thanks, Derek," Stiles utters quietly, and looks up to stare at him with the biggest, most earnest set of Bambi eyes the world has ever seen. They make Derek turn away and go back to his desk, but not before he sees Stiles run a gentle thumb over Pig's ears, as if petting it.

The rain drones on, accompanied by the gentle wobble of the lantern light.

Derek continues his work, listening to the muffled soliloquy of movement behind him. Stiles is noisy even when he's quiet, fidgeting minutely against the comforter, shifting to a new position every few minutes, fingers tapping away at his phone. His heart rate still bounces along a little faster than usual, albeit no where near what it was when he was downstairs. It's faint, but Derek can still smell the residual anxiety in the air. He wonders how Stiles manages to crack so many jokes with constantly frayed nerves.

Wolfsbane bullets and mountain ash mini-canons swim in his vision for a while. He finishes almost the entire index before his eyes get too grainy and sleep tugs at his lids, blurring the letters into inky squiggles. He rubs his eyes, opening his mouth to announce that he's going to bed, but pauses when he realizes the muffled sounds behind him have tapered off into silence. No tapping fingers on a phone or little shuffles against the comforter, replaced by deep, even exhales.

"Stiles."

Derek slowly spins the chair around, letting out a small sigh when he sees that Stiles fell asleep in his bed. Conked out against the pillows as if he owned the mattress, face turned towards the wall. Derek gets up and makes his way over to wake him up, but pauses when he realizes the muffled sounds behind him have tapered off into silence. No tapping fingers on a phone or little shuffles against the comforter, replaced by deep, even exhaled.

"Stiles."

Derek slowly spins the chair around, letting out a small sigh when he sees that Stiles fell asleep in his bed. Conked out against the pillows as if he owned the mattress, face turned towards the wall. Derek gets up and makes his way over to wake him up, but slows to a halt when he reaches the mattress. Something breaks inside of him when he sees.

Stiles's cheek is smushed into his pillow, mouth open, eyes closed, face a placid canvas of dark
eyelashes and little moles. Deep, borderline snores filter in and out between his lips, slow and even to match the finally calm rhythm of his heartbeat. His hand is slack around his phone on his stomach, legs tucked to the side in an awkward fold of limbs. But everything stills when Derek sees that Cora's rabbit is tucked in under his other hand, floppy ears ghosting the bottom of his chin.
He stares longer than necessary, unable to decipher the weird tug in his chest. It hurts, but it’s also warm and grounding, making him swallow heavily for reasons he doesn’t understand. Deep down he knows what it feels like. But he doesn’t dwell on it, because then he might have to admit it to himself.

A glance to the clock. 1:00am.

He sighs, rubbing his hands over his face. It does nothing to erase away the pang in his ribcage, so he takes the edge of the comforter and folds it over Stiles. The lantern throws the room to darkness with a thin wisp of smoke as he blows out the flame, and he settles back into his chair, putting his feet up on the desk. A yawn finds it’s way out as he leans his head back, folds his arms over his chest, and shifts his shoulders to get more comfortable. He knows there’s going to be a puddle of drool on his pillow tomorrow morning.

The rain dulls to a steady drizzle against the window, and Stiles snores softly from his bed.

"That'll do, Pig," he mutters softly, and closes his eyes.
Chapter 13 sparks a change in dynamic. It should be up in 4-5 weeks, thanks for your patience. And as always, thank you so much for all the love and support! <3
Stiles awakes to the smell of different.

It's not a bad smell, it's just… Not his.
Muzzily he registers the faint sound of rain breathing against the window, the warm sigh of the comforter against his sleep-heavy body. His eyelids are stuck together in that way that only happens after a good night's rest, and his limbs are cradled like stone between the soft fuzz of morning blankets. He breathes deep through his nose and squooshes his face deeper into his pillow, dragging in the scent of dryer sheets, redwood and—

Derek.

His eyes snap open, only to find that it's not his room. It's Derek's. He's in Derek's bed. Under Derek's bedspread, which is folded over him.

He may still be dreaming.

With a jolt he rolls over and scrambles up onto his elbows, nearly falling off the mattress in the process. He blinks, winces at the puddle of drool on Derek's pillow, and listens to his heartbeat pound in his ears as he spies the stuffed rabbit flopped over on the sheets.

Pig.

He scoots back against the headboard and gingerly picks it up. For fur so charred, it's remarkably soft in his hand, faded in a way that suggests it was once bubblegum pink. He stares at the black burns on it's ears as the events of last night hit him— the storm, Chinese food, creeping up the stairs in the dark, playing candy crush on his phone and putting it down to close his eyes for just a second, and then… Nothing. He must have fallen asleep.

Which he doesn't really have time to be embarrassed about, because next is the small pang when he remembers that Richard came by and took the badge. And after that, a moment of confusion when he realizes his eyes are grainy with sleep. Sleep, because he didn't have any nightmares. Not even the nightmare. He glances back to the stuffed rabbit in his hands, which stares back at him unblinkingly, tiny smile stitched beneath it's charred nose.

Huh.

"Thanks, buddy," he mutters. Then he licks his lips and scratches his head, because he's talking to a beanie baby.

"Plink, plink, plink"

He swings his head around. The source of the dripping is a mug on the floor, nearly filled to the brim with a steady line of water leaking from the ceiling. But this only captures his attention for a few seconds, because that's when he registers the low hum of faint voices coming from downstairs.

First he freezes, because they never have guests unless it's Scott or Lydia, but the muffled tones don't match either of them. He strains his ears to tune in, and fails to make out the words.

He gently sets Pig down on the nightstand and throws his feet out of bed, creeping over to the door. He opens it quietly, placing a palm against the hinge to muffle the squeak, and tiptoes across the hall and down the stairs, avoiding the creaky spots the fifth and second steps. As he travels closer to the living room the voices grow more distinguished, emanating from the kitchen. On the third to last step he halts, gently pressing his ear against the wall to listen to the voices around the corner. One is Derek's, low and calm in the way he only uses when he's trying to keep a lid on his anger, and the other belongs to—

"—because you got all the inheritance while I go live in some human apartment two towns over! And here you are, still living in this dump. The money? Almost six years, and you still haven't even
touched it for anything useful, have you?"

Stiles freezes against the wall, hand tightening around the guardrail. The voice is all too familiar, oily, smooth, a soft drawl like he's clicking his tongue distastefully. Someone else, definitely Derek, murmurs something he can't make out.

"How human of you, Derek. I spent the better half of my thirties dealing with your little teenage temper tantrums, and this how you repay me? Do you know how many times I had to drop everything and swing by the Sheriff's department to bail your delinquent ass out of jail?"

"I never asked you to." That's Derek, voice dangerously low and articulate. "In case you don't remember, you didn't do a very good job of sticking around."

The other voice huffs a laugh. "That's because my nephew didn't do a very good job of being a werewolf. All you did was blubber and cry after the fire, and when you finally snapped out of it your hobby of choice was to go out and wreak childish, petty crimes on the town—"

"I was sixteen and you left just two weeks after signing off as my legal guardian," Derek hisses.

"Because I couldn't stand living in this dump with such wasted potential!" The voice spits. "And all these years later you're still failing miserably as a Hale— even worse, as an alpha. You steal my power, score yourself some red eyes, and what do you do with it? You run off and bite three misfit teenagers, two of which, I might add, have died. And then you go and do this."

There's silence on Derek's part, and Stiles winces at the low blow. He creeps further down the stairs, straining to hear as the other voice drops lower.

"—I will not have my nephew insult me like this," the voice hisses. "Taking in a fucking child, I don't know why I even dared to think that you would've kicked him out by now. I can't think of anything more degrading for a werewolf than housing a little human pet to—"

---Creak.---

Stiles cringes as he places his weight too far to the left on the bottom step, coaxing a high-pitched whine from the wood. The voice cuts off abruptly, and everything is way, way too quiet. He freezes, heart pounding, but before he can even twitch Peter Hale rounds the bend into the living room, a wide-eyed Derek following in tow. The actual flicker of worry in Derek's eyes is enough to make Stiles reconsider bolting back up the stairs.
Peter stands tall in a dark grey v-neck, eyes just as pale and cold as Stiles remembers. For a scary second Stiles can see the side-by-side resemblance between him and Derek; the chiseled jawlines and dimpled chins, but entirely different objectives in their stares. His hair is better now, not quite so long and greasy, but still sculpted with way too much gel than what should be allowed for a middle age man. Naturally, his broad chest and shoulders are hugged tight by his shirt, a grey V-neck that reveals a very unwanted glimpse of a few curls of chest hair. Stiles kind of wants to puke at the imagery, but even more unsettling is the way the ex-alpha's mouth quirks in a constant state of reprimand, canines peeking out over his bottom lip.

"Well, look who's still in one piece," Peter muses softly. He turns to Derek, an incredulous, victorious smile creeping across his lips. "And coming down from your bedroom?"

And oh, oh. That doesn't look good. Stiles stiffens, swallows reflexively because a) fucking shit on a rainbow and b) he's ninety-nine percent sure he just stepped into something bad and made it much worse. His eyes dart between Derek, who looks half mortified and half like he's seriously considering punching the wall, and Peter, who's eyeing his nephew like a satisfied predator about to
go in for the kill.

"It's not like that," Derek snaps, eyebrows scrunching down distastefully.

Peter ignores him and takes a step forward, eyes narrowing hungrily on Stiles in a way that raises serious red flags for a restraining order. Derek watches his uncle closely and takes a step forward too, hands curling into fists.

"Hello, Stiles," Peter greets airily, pedo-wolf as possible. "Sleep well? Or were you too busy with… Other activities, perhaps?"

Stiles casually runs his tongue over his teeth. "Peter," he nods in greeting. "Still into V-necks I see. Does it hurt to maintain that creepy, greasy undead look?

The creep, unfazed, merely smiles and spins around to face Derek.

"Now I see why you took him in," Peter utters, rubbing a thumb over his chin. He chuckles, a horrible, wheezy sound like breath over sandpaper. "I should have guessed considering how lonely you must get in this house, cooped up for so long. You just thought it'd be nice to have a little human cock to—"

But that's as far as Peter gets before Derek violently lashes out and slams Peter against the wall, elbow under his chin.

"Boom."

Stiles stumbles back in surprise as Peter's head bounces off the paint, back thumping loudly with the impact. Derek uses enough force that a framed piece of artwork a few feet to the left crashes to the floor, scattering glass over the hardwood. Peter looks startled but quickly recovers, something of an amused chuckle worming out from his throat as Derek bares his teeth.

"My, sensitive subject, is it Derek?" Peter taunts, voice garbled a bit by the arm against his windpipe. "Or is it just difficult to hear your old uncle talk about your jailbait se—"

Derek rams his arm harder against Peter's neck, cutting him off with a choke. His eyes flash deep scarlet, lips so tight they nearly disappear. Peter's feet scrabble uselessly against the wall, weakened from his resurrection and no match for an alpha's strength. Derek could easily kill him, and it looks like he's seriously considering it.

"Derek," Stiles blurs warningly, flitting forwards. "Derek let him go, he's not worth it."

But Derek doesn't move. He watches Peter squirm, who cocks a smirk despite being strangled. "I could snap your neck in a heartbeat," he utters through his teeth, low and dark. It's true. He could.

"Go on," Peter rasps in challenge, almost like he wants Derek to choke him. "Killing me was the best thing you ever did, Derek. Why not do it again?"

Derek clenches his teeth so tight his jaw trembles, nostrils flaring wide. He slowly presses harder against his uncle's windpipe, and Peter's eyes bug out of his head with the pressure. Several tense seconds tick by, filled by Peter's guttural choking noises. His lips start to turn blue, cheeks turning an ugly, ruddy purple color. Incredibly, he manages to narrow his eyes at Derek, as if daring him to add the slight bit of extra pressure that will snap his bones. Which is bad, extra super bad because a dead body in the house is the last thing they need, especially with Richard on a private mission to toss Derek behind bars for good.
"Derek, stop!" Stiles tries again, and when Derek still doesn't move he blurts, "This isn't who you are!"

Derek hesitates, eyes flickering to hazel for a brief moment. Peter tries and fails to suck in oxygen, looking on the verge of passing out. Just when Stiles thinks that Derek really will go through with it and snap his neck, he finally rips his arm away, leaving Peter to collapse to the floor in a choking heap. The man sucks in horrid gasps of air, sputtering and wheezing as the red drains from his face. Despite his struggle he wrenches his head up to look in disgust at Derek, lip curling. He seems pretty angry to still be alive, and chokes out the words before he even has his breath back.

"The kid's really got you under his thumb, huh Derek?"

Derek stands with his jaw locked. He refuses to look at either of them, opting instead to stare at the floor. It's submissive and completely out of character, and Stiles watches him anxiously and waits for him to bite back with a retort. He doesn't. He almost looks disappointed in himself.

Peter stands up, bracing a hand against the wall. "Even your sisters had more promise than you," he wheezes softly. "But instead I get you as the only survivor of that fire. You wear your father's jacket like a second skin, but he would have disowned you in a heartbeat if he was here to see you now."

Derek's expression remains hard and stone-like, fooling anyone if it not for the way his fingers subtly curl into fists. Stiles spies small drops of blood forming where his claws are pressed into his palms. Peter brushes himself off and straightens his shirt, nodding curtly at Stiles.

"I apologize for what I said earlier, Stiles. I take it back, you're not the pet here." He turns to Derek, eyes cold and disgusted. "It's Derek who's the bitch."

And Peter spins on his heel and exits the house, steps slow and purposeful. Each footfall seems to pound the words in deeper. The door slams shut behind him, and the living room is plunged into heavy silence.

Stiles turns to Derek, who's still standing stiffly in the middle of the living room. He's staring at the floor, breathing a little harder than usual through his nostrils, adam's apple bobbing minutely. He almost looks embarrassed, lips pinched in a thin line. He can hardly meet Stiles's eyes.

"Derek," he says hesitantly, and takes a step forward.

But Derek abruptly spins on his heel, taking off up the stairs without a word.

"Derek!"

Stiles springs after him, taking the steps two at a time to catch up. Derek ignores him and quickly rounds the bend at the top of the banister, darts into his room, and slams the door in his face.

His arms pinwheel as he reels back, hands flying to where his nose nearly got bashed in. He stares at the door, clamping down on his lip as he hesitates, and then he yanks down on the handle and barges in.

There's a small moment of satisfaction when he sees the startled look on Derek's face, probably the same expression he'd worn himself in January during the dozen occasions when the werewolf barged in to make him take a shower or go on errands. Things he thought were stupid reasons at the time, but now thinks weren't so stupid at all. He never thought their roles would be swapped.

"Yeah, now you know how it feels when someone doesn't knock," is what he opens with, because that's his mouth, and strides into the room to stand in front of Derek. Derek is sitting hunched over at
his desk, fingers curled into his hair with his most intimidating angle of eyebrows on. He glares at Stiles from his chair.

"Stiles, get out," Derek warns, scowling.

"Funny, I told you the same thing almost three months ago, and guess what? You didn't leave, so I'm sticking right here," he quips, planting his feet against the hardwood and gesturing down at them for emphasis. "So… Are you okay? Because I've seen you stay cool as a cucumber while being smack-talked by alphas, Richard, hell, even Scott. But I've never seen you…" He trails off.

*Look so defeated.*

"—Let someone have the last word," he substitutes.

Derek glares at him, and then glances at the now overflowing mug on floor and glares at that. He looks like maybe he just wants to glare at everything at the moment.

"I'm fine," Derek growls. Even though he's clearly not. Stiles lets it slide and moves on to the next question.

"Well, no, actually. But what was Peter doing here?"

"Nothing. He comes by occasionally. You happened to be here this time. Now get out."

"Hey, hold on," Stiles counters. He crosses his arms, bites his lip and hopes he doesn't look too concerned. "Does he… Always talk to you like that?"

Derek is silent. His nostrils flare even further as he stares unblinkingly at his hands. Stiles frowns.

"Well, the guy's clearly just as much of an asshole as he was back when he bit Scott. Those things he said—"

"I let him go," Derek cuts in. His hands curl into fists over his desk.

"And it's a good thing, too, because a dead body in this place would've—"

"It was fucking soft," Derek spits, wrinking his nose. The utter hatred in his voice is surprising.

"Well, yeah," Stiles supplies, eyes wide. "Yeah, and no. You're not really the kind of person to murder your uncle, not anymore anyway, if that's what you mean. But you wear sweaters and you like outdated comedies, and you helped that old lady carry her groceries at Lucky's that one time. And you're also actually pretty nice when you're not being all, you know—" he makes claw gesturers with his fingers and makes a little growly noise "—but those aren't bad things, Derek."

The words seem to upset Derek more than actually make him feel better, and he tenses rigidly. "Stiles, I'm not kidding." he growls, lip curling. "Get out."

Stiles should leave. He should so, totally leave before he's slammed up against the wall and makes a Stiles-shaped indent in the plaster, but instead he walks around to the other side of the desk so he can look Derek in the eye, somehow not really afraid of potential consequences. But he doesn't dare leave, because the last thing Derek needs is to sit alone and convince himself that his uncle was right.

"Derek, is that what this is about?" The words slip out quietly, definitely more gently than he expects. "You're sorry you let him go?"
"You don't get it," Derek snaps, face tense and all eyebrows. "Peter has shut me down since day one. You heard what he said—"

"And I don't believe a word of it," Stiles cuts in firmly. "I know you, and I know Peter. Peter less, but last time I checked the guy had a fetish for spewing lies and bullshit. Personally I think you're an awesome werewolf. Very bite-ey."

"If I didn't let him go, I could have—"

"—killed him, yeah! Which is a good thing, that you stepped away. That was really—"

"No! I wasn't strong enough, I—"

"Strong enough? Wha— You easily could have snapped his neck, you said so yourself. You just chose not to!"

"Stiles—"

"I've seen you take down other alphas with one hand, stay standing after getting gutted, didn't you even backflip off a balcony that one time? If it's your strength you're worried about, you're hardly—"

"I'M WEAK!"

Derek yells abruptly, cutting him off. In doing so he slams his fist down on the desk so hard that the wood cracks, leaving a small crater beneath his knuckles. He grunts in pain, eyes flashing red briefly. Stiles stumbles back, shocked at the sudden outburst. But all it takes is one glance at Derek's face to see that the pain is deeper than his bruised fist, and suddenly Stiles gets it. It wasn't physical strength Derek was talking about.

Derek glances at the dent his knuckles made, almost looking embarrassed for the second time today. Then turns his body away, hiding his face. The anger drains from his shoulders. "Please go," he says quietly, defeated. "Leave me alone."

Stiles stares at him. The mug in the corner goes plink, plink, plink. With every drip something bubbles up in his stomach, tying his chest into knots. He feels his nostrils flare to incredible widths, and before he knows what he's doing he marches forward and grabs Derek's wrist.

"No," he blurts stubbornly, suddenly angry. Derek snaps his head up, eyes darting to Stiles's hand. "You didn't let me sulk around when I first got here, so neither do you. I live with you now, you don't get to be alone anymore!"

Derek's eyes widen in surprise at the last line but quickly right themselves, upper lip even curling when Stiles yanks his hand and pulls from from the chair, dragging him out the door.

"Stiles, let go!" Derek snarls.

"No!"

He almost thinks it's funny because Derek could easily rip his hand away, but doesn't, and pretends to resist as Stiles drags him down the hallway to the last door.

"Stiles—!"

"No! Quit being a giant stubborn furball and just listen to me without straining an eyebrow for once in your life!"
They reach the end of the hallway and he all but shoves Derek through the door of the bedroom. Then he brushes past the werewolf and strides into the space, throwing his hands up.

"There, now look!" He shouts.

The walls are clean, repainted powder blue, and the floors swept and shiny, sanded over with cherry wood stain to blur the burn marks. A new nightstand had been put in, and a simple set of white curtains for the window that flutter with the change in air movement. The panes had been set with new glass, every last splinter and charred speck of debris cleared away. Their handiwork from last friday, and the friday before that.

"Look, Derek! This is your doing!" He blurts loudly, pointing to it all.

Derek stares, eyes wide and unblinking. His nostrils flare slightly, lips clamped together, but not with anger this time. Stiles paces a lap around the room, gesturing his hands wildly at the clean walls.

"Remember the day I came in here? When I was a complete asshat and dropped my toothbrush on the shitty floor? Remember what this room looked like? It was a mess, Derek, and who went back in here and cleaned it up? You did. And don't try to act like it was no big deal, because I know it hurts to come back in here. But you did it, and then you did it again last week and finished the job!"

Derek stares at him.

"And you wanna know what else you did?" Stiles adds loudly, because his mouth is kind of running away from him before his brain can catch up. He jabs a thumb back towards the photo frame on the nightstand. "You made it through the past six years without them, Derek! You stayed in this house all by yourself, and somehow figured out how to pick your ass off the floor and fucking get through it on your own, and you're trying to tell me that you're weak?"

He huffs a hysterical laugh. "Peter could be the werewolfiest werewolf there ever was and overpower hundreds of alphas, but he still wouldn't be half as strong as you!"

Derek stares at the walls, and stares at Stiles with the biggest, saddest, surprised set of grey-green eyes Stiles has ever seen. His mouth is hanging open a touch like he's baffled beyond baffled, just enough so that the tip of his dumb bunny teeth peek out. Stiles breathes heavily through his nose, heart pounding with the fervor of his speech. His chest aches, but not in the kind of way it does when he's out of breath.

"And you—" he swipes a hand through his hair, biting his lip as he strings together his frustration. "I know you don't believe me, you big, friggin'— ugh. Sometimes I just wanna—" He clenches his fingers into fists and shakes them for lack of a better word. "You're so impossibly self-deprecating sometimes that you can't see how much better you are than the rest of us."

Because it's true.
And with that he strides over to the new nightstand Derek picked up at IKEA, gently plucking the photo up off the wood. The glass is no longer cracked, replaced with a new gold frame. Five beautiful faces smile up at him. He walks back across the room and holds it out to Derek.

"Peter may be your uncle, but this is your family, Derek. And for what it's worth, I think they would've been proud of you."

Slowly, Derek takes the picture. Stiles licks his lips and walks out of the room, leaving him with some space.
His legs take him to the couch downstairs. He feels like pacing, but Derek's ears would pick that up. So he sits against the leather instead, leg bouncing up and down in time to the jittery pace of his thoughts. His fingers dance along his chin, antsy with residual adrenaline.

*All you did was blubber and cry after the fire, and when you finally snapped out of it your hobby of choice was to go out and wreak childish, petty crimes on the town*

*All these years later you're still failing miserably as a Hale*

*You run off and bite three misfit teenagers, two of which, I might add, have died*

*You wear your father's jacket like a second skin, but he would have disowned you in a heartbeat if he was here to see you now*

Stiles sucks in a breath as he feels a sting of pain, and glances down to see that his nails have left crescent-shaped indents in his palms.

Sometime later he hears Derek walk down the hall and go back into his room, softly shutting the door behind him. Stiles is still on the couch. He blows out a breath and clicks the remote at the TV, only to remember that the power is still out. Awesome.

He gets up and does the dishes. Derek left a cold cup of coffee and a half-eaten breakfast sandwich on the table, which looks really tempting but he wraps it in saran and sticks it in the fridge in case Derek wants it later. At this point he's learned that the fastest way to upset a werewolf is to eat his food.

More time passes.

He soon discovers that a world without working technology is a cruel place. He tries to think back to what exactly he used to *do* as a kid without a smartphone or a computer, but can't remember. Apparently everything remotely interesting requires power—microwaving a hot pocket? Whoops, think again. Be a productive student and work on his online courses? Sorry, nerd. His phone and laptop are both dead, and the power outlets on the wall mock him silently. He flops down on the couch again in defeat, hangs his head back and moans. And he only had one episode left of *Freaks and Geeks*.

The rain slowly tapers off throughout the afternoon until only a cold, grey sky is left behind. He maintains the house since Derek is upstairs moping, which includes changing the leak buckets and peeling off the soggy duct tape from the windows. He almost throws his back out trying to haul the sandbags back into the garage, so he leaves those for Derek to move with his werewolf biceps. In a bout of desperation he tries to fiddle with the electrical box to turn the power back on, but ultimately decides he doesn't really want to electrocute himself, so he gives up on that.

Around noon he fries up some bacon, knowing that Derek will smell it and maybe come downstairs to get some. It doesn't work, and he ends up burning most of it when he gets distracted trying to save the rug in the living room, which falls victim to yet another new leak in the ceiling. After a couple rounds of paper towel blotting he retires to his bedroom, where he adds to his bucket list, tosses a
few dirty socks into the hamper, and glances at the pile of clothes spilling out of his half-empty suitcase on the floor. He goes over and pulls out hoodie #5, deciding that maybe it's time to unpack.

He folds (sloppily rolls up) his clothes and puts them away in the untouched drawers by the window, accompanied by thoughts of last night's conversation.

A better werewolf could have saved them.

Who told you that?

Peter.

Your uncle?

Technically.

Do you guys keep in touch? You know, since... You killed him?

Not to talk about the weather.

He frowns, tracing his thumbnail over the cable knit lines in his sweater. Since the beginning he got the sense that Derek and Peter weren't exactly on good terms, assumedly based on how Derek kinda murdered him last year, but apparently their rift ran much deeper than that. "Soft" seemed to be a word Derek shied away from, which was the same as saying Derek shied away from himself.

But soft, in that Derek wasn't a reckless killer, or a hardened criminal, or even an asshole. He might like rival packs to think that, but Stiles had seen differently the past three months. His favorite was how Derek ate popcorn when he thought no one was looking—like a little kid, but god knows Derek would rather chug a wolfsbane smoothie than let the pack think he was anything short of a rough-and-tough alpha. And that betrayed the biggest secret of all: Derek Hale hid his softness, and Stiles had been lucky enough to see more than a few glimpses of it.

Stiles doesn't know what to think of that.

He scoots his now empty suitcase into the closet and goes back to the kitchen to pop in a couple frozen waffles. While he waits he paces the living room for lack of anything better to do, eyes snagging on the bookshelf. Out of curiosity he wanders closer, gaze skimming the titles until he finds the one he's looking for. He plucks Dealing with PTSD off the shelf, sits down cross-legged on the floor, and turns to page one.

By the time he realizes the toaster popped up, the waffles are cold and he's on page 42.

The power finally flickers back on just after 2:00pm. Derek is still upstairs in his room, and Stiles practically swan-dives to the electrical outlet to plug in his dead technology. He swipes one of the now rock-hard waffles from the toaster, sniffs it, shrugs, and bites into it with a crunch as he wiggles the cursor impatiently on his laptop. The Mac announces it's resurrection with the musical "dong," and as soon as the screen blinks to life he opens up six tabs for all the essentials. CNN News, Reddit, Mets Sports Center, MLB stats, and his melee levels on World of Warcraft. Then he opens up his email, and his stomach does a funny loopy thing when he sees that he got a response from the Craigslist guy.

Re: Craigslist apartment listing 125 Melbrooke Ave
Doug Andreatta (dbandreatta.cmail) Mar 9 (1 hour ago)

To: me (stilesmstilinski.cmail)

Good morning Stiles,

Yes, the apartment is still for lease. My wife and I would like to meet you and show you the space. If you give me your current address I can mail you the application ahead of time for you to fill out. Can you come by this Sunday at noon? We need to vacate ASAP so if you like it and we like you, it's yours as soon as you turn 18.

Please let us know,

Doug

Stiles swallows. He glances to the calendar and licks his lips when he sees the date. He starts to type in a reply.

Re: Apartment listing 125 Melbrooke Ave

me (stilesmstilinski.cmail)

To: Doug Andreatta (dbandreatta.cmail)

Hi Doug,

Thanks for getting back to me. This Sunday at noon works great, and

But he can't finish it. He saves it as a draft and hastily shuts his laptop.

His phone lights up next, glowing with a little silver apple icon. When the screen wakes up he sees a green message bubble from Scott.

Scott McMuffin: hey big storm you guys okay?

Yeah we just got our power back. Any news? Stiles hits send.

Scott McMuffin: really? we had power all night. my mom says a telphone pole fell and took out a few windows at the hospital and the danbridge freeway closed for flooding. weather report said its going to keep raining on and off for another week. there's another storm coming friday

I'll invest in a megawatt generator then. If all the electronics die again I'm not sure I'll get through it alive. Seriously regretting lending you that Batman #5

Scott McMuffin: sorry dude. i'd give it back but I'm gonna be in redding that day for the lacrosse tournament and i need something to read on the bus
Stiles purses his lips. He forgot about that. Then he remembers that this Friday is the fourteenth, and his phone lights up with another text.

Scott McMuffin: sorry bro i know thats a big day :/ i'd skip the trip for u but coach would kill me. with my own stick... but ill make it up to you saturday. did you hear back from that guy with the apartment?

Hey don't worry bro its fine. He pauses, licking his lips. And yeah. He wants to meet this Sunday. Scott McMuffin: dude thats awesome! then you'll have a place all to yourself :)

Stiles bites his lip.

yeah

At 3:00pm Derek still hasn't come downstairs, and Stiles decides enough is enough. He makes his way up the stairs, mindful not to trip over the buckets on the fifth and bottom steps. He knocks twice when he reaches the bedroom.

"Hey, sourwolf."

No response. Stiles sighs. He scratches idly at a nick in the wood of the door.

"I know you can hear me, Derek. Think you can grab your jacket and be downstairs in ten? I wanna take you somewhere."

He turns around and saunters back down the hallway. He doesn't expect Derek to come. There's still a good chunk of daylight left so he thinks about what he's going to do later tonight, maybe call Lydia to see if she wants to come over for a homework date.

Snick.

His feet make it halfway down the stairs before Derek quietly opens the door to his bedroom, slowly stepping out into the hallway with the leather jacket slung over his shoulder. He meets Stiles's eyes before looking down again, and Stiles tries and fails not to smile.

"'Atta boy."

.o0O0o.

They take the jeep.

The road is slick and dark with last night's rain, leaving a crisp chill behind in the air. Derek's massive frame barely fits into the passenger seat, fingers clutching the armrest like he's worried the car will fall to pieces with the next bump in the road. Which is dumb, because Stiles just reinforced the camshafts with duct tape last week and it should probably hold.

"Where are we going?" Derek tries again, glancing moodily out the window. Stiles wonders if maybe that's what he looked like when Derek took him to the farmer's market a couple months ago.
"Not the V-E-T, if that's what you're worried about," he assures airily. The jeep chuckles beneath his grip on the clutch.

Derek frowns, eyeing the dashboard disapprovingly. He shifts his feet, and Stiles hears the crackle of an empty Cheetos bags from last weekend's 7/11 raid with Scott.

Ten minutes later he pulls the tires onto a bank of pebbles, which leads up to the body of water behind a familiar residential area. He inches forward until her headlights nearly hit the edge of the pond and parks right there over the bed of pebbles, and thinks better of making a comment about the "no dogs allowed" sign.

He hops out of the car, Derek following suit more slowly. The wintry months have bled away, melting the ice that usually keeps the pond sealed during Christmas season. But it's Beacon Hills, so the weather is freezing anyway and the sky is slate grey and overcast. He strides up to the water's edge and whistles, listening to the sound echo across the placid surface. His breath spews out in front of him, a long stream of white that gets carried away on the breeze. On the other end of the pond is a line of thick trees, and his old neighborhood behind that.

"Welcome to Greywater pond," he announces, brandishing a hand out over the water in his best Vanna White gesture. "AKA, the secluded body of water at the edge of Beacon Hills that nobody knows about, named after it's not-so-exciting color."

Derek's eyebrow twitches. Stiles clears his throat. Tough crowd.

"Aheh. Okay, so you know that spot in the woods you took me to? By that cliff?" He begins, licking his lips. "Well, this is my peace place. I uh, used to come here after my mom died. A few other times since… You know."

Derek blinks at him. Stiles strides forwards, scratching at his neck because he doesn't have a collar to tug. He smiles nervously and hopes that it looks confident and not like he has gas.

"So here's the stitch. You pick up one of these bad boys," he bends down, selecting one of the fifty-thousand pebbles they're standing on and waving it around for emphasis. "Bigger the better, but whatever floats your boat. And by, I dunno, let's say the magical power of the spark which Deaton never explained to me— this rock is no longer a rock."

Derek stands with his arms folded, eyeing the pebble with the deadpan of all deadpans. Stiles quickly continues before the guy pops a blood vessel.

"—No longer a rock, that is, because instead it becomes all the shitty crap you feel inside. Whether you failed a final, or your jeep broke down two miles from school, or Lydia Martin turns you down when you ask her to Freshman formal." He turns around and walks to the edge of the water, until the tips of his sneakers squish right up against the mudbank. "And then—"

He throws his arm back and chucks the rock across the pond with everything he has, unleashing his best tarzan battle-cry.

"AAAAHHHHHHHHGGGHHH!"

The stone soars a good five yards over the pond, landing with a decent splash and an explosion of ripples. He spins around and throws his arms out in a "ta-da" gesture, raising his eyebrows in preparation for the punchline.

"You chuck those bad vibes into the water and sink them forever."
For one beautiful moment, Derek Hale looks perturbed at his yell. Stiles suddenly regrets not bringing a camera.

"Yeah, that's the other thing, too," he adds, and bends down to pick up another pebble. "You gotta yell too, just get it all out, you know? For example, two days ago when I wanted a sandwich, only to discover that someone ate all the pastrami in the house— Aghhh!"

And he hurtles it, pleased to see it skip a few times before disappearing beneath the water's surface. He turns back to Derek, who's eyebrows are back in the usual 'v' shape. A capital v.

"You're looking at me like my system is questionable, which it totally is. But—" he bends down and picks up another rock, offering it with a smirk. "It helps."
Derek stares at the rock skeptically. Then he turns around and starts walking back towards the jeep.

Stiles's heart sinks. Well now he's just embarrassed. He knew Derek would probably think it stupid, but he didn't really expect him to just up and walk away. But then…

But then Derek bends down and hoists up a boulder by the base of a tree.

Stiles gapes and steps the hell back, because the rock is the size of a loaf of bread. Like a loaf of Costco bread. Derek doesn't look at him as he carries it to the pond (in one hand, Christ), eyes hard and determined. He walks all the way up to the water's edge, swings back his arm, and hurtles the boulder with everything he has, letting out a roar so loud that Stiles has to clap his hands over his ears. A flock of birds screech and scatter into the air from the line of pines on the other end of the
preserve, accompanied by several dog howls that yipe back in response. The stone makes it all the way out to the middle of the pond and makes impact with a "ka-boosh" and a giant spray of white.

Oh.

He clears his throat and presses his fingertips to his lips, trying not to giggle with delight.

"Uh, yeah. Like that. You... Not bad," he manages.

Derek doesn't say a word, simply spins on his heels and picks up the next biggest rock on the water bank, which is roughly the size of a size eleven shoe.

Stiles grins and follows suit, snatching another stone. He stares at the line of trees marking the edge of his used-to-be neighborhood, and thinks about his old house just on the other side of the woods. He crows like a rooster and chucks his stone across the water. It kicks up a spray of white droplets and sinks to the bottom.

Derek doesn't roar or shout anymore with his throws, but he chucks rock after rock across the lake with an unwavering look of hard determination. Meanwhile Stiles starts getting creative with his yelling. He Hollers, yodels, even throws in a wolf howl, at which Derek snaps his head over, eyes wide like Stiles just hollered profanities in wolf-language. That one makes a few dogs bark from the residential area again, and Stiles barks back at them. Because why not.

The chilly air grows colder as they throw more stones. Derek can skip rocks all the way across the pond, beating Stiles's current record of twelve skips. It's only a matter of time before a Beacon Hills PD truck rolls to a stop over the gravel, window rolling down to reveal a familiar man with ginger hair and big ears.

"Hey, you boys!" The officer rolls down his window, but flicks up his shades up when he and Derek turn around. He squints. "Hey, Stiles, is that you?"

Stiles pulls a smile, raising a hand in a wave. "In the flesh! Hey, Phil. Patrol duty today?"

Phil nods. Phil hates patrol duty. He's relatively new to the station, on the younger side of the department. His real name is Philippe Tynarell, but goes by Phil because who wouldn't.

"Yep, double shift today," Phil says, letting an arm hang out over the window. "I got a disturbance report about a couple of noisy dogs over here? Said it sounded like wolf howls. You two see anything of the sort?"

"Nope, must be a false claim," Stiles shrugs. "Last I checked, there are no wolves in California." He turns to Derek and winks.

"Alright. Can never be too careful with all these mountain lion attacks as of late," Phil says. He scratches his head to add, "hey uh, sorry about your dad, champ. We all miss him down at the station."

Stiles licks his lips. His pocket feels extra empty without the badge in it. "Yeah, me too."

Phil nods somewhat awkwardly. "Well, I should get back to rounds. You're always welcome to pop by the station, you know."

Stiles isn't sure if the building would feel the same without his dad there behind the desk, but he tries to smile anyway. Manners and all. "Thanks, Phil. Try not to run into any mountain lions."
"Wish me luck," Phil flips his shades back down and drives off.

They take it as their cue to retire. Stiles tosses a final stone across the pond and wanders back over to the jeep, Derek following behind him. They sit beside the tires with backs against the headlights, and he kind of realizes how close they're sitting. It's like how close he and Scott would sit, but Derek isn't Scott. Proximity-wise, it's the closest they've sat next to each other compared to... Ever. It's casual. Something friends do. He and Derek are... Friends.

He doesn't really know what they are.

His eyes flicker down to his hand, which is perched half-curled on the pebbles, mere inches from Derek's own. He sticks his fingers into his pocket and pulls out the bag of Reese's Pieces he stashed there, and tears it open with his teeth. After throwing a few back into his mouth he looks to Derek, holding out the package.

"Reese's Pieces?" He offers, giving the bag a little shake.

Derek side-eyes the candy, eyebrow twitching.

"Come on, man. You know you want some. Unless you've got a snack drawer in your room, I know you haven't eaten since this morning."

Derek turns back to look at the water. He holds out a hand. Stiles tips the bag and piles a heap of candies into his palm, and Derek selects an orange one with his thumb and index finger and pops it in his mouth, sucking on it slowly as he studies the horizon.

For a few minutes it's just the mellow breath of the pond that washes over them, mixed with the quiet clack of candy against their teeth. The sun sags against the horizon, littering the water's surface with silver twinkles. Breath puffs out white in front of their faces like syncopated steam engines. It's cold, but his blood buzzes warm beneath his nose and cheeks, which are probably pink from the frigid air. He nibbles on Reese's Pieces, cracks the shell with his teeth and feels the shards break on his tongue, and peanut buttery sweetness blooms on his buds.

"Power stems from the fear you elicit in others," Derek says suddenly, quietly. It's the first thing he's really said since this morning. "It's what Peter used to tell me.

Stiles pops another candy into his mouth, sucking thoughtfully on the sugary coating. "Do you believe that?" He asks.

"I used to," Derek admits. "Power used to be the most important thing in the world to me. So important that I was willing to kill him for it. I thought that if I was powerful enough, then my past —" A fraction of a pause. "—Then nothing could hurt me anymore. It just took me a while to realize that power stems from facing your fears, not running away from them."

Stiles stares at him, because it's the longest, honest, most emotionally-revealing speech Derek has ever uttered.

"Did you get that from that book you read?" He asks quietly, slipping a few more candies into his palm. "One Hundred Years of Solitaire or something?"

"Solitude," Derek corrects softly. "And no. I got it from you."

He stops chewing abruptly, heart tripping over itself a little maybe. He slowly turns his head, meeting the not-quite-green eyes staring back at him. Derek is looking at him without a scowl, or any sort of growly expression for that matter. His gaze is honest, unafraid, almost soft in the pale light. He looks
so sure of himself, vastly different from his expression this morning. Somehow it makes him look—
"You're different now," Stiles says, because he is. "From when I first met you. From a month ago, even."

Derek nods, like he knows this. "You're different, too." And then more quietly, "When you first got here you looked... Hollow. Quiet. You didn't look like you."

Stiles considers this, nibbling on his thumbnail. "I didn't feel like me." He tips more candies back in his mouth, playing with the bag between his fingers. "But I do now."
Derek pops the last Reese's Pieces into his mouth and wordlessly holds out his hand for more. Stiles chuckles and tips a few more into his palm. He notices that Derek is eating the orange and yellow ones first, leaving the brown ones behind in his palm.

"Stick out your tongue."

Derek's eyebrows drop to defensive #2.

"No."

"Come on, just do it."

"Why."
"Because I'll show you mine."

"What makes you think I want to see your tongue."

"Just stick out your tongue, Derek."

He raises an eyebrow expectantly, channeling his inner sourwolf. It must work, because after a pause Derek cautiously sticks his tongue out, and Stiles is delighted to see that it's bright orange. He grins and Derek's tongue quickly darts back into his mouth, eyebrows dropping further.

"What was that for."

"To see Derek Hale's tongue painted with yellow dye number five," he smirks. "Don't like the brown ones?"

"The colored ones taste the best." Derek mutters.

He doesn't know why, but hearing this come out of Derek Hale's mouth delights him more than Disneyland. And they have Mickey Mouse pancakes there.

His shoulders settle back against the bumper as he gets more comfortable, but apparently leaning against the jeep is like scratching a head full of dandruff. Tiny flecks of candy blue rain down on his shoulders from the friction, dotting his flannel with paint. He brushes them off.

Derek watches and taps a knuckle against the headlight. "Why do you like this thing so much?"

Stiles gawks, shooting a hand up to stroke the hood. "Hey, she can hear you! This baby is the only set of wheels I've ever owned and as far as I'm concerned, it's the greatest set of wheels. It's beat up, constantly mocked for it's style, and has terrible milage. Ever think that I relate to it?"

No his surprise Derek snorts softly. The werewolf pops the last of his Reese's pieces into his mouth and holds his palm out for more. Which brings them to the last of the peanut butter crack candies.

Stiles crumples the empty bag in his fist and tucks it in his pocket. He makes a little 'o' with his lips and blows out a stream of breath, watching the white string of fog curl away over the pond. He gazes out over the water to the line of trees on the horizon, where the residential neighborhood is. If he cranes his neck he can see the top of the chimney.

"What is it."

Derek and his irrevocable noticing powers.

"Oh... Nothing. Kinda," he answers, raising a finger to point across the pond. "It's just my house. It's right on the other side of those trees."

"On Elmer."

Right. Derek would remember, considering all the times the guy crawled through his window bleeding and half-dead.

He nods, resting his chin on his knuckles. "Yeah, the one with the red chimney." He intends to stop there but his mouth has other ideas. "I mean I lived my whole life there. S'just weird to think that some other family is going to move in and move everything around, if they haven't already. The wallpaper's probably already been torn down, but maybe that's kind of a good thing. That stuff was hideous. Like a weird hippy couple from Half Moon Bay or some newlyweds with their toddler.
That little guy will probably get my room."

He actually smirks a little at the thought, somehow not as sad as he expects.

"You miss it."

Says Derek, the master of phrasing questions as statements, but Stiles can tell that the words aren't meant to be a question this time. Derek just knows.

"Yeah," he admits. "Yeah, I miss it. But I'm glad I'm not there anymore. It wouldn't be the same without my dad there, too."

Silence on Derek's part. He gets the feeling he knows exactly what he means, because Derek's been sitting in that boat for nearly six years. Right now Derek is sitting with his elbows resting on his knees, staring at his folded hands. He absently traces a thumb over his palm in a ritualistic little circles, seemingly lost in thought.

"Is there a reason you do that?"

Derek glances up. "What."

"You stare at your hands a lot," Stiles answers. The face Derek makes suggests that he didn't even realize he was doing it.

"Just a habit I guess."

"Can I see?"

Derek side-glances him curiously, guarded. "My hand?"

"Yeah."

"Why."

"Just because."

Derek hesitates. Stiles almost regrets asking— doesn't even really know why he asked in the first place, but then Derek uncurls his fingers and holds his palm out.
The pond grows quiet as he takes Derek's hand, gently maneuvering it palm-up and and placing it to rest on his knee. Just because he can, and because he wants to, and because he knows that Derek hasn't had anyone inspect his hands for 'just because' in a long time. He can feel Derek watching him, probably about to yank his arm back any second and scoot ten feet to the left, so Stiles just kinda traces Derek's fingers until that happens, studying the creases in his palm like it's a map to the world.

Derek grows impossibly still. He doesn't say anything, but when he does it comes out quieter and softer than Stiles expects.

"What are you doing…"

For once he doesn't have anything say anything in return. Instead he simply keeps ghosting his fingertips over the lines in Derek's skin, getting kind of lost in the spiderweb patterns. His fingers tremble slightly like they always do, but for once he is only a little self-conscious about the tremors in his hands. He's had them for three months, and Derek has seen them by now. At the moment it doesn't seem to matter, because he can taste Reese's Pieces on his tongue and he's casually playing with Derek's fingers at Greywater pond. He finds a freckle on Derek's wrist, which excites him more
than freckles might excite other people.

"You're hands are so… Manly," he murmurs, then immediately regrets it when he realizes how stupid that is.

But to his surprise, "Yours are cold," Derek mutters back. It's true. Stiles's fingers are like ice against Derek's palm. Werewolves and their warm skin. Unfair.

They sit in the quiet for a little like that, staring at the bruising horizon. He finishes examining and opts for just kind of holding Derek's hand, thumb resting over Derek's knuckles. Derek lets him. In a way, he's not even surprised that Derek lets him. Stiles's mom used to do stuff like this to him when he was younger, just weird little things like playing with his hands or brushing her fingers through his buzz cut, or smoothing back his arm hair just for the heck of it. He wonders when was the last time Derek had anyone smooth back his arm hair just for the heck of it.

"The heater turned on automatically one night when we were all asleep," Derek says quietly. "There was a gas leak, and when the pilot light lit it caused an explosion downstairs."

His thumb slows to a halt over Derek's palm. He already knows this from looking at the Hale police reports last year, back when he and dad used to stay up late at the dining table and they both thought Derek was a dangerous criminal. But he keeps his eyes down on the hand over his knee, because he knows that if he looks up Derek will probably stop talking.

"Laura went to get my parents," Derek continues, staring straight ahead, eyes a little vacant. "I went downstairs. When I got to Cora's room her door was already on fire."

The quiet of the pond settles into his bones like ice.

"The frame was stuck. The heat jammed it, I guess. I had to rip it off the hinges to get inside. But…"

Derek swallows heavily. The silence is palpable.

"I didn't let my hands heal for a while, after that."

Stiles swallows. He stares down at Derek's fingers, imagining the intense burns that must have scorched the skin there. He had seen pictures of burn victims from police reports, and knew how the flesh puckered up in painful black welts, sometimes cracking and bleeding. He licks his lips and ghosts a thumb over a crinkle in Derek's palm.

"And that's why you look at them," he murmurs.

"…Yeah."

And then Stiles sees it. A little crescent moon mark by Derek's thumb, a few shades pinker than the surrounding skin. He touches it gently, lips falling ajar when he realizes that it's a burn mark, like one would get while cooking. He knows immediately what it's from— it's from yesterday morning, when Derek burned his hand on the coffee pot. Stiles knows because Derek had sucked in a quiet gasp and yanked his hand away after it slipped. "You okay over there? Stiles had asked. 'I'm fine," Derek had said.

Derek catches on and quickly curls his hand into a fist, pulling it away. He hides it in his overly-long jacket sleeve, and Stiles's heart breaks. A conversation with Scott pops up from a few months ago, about how healing could be effected psychosomatically. He counts back the last six years, and wonders how many accidental burns Derek had gotten that didn't disappear within minutes.
Derek still wasn't letting himself heal, which meant the past still cut into him sharper than Stiles thought.

"It's not your fault."

His words are met with a drag of silence.

"I don't need someone to tell me that, Stiles."

"Yes you do."

Derek doesn't argue.

He glances again at Derek's hand, now resting on the werewolf's lap. He wants to reach out and hold it again, but he doesn't. His birthday is in less than a week, after all.

They sit in silence and watch the lake, breaths billowing out in white puffs before their faces. More mist rolls in along with the evening, and he tugs his flannel tighter around himself to combat the chill. Just as the sun kisses the tip of the pond, a low growl cuts through the quiet. Stiles glances to Derek, who sheepishly curls a hand over his belly.

"Me too," He agrees. He stretches, scratching at his own empty stomach. "I'd suggest leftover Chinese, but that was my lunch. Grilled sandwiches?"

"Sounds great," Derek murmurs, with an actual hint of a smile. "But I heard someone ate all the pastrami."

He hums, pleased that Derek found his sarcasm again. "Mmm, right," he muses, and tosses one last stone across the pond. It skips three times and sinks to the bottom. "Then let's stop at the deli on the way home. I could totally go for a ham sub."

"Home?"

Stiles pauses. He watches the sun scatter rays over the water, the ghost of Derek's hand still soft on his skin. It's the first time he hasn't referred to the mansion as Derek's house, and the first time he's suggested sandwiches for dinner. Derek seems to have caught it too.

"Yeah…" He repeats. "Home."
Chapter 14 is very special, and the heart of this fic. It’s also a monster at 21,000 words, as well as my other favorite chapter. I really wanted to release it September 22nd (my birthday) but with 40 drawings to complete, I think it will end up being more towards mid October. For sneak peeks and updates, come find me on tumblr at stiles-and-the-sourwolf :) Thank you all for the love and kudos!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

CAUTION: graphic illustrations of blood at the very bottom— if gore doesn’t bother you DO NOT scroll down to see ahead of time or else you will spoil the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Purple twilight streams in through the window, a pale juxtaposition to the warmth of the living room. The salty scent of marinara tickles his nose, a looming weight hangs on his shoulders, and the book in his lap shines gold with the light of the floor lamp and chandelier. He thinks the hanging crystals are the ugliest piece of tacky crap in the whole house, but his mom likes it.

He sighs and slumps down further against the couch as he turns to page 49, sticking his heels up on the coffee table. As soon as his socks touch the wood his mom speaks up from the kitchen, not even bothering to turn around as she stirs the sauce.

"Feet off the coffee table, please."

He sighs, louder this time, and lets his feet flop to the floor.
"Come on, dad's not even here," he mutters, and tucks his legs up on the couch instead.

"Your father works hard," his mom points out calmly, bringing the spoon up to sniff. "At the very least he deserves to come home and not smell your dirty socks where he puts his morning coffee."

Derek purses his lips, trying to find the sentence where he last left off. Talia turns around from the stove, raising an eyebrow.

"My, no sarcastic retort? What's gotten into you today?"

He could easily rattle off a list, but instead what slips out is, "Nothing, I'm fine."

His mom looks unconvinced, but turns back to her recipe book. She'll get him later. "How's the book coming?"

"Terrible."

"Maybe that's because you left your reading until the day before the test," a voice chirps from the stairwell.

Derek groans inwardly as Laura prances around the corner, dark lips quirked into a smirk. Her Docs thunder down the stairs and she leaps the last two steps, long, tousled dark hair billowing out behind her. She sweeps it aside to poke a diamond stud through her ear, and her fifty-million bracelets jingle obnoxiously beneath the sleeve of the usual denim jacket. She places a hand on her hip and smirks at him like she's the queen of everything.
Derek glares at er. "Excuse me, we can't all be straight-A students," he shoots back.

Laura winks at this, snapping her gum obnoxiously as she waltzes over. She tips his book forward with a black-laquered nail to glance at the title.

"Catcher in the Rye, huh? I remember that one. Enjoy it while you can, next year you'll be reading One Hundred Years of Solitude. That was drier than ash."

He grunts half-heartedly. His sister spins on her heel with a flourish, striding towards the front door.

"Laura, where are you going?" His mom calls out warningly.
"Out."

"Laura Ann."

"Oh, you got me," Laura slows to a halt, throwing her arms out in jazz hands. "I'm going out to have sex with tons of boys!"

His mom stops stirring to glance up and eye her daughter sharply. The scary look. Laura turns around, flashing an apologetic grin when she sees it. "Chill mom, it's just a movie with Alex and Kim."

"I was making spaghetti and meatballs tonight," his mom clucks.

"Which will be awesome tomorrow for lunch," Laura assures, batting her fingers in the air dismissively. She turns again to leave but stops to glance back Derek's direction, cocking her head to the side as her eyes narrow analytically. She studies him, bringing up a hand to nibble on her thumbnail. "What's up with you anyway, grumpy pants?"

Derek frowns. "Why does everyone keep saying that?"

Laura bats her eyelashes at the ceiling, swopping a strand of hair behind her ear. "Because you're quiet for once, and you smell like pathetic. More so than usual. And what's up with your 'do? Lose your hair gel again?"

"Not since you stole it," he reminds her.

Laura grins, and it reminds Derek of the Cheshire cat. "You look better without all that crap in your hair anyway." She steps forward to ruffle his hair, to which he immediately slaps her hand away. "Ah, youth. Spiked tips were really more of thing back in my day."

"Shut up, you're two years older than me," he mumbles, and sticks his nose back into his book.

"Yeah, but you act like you're twelve, not sixteen," Laura rolls her eyes. "You just sit in your room all day and read those dumb sports magazines, and then you shoot hoops in the front yard by yourself. Maybe you'd have more friends if you actually got out more."

"Laura." His mom warns sharply from the kitchen, smile suddenly gone. Her eyes flash with a glint of red.

Laura looks guilty for half a second, wincing as she snaps her gum again. She shrugs. "Sorry, low blow. But seriously, Der. What's up? Are those Callahan assholes picking on you again? Do I need to teach them another lesson?"

"No! Laura, no. Please don't," Derek groans, slumping down into the couch. "God, you made it so much worse after that."

"What, just 'cuz they got beat up by a girl?" Laura wrinkles her nose. "Please, this is 2009. People need to learn that girls are twice as tough as boys. Boys are complete shitheads."

Talia glares at her sharply from the kitchen, finger halting over a line in the recipe book. Laura grins widely and decides to save herself by dipping forward to wrap her arms obnoxiously around Derek's shoulders before he can protest.

"Eeeexcept for my precious baby brother, that is!" She singsongs into his ear, smothering him with her perfume and her hair and all fifty-million yards of rough-and-tough demeanor. He squirms and
tries to wriggle away.

"Ugh, gross, get off me," he shoves her away, making little "ppffft" sounds with his lips as he tries to get her hair out of his mouth. "God, you have so much hair."

"Yáadilá óólyé, Laura, you're graduating in less than two months," his mom sighs from the kitchen. "I better not hear you say words like that up at the podium."

"What, 'shitheads?' Please mom, you really think I'd swear in my valedictorian speech?" Laura asks innocently.

"Yes," he and his mom answer in unison.

Laura purses her lips, glancing at the ceiling. "Okay, so maybe a couple. But hey, 'shit' and 'damn' are vanilla ice cream compared to what we're going to face in college."

"Mm. And have you found your dress yet?" His mom fishes.

Laura sighs. "No. But I will. A nice lady-like one for you T.H., don't worry." Then she leans close to whisper in Derek's ear, low enough so their mom won't catch it. "But my Docs? Totally wearing them underneath."

Derek glances at her scuffed-up boots as she wiggles her toes, raising an eyebrow. "You would. Now stop snapping your gum in my face."

His sister straightens up, folding her arms. "Man, you're such a tart today. Where's that dopey smile you always have?"

"I left it in a deep dark hole along with your feminine charm."

Laura snorts, raising her hands in surrender. "Alright, fine, don't tell me. But you know the drill when someone's a drag in this house." She pulls what can only be described as a pure-evil smirk, and Derek's eyes automatically dart down the hall. Oh no.

"Laura, don't you d—"

"Hey Coorraaaaal!" Laura singsongs, cupping her hands around her mouth for extra volume. "Derek needs a certain stuffed rabbit!"

Derek groans, slumping down further against the couch. Maybe he could disappear if he sank down far enough. Laura snickers and jumps up to leave but he grabs her wrist, throwing his best scowl at her. "I'll get you later for this," he hisses.

"You're welcome," she whispers with a grin, and yanks her hand back, whirling around to prance out the door. "Catch ya later, mom!"

"Be home by eleven, Laura. And don't forget—!"

But the front door slams shut as Laura rushes outside in a whirlwind, leaving his mom to sigh something about "teenage girls" under her breath. Derek doesn't get time to figure it out, because the door to Cora's room squeaks open down the hall, followed by the sound of tiny bare feet thundering towards him.

Here we go.
"Hello, Derek," Cora greets, in a voice that's remarkably prim for a third grader. She's already in her pajamas, a matching checkered set with blue buttons and what used to be the Power Rangers on the front before it rubbed off in the wash. Her eyes are huge and unblinking, rosy cheeks somehow still shiny and pink in the dim lighting. And yep, she's got Pig seated in her hands, cradled close like her very best friend in the world.

He sighs, lolling his head over to blink at her. "Hi, Cora."

She plays with Pig in her hands, holding the rabbit by the arms and swinging it gently back and forth.

"Derek, are you sad?"

"No, Cora, I'm fine," he grumbles, and tries to wave her away. "Laura was just trying to be funny. No need for Pig."
Her response is to nose forward and stick her face about three inches from his own, inspecting him closely for signs of ill mood. There's a smear of brown on her chin and her breath smells like sugar, and Derek knows she found the secret Hershey's kisses container Laura kept in her room.

"You look pretty grumpy to me," she diagnoses matter-of-factly. "What do you think, Pig?" She turns the rabbit around, studying it's face, and nods after a heartbeat. "He thinks you look like a potato, but agrees."

Derek chuffs. "You've been spending too much time around Laura."

"Laura said you would say that," Cora informs him, and plops Pig down on his knee.

"Cora, I'm trying to read," he tries, but he knows it's useless. She's already using her hand to make Pig 'hop' up along his arm, slowly but surely making it's way to his face. To make it worse she starts humming a little tune, which he soon realizes is a very off-key version of the song from Babe. Nope.

"Mom," he calls out in annoyance, but Talia merely smiles and watches from the kitchen, breaking spaghetti over a pot. Traitor.

"Don't eight-year-olds have better things to do than harass their brothers?" He tries, although truthfully he doesn't mind it as much as he claims.

"Eight and a half."

"Eight and half, right. My bad," he corrects, rolling his eyes.

Cora nods satisfactorily and moves Pig up to his shoulders, and he surrenders, flopping The Catcher in the Rye down on his lap. He sits with a deadpan, waiting for her to get bored and go away, although that tactic had yet to prove successful. She wriggles around his knees and hops up onto the couch so that she can reach up higher, probably with the intention of making Pig attack his neck. In doing so she steps on his toes, and the surprised yelp that flies out of his mouth is not one he's proud of.

"Ow, hey!"

She giggles, apparently finding his pain hilarious. "You sound like a dinosaur."

He frowns. "That's— I do not. You don't even know what dinosaurs sound like."

"Yes I do," Cora insists. She's still wiggling Pig atop his shoulder, fuzzy pink ears flopping and hitting him in the face. "Like in The Land Before Time."

"That's a cartoon," he explains. As if it needs explaining. "We don't know what dinosaurs sounded like."

"Why not?"

"Because we weren't there with them. They died millions of years ago."

"I bet I know what they sound like," Cora states bravely.

"Mm. Is that right."

She nods. Then without warning she suddenly shrieks in his face, a wild, loud sound similar to a dying cat— one that makes him jerk back and smack his head hard against the window. He hisses in pain and rubs the back of his skull, about to voice his annoyance when Cora beats him to it.
"That was a Derek-saurus," Cora explains, and moves Pig up to sit on his head. "You can tell because it gives people a headache."

And… Crap. He shouldn't laugh. He really shouldn't, the joke is about him after all (and no doubt influenced by Laura) but Cora is already grinning like she knows she's won, and Pig is sitting on his head. Which is suddenly way funnier than it was a second ago.

His lips twitch up in a small smile. Cora beams and immediately yanks Pig off of his head, holding the animal up in the air like Simba from *The Lion King*. Fuck his life.

"That'll do, Pig!" She exclaims triumphantly, and her dimples shine as she beams wide. Derek sees that she's no longer missing two, but three front teeth.

He slumps against the cushions in defeat. "You look like a beaver," he sighs.

Her eyes light up as she takes this as a compliment, and she practically crawls onto his lap in her haste to show him her teeth. She pulls her lips back as far as they'll go and sticks a finger in her mouth, which she uses to wiggle the bottom one for him. When she talks her voice comes out all lispy.

"Look, this one's all wiggly! It's almost out, I can feel it."

He's caught somewhere between laughing and making a face in disgust. The tooth is very wiggly. "Yeah? Then you'll have a set of real werewolf teeth in no time."

"Yeah!" She exclaims, eyes shining. "I'm gonna be just like dad!"

"Let's hear it. Your roar, come on."

Cora sucks in a little gasp of delight and scoots back, shifting onto her knees. She shoves Pig into his hands, which he takes and sets on his shoulder for a front row seat. Her face scrunches in a look of utmost concentration as she licks her lips, takes a deep breath, and lets out the most pitiful roar Derek has ever heard. She isn't old enough yet to howl properly— the full vocal chords, along with her claws, would come in a couple years.

He chuckles in amusement. His mom turns around disapprovingly from the stove. "Derek, don't encourage her. She'll strain her voice."

"Was it scary?" Cora demands, eager to please. Derek pulls a face and scratches his chin like he's thinking about it.

"You have some practice to do." She deflates a little. He grins. "But not bad."

She beams, plucking Pig off his shoulder. "Well Pig thought it was great," she declares, and plants a kiss on the rabbit's nose. "What are you reading, Derek?"

"Alright you two, come set the table," his mom announces, setting the plates on the counter.

Derek prays a silent thank you, because he knows otherwise Cora would hop up and insist on sitting with him for the rest of the evening, and Derek would let her. Then he would never finish the damn book.
A moth taps softly on the glass outside his window as he turns to page 131.

He's sitting in bed, feet tucked under his blanket. Down the hall he hears one of his parents— his mom maybe, lighter footsteps— emerge from their bedroom and go downstairs. He listens to them pour a glass of water from the kitchen tap, set the glass in the sink when they're done drinking, trek back up. A shadow passes by the foot of his door, and when it cracks open his mom is standing
there, silhouetted in her purple robe against the dim light of his lamp.

"You still up, my boy abeque?"

He sighs. Abeque meant "stays at home." Cora was adahy, "stays in the woods," and Laura was ahote, "restless one."

"I haven't gone to bed before midnight since eighth grade, mom."

Talia tightens her robe around her waist and pads into the room, taking a seat on the edge of his bed. She studies him, and he looks at the spray of freckles on her cheeks and under her eyes, thinking about how he and Cora got the same ones.

"Keep it up and these dark circles will never go away," she teases, lightly brushing her knuckle over the purple beneath his eyes.

"Mm, thanks. Maybe we should get some cucumbers from Pietro for a face mask." He turns back to his page.

"Now listen, young man," she says, and gently pushes the book down flat on his lap to make him look up. "You've been as reserved as your father today, and I know it can't be all about this English test tomorrow. Your sisters may not be able to get it out of you, but I'm here to listen if you want to tell me."

His mom sits and smiles, waiting patiently for him to crack. That was her specialty. Scary as shit in supernatural relations, but incredibly warm when her children needed her to be. She trapped him every time. Derek licks his lips, tuning in to make sure that Laura wasn't lurking around the corner to eavesdrop. He hears her brushing her teeth in the bathroom down the hall.

"I sat alone at lunch today," he admits quietly, glancing down at his lap. The words sound twice as embarrassing out loud.

His mom nods, as if musing this over. "I see. Were your friends busy?"

"No… Mom. I don't…" He licks his lips. "I sit alone every day." He looks to the side, remembering how he chickened out and walked away from slashing Mr. Reardon's car tires last week.

"They don't like me very much," he mutters. "Connor Landon found out that Laura beat up the Callahan twins and told the whole team about it. The ones who didn't think I was a wuss before are now all on board with Fearless Leader."

He doesn't mention how they cornered him in the locker room that afternoon, and used Libby Fenton's lipstick to write "fag" on his locker.

"Mm," his mom hums patiently. "And what does this Connor Landon have that has everyone so smitten with him?"

"Well, he's the captain of the team, started freshman flush fridays, and got arrested once for drug dealing," Derek rattles off. "People respect him. Even seniors step aside when he walks down the hall."
His mom clucks softly. "It sounds to me like people are afraid of him."

"He doesn't need his sister to win fights for him," Derek counters. "He also doesn't trip over his words when he talks to people."

"You're a little shy," his mom admits, and her lips pinch up like she thinks this is cute. He frowns.

"Werewolves aren't supposed to be shy."

"You shouldn't always listen to what your uncle Peter has to say."

"He has a point, though," he mutters. "I don't even have the guts to prank a teacher. What kind of werewolf does that make me?"

"A good one, dumbass."

Suddenly Laura pokes her head around the corner, toothbrush sticking out of her mouth, eyes hooded in a deadpan. She leans against the doorway in a baggy 'The Killers' shirt and pajama shorts, bare feet on the hardwood. Her toes are painted purple.

"Oh my god," she moans, rolling her eyes. "You are like the biggest sap in the world. Listen, we all know you're the softie in the family. Get over it, it's not a bad thing. You're a real pain in the ass, and you need to stop using so much gel in your hair, but you're not half bad, okay? Way better than any of those dicks in your grade, at least. So just—" She flops her hand around in the air. "Loosen up, yeah?"

She reveals her other hand from behind the door. In it is a pack of Reese's Pieces, which she tosses to him. "Here. Your favorite. From the concession stand. Just stop with the big sad puppy eyes, okay? You're killing my vibe."

He catches the candy, raising a confused but pleasantly surprised eyebrow. It's probably the nicest thing Laura's ever said to him. And he got bonus candy.

"Thanks, princess."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't let it go to your head. If it gets any bigger it might explode."

With a wild eye roll Laura sticks her toothbrush back between her teeth and waltzes back down the hall. His mom leans in close, and Derek gets a whiff of her lotion as she whispers to him, "See? I told you. Even Laura cares."

"I do not!"

Laura's voice rings out from the bathroom garbled around her toothpaste, and Derek can't help but laugh. His mom catches it and beams, tapping her knuckle against his dimples. "There's that smile," she declares softly, eyes alight. "Don't ever let it hide away for too long."

He snorts. "Kinda hard when your sister is a walking joke," he teases, just loud enough for Laura to hear. He knows he's going to pay for it later, she's probably already switching out his shampoo with hemorrhoid cream. His mom lets the jab slide for once, letting him off the hook with just a playful squeeze on his ear.

She shifts as if starting to stand up, but stops when her eyes catch on his desk where his dad's leather jacket is draped over his chair. She smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners.
"Did you try that on again today?"

"Still big," he shrugs, pretending like it doesn't bother him.

"You'll fit into it in no time. Maybe eat an extra helping of spaghetti next time, hmm?" His mom smiles at him, but then the corners of her lips sag a little. "It might be nice to talk to your father once in a while, you know. He'd like to hear about your day."

Derek reopens his book so he doesn't have to meet her eyes. "Well, maybe I'm just quiet."

"You? Quiet around this family?" She chuckles. "Maybe the day Cora decides to skip dessert. I know your father can be a little intimidating, but he's proud of you, Derek."

He licks his lips. He'll believe it the day he's able to actually lift something heavier than a backpack.

"I, uh. I should get back to reading."

A little wistful smile appears on his mom's lips, almost something sad there. "Remember, Derek. Physical strength isn't the same as strength of heart. All werewolves find the speed of their claws eventually, but not everyone has the courage to stand up for who they are. We gave you the middle name Bidziil for a reason."
Derek glances down, suddenly too shy to look her in the eye. Bidziil was Navajo for "he is strong."

"Thanks, mom," he mumbles, and grants her a small smile. She returns it and rises to make her way to the door, pausing once to turn around.

"Do you want an extra blanket? It's cold tonight."

"I'm okay. Thanks, though."

"Alright. Goodnight, my son abeque."

"Night, mom."
His mom softly shuts the door behind her. He tears open the Reese's Pieces and turns to page 132. He eats all the yellow and orange ones first, because they taste the best.

"—erek, Derek!"

He awakes to an acrid taste on his tongue and a frantic screaming in his ear.

He sucks in a gasp as his eyes snap open— but they immediately squeeze shut again when the air stings his throat, kickstarting a round of coughing. His arms snag in his sheets as he rolls to the side, hacking painfully, and he hears the half-empty package of Reese's Pieces fall to the ground and scatter candies across his floor.

"Derek!"

Laura is there shaking his shoulders, eyes wide and red-rimmed in the dark. Her hair is messy and falling over her face in strings, makeup smeared and purple 'The Killers' nightshirt askew over her shoulders. There's a weird orange light coming in from the hallway, a dull roaring in the background he can't figure out.

"Derek, wake up!" She screams at him, fingers scrabbling at his shirt. "Get up— now! We gotta go!"

"Wh— What?" He manages to choke out. It takes a couple of blinks to realize that the room is tinted black, cloudy with smoke that's wafting in from the door frame. A stab of panic hits him as she grabs his hand, fingers in a death-grip around his wrist as she drags him out of bed.

"Laura—?"

"Come on, now!"

He finds his feet and they stumble into the hallway, nearly tripping over each other as she pulls him to the edge of the stair banister. His eyes widen in horror.

Downstairs the entire first floor is alight with crackling flames, neon orange fingers licking up the curtains, eating along the rafters to the stairwell, grabbing onto the couch and the shelves with the photo albums. Tiny orange embers swirl and dance in the air, raining down on their heads with flakes of ash that fly up on the heat. The volume is overwhelming— crackles and pops and dull roar above it all that makes his ears ring.
"What happened!" He demands, panic rancid in his voice.

"I don't know!" Laura turns to him, and he's terrified to see how round and glassy her eyes are. Her voice is high and breathless, nothing like the sarcastic drawl he knows. The flames down below are blindingly bright, and they paint the walls with a shrill orange glow that drowns her blue irises.

"Mom and dad," he blurts suddenly, eyes snapping wide. "Where's—"

But he cuts off as the fire ventures too close to the wall lamp by the railing, making it burst in a small explosion of glass that showers down on them. Laura shrieks and he throws his arms around her, pulling them back against the wall and out of the way. They cling to each other as the wallpaper goes up with a "woosh" and a blast of heat, catching fire to the banister. He snaps his head down the hall to where his parents' bedroom is, the side of the house that already has flames licking up onto the
second floor. Sparks fly up to the ceiling, catching on the wood rafters and setting them alight over the hallway.

"Mom!" He calls in fear and starts down the hall, but Laura grabs his wrist and yanks him back.

"I'll get them! Derek, Cora! Get Cora!"

Derek snaps his head towards the stairs, suddenly feeling impossibly cold despite the heat. Cora's bedroom was downstairs, where the fire had already—

"Laura—?" He demands, not even caring about the crack of fear in his voice. He's scared, and he's only sixteen, and it's all happening too fast. Just a few hours ago he had been sitting on the couch with Cora, eating spaghetti at the dinner table, finishing up the last few pages of his book in bed. Maybe this was all just a dream and he'll wake up tomorrow and take the test on *The Catcher In The Rye*.

The smoke continues to rise upwards, pooling against the ceiling in big black swirls. He coughs into his elbow, eyes darting back down the hall to his mom and dad's bedroom. "Laura, how come they haven't come—"

"I'll get them!" Laura shrieks urgently, her eyes bright with fear. "Get Cora, Derek!"

But he can't move. He wants to go, he *needs* to go— but he's afraid to leave Laura's side, because a part of him is terrified that he'll never see her again: his annoying, cocky, smart-ass sister who has too much hair and picks too many fights. The roar of the flames render him frozen in fear, and he looks to her desperately for help, eyes pleading.

"Laura—"

She bites her lip, eyes sparkling as she rushes forward and grabs his hands. She gives a quick, short squeeze before pushing him away. "We're all gonna be fine," she tells him fiercely, and Derek wants to believe her even though her voice is shaking. "All of us, you got that? Now go!"

Laura's hand slips from his and she takes off down the hall, hair swinging wildly behind her.

That's all he needs to jump into action, sprinting down the stairs in the opposite direction. His bare feet thunder down the steps, and the hardwood gets warm and then hot when he reaches the living room, where the heat intensifies ten fold. He shields his eyes against the glare of the flames, and sees with horror that the entire downstairs is engulfed in orange and black. The couch is on fire, and the bookshelves by the chandelier, Laura's artwork and his father's field journals, all going up in flames. The heat roars like a plane engine in his ears, interspersed with the musical chime of shattering glass as the pictures fall— Laura's senior portrait, last year's Christmas photo, Cora's artwork from summer camp. A couple windows blow out with the heat and smoke billows up thickly between the cracks in the walls, thick and brown where it spills up from the curtains. He coughs, tucks his nose into his elbow and hurriedly wades forward, skirting around the flames licking up the walls.

"Cora!" He yells. Upstairs he hears Laura calling his parents. "Cora!"
He stumbles back and hisses as one of the light fixtures falls from the ceiling, scalding his shoulder. It's hot, unbearably hot amongst the brunt of the fire, but he ignores it and pushes forward, sleeve over his mouth as he charges around the bend of the kitchen, where he catches a brief glance at his mother's cookbooks on fire. The desk with the home computer he used to sit at to play games after school.

"Cora!"

He hears no response as he reaches the hallway leading to her bedroom, which she chose because the downstairs window had a better view of the woods. But he freezes, heart beating impossibly
faster when he sees that the hallway is already engulfed—and that the wall heater is in shambles, blowing out wild blue and orange flames.

*Do you want an extra blanket? It's cold tonight.*

He charges forward, shouting more frantically as he sees that Cora's door is on fire. The flames lick up over the farm animal decals she had stuck there, turning them black and shriveled.

With a grunt of pain he wraps his hands around the door handle, scalding his palms on the hot metal. He yanks and jiggles but the door won't give, the frame is warped from the heat. He doesn't hesitate to plunge his hands into the flames and rip the door from it's hinges. He thinks he screams—the agony that sears his skin is worse than every form of wolfsbane he's experienced, shooting up his arms in waves of white-hot pinpricks—but he hardly notices, because Cora's room is so thick with smoke he can hardly see.

"Cor—" He cuts off with a violent cough, staggering forward blindly. "Cora? Cora!"

The small figure in the bed is unmoving, face ashen. One of her arms dangles off the side of the mattress, the other hand limp around Pig.

"No, no—Cora!"

He wheezes her name as he stumbles over and quickly scoops her up, cradling her limp body against his chest. He grabs Pig, too, because he knows that she's going to want him when she wakes up. *When*, he tells himself firmly, and repeats the word like a mantra as he staggers out of the room.

Smoke clings hot to his shirt as the soles of his feet start to blister. Something is throbbing—his temples maybe, and his hands. He gets a glimpse of them and sees that they're black and charred and shiny with blood, but he hardly cares because his little sister is unmoving in his arms. His breaths are starting to come out wheezy, head growing dizzy. He tucks his nose into Cora's neck and tips her head towards his chest, trying his best to shield her airways from the smoke as he stumbles past the kitchen again. He tries to remember where the front door is, but it slips from his memory like a bar of soap.

"Cora?" He tries again, voice barely above a croak. He fumbles to press two fingers against her neck, curses when he can't get a good grip.

The heat is growing unbearable. Sweat pours from his temples, dripping into his already watery eyes. It's disorienting, and he loses his balance more than once as he tries to decipher flame from footfall. His toes start dragging over something plushy—the living room carpet. He's in the living room. He needs to get out, find the front door, but he's in the living room and he can't see a lick of space where the flames haven't claimed territory. He calls for Laura but cuts off hacking, falling clumsily to his knees. Cora dangles limply in his arms, and his lungs stop working for an entirely different reason when he realizes that she isn't breathing.

"Lau—"

But his breath is useless. He panics, tries again to scream for his sister but his voice sounds like sandpaper, swallowed up by the roar of the flames. He lurches to his feet again, staggers, and stumbles back against the last stretch of wall the flames haven't reached yet. His lungs burn.
"Hhng—"

Distantly he's aware of the horrible noises coming form his throat, and the taste of copper on his tongue. Combined with the smell of the smoke and his own panic, it makes him want to gag. The house groans with him as the heat makes the walls buckle, cracking the ceiling. Smoke clings to his tongue and coats his throat. Motor oil, he thinks distantly. It tastes putrid like motor oil.

He tries again to rise to his knees but his limbs are uncooperative and tingly. He can't breathe. He sags to the ground, trying not to let Cora's head bump against the wall. He hears something like nails on a chalkboard, and realizes it's his own breathing. He jerks back against the wall as the chandelier
falls from the ceiling, crystals scattering in a large explosion of glass and flames and heat, and he wishes he had his dad's strength.

He feels himself slipping, eyes stinging as he struggles to keep them open. He can't hear Laura or his parents upstairs.

Desperate for some small form of comfort, he clutches Pig weakly in his sweaty palm. Cora sags against his chest as flames dance around them, and his head pounds in sync with his heartbeat. It vaguely reminds him of church bells.

He can't breathe—

    he can't breathe—

    he can't—
he needs to—
sirens—

he can't—

 Crack.
thunder—
He awakes to March thirteenth, otherwise known as his least favorite day of the year.

A shaky hand wipes the sweat from his brow as he lurches upright, licking the stale air from his chapped lips. He closes his eyes and hangs his head between his knees, counting in for four and out for four until his heart stops hammering in his ears.

A gas leak.

Something so laughably small, that claimed his family's lives forever.

He had awoken on a stretcher halfway into an ambulance with something cold and plastic strapped over his face. A swarm of paramedics were poking at him, tossing medical jargon back and forth, something about "third degree burns" and "blood oxygen," holding him down when he tried to sit up and crane his neck to find his family. "Cora," he had wheezed behind the mask. "Laur—"

But then he had rolled his head to the side, just in time to see another pair of medics zipping a black bag up over a purple The Killers pajama shirt. Beside her, the unmoving bodies of his parents, and
another smaller body bag beside them. His eyes had stung, throat dry as sandpaper, charred hands numb with pain— distantly he wondered why he wasn't healing yet, thought one of the medics said something about "I'm sorry" as he blinked at the smoking ruins of his home. A band of firefighters were hosing down the last of the flames, grey curls of smoke drifting up into the night sky. Through hazy vision he saw that the entire third and second floor had collapsed like a house of cards atop the first floor, and knew in his heart that Laura and his parents had been caught in it.

That was the last thing he remembered before the blackness swallowed him whole.

*One, two, three, four*

Practice and passage of time has enabled him to keep panic attacks down to once a year. This year the nightmare is kind, only capturing his lungs for a few shaky minutes before he earns his breath back. Once he drags his head up from between his knees, the first thing he sees is Pig sitting on the nightstand. Stiles had given it back to him a couple days ago, and Derek had kept it out instead of putting it back in the closet shoebox. There was something new that made him feel like he didn't need to hide it away anymore.

He goes downstairs in a bit of a daze, grabbing out to clutch at the railing as he gets a rush of deja-vu, momentarily seeing flame shadows dance on the wall. An irrational spike of fear hits him that he'll find the house empty today— that Stiles will be gone and he'll spend the day alone just like he has for last half-decade, only he doesn't know if he'll be able to handle another March thirteenth like that.

But he rounds the bend into the kitchen, and feels the blood in his cheeks again when he sees the lanky figure at the stove.

Amazingly, Stiles is already downstairs and dressed; his back is to Derek, spatula in hand as he pokes at a frying pan. He's wearing his purple sleep hoodie and the socks with the hole in the toe, and his laptop is open on the counter loudly playing sports radio. The kitchen is a mess, per usual when Stiles does the cooking— a carton of eggs is open on the counter, and there's a smear on the floor from where he must have dropped one. When Derek walks in the teen turns around, nodding in greeting. A piece of floppy bacon hangs out of his mouth.

"Hey, perfect timing," Stiles chirps, and turns back to the stove to wiggle the spatula beneath the eggs. "Just flipped these egg babies over. Kinda got some yolk on the burner, and the floor a little. But I'll clean it up after we eat because I'm starved. Also, Mets are behind by three so my cooking is a little unorthodox, but they can totally turn things around in two innings. All's well that egg's well, ammiright?" He trails off, mouth falling slack when he catches sight of Derek's face. "Hey. You okay?"

Derek blinks, unaware that his expression had slipped. He can feel the dampness cooling on his face, probably still shiny with cold sweat. It's something Stiles would usually notice and point out, but for some reason he isn't saying anything about it. Derek teeters over to find the coffee pot and rubs his face.

"Yeah, just… Didn't know where you were."

Some yolk drips off the spatula and onto the floor as Stiles pauses to look at him. He smiles softly, eyes growing round and maybe a little sad. "I'm right here, big guy," he says, and returns to the eggs. "You want sunny side up or over-easy? Either way you're getting well-done, because I don't know the difference."

"No," Derek mumbles. When Stiles looks confused he adds a quiet, "I'll eat later."
He swipes the newspaper from the counter and tries to go back up to his room, but Stiles lowers the burner and catches him by the wrist.

"Whoa, hey wait a second."

Derek blinks at the fingers wrapped around his sleeve. Stiles had been increasingly grabby lately, and he isn't sure when the invisible boundary between them suddenly disappeared.

"Hey, look. You can hide up in your room, but I'm not letting you spend the day alone," Stiles says, voice dropping gently. Derek must look at him funny or something, becuase he lifts an eyebrow and adds, "Derek, my dad was the Sheriff. Two years ago we ate Christmas dinner on the couch because our kitchen table was covered in your family records. I know what today is."

Derek stares at him, and falters when he tries to form words. When he doesn't say anything Stiles continues, raises the other eyebrow, and says softly,

"Six years today, right?"

Derek looks down. He swallows. "Yeah."

Stiles nods. He lets go of Derek's wrist and waltzes back to the stove, twirling the spatula like a baton. "So over easy, then?"

...0000...

They sit at the table.

Or rather, Derek sits at the table and Stiles spends ten minutes scurrying around organizing the food before finally plopping down to join him.

The spread is impressive, if not akin to something a six-year-old might put together. The entire carton of eggs is fried up and piled on a plate swimming in yellow, only two out of twelve yolks still in one piece. Another plate holds a mountain of toast and a few frozen waffles, all varying hues of black because Stiles always gets distracted and forgets to check the toaster. The bacon is the only thing that isn't fried to a crisp— it's actually perfectly done, which shouldn't be a surprise based on how often the teen expresses his "undying, unconditional, eternal" love for the pork strips. Every beverage on hand is lined up in front of them: the pot of coffee, the orange juice, the Pellegrinos, Derek's half-empty blueberry Odwalla, and the gallon of milk, of which Stiles pours a giant glass for himself and squirts in about a pint of chocolate syrup.

They eat quietly, for the most part. At first Stiles is too busy listening to the Mets game on his laptop to proceed with his usual blabbering. He pops a couple Adderall and listens intently while nibbling on his bacon, big eyes staring straight ahead as the announcer obnoxiously narrates the game, which sounds like a hot mess. Derek doesn't follow baseball and doesn't really understand most of what's going on, but he knows something good must happen whenever Stiles interrupts his chewing to whoop "hell yeah!" and do a mini fist-bump in the air. Derek thinks it's stupid, but it's fun to watch regardless. Maybe.

When the game ends there's only two strips of bacon left. Stiles mutes his laptop and proceeds with
the usual ramblings about the dumb adventures he and Scott did as kids and his latest Lord of the Rings theories, until he pops the question.

"So what time do you want to leave?" Stiles asks around a mouthful of egg. Derek glances up.

"Leave where?"

"The cemetery."

Derek stiffens. His heart pounds and he cuts into his egg a little too hard, fork scraping across his plate with an obnoxious clatter.

"No," he blurts, too quickly, too loudly. Stiles glances up. "No," he repeats, calmer this time. "I don’t… I haven’t… I don’t go to the cemetery."

Stiles pauses, eyes widening a little like he's trying not to choke on his breakfast. It looks like he's about to say something, but then seems to change his mind and simply gives a small nod. He pushes the bacon around on his plate and bites his lip, as if mulling something over. Derek knows that he's putting it together, probably silently appalled that Derek hasn't visited his family once since the burial. Then Stiles shoves a whole egg into his mouth in one go and says,

"Alright. Well, uh… Will you come with me? I think I wanna… Visit my dad today."

Now it's Derek's turn to be surprised. He pauses, eyes narrowing on the body across from him. Stiles hadn't been back to the Sheriff's grave as far as he knew, but March thirteenth was a hell of a day to decide to visit. His immediate reaction is to blurt no— he had made a silent vow never to go back to that cemetery, or any cemetery for that matter. But he thinks of Stiles having to see his father's headstone without someone standing by his side, and Derek knows that the only thing worse than visiting a grave is visiting it alone.

"Maybe," he says.

.o0O0o.

The day drags by in a numb daze.

He never really knows what to do on March thirteenth. The hours crawl by like molasses but memories run high speed on a little loop-de-loop in his head.

He brushes his teeth and goes for a run that turns into a long walk. At noon he stares at the newspaper in the armchair while Stiles watches The Big Bang Theory reruns on the couch. He stays in his room mostly, in the chair at his desk, but he doesn't really end up doing anything other than sitting and folding origami paper cranes with sheets from a yellow legal pad. Stiles stays downstairs, allowing space by chattering to himself in the living room or mulling around in his bedroom, yet providing company in the familiar heartbeat Derek's grown to memorize. Throughout the day Derek listens to him, quietly counting the number of times the teen trips on the carpet while vaguely wondering why Stiles hasn't left the house.

It's a little after 2:00pm when he hears Stiles's phone shriek downstairs with "Hungry Like the Wolf," the designated ring tone for Scott. The TV is muted, and Derek shamelessly tunes in to he hear the following conversation from Stiles's end:
"Hey man, what's up?"

... "Dude, no way! How'd you find tickets so late?"

... "Ah. I knew there was a reason we still liked Danny."

... "Oh, uh... That's, awesome. Really awesome. But I can't go, actually."

... "Yeah, no, I'm fine. Totally. It's just... I'm just staying in today."

... "Hey, it's okay, I promise. It's just, um, I wanna keep my schedule clear... For something."

... "Nah, don't worry about it. Did you try Lydia? Her music tastes are more defined than you think. Mhm. Thanks, man. Kick ass for me tomorrow on the field."

... "Back atcha' bro. Bye Scott."

The TV volume turns up again. Derek creases the last fold, and tugs the tips to make the crane flap it's wings. He adds it to the pile of paper birds on his desk.

He finally comes downstairs in the afternoon. It's then, when he realizes that he hasn't changed—he's still in his sweats and the shirt he woke up in, hair mussed and unkept from not taking a shower. Stiles is sitting on a stool at the counter with his back to stairwell, a silver mixing bowl in front of him and an empty package of Pillsbury instant cookie mix by his elbow. He glances over his shoulder as Derek reaches the bottom step, flashing a grin.

"Hey," Stiles greets. "Come give me a hand with these."

Derek pads over quietly, taking the stool opposite. He glances at the little balls of dough laid out on the cookie sheet, and watches as Stiles scoops out spoonfuls from the bowl and adds them to the lineup. Derek didn't buy any cookie mix, which means that Stiles must have gone out on a rogue grocery trip, which he did sometimes at night when he got the munchies. Which was always.

"You're making cookies," he observes. Astute.

"Yep, sometimes you just gotta bake some cookies," Stiles replies, and picks a piece of fallen dough off the counter to eat it.

He scoops up another ball and holds it out. Derek takes it and places it on the tray. They continue this system until four rows of cookies dot the pan, and when they get to the bottom of the bowl Stiles
uses the spoons to scrape up the last of the dough, piling it in two generous mountains. He inserts one spoon between his front teeth, handing out the other for Derek to take. Derek blinks at it.

"You'll get salmonella," he warns.

Stiles rolls his eyes. "Do you know how many pounds of cookie dough I've consumed in my lifetime? And look at me, I turned out great." He waggles the spoon a little, raising an eyebrow. "Not to mention, how many times both of us have nearly died terrible gruesome deaths in the past couple years. A little bacteria is the least of our worries."

Derek gives up and takes the spoon. He picks off a chocolate chip and puts it in his mouth, figuring grimly that his risk of diabetes has probably doubled since Stiles moved in. Stiles smiles approvingly and goes to the fridge, returning with the gallon of milk. Derek watches as he pours two tall glasses and slides the first one over.

"Can't eat cookies without milk," Stiles explains, as if some sort of expert. "Eating cookies the right way, at least. Personally I consider it a sin to eat anything chocolatey without milk, otherwise you just don't get the full experience. It's like going to The Kentucky Derby without a fancy hat. Just kinda sad and sub-par, you know?"

Derek doesn't know. Stiles whirls around to put the cookies in the oven, swapping them out for another tray that was already baking. That's when Derek notices two more trays cooling off on the stove burners.

"How many did you make?" He asks, weary. Stiles shrugs and sticks his now clean spoon in the sink.

"Eh. Package says it makes forty-eight. But I added some extra ingredients, so who knows."

Derek rethinks taking another lick to squint questionably at the cookie dough on his spoon. He isn't sure if he wants to know what the mystery ingredients are.

Stiles brings the hot tray over and sets it on the counter, plopping back down on the opposite barstool. The cookies steam before them, blowing up hot curls of buttery-sweet aroma. Stiles pokes them experimentally and leaves little craters in the glistening dough with his fingers. The chocolate chips bubble and ooze like molten sugar vats, shiny with oil and the smell of comfort.

"Fuck yes, look at these babies. Ten out of ten for looks for sure, probably twelve out of ten for taste." Stiles selects the biggest one, nudging it off the tray with his index and pinky finger to a whispered tune of, "ouch, ow, hot, hot," and grins triumphantly once the cookie is in his palm. Derek pulls a couple napkins off the stack by the microwave and tosses them over. Then he abandons his dough spoon and takes the second biggest cookie for himself.

Before biting into them Stiles raises his milk glass, offering his lopsided smirk™. "Cheers."

Derek nudges his milk forward and the glasses kiss with a clink. Stiles bites into his cookie with an orgasmic sound, eyes rolling up to the ceiling as he tries to chew around the piping hot chocolate on his tongue, fanning his mouth with his fingers as if this will help somehow. Derek blows on his, because he is friends with patience. Stiles takes a long drag of milk, studying Derek over the rim of his glass.

"Tell me your favorite color."

Derek blinks at him.
"Why."

"I dunno, just tell me your favorite color," Stiles shrugs, and sucks the chocolate goo from his thumb when a chip sticks to his finger. Derek's never thought about his favorite color. He swipes his tongue over his teeth, wiping away the smear of chalky dough stuck there.

"I like blue, I guess."

Stiles nods. "Blue's nice. Color of the ocean, blue M&M's… Scott's face that one time we tried to see who could hold our breath the longest. I won, by the way."

Derek stares at his cookie. This is not what he does. He doesn't sit and eat cookies with people, or tell people his favorite color. Especially not on March thirteenth. Usually he would think of abandoning the situation and going back to his room, but instead he stays at the counter. Stiles isn't really people. And cookies are kind of tasty. He had forgotten how good freshly baked ones were.

"Don't you wanna know what my favorite color is?"

"Red."

Stiles squints at him. "I thought you said mind-reading wasn't on your list of werewolf powers."

"Half your wardrobe is red," Derek points out.

"Cheater," Stiles dismisses. "If you could eat one food for the rest of your life what would it be?"

"What kind of question is that."

"Hey, no disparaging eyebrows. Answer."

"Rabbit," Derek says, just to see the look on Stiles's face. He should maybe ask back. "You?"

Stiles tips his head back, dragging long fingers down his cheek. "Oh, s'mores. Totally s'mores. At summer camp, which was this one summer camp in particular that was exceptionally awesome, we used to make these ones with Reese's peanut butter cups instead of Hershey's, they were just, holy god, heaven in a diabetes package. I ate like ten of them within half an hour. Food coma for days. You think regular s'mores are as good as it gets, but nope. Not until you've had Reese's s'mores."

"I wouldn't know," Derek admits. "I've never had s'mores."

Stiles's eyes bug out of his head. "You— That's— you've never tasted the the godly polyamorous marriage of marshmallow to chocolate to graham cracker? That's almost as bad as Scott not knowing the difference between DC and Marvel— Well, okay, maybe not that bad. But s'mores make everything better, it's like, a fact. Didn't you ever go to Outdoor Ed in eighth grade?"

Derek shrugs. "It was during the week of the full moon. I wasn't very good at controlling the shift yet, so I stayed home."

"Huh," Stiles nibbles on his cookie. "Well you didn't miss much, other than a bunch of ear-bleedy campfire songs. And banana slugs. So many banana slugs. But s'mores, dude. You need to get on that, like ASAP."

"As soon as my pancreas recovers from all the sugar you keep feeding me."

Stiles smiles, like this pleases him. "Deal. So what freaks you out? As in the creepy-crawlies, the heebie-jeebies. And I mean besides unorganized laundry." He pops the last of his cookie onto his
tongue and immediately goes for a second one.

"The dentist," Derek admits after a beat. Because strangers poking fingers into his mouth is a fucking nightmare. "You? And I mean besides spiders."

Stiles shudders, looking briefly like he's considering spitting out his cookie. "Mm, nope. Spiders are definitely the one and only, at least at the top the list. Have you seen those little hairy ones with the fat butts? I know we're supposed to be appreciative of God's creatures and whatnot, but those things are straight from Satan's inferno. Stiles does not do spiders."

"We're going to work on that," Derek mutters. "Next time you see one, try not to parkour across the living room so much."

"It was on my arm. That warrants parkouring to the moon."

"You broke a lamp."

"You hated that lamp."

Derek considers this. He did. "What's your favorite subject?" He dodges.

"In conversations?"

"In school."

Stiles raises an eyebrow, sneaking a hand forward to grab his milk. "Take a guess. Use those keen werewolf senses."

"Science."

"Nope."

"Whatever class you have with Scott."

Stiles smirks and taps his nose twice, seemingly forgetting that he has a cookie between his fingers. It leaves a dot of chocolate on his nose, which he tries to reach with his tongue before he gives up and wipes it away with his thumb. "You got it. That would be American History sophomore year, Bio with Ms. Swartz last semester, hopefully something cool like Mythology this fall. What was your major?"

Mm.

"I only went to high school for a few years," Derek admits. And when Stiles blinks at him, he continues. "I dropped out at the start of senior year." Back when I was too busy committing small felonies to care about going to class. "But I changed my mind not long after. I used to sneak into college classes and sit in the back, just for subjects I thought were interesting. I bought some books, things like linguistics, mythology… Biology, medicine. Picked up a couple languages, too."

For once, the reaction he gets isn't a judgmental eyebrow.

"Wow," Stiles breathes, gazing at him fascination. "That's… That's kind of amazing. All by yourself? You mean you picked up languages, even?"

"Spanish and Italian. A little Mandarin."

Stiles grins at him. Derek knows what's coming.
"Dude, that's sick! How do you say, 'Stiles has an awesome ass' in Italian?"

Derek raises one eyebrow of doom as he takes a long sip of milk. Stiles makes a giggle that sounds more like a wheeze and scratches his nose awkwardly.

"Fine, okay scratch that. How about, 'Stiles bakes the best cookies in the world?'"

"Stiles cuoce biscotti dal sapore schifoso."

Stiles beams, batting his eyelashes exaggeratedly. "Why thank you, Derek. I do try my best."

Derek smirks, because what he really said was 'Stiles bakes cookies that taste like crap.'

"What's your middle name?" Stiles asks next, and Derek's stomach swoops. "On your driver's license it's a 'B,' right?" (From when they went to IKEA to look for the nightstand, and Stiles swiped his wallet while Derek signed the receipt).

"You're not going to guess," Derek tells him. Because Stiles is going to try and guess anyway in three, two—

Stiles cracks his knuckles. "You are so underestimating me. I'm the dude who goes by 'Stiles' because my real name gives people aneurisms. Brian? Benjamin. Brandon. Bradley? Bonaparte, that would be cool."

"No."

"Baxter. Batman. Bartholomew. It's Derek Bartholomew Hale, isn't it?"

Derek hesitates.

"Bidziül."

Stiles pauses, eyebrows practically disappearing into his hairline. "And I thought my first name was weird. Is that English?"

"Navajo," he answers. "My mother gave it to me."

"Sweet. Does it mean anything?"

Derek glances down, studying the chocolate chips in his cookie. He picks one out and nibbles on it. "He is strong."

"Intuitive woman," Stiles replies. He grins, leaning back on his stool. "Does that mean you can speak Navajo too?"

"A little."

"What would I be? Like my Navajo middle name."

Derek thinks for a moment. "Teetonka."

"Cool, what's that? Like 'awesome warrior'? 'Muscles of steel'?"

"Talks too much." He smirks when Stiles chokes a little on his cookie. "What's your first name?"

The jumble of syllables Stiles pronounces makes Derek raise not one, but both eyebrows. He'd raise
three if he had them. "Really rolls off the tongue."

Stiles shrugs. "Right? It's Polish, which isn't as cool as Navajo, but my mom liked it. Smash a keyboard, you'll probably spell it right. Why henleys?"

"They're comfortable. Why hoodies?"

"The pockets are big enough to hide all my secrets."

"Mm," he hums. "Like how your extra ingredients are tabasco and cinnamon?"

Stiles's jaw drops, looking betrayed. "Wha— did you see me adding them?"

"I'd think by now you'd remember I have a wolf's nose."

Stiles leans in, lowering his voice dramatically. "Which reminds me. Okay, honesty hour here... Have you really ever eaten a rabbit?"

Derek bites into his cookie, making sure his canines show. "It tastes like chicken."

Stiles gapes and leans back, looking half horrified and half impressed. He buries his fingers in his hair. "Duuuude, I totally called that. Oh, gross, little bunnies though? With their fluffy tails? I knew it. Remind me to call Scott later, he owes me ten bucks."

Stiles mulls this revelation over as he gnaws on the last of his cookie. Derek watches him and decides to ask a question.

"What do you want to do?"

The teen glances up, licking away his milk mustache. "What, you mean like my hopes and dreams? Career?"

Derek nods.

"Film," Stiles says immediately. "I love film. I wanna be like, I dunno, the next John Hughes or something. Or just work on the set for something cool," he leans back and splays his hands wide, eyes shiny and faraway. Derek stops chewing to stare and watch. "Either that or a cop, but if those don't work out then I totally plan on publishing a tell-all book about the secret lives of werewolves."

Because of course Stiles would.

"Pssh, don't look at me like that. It totally has potential to be the next Hunger Games, I already have the plot planned out and everything. Scott's the annoyingly moralistic but relatable protagonist, right? Like the lovable hero with the Natasha Romanoff-esque girlfriend, that's Allison. Only cooler because she's got Hawkeye's sharpshooting skills too. Lydia's the super hot spy girl with banshee powers under her belt, you're the dark and mysterious vigilante in the leather jacket, and I'm the cool, ultra-smart hacker on the side. Like Wade from Kim Possible, but less hermit-y."

"I thought you were Batman."

"I—" Stiles looks surprised. His lips twitch and bloom into a grin. "Yes. Batman. I am so totally Batman."

He's a little confused by what Stiles does next. Which is curl his pale fingers into a fist and hold it out for Derek to bump. Derek stares at it blankly.
"Well, don't leave me hanging."

Derek bumps it weakly with his knuckles.

"Ah, no. Again. Properly this time," Stiles orders, still holding his fist in the air. "You wanna show your street cred? You do it like this."

Stiles nudges his fist forward until their knuckles meet again, only this time when the teen draws back he splays his digits out wide, waggling his fingers. "Boom, explosion!" Stiles grins at him. "And if you wanna be kosher about it," they do it again and Stiles repeats the finger-wiggling action. "Potatoes, fries!"

They had been doing an awful lot of hand-touching recently, Derek thinks.

"And my personal favorite," Stiles continues, setting their hands up again for another one. This time he whispers "octopus," and undulates his fingers away in a swimming motion. A chuckle bubbles out of him as he finds amusement in his own dumb fist-bump joke, and Derek marvels at how Stiles can find such joy in the stupidest things. It makes him want to remember how.

"You're..." But he trails off, unable to finish. Stiles glances up, wipes the milk off his lips. Smiles.

"Yeah, you are too," Stiles tells him.
Together they devour half the cookie sheet. They eat in quiet, eyes flicking up to watch each other every once in a while— sometimes locking, sometimes just missing each other's gazes. It's much different from how they used to look at each other, Derek thinks, although still not really different at all. The rain tap taps against the window for their attention, but the noise gets lost behind the hum of the oven and the clink of their glasses against the counter. For the last question Stiles downs the rest of his milk, looks at the clock and asks carefully,

"So, uh, I'm about ready to go..." He glances up, meeting Derek's eyes. "You make up your mind yet?"

The cemetery. Derek chews his cookie. He watches Stiles blink, looks at the crumbs stuck to the teen's chin. Maybe it's the sugar high, or maybe just the dumb way Stiles is looking at him, but apparently it's just enough to change his mind.

He nods.

"You're driving."
They take the jeep.

Stiles peels off of Highway 92 to stop for flowers at a Safeway shopping center. He buys a bouquet of yellow tulips, and Derek remembers when they were eating grilled cheese on the porch and talking about their families. "She had a garden with like, every flower on the planet, and occasionally she'd cut some and make little bouquets for the table. For their anniversary my dad would always get her yellow tulips because they were her favorite flowers, but they were the one thing she was never able to grow."

After that Stiles drives through a Burger King and orders a Whopper, but doesn't eat it.

_Beacon Hills Memorial Cemetery_ looms above them in a weathered arc sign as they pull past the entrance gate. A wall of wispy grey clouds hang over their heads as they walk across the grass, but the setting sun bathes the field in a peachy glow, tickling the surrounding trees with soft warmth. The air is crisp with cold wind, mixed with the sharp scent of wet lawn and nearing rain. Already a few drops of water plummet from the sky, pecking the grass with tiny beads of dew, leaving little dark speckles on their jackets.

Their shoes are quiet against the damp green. Across the other end of the field there's a woman in a blue coat kneeling at a gravestone with an umbrella tucked beneath her arm. Other than that, they're the only ones in sight. Stiles leads them, clutching the burger and bouquet of flowers tight to his chest. As they get closer Derek hears his heartbeat speed up, and the click of the teen's throat as he swallows nervously. He half expects Stiles to turn around and change his mind. That's what Derek would do. But Stiles keeps walking, face a controlled mask of something Derek recognizes all too well.

When they reach the headstone Stiles's feet slow to a stop, sneakers squelching in the damp soil. He clears his throat a little and bends down to place the flowers and burger at the head of the grave. His fingers tremble.

The wind stills to a hushed whisper.
Stiles fidgets with his sleeve, breathing so quietly that Derek wonders if he's holding his breath. The breeze streaks past them, running invisible fingers through their hair.

"Hey pops," Stiles says, voice uneven and thin. He licks his lips, corners twitching into an attempted smile. "Brought'cha something. Don't eat it all at once, okay?"

He gives the Whopper a little pat and straightens up, arms swinging minutely at his sides. One hand comes up and scratches at his cheeks, heels bouncing unsteadily in the grass. He blows out a shaky breath and coughs a little into his fist. Derek stands quietly behind him.

"I, uh, gotcha some flowers too," Stiles adds, gesturing to the tulips as if his dad was there to see the action. "I don't know what your favorite flowers were, but I got you yellow tulips because they were mom's favorite, and so I figured that might make them your favorite. You know, 'cause um… I, uh…"
Stiles falters. He clears his throat when his voice cracks off, struggling to save himself. Derek watches as his jaw quivers, pale chin washed over with tiny dimples. Stiles raises a shaking set of fingers to his lips, tucking his other hand into the nook of his arm and ribcage.

"I, um, hope you and her get to talk, you know? Wherever you are. I just, um, thought maybe I'd come by and say h-hi, and t-that…"

A drop of water falls to the grass next to Stiles's sneaker. Derek can't see his face, but he's sure that it isn't a raindrop.

"—That I r-really miss you."

Stiles breaks off with a hushed sob, knees buckling slightly as he doubles over, shoulders caving in. Derek immediately steps forward and places a palm on his shoulder to steady him, offering a small squeeze. He keeps it there when a pale hand comes up and wraps over his fingers, squeezing back weakly in response. Stiles leans a little into his side and straightens up, wiping his face. He sniffs, laughs a little. Sniffs again.

"Geez. This is— sorry for all the waterworks, I honestly thought I'd dried up my tear ducts by now. But— I'm uh, living with Derek now," Stiles continues shakily, nudging Derek's side with his elbow. "I know what you're thinking, but he actually doesn't need to be walked as often as you might think and he's actually pretty good about house-training."

Derek removes his hand from Stiles's shoulder to yank on the teen's jacket string, scrunching up the hood. Stiles laughs weakly again, continuing a little stronger.

"And um. Scott says hi. Lydia too, probably. Melissa talks about you all the time, at least that's what Scott says. I think she totally had a thing for you, but you probably already knew that. You got an article in the paper, too, which was nice. About your life, and your BAMF Sheriff skills. I mean, there was also a plane crash over the Atlantic that day, so you didn't get front page, but still…"

He falters for a minute, nodding at the ground. "But um… We all miss you. We all… Really miss you."

And with that Stiles sinks down on one knee in the grass. He makes a fist and lightly bumps it against the headstone, then pulls it back and wiggles his fingers in the little explosion gesture he taught Derek. Potatoes, fries.

"Love ya, pops."
Stiles stays there a minute kneeled before the headstone, shoulders shaking minutely. Two minutes. Three. Derek waits. Eventually he sniffs and turns away, tears glimmery where they stick to the wells beneath his eyes. He smells sharp like adrenaline, buttery and mellow with the scent of relief. His pale skin looks warm beneath the saturated pink of the sunset, and the feathery tips of his hair glow gold in the light. To a stranger he looks fragile, but to Derek he’s the picture of strength.

Before straightening up Stiles plucks a single tulip from the pile of flowers and takes it with him, which strikes Derek as odd. But he doesn’t comment.

A long rumble of thunder rolls above them from the pink sky, groaning a warning for the nearing rainstorm. Stiles makes a beeline back to Derek's side, and without hesitation Derek simply raises a hand and tucks Stiles under his arm against the cold. As they start walking back across the grass to the car Stiles's lips are taut, lashes blinking wetly at the ground. He's quiet aside form the occasional little sniffle.

"You okay?" Derek asks quietly. Even though it's dumb, because of course not.
Stiles sniffs. He nods, and when Derek glances down he's surprised to see that Stiles is actually smiling a little.

"Yeah. I actually am."

It takes another ten seconds to notice that Stiles is leading them the wrong way. Derek tries to guide them left towards the parking lot but Stiles persists to the right.

"Stiles, the car is that way."

"I know."

And terror like no other grips him as he realizes where Stiles is taking them. They're heading towards the little grassy slope opposite the entrance— and of course, of course Stiles would know where it is, Stiles had spent almost an entire decade walking through this cemetry.

"Stiles," he blurts, but it comes out more plea than warning. "Stiles, no."

He tries to tug away but Stiles catches his hand before he can leave, wrapping his fingers firmly around his wrist like a little octopus. Derek freezes in his tracks, eyes jumping to the top of the hill where he knows it is.

"Stiles—" He tries again, pulling back. "I haven't. Not since—"

But the sentence snags in his throat. Stiles is staring at him with his stupid never-really-brown eyes, mouth a calm little line. For once he doesn't speak a word, but his eyes say everything, still a little pink from crying. His lips bend up in a tiny, encouraging smile. Wordlessly he holds out the yellow tulip for Derek to take.
Derek stares at the flower, glancing from the cheery yellow petals and back up to the top of the hill, getting stuck on the pale face across from him.

Slowly, he takes the tulip. His feet take a stiff step forward, letting Stiles lead him to the top of the hill for reasons he can't really decipher. Stiles keeps his fingers wrapped around Derek's wrist, like he knows that letting go will allow Derek to run for the car and never come back.

The grass is plush beneath his boots as they reach the top, a small distraction from the muscle hammering painfully in his ribcage. To anyone else the view is beautiful, with the grassy slopes of the cemetery and the distant shadows of the county saturated beneath the setting sun. Above them the purpling sky grows quiet, even the wind slowing to a stop. Derek steps into the first row of graves, hand slipping free from Stiles's as he approaches the familiar slab of stone. He keeps his eyes glued on the horizon, because he's too afraid to look at it. He can't look at it. But he senses when his boots step over the mound of hardened earth, and stiffly he bends down to place the tulip on top, pretending not to notice how his fingers shake. Finally he coaxes his eyes open and looks down.
They had been buried together, ashes to ashes. Creamated in urns buried beneath his feet.

He stares rigidly at the grey slab of stone, chest tight. He can't breathe, he can't think, can't do anything but be crushed from the inside out with the weight of the last six years. The engraved names hit him like a truck, harder and more painful than any supernatural blow. It makes his face tighten, his lips pinch together, rekindles the foreign sensation of his throat growing tight and hot, and tighter and hotter until he can't hold it in anymore— until he won't hold it in anymore. He collapses to his knees, and for the first time in six years—

*Feet off the coffee table, please.*

*But my Docs? Totally wearing them underneath.*

*Look, this one's all wiggly! It's almost out, I can feel it.*

He cries.

The sound that snags in his throat is embarrassingly human. He crashes to his shins, legs rendered
useless by the sudden vice around his chest. A choked sob worms through the hand he clamps over his mouth, followed by gasping hiccups that make his shoulders quake. It's terrifying how once the first one escapes he can't stop, but tears start running down his face and all he can think of is how it's a nice change from the blood and sweat that often drip down his cheeks instead.

He cries, and it feels like rain and sin and freedom all at once, and it feels like the best thing in the world.

Above him the sky rumbles softly with a tirade of thunder, and the rain pours down on his shoulders like it's all too eager to celebrate his newfound softness. It's cold and his jacket is getting drenched but he doesn't care, his limbs are shaking and he doesn't know why, he just lets himself huddle pathetically in front of his family's headstone as the knot in his chest loosens. He blubbers, horrible ugly sounds he once swore never to let himself have the luxury of expressing again. But just when he thinks that he can't handle it, he's going to cave in on himself—

Suddenly there's a pair of arms wrapped around his shoulders, a warm chest in front of him. Something wet and heavy is draped over his shoulders, and it takes a second to register that the arms around him are bare— Bare, because Stiles has shrugged out of his hoodie and draped it over his shoulders, which is stupid and ridiculous because the hoodie is already sopping wet and isn't doing anything to protect against the rain, but it just makes Derek cry harder.

This is going to be so embarrassing later, he thinks.

He slumps a little further to the ground, and Stiles stupidly follows him, clinging onto him like he doesn't even care that his knees will get wet too from kneeling in the grass. Derek doesn't even care anymore, or maybe he cares too much. But he needs something to hold onto, an anchor to keep him from breaking like glass. So he holds onto Stiles.

He presses his face into Stiles's shoulder and tries to catch his breath. His hands find their way around to Stiles's chest, the back of his shirt, and clutch the fabric like a lifeline. The last time he was like this was six years ago in this same spot, when he watched shovels of dirt rain down onto their urns. But no one had stepped forward like this. The burial had been reserved for family only, but Peter didn't step forward and touch him, embrace him. Not like Stiles is doing now.

Up until today, he never had the courage to revisit their grave because he didn't want to do it alone.

"Thank you," he chokes out, and squeezes his eyes shut against Stiles's shoulder. He can't see the rest of the world that way.

Stiles doesn't hesitate to melt into his embrace, squeezing him back and curling long fingers into his hair, tucking his nose firmly into the crook of Derek's shoulder. It's exactly what Derek needs, and for once he isn't afraid to ask for it. The frigid rain soaks their skin and the damp grass stains their jeans. Stiles answers him, and his voice sounds like home.

"You're welcome."
An hour later he's sitting on the couch, a cup of hot tea in his hands and a blanket wrapped around his legs.

His hair is still damp from the shower he took, a pair of fuzzy sweats and thumbhole sweater soft against his skin. He watches the rain patter softly against the window, streaming down the glass in little silver streaks that blur the woods beyond the glass. The rim of the mug presses warm against his lips as he takes a sip of tea, feeling oddly fragile. He feels stripped bare, like a wrung out rag. Like he ran a marathon on an empty stomach, jumped off the empire state building without a parachute. He feels like a child, and he takes another sip of chamomile and thinks about how much he doesn't mind.

"Come on, Linda, what is Costa Rica? Who the hell let you on this show."
Stiles is in the kitchen fixing a hot chocolate for himself, occasionally poking his head out around the bar to snark at the TV, where Jepordy! is on. Derek listens to the beep beep of the microwave, the plastic stretch of the marshmallow bag. Eventually he comes over to join Derek on the couch, cradling a steaming mug of cocoa. A mountain of mini marshmallows spills over the rim, which he tries lapping up with his tongue while simultaneously balancing the hot cup between his fingertips. A menu pamphlet is tucked under his armpit, and his phone hangs precariously between his thumb and pinky. It's a small miracle that he doesn't drop anything.

Stiles plops down on the couch and stretches his legs out, flipping his phone right-side up in his palm.

"How does Chinese sound?"

Derek stares mindlessly at the TV. He nods.

"Was that a nod? Awesome, because I could totally go for some egg rolls right now. Let's just hope they actually remember the fortune cookies this time."

Derek watches from the corner of his eye as Stiles dials the number from the menu. The teen is sprawled across the cushions with one leg swinging over the arm of the couch, socked foot bouncing sporadically to some offbeat tune inside his head. His shirt is riding up to reveal a strip of pale skin dotted with moles, and a little trail of dark hair that ventures down below his waistband. He hums idly as he thumbs through the pamphlet in his lap.

A man answers on the other end of the phone. Stiles scratches his head, blinking rapidly as if pulled from a train of thought. Knowing him, probably four trains of thought.

"Oh, hey, yes, hello. Uh… Heh, guess I got a little excited to order, we haven't even decided on the food yet. Hey, er, could you hold on just a second?"

Stiles tucks the phone between his ear and shoulder, tongue sticking out at an angle as he uses one hand to thumb through the menu, the other to bring the mug of cocoa to his lips again.

"So let's see, just what we got last time okay? There's chow mein, sweet and sour pork, tong sui, some other thing I probably can't pronounce… Christ, look at all their dumplings. Do we like dumplings? I don't think I've ever tried one. But these little pictures make them look kinda tasty. Maybe we should get dumplings. You liked the orange chicken, right?"

Derek takes a sip of tea.

"M'kay. So orange chicken then. Ah— Y'ello? Hi I'm back, how you doing today, sir? Oh. Okay, cool, cool—"

Stiles looks over and mouths "I can't understand a word he's saying," then turns back to the phone.

"Alright, so we'll have two orders of orange chicken, two orders of chicken chow mein, and uh, okay let's do one order of hot green beans. I guess we should at least try to be healthy, right? Mhm. Oh, and dumplings. What kind do you suggest? No, I mean what kind do you recommend? Like the yummy ones. Uh-huh… Okay, lets do an order of those then. And let's do one beef fried rice to shake things up. Mhm. And one, no scratch that, two, we totally want two orders of egg rolls." He turns to Derek. "Anything else?"

"Egg drop soup." Derek says.

Stiles wrinkles his nose but repeats 'egg drop soup' into the speaker anyway.
Twenty minutes later the door knocks. Stiles jumps up from the couch, pays the deliveryman, and whoops in delight when the food bags are in his hands. He makes a pit-stop in the kitchen to grab some napkins, which is the moment the power finally shorts out.

A roll of thunder slams the house into pitch darkness, followed by what sounds suspiciously like a yelp, Stiles tripping, and the sound of Chinese food hitting the floor.

"Ah, crap."

Derek sighs. "Stiles." He cranes his neck back towards the kitchen. His eyes adjust in a matter of seconds (werewolf perks), and he sees Stiles feeling blindly along the counter for the flashlights.

"Yeah, just tripped a little. I'm okay but— shit. Oh sweet Jesus, please, hang on hang on—"

Crinkling plastic bags. "Oh thank god. The fortune cookies are okay!"

Christ.

"Flashlights are by the microwave. Left. Your other left," Derek directs, watching from the couch as Stiles feels around blindly in the dark. Stiles snorts, finds a flashlight and flicks it on. He immediately swings the beam into Derek’s face, briefly scalding his retinas.

"Stiles."

"Ah— shoot, sorry, sorry! You're not blind now, are you? That would be bad."

"Bring the food to the couch," Derek voices, and stands up to go to the hall closet for the candles. He blinks the lingering fireworks from his vision and remembers how he never used to eat on the couch because his parents didn't want food spilling down between the cushions. He never used to do a lot of things, until now.

When he returns Stiles is setting their laptops on the coffee table, one of the smaller flashlights clamped between his teeth. The Chinese food is in a bag on the floor along with the unlit lantern, and he’s humming some tune that sounds suspiciously like the Star Trek theme. Derek starts unloading the box of mismatched candles onto the coffee table, collected over the years from various garage sales and quiet bookstores, and Stiles brings over napkins and plates and ventures into the Little Hunan bags for the grub.

"Mm, fancy," Stiles comments, and proceeds to stick his nose down to sniff each one of the newly-lit candles. Derek decides to let him find out on his own that they're all unscented. Stiles sneezes over one of them, successfully blowing it out with a spray of spit. It dies with a wisp of smoke and Derek wordlessly flicks out his lighter again and rekindles the wick.

Stiles wipes his nose. "Why do you always have a lighter on you?"

"In case I get shot."

Stiles makes a little noise of awkward and takes an extra big swig of cocoa.

"Are you cold?" Derek asks.

"What?"

"You sneezed."

"Yes, people sneeze."
"So you're cold."

"Maybe a little. A moderate amount. Yes."

"Light the fireplace then."

Derek tosses him the lighter. Stiles only bangs his elbow against one piece of furniture while flailing to catch it.

A little flip of fear always circles Derek's chest when he lights the fireplace, or even just the candles. He froze beneath thin blankets the first year after his family died, too perturbed to dare sparking an open flame in the house. He still won't walk within five feet of the gas heater, and doubts that he'll ever turn it on for as long as he lives.

A few pieces of wood are piled up on the hearth, finally dry from when they gathered it last weekend. Derek crumples some newspaper and adds it as kindling to get the flames going, and Stiles eyes him discreetly like he wants to make sure Derek is okay with it. Then Stiles finds the poker and spends a few minutes arranging (stabbing) the wood with hushed proclamations of "take that, logs," and then jousting the air until Derek tells him that it isn't a toy and to put it back before he pokes an eye out. They return to the couch where the lantern shines on the table, little flames dance atop the candles, and a pinky orange glow bathes the living room.

"Hey, it's like Christmas," Stiles comments as he gazes contentedly around the living room, taking a moment to wiggle further into his hoodie before grabbing the takeout boxes. He finds Derek's soup and hands it over to him. "It's all cozy-ish and..." He twirls some vague fingers in the air. "Glowy. Great environment for a cheesy Christmas movie or something. Now all we need is Tim Allen crashing down the chimney, or a basket full of lab puppies."

He starts unloading the containers onto the coffee table, and Derek thinks about how this is just like last weekend in the fort, when their roles had been reversed.

The embarrassment about what happened in the cemetery kicked in about an hour ago. The car ride home had been quiet, but not quite an awkward kind of quiet. A Black Keys song had come on the radio and Stiles had immediately switched to the oldies station, almost like he knew that Derek wouldn't want to hear his favorite artist when he still had tear stains on his cheeks. 'Love Me Do' had been in sync with the windshield wipers.

At the bottom of the bag is a package of fortune cookies wrapped in red plastic. There's six included, which makes Stiles's heartbeat hop excitedly.

"Aw, yesss. Now this is a number I can work with," Stiles preens, diving a hand into the bag to select the perfect one. "Here. Pick your fate." He holds the bag out and shakes it a little. Derek declines with a shake of his head.

"What, you're too cool for fortune cookies?"

"They're just slips of paper printed out in a factory."

"Just slips of—" Stiles gapes, apparently very offended about this. "I'd be more careful about insulting the power of the cookie if I were you. One time I got one that said 'the grass isn't always greener on the other side,' and the next day my neighbor's lawn caught fire. Total freak accident. Impossible, some might say, if dad and I hadn't decided to order Chinese the night before. Here, pick one."

Derek sighs but plays along, tucking a hand into the paper bag to grab a cookie. Stiles watches and
nods approvingly as he cracks one open, and selects his own cookie. Derek reads the little slip of paper, printed with smudged red ink.

"Well, mine says 'home is where the heart is,'" Stiles muses, frowning a little. He shrugs. "Which is a lot more 'grandma's embroidered wall decal' than 'fortune cookie' in my opinion, but I'll take it. What did you get?"

Derek hands him the slip of paper. Stiles takes it and recites, "Luck will come your way." He pulls a 'huh, not bad' face. "Lucky you, then. Better hang on to that one."

"It's just a piece of paper."

"I thought we went over this with my inferno lawn story? You're telling me you don't believe in luck, either?"

"I believe that fate is bigger than a cookie," Derek responds. "And no, I don't believe in luck."

Stiles balks. "You're a werewolf. You battle alphas and Kanimas on a weekly basis and a Banshee gave you a scarf, but fortune cookies are too far-fetched? Luck is hardly the most outrageous concept in this town."
Derek shrugs. Stiles makes a little raspberry noise.

"Throw it away if you want," Stiles dismisses airily, and lets go of the paper with a flourish. It flutters down onto Derek's lap. "But I'd keep it. Never know, might help you dodge a bullet sometime. A real one, even, knowing your history with wolfsbane-y situations."

Derek picks up the fortune, raising a dubious eyebrow. He stares down at the ink again, and decides it's the stupidest thing he's ever heard.

He sticks it in his pocket.

Stiles peeks through the takeout boxes and folds his legs criss-cross on the couch, cradling his laptop atop his thighs. He jiggles the cursor with one hand and shoves a dumpling into his mouth with the other.

"Okay, so whaddaya feel like?" He tilts the laptop screen towards Derek and scrolls through the titles on Netflix. Derek finds the orange chicken and rubs a pair of chopsticks together as he listens. "I think the MTV movie awards should be up on youtube by now, if you're into that. Netflix's got the usual crap, Parks and Rec, Criminal minds, New Girl, blah de blah, Vanilla Ice Goes Amish— wait, seriously? I guess they ran out of ideas for TV shows. Or a movie? According to Netflix, popular titles include Catching Fire, The Interview, The Sandlot, that's a goodie. The Wolf of Wallstreet, Charlie— here, I don't know why I'm reading them off, you can see them all. Oh hey, there's a nature special on coyotes, wanna see your long lost cousins?"

Derek takes a long, ominous sip of tea.

"Okay, so no coyotes then. How about Stand By Me? You like the classics, right?"

"Babe."

Stiles blinks.

"You mean… The one with the farm animals?"

Derek nods. Stiles pulls up a new tab and licks his lips to hide his smile.

"Oh. Yeah, sure. I loved that movie when I was a kid."

Stiles finds it on iTunes for $2.99. It takes about two minutes to download, and when the opening credits play the mansion suddenly feels just like it used to.

"This is a tale about an unprejudiced heart, and how it changed our valley forever…"

"Well, what did your mother call you to tell you apart from your brothers and sisters?"

"Our mom called us all the same."

"And what was that, dear?"

"She called us all 'Babe.'"

Derek knows the dialogue by heart. It had been Cora's go-to movie for every occasion, whether it was an after-school wind down or Christmas morning. At sixteen he found it annoying to hear it constantly playing from the living room, but at twenty-two he drinks it in like she had when she watched it for the first time.
Stiles immediately "aww"s at the puppies in the beginning, nudging Derek's shoulder and pointing at the laptop as if Derek can't see for himself. He comments throughout the film as usual, things like "wow, that dog is a dick," "Damn, that farmer could really use some Botox. Guess that's what you get for not wearing sunscreen," and "I wonder if that duck is related to the Afflack duck. Or maybe it *is* the Afflack duck, they sound the same, don't they?"

It warms Derek up from the inside, much more effectively than the fireplace, blanket, or tea.

Stiles however, takes a little trembly breath twenty minutes in, and yanks on his hoodie strings to scrunch the fabric up closer to his neck. Admittedly, the fireplace isn't doing much. It never does much anymore, ever since wild flames licked up the walls six years ago and ruined the house insulation. Even Derek can feel the storm's chill seeping in through the walls.

"Do you want the blanket?" He voices, eyes still glued to the screen where Babe is chatting with some hens.

"Yeah," Stiles shudders, making grabby-hands. "Hand it over, big guy. Another minute or two and I'll be a human popsicle."

Derek takes another slurp of soup and holds out the blanket, intending to give it over.

"Thanks." But instead of taking the whole blanket Stiles just tugs half of it over him and scoots over a little closer to Derek's side, with the intention of sharing. Derek blinks, caught off guard. He had forgotten that sharing was a thing.

"…Did you… Want the blanket back?" Stiles asks hesitantly, sensing his stiffness.

"No. No, it's fine."

(Idiot).

Stiles huddles down under the wool and gives a final shiver of relief. He tucks his socks up on the couch, careful to keep a small buffer of space between him and Derek's arm. It's cozy. Warm. New. It's something he's only ever done with his family, but for once Derek finds that he doesn't shy away from it. He welcomes it, distracted with the instinct to scoot closer.

Every so often the house groans with the wind's harassment, but it's drowned out by the glow of Stiles's Chinese food-filled chuckles. Stiles grins and releases a little hoarse laugh at the singing mice, and tries to get Derek to sing along with him in a high-pitched mouse voice, to which Derek refuses petulantly. They pass each other dumplings and trade boxes of fried rice, fingers occasionally brushing together with tiny blips in heartbeats.

"Dearie me! If it's not a duck that thinks it's a rooster, it's a pig that thinks it's a dog!"

Stiles wiggles further under the blanket and pops an entire dumpling into his mouth, chewing contentedly. Derek is surprised by how comfortable he feels. The past three months he's done little more than sit, watch TV, and putter around the house; a far cry from his usual routine. At first it was so that Stiles wouldn't be left alone in the mansion, but now staying indoors had become a habit. It was a luxury to slow down and not worry about the violent battles of Beacon Hills for once.

Outside thunder rumbles softly, rhythmically lighting up the windows with flashes of lightning. The takeout boxes pile atop the coffee table as they grow empty, and the candles burn quietly, little flames wobbling atop the wax. As the movie drones on Stiles yawns a few times, and despite the early hour Derek feels the pull of exhaustion too. They didn't even do anything today, but the impact of the afternoon hits him like a truck. He had forgotten how physically draining emotions could be.
And then Stiles's head droops a little, just enough so that his cheek rests on Derek's shoulder. Stiles blinks up at him, lips puckering nervously when Derek side-eyes the action.

"This okay?" Stiles asks quietly, voice low and sleepy. "You're… Warm."

Derek answers by fishing his arm out from underneath the blanket and wrapping it around Stiles's shoulders.

That's new for him, too. He isn't even fully aware he's made the action until his sweater is draped over Stiles's hoodie; it's the perfect opportunity for Stiles to make a quip about how intimate it is, but he doesn't. Instead Stiles just stiffens in surprise, pulse rabbiting double-time for a few moments before he lets his head fall more snuggly against Derek's shoulder, relaxing against the couch. Derek listens to their heartbeats slow down and thump-thump drowsily together.

"You weren't planning on visiting your dad today, were you," he murmurs.

Stiles licks his lips. Derek can feel his fingers twiddling with his hoodie strings beneath the blanket.

"No," Stiles admits. "But I knew you wouldn't go otherwise."

Hearing it out loud makes Derek want to curl his fingers into the soft fabric covering Stiles's shoulder, draw him close, press his nose into his pale neck and do a million other stupid things. It surprises him that someone would do that for him, but doesn't surprise him that Stiles would. "Are you sorry you went?" he asks.

"No," Stiles says. "I'm really… Glad I did, actually." His heartbeat is steady. Not a lie, then. "Are you sorry I took you there?"

"No," Derek replies, and watches Babe herd the sheep into the corral on Stiles's laptop. "I'm glad you did."

He feels Stiles smile a little against his sweater, breath puffing against Derek's shoulder. "Good."
They watch the rest of the movie. Earlier Stiles had stated "I can totally stay up all night," but now Stiles mumbles sleepy commentary against Derek's sleeve, sentences slipping further and further apart until dropping off entirely. The rain drones on, mingling with the faint tick of the clock in the kitchen. Stiles sags into him, growing heavier and heavier before slumping fully into Derek's side, eyelids blinking drowsily until they close and stay that way.

Derek glances down at him from the corner of his eye. "Thought you said you were the night owl of all night owls," he comments.

"Shut up. I'm full of chinese food and you're like a werewolf heater. 'M allowed." Stiles mumbles.

"I know. You ate an entire box of egg rolls yourself," Derek tells him.

"Your breath smells like egg drop soup," Stiles protests sleepily.

"You want to grow a beard when you're seventy so you can look like Gandalf."

"Go 'way."
"Then you'd be without a pillow."

"Mm."

Just before midnight the farmer tells Babe, "that'll do, pig," and the movie ends. Neither of them move.

The laptop dies not five minutes later, screen going black with a "pew" of the motor. The living room falls silent, filled in only by the storm outside. Even in slumber Stiles fidgets, fingers twitching against Derek's pant leg, lips sticking together briefly with every other exhale. His egg roll breath spills hot over Derek's chest, sending rolling waves of warm down Derek's spine and into his belly. His arm is still draped over Stiles's shoulders, and without even really realizing it, he traces a thumb over Stiles's sleeve. Just a brush, because after all this time the action is nothing unexpected.

Soft.

He thinks about how soft he's become. How it was Stiles's fault. Stiles somehow managed to wriggle inside his head and stick his freckled, upturned nose into Derek's life, thawing him out into someone as vulnerable as his sixteen-year-old self. Today he had cried for the first time in half a decade, and Stiles was to blame. But maybe that was a good thing, because Stiles also managed to somehow dull the pain of the past six years just by blabbering his usual nonsense, crying openly, learning to laugh again, having the simple courage to bake cookies and ask his favorite color, yell at him when he needed it, and think nothing of falling asleep on him.

He cracked Derek open, which is something Derek hasn't been since his family was still alive.

Derek lets his head dip down, just enough so that his lips barely brush against Stiles's hair. He lets his eyes flutter closed and inhales softly, finding comfort in the scent of mint and sweat and Stiles, the rainwater from a few hours earlier. He remembers how much he's missed touching like this, and how easy it is to let himself indulge in it again, and thinks that maybe it's time to admit that the past three months it had all grown into something more.
The fireplace dies with tiny wisps of sparks, glowing embers cooling off to a dull orange, some pieces twilight blue. Grey ash falls with tiny "splish" sounds to the black rack below, and the last of the candles flicker out like sacrificial soldiers. Outside the rain drums on, although the thunder doesn't sound as menacing as it has the past six years.

Derek falls asleep to the sound of the gentle pop of the fireplace, the low mull of his thoughts, and Stiles's breath warm against his collarbone.

He thinks maybe it's the best March thirteenth he's had in a long time.
When he blinks his eyes open the rain has tapered off to a light drizzle, pressing tiny kisses against the window.

Pale lavender light spills in from outside, tickling his sticky lashes as he pries them apart. His neck is stiff from being tipped back against the cushions and the distant coos of mourning doves find his ears, signaling that it must be early morning, sometime before seven he guesses. He glances down.

Sometime during the night Stiles rolled over in his sleep and slipped down so that his head is cushioned on Derek's lap, cheek squished against his thigh. The candles have burnt themselves out to waxy drips on the table, the fireplace long since stone cold. Carefully Derek maneuvers himself out from under Stiles's head and scoots off the couch. Stiles remains asleep. God knows he wouldn't be up until at least nine.

He goes to the laundry room, slips on a new henley and a pair of jeans from the drier, starts a load of whites. Since the power is back on he sets out a mug and switches on the Kei'rig, but is surprised when his phone buzzes with a text from Scott, seeing as it's 6:42am.

Scott: do u remember what today is?

Yes. He hits send.

Scott: ok just checking. i'm on a lacrosse trip in redding so i can't see him until tomorrow. don't leave him alone… this is the first year without his dad.

I won't.

Derek puts the phone down, mentally organizing the day as he waits for his coffee. He's going to need to run to the store, make that two stores, and take care of the rain maintenance. But before that he needs to muster up the courage to call—

His phone lights up again.

Peter: Delaware warehouse life or death need help asap

Derek stares at the message on his screen. Peter was not one to text. Ever. Particularly not to Derek.

The warehouse on Delaware was two towns over, an abandoned building that used to manufacture Morrison's school supplies. It was his family's old meeting place for business negotiations with other packs, chosen for it's prime location because it wasn't around any residential neighborhoods. What Peter is doing there before seven in the morning, Derek doesn't know. But something must be important if the man actually swallowed his pride to turn to Derek for help. And as much as he hates Peter, Peter is his father's brother— a Hale, and as much as Derek doesn't like to acknowledge it, family is family. His mother would want him to go.

He calls Peter twice. It goes straight to voicemail both times.

He leaves his coffee cup empty and grabs the keys to the Camaro, hurriedly slipping on his leather jacket. On his way out the door he pauses only to look back at Stiles sleeping soundly on the couch, Scott's text buzzing in his head.

don't leave him alone… this is the first year without his dad
Derek pops his jacket collar and quietly slips outside, deciding that he’ll be back before Stiles even wakes up.

.o0O0o.

The warehouse is cold and empty when he darts in through the back entrance.

"Peter," he calls out as shakes the rain from his hair. "What do you want. I don't have a lot of time, so the sooner I can get out of here the better."

Dim rays of dawn filter in through the window, casting blue shadows on the cement floor. The place is barren, dusty, and littered with abandoned boxes of faded school supplies, illuminated only by thin beams of light ghosting through the cobwebs. Old elementary textbooks lay in disheveled stacks in the corners, surrounded by shelves of pencils, puzzles, tempera paints, white boards, geography maps, and holiday window decals bleached and withered from years of exposure. It used to be the only school supplier in the county until Beacon Elementary went bankrupt a near decade ago. Now mildew masks the once sharp scent of wood shavings and ink.

Memories of standing beside Laura in his father's shadow immediately poke and prod at him, as he stares at the spot where his mother used to stand tall and address other alphas. The same cracked fluorescents hang above him from the high ceiling, turned off and swathing the floor in darkness. Tiny beads of rainwater stick to his jacket, clumping in his bangs.

He cautiously enters the space, looking around uneasily. "Peter," he calls again. His voice rings out and echoes against the concrete floor.

He's met with silence, aside from the light prickle of rain against the gated windows. It's quiet — too quiet, and his spine tingles with a deep sense of something is wrong. He takes his phone out to check if there are any other messages, but he freezes, tuning in too late to a heartbeat behind him. He stiffens, whirls on his feet to turn around—

Bang.

He falls to his knees with a gasp of pain as the bullet tears through his side, phone clattering to the floor. White-hot agony ripples up his stomach and twists his face into a grimace, and soft footsteps echo out from behind him. He turns around just in time to see Peter stepping out from the shadows behind the door, a smoking gun cocked in his hand.

"Amazing how fast you'll come running to even my side at such an early hour of the morning," Peter clucks softly. "I'm flattered, truly, but is a small mention of 'help me' all you need to put your neck on the line? I've told you for years and I'll tell you again, compassion will only derail you."

From far away Derek hears the harsh whoosh woosh of his breath as he pants heavily through the pain, the steady drips tapping against the cement beneath his fingers. His ears are still ringing from the shot, head reeling in shock. He and Peter's relationship has always been cold at best, built upon contempt and power play— but all he can do is stare speechlessly up at his uncle. Peter watches him calmly with a faint smirk on his lips.

"Oh, don't be so butthurt, Derek. This was a long time coming."

"What are you doing," Derek sputters. He can feel the blood blooming beneath his fingers, staining
his shirt, already turning black.

"Killing your own uncle for the alpha title was perhaps the only thing you've done right all these years, but that hurt," Peter pouts, eyes humorless. "Not having full power has been... Difficult," he enunciates softly, twirling a set of blunt fingers in the air beside the gun. He smiles. "But I find my ways to gain the advantage."

Derek struggles to keep his breathing under control, shoving down his fear and welling rage. He's stuck, and Peter knows it. The wolfsbane is already weakening his system, and Peter will just shoot him anyway if he tries to attack. With all the subtlety of a dropped anvil, it suddenly makes sense why they're in the warehouse district and not someplace more urban; with empty buildings on all sides, there's no one around to hear the gunshots.

Peter paces leisurely in front of him, looking bored as he examines the gun in his hand. A sleek silver pistol with a black barrel—familiar somehow. But another blink and Derek realizes how he knows that gun— he made a note on it for Argent's weaponry index last week, by lantern light during the storm when Stiles fell asleep on his bed. It's the twenty-two caliber, one of the newer models Chris developed, the one with—

"You stole Chris's gun," he states. Peter lifts an eyebrow.

"First name basis with a hunter now, are we? Then you should know your friend is out of town collecting more weapons to kill our kind," Peter muses softly, enunciating 'friend' slowly. "You'd be amazed how easy it is to break into his supply closet when his pretty little brat is at school." He flicks up a single clawed finger, suggesting that he picked the lock.

Derek's head spins. "Couldn't just slip wolfsbane into my coffee?" he grits out.

Peter shrugs casually. "I thought about it. But this is much more fun. Lure you out to an empty warehouse, smack you around a little, put a bullet in your skull where no one will hear the gunshot. In Talia's pack business place for old time's sake. A little family reunion, if you will."

"You're nothing like my family," Derek spits, with more tenacity he's ever used against his uncle.

"Our family, Derek," Peter corrects coolly. "Your father was my brother, remember?"

"By blood, yes," Derek counters, some of his own blood flecking onto his lip. He stares Peter down. "But not by spirit."

Peter takes a menacing step forward, prompting Derek to scoot back against the windows—a sign of weakness, cowardice, he realizes too late. Peter's expression suddenly twists into wild-eyed fury, criss-crossed wrinkles spilling out across his forehead.

"For years I tried helping you," his uncle seethes. "Tried to save the family name from being tarnished by a fucking failure like you, but I've just wasted my time! You dare call yourself a werewolf? Werewolves don't make habits of cowering. They don't waste time humoring a bunch of teenagers, they don't make friends with hunters, and they don't let a fucking human come live with them in a house belonging to wolves!"

Peter violently whips the gun to the side, firing an angry bullet at random into the warehouse. It hits a crate of textbooks in the far corner, spilling a plume of papery debris into the air. Paper and wood shards rain down like confetti and scatter across the floor, swathing splinters across the cement. But Derek's eyes are on the gun, where the back end by the hammer is smoking a little. Peter is breathing too heavily to notice.
"So you're going to kill me," Derek states. It comes out calmer than he expects, but there's no mistaking the waver in his voice. He figures he has three minutes at best; Peter, ever one for dramatics, would undoubtedly spend some time villain monologuing.

"Why not? You killed me first," Peter utters darkly, eyes narrowing. "I was the alpha, remember? You stole it from me. And now I'm taking it back."

And of all things, Derek remembers a line from One Hundred Years of Solitude: "Lost in the solitude of his immense power, he began to lose direction."

"Power stems from the fear you elicit in others, Derek. You can't get lost when you people will clear a path for you like the red sea," Peter scoffs, and Derek wrenches his head up, not realizing he said anything out loud.

He hates those words, the same fucking words he's been hearing all his life, but only now does it truly register how empty they are.

"No," he says, and his voice is steady this time. "You're wrong."

Blue eyes cool to a dangerous calm. An amused smile plays at Peter's lips as he murmurs, "Am I? Enlighten me."

Derek spits some blood out of his mouth. It dribbles down his chin.

"Power is nothing," he pants slowly. "Power makes you weak. Strength is… Is being able to ask for help," he admits quietly, more to himself than the other man in the room. He can sense Peter's eyes daggering into him, but in the moment the warehouse seems to slip away as the past three months engulf him, suddenly clicking into gear with memories he only recently unlocked.

"It's about finding strength in others, and letting them influence you. To face your fears, and… And to admit that you're scared," he swallows heavily, feeling strangely clear-headed. "Setting aside your beliefs to allow yourself to change. Strength is…"

Laura tossing him a packet of Reese's Pieces

"You're a real pain in the ass, and you need to stop using so much gel in your hair, but you're not half bad, okay?"

Cora bouncing Pig along his arm

"Derek, are you sad?"

His mother sitting on the edge of his bed

Goodnight, my son abeque."

Melissa reaching out to squeeze his shoulder

"I guess what I'm trying to say is… I don't know what you're doing, but thank you."

Stiles taking him by the hand and leading him up the hill in the graveyard

"Your breath smells like egg drop soup."
"Strength is love," he declares quietly, and stares Peter square in the eye. "Something you wouldn't know about."

Peter's eyes are cold and mocking, an incredulous ring of white around his irises. His lips twitch as he whispers, "did your little human tell you that?"

"No," Derek keeps his voice steady. "He showed me."

At that Peter's face abruptly melts into a dark scowl, mouth thinning with contempt. He takes an ominous step forward, and despite how he's probably mere seconds away from a bullet in his brain, Derek continues, because he needs to say it aloud before he dies.

"Stiles knew about true power before I ever figured it out. And that's why even as an alpha, you still won't be as strong as he is."

Peter cocks the gun, lining it up point-blank between Derek's eyes. At last his smile is gone, worn down to nothing but a hardened stare. He clicks off the safety, and the sound echoes coldly across the room.
"I'll be sure to pass on the message."

Derek's heart thunders in his ears as he stares down the barrel of the gun. It's the same gun he had read about not even a week ago, but he never thought he'd be introduced to it this way. The odds are not in his favor, they never are, and there's no healing from a shot like that—faulty barrel or not, it fired the first two times and the chance of malfunctioning for the third is slim. Mentally he wills the sleek metal to weaken anyway, to be as unstable as Chris had claimed in the notebook margin.
But he meet's Peter's gaze full-on, without so much as a blink between them. In his own way, it's his first and final stand against his uncle. He doesn't fear Peter anymore; the only thing Derek fears now is what will happen to Stiles when he never comes home. That Stiles will be left alone, again.

Peter squeezes the trigger.

Bang.
Derek jerks back at the sound of fire, ears ringing with the explosion. His head bounces off the window sill and he sucks a gasp in through his nose, screwing his eyes shut against the spray of hot blood on his face. He's dead, that's it, he's—

But there's no bullet in his skull.

He sputters, registers a heavy thump somewhere in front of him, and snaps his eyes open once he figures out how to breathe again. Time slows to a near-halt when his uncle blurs into focus, and the ringing in his ears tunes out to a high-pitched buzz, lips growing numb beneath the slick blood dripping down his cheeks. Slowly, he inches forward.
A gaping hole marks the center of Peter's forehead, oozing thick black blood down between his eyes. Derek stares, mesmerized as it trickles down to small puddle pooling out beneath his head. Pale blue eyes are sightless and wide open, focused somewhere far beyond the ceiling, and his chest is unmoving beneath his v-neck. His fingers are curled limp around the gun, both ends of the barrel smoking with pale purple vapor. The end by the trigger is a warped mess of melted shrapnel. It takes a second for Derek to realize that the gun backfired, and there's a wolfsbane bullet lodged somewhere in his uncle's brain.

He doesn't dwell on it. He should feel sad, but he's never been more relieved.

Clutching his side he dizzily crawls over to his phone, cursing when he flips it over and sees the cracked glass. He jabs down on the buttons but the screen remains black as night, killed by the fall when he dropped it upon entering. He could fish for Peter's phone but he doesn't know any numbers by heart, and 911 is the last thing he needs. He could call operator for the animal clinic, but Deaton wouldn't be in for a couple hours and he doesn't have change for a payphone. Both Scott and Isaac are on a bus halfway to Redding.

And Stiles doesn't know where he is. He didn't leave a sticky note.

Derek winces as he presses two fingers to his side, experiencing momentary relief when he feels the
hard lump of the bullet beneath his skin; a small blessing. Fingers slick with blood, he fishes for his lighter, but freezes when he realizes his pockets are empty. He doesn't have it—it's at home on the coffee table from lighting last night's candles.

His stomach plummets as he glances back to the broken gun on the floor. He knows from Argent's paperwork that this particular glock uses Chinese Aconite—it's triple the potency of Blue Monkshood, meaning he has about sixteen hours to live instead of the usual forty-eight, likely less considering the bullet is lodged by his kidney. Bleeding out could also be problematic. He allows himself ten seconds to weigh his options until he realize he doesn't have any other options. He needs to get home to Stiles.

He stumbles to his feet using the window ledge for leverage. Peter's body stands between him and the door, slowly oozing blood onto the cement like a gory halo around his head. A sick part of him wants to rip his claws into Peter's chest, wrap bloodied fingers around his heart, and throw the organ with all his might across the empty warehouse. Just as a final *fuck you*, to ensure that Peter got a taste of how dark of a shadow he was over Derek's life.

But Derek doesn't.

Derek from a year ago would have done it. Derek from three months ago would have done it. But not the Derek he is now. The *Bidziil* Derek.

Instead he settles for plucking one of the dusty school decals off the floor on his way out—a faded paper heart for Valentine's Day, and lets it flutter down over Peter's body. He doesn't watch it fall, nor does he spare a final glance at his uncle's face. It is a parting gift, a emotionless exchange, and a silent suggestion.

A token of victory for the death of a hated man, and a parting gift so that the man can at least have a symbol of love in death.

His vision greys at the edges as he stumbles outside onto the sidewalk, where rain puddles lap at his clumsy footsteps. He's dizzy from adrenaline, feeling slightly drunk as he limps down the block. The Camaro glitters in the dim rain, waiting for him by the curb, but he abandons it, passing it by to stagger down the street on foot. He can't risk passing out behind the wheel and veering into a building or another car, potentially injuring or even killing someone. Too many questions would be raised if an ambulance came and took him to the hospital.

He trips on the curb, grunting in pain when he catches himself on a streetlamp. Rain drums on his head, drenching his clothes and blanketing the sky with dark clouds. The instinct to get back to the mansion is overwhelming despite the daunting task of traveling two cities on foot—he'll stick to the shadows, and cut into the woods off the interstate before he hits the county line. With the cover of the weather he should be able to make it without drawing attention. His head is still reeling from the small miracle of Peter stealing the one firearm Chris was still tweaking. Logically he knows the odds of a gun backfiring like that is near impossible, but he shoves it aside to ponder later and silently thanks Chris for making a design mistake.

A drop of blood seeps through his fingers and splats against the pavement, running pink in the wet. He places one foot in front of the other, tries not to think about how he's the last living Hale, and follows the shadows home.
THANK YOU all so much for 200k hits!! It’s a dream come true to have my work seen by so many people, and to read all your beautiful comments! And thanks for waiting so long for this chapter— the art was quite intensive to put it lightly. I post updates on my tumblr at stiles-and-the-sourwolf

UPDATE 12/22/15: I expect chapter 15 to be up in early March instead of early January: I am posting it with a very special (and LONG) added companion piece (which I am so so excited for you to read), so I need the extra time. Thanks for waiting!
Chapter 15

Stiles awakes to March fourteenth, otherwise known as his favorite day of the year.

Usually.

The first thing fuzzy consciousness registers is that he's not in his bed. He's on a couch, with his cheek smashed into the cushion and the living room blanket tangled in his legs. A minute is spared to sleepily muse over how he kinda does this a lot in the mansion (waking up all cozy and warm on some soft surface he doesn't remember falling asleep on), which is nice. His eyes peel open, revealing his laptop on the coffee table surrounded by empty takeout containers and a stain on the rug where he spilled some sweet and sour sauce. Right. The movie. He remembers the movie, and eating egg rolls, and—

Falling asleep on Derek's shoulder.

Falling asleep on Derek's shoulder.

Which was actually not awkward in the slightest and three times more comfortable than he imagined. Not that he's imagined sleeping on Derek a lot, per say, but the 'grr, no-touching' wall between them has been rapidly diminishing and he's actually okay with that. Especially when Derek has a very comfy shoulder and the kind of broad collarbones that are really perfect for napping, and staring at maybe. But Stiles had done a lot of sleeping the past few months, in his bed and on the couch, and once on the floor accidentally, and in the woods next to a furrier-than-usual Derek, and once in Derek's bed, and now Derek himself can be added to the list of siesta spots.

Which hopefully will become a habit. But no pressure.

Then again the whole cuddle thing might just have been a dream, but he recalls mumbling something about Derek's breath and egg drop soup and the ghost of a fuzzy sweater against his cheek. And he definitely remembers Derek draping his arm around his shoulders, which had simultaneously been the most exhilarating and calming experience of Stiles's life. He absently brings a hand up to his sleeve, remembering the warmth of another hand there, and wishing it was still there.

It takes about five minutes for him to realize that something is wrong.

At first he figures Derek must have gone back upstairs to brush his teeth or check the leak buckets or whatever, which would account for Derek's absence on the couch. He gets up and shuffles to the bathroom to take a piss. He pads back into to the kitchen to dig out the pop tarts, switches on the chandelier to see if the power is back (hooray, it is), and that's when he notices the little blinking red light on the Keiruig, indicating a finished brew. Only Stiles didn't start any coffee.

He does a double-take and approaches the counter for a better look. The coffee pot below the brewer is filled to the brim, and an empty mug is set out beside it as if waiting to be filled. He taps the coffee pot. It's stone cold.

"Er'kaaaay…"

He frowns at the items on the counter. It's weird. Maybe Derek just made some coffee and changed his mind? But it's still weird, because Derek's eyebrows bend to a near forty-five degree angle
instead of the usual ninety without a cuppa joe in the morning. The kind of fancy imported deep-snob-roast joe at least, because the guy claims he has refined werewolf tastebuds like that. But a cold coffee pot means he must have brewed it hours ago, and then... Forgot?

"Derek?" He calls, eyes swinging upstairs. The mansion is quiet, snoring softly with little creaks and drips from the rain.

He swivels around, eyes tracking analytically over the kitchen. There's no evidence of breakfast made, and the leak bucket on the stove is nearly filled to the brim, yet to be emptied. Derek never skips breakfast ("—the most important meal of the day blah blah grrr you'll crash later if you don't eat now"), and Derek maintains the mansion's health almost obsessively. Stiles makes a beeline back to the living room, where he's surprised to find the Chinese boxes still stacked on the coffee table, drips of wax from the candles marking the wood. But Derek, the furry poster-dude for 'neat freak' wouldn't be able to stand two conscious minutes without giving into the urge to clean up the mess. The guy practically had an aneurism if a pair of socks were left on the couch.

He dives for the blanket on the sofa and shakes it out, snatching his phone when it tumbles out onto the carpet. No messages or missed calls. He doubles back to the kitchen and searches high and low for a sticky note but can't find one. Which would be fine, except that Derek made a point to always leave a note, a text, or tell Stiles in person when he went out, even just for a run. But a quick sweep of the room reveals that Derek's keys are missing from the hook by the door, and the Camaro is gone from the garage.

Okay. So Derek... Left. Suddenly. Without telling him.

Okay.

Which means one of three things:

a) Derek is in huge major trouble and is dead or dying in some ditch in the side of the road.

b) Derek went out for a drive but pulled over when he heard a squirrel in the woods and morphed into wolf-form to chase it, then got caught by the SPCA and is currently sitting in a cell at the pound.

c) Derek got a huge overwhelming craving for pancakes that was so intense he left immediately to go get some, and would be back soon with a to-go stack for Stiles too.

He decides to text Derek. **Hey where are you?**

With every minute that Derek doesn't answer he finds himself obsessing over the first option, but stops when a more logical answer hits him like a ton of bricks.

For one terrifying second he worries that Derek took off because of last night. Yesterday Derek actually cried in front of him, *really* cried, which most people would feel embarrassed about, especially emotionally constipated werewolves with bulky muscles and too many grooming tools. Derek was probably pretty embarrassed about that, maybe even about how they fell asleep together on the couch. Or did Stiles make him uncomfortable by getting too close? They did kind of... Cuddle? Sit. Cuddle-sit. So maybe Derek just went out to get some air. Which Stiles can understand, even though it hurts a little. But Derek would be back eventually. Derek always came back to the mansion.

With that in mind he tries to shrug it off and carry on with the day— a very **significant** day, the small voice in the back of head unhelpfully reminds him.

The voice gets louder as he discards the takeout boxes and starts chipping at the spilled wax on the
coffee table. It taunts him as he dumps out the leak buckets and scrubs at the dirty dishes, pointing out the empty echo of the hallways and the fact that they aren't *his* hallways on Elmer Ave, where he usually spends his March fourteenths. On reflex he reaches into his pocket, but his soapy fingers grasp at thin air where a six-pointed shape used to be.

He lasts about ten minutes before it starts to freak him out too much and he needs to flee the house. He drives the Jeep out to Target for lack of anything better to do, and buys five packs of white Christmas lights on a whim because he deserves it today, okay? When he takes them back to the mansion he spends a good hour hanging them up around the living room because the space is huge and barren and Derek could use a little light in his life, he decides. And Christmas lights are awesome. Holiday ambiance in March, who would say no to that? Cretins, that's who.

His de-tangling efforts are rewarded when he sticks the plug-end into the eroded power socket by the curtains.

The chandelier and the kitchen fluorescents dim a little as the Christmas lights suck most of the power, but it looks fantastic. It makes the living room all warm and glowy and 62% less like the setting for a horror film, which is a big plus. Derek probably won't know what to do with it all but Stiles will just make sure to take it down before he notices. He takes a snapchat of it and sends it to Lydia, who's in AP Calc.

He stretches out on the living room floor in his rad new glowy hangout space, and pulls out the tub of Ben&Jerry's Phish Phood he also bought at Target. There's a glow-in-the-dark bouncy ball in the plastic bag too, because yes. But frozen calories and phosphorescent rubber soon prove to be crappy company, even with the *Billy Crystal: Live! From Chicago* playing in the background from his laptop. He's like ninety-nine percent sure Derek doesn't know what today is, since Stiles didn't say anything. Which is why Stiles took it upon himself to indulge today.
Once he found out Scott would be out of town, he was bummed and then not-so-bummed when he remembered that at least he’d get a semi-grumpy werewolf to hang out with, assuming Derek didn’t have any squirrels to chase or weapons to craft with Allison’s semi-scary father. Thus, he had preemptively planned out exactly how today would go, starting with dropping not-so-subtle hints and winking at Derek in the morning, which Derek would immediately figure out and then pretend to remain clueless just to watch Stiles get frustrated, and then Stiles would eventually ask Derek to go downtown with him or go see whatever sci-fi movie is in theaters (he hadn’t decided which one yet). Then Derek would knit his eyebrows together all grumpy-like and say, "bler blah, Stiles you’re so annoying," and then Stiles would fire back "your face is annoying," and they would go off and have a super fantastic day.

Only Derek isn't here. So Stiles is… Flying solo. But again, he never actually told Derek, so he can't blame Derek for not being around.

Yet he takes one bite of ice cream and ends up staring at the little chocolate fish until the container starts to sweat. He sticks it in the freezer with an upset stomach, too unsettled to really care about stuffing himself to the brim with sugar today, because now it's pushing noon and Derek’s been out of the house since before nine. And his earlier message is unanswered.

He decides to resend his text to Derek. **Hey where are you?**

He tosses the glowy bouncy ball against the wall and catches it when it bounces back. He repeats
this two more times until he notices that the paint is actually cracking beneath the impact, and is so startled by this that he impulsively throws the ball again in a different direction (stupid, stupid brain) and it shatters right through the front window pane in a thousand tinkly pieces of glass. A lot of swearing and failing follows this as he goes out to the front porch to inspect the damage. The porch is littered with an estimated three thousand shards of fire-damaged glass, and a gaping two-by-two foot hole in the window marks the center of spiderweb cracks rendering the glass opaque. Or rather, more opaque since they were pretty foggy black to begin with.

The bouncy ball rolls to a stop in a patch of clover beneath the porch, and glows a mocking neon green up at him as he presses his eye to one of the cracks in the wood.

Little early to go out and howl at the moon isn't it? He hits send.

He grabs the duct tape from the garage and spends twenty minutes laying strips over the gaping new ventilation system in the window, as he mentally maps out all the best hiding spots in Beacon Hills for when Derek finds out and tries eats him. On Mythbusters he saw that cayenne pepper confuses hound noses, so he should probably go to Costco and pick up a few pounds to roll around in beforehand. Derek still doesn't respond. Stiles sends some more messages.

Unless the time of day doesn't matter for moon-howling. Since the moon is technically always in the sky, hangin out in space. Tempting werewolves 24/7

Dude I was kidding are you really out howling at the moon?

Do you howl in your wolf form or do you do it biped style?

He sweeps up the last of the glass from the porch and catches a glimpse of the date on his phone. He swallows thickly, throat suddenly dry.

Don't mind me. Just hanging out. Alone. Without you.

Which is cool. Just not as cool as it would b if you were here maybe

Don't let that go to your head bwt

*btw

(Which is "by the way" you whippersnapper)

I think I'll reorganize the bookshelves so nothing is alphabetized

Maybe stick some dirty plates in the dishwasher without rinsing them off first

Good thing no ones here to stop me

And then after much deliberation and backspaces and retypes, he sends:

I'm sorry if I invaded your personal bubble last night. I'm guessing you're out getting space or something because I don't know where you are but if you could just text or call me with a quick "hey I'm not dying" that would be awesome because I'm getting worried dude

And then it happens. He's hanging upside-down on the couch, legs thrown over the cushions and back flat against the floor, fingers tracing absent patterns over his phone as he waits for some kind of reply from Derek. But he must accidentally hit "Call Grumpyants McSourwolf" because he nearly
has a heart attack when an automated voice rings out from his speaker.

_We're sorry, but the number you are dialing is not available._

Which is when he knows something has gone horribly wrong. Derek makes it a point to always have his phone on in case some supernatural crisis needing his immediate claw-power happens. And that isn't Derek's voice box. Derek's voice box is Derek's monotone voice saying, _"This is Derek. Leave a message."_ Stiles dials again.

_We're sorry, but the number you are dialing is not available._

"Alright," he breathes. "No big deal, everything's fine." He glances at the missing Camaro keys by the door. "Totally, totally, completely fine."

He hangs up, and stares at the cold coffee pot on the counter.

Staying calm. That's what he tries to do, but his feet just kind of take him in anxious circles around the living room instead. He tries to talk himself down— Derek is probably okay, probably just out getting gas in Nebraska or taking the Camaro for a really _really_ long oil change. And didn't leave a sticky note because he'd be back soon? Yeah. Makes sense. But now it's way past _soon_, and the only logical answer is that something has gone terribly wrong. Things going terribly wrong is kind of Derek's style.

He searches high and low again for a sticky note in case he missed it but finds none. There are no signs of blood or black goopy werewolf-death, which is slightly reassuring. He checks Derek's bathroom where the shower stall is dry, and doubles back to check the garage again where he shimmies around his jeep to peek inside the hamper, and finds Derek's red thumbhole sweater from last night atop the pile of clothes. So Derek had time to change but never got around to showering. Derek got up, threw on new clothes, put on the coffee, and left before sticking around to drink said coffee or touch anything else. And then either changed his phone to the generic answering recording or dropped it down a well.

Nothing to worry about.

.0000o.

Three minutes later he's huddled behind the wheel of the Jeep listening to the police scanner.

He takes a pen and and the yellow legal pad from the kitchen counter and sits in the darkness of the garage, jotting down anything fishy. But the day's crime report is the usual: a robbery at the mall downtown, an accident on highway twelve involving a semi truck and a Toyota Camry, a woman's purse stolen on Whipple Ave. Nothing that Derek would be involved in. He listens for any incidents involving a Camaro, suspicious figures in leather jackets, the body of an early-twenties male found in some alleyway with multiple stab wounds bleeding black blood— but hears nothing of the sort. He isn't sure whether to be relieved or extra worried.

Once two pages of useless notes are filled he drums his fingertips fretfully against the paper, racking his brain to think of anything Derek might have done the past couple weeks to make him the target for a kidnapping. But Derek just did his usual stuff, like go on runs and hang out on the couch and meditate in front of the window early morning like some kind of unfairly attractive zen Buddhist monk. Last week Derek had edited Chris's weaponry index last week, by lantern light during the
storm. That was the night he fell asleep in Derek's bed, and his chest does a weird little *skip-clench-swell* when he thinks about it.

Despite the heavy rain he takes the Jeep out, leaving a scrawled "*going out to look for you, call me if you see this*" on a sticky note for Derek on the counter.

The signal lights are neon smudges on his battered windows as he fights the friday traffic— he scouts the obvious spots first: the bank, the coffee shops and café's on Market Street, the secluded parks hidden throughout town. He comes up empty handed and flies down the freeway to the next city, where he checks Minton's and the rooftop of the art museum, ending with Mike's Auto Repair on Reed Ave. He leaves a trail of rainwater as he strides into the small garage, and marches right back around when the mechanic says no one's been in all day, let alone a broody handsome guy with eyebrows from hell and a sportscar from heaven. The Farmer's market is cancelled for the rain, and Stiles is out of ideas.

Until he nearly wraps the Jeep around a streetlight when he suddenly pulls a very illegal u-turn, after it strikes him that Richard might have run into Derek and found and excuse to arrest him. Which means he needs to go… There.

The Jeep sputters and sticks her gears at the next turn, as if to say, "*are you sure?*" "Nope," he tells her, because it's the last place he wants to go. *No, nada, definitely no, how 'bout in French? Non.* He thinks about it sometimes or sees it in his dreams, but mostly just remembers how it used to be his second home.

Her tires roll to a halt in front of the police department, and he huffs a humorless laugh when he realizes it's the same parking spot his dad used to nab on a good day. His heart hammers painfully as it suddenly catches up to him what the hell he's doing here, because didn't he vow never to come back? He did that, he swore it the day before the wake and that's why Melissa went and packed up all the things from the Sheriff's office instead of him. He doesn't want to step foot inside the building he grew up in, not unless his dad is there behind the desk. But it's pushing later into the afternoon and—

Derek.

So he takes a deep breath and climbs out of the Jeep.

The building is the same, except it's not. The walls behind the double doors are still painted beige but they look a little duller, the smell of cheap coffee and newspaper ink almost seems overwhelming, and it's probably just his imagination but the lights seem thirty watts dimmer. Val is there at the front desk when he walks in— she looks surprised for half a second before she pulls a smile drenched in sympathy, and he tries his best not to cringe.

"Oh, Stiles, sweetie!"

"Uh, hey Valerie."

"Is that Casper? Stiles, my man!" A deep voice greets him from the break room, where a few other officers are huddled around a box of pastries. At the sound of Terry's hello they all whip their heads up, cracking hearty and jovial exclamations when they see him. Stiles feels his cheeks flush with anxiety as Terry stands and grins, crinkling his chocolate skin as he waves him over.

"Hey, um, m'not sure I'm allowed…" Stiles clears his throat awkwardly. *In the break room, he wants to say. In the station, behind the desks and being friends with you because I'm not the Sheriff's son*
"Hey, none of that, sure you are!" Terry beckons him forward until Stiles is standing before the group of officers, thankfully none of which are Richard. He can't really meet their eyes for more than a split second, so he looks at Gary's handlebar mustache, Rhonda's greying hairline, and the dusting of powdered sugar on Bernard's square jaw. "What brings you down to the station?" Terry asks. Terry had been his dad's best friend since the first day on the force.

"Uh…" But Stiles is looking over Terry's shoulder at the cell blocks, sagging in disappointment when he sees that there isn't a werewolf-shaped frowny face in any of them. "Well, I, uh," he shifts uneasily. "I was looking for a friend, but it looks like he's not here."

"Ah, Scott finally get into some trouble?" Terry winks. "Gotta say, I'm surprised you've managed to stay on this side of the bars for so long. Life been treating you okay?"

"Mm, s'not Scott, actually… But yeah, I guess it has been," Stiles blinks, and watches as Terry grins his giant, radiant grin at him. Terry's always had that way about him.

"We've got some doughnuts left over, wanna hang for a bit?"

"No thanks, I uh, actually have a tight timeline today. Yeah. I should, you know, head out. Now."

"Ah. Alright then, mah'man." They fist-bump a quick goodbye and Stiles turns on his heel. He's almost out to the sidewalk when he hears footsteps jogging up behind him.

"Hey, Stiles, wait up!"

Stiles turns around. Terry claps him on the shoulder. "Listen, I know it's tough for you being here. Honestly, I didn't think I'd ever see you back, but I'm glad you came, Casper."

Stiles nods, warming a little at his old nickname. It makes him want to believe that nothing has changed. "Thanks, man."

Terry winks. "If that whole movie director gig doesn't work out, the station could really use your brain around here for cases. You're always welcome, you know."

"Yeah, I… Thanks."

His sneakers squeak with dampness as he walks out the double doors. He should probably take more Adderall.

"It's March."

"Yep. The month between February and April. You're gonna have to do more than wiggle your eyebrows if you want to communicate the significance of that to me."

"It's Girl Scout season."

"Oooh, right. Like those cookies? Thin Mints, man. The best. Did you want to order some?"
"I order some every year. There's a fifty under the potted plant in case any girls come by to sell. Use it to buy a few boxes if I'm not home."

"Sure. What kind do you want me to get?"

"Whatever you want. Let them keep the change."

"Cool, man. But sure you don't wanna cast your vote? What's your favorite Girl Scout cookie?"

"They all taste like cardboard. But Cora used to be in troop 1174."

He screeches to a halt to turn into the Walgreen's parking lot when he sees the plastic green tablecloth out front, kicking up a spray of rainwater from the gutter. It's a long-shot, but it's his last spur-of-the-moment idea. Three girls who look to be about in second or third grade chatter behind the stand, and a blonde woman who could be the poster-woman for white soccer mom. They're set up under the awning of Walgreens, providing ample shelter from the rain.

The first Girl Scout is petite with two pristine platinum blonde pigtails (presumably soccer mom's daughter), alongside a cute redhead with tiny blue glasses, and a small dark girl with a head of tight curls wearing a ladybug raincoat. He walks up to them, folding his hood as the rain tapers off to a light drizzle.

"Hi!" the woman greets, smiling broadly. "You're just in time! We were about to start packing up."

"Uh, yay," Stiles replies. The little girls stop chattering to giggle at him with three sets of doe eyes, which would be cute if it didn't make him so uncomfortable. "I'm surprised you guys are out here in this weather."

"Well, you'd be surprised how determined third grade girls can be when the prize for most boxes sold is a shiny new bike," the blonde woman chuckles, gazing down proudly at trio. "I promised these three I'd run them down here this morning before the real storm starts. We've been out since ten! What do you say, girls?"

In perfect unison they chant, "Would you like to buy some girl scout cookies?" And blink up at him with bow lips and pink noses.

"Uh, hi," Stiles greets, waggling his fingers at them before turning back to the blonde woman. "Actually, I was wondering if you've seen a guy about my height come by here? Lots of stubble, classically handsome in like an early Marlin Brando kind of way, radiates general grumpiness. Probably wearing a leather jacket?"

The woman makes a little chuckle. "Goodness, honey, it sounds like you're describing that Hale kid."

Stiles freezes, perking up slightly. "Uh, yes! Yes I am, actually. Derek Hale? That's the dude I'm looking for. Has he come by here?"

"Oh, I would hope not. I certainly don't need him around my kids."

Stiles freezes, hopeful edge suddenly replaced with an ill feeling in his gut. The woman cheerily straightens out the cookie boxes on the table as he stares at the puke-green beret perched atop her blonde, Hillary Clinton hairstyle.

"Why not." He says. It's blunt, humorless, and a part of him already knows the answer. But he's seen people all over town avoid Derek like the plague, and he wants to hear the reasoning straight from
one of their mouths.

The lady pats her chest a little, right over her heart like it gives her a fright just thinking about it. Her eyes open wider, so he can see the clumps in her mascara more prominently.

"Oh honey, don't you know? That guy is a thug if this town's ever known one. I had a friend who used to work at a bakery a few years ago, and one day he came in and stole an entire basket of muffins when she wasn't looking! Back when he was a teenager he used to get arrested all the time for one thing or another—you probably wouldn't know, seeing as you're so young. What, sixteen? Seventeen?"

"Eighteen."

She smiles, revealing a smear of lipstick on her incisor. "Well Derek Hale has certainly made a name for himself. The neighbors and I always wondered why they never just locked him behind bars for good instead of letting him keep that sad old house of his. They say there used to be an entire third floor—after all that fire damage, can you imagine the cost he put into repair? And it still looks like something from a horror film! Thank goodness it's so far from the residential neighborhood, Lord knows it would certainly lower the property value. I tell our troops not to risk knocking on his door, seeing how isolated it is out there in the middle of the woods, although he usually stops by our table to buy cookies anyway, heavens knows his intentions. Now why on earth would a nice young man like you need to find him, dear?"

Stiles stares the woman down, nostrils flaring. He's lucky his hands are stuffed in his pockets, because his nails are digging fiercely into his palms and they would probably be more comfortable tearing clumps of her hair out. He pulls a tight smile and shakes his head.

"Nothing," He says stiffly, and his eye twitches with the strain. "I'd actually like to buy some cookies. Before you pack up for the day."

"Oh, did you hear that, girls?" The woman bends down, grinning wide at the children as they high-five each other. "Sure, we've got them all here, honey! Tagalongs, All-Abouts, Samo—"

"Thin Mints, please. Just one box."

The woman opens the cashbox as he hands her a twenty. She takes it and chuckles again as she peels out the change, shaking her head. Her blonde bob is so hair-sprayed that it doesn't even budge with the movement. "Yeah, I guess now he's just moved on to quieter crimes, but he used to cause some real trouble in this town. Thank goodness the county's filled up with sweethearts like you."

"The only trouble I see is that these cookies are five dollars a box now," Stiles quips, swathing his sticky-sweet tone with a cheeky smile.

"Your change is fifteen dollars even," she tells him, as one of the little girls hands him the Thin Mints.

"Thanks," he grins so intensely that his cheeks hurt. He probably looks maniacal. "But I insist you keep it. In fact—" He digs out all the bills and change from his pockets and slaps them all down on the table, which he guesses is maybe ten dollars total. He throws singles and quarters and old gum wrappers, ignoring the tinkling change that falls to the sidewalk as he dumps it onto the plastic tablecloth to the bewilderment of the woman.

"Take all my change!" He exclaims, "because I'm such a nice young man, right?"

The woman gapes at him, lipstick forming a little surprised "o' as she sputters. "I'm—?"
"You write Derek off as a thug because he stole some muffins and jumped some rooftops as a teenager?" He laughs almost hysterically as he jabs a thumb to his chest. "I've drank my weight in whiskey, stolen several sets of private keys and my fair share of wallets, hacked into my school system to access classified files, broke into the police station practically every other weekend, and lied to the Sheriff more times than I can count. Derek Hale has nothing on me."

The woman's eyes widen impossibly further as she clutches a protective hand over the little girls. Stiles puffs out his chest.

"Offended that a sweetheart like me wants to buy your cookies?" He challenges. "Or just surprised because you thought you had me all figured out just by looking at me?"

He's about to stomp back to the jeep when he's struck with an afterthought— Maybe it's just his frayed nerves from the day, or the fact that his ass is still wet from marching around in the rain for hours, but he decides he's not quite done yet.

"No, you know what?" He whirls back around, jabbing his index finger towards her. "Let me tell you something, Hillary Clinton. That big 'thug' keeps a pile of bills by his front window every March just in case a troop knocks on his door selling cookies. But no one ever comes by, because all you snobby people are too busy gossiping about stuff he did half a decade ago to see that he is the biggest, softest marshmallow living in this town! You think he doesn't see how you hold your purses tighter when he walks by? Like you think he's going to rob you? I've seen him rob exactly two things since I moved in with him, and that's my Fruit Loops, and my bottle of Advil when I started popping too many."

The woman's manicured hand tightens over the girls. They all look terrified, except for the one with the ladybug raincoat, who scrunches her brown forehead defiantly. Stiles decides he likes her the best.

"And by the way, Derek doesn't even like Girl Scout cookies," he tells them flatly. "He only buys them because his little sister used to be in a troop, before she died in that fire along with the rest of his family."

The blonde woman looks slightly ill as she stands there, still holding his change.

"Seriously, keep it," he tells her, and she stares between him and the bills in her hand, and the mountain of crumpled bills on the table. "For the troop. You know, to help support that loving Girl Scout spirit and all." Before leaving for good he bends down eye-level with the girl wearing the ladybug raincoat. He winks at her.

"I hope you win that shiny new bike, sweetheart." And he whirls around to march back to the jeep, clutching the box of Thin Mints to his chest.

.o0O0o.

After an angry loop around the block he's sitting damp in a dim Railey's parking lot, the Jeep in idle. Another glance at the time and he breaks and decides to call Scott. As the line rings he thinks that maybe he and Isaac can sniff out Derek's scent, or maybe they've even heard from Derek. His fingers tap impatiently against the wheel with little clicky sounds, knee bobbing uneasily he as wipes the cold wetness from his nose.
It goes to voicemail, and his stomach sinks when he remembers that Scott and Isaac are at the lacrosse tournament this weekend. Awesome.

He calls Lydia next, and formulates what he's going to say as the line rings. He's thinking something along the lines of, "Hey Lydia, you haven't screamed recently, have you? Like your glass-shattering, impending death kind of banshee scream that could possibly signify the death of a certain leather jacket-wearing werewolf—"

*This is Lydia Martin. Leave a message and I'll get back to you if you're sweet about it.*

But no, Lydia doesn't answer. Lydia just got out of class and is probably too busy ordering around lowly pining freshman in room 119 to check her phone. "Stay on my good side, Stilinski, or else I'll have that picture of you snorting milk from your nose put on page 38. Yes, don't give me that look, Danny snapped a picture last semester. You don't want bad pictures of you permanently embedded in time for future generations to see? You should have become yearbook president like me."

He calls Allison next, looking for help from Chris.

"Hello?"

"Hey Allison," he starts, suddenly feeling awkward. He's hardly spoken a word to her since the funeral.

"Stiles," she sounds surprised. "Hi, um. Are you— how are you?"

He licks his lips. She sounds incredibly uncomfortable, and he doesn't blame her.

"Yeah, hi, I'm doing okay. Listen, um... This is gonna sound weird, but is your dad there?"


Fuck.

"Nothing, nothing, probably," he mutters, and runs a hand through his hair.

"Stiles," Allison says slowly, like she knows something's up. Amazing how Scott scored someone so intuitive. "Is everything okay?"

He offers a half-hearted grunt. "Well, no. Maybe. It's just that Derek hasn't been home all day and he's not picking up his phone, and I just… Have kind of a bad feeling? I was hoping your dad might know where he is, or have some kind of fancy werewolf locator to help find him."

"I can scrounge around in my dad's gear to see if I can find anything useful," Allison offers tentatively. "I'm out shopping right now, but I'll be home in an hour or two... I'm sure Derek's fine."

"Yeah… Thanks," Stiles returns. She says goodbye and "I'll see you tomorrow," and a low roll of thunder grumbles overhead.

He hangs up and thumps his head back against the headrest, watching the tiny sprinkles of rain fleck against the windshield. The Jeep rumbles beneath him, engine quivering in unease. He strokes a soothing palm over her clutch, sighing heavily.

"I know," he tells her. "This is pretty shitty, but we're gonna figure this out, you know why? Because we have logic on our side, which is both badass and scientifically advantageous. What Would Spock Do?" He asks himself again, which he's very good at that now because *WWSD* has
been the mantra of the day.

Spock would remain calm. Spock would deduct that someone might have gone out their way to hurt Derek, because that's the only option left at this point. Life is nothing if not based off a sic-fi television show, and based on all the tropey supernatural plot lines he and Scott have experienced thus far it's not a bad bet. He types out a list of Derek's enemies using the Notes app on his phone, and the list comes out relatively short:

Derek's enemies:

— cats (probably)

— Peter

He has more to add to the list, but slows to a stop once he types the man's name. If anyone is evil enough to kidnap Derek, it's Peter. And Peter probably has Derek's phone number, which means he could easily call Derek to lure him to another location like a giant centrifuge or a volcano of death. Or a room full of kittens. And Derek totally mentioned that Peter lived in an apartment somewhere, but Stiles's long-term memory betrays him and draws up blank.

Yellowpages online is a beautiful, beautiful thing, he decides, because all he has to do is type in "Peter Hale" located near "Beacon Hills" and bingo, one little red flag pops up with a tag for an apartment building on Port Ave in Medina county— Medina, that was it! And it's only a couple towns over.

He whoops, slapping the Jeep's sun visor in a high-five. She sputters in agreement so he moves the clutch to reverse, cranes his neck back, and backs out of the parking lot with a squeal of wet tires.

"Come on, baby, we're gonna go invade a creeperwolf's den."

.00O0o.

The sidewalk beneath his feet is dark with damp as he stares up at the tall brick building.

'Apartmet 41' in bronze plaing embellishes the space above the room listings, and he steps forward to examine the scrawled names. Peter Hale is thirteenth down the line, printed in tiny all-caps. The apartment numbers are listed sequentially in 100s, 200s, and 300s, presumably for the three stories of the building. Peter is listed as apartment 314, which is... Annoying.

So, options. He could ring the most old-fashioned name listed (Betty Cooper) and claim to be someone from PG&E who needs to come in to check the oven pilot lights. Old ladies are gullible and trusting and he's an excellent liar, so she would probably buzz him in. Then he could get to Peter's room on the third floor, but the door would probably be locked, and he highly doubts the prick would just let him in if he rings the doorbell, especially if Derek was gagged and hog-tied in the back closet somewhere.

Which is how Stiles finds himself scaling the fire escapes on the side alley of the apartment.

His breath is loud in his ears as he grips the slippery railings, and it's just his luck that the rain, although stopped for now, has left the metal rungs slick with beads of water. The building behind him is another brick apartment, thankfully with many of the drapes closed or dark. But he's down to
the last four windows in his search, and he needs to work fast before someone notices him clearly committing some kind of felony. He peeks over the next window sill, where he spies fluffy pink towels on the bathroom racks and a curling iron on the sink counter. Definitely not Peter, unless the guy has certain kinks.

The next window peers into a small bedroom with purple walls and a potted orchid on the dresser. Three photo frames line atop the nightstand, of young children and a married couple that does not include Peter. So he shuffles across the apartment ledge to the last window and mentally crosses his fingers since his real fingers are currently busy gripping onto wet brick for dear life— the bathroom is plain, clean, with the shower door open. An electric razor and old spice deodorant sits on the sink counter, and on the floor is a crumpled pair of sweats and a grey V-neck.

Bingo.

He glances down at the Jeep, parked safely against the curb three stories below. Her headlights stare up at him in encouragement. Stiles Stilinski is a man of no gods, no kings, and no masters.

Times like these usually include his baseball bat or a lacrosse stick to smash the glass in, but in this case the window is already ajar. He slips his fingers beneath the frame and slides it open, feeling nostalgic as he quickly wiggles his slim hips through the opening and into the bathroom. He used to break into his dad's office like this all the time during free period, to make sure the traitor was keeping his junk drawer full of actual office junk, not junk food. It was always worth it to get a free bag of potato chips for lunch and to bat his eyelashes innocently later at the dinner table during, "— swear to god, we must have a rodent problem! The Doritos, Fritos, and barbecue Ruffles, all gone without a trace! Don't look at me like that, kid. Not that I was going to eat them, I was just holding them for a friend."

Stiles tries to be like those cool, quiet ninjas that backflip off windowsills in movies, but ends up kind of sprawling heavily onto Peter's bathroom tile like a beached starfish when his foot snags on a wicker shelf. He lays there silently on his stomach for a few seconds, tuning into any noise that might indicate Peter's presence— or perhaps a sign that he's in the wrong apartment after all, but hears nothing.

He takes it as a cue to push himself up and inch cautiously to the door. Sweat drips down his temple as he whirls around, spooking himself in the mirror. A weapon— he should have a weapon, right? This is kind of dangerous, and crazy, but mostly weird and dangerous so he grabs the electric razor by the sink, which he figures could do some damage if he jabs it in the right spot. He's good at jabbing things, or at least he's had experience with jabbing roadkill.

The bathroom door swings open with a quiet creak as he pokes his head out into the hallway. There's no drawl from a TV, no whir of appliances or oily voices belonging to a creepy man in a v-neck. However, Peter's apartment is surprisingly not an evil lair littered with weapons and severed doll heads. Also surprisingly, there is no dart board with Derek's head as the target anywhere in sight. Just a regular couch with decorative throw pillows (decorative throw pillows), a couple bookshelves with normal novels, a simple beige carpet and a potted plant in the corner. It's really just...

Normal.

Which is somehow creepier than an evil lair, so Stiles shivers a little as he creeps forward.

"Derek," he whispers as quietly as he can. Derek will be able to hear him, but Peter won't, not with his weakened powers. But it soon becomes apparent that neither werewolf is here. The apartment is silent and empty. Stiles frowns at his electric razor and asks it, "Okay, great, now what?"
He ventures down the tiny hall. The walls are barren aside from a few small frames of black and white photography. There's only two doors, the first a small closet of towels and cleaning supplies, the second what must be Peter's bedroom. He wanders inside—it's neat, plain, tidy. He isn't exactly sure what he's doing here, but it's basically his last idea and thorough investigating always deems the best results. And he's nosy. Very, very nosy.

Until he sees flutter of movement from the corner of his eyes.

He whirls around, shrieks, and promptly loses his footing amid the startled windmill of his arms. He lands with a heavy "oomph!" on his belly, where he lays like a beached whale as he waits for his heart to calm the fuck down. It's not even funny when he sees what it is. He scoffs and glares at the aquarium tank by the door, because honestly, the guy owns a lion fish. He remembers reading somewhere that lion fish are considered symbols of power in Indonesian countries, but seriously, the guy has an obsession. It's probably even named 'Goliath' or 'Nepolian' or something. But he doesn't get time to tap on the glass in revenge, because that's when he turns his head and notices the embellished wooden box underneath the bed.
Before he even blinks his arm is stretching out beneath the bed, fingers wrapping around the box to pull it out. It slides over the hardwood with a trail of dust, so he brushes his sleeve over the top to wipe it off and consequently sneezes twice. Two brass (or gold?) clasps decorate the side, along with detailed embellishments— it's heavy and looks like expensive wood, a glossy mahogany if not a little dull from the years. Atop is an inscription:

"Pete— power stems from the diligence you inspire in others. Your brother, Robbie."

He stares at it, because the phrase sounds vaguely familiar. The first listing on Derek's family's headstone had been "Robert Hale."

Stiles opens the box. Inside is a small pile of aged newspaper clippings and magazine articles. He picks up the one on the top, mouth falling ajar as he reads the title. It's a full two-page article from Forbes magazine:

Friday March 10th, 1986.

BROTHERS BECOME YOUNGEST INVESTORS TO EARN OVER 2 MILLION, LAUNCH PARTNERSHIP COMPANY

Not every fresh-out-of-college man can admit to achieving the American dream, but that's precisely what brothers Robert Hale, 24, and Peter Hale, 22, are celebrating. The dynamic duo are the youngest investors in the state of California to earn more than 2 million dollars in their first quarter of business, grossing a collective 3.1 million last year. Born and raised in Beacon Hills, California, the Hale brothers grew up a rarity as best friends instead of bickering siblings. "We went through everything together," Robert, Stanford graduate '85 tells Forbes. "Highschool, college, home life, you name it. Some people say we're joined at the hip, but I like to think we've just got the same ambition." In their second year of college, Robert and his brother designed a high-tech irrigation system, an idea which they sold for 2.7 million. In addition to winning the National Thomson Inventor's Award and a generous grant, the two siblings invested the sum into their new business and scored themselves millions.

"Rob is my best friend," Peter tells Forbes. "He's the brawn and I'm the brain, which makes us a powerful duo." Peter, age 22, showed academic excellence throughout high school and college, graduating early from Stanford University with honors and a major in Finance. "Peter's greatest asset is his sharp mind," one of his previous professors, Charles Denning praises. "I've never seen a student so hungry for knowledge. He was very competitive amongst his peers, and always strived to be the best. That can probably be accredited to his current success."
Success is putting it lightly, as Peter Hale's partnership with his brother has made the pair highly successful millionaires before age 25. This summer the team is launching their new company, Hale Associates, in the newly-built Scorsinston building downtown Beacon Hills, a town near and dear to the pair's hearts despite it's little-known name. Their mission is inspired by their mother, Laura Hale, 56, who is currently living with early-onset dementia in Silverado Care Home in Shoreview. Due to her condition and the absence of a father, the Hale brothers lived on their own in their family penthouse since middle school, overseen by the family nanny and personal assistants.

"We've got great plans in mind," Robert tells Forbes excitedly. "You'll be seeing Peter and I a lot in the next few years. Our first mission once we get started is to start clearing some of the surrounding forest in order to create space for more housing throughout the county. It should help the economy substantially, and in turn provide more living units for people who want to move to Beacon Hills. That's our dream, to help more people find home in the city we love."

Attached is a picture of a very young Peter and someone with a striking resemblance to Derek with arms linked at the bottom. The Caption reads, "Robert [left] and Peter [right] after graduation at Stanford University, May 1985." Stiles takes a minute to stare— It catches him off guard, because the man in the photo looks a lot different from the Peter Stiles has interacted with. Peter looks younger, happier, genuinely entertained by his brother and the diplomas between them. He turns to the next article, from the front page of Beacon Hills Gazette:


ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS STAND UP TO HALE ASSOCIATES, COMPANY PLANS ON STANDBY

Just two years after launching their firm, millionaire brothers and co-CEOs Robert and Peter Hale (age 26, 24) organized a contract with Newman Norton to clear thirty acres of Beacon Hills forest to build new housing, but a group of spirited locals are quite literally sitting in their way. The "Kin of Kéyah," a small group of environmental activists led by Talia Nat’aanii, 28, have stopped Hale Associates' bulldozers by perching in the trees marked for termination. "Kéyah" is the Navajo term for "land," translating the organization's name to "kin of the land."

"The forests of Beacon Hills house hundreds of species of local plants and wildlife," Nat’aanii tells Beacon Hills Gazette from her tree branch. "Hale Associates, or any other company for that matter, has no right to destroy that in favor of profit. They want to build more homes, but think of the homes they will rob in trade."

When confronted at the scene, co-CEO Robert Hale seemed irritated. "While these
people are admirable for their efforts, they aren't going to win. My brother and I have been planning this step for two years now, and every piece is in motion to make this happen. There's an opportunity to make more living space for families, which is more important than preserving a few acres of trees."

The thirteen Kin of Kéyah members climbed up those surrounding trees last Friday morning according to Nat'aanii, a mere hour before Hale contractors were scheduled to arrive at the scene. They are equipped with blankets, safety harnesses, and lunch boxes for preparedness. Sources report that the members have also been singing songs and shouting down their mission to gathering speculators below. Police security is present. "I've been on watch here for three days," says John Stilinski, 24, a newly—

Stiles stops breathing.

— a newly appointed Beacon Hills officer at the scene. "We tried talking them down, but they won't budge. A few of them starting dropping walnuts on us," Stilinski adds, eyeing a Kin of Kéyah member above him. "But otherwise they're all pretty peaceful. Just loud." Other speculators at the scene confirm that some of the environmentalists have started losing their voice due to the verbal protesting, but resident Beacon Hills supporters have started tossing throat lozenges up to them. Stilinski, along with two other new officers recently added to BHPD, including Richard Sullivan, 24, and Terry Grey, 28, are assigned to keep the protest peaceful and in check. Stilinski comments, "Not exactly how I expected my first day on the force to go, but it's entertaining, I'll say that."

When handed up a mic, The Kin of Kéyah members pledged their allegiance. "We don't plan on coming down until Hale Associates change their mind, or agree to hear us out," many of them comment. Another member expressed support for leader Nat'aanii. "Talia has such a passionate soul," says Claudia Górski, 21, a new member of the group. "Her love for the forest is inspiring. I'm leaving in a couple months to finish up my fine arts degree, but I'll remember her as a great leader."

Stiles has to stop reading to control his breathing, because Górski was his mom's maiden name. His mom had a fine arts degree. And suddenly it clicks—

"Hey dad, how did you and mom meet?"

"It was my first day on the job. She was sitting in a tree yelling her lungs off."

Stiles clamps a hand over his lips, letting out a long breath through his nose. He allows ten seconds to gather himself, and keeps reading.
It is unknown how long the protest standoff will last, but anonymous insiders reveal that the Hale brothers are growing impatient. "They held a meeting this morning," one source tells Beacon Hills Gazette. "The chipper machines are only rented for construction, so they've had to shell out extra to keep them and will need to keep spending for every extra day Kin of Kéyah hold up the contractors, too. It's an inconvenience, but Robert and Peter have been planning this for a while. They won't let a few tree-huggers stand in their way, that's for sure. They won't let the company lose."

The next article is just a couple years later, in another full page spread of Forbes magazine. The paper is heavily crinkled, like Peter balled it up and threw it away before changing his mind and smoothing it out again. Stiles stares wide-eyed at the picture in the article, which is Derek's dad again only a little older, and next to him sits who can only be a very pregnant Talia Hale.

Friday November 21st, 1990.

TOP GROSSING CEO ROBERT HALE QUILTS BUSINESS, PURCHASES LARGEST MANSION IN BEACON HILLS COUNTY

An exclusive interview with Beacon Hill's new power couple:

In 1986 brothers Robert and Peter Hale graduated top of their Stanford class as millionaires. Just two years later they launched plans to clear local forests for residential housing, but were stopped by a group of environmentalists called the "Kin of Kéyah" led by then Talia Nat'aanii, who engaged a political battle with co-CEO Robert in particular. Today, the former opponents are newlyweds with their first child on the way, and Robert has announced his leave of the company he co-created in order to become a family man.

Forbes's top journalist Joe Manello sits with Robert, age 28, and Talia, age 30, in the magazine's studio cafe, gathering the exclusive details on how love conquered politics three years ago.

Robert: "Talia was actually the leader of the protest. One of my contractors called me to the set early that day, saying there were about a dozen people parked up in the trees refusing to move. I thought, 'this is a disaster.' We were supposed to bulldoze thirty acres of forest that morning, and you're telling me there are bodies in the way? Just make them move!"
Talia: "We had no plans of moving. But none of us could just stand by and let the woods get destroyed, no matter how small the acreage. It was inspiring to see the support from the townspeople, but it took Robert five days before he gave up and agreed to talk to us."

Robert: "We really thought you wouldn't last that long. My brother and I tried everything to get them to come down. Bullhorns to keep them from sleeping, stepping up police security to herd away the locals who kept tossing up supplies, Peter even suggested smoking them out with pepper bombs. It was rather mean-spirited on our behalf looking back on it, but at the time I was blinded by my dream. Peter and I had dedicated our lives to the company's success, so we were pretty miffed with the snag in plans."

Talia: "Imagine my surprise when he actually climbed up a tree in his Bill Blass suit to hold a conference with me."

Joe: Impressive!

Robert: [laughs]. "I had no choice. Everyone was vouching for Peter and I to have a discussion with the protestors, but Talia refused to come down. Which was smart, because we probably would have had security step in to arrest her. But at that point I thought, 'well, I need to go listen to this woman, and I'd like to do it face-to-face instead of making her call down to us.' She and the other Kéyah members had been doing quite a bit of, er… Singing."

Talia: "And vocalizing our mission. I must admit, our voices were pretty raw at that point."

Robert: "Right. So I climbed up to meet her. Peter just about had a fit, but everyone else seemed to think it was pretty funny."

Joe: So what happened up there?

Robert: "Well, we talked. She told me about her father, and how he had started the organization to protect the forests, and the creatures living there… Quite a few creatures, actually, and the more we went into it we realized that we… Well, we had some special qualities in common. Which was surprising, seeing as how different we were, but Talia reminded me just how fundamental the forest was, for people like us. Beacon Hills used to be all forest, before people came in. The trees we were sitting on had brought together a group of environmentalists and a group of businessmen, so there had to be something significant about that, right? I told her about the dream my brother and I had, and how we wanted to help the people of the county afford good living spaces. She listened patiently, more patiently than I had done, and ensured me that her and the other Kéyah members would 'hang out' as long as I needed to make a decision."

Joe: Wow. Your first impressions?

Talia: "I thought you were very pompous. Passionate. Serious, too, but I could see a young spirit in your eyes. I think you were repressing it.

Robert: "You were beautiful. And equally headstrong. You scared me a little, to be honest."
Joe: It's reported that it took another week before you ordered Hale Associates to call off the bulldozers. So a total of fifteen days where Talia and her group sat in the trees. Is that right?

Robert: "Yes. Peter and I... We knocked heads a lot with our decision. I wanted to change my mind, and he wanted to follow through with our original plan, which I don't blame him for. We went into the business together, and he didn't understand why I suddenly had doubts about tearing down the trees. But I didn't have doubt in our company, I just reconsidered if we were making the right choice."

Joe: How did you come to a decision?

Talia: "He came running to me in the middle of the night."

Joe: He did not!

Robert: [sighs.] "I did. The firm needed a unanimous decision from Peter and I to follow through with wether or not to stake a claim on another section of forest, and we were still one-against-one. I was struggling, and I wanted a fresh opinion that didn't belong to the advisors at the company, who all just told me to go through with the demolition. I immediately thought of Talia, so I sought her out when the reporters weren't watching."

Talia: "I thought you were crazy. But I liked your old-man pajamas."

Robert: "They were pinstripe, and they were comfortable. But not comfortable enough to make sitting on tree bark pleasant... I don't know how you managed for so long. We talked a long time that night. About the company, and not about the company. She pointed out the constellations to me, and handed over her blanket when I got cold in my young-man pajamas. She confused me, really, by being so kind and relaxed when I had been so cold with her. Then she told me to try making decisions with my heart instead of my head."

Joe: And did you?

Robert: "The next morning I told Peter that we would find another location to build housing. That I refused to tear down any forest in Beacon Hills. He was... That was a hard day for us. But we were best friends, had been since as long as we could remember. He trusted me enough to take my word for it. So we spent a few months meeting with the owners of the Poupordi flat grounds in Glensdale. We built the houses there. It wasn't in Beacon Hills like we'd hoped for, but it was a compromise."

Joe: You say 'we were best friends' in the past tense. Are you and your brother no longer close?

Robert: "We will always be family. If he wants to be more than family again, I'll welcome him with open arms."

Joe: Is he the reason you left Hale Associates?

Robert: [shakes head.] "No, no. My brother and I... We just grew into different people. We built the company with our own hands, and I loved that company. I still do. But I love Talia and our baby more... I hope that's something Peter will get to understand for himself one day. I have no doubt that he'll do a fine job taking over the firm, but it's time
for me and my wife to start raising our little girl."

Joe: And congratulations! Any name ideas yet?

Robert: [chuckles] "Talia has some interesting ones in mind. I promised she'd get full say later on if our first daughter gets my mother's name, Laura Ann."

Joe: Oh! so there are more in the future for you?

Robert: "As long as it's alright with Talia, but yeah, that's why we chose the biggest house in the county. That, and we wanted a place close to the woods… So we got the one house built in the woods. I'd love to raise a son one day," [glances to Talia, who smiles] "but for now I'm very excited for our baby girl."

By quitting the firm, Robert leaves his younger brother, Peter Hale, age 26, the sole CEO in charge of Hale Associates. When confronted, Peter waved reporters away with no comment. Talia and Robert are expecting their first child this February; when asked to describe his wife in one word, Robert answered with the following statement: "There aren't enough words in the world to describe Talia. She made me a better man. My ambition used to blind me, but she taught me how to open my eyes and see the rest of the world."

Stiles feels himself smile as he finishes the article. Derek's parents sound like best friends, not unlike his own parents, and irrevocably in love. But his grin falls when he flips to the next article underneath, printed in big, front-page block letters:


**FOUR KILLED IN BEACON HILLS ESTATE FIRE, TEENAGE SON SURVIVES**

At 2:45 this morning, Beacon Hills Police station received a local call reporting a column of smoke emanating from the woods adjacent the Highway 92 county line. Fire trucks quickly arrived at the scene, where the Hale Estate, the largest mansion in the county, was aflame. Rescuers pulled two victims from the vicinity before the top floors collapsed atop the first floor, and three more from the wreckage; Robert Hale, 46, Talia Hale, 48, and their two children, Laura Hale, 18, and Cora Hale, 8, were declared deceased at the scene due to various injuries and smoke inhalation, coroners report. Lone survivor Derek Hale, 16, was unconscious for approximately fifteen minutes as paramedics stabilized him after rescue. At 3:30am he was admitted to Beacon Hills Memorial Hospital for treatment of third-degree burns on his hands and feet, where he is currently in critical condition. He is the son of Robert and Talia.
Officials report the fire was result of a gas leak centralized from a downstairs heating unit, which caused an explosion when the pilot light automatically switched on. "It's a tragedy," says Richard Sullivan, age 40, newly-appointed Sheriff of Beacon Hills. "I got the call around 3am this morning and reported to the scene. The house is almost completely ruined, it'll probably be condemned."

The mansion was purchased by Robert Hale in 1990, after quitting his successful position as co-CEO at Hale Associate's in order to start a family. He has been featured multiple times in Forbes magazine and other high-name publications for his millionaire success. His son, Derek, is said to be the sole heir of the family fortune, and therefore owner of the now ruined Hale mansion. Robert's brother, former business parter, and only other living relative, Peter Hale, 44, is said to receive no share of the estate.

Reporters are currently standing by the Hospital entrance to receive further word on the physical condition of Derek Hale, and what he plans on doing with fortune.

Stiles swallows heavily, unable to dislodge the painful lump in his throat. There's more to the article, details about Derek's sister's and his parents' accomplishments, quickly-written type about how they were the county's happiest, well-known family, but he can't read it. He quickly flips to the last newspaper clipping, dated a few months later from the front page of The California Reporter subscription journal.

Saturday August 3rd, 2009.

HALE ASSOCIATES GOES BANKRUPT, FORMER CEO PETER HALE LOOSES WORKERS AND COMPANY

Peter Hale, 44, is the younger brother of the largely successful Robert Hale, ex-co-CEO of Hale Associates, the firm the siblings started together after graduating Stanford University in 1985. Robert Hale was declared deceased March of this year after his home, the Hale Estate in Beacon Hills, caught fire. Today, Peter Hale faces scrutiny for months of scandal regarding the closure of his firm, as dozens of people speak up about the dark truth behind the company's demise.

"[Peter] didn't treat his workers right," an anonymous former employee tells The California Reporter. "After his brother died he lost focus, started pushing longer hours and cut everyone's pay to make up for his spending. He became very reckless." Others claim Hale started showing abuse and anger in the office. "He threw a chair across the room during a meeting," another source adds. "It was like he had super strength... We were terrified."

After months of mistreatment and watching the firm lose money, employees started
quitting in droves. "I couldn't take it anymore," says Garrison Myers, 50, who tells us he "hopes [Hale will] see my name here, so he can know what I think." "He kept getting angrier and angrier, focusing on profit and power. It was intense, and a far cry from the company's original mission. When the firm started out he and Robert put the welfare of Beacon Hills citizens above all else, but that policy flew out the window years ago." Since turing in his resignation, Myers is employed as a bus driver for Beacon Hills High School.

"It's such a shame," says Hank Philpott, 62, who has been the company treasurer and advisor since the birth of the firm in 1986. "When [Peter] and Robert started out they were great friends as much as brothers, very eager to do business together. They had vision, passion… They wanted to help make housing available for everyone in the county. But after Rob left, Peter got greedy. It's amazing how much the company's changed. Robert would have been so disappointed, God rest his spirit."

Outraged over the CEO's mistreatment, twenty-four ex-employees have sued Hale for verbal abuse, illegal working hours, and threatening actions. Hale lost the first court case, at the expense of 1.4 million dollars for stress and verbal abuse caused to 32-year-old Melanie Rodriguez, who was eight months pregnant at the time of her employment. "He threatened to fire me if I didn't wear heels to the office," she stated in her court plea. "He said it was to maintain a powerful appearance to represent the company, but when I tried to explain how it hurt my back he grew violent and swore at me, and shattered the glass he was holding with his bare hand. I was scared for me and my baby."

Arnold Montgomery, the company's financial advisor claims Hale "started coming into the office hungover, sometimes drunk. During meetings he smelled like alcohol and got sloppy with management, he wasn't in a good mindset. [He] started firing people on the spot if he got angry, then refused to send out the required two week paychecks. People who once stood loyally beside the company were running for the door. I hope he gets the help he needs."

Peter Hale is to face the remaining seven lawsuits next month in court for verbal abuse and violent behavior. When asked how the court orders would affect his guardianship over his nephew (Derek Hale, 16), Hale was quick to turn reporters away with no comment. "I plan on bringing this man down," states Bob Devine, a lawyer representing Mary Pardon and John Atley, two ex-employees that suffered minor abrasions when Hale lost his temper and smashed a presentation projector during a meeting. "Honestly I'll be surprised if he has any earnings left after these court dates. The man could very easily lose his entire fortune, and after the behavior he's exhibited towards my clients, I'm in favor of that. He doesn't deserve to be in a position of power."

Peter Hale has since lost an estimated 117 million due to lawsuits and poor financial management. Hale Associates declared bankruptcy as of September 23rd of this year. Hale, after the bank foreclosed his estate in Marin, has downsized into an apartment downtown Medina County. He has no spouse or children.

Stiles stares at the article. That's it. By the look of his humble apartment, no doubt Peter ended up losing all his money. He has questions, lots of them, namely if the rift between Peter and Derek's dad started when Robert left the company for Talia. Heart loud in his ears, he keeps digging into Peter’s box of treasures— An old photograph of a woman holding an infant, a yellowed business card titled "Hale Associates" with the company telephone number, Robert's obituary from the newspaper, and a
picture of young Peter and Robert laughing in Cowboy costumes at what looks like a frat party. On
the back is a scrawled, "Petey and Robbie, age 20/22"

And suddenly Stiles gets it.

Because Derek looks just like his father: Robert Hale at age twenty-two has the same defined jaw,
the same dark stubble and grey-green eyes that Derek has at age twenty-two. It's apparent from the
articles that Peter used to be very close with his brother, even declared as best friends before their
relationship soured. But the older Derek grew the more he acquired his father's features, so Peter
took one look at him and saw the man that abandoned him and their company for a family. Maybe
even bitter that Derek was the only survivor of the fire. Not Robert.

But amongst the dated artifacts is another photograph in a frame, this time a candid of an older
Robert Hale blowing out candles on a birthday cake with Talia smiling by his side. On her lap is a
rosy-cheeked baby who looks very unhappy at the situation, tiny lips pursed in a frown. He flips it
over and sees a handwritten caption: "Check out your niece! Laura turned one year old last week
and this is the only picture that didn't come out blurry. I'm sure she'd love to meet you. —Robbie."

And another polaroid below that's framed, of two girls that are undoubtedly Laura and Cora.
They look younger than the picture in the mansion, with heads thrown back laughing in the snow. A
snapshot in time captured so perfectly that he can almost hear their giggles.

Against the fact that it's probably a terrible idea, Stiles swipes the picture from the box. The bulk of
the frame doesn't fit in his jacket, so he slips the photo out and tucks it into his pocket. He takes the
article mentioning his mom and dad, the interview with Derek's parents, and the picture of Laura's
first birthday too, because as far as he knows Derek only has one picture of his family that survived
the fire. He hastily shoves the box back beneath the bed, says goodbye to Napoleon, and goes back
to the bathroom window, wondering how many other pictures Peter has tucked away in a closet
somewhere.

Before exiting he spares a minute to switch Peter's toothpaste with hair cream he finds beneath the
sink.

..00000.

He goes back to the mansion after that.

Derek still isn't there.

His sticky note is still on the counter, a pale yellow square amongst a sea of countertop tile. He paces
over the living room carpet, dry swallowing periodically as his stomach flutters with unease. Outside
the sky is dark now, filled with clouds that squeeze buckets of rain down on the house as he
formulates a million "what-if's" about Derek until he can't take it anymore.

The front door bangs open as he darts out onto the porch, desperate to see a glimpse of Derek
emerging through the woods towards the house, but there's nothing. The forest is dark and empty,
wind and rain frigid as they whip his clothes, sticking his shirt to his stomach and arms. He clutches
the wood banister and leans out towards the line of towering evergreens, shielding his eyes against
the stinging rain.

"DEREK!"
He shouts against the gust but an answer doesn't ride back on it. The only movement from the woods is the shutter of leaves as their trees shake them like baby rattles, no other response aside the howling wind that whips his hair, plastering it to his forehead in a sticky jumble of dark strings. His heart pounds in in sync with the thwack of the tree branches, faster and louder until he's stumbling down the porch steps and bolting into the woods, letting the mass of the damp trees swallow him up like a wet black hole.

He runs.

He shouts for Derek until his voice is hoarse and wrecked, and until his sneakers are sopping wet and caked with mud. The woods fly by as he sprints through the trees in random desperation, hoping to catch any sign of a stubbled face or a furry black tail— until he's struck by a desperate thought.

His shoes kick up a spray of damp leaves as he digs his heels and skids to a stop, whirling around one-eighty to dash up the slope by the hiking trail fifty yards away. It's the one place he hasn't checked yet, and the one place Derek might run to in a pinch. His lungs burn as he wills his damp calves to carry him faster up the hill, to the overlook a black wolf led him to two weeks ago. The cold wind slaps his hair and jacket as he reaches the Peace Place, where the tortured grey sky stretches for miles in front of him. He runs to the edge of the grass, and the wind greets him by whipping his jacket and hair, revealing the lights of the town beyond the sheet of rain. He cups his hands and yells over the cliff.

"DEREK!"

No response. No howl. Not a twinkle from the stretch of county in front of him. His breaths are harsh and heaving as he runs a hand through his damp bangs and tugs hard on them. He licks his lips, bites them hard and wrinkles his nose in order to clamp down on his frustration. It bothers him that he can't pop claws or defend himself or sense like Scott and Isaac can, or have Lydia's insight or allison's weaponry skills. He's been the son of a cop all his life, but he's never felt so incompetent. He feels wet, cold, stupid, scared, weak—

*Human.*

"Aaugh!"

He whirls around and rams his fist hard into the nearest tree, splitting skin on the rough bark. This brilliant idea stings like a bitch of course, and he doubles over with a grunt as he cradles his knuckles against his belly.

"Fuck," he whispers. "Fuck, shit, *fucking*— no. No, no, focus. Focus, Stiles. There's gotta be… Gotta something you missed, you missed—"

He looks back out over the cliff to see the town to see if the horizon holds the answer. But he's only met with the silence of the woods, the quiet slap of rain against leaves. *What Would Spock Do?* he tries again, because it's been the mantra of the day and he's out of ideas. "What would Spock do?"

He mumbles wearily, "Be logical, what would Spock do… What…” But trails off with an empty breath. Because it's not about what Spock would do.

It's what his dad would do.

He slumps down to his knees as the wasted efforts of the day weigh down on him. Derek is missing, and he knows in his gut that something is wrong. He draws his legs to chest and curls his feet again and again inside his soggy sneakers, feeling the cold squelch between his toes. The rain pelts him, a bitter metaphor for how everything is crashing down on him at once— He tries to rethink, tries to
rack his brain and figure out what to do, but his nerves are frayed and his pocket is empty. He wishes so hard it hurts, for there to be a badge to grip, or for his dad to be right there with him. A simple squeeze on the shoulder.

"Now would be a really great time to come back," he whispers, voice quiet and raw.
He closes his eyes and lets his back bow against the wind as he thinks of his dad, and his dad's favorite coffee cup with the little Garfield cartoon on it that he only drank from on Mondays. His dad, done up in uniform at the station, khaki shirt and slacks ironed to perfection. At home on the couch in his scratchy moth sweater, frowning down at the salad Stiles made him—or sneaking curly fries while they sat side-by-side in the patrol car. His dad, hunched over the dining table with Dumbledore glasses perched on the tip of his nose, skimming through files beneath his mom's old reading lamp. His laugh, dry and warm with breath like coffee. His warm-but-weary voice, sometimes with an undertone of exasperation, sometimes authority, sometimes whiskey. Occasionally disappointment. Always affection. But Stiles can't see his dad, and he can't ask him what to do, either. He doesn't even have the badge anymore.

*I'm sticking right by your side, kiddo.*

The last words his dad had said to him before he died. He hears his dad's voice saying them again now, just like he's heard them every day since January first. But they're ironic now, because his dad didn't stay, the same way his mom didn't. Stiles bites his lip, fingers curling into the damp soil. He feels almost angry about it, because the broken promise left him that night permanently alone.
Focus, Stiles.

But he hears that now, too, in the same tone his dad used to use when Stiles's thoughts twisted into too many knots during homework.

"But I can't," Stiles whispers. "I don't know what I missed, I can't think of— I need you." He tells the wind miserably.

I never left, son.

He whips his head around the clearing, almost expecting to see his dad. The words are so clear in his mind, voice so exact to his dad's in tone and drawl that he swears the man is standing right behind him— but he sees no one. His dad is dead.

He chuckles hysterically, dragging a clammy hand down his face. "I'm going crazy," he mutters, rainwater dripping into his mouth and rolling off his chin. "Derek is missing and now I'm losing my mind. Great. I'd audition for One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, but it hasn't been on Broadway since the sixties." He buries his head in his arms again, feeling played and cold.

Sitting in the rain won't do you or Derek any good.

"Stop that," Stiles tells the voice, his mind, whatever. "I know it won't, but I don't know what else to do. He could be anywhere, I've looked— I've looked everywhere, alright? Aside from the ball pit at Chuck E Cheese, but I figured Derek wouldn't go there in a full body contamination suit. So what am I supposed to do now, huh? How do I know where to go?"

You know this. What do you do when you reach a dead end with a case?

"Go back to square one," Stiles says automatically. "The motivation, the big picture."

Exactly. So go back to square one.

The gears grind in his head as he thinks back to every case within the past two years, from the alpha pack to the pixies, the kanima, the darach, the shortlist of robberies and cold cases he and his dad used to scour over until the early hours of the morning, when John would realize it was a school night and herd Stiles into bed. But what is square one in this situation? The square one of the past three months would be the spot in the woods his dad died, wouldn't it? Or the badge? Derek himself? He already checked the police station and Derek wasn't there, he even broke into Peter's apartment and Derek wasn't there. Square one could be a million things. Some clue he overlooked or —

Breathe, son.

It feels so close and real that he glances up again, staring wide-eyed into the woods. The trees are silent and soulless except for the sound of the rain around him, quiet and lush. But the words are right. He's holding his breath, which isn't helpful in the given situation.

Stiles plucked Dealing With PTSD off Derek's bookshelf about a month ago and read through it in two days. He kept it on his nightstand and occasionally paged through it again on the couch during rainy afternoons, unafraid of the quiet side-glances and observant nods Derek sent to him from across the room. Now, Stiles crosses his legs in the meditation stance he sees Derek doing in the mornings by the front window, and remembers the anxiety techniques in chapter two.

He focuses on centering himself, letting his eyes flutter shut as he takes a deep breath through his nose. The wet earth soaks into his pants and stains his knees and ankles dark, grounding him with icy
pinpricks; when he was younger his dad used to place a cold washcloth behind his neck when he got panic attacks, but the past couple months breathing, eating, and Derek’s simple company have kept him calm. The nightmare still rears it's ugly head, but less frequently and less vivid, and the tremors in his hands are almost nonexistent now. The mansion, or perhaps the other soul inside the mansion, swathes him in a sense of safety. So it's easy to remember what he doubted, and where he started—square one.

It's what he's been looking for all year, but he never actually lost it.

"Home," he says aloud.
His head whips up so fast he hears his neck crack. He has to go back to the Hale house. *His* house—no, *his* home. *Their* shitty, burnt-out, gigantic home where they change leak buckets and drink coffee and fall asleep on the couch and pretend that they annoy each other. Where they eat each other's cereal when the other isn't looking and watch whatever Alfred Hitchcock movie is on PBS on Saturdays and argue over which topping is the best for popcorn (parmesan, the answer is always parmesan), where they share Chinese food and where they learn to open up to one another. Searching the city isn't the answer, but when Derek shows up at home—because Derek *always* comes back to the mansion—Stiles needs to be there for him.

With a spray of dirt he leaps to his feet and takes off back into the woods. His sneakers slip on mud and his arms swing wide and uncoordinated but he's strangely clearheaded as he pants against the frigid wind, feeling the rainwater drip down his nose and over his lips, landing cold on his hot tongue. He sprints down the slope and dodges wet trees to the mansion, and chuckles a little because he's cold and confused and charged enough to fly up into the sky without any Redbull, so he says the
words he was too afraid to say at the funeral.

"I love you, dad."
He makes it back to the mansion in record-time, gasping harshly with breath burned from the cold. His calves burn like fucking *ow* when he crashes back into the house, but he pauses only to rip off his muddied sneakers and dump them on the porch before stepping inside, because he knows that Derek will figuratively kill him for tracking mud on the hardwood. His socks slap wetly as he quickly grabs the megawatt flashlight from the collection on the counter, then sprints to his room and rips the bat logo sticker off his backpack. He sticks to the center of the glass and stumbles down the porch steps again, aims the beam of light to the roof, and watches the bat logo glow against the dark shingles.

"You're Batman, you can do this, I'm Batman," he breathes as he runs back inside to grab his hoodie. It's not a cape, but it serves the same purpose. He's been Batman since his dad introduced him to comic books in Preschool, and he still reverts back to it when he needs a confidence boost. Right now is a great example, because he isn't sure if he'll be able to handle whatever happens next.

He's dialing the first 1 of 9-1-1 to tell Terry to be on the lookout for a black Camaro when something heavy bangs against the front door.
Stiles jolts and the phone clatters to the floor as his eyes snap to the front of the house. Something heavy slams against the wood again, rattling the frame and door handle.

A second later Derek bursts in and stumbles a step into the living room, swaying on his feet. He's paper-white and panting, drenched and glistening from the rain, head bobbing unsteadily. Flecks of black decorate his lips and chin, and Stiles stops breathing when he notices that Derek has his hand weakly pressed over his side, which is oozing black blood down over his hip and onto his jeans.

Derek's hazy eyes meet Stiles's for all of one second before they roll into his head and he crumples to the floor in a graceless pile. He doesn't get up.

"Derek!" Stiles screams, leaping over the couch to reach the bloody heap in the middle of the living room.

He skids to his knees beside Derek's prone form, grunting as he struggles to roll him over onto his back. The werewolf flops over heavily, and his hands fumble rapid-fire over Derek's arms, jacket, face—all of which loll listless with black stains. His mouth falls open in horror when he peels back Derek's tattered jacket and sees the shiny mess beneath the leather; Derek's entire torso is drenched in sticky black blood, too much blood, and the putrid smell of copper and rotting flesh that screams wolfsbane.

His dad's torso drenched in sticky red blood glistening black beneath the moonlight rivers of coppery gore oozing down his dad's uniform thin ribbons of ruby dripping from his dad's lips his dad's eyes glazing over sightless his dad's body falling slack and heavily to the forest floor unmoving dead screaming bloody wailing bloody clothes bloody badge blood collecting in a crimson pool beneath his dad's body—

The room spins.

He hunches over away from Derek and gasps for air, blinking owlishly to try and clear the vivid pictures in his head.

Derek needs him. Derek needs him Derek needs him Derekneeds—

With a grunt he yanks on his hoodie strings and forces himself to focus. Dealing with PTSD chapter two: Dialectal Behavior Therapy, emotional response: Acknowledge emotions. The trigger is not hurting you, the images are not the same as the ones in the past.

His fingers tremble over Derek's skin as he searches for the source of the bleeding. He finds the bullet lodged between Derek's hip and belly button, oozing sluggishly. Black spiderweb veins stretch out around it across Derek's stomach, wrapping all the way around to his back.

His breath stutters and fuck, this is bad.

"Derek!" He cradles Derek's cheeks in his hands, slapping the pale skin there. "Derek, common, wake up!"

But Derek doesn't even twitch, completely dead to the world. His face is startlingly pallid, mouth slack with little beads of moisture and sinewy onyx stains. His eyes are closed and his head is worryingly limp on his neck, lolling side to side between Stiles's fingers. Stiles tastes bile in the back of his throat and fights the urge to be sick.

Why do you always keep a lighter on you?

In case I get shot.
"Okay, okay Derek, just h-hold on," he rambles and leaps up to sprint to the coffee table, the dialogue from last night ringing in his ears. If Derek hadn't used the lighter already, that meant it was probably back on the coffee table somewhere. Hard to believe just two years ago he almost had to saw the guy's arm off to save him from a wolfsbane-y death, and since then he sincerely hoped it was something he wouldn't have to do again.

He trips over the edge of the carpet and shoves aside the leftover Christmas lights, ignoring how his fingers leave sticky smears of black on the white plastic. The lighter falls onto the rug with a metallic clink and he grabs it with slippery hands. When he gets back to the body on the floor the bile taste comes back as he realizes that he's going to have to dig the bullet out with his fingers. His squeamishness rears but Derek is still out cold, breathing shallowly, chest barely rising and falling.

Kali's claws ripping through his dad's chest spilling thick rivers of blood down his dad's lips—

"Stop it!" Stiles yells, because Derek's bloody torso looks like a mirror image of his dad's bloody torso the night he died, but it's not the same. It's not the same, his dad died three months ago and can't die again, the past is in the past and it's not the same, Derek needs him and it's not the same, it's not the same it's not the same—

Focus, Stiles.

"I know you're not a conversationalist but any words of encouragement at all right now would be really helpful," he mutters as his fingers hover over Derek's body. His hands are shaking again, trembling just as bad as they did back when his dad died. Those first weeks in January when he used to spill coffee all over the table when trying to pour a cup.

"Okay, okay, you can do this," he tries to convince himself, and winces as he readies his fingers over the wound. "Sorry dude, this is gonna hurt."

He sinks his teeth into his lip, and plunges his fingers into Derek's side.

The sound that keens out of his mouth is one that he will forever deny, something high-pitched and drawn out and not macho or brave in the slightest. It's by far the grossest thing he's ever felt, twice as hot and slippery as he mentally prepared himself for and accompanied by several squelchy noises akin to wringing out a sponge. He steels himself against his nausea with a high-pitched string of every swear he knows.

"Grossgrossgross, fuck— Derek, Derekhang on! Oh, holy motherfriggin' Jesus in a cradle—"

Finally he gets a grip on the bullet yanks it free from Derek's flesh. It pops free with a spurt of fresh blood that reminds Stiles of the foam from a popped champagne bottle, but most alarming is how the body on the floor doesn't even react to it. Derek's breath hitches and his eyelashes flutter, but other than that he doesn't rouse. Stiles spares a milisecond to press two shaking fingers to Derek's neck, and another milisecond to internally panic at how slow and weak the pulse is.

"No, Derek, don't you dare die on me!" He orders, but it comes out borderline hysterical.

He trembles with bullet and tries to crack it open by knocking it against the floor, but his hands are slippery and it nearly goes spinning out under the oven. He doesn't hesitate to stick the bloodied cap between his molars, and bites down with everything he has until he hears a sharp crack. He spits it out, empties the purple gunpowder into his palm, and fumbles against the floor to find the lighter, leaving a trail of black handprints.

It sparks once, twice, dies again and again because his fingers— his fucking fingers are shaking and
slippery and he can't get a grip on his damn emotions to strike his thumb correctly. Derek lays still and quiet as a log before him, and Stiles's eyes start to sting as another minute drags by without a flame.

"Come on, COME ON!" He shrieks as sweat beads on his forehead and drips down his nose. It might be rainwater too, because he's still drenched from his run in the forest and Derek is drenched too with rain and other darker bodily fluids, and together they're making a big motherfucking mess on the hardwood, and normally Derek would tighten his jaw and arch an eyebrow until he has a bottle of pinesol in his hand, but this time he doesn't because he's unconscious and might already be—

"Fuck!"

With a frustrated scream the lighter sparks to life, offering the most beautiful flame Stiles has ever seen. The gunpowder sparks and pops in his palm as he lights it, releasing sinewy wisps of pale purple smoke.

"Alright, yes! Okay, almost there, sorry in advance big guy," and he grits his teeth in apology and shoves the powder into the hole in Derek's side, which crackles like firecrackers against the wound.

Derek doesn't even twitch. Stiles watches as purple vapor swirls up around his arm, stinging the air with smoky flower scent as the black veins disappear from the wound. As soon as he sees it he turns to the side and retches, and nope, he doesn't even make it to the sink, so now there's a slippery puddle of vomit on the kitchen tile. Beautiful. He shakes as he sags forward on top of Derek's chest, pressing his cheek against the near nonexistent heartbeat below. His fingers curl into the damp fabric of Derek's shirt as he listens.

"Come on, come on," he whispers. He spares a glance to the wound again, which doesn't look much different. Maybe it needs time? "You're healing right? You better be healing, I'm going to need therapy after all that, and I'm going to insist that you drive me to every session in the Camaro. No, I take it back, I get to drive the Camaro, and you get to come along anyway. So wake up already."

But Derek doesn't wake up. Stiles's hands hover over him, unsure of where to go because they want to go everywhere. He pokes Derek's cheek, checks the wound five more times, lightly shakes Derek's shoulder. Derek doesn't wake up.

"No," he breathes. He squeezes his eyes shut when they start to sting, he's cold and wet and so is Derek, the front door is still swung wide open, letting the rainwater from the porch into the living room. He leans over and presses an ear to Derek's chest, holding his breath as he struggles to hear a heartbeat.

"Derek," he breathes. "Quit napping. Just wake up, maybe scowl once or twice for me so I know you're not brain damaged, okay? But you can't die. No dying. Derek? Wake up, you asshole, because you haven't gone to that leather jacket store downtown, okay? And only you know how to load the dishwasher so that all the bowls fit and you're the only one who can get us the good raspberries at the farmer's market because you're friends with all the farmers like some giant dork, you dork. And who's gonna tell me the difference between tarragon and oregano, huh? Or help me keep Scott focused when Allison is within ten feet, you really think I can do that on my own? I haven't even taken you to the pet store yet to reacquaint you with the bunnies and teach you not to eat them, fuck, you haven't even seen all the Star Wars films yet, and you need to eat s'mores because you've never tasted s'mores and that is the fucking stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

He tells it to Derek's jacket, spewing the words into Derek's chest. He's not really surprised when he tastes something salty roll down his cheek and onto his tongue. It plucks and pulls at his chest and
it *hurts*, because three months ago it was about living with Derek, but now it's about living *without* Derek.

He squeezes his eyes shut as he shifts his cheek to the side and whispers the secret against Derek's chest, right over the heart he once thought was stone cold.

"I can't lose you, too."
He stays there for an indefinite amount of time, straining to analyze the heartbeat beneath his ear. The muscle pushes blood like tired morse code, sluggish and unstable. Stiles hears his own pulse drumming loud and forceful in his ears and wills it to transfer to Derek somehow, maybe if he just believes hard enough or wants it badly enough, and right now he wants it more than anything in the world. And then—a rush of relief when he thinks, just vaguely, it starts thumping a little stronger. So he keeps his head there, eyes fluttering closed as he hears the rhythm beat stronger, louder, beating in sync with his own heart. A breath a little stronger than the previous ruffles the hair on the crown of his head, and he feels Derek’s fingers twitch by his knee.

He raises his head, blinking wide-eyed as he drinks in Derek, who’s peering at him blearily through heavy lids. A crack of grey-green shines between the dark sweep of his eyelashes, clumped with
beads of sweat and rain.

Stiles releases a shuddering, hysterical laugh, and blows it right into Derek’s face but he doesn’t think either one of them cares. "Oh thank god," he breathes, and tips his head down in relief. His damp bangs brush against Derek's neck and then he snaps up again, maybe panting for air a little. "Friggin' hell Derek, don't— don't do that again! No dying! Bad!"

Derek blinks heavily at him. "You…"

"Saved your life and simultaneously almost had a heart attack? Have incredibly suave hair and a dapper sense of fashion? Yes, and yes. To all of the above, yes."

Derek stares at him. "You're crying."

Fuck.

"No, I'm just highly sensitive to werewolves collapsing through the door covered in blood," he snaps, and quickly wipes a sleeve over his face, successfully smearing Derek's gross black bodily goop across his cheek. Gross. He wipes his goopy hands off on his pants, apologizing silently to khakis #3.

Derek swallows thickly and rolls his head to the side. His eyes are unfocused and he probably can't see very well, but Stiles knows he smells the small puddle of vomit to his left. Which is highly embarrassing.

"You got sick."

"Yep, squeamish, remember? Don't worry. It's fine."

"You're wet."

"Yeah, rain does that to you. I was out looking for you. It's fine," Stiles dismisses again, and resists the urge to face-plant back on Derek's chest to relieve his adrenaline crash. Instead he ungracefully flops down on his butt and scoots closer to check his stupid, bloody werewolf over.

He pats Derek down and double-checks the wound, just to reassure himself that he's alive and all. Derek actually allows this in favor of blinking at the ceiling, which reveals how shitty he must feel. He's still pale and looks more than a little woozy, but is otherwise conscious and not so on-the-verge-of-death anymore, which Stiles counts as a win. The injury is already knitting back together, sealing up with a shiny pink line of new skin. The bullet shell is on the floor, smeared with blood. Derek is covered in blood, and Stiles is too. There's blood on everything, really.

"Come on, let's get you cleaned up," he breathes, placing a hand on Derek's shoulder. "Can you stand?"

Derek nods weakly and tries to shift up onto his elbows. Stiles immediately scoots beside him and braces a hand against his back to help him into a sitting position, because nope, he definitely needs help with standing. From there he loops an arm around Derek's waist and Derek hangs an arm over his shoulders without complaint, which is new. Derek also lets his head roll to the side so that his nose brushes against Stiles's jugular (which is very new), and he inhales deeply as Stiles's brain malfunctions like a shitty computer.

"Uh… Hey," Stiles tries, clearing his throat when his voice comes out all crackly. "You good?"

Derek nods. On three they rise, and Derek sways and nearly falls to his knees again before Stiles
keeps him upright. "Whoa, easy, big guy. I got you," Stiles tells him, grunting a little under Derek's unsteady weight. "We're gonna make it to the bathroom, okay? Yep, here we go."

Together they manage to hobble down the hallway to Stiles's bathroom. It takes a little time since Derek is teetering like a drunkard, which might be funny if it didn't raise concerns as to just how much blood he's lost during his MIA time. Stiles has a million questions, namely what the fuck happened, but he bites his tongue for now and sets Derek on the edge of tub, where Stiles sat just two months ago after slicing his hand open cutting an onion. He never thought they would switch roles.

His hands hover to make sure Derek won't tip over during the two seconds it takes to grab a couple towels from the rack, and for whatever reason he finds himself narrating everything, maybe to keep away the nerves. Just like his dad used to do when he was sick.

There you go, kiddo. Slow sips, that's it. Let's get you into bed.

"There you go, okay, yes, now we're in the bathroom, hooray. Uh, things—we need things." He grabs a paper cup from the stack on the sink he uses for brushing his teeth, fills it from the tap and hands it to Derek with a "here, drink." Derek sips slowly and then downs it in one go, blinking down at the bath rug over the rim. Stiles doesn't miss the way his hand shakes a little bit.

"Kay, lift your arms up. Up, yep. Are you—? Right. Let's get this off you," he babbles, reaching to help Derek shrug out of his leather jacket. Which is—

Derek's jacket is… Has seen better days.

The black shine is dull with bloodstains, but bloodstains can be washed away. The bigger problem is the gaping hole on the side, a shredded gash of leather marking where the bullet, probably close range, busted the material. Stiles could poke his fist through and still have room for a couple extra fingers, so it's too wide for a needle and thread to fix properly. Derek blinks slowly at it, looking impassive except for the sad droop of his eyelashes.

"Sorry, man. I know this was your dad's jacket," he offers quietly, and drapes the bloodied leather over the sink. Derek closes his eyes, sighing softly in that way that silently screams, I'm used to it.

Derek doesn't say anything after that, not even his usual lie of "I'm fine," which proves how really not fine it is.

Stiles runs the faucet over one of the towels with warm water, soaks it through and wrings it out. He helps Derek peel the bloody henley off over his head and kneels down before Derek's wound. He winces at the blood but the flesh is healing already, fresh pink skin stretching across Derek's navel.

"Christ, Derek. What happened?" He demands breathlessly as he dabs at it with the washcloth. Derek closes his eyes, looking very tranquil for someone who almost died. Maybe he's used to it by now.

"I got a text from Peter this morning, before you woke up. He said he needed help, to meet him at a warehouse. I thought he was in trouble."

Stiles's heart sinks. Amazing how Derek was willing to help his douchebag uncle despite how much hatred ran between them. It reminds him of his dad and aunt Carol, and how his dad hated her tiny guts but made sacrifices anyway when she needed it. "You don't pick your sister, son, but family is family." He continues to wipe away the blood.

"You..." He breathes. "On the few occasions I've actually met Peter he came off as a real dick. But
that's…" A big leap, he wants to say. Malevolent, intense, crazy, Darth-Vader levels of evil. Peter had tried to kill his own nephew. But Stiles remembers the article he read from the man's apartment and how he lost his fortune, and decides it's not that far of a leap after all.

"Power has always been important to him," Derek murmurs. "But when I was younger it was more about strengthening a pack… A family. The past few years it got to his head. He never had a pack after the fire. It's easy to let the lure of power consume you when you're alone like that."

A moment of silence as it ruminates that Derek, living alone in the mansion for six years, could have become his uncle. But didn't.

"When I got to there he shot me." Derek swallows. "He stole one of Argent's guns, one of the models Chris was still tweaking. Tried to put a bullet through my head, but it backfired. He's dead." The last line is blunt, spoken without emotion.

Stiles forgets how to breathe as he stares up at Derek. The odds of it make his head spin, of just how close Derek came to dying. Gun safety and statistics were amongst the first things his dad taught him, so he knows how rare it is for a firearm to backfire on the shooter. He pictures Derek dragging his feet through the woods in the freezing rain, pushing through the pain and poison to make it home — on foot, because only Derek is stubborn like that. Only Derek is strong like that.

"Jesus, Derek," he breathes. "How the hell did you manage that? The first thing my dad ever taught me was gun safety. Do know what the odds of that are? One in ten thousand, it like never happens! Even with unstable barrels the chances of backfiring are crazy low. How did—? Any other weapon and you would've—"

"I was lucky."

Stiles glances up as Derek shifts slightly, fishing a hand into his jeans pocket. His fist emerges and slowly uncurls, revealing a crumpled slip of paper from the night before.
Stiles stares. The first thing he notices is the smear of black blood staining the paper. The second thing he notices is that Derek is wearing a new pair of jeans, different from last night's sweats, and must have made a conscious effort to keep the fortune and move it into his new pants pocket this morning. He thought for sure Derek just threw it away.

"You kept it…" He murmurs, staring at the slip of paper. Derek puts it on the sink counter.

"Glad I did."

Stiles goes back to cleaning Derek's hands and pretends his insides aren't bucking and flipping with giddiness. He licks his lips, tasting salt and rainwater. "Does, uh… Does this mean you believe in the power of fortune cookies maybe?"

Derek keeps his eyes closed as he lets his head hang. "I believe in a lot of things now."

A tiny smile plays at Stiles's lips. He continues cleaning until the last of the blood is wiped away, leaving Derek's clean torso behind. He steals a glance at Derek's face, staring openly when he sees that Derek still has his eyes closed. His cheeks aren't as pale, but his mouth and chin are smeared with black, forehead ruddy with sweat.

Before he even knows what he's doing, he flips to the clean side of the washcloth and gently presses
it to Derek's lips, wiping away the damp bloodstains there. Derek's eyes flutter open at the contact, and he stares at Stiles through half-lidded eyes, only thin rings of green circling his pupils. Their faces are close enough that Stiles notices that Derek actually has small flecks of brown in his irises before the color bleeds into grey, and suddenly he's hyper-aware of Derek's lips right there under his he swallows and gingerly drags the rag down Derek's chin to wipe away the black stains there, hoping that Derek is too out of it to contemplate the hammering stumbles of his heartbeat.

"Sorry, you've um… Got a little black goop on you," he mumbles, and quickly wipes it away, trying not to think about how Derek's mouth snags on the towel beneath his fingers. The werewolf lists forward and Stiles catches him by the bicep. His skin is cold with goosebumps.

"Christ, you're freezing," he comments. "Are werewolves supposed to be cold? The abominable snowman was supposed to be my gig, so don't go trying to steal that from me. Do you— here, hold on."

He grabs the biggest towel from the rack and drapes it over Derek like a pale blue cape. Derek tenses slightly on reflex and tries to grab the towel himself but Stiles crouches down to meet his eyes.

"Hey. Let me help you."

And Derek —Derek who snarls at the wrong flavor tortilla chips and scoffs at infomercials and insists on waxing the Camaro himself even when Stiles offers— nods.

So Stiles dries him off, working the terrycloth with his hands to dry away the rain water. Derek lets out a little moan in the middle, caught somewhere between a last-ditch (unconvincing) effort to sound annoyed, and relief.

"There," Stiles murmurs, unable to keep from grinning. "Nice and toasty. Right? Here at bathroom a la Stiles, we only have the best. Rated five stars for our heated towel racks, didn't you know?"

He smiles a little at his own joke since Derek is too busy melting pliantly in his grip to roll his eyes. With the newfound heat Derek lets his head fall forward and chin rest on Stiles's shoulder, and fades in and out as Stiles gently works the towel over his hair, drying away the rainwater and sweat.

"I take it the Camaro is still over there?" He asks.

Derek makes an affirmative "Mm" sound against his shoulder. "Didn't wanna swerve and hit anyone. I got here on foot… I must've blacked out for a while at the edge of the woods, by th'interstate. I lost a lot of time. But I heard you… Calling for me… And saw your..." Derek trails off, sounding spent. He sways forward heavily, and Stiles shoots out a hand to catch his weight, supporting him by the chest.

"Whoa, take it easy big guy. Never thought I'd have to tell you this, but maybe you should try not to talk. Save your energy, yeah? You did nearly bleed out."

Derek breathes against him in response, letting his forehead loll against Stiles's shoulder. Stiles thinks he may have dozed off until Derek speaks up quietly, so quietly that Stiles almost misses it.

"I'm sorry," Derek murmurs softly into his shoulder. He sounds sad, exhausted. Defeated.

"You're sorry? What, why? Derek, this isn't your fault. I mean you got blood all over your living room rug but that doesn't matter to me, a little baking soda and vinegar and it'll come right—"

"I didn't mean for you to spend your birthday alone."
The silence is palpable. Stiles freezes. He had forgotten the date entirely. It didn't seem to matter anymore.

"How did you—"

"Scott gave me a head's up last week," Derek mutters, eyes still closed against Stiles's shoulder. "I'm sorry for not being home today. I had plans for us. We'll celebrate tomorrow."

A blush creeps up Stiles's neck, slowly staining his neck and burning his ears. 'Plans for us' runs in a little loop-de-loop in his head and he has to clamp down on his bottom lip to keep from smiling like a schoolgirl. Plans for us. A brief pause as his brain stutters online again, and he goes back to rubbing the towel down Derek's back. Then he realizes he's being too quiet and jumps in quickly with a mouthful of babble.

"Hey, don't worry about it," he answers. "It is totally, completely fine. More than fine, considering you're here now with the added bonus of being in one piece. Which is, you know, a pretty big plus in my book. Best birthday present ever."

And that's the thing, with babble. The last part slips out before he has a chance to think about it, and he feels himself blushing deeper and wills himself to shut up before he starts professing sonnets or something.

"You can leave, you know."

Derek says it quietly. Softly. Like Derek is afraid of hearing the wrong answer if he speaks too loudly. And that... That was their agreement, back in January. Derek offered to let him stay until he turned eighteen and was able to legally sign a lease to move into an apartment. Stiles remembers the first day he arrived at the mansion, when he had been so adamant about leaving the minute he became an adult. He remembers telling Derek in Minton's about all the rental locations he was considering. The craigslist email is still sitting in his inbox, as a draft he never sent. But now his fingers are legally able to sign a lease. He could leave.

"I know," he mutters quietly. "I uh... Found an apartment. On Melbrooke Avenue. But, um..."

Derek swallows heavily. He doesn't say anything, and Stiles's heart squeezes and starts thumping even louder, clench-swoosh-clench-swoosh—

"Do you want me to?" He asks quietly. "Are you kicking me out?"

"No."

Stiles nods, relief gushing from every pore. He can suddenly breathe again. "Okay, good. Because, um... I'd like to stay. With you. I mean, if that's okay with you."

He's thought about it. He's thought about emailing back the craigslist guy and asking Derek to move out with him, into the apartment on Melbrooke. But he knows Derek wouldn't leave the mansion, at least not yet. Derek sags a little more into Stiles's shoulder, as if the remaining tension drains from his shoulders. And for a second —just a second— Stiles thinks he feels something of a relieved breath against his shoulder.

"Stay as long as you need."

Stiles ducks his head to hide his smile, because he knows that's Derek's way of saying he wants him...
Derek is in no shape to make it upstairs to bed, so Stiles leads him around the corner to his own bedroom. Derek groggily tries to protest once he realizes he's been plopped down on Stiles's mattress, but Stiles shushes him.

"This is your—"

"Shh. Sit."

Derek clutches the towel around his shoulders, shivering slightly. Whether it's from the cold or something else, Stiles doesn't know. But he looks like a half-drowned puppy, and it's taking all of Stiles's willpower not to attack him with the biggest bear-hug in history. Instead he fumbles through his drawers for the biggest shirt he can find.

"You unpacked." Derek says quietly.

Stiles blinks at his room, glancing over to the empty suitcase in his closet.

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, I did." He says, and returns to digging through his drawers. The winner is an old cableknit Christmas sweater his grandma crocheted for his dad a few years ago. It was voted even uglier than the groty moth sweater, so his dad had kept it packed away in the back of the blanket closet. Until last January, when Stiles found it and decided to keep it for old time's sake. He takes it over to Derek.

"Sorry, dude. Hope you're not Jewish. Arms up."

Derek blinks at it and reaches out to take it, but misses on the first try. Stiles takes the towel and helps himmy the sweater over his head. Derek looks ready to keel over at any second, barely keeping his eyes open. He looks adorably hilarious in the Christmas sweater, which is blue with embroidered snowflakes and "ho ho ho" across the chest in red holiday lettering. If he had a camera and if Derek wasn't so death-warmed-over, it would make a great Christmas card.

"Heh, okay. Lie down before you fall down, big guy."

Derek blinks at him for another second before easing back onto the mattress in resignation. His eyelids flutter but remain closed as he sinks back into the pillows, releasing a quiet sigh. He looks utterly exhausted, so Stiles moves to the foot of the bed to unlace Derek's boots and pull them off. He slips his fingers underneath Derek's pant legs to peel off his socks, and considers taking off Derek's damp jeans as well to get him into some dry pants, but decides against it since Derek doesn't look awake to approve that decision. He settles for grabbing the edge of the comforter and folding it over Derek's sleeping form.

Next Stiles fumbles to check his phone, and a lineup of texts lights his screen.

Scott McMuffin: we won! see u tomorrow buddy. happy birthday :))

Lydia 3: Sorry, yearbook went later than usual. Everything okay? I hear it's someone's birthday... You can expect an amazing gift when I see you tomorrow. xoxo ;)

Allison A: (2 missed calls)

Allison A: Hey I checked our weaponry room and one of my dad's guns is missing. Did you find Derek?
Stiles takes the time to reply to that one. **Yeah he's ok. Might want to tell your dad to come home, we've got a dead body to deal with.** And then adds, *it's Peter* because he figures it's always best to specify whose dead body it is.

He turns towards the hallway, preparing himself for the several pools of blood he has to mop up before they permanently seep into the floors and give Derek a heart attack tomorrow. He grabs his lacrosse helmet just in case, because this time he doesn't have the adrenaline to ward off squeamish fainting. He sighs, grabs a Red Vine off his desk, and walks towards the door.

"Stay."

It's just one word, but Stiles can hear an entire monologue in it.

"What?" He turns around, staring at Derek who still has his eyes closed on the bed. "You want me to…?"

Derek doesn't say anything else, perhaps already asleep. Stiles considers just going to his desk—
"stay" could simply mean sitting nearby, but his feet end up taking him to the bed. The digital clock reads 4:30pm; too early for sleep, but he knows Derek will probably conk out until tomorrow morning. He slips off his wet layers and quickly shimmies into a dry shirt and sweats, peering nervously over his shoulder at the conked out form on the comforter.

The mattress dips softly as he scoots onto the blanket and lays down next to Derek. He tucks an elbow behind his head and stretches out on his back, watching the sleeping face to his left. Derek doesn't move, doesn't open his eyes, just breathes. Stiles glances down to their hands, laying a few inches apart. Dark wisps of hair comb out over Derek's wrists, above the fingers just barely peeking out from the sleeve of the sweater. He swallows, slowly turning his head to look at Derek's face on the pillow next to him. His eyes are closed, dark lashes swooping over the dips above his cheeks. He looks incredibly young like this without the firm lines etched into his features, with wet hair is still plastered to his forehead in lose waves. For someone so strong, he looks remarkably small.

Stiles inches his hand over and brushes his fingers over Derek's wrist.

Just because it's there, and it's only three inches from his own hand, and he has a tendency to constantly play with things within reach. His eyes skirt over Derek's face, and imagines lazily tracing his fingers down Derek's stubble, brushing his hair back from his forehead even though it's not really long enough to be in the way, pressing his thumbs into Derek's dimples. If he mentally erases the stubble, he can almost see what Derek looked like as a teenager in a happy family. He stares at Derek's lips, and wonders what they would feel like against his own.

As he watches the slow rhythm of Derek's breathing beneath his dad's sweater, he realizes the painful absence in his chest doesn't feel so empty anymore. Somewhere between gazing down at a museum through a skylight, drying books with blowdryer #3, and sitting in a fort beside a frowny face, it started filling up with something warmer. Once he's sure Derek is asleep Stiles licks his lips, feels his heart skip a beat somewhere inside his chest, and whispers as he realizes,
We do crazy things for the ones we love, kiddo.

"I do crazy things for you."
Thank you all so much for waiting, I wish I could post updates faster for you. Your reviews mean the WORLD to me! It's the best reward after months of hard work. As always, you can find updates, answered questions, and sneak-peeks on my tumblr at stiles-and-the-sourwolf. See you in a couple months :)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT!!! If you have not read Raising Home yet, please do so before reading this chapter (if you don't want to it won't be the end of the world but it will fill in a lot of holes). You can find the link at the end of chapter 15, and in my works! It will add a lot of depth to Home and answer some questions, so please do check it out! :)

Stiles.

It takes a minute to remember that his bed smells like Stiles because it’s not his bed. It’s Stiles’s.

Derek peels his eyes open, blinking a few times to clear the film from his vision. A nightstand comes into focus, and a tall glass of pale gatorade with a straw. Small beads of sweat drip down the glass, indicating there used to be ice cubes in there.

“Mmph, ow, stupid— friggin’ shoelaces— I oughta go out and buy velcro. Crocs, even! That’s right, I went there—"

Stiles is facing his closet, hopping on one foot as he tugs on a red sneaker. A blue toothbrush is sticking out of his mouth, jiggling precariously between his lips. Derek watches him wobble on one foot to lace up the shoe, mumbling obscenities to the offensive laces and stubbing his toe in the process. He huffs softly in amusement, which makes Stiles whirl around and shriek with all the grace of a drunken chicken.

“Ow ow ow OHMYGO— you’re awake!”

Stiles trips again as he teleports to the side of the bed, hands hovering like he’s not sure what to do when he gets there. His eyes are huge, two honey brown orbs in the morning light as they skitter over Derek’s face. A tiny peek of tongue slips out to wet his lips and his heart beats like a bass drum—bum, ba-da, da-dum— as Derek shamelessly listens.

“Hey,” he croaks.

Stiles rubs the back of his neck. “Hey yourself, Snorlax,” he says, trying for nonchalance. It doesn’t work because Derek can hear the excited thumptity-thump of his heart.

He shifts up onto his elbows, discovering he’s under a blanket. He doesn’t remember falling asleep with a blanket over him. A glance down reveals he’s wearing a moth-bitten, too-big Christmas sweater that smells faintly of the Sheriff. It says “Ho Ho Ho” and has snowflakes on it. Derek has
never worn anything with snowflakes on it.

“Sorry, I know that thing is just about the ugliest sweater in existence, but it was kind of all that was gonna fit you. Down here, I mean, like in my room, since you were all conked out on my bed and I didn’t really wanna leave you to go up digging through your drawers, as in furniture drawers, heh.” Stiles rubs the back of his neck again. “Feeling better?”

Derek stares at him. “Yeah,” comes out cracked and hoarse, like his voice was run through a shredder. Stiles leaps for the glass of gatorade. The liquid sloshes as his fingers tremble.

“Yeesh, here, take this,” Stiles says, holding out the glass to him. Derek sits up and takes it. “You should probably drink that whole thing.”

He frowns at the straw but drinks anyway, blessed lemon-lime liquid down his dry throat. In between sips, “what time is it?”

Stiles automatically glances to his wrist even though he doesn’t wear a watch. He spins in a circle trying to find his alarm clock, which is on the nightstand where it always is, and tips it towards him. “About eleven am. Congratulations, you actually slept in past eight for once! Although you have yet to break my record, which is three in the afternoon, but you slept for about nineteen hours, which you probably needed.”

“Where did you sleep.”

“Oh, me?” Stiles blinks. “Right, me. Yes. The chair. At my desk.” He gestures to an uncomfortable-looking office chair, with a blanket draped over the armrest and one of the couch pillows on the desk. Derek frowns at it, and then frowns at his stomach when it rumbles.

“If you give me a few minutes I can make you a few breakfast burritos or something,” Stiles plops down in the chair by his desk, which spins. “I called Deaton last night, he said you’d be really hungry when you woke up. He also dropped off this—” He holds up little bottle of liquid that looks like urine. “—which apparently will help replenish the platelets you lost while you were all bleedy. I also talked to Chris Argent, who got back last night once he heard what happened when Allison called and told him, after I called and told her. He’s dealing with the police situation down at the warehouse, so he’s got you covered as far as the whole crime involvement slash human investigation thing. He reported the missing weapon and they’re saying Peter killed himself via freak accident since they found him with the gun still in hand. Oh! And he drove the Camaro back here a little while ago. Hope that’s okay.”

Derek is impressed with how productive Stiles has been, but all he can manage is, “Yeah, that’s… Yeah.” He peels up his shirt, pleased to find that the bullet wound is completely healed over with new pink skin. He stares at that too, remembering the shock of it tearing through his flesh.

“Hey… Are you okay?”

He knows Stiles is referring to how Peter is dead. But Peter hasn’t been his uncle for a near decade.

“I’m fine,” he says, and for once he actually means it. “Better than fine.”

Stiles grins. “Well I’m glad you’re up! I wanted to make sure it was still okay with you that Scott and Lydia are taking me mini golfing today? For my birthday. Isaac and Allison will probably tag along too, and you’re free to come too if you want. But if that’s not your thing will you be okay here by yourself until four-ish? I can totally stay if you need me, it’s no problem.”

Derek swings his legs over the side of his bed. His jeans are stiff and bloodstained, but his shoes and
socks have been removed. He curls his toes, thinking about how long it’s been since somebody did that for him, and stunned that Stiles would offer to skip his plans to babysit.

“I’ll be fine. Go. Have fun.”

“You sure?”

“Very.”

Stiles claps his hands. “Alrighty then, cool. Grab your Gatorade. Breakfast burritos comin' up, on the house.”

Derek follows him out to the kitchen, a little stiff but otherwise well-rested and feeling like silly putty that someone stretched to the moon. Stiles narrates his cooking process as he makes the breakfast burrito. Derek doesn’t know how, but he knows to add chorizo and Tapatio. Long, slender fingers assemble it with comfortable normalcy, spidering over ingredients and occasionally popping pieces of ham into his mouth. Derek sits at the counter and calls Chris to thank him for taking care of the situation.

As they finish off breakfast he observes the rug by the couch, which is much cleaner than he remembers from last night. It smells like peroxide, and the armchair has been moved over a few inches to hide a very obvious bleach stain.

“Oh. Yeah. I cleaned up. You kinda spilled a bunch of your insides all over the place, so the carpet was kinda… Stain-y. Also we’re out of Ajax now, so try not to do that again anytime soon,” Stiles explains.

But Derek is only half listening. He’s too busy walking slowly into the living room, staring at the ropes and ropes of white Christmas lights strung around the walls, draped over the windows and meeting in sporadic curls to the chandelier, in a chaotic spiderweb only Stiles could weave. Quietly, he picks up the end to his right and plugs it into the power socket, and watches as the electricity zips through the lines and illuminates hundreds of little bulbs with gold light. It dims the kitchen fluorescents but brightens up the walls, tosses warm light over the fire damage in the corners, and makes the living room look as bright as it did six years ago, when he and Laura used to sneak over to the tree and shake the presents.

“Uh, heh. Yeah, sorry about that,” Stiles is suddenly behind him, skittering beneath the chandelier to throw his hands out, as if to block Derek’s view of the Christmas carnage currently decorating every corner of furnishing. “I put them up yesterday, while you were, um, missing. But you’re kind of looking at them like you’re— you don’t like them. Which is fine! I just thought… Yeah, I’ll take them down—“

“It’s great.”

Derek cuts him off, and reaches up to poke one of the lights above his head in an incredibly uncharacteristic gesture. It wobbles. Stiles flails a little, mouth opening and closing with a happy, “Really? Awesome! They’re so festive, right? Ambiance is so ‘in’ nowadays, at least according to Lydia, but she’s like the queen of all things trendy so she’s a pretty reliable source. Now you’re a real hipster, you even have the ironic ugly Christmas sweater on.”

Stiles’s pocket buzzes. He glances at his phone. “Oh. That’s Scott. They’re on their way to the mini golf place, sooo… I should get going.”

“Alright.”
Halfway to running out the door, Stiles stops and whirls around.

“Hey, Derek?”

Derek turns around, taking a moment to watch Stiles’s adam apple bob before answering. “Yeah?”

Stiles’s eyes are round and bright as he licks his lips. “I’m... I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Me, too.”
For a second it looks like maybe Stiles is going to say something else, but then seems to change his mind, clears his throat, nods, and raises two fingers in salute. “Your jacket is on my desk,” he mentions, grabs the jeep keys off the hook, and shuts the door behind him.

Derek is alone.

The leak buckets are overflowing, spilling puddles of water over the floor and in the kitchen, but for once he doesn’t care. The compulsion to keep the house in tip-top shape has vanished. He passes it by to walk back to Stiles’s room, where he lets his eyes rake over the things there on the desk— mini figurines of Yoda and Han Solo, a lacrosse stick dirty from practice in Scott’s backyard, a stack of books for his online classes. There’s a piece of paper pinned to a bare cork board and a roll of unopened red string.

His henley smells faintly of Stiles. The whole house smells like Stiles now, because they both walk over the rug in the living room and sit on the same couch, eat at the same table, breathe the same air. The scent of their laundry has melded together with detergent from the washing machine— Stiles’s fingerprints litter the pots and pans, the fridge handle, the TV remote, even Derek’s laptop when he insists on clicking through his Spotify playlists, tinging the house with Adderall, sweet-spice, and something bright and uniquely Stiles that masks the lingering smoky scent of the walls.
But it’s the folded leather jacket on the desk that catches his eye. It’s been cleaned of bloodstains, and a patch of red fabric greets him where the bullet hole once was, sloppily stitched in with long, inexperienced fingers. Two sticky notes flutter to the ground.

*First aid kit had some sewing stuff. I didn’t have anything leather but I hope this is an okay substitute*

And the second:

*P.S. try not to die again anytime soon k thx*

Derek runs a thumb over the patch of hoodie and shakes his head, smiling uncontrollably.

The feeling sticks like magic as he carries the jacket upstairs, around the banister and down the hall to the furthest room on the left. Powder blue walls celebrate the family photo on the desk, which he picks up and grins at with a warmness he didn’t think was possible any more. It’s easy to take out his phone and search through his contacts for the number that’s been sitting there untouched for over a
month. He dials, and the line picks up after three rings.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Melissa? This is Derek. I need your help.”

“You sure this won’t get you arrested?”

Derek pulls the Camaro into a parking spot right in front of the station’s double doors. He kills the engine and turns to Melissa, who’s eyeing him with a heavily wrinkled forehead, one eyebrow arched high.

“That’s what you’re here for,” he tells her.

Melissa chuffs and starts undoing her seatbelt. Her fingers are white from where they were gripping the armrest. “Yeah. That, and I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

They step outside the car and walk up to the station’s double doors.

“All right, so just stick behind me,” she tells him in a hushed tone, reviewing. “And try your best not to look so—”

She looks him up and down, hands gesturing to the whole of him, which is clad in dark jeans, his weathered black Docs, and his leather jacket. To make things worse he has extra stubble from not shaving since two days ago. He thinks that maybe he should have tried a bit harder to look less like a hardened criminal. Melissa bites her lip.

“—Well, like you. But I like the boots,” she adds, and they walk into the station.

The department is quiet for a Saturday morning, with a few officers in tan muling around carrying papers or mug shots. The scent of Foldger’s coffee and half-stale doughnuts hit Derek’s nose, newspaper ink and deodorant and fabric softener. Melissa leads the way to the front desk, where a dark-skinned woman is sitting. She has her hair up in one braid and a little badge that says “Valerie” on it with a little Winnie the Pooh sticker.

“Hi, Val,” Melissa greets sweetly, and slaps on the large, friendly smile that will get them inside. “How are you?”

The woman glances up, eyebrows jumping. “Wow, hi Melissa! It’s been awhile, I’m hangin’ in there. How are you?”

“Oh, just great, thanks!”

“And Scott?”

“Well, I haven’t had to sign any detention slips recently, so pretty good.”

“Oh, well I’m glad to hear that.” Valerie then looks at Derek, expression slipping into something concerned. “Sorry, um… Is he with you?”
“He’s my nephew,” Melissa answers sweetly, and reaches out to squeeze his shoulder like a caring aunt would. Derek stretches his lips to show as much teeth as possible, hoping that it looks like a friendly grin and not the creepy expression of a serial killer.

“Oh, okay… So uh, what can I do for you?”


They already know Richard is in today. Melissa called ahead of time and got his schedule from a man named Terry. He has a small office in the back, privileges of being file manager.

Valerie looks conflicted. “Well, you know the drill, Mel. Technically we’re not allowed to send visitors back, but…”

She cranes her back, checking for deputies. The station is mostly empty. She leans back in over the desk, lowering her voice with a sympathetic smile. “I know Sheriff Stilinski would have let you back anytime. Go on in, it’s the small office at the end of the hall.”

Melissa smiles sweetly. “Thank you, Val.”

“Alright, just for you, Melissa. Be quick.”

They nod their thanks and quickly shuffle back to the station staff rooms, where the cubicles are. Luckily most of the officers are off duty, or perhaps dealing with the rain cleanup from the night before. Richard’s office has a brown door with a frosted window. They don’t bother knocking before they step inside.

The man isn’t facing them, rather bent over in his office chair stuffing files into a drawer. They cross their arms, Derek shuts the door behind them, and the nose alerts Richard and he spins around in his chair, looking surprised for all of one second before scowling. Melissa’s sweet smile drops off her face like a lead weight.

“You,” he sneers, pointing a finger at Derek. “How did you get in here? You can’t—"

“Richard, is it?” Melissa cuts him off flatly. “It’s my understanding that you arranged for John Stilinski’s Sheriff badge to be taken away from his only son?” She demands, very icy cold and calm for the fire in her eyes.

Richard grunts. “You must be that nurse who talked to the personnel director,” he mutters, glancing at her scrubs. “Sorry, sweetheart, but there’s nothing I can do. The thing belongs to the state, station property. Nothing I can do about it now.” He smiles, sliding his coffee cup aside to reveal the badge, sitting on the table atop a stack of papers. “Besides, I think it looks pretty good here as my new paperweight, don’t you think?”

Melissa’s eyes harden impossibly further. Then without warning she leans forward and slams her hands down on his desk, making Richard jerk back in alarm. If Derek’s honest, he may have twitched a little too.

“Look, you pathetic excuse of a man,” she warns, voice low and deadly serious. "First you will get it past that thick scull of yours that John was three times the man you will ever be, got that? And secondly. If you don’t hand that badge over to us to give back to his kid, then next time you check into the hospital for a colonoscopy I will make personally ensure that I will be your nurse, and I will not numb you before sticking my hand up your fat ass.”
Derek watches her with a small smile. Richard is visibly frightened but recovers quickly. He stands up, eyes flicking towards his walkie-talkie on the desk.

“Look, lady. You’re one step away from getting arrested for challenging an officer, and we’ll see how easy it is for you to do a colonoscopy from jail.”

“I’ve got other friends in the medical field. Surgeons, nurses, anesthesiologists. You’d be amazed how easy it is to misdiagnose a cancerous testicle in need of amputation.”

Richard barks a laugh. “What do you specialize in, empty threats? Sorry sweet cheeks, but I have the upper hand here. Say I keep the badge, which I plan on doing. What’cha gonna do, file harassment charges? Who do you think the department will believe? A low-income nurse? A sketchy ex-convict and a sass mouth kid, or an officer of twenty-three years?”

Melissa looks calmly to Derek. “We thought you’d say that.”

Derek steps forward and cracks his neck. Richard pales—he reaches for his walkie talkie but Derek is faster, snatching it and kicking it out of reach. In one swift move he grabs Richard’s collar and pins him to the file cabinet, and flashes his eyes red to promptly cut off the man’s yell for help. Richard gasps as he sees a face rearrange with hard lines and sideburns, and Derek pushes his fangs out as far as they’ll go while staring him down. He sticks his nose close enough so Richard can feel his breath, and lets the wolf bleed into his voice as he enunciates each word slowly, calmly, and deadly serious.

“Hand over the badge and never bother us again, or I will personally come after you. Got it?”

Richard turns paper white, his whole body quaking with fear. His eyes bulge out of his head “y-y-y-ye-yes, s-s-sir.”

“Now apologize to Melissa.”

“W-what? I-I—”

Derek tightens his grip with a growl.

“S-S-s-s-o-r-r-r-r-rr-y—”

Once the words are out Richard's knees buckle and his eyes roll back in his head. Derek lets him slump to the floor in a faint.

“What a pansy,” Melissa mutters.

She swipes the badge from the table. Derek steps over Richard and heads for the office door, but not before dumping the remainder of Richard’s coffee onto the man's bald spot for good measure. Melissa nods approvingly and he holds the door open for her as they slip out into the station hallway. They walk out quickly, swiftly moving back to the lobby and past the front desk. She tucks the badge inside the front pocket of her scrubs and places a hand on his elbow as they walk, giving a light squeeze.

“Thanks again, Val! Say hi to the kids for me,” she waves sweetly over her shoulder, and they step outside onto the sidewalk. Then murmurs, “Nice touch with the coffee. Don’t tell Scott, but your whole alpha thing is way scarier than his.”

Derek smirks. “Thank you.”

He drives her back to the hospital in the Camaro. When he pulls up in front of the entrance, he steps
out with her to say goodbye. “Thank you for coming,” he says.

“Please, that was worth every minute of my lunch break,” Melissa dismisses. She takes out the badge from her pocket, admiring it wistfully for a second. “Wow, Stiles sure kept this thing clean.”

“Yes, he did.”

“I’m glad you called me. Here you go, hon.”

He accepts the star hesitantly, with a certain reverence he used to reserve only for the leaves he collected as a middle schooler, or the solar system marbles his mom gave him the Christmas before eighth grade. The metal feels warm from her fingers, and he decides the object is too holy for his own hands. He sticks it quietly in the pocket of his jacket and zips it in safe.

Melissa looks him up and down, and he sees when her eyes catch on the red patch of fabric. She points to it.

“That, uh… Looks familiar,” she says.

All he can do is stare at the sloppy stitches connecting the red to his jacket. He can’t think of anything to say.

“When he and Scott were freshmen they decided to practice lacrosse in the rain for two hours. When they came inside their clothes were so muddy I made them throw everything they were wearing straight into the trash, but Stiles tried to bite me when I tried taking that hoodie away. I’d say he’d only cut it up for someone he really cares about.”

She studies his silence thoughtfully, chews her lip, then adds,

"And I’d say that anyone who marches back into that station to steal his dad’s badge back might feel the same."

Derek doesn’t get flustered, but it’s a close call. He flares his nostrils to lock in his guarded expression, but Melissa just smiles, a lovely, knowing thing she tucks away just out of sight, and she squeezes a hand over his shoulder again. “Tell him happy birthday for me, alright? See you later, hon.”

“Er, excuse me?”

They turn around in surprise. It’s the blonde woman from the Girl Scout troop, the one with the french manicure and the Hillary Clinton hair. She stands before him, the table of cookies and girls in the background in front of the hospital entrance, looking a little nervous on her feet.

“Derek Hale?” She asks tentatively.

He observes her, just as cautious. It’s the same woman who sits at the Girl Scout table every year, the one who usually hands him boxes of All-abouts with a guarded hand and narrow eyes framed with clumpy mascara. But this time she offers a small smile when he nods his response.

“Would you like to buy some Girl Scout cookies?”

It takes a minute to register if he heard correctly. He doesn’t understand, but he feels what must be the third smile of the day appear on his face. He wonders if it’s going to be a new thing.

“I— Yes, thank you. I’d love to.” He turns towards Melissa, raising an eyebrow in quiet question.
She checks her watch and shrugs, digging into her purse.

“As long as we’re here, Scott does love Tagalongs.”

.o0O0o.

One hour later he's sitting at the dining table, absently rubbing a thumb over the six starred points of the badge. It's the first time he's really held it, and the nicks and dents beneath his fingers reveal the love worn into the metal over the years. He thinks of the four boxes of Thin Mints in the cupboard behind him, and the 300 yards of Christmas lights glowing in the living room, that dumb pop song the band had played at Minton’s diner, Pig, Laura’s sarcastic drawl, the leaks in the ceiling, egg drop soup, a pair of not-really-brown eyes, a lopsided grin, boxes of Fruit Loops and 2% milk because it’s ‘moo-perior’ to 1% milk, and pale, slender fingers fluttering over the comics section of The Beacon Hills Gazette, and silently asks the Sheriff permission. For what, he isn’t exactly sure.

*Your son is an idiot,* he thinks.

*But I think of him as my idiot.*

.o0O0o.

Derek is loading the last of the sandwiches into the backpack when Stiles walks through the door.

“Hey,” he greets, still facing the kitchen window. He figures Stiles must be in a good mood when he hears a chipper voice chirp back, “hey yourself, furball,” and snort to himself as he hangs the keys on the hook. Derek steals a glance over his shoulder, and his breath kind of flies away from him in a quiet woosh.

Stiles is standing in the middle of the living room, golden light from the afternoon window outlining his tall frame. A pair of sharp black denims hug the slim curve of his legs, tucked into the usual chucks. He’s wearing a shirt Derek hasn’t seen before, a deep blue striped tee that settles below his collarbones. The rich color plays off the red plaid overshirt rolled up to his elbows and draws out the flush of his cheeks, making his irises sparkle bright against his complexion. His hair is shorter—trimmed at the sides with a few stubborn wisps tickling his nape, with bangs perfectly coiffed atop his forehead. It's a vast improvement from the long tufts that had started growing out over his ears, a cropped style that shows off his cheekbones and makes his eyes look even bigger.

He’s stunning.

“Lydia decided to take me shopping,” Stiles mutters in explanation, looking down sheepishly at his ensemble. His hand moves up to tug at his bangs —a little nervous habit that Derek has picked up on — but he seems to catch himself at the last second, remembering his apparent haircut.

“After mini-golfing I mentioned that you and I were going out tonight, but not like— but like just *hanging* out, you know, which is when she decided it was the *perfect* time to drag me all over the mall for a few ‘necessities,’” Stiles adds air quotes. "Designer everything, her treat. Which is crazy insane, but that’s Lydia for ‘ya. She wanted to get me something that wasn’t plaid, but I told her that plaid shirts will only leave my back if they spontaneously combust. And even then there’s still a chance I’ll just try to stop drop and roll.”

He spins around and waggles his fingers a little, showcasing his new attire. Derek can’t help but steal
a glance down at Stiles’s jeans. If anyone knows how to pick out clothes, it’s Lydia. He wonders if he will get to know her better soon.

But he can only grunt instead of voicing a compliment. He says, “Maybe now you’ll stop bumping into things since all that hair isn’t in your eyes.”

Stiles chortles and throws something at the back of his head. It’s a crumpled gum wrapper from his pocket, which bounces to the floor. “Don’t count on it.” He bounds over to the counter, leaning into Derek’s space with his elbows propped up on the tile, chin propped up of his knuckles. He sniffs at the backpacks, bat ting his eyelashes as he tries to scope out what’s inside.

“What’s inside the backpack?”

“Some bones I haven’t gotten around to burying."

Stiles throws his head back and releases a sharp note of laughter.

“Dude, dog jokes are my specialty! You know that. Is it fireworks? Wait, are we going to launch rockets?”

Stiles sounds entirely too excited at the prospect of blowing things up. Derek makes a mental note not to let him near the kerosene in the garage.

“No. Are you ready to go? We’re leaving in two minutes.”

“Gimme’ three. I gotta pee first.”

“Hey.”

“Ho?”

“Thanks for the jacket.”

“You’re— Oh! Your jacket,” Stiles licks his lips and makes serval vague hand gestures like he can’t decide on which one. “Yeah, I mean you— no problem man, it was— good. Fine. No problemo. I’m gonna pee now, so—"

He trips over the rug and knocks his forehead against the wall on the way to the bathroom. Derek is willing to bet his tail that it isn’t on purpose.

.o00o0.

The smell of the woods is crisp and fragrant.

Derek leads the way, hands tucked into his jeans as the breeze plays with his jacket collar. The backpack swings contentedly over his shoulders, dancing to the chirpy stream of babble flowing from Stiles’s mouth. For once the the sun is actually out despite the aging hour, teasing the trees and flowers with amber shadows. March’s rainy spell is finally over, announcing the promise of spring with notes of honeysuckle and the dew, musky scent of evening wood.

Stiles figures out where they’re going in less than five minutes.

“Hey, we’re going to your peace place thingy, aren’t we?” He asks as he chucks an acorn at the sky.
Derek nods, briefly worried his humble destination will breed disappointment. But instead—

“Awesome! Two visits in one month? I knew you liked me.”

A little more than that, Derek thinks.

They make it to the overlook at the perfect time.

Before them lies the small grove overlooking the city, a tiny nook of nature nestled on a cliff. A ring of trees surrounds a small patch of dewy grass peppered with wildflowers, bathed in a peachy glow from the sunset. Only the tip of the sun peeks out above the sea of tiny houses littering the horizon, painting the sky dark enough to see the scattered daubs of yellow from early porch lights. It’s like something taken from a panting, a million different colors illuminated by the watercolor sky.

It’s not anything fancy like mini-golfing or a night on the town, but Stiles eagerly skips ahead of him onto the grass, squishing his heels into the earth like it’s his peace place, not Derek’s. Derek silently nods a greeting to the surrounding trees and takes a seat in front of the small circle of dirt, one he had cleared himself a few years ago. Stiles flops forward onto his stomach and rests his chin on his elbows to watch as he zips open the backpack to unload the sandwiches. Pastrami and swiss for himself, fluffernutter on crappy white bread for Stiles.

“Dude, you so know me,” Stiles exclaims, and grins as Derek tosses the sandwich to him. “I thought we ran out of peanut butter?”

They did. Derek ate the last of it with a spoon last Wednesday when Stiles was in the shower, and had to run out and get more this afternoon. Laura would be cackling over the new layer of squish above his belt, but he pulls out two bottles of root beer and extends his fangs to uncap them with his teeth. Stiles glances up at the crisp, carbonated click, eyes growing wide on Derek’s mouth before he graciously accepts the bottle and takes a swig.

“Thanks! That’s a neat trick.”

“It probably wears down on my enamel.”

“Ha! Werewolves and dental problems. Next you’ll tell me that unicorns wear rings on their horns.”

“Only when they get married.”

“Wait… Really?”

“No.”

Derek doesn’t have to talk much as they watch the sun go down, although he does say more words than he used to. In the distance he can hear the buzz of eager fireflies getting ready to emerge for dusk, and bending grass blades as the breeze picks up. Stiles tells him about mini golfing, and how Allison won because she has unfair huntress accuracy and how he came in last because the sun was in his eye. And then how Lydia asked him how the scarf and beanie were working out, and—

“I, uh, may have told her that we lost them. Left them. At a restaurant two towns over.”

Derek makes a noncommittal sound. He hated that scarf.

“I know, you can bash my head into a steering wheel later. But I don’t think she’ll buy you a replacement scarf anytime soon, since winter is pretty much over. So your neck is safe from wooly confines for a while at least, rest your furry face at ease.”
The sandwiches disappear.

As it grows darker he builds a campfire, not missing the glance Stiles shoots him when he starts it with the lighter in his pocket. He ducks a hand inside the backpack and pulls out a bag of jumbo marshmallows he sets down between them. Stiles’ eyes bug out of his head as he dips in a second time and reemerges with a box of honey graham and a king-size pack of Reese’s peanut butter cups.

"No way!" Stiles blurs. "You brought... Are those Reese's?"

Derek rips open the plastic bag of marshmallows with his hands. He sets it back down and shrugs. "Oh my god, you are awesome!" Stiles exclaims, and dives for the puffy white snacks. "But... Wait, didn’t I just tell you about that a couple days ago? When we were eating cookies? And I—I-- Holy crap, you remembered that my favorite food is Reese’s s'mores?"

The appreciation in his eyes is so genuine it makes Derek look down in embarrassment. He busies himself widdling the bark off a long stick by his right.

"The marshmallows were on sale."

(They weren’t).

Stiles makes an elated sound. "You are looking at the eighth grade Outdoor Ed champion of Chubby Bunny," and when Derek stares at him blankly he clarifies, “it’s a classic campfire game where you shove marshmallows into your mouth and try to pronounce ‘chubby bunny.’ The person who can remain intelligible with the most marshmallows wins."

"If you think you’re going to get me to play that game, you’d have better luck trying to fly off the cliff."

"Why so sour, sourwolf? But hey, I can work around it. You are looking at the MMR of boy scouts, outdoor ed, and the sophomore campout. Master Marshmallow Roaster, made all the more fancy with the acronym. Now, since you have weirdly never actually made s’mores, I will be teaching you the best technique to getting the perfect golden brown consistence. So first, you—"

Derek listens politely as he holds his marshmallow calmly over the fire. He has a suspicion that s’mores-making is not nearly as complicated as Stiles is making it sound, but gets enjoyment nonetheless from watching Stiles push as many marshmallows that will fit onto his stick and attempting to roast them all at the same time. He only catches three on fire. The air fills with the scent of charred sugar.

"The key is rotating with a steady hand, the steadiest of hands, which— oh, shit! Shit, shit!"

Marshmallow #4 bursts into flames.

"What was that about a steady hand?"

"Shut up and pass me the Reese’s."

There’s something comforting simple about roasting s’mores— Derek can see why people like it, but perhaps more entertaining is the way Stiles is so easily satisfied with his burned black marshmallows, and eats them with glee between graham crackers and peanut butter cups. He laughs, and makes fun of Derek for taking “a million years” to roast his single marshmallow, and has a relaxed posture about him that shows he’s back to his normal self again, trembling fingers and sunken eyes of January left far behind. His mouth stays in a constant smirk now, as it should.
"You're staring at my lips."

"You have chocolate smeared on them," Derek murmurs.

"Do I?"

"Yes."

Stiles peeks the tip of his tongue out, slowly brushing it over the corner of his mouth. His eyes dance.

"Did I get it?"

"Yeah."

He feels like a teenager again, when he was whole and happy and knew what simple pleasures felt like. He pops another s'more into his mouth and cringes at the sticky-sweetness, but nods approvingly as Stiles beams. The twinkling lights of the city shine in front of them, and slowly the fire grows quieter as they clasp hands around their full bellies and bump knees on accident.
“Man, this is awesome,” Stiles says again, through a burp. “Top notch s’more supplies.”

“I got them at Walgreeens,” Derek says. “There was a Girl Scout Troop Outside. Selling cookies.”

“…Mm,” Stiles hums, too nonchalantly. His eyes flick over, like he isn’t sure and is maybe a little nervous at where this might be going.

Derek nods. “The same girls who set up there every year. A blonde woman was with them.”

“Mm.”

“She came up and offered me cookies,” Derek voices casually, still arranging his s’mores pieces. “Introduced herself as Jill. She said that a kid with moles came up to her yesterday and called her
“The mole kid also told her that Derek Hale was ‘the biggest, softest marshmallow’ in Beacon Hills, I believe.”

Stiles refuses to meet his eyes, mulling thoughtfully up at the stars. “Well, these are really more freckles than moles, so,” he shrugs, tapping the dots scattered across his cheek. “I dunno what you’re implying, but clearly some hipster is running around spreading rumors about you. Probably does it all over town, this guy might even have a problem. He sounds like a real nut case, so it’s probably best not to go out investigating, you know. For the betterment of your health. And his health.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Derek says lightly. “I bet he’s a real whack job. Probably owns a giant glow stick.”

“It’s a lightsaber. And if you use it to replace the fluorescents in the kitchen again I'm going to slip wolfsbane into your delicates, and you won't even realize it until you start walking around like you've got ants up your—”

Derek cuts him off by thwacking his stick against Stiles’s, knocking Stiles’s marshmallow into the fire.

“Thank you,” Derek says.

“You're welcome,” Stiles replies, and tries fishing his fallen marshmallow out from the fire with his stick. “Now eat your marshmallow, you marshmallow.”

“I've got a better idea.” Derek stands and brushes the crumbs from his jacket. “Follow me.”

“Uh… Where are we going? We’re in the middle of a forest on top of a cliff.”

“Hurry up.”

“What are you— Oh. What? I thought you were a werewolf, not a were-monkey,” Stiles snorts as Derek starts climbing up the nearest elm tree. “I know you like chasing squirrels but I guarantee you can find some on the ground, you know.”

“He scrambles onto the branch next to Derek. It takes a lot of clumsy limbs and flailing legs, but he manages to sit steadily enough on the bark. He starts swinging his feet and peering around the leaves.

“So… This is… What is this?”

“We have a better view from up here,” Derek says.

“For…? Estimating how far down the ground is?”

“For seeing the constellations.”

Stiles looks up and blinks at the sky. Which looks exactly the same as it always has in California, but from this seat the stars seem to twinkle twice as bright against the sky, a dark indigo backdrop dusted
with hues of purple and onyx. An airplane miles and miles above them skates by as a tiny red blink in slow motion, leaving no ripples behind in the placid nighttime canvas.

“Oh,” Stiles muses. “I think I know where the Big Dipper is— it’s… I think near a red star? A twinkly star? A cluster of stars? Crap, there’s like a million stars. I can’t find it.”

“My mom used to teach us about Navajo constellations,” Derek says, and points to a triangle of dots. “The three stars there make the head of the Northern Male. Below him is the Northern Female, and to the right… Those four stars in a row make the Squatting Man, Hastiin Sik’ai’i.”

“Gesundheit. And I thought Polish was a mouthful. Is there a wolf constellation?”

“Just because I’m a werewolf doesn’t mean I know about a wolf constellation.”

“Is there a wolf constellation?”

“…Yes.”

“Knew it. Is it that cluster of stars right there? The ones that kinda line up like a curved tail?”

“That’s Átse Ats’oostí, Orion. Lupus, that’s The Wolf—"

“Yes, I know, Lydia is the master of Latin, which has made me a smaller master of Latin by default.”

“—is behind us somewhere I think. It might not be in the sky right now.”

“At-suh Atch’oo… What was it again?”

"Átse Ats’oostí. The warrior."

"Looks like an elephant.”

“It’s a warrior.”

“An elephant warrior. Look, see, that’s the trunk.”

“No.”

“Come on, you’re a wolf and a human, why can’t you let this constellation be an elephant and a warrior?”

“It doesn’t look like an elephant.”

“Pffft. You don’t look like a wolf!”

Eventually he runs out of constellations. He only remembers so many of them, and Stiles seems intent on seeing something completely weird and different in every map of stars. They bicker a bit over where the Big Dipper is, and argue over which star is Saturn (Derek wins when Stiles looks it up on his phone), but eventually they grow quiet, letting the quiet orchestration of the crickets take over as they gaze up at the sky. Derek steals too many looks to the side during this— The stars are millions of miles away, but somehow they manage to twinkle their reflections in Stiles’s curious eyes. He startles when Stiles asks abruptly,

“Do you think there are people up there? Like heaven, where everyone gets little wings and sits on clouds and eats chocolate fondue and stuff?”
“Derek’s answer is almost immediate. “No.”

“Neither do I,” Stiles shrugs. “But they gotta go somewhere, right? Like after everything I’ve seen happen here, werewolves and kanimas, darachs… Things I never would have thought were possible, really, but after all that, life after death doesn’t seem that farfetched.”

“What do you think?”

Stiles laughs. “I dunno. Personally I think the promise of a bottomless chocolate fondue fountain sounds pretty awesome, But…”

He blinks, licks his lips, still staring at the stars. “My dad,” he answers. "The night he died, my dad said he would stick right by my side. And I’ve kind of thought about that a lot, and I used to be mad that he left, even though dying wasn’t his fault. But then I realized… He’s still kinda here? Even though I don’t have the badge anymore, he’s still in my head, and in memories, even that old christmas sweater I pulled out for you. Like I still hear his voice sometimes, or at least I can remember it really well and picture things he would say to me. Like… I guess if I keep all that in mind it feels like he’s still with me, just not in the flesh maybe. It just took me a while to realize he never actually left."
After a beat of silence Stiles turns to him, huffs a laugh, and hangs his head before looking back up at the sky.

"Hah. Sorry. That’s like the cheesiest thing I’ve ever said."

“No, I get it,” Derek answers, because he does. “It took me a while too, but I think you’re right… About how they never leave us."

Even with the mansion a shadow of his childhood, he still remembers opening stockings on Christmas mornings when he looks at the fireplace. When he cooks on the stove he can hear his mother’s voice calling them all down to set the table for dinner, and when he finds caterpillars in the woods they look just like the caterpillars Cora used to try to keep as pets. The rumble of the Camaro engine sounds like his dad’s Maserati, and sometimes when he sits on the couch he half expects Laura to come barreling into his side with a bowl of popcorn for movie night. His photos and possessions burned away that night, but he still feels his family in the walls of the mansion. Maybe that’s why it’s so hard to leave.
Yet he takes out his lighter and flicks it on. He hasn’t tried, but he’s pretty sure it will work now. Stiles watches as he puts the flame to his thumb, and then a smile grows there as the burn mark disappears from Derek’s skin.

“You healed.”

Derek nods. He wiggles his thumb, remembering the thumb wars he used to let Cora win, and smiles a little.

“Yeah.”

Stiles grins at the ground. He swings his feet, laces flopping in the air, and chuckles a little. “So what’d you do today, anyway? Besides snuffing out flames with your fingertips.”

“I went on an errand with Melissa McCall.”

“You… No you didn’t. With Melissa McCall? A.K.A Scott’s mom, A.K.A the second scariest woman after Nurse Ratchet? I mean she’s great, I love her, but considering how both of you get too enjoyment out of tenderizing chicken, I’m a little worried about what this ‘errand’ was.”

“You could say we were birthday shopping for you.”

Stiles startles. “Aheh. Sorry, I think I might have had a little stroke, or like a time slip maybe. You what now?”

Derek wordlessly fishes a hand inside his jacket pocket and pulls out the box, wrapped in the plain blue wrapping paper he picked up at Walgreen’s.

“Happy birthday.”

He hands it over. Stiles stares, mouth falling open to an ‘O’, and takes it.

“You— No way, you got me a present? But this is already— That’s… You didn’t have to.”

“Open it,” Derek says.

Stiles opens gifts like he approaches all things; as if solving a puzzle. He gives it a little shake by his ear, eyebrows knitting. He tries to guess the weight in his palm and lets the wrapping paper flutter to the grass below them. He gently pries off the lid, forehead a curious spiderweb of lines, and freezes when he sees what’s inside.
Stiles must stare at it for a solid minute before he moves. He silently looks up at Derek, eyes utterly huge in the moonlight, and mouth agape between confusion and utter joy. A hand flies to his forehead, fingers trembling, and then slowly, a huge smile stretches across his face, one so warm that Derek can’t help but smile too.

“Oh my god,” Stiles releases in a breathless laugh, eyes sparkling. “This is—you—How?”

Derek looks down, failing to rein in his satisfied smile. “Melissa got us into Richard’s office. Turns out some people can be bribed into handing over anything if you can pop a pair of fangs.” With the last word he flashes his eyes red. A musical laugh bursts from Stiles’s mouth, rich with mirth and disbelief.

“You—Derek!”

Stiles laughs—really, truly laughs for the first time, and it’s beautiful. In a heartbeat he flings himself forward and throws his arms around Derek in a hug, and this time Derek is neither surprised nor unsure of what to do. He squeezes back, grinning into Stiles’s shoulder as they sway upon the
branch, and just as quickly Stiles breaks away to throw his hands in the air and cheer, badge clasped tightly in his fist—but he tips backwards, arms pinwheeling as he tries to catch his balance, but he’s already pitching off the side of the branch.

“Stiles—!”

Derek lunges forward and grabs him by the shoulders just before he falls off. A “whooamigod!” mingles with Stiles’s laugh as he clings to the bark by his arms, legs dangling down and scrabbling for purchase.

“You idiot,” Derek breathes, because seriously, Stiles could die. “Can’t you go five minutes without falling into trouble? Literally, this time.” This makes Stiles laugh harder as he pulls him up by the collar.

“Don’t make me laugh,” Stiles wheezes, still giggling. “I can’t— ohmygod, fuck, getmeupgetmeup—”

But since Stiles can’t stop moving ever, and decides to use his fingers to grab onto Derek’s face for purchase, both of them end up toppling to the grass below. Derek grunts as he shoves a skinny leg off his face since the best he could do was use his body to cushion Stiles’s fall, and Stiles remains a cackling starfish on top of him. His laugh tapers off to a breathless giggle as Derek warns “your knee is digging into my kidney” and rolls over onto the grass.

“Thank you,” Stiles grins at him. He waves the badge around. “I— thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Derek says.

“Hey, listen! The ground might be good, actually, ‘cause um— I have something for you, too. And I want to be able to actually see them, so—”

Stiles bolts upright and Derek quizzically follows him back to the campfire. The teen flops onto his belly and starts pulling something from his jeans pocket. The hearth crackles in pink and orange beside them, making the nearby s’mores supplies glisten. Derek breaks off a graham cracker and eats it.

“Here, I wanted to show you these,” Stiles says, and slaps down a stack of folded papers in front of him.

“What are they?” Derek asks, genuinely curious.

“My new favorite newspaper articles, replacing the blurb about the man who survived getting eaten alive by a Hippo in 1962. I stole them from Peter yesterday.”

Derek chokes on his graham cracker.

“Whoa, whoa, don’t choke to death on me, are you kidding? Especially since I told you not to do the dying thing again! That would be a sad way to kick it, too. Death by s’mores, really?”

“Stiles,” Derek tries once he dislodges the crumbs from his throat. “Explain.”

Long fingers rub nervously over a pale throat, turning the skin pink there beneath the moles. Stiles makes a squeaky noise that eventually morphs into words. “Right, okay. Well, yesterday when you didn’t show up I figured something must have gone horribly wrong, since that tends to be your style, and one of my tactics was to compile a list of your enemies in case you were kidnapped. This list included footwear under $150, and cats obviously, and Peter. So since you mentioned he lived in an
apartment in some nearby town I couldn’t remember the name of for the life of me, I googled his name in Yellowpages and bingo! Found it. And then broke into it. And found these, which I took because I couldn’t just not take them.”

Derek blinks at him. “You broke into Peter’s apartment.” To look for me.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Well yeah, I figured he wouldn’t just let me in through the front door and offer me a beverage if you were hog-tied inside somewhere. Luckily most brick apartments have escape ladders on the side, which conveniently lead up to windows. Slightly ajar windows, with easily-removable screens that are big enough for skinny teenage bodies to wiggle through. Also luckily, he wasn’t home, apparently because he had already kicked the bucket that morning. Soooo… Hooray for Stiles! Just don’t report me, because one more misdemeanor on my record and you might have to bail me out of jail.”

Derek can’t help but smile. “That was…” Stupid, if Peter was home he could have killed you. Smart, how close you came to guessing where I was. “Brave.”

Stiles chuffs and blushes. “Yeah, well you can thank me later. After you read these babies.”

Derek regards the first paper, with a vague headline about his father’s old company and an environmentalist protest. “What am I looking at.”

“Dude,” Stiles breathes, grinning wildly, eyes shining with excitement. “Our moms knew each other!”

Derek doesn’t comprehend. “What?”

Stiles flips the paper over and points to the bottom. “Here, just read it! It’s insane.”

Derek skims the paper. It’s dated from 1988, the year his parents met at the protest. He’s heard the story plenty of times over the years, but he’s never seen an actual article written about it. It describes his father, then twenty-six, and his mom, then named Talia Nat’aanii, and their roles as CEO of Hale Associate’s and the Kin of Kéyah environmental group. Still, he wonders what he’s supposed to be looking for until he hits it.

”—their mission to gathering speculators below. Police security is present. “I’ve been on watch here for three days,” says John Stilinski, 24, a newly—

Derek squints at the paper. He keeps reading.

—a newly appointed Beacon Hills officer at the scene. “We tried talking them down, but they won’t budge. A few of them starting dropping walnuts on us,” Stilinski adds, eyeing a Kin of Kéyah member above him. “But otherwise they’re all pretty peaceful. Just loud.”

“Your dad?” He looks to Stiles in question, who’s megawatt grinning, fingers twiddling excitedly.

“That’s him! Keep reading, it gets better.”

He skims the rest of the article, expecting more mention of John Stilinski. But what he finds instead is twice the surprise.

”—as another member expressed support for leader Nat’aanii. “Talia has such a passionate soul,” says Claudia Górski, 21, a new member of the group. “Her love for the forest is inspiring. I’m leaving in a couple months to finish up my fine arts degree, but I’ll remember her as a great leader.”

“Claudia,” he breathes. “That’s your…”
“My mom, yeah!” Stiles beams. “Back in her hippie-dippie— well, less hippie-dippie days as a college student. But dude, your mom was her leader! How awesome is that?!”

“That’s…” Derek stares at the tiny ink of the newspaper. “Yeah.”

“Right?” Stiles flops over onto his back and props a sneaker on his knee, waggling intensely. “I wonder what they talked about? I mean environmental stuff, sure, but they had to be friends on some level, right? Do you think they like, had those girly girl-to-girl talks about crushes? Crushes in question being your dad, and my dad, when our dads were awkward fresh-out-of-college nerds just a few years older than us! This is incredible. I’m not the only one wiggin’ out over here, right? Because dude, Derek—”

Stiles flops over onto his stomach again, gazing up to meet Derek’s eyes, and grabs Derek’s arm to squeeze it excitedly. “Our parents met at the same time, in the same place.”
“Are your parents in this one, too?” Derek asks, picking up the second newspaper in the pile.

"Uh, no. That one’s just for you. It’s your parents.”

His heart beats faster as he carefully opens the crinkled paper, and reads the headline: it’s the Forbes article from 1990 about his father leaving Hale Associates to marry his mom, and how they newly purchased the mansion. Attached is a picture of his dad at age twenty-eight before he grew his stubble, and his mom pregnant with Laura before she cut her hair. Both of them are smiling at the camera like they’re the luckiest people on earth. He reads it again eagerly, but doesn’t realize he’s smiling until he gets to the last few lines of the interview.

Joe: Oh! so there are more in the future for you?
Robert: “As long as it’s alright with Talia, but yeah, that’s why we chose the biggest house in the county. That, and we wanted a place close to the woods… So we got the one house built in the woods. I’d love to raise a son one day,” [glances to Talia, who smiles] “but for now I’m very excited for our baby girl.”

Talia and Robert are expecting their first child this February; when asked to describe his wife in one word, Robert answered with the following statement: “There aren’t enough words in the world to describe Talia. She made me a better man. My ambition used to blind me, but she taught me how to open my eyes and see the rest of the world.”

“We had this one framed in the library,” Derek admits. It feels like gold in his hands, a piece of treasure he thought he lost forever in the fire. He looks at the picture with pride for his father, and pride for his mother, and a strange urge to laugh for no reason. He feels lighter somehow, like the fire never happened.

“And here,” Stiles says, glancing up shyly. He slides forward two photographs from his palm. “I, uh. Found these too. So I took them, because I figured you probably hadn’t seen them, and you should see them.”

Derek flips them over and stares. The first one is of his parents, laughing beside who can only be an infant Laura and a chocolate cake. The second is of Cora and Laura hugging each other in the snow, cheeks pink and heads tossed back with laughter.
“I haven’t seen these before,” he whispers.

“Really?” Stiles licks his lips.

“Our photo albums got destroyed in the fire.” He swallows, looks up at Stiles, and tries not to cave in on himself as their eyes meet. “Thank you.”

Pink blooms over Stiles’s cheeks. He squishes his lips back and forth and plays with a piece of grass. “Yeah, no biggie. Anytime.” He looks at the photos glancingly, probably because he's already spent a while looking at them. He points to the snow picture. “Is this one taken in these woods?”

Derek shakes his head. “No, when we went to Tahoe for Christmas vacation.”

Stiles grins excitedly. “Dude, I went to Tahoe with Scott once. It was a total disaster. My dad almost killed us for breaking three pairs of rental skis.”
“You’ve got nothing on Laura,” Derek huffs, smirking at her in the photo. “She was banned from three bowling alleys, a car wash, and seven different restaurants for essentially blowing up the place. Once she caused a fire in a grocery store.”

“Whoa, on purpose?”

“Mostly accidents. Although she did lock a manager in his own 7-Eleven after he refused to sell her beer.”

“She is my new role model,” Stiles declares.

“My mom used to make these cakes for our birthdays,” Derek murmurs as he studies the birthday photo. “Everyone liked German chocolate the best so we had that all the time, but I was the only one who asked for vanilla.”

“Melissa made us a German chocolate cake once for my dad’s birthday in like… I was in seventh grade, I think? We actually got mugged that night on our way back from the movies.”

“You and Melissa got mugged?”

“Nah, me and my dad. Well, kinda. The guy had a fake gun but still managed to bang us up a little. Melissa patched us up after, and we got more pity cake.”

“Did he get away?”

“Yeah, with my dad’s wallet, which sucked. Probably would have gone better if we had your werewolf fighting skills.”

“My dad used to train us every weekend to help us use our abilities,” Derek says. “It wasn’t always glamorous. One time he gave us cupcakes with wolfsbane, and then cupcakes with the anti-poison to teach us about what wolfsbane poisoning felt like.”

“Duuuude! That’s some hardcore parenting right there,” Stiles balks. "I can’t imagine what it was like when he grounded you.”

“My mom was the one who grounded us. My dad’s best attempt was making Laura drive us to school in her Porche instead of the Lamborghini.”

“Ha! And to think my dad drove me to school in a beat-up 1976 Station-wagon for nine years. The kind with the wood on the side? Oh, man. While you and your sister had access to two shiny four-wheel drives!” Stiles pouts.

“We actually had eight— my dad had a thing for collecting sports cars,” Derek smirks.

“Holy— I think I need a minute to breathe here, to try and not die from shock, maybe. You guys had eight cars?”

“Yeah, we had to move our laundry machines into the parlor to make space. The Lamborghini, Laura’s Porche, the Corbra… There was a green 1970s Thunderbird, and a baby blue Cadillac from the 50s… We didn’t really use the other ones.”

Stiles blows out a long whistle. “Damn. I would have found an excuse to be in the garage, like all the time. What was your favorite?”

“My dad had this red 1986 Maserati. We all joked it was his fourth child.”
“Dude, a Maserati?”

“Yeah. I crashed it though, when I was sixteen.”

“You didn’t.”

“Into a tree,” Derek nods. “My dad was in the passenger seat.”

“Did he murder you?”

“No, actually. He just picked it up and dragged it back to the house.”

“He picked it— you and your werewolf life, man. Yeah, you think your cars are sweet but nothing compares to my mom’s jeep,” Stiles declares. "She had that thing when she met my dad— and I wanted to drive it soooo badly. Forget Porches and Maserati’s, that baby was the love of my life and my only goal of freshman year. I used to make my dad breakfast in bed and bribe him by doing all the dishes so he would teach me to drive it before I turned fifteen.”

“Did it work?”

“Kinda. Long story short Scott had an asthma attack and almost died in the backseat of the cruiser, but then dad was all, ‘son, you showed responsibility today, blah blah here are the jeep keys’ and I was like, ‘well this is a fun surprise, thanks for having terrible lungs, Scotty-boy’, and then I was finally united with my baby. Hitting that gas pedal for the first time was awesome.”

“Mm.”

“Was your mom still running her group thingy when you were a kid?” Stiles asks.

“The Kin of Kéyah? Not for very long.” Derek scratches his chin. "When Laura and I got into middle school she handed it over to another member to run because she was too busy with us."

“I bet you two were wreaking all kinds of havoc.”

“Just Laura. I was more of a… Quiet kid.”

“Shocker. I bet you had a pet rock.”

“No, I had a leaf collection.”

Stiles chokes and spirals into a coughing fit. When he recovers, “You— no, no you didn’t. That’s— a leaf collection? You mean marijuana leaves, right?”

Derek shakes his head somberly. “My favorite was my purple oak leaf. It was the size of my head.”

Stiles rolls in the grass with laughter. “Oh my god, I can’t handle this, this is the best thing I’ve ever found out about you! Derek Hale! Ferocious werewolf by day, leaf collector by night!”

“Laugh all you want. You’re the one who tried eating an earplug because you thought it was a Tootsie Roll.”

“Hey! When I was fourteen I solved a triple homicide case, so I’d be careful about insulting my intelligence.”

Derek raises an eyebrow. “You solved a triple homicide when you were fourteen?”
“Yeah,” Stiles chuckles. “Some guy was poisoning limes with arsenic at The Jungle. I snuck around a lot on my bike to gather evidence.”

Derek can’t help but laugh, a wild, crinkly-eyed thing he almost forgets to hide behind his fist. Stiles looks surprised but eagerly laughs with him.

“It’s funny, right? The newspaper titled it ‘The Lime Crime’ of the century. The next day Lydia actually said hi to me in the hall, it was the beginning of a new era. There was even this asshole kid at school— he had an English accent and everything, and he actually complimented me that day. But the guy was a total snob, so I only preened over it for a few days. And— dude, you’re still laughing!”

“It’s just,” Derek giggles. "Laura had a boyfriend with an English accent once, and he was also an asshole. I dumped spaghetti on his head when he broke up with her.”

This time Stiles throws his head back and cackles. “Holy crap, forget battling alphas with claws and fangs, we should just fire spaghetti cannons at them!”

“And poisoned limes,” Derek sniggers.

“Yes! A feast of weaponry!”

“A militant meal.”

“Dinner for dummies! The most— Oh my god,” Stiles breathes, looking intensely into Derek’s eyes. “You’re… Is that—?”

He reaches out and gently brushes a finger beneath Derek’s eye. Derek blinks, surprised to see a bead of moisture on Stiles’s fingertip. The finger trembles as Stiles brings it close to his nose to inspect it, mouth agape.

“Oh my god,” Stiles breathes again, with a fantastic smile. “Do you know what this is?” And when Derek doesn’t answer, a louder and more staggered, "Do you KNOW what this IS?"

“I—"

"This is a happy tear,” Stiles whisper-yells, and then almost hits Derek in the face when he flails and shouts, “A Derek Hale happy tear! This is— This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Stiles declares, like he’s literally holding Christmas on his fingertip. “This beautiful drop of 70% water 30% pheromones is the rarest object on the entire planet, and I’m holding it, right now!” Stiles is actually dangerously close to hyper-excitement over this. “And it’s— Oh! Oh shit! It’s evaporating! Quick, quick! What do we do with it? Make a wish? Should I eat it? No, wait, gross, that’s so weird. Offer it to the sky in hope that it brings good crops this year? I’m not ready for this kind of pressure!”

“You’re insane,” Derek chuckles at the grass, and Stiles yells “Your face is insane!” with such volume and enthusiasm it startles Derek, but not enough to kill his laughter. He can’t remember the last time he’s been so happy, or the last time he’s talked about his family without an ounce of sadness.

“Jesus, this is amazing. You’re amazing. This is the best day ever, ever! You hear me? I—"
“—ey, Derek? Derek, are you okay? I didn’t mean to—"

“I didn’t want you to be alone,” Derek blurts.

Behind him Stiles grows still. “What?”

“That’s why I took you in,” Derek says, because Stiles asked him in his parents’ bedroom two months ago, but he just now figured out his answer. “I didn’t want you to be alone, or for you to live in an empty house like I did. And… Because I didn’t want to be alone anymore.” He swallows. “Which was maybe more selfish of me, to want you to live with me after how I treated you the past couple years. And because I’m not Scott, and I’m not someone…” **Happy, talkative, outgoing, fearless—**

“Like you,” pops out of his mouth.

Stiles stares at him, face a picture of incredulity. His gaze is soft like he sees the whole world in front of him, even in the darkness, and he shakes his head softly. A smile slowly grows there, one of those smiles someone pulls when they laugh at irony or lack of something to do, and his gaze still won’t leave Derek.

“Come here,” Stiles says, smile suddenly gone. His eyes are round and almost serious, heart rate climbing upwards. He stares at Derek intently, firelight illuminating the wild tips of his hair in the background. Derek studies him, cautious.

“Why.”

“Because I want to give you something.”

“What is it?”

“Something you need. I need, maybe. Just trust me.”

Trust. It’s a word they both would have scoffed at a few months ago, but Derek realizes he trusts Stiles now more than he trusts anyone else. He obediently walks closer, until only a couple feet separate them.

“Closer,” Stiles murmurs, and places a careful hand on his shoulder. His heart stumbles over itself as he rearranges his fingers on Derek’s leather jacket, eyes darting down to the little patch of hoodie sewn over the pocket. He’s near enough that Derek can feel the sweet breath on his face, and it’s distracting enough to erase the surrounding trees into the background.

And then Stiles leans in to the side like he’s gong to whisper something in his ear, but instead he presses a gentle kiss to the tender skin on Derek’s neck, on the little dip beneath his earlobe.

Derek’s breath hitches as the touch ghosts over his skin, just a chaste brush of lip on nape. Stiles holds it there for a drawn-out second like he’s taking his time, and the woods fall silent aside from gentle breath and the crickets behind them. All too soon the lips part from his skin and hover there, tickling the fine hairs by his ear.

“This is because you listen,” Stiles whispers. Derek’s lungs freeze as Stiles draws back, taking a moment to meet his eyes and cup Derek’s cheek with his hand, fingers trembling slightly. “Even when I think you’re not paying attention.”

Derek wants to keep watching him— it almost hurts to close his eyes, but he does so anyway, because Stiles is tilting his lips up to meet his eyelids, barely skimming his eyelashes as they flutter
closed.

“This is because you always see the bigger picture,” Stiles tells him quietly, and draws back again. “Even when no one else notices.”

The forest grows still as Stiles leans in a third time, slower and more hesitantly than before, and gently touches their lips together. It’s barely a kiss, just a ghost of Stiles’s slack lips against his own, and Derek fights the urge to chase him back and taste them deeper. He stays perfectly still, hardly breathing as Stiles draws back, and stares as honey-brown eyes flick up to greet his, gazes so close that Derek can see the tiny freckles in his irises.

“And this is because you’re a poor conversationalist, but you’re an honest conversationalist. And that’s what I needed.”

He stares, feeling lightheaded and warm and too many impossible things. He swallows, watches the blush creep up Stiles’s neck, and feels his own ears grow red. Stiles’s heart thumps wildly as he searches for a reaction. There’s a fleeting thought of how Past Derek would’ve ran away, but all he can feel now is the overwhelming sureness in his chest.

He slowly takes Stiles’s hand and brings it up to his face. He mirrors what Stiles did— just lightly presses his lips there on his pale knuckles, hardly enough to taste the sweat on his lips. The pulse beneath them stutters, along with the lungs before him.

“This is because you fix things,” he murmurs, thinking about the jeep, and his jacket, and himself. “You figure things out, and you make them right.”

He searches Stiles’s face, and hardly needs to even think about where to go next. He zeros in on his cheek, leans forward, and presses an even gentler kiss to mole #3. It’s his favorite mole, he’s decided, right where Stiles’s dimple is when he smiles.

“This is because I’m an idiot sometimes,” he says, and smirks as Stiles’s lips stretch into a grin. “But you’re the only one who isn’t afraid to tell me that I am.”

“And this,” he leans in, and watches Stiles’s eyelashes flutter closed as their lips touch. Like the first time it’s barely a brush of skin against skin, but it’s enough to jolt their heartbeats to staccatos. “Is because you talk too much, but it makes me want to talk more.”

The words slip out freely, because he isn’t afraid to say them anymore. Stiles stares at him, eyes shining, and pulls him forward again to meet his lips wholeheartedly.
In that moment, everything stops.

The quiet rush of the wind through the leaves mutes out, the grass beneath his feet disappears. Stiles’s mouth is warm, wet, soft against his own. The kiss is slow, patient, and eager, summarizing everything they’ve been teasing the past few months. Stiles’s fingers slide up his neck and press softly into his stubble, and Derek slips a hand up to curl his fingers through Stiles’s hair with a rushing thought of how long he’s wanted to do it. He can taste the chocolate on Stiles’s tongue.

It’s both everything and more than he imagined — the flutter of Stiles’s fingers through his hair, the quiet rush as their lips dance with each other, and butterfly tickles of eyelashes sweeping each other’s cheeks and noses. He can feel Stiles smiling into it and he’s pretty sure he’s smiling too, a yearning
proclamation as he playfully catches Stiles’s lip between his teeth and gently releases them again, a rhythm like their dance at Minton’s.

“I guess birthday wishes do come true,” Stiles murmurs, and Derek surges forward to taste the laughter on his lips.

Time melts by. He tucks his nose into Stiles’s neck and breathes deeply, then gently, slowly presses kisses against the freckles leading up that pale neck, starting with the base of his collarbone and patiently working his way up to the base of his ear. He kisses Stiles like how Stiles taught him to eat s’mores, with passion and joy and without an ounce of self-consciousness. Only Stiles tastes better.

The pain of the past six years is somehow erased, irrelevant and no longer painful. It’s just him and Stiles, their warm breaths mixing in peaceful syncopation, and for a moment, for the first time in six years, everything is right.

After what feels like only a mere moment they break apart, hands slowly slipping down jawlines and plaid until their knuckles rest tangled on each other’s knees. When he pulls his eyes open he gets the privilege of watching Stiles’s eyes flutter wide just half a second after his own, lips shiny and flush, eyelashes painted peach with the the soft light of the campfire beside them.

A blink later and their backs are pressed softly into the grass, tucked warmly beside each other and the applause of the crickets in the background. They stare up at the sky at The Wolf and the Squatting Man and the Elephant Warrior. They’re both panting, hair mussed and cheeks flushed beneath it all, and arms wrapped around each other like they’re afraid they’ll float away if they let go. Stiles looks at him with a soft smile, and it’s the first time Stiles looks exactly like he had last year, if not a bit brighter. His eyes sparkle in the dim light, every shade of his irises visible, from the tiny flecks of honey to deep amber, and every dark mocha in between.

“Finally,” Stiles breathes.

Derek couldn’t agree more.
Chapter End Notes

AHHHHHH!!! See you in a month or two for chapter 17 - and THANK YOU for the incredible patience, praise, and kudos. Don't forget to read Raising Home!! :)

Stiles wakes up to the smell of forest dew and Derek Hale.

His face is nestled between the crook of Derek’s armpit and left pectoral, which beats a pillow any day. A memory foam pillow, even. They’re still in the woods, but Derek just smells like the woods himself anyway, like redwood and fresh pine and a little like sweat and earth. It’s good. So good that it takes a minute to remember that right— he and Derek kissed last night, like reallysuperduperintenselyawesome kissed, before falling asleep together staring up at the stars.

Best. Day after his birthday. Ever.

He’s still kind of half asleep, but he can sense that it must be early morning because the light behind his eyelids is a little too bright to still be nighttime, and he can hear the distant coos of woodland fowl over the breeze. The leather jacket is layed out over them in a makeshift blanket (when did that happen?) and he blinks his eyes open, which is a monumental task because Derek’s breath (which somehow magically doesn’t even smell that horrible despite the early hour) is spilling down and ruffling his bangs oh-so-slightly, which is nice. Really nice. Nice squared.

He turns his nose down further into Derek’s chest away from the cold. The tip of the sun is just barely watching over the city, so the sky stretches lazily over them in shades of pale purple dusk, with rings of deep pink yawning hello from the horizon. He blinks sleepily at it, sighs happily, and shifts his head up to steal a glance at Derek’s sleeping face, only to find that Derek is already awake and staring at him contentedly.

“Were you watching me sleep?” He snorts, voice gravelly. “Gotta say, you’ve reached a new level of creeper-dom.”
Derek grunts in reply. “You snore a lot.”

He snuggles back down under the jacket. He’s safe. A safe little cocoon, or like a bug under a leaf, like those little black caterpillar eggs that stick to your fingers and freak you out when you pick up a leaf. It’s awesome. “And you cuddle a lot, apparently. Derek Hale, the cuddler. Cuddlewolf. Who knew?”

Derek responds by shifting over and slipping his arms off to sit up. Stiles does not whine a little at this.

“Hey, I didn’t say stop.” He curls into a very lonely ball as the chilly air nips at his arms. Derek tosses the jacket at him, which lands over his face.

“We should get up,” Derek announces. His hair is sleep-ruffled and his eyes are sharp grey against the woods, and somehow aren’t sealed over with gross crusties, which is just unfair. “Judging by the sun it’s about seven. We’re meeting Melissa at the farmer’s market at nine.”

“Okay first, is that a wolf thing? Being super in tune with the sun’s alignment and all that? Second, I gotta say you and mama McCall being grocery buds is kind of awesome. Weird and totally unexpected, but awesome. Like those mugs that change color if you put hot or cold drinks in them— Ha! Hey, there’s a beetle on my shoe. Sup, beetle— like if you pour hot coffee into it and the mug turns orange— weird and unexpected, but awesome. Actually jk, the beetle’s actually just some dirt. I need Adderall.”

“Hurry up.”

"I gotta say you are probably the most passionate grocery shopper I’ve ever met. Sun barely cracks the horizon? Oh good, let’s go get some vegetables. Derek Hale, the veggiewolf. Did’ja know NASA’s doing experiments where they’re trying to grow potatoes on Mars? I bet you’d go to Mars just to get those potatoes. In like, 2053. We’d be like… How old would we be? I can’t do math at this hour. I prefer to avoid math at all hours of the day, actually. Hey, is that mint over there?”

“That’s huckleberry. It’ll probably give your mouth a rash if you try chewing it.”

Stiles flings the leaf away.

The house waits for them in a bath of silver fog, compliments of the early morning hour. For the first time in three months, Derek doesn’t absentely stroke a hand up the guardrail as they ascend the porch. It’s something that always struck Stiles as a loving gesture, as if he’s soothing the mansion, or maybe pleading with it not to fall down, since he obviously doesn’t need a guardrail for balance. Derek doesn’t seem to realize he forgot to do it.

The transition from the woods to the living room isn’t much change because the house is always freezing before noon. Stiles tucks his hands into his hoodie and makes a little “brrr” sound with his lips, smiling when his fingers brush against a familiar six-pointed star. He opens his mouth to say something—he isn’t really sure what, but instead he yelps in surprise when a pair of arms wrap around his waist and lift him up.

His legs swing as he’s spun around and plopped on his butt on the counter, and a little happy startled noise slips out of him when Derek’s lips are suddenly pressed against his, warm and sure and inviting. God, he could get used to kissing Derek. Derek’s lips are plush and buttery-soft, a stark contrast to the scratchy-scratch of his stubble and the warmth of his nose. He could say something like Derek tastes like his wildest dreams or unicorn tears, but Derek just tastes like Derek, which is way better. No offense to unicorns.
They take a quiet moment to smile at each other. He swings his legs contentedly as Derek turns around to grab a knife and an orange from the fruit basket.

“Mmm, yep,” he hums, swaying blissfully on the counter. “The kissing is good. I could get used to the kissing. Stiles approves.”

Derek returns and pushes Stiles’s knees apart so he can stand in between. He starts slicing the orange into wedges and hands the first one over, and Stiles puts it between his canines and cranes his neck out to give it to another mouth. Derek looks up, and with a tiny smile he leans in and tears out the pulp as Stiles holds the rind with his teeth.

“So uh,” Stiles starts, and takes a bite of the next orange slice Derek hands him. “I didn’t know you were…” He squints, searching for the right word. “Not straight? Or are you straight and I’m just an exception? Are you… What are you?”

Derek examines his orange thoughtfully before cutting another wedge. He shrugs. “I’m a werewolf.”

Stiles snorts. “When I was six I wanted to marry Aladdin. But then Lydia happened, so mom and pop knew I had hopped aboard the bi train before I knew it. Stiles Stilinski, internally queer but always assumed straight, at your service. I’m like a secret spy amongst the heterosexuals. A bi-spy! Although Lydia’s probably already figured it out, Danny too since I spent most of my sophomore year hitting on him. Scott’s still pretty clueless though, even though I’ve asked him several occasions if he wanted to make out. Which is pretty obviously gay in my opinion, but it’s Scott, so.”

Derek chokes a little on his orange. And then the door knocks.

Rap rap rap.

Stiles frowns. “Was Melissa coming here first?”

Derek dries his hands and starts walking towards the door, looking equally confused and a little worried. “No, she wasn’t.”

Stiles follows him to the door, subconsciously clutching the badge in his pocket.

But it isn’t Melissa. The door swings aside, revealing Hillary Clinton—the blonde Girl Scout soccer mom lady from the other day. She’s wearing a soft lavender sweater and a brown tote over her shoulder, and at her side is the little dark-skinned girl with the pigtails. She isn’t in her ladybug coat anymore, but she has on a polka dot turtleneck. She seems unimpressed.

“Hi,” the woman says. Her smile is a little nervous, but genuine enough. “I don’t know if you remember me, but I’m—“

“Jill,” Derek interrupts as Stiles is about to suggest a less-polite name. “From the Girl Scout table. Of course. How are you?”

Jill swoops some stiff blonde hair behind her ear, looking surprised. “Oh, I— I’m just fine, thank you. Listen, I, um. Wanted to come by with Penelope here,” she squeezes the little girl’s hand. “To talk to you about something… If you have a minute, of course. I don’t mean to just drop by like this, but the number in the phone book wasn’t working and I knew that you lived here.”
“The house line hasn’t worked in a few years,” Derek tells her. “Would you like to come in?”

Stiles gapes in protest behind Derek, who isn’t looking at him because he’s too busy being polite and trusting like a Smurf. It’s crazy how utterly well-mannered Derek is in the face of strangers, but perpetually grumpy in the face of the pack. And cute animals. And puns.

Jill enters the house, obviously trying not to stare at everything. She’s wearing crisp black slacks and little flats with a gold chain, like something from an overpriced boutique. Stiles squints suspiciously at her, still not entirely convinced by her innocent appearance based on what she said about Derek a couple days ago, but she smiles weakly at him, and it looks apologetic. Which makes her absolutely no more than two percent more favorable.

“Would you like something to drink?” Derek asks, like the secret gentleman marshmallow he is. “We just brewed some coffee.”

“Oh,” the woman takes a second. “Ah— Sure, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all. Take a seat.”

She chooses a seat at the bar, and Stiles approaches her and the little girl cautiously, hooking his thumbs in his pockets. He tries to sniff discreetly for hidden wolfsbane bombs or maybe just some pepper spray, but figures Derek probably would have caught that at the door. The girl seems equally alert as he is— she looks to be in about third grade, with dark brown eyes that squint suspiciously at everything in the living room.

“Hi,” Jill bites her lip, looking a little like she’s afraid Stiles might decide to throw all his money at her again. “We never… Officially met, the other day. I’m Jill.”

She holds out elegant fingers to shake his hand, and he raises an eyebrow. He’s got about fifty shady remarks loaded on his tongue, but Derek turns his head around from the cabinets and throws him a silent look (really just a minute twitch of an eyebrow) that says, ‘play nice.’

He stretches his lips into a tight smile, deciding that he will just be internally shady. “Stiles,” he says, and shakes her hand. Her fingers are cold and smooth, like she uses hand cream. Expensive hand cream.

“Can she have chocolate milk?” Derek asks Jill, tipping his head towards the little girl, who —to her credit— is standing over by the window frowning intensely at the duct tape holding the frame in place. “If not we have regular milk.”

First of all, that’s Stiles’s chocolate milk that Derek just offered to the unappreciative tastebuds of a little girl. Second of all, Derek’s eyes weirdly keep flicking over to the little girl every minute or so. But not like he’s monitoring her to make sure she doesn’t knock over a ceramic pot or something (even though Stiles has accidentally smashed all but one of them now), more like how if there’s a puppy in the room then everyone just wants to stare at the puppy, because puppies.

“She would probably love chocolate milk,” Jill smiles. Drat.

Derek sets out two mugs. Stiles cautiously approaches the girl. She crosses her arms and regards him the same.

“So Penelope, huh. I’m Stiles,” he offers.

“Your name is Stiles?” She squints at him. “What kind of name is that. And you can call me P.”
“P?” Stiles echoes dubiously. "That stand for anything special?"

The girl narrows her eyes. “Yeah, Penelope. But I go by ‘P’ because Penelope is dumb and so is ‘Penny’ ‘cause I’m worth way more than some silly coin."

Stiles suddenly, immediately likes her against his will. “Hey, I feel you. My real name is hella crazy too, I didn’t even learn to spell it right until I was your age.”

“What’s your real name?” She asks suspiciously.

“Uh-uh, only top tier friends get to know that secret. But I go by Stiles.”

“That’s a weird name,” P tells him matter-of-factly.

“Yeah. But you know superheroes have weird names too, with all that alliteration. It’s something me and superheroes have in common.”

"What’s that?"

“Alliteration? It’s where two words, or names, start with the same letter. All over the place in Stan Lee’s world. Like Bruce Banner, Sue Storm, Matt Murdock…”

“Peter Parker?” She cocks her head.

Impressive. “Yeah, exactly! Or me, Stiles Stilinski.”

Behind him, the faint clink of someone losing grip on their coffee mug clacks against the counter. He braces himself as he turns around, where Jill is staring at him with wide eyes. "Oh," she breathes softly. "You’re the Sheriff’s…”

There’s two ways he could answer. But after three months of slumped shoulders and cringing like a turtle, he's ready for option two.

"Son, yeah." He finishes proudly for her, because he is proud. He throws in a small salute. "Stiles Stilinski, former first son of the county’s greatest Sheriff, at your service."

Derek’s lips do this tiny little twitch that might have been a smile, but he turns his face away before Stiles can really be sure.

“Oh,” Jill says again, eyes round. “I didn’t… I heard he had a son, but I didn’t realize it was you. I’m sorry. I met him once on the side of Highway ninety-two last summer, after another car rear-ended me. The other driver and I were fine, but there was a lot of glass on the road and they had to block off two lanes. It took hours to finally clear it all away, and I hadn’t eaten breakfast yet that day. He offered me his lunch when he heard my stomach growling.”

“Mm, lemme guess. Double cheeseburger, fries, and an untouched container of salad?”

Jill smiles. “Yes!”

He nods. “Yeah, sounds like him. Sometimes I had to hide veggies in his mashed potatoes to get him to eat something green.”

“Sounds like P,” Jill glances amusedly to Penelope. “Eight years old, and refuses to touch anything except waffles and dinosaur chicken nuggets.”

“Eight and a half.” Penelope cuts in, with a bounce of pigtails.
Derek’s head whips around so fast that he actually bangs his forehead against the kitchen cabinet—which catches Stiles’s attention because that is a very un-Derek move. So is the way Derek's face softens, mouth falling open a little as he stares at P like she’s breaking his heart and gluing it back together at the same time.

Jill sighs and looks at Derek pointedly. “Right, eight and a half,” she corrects, and Derek just stares at her like his face got stuck like that.

“Pssst—” Penelope tugs on Derek’s shirt sleeve. “Do you have any pets?”

“Derek turns into a wolf if you scratch him behind the ears right,” Stiles prompts. Derek scowls at him.

“No, but I’m sure you could find something growing on the old pizza containers Stiles leaves in his room,” Derek offers.

“Ew, that’s gross.” P stands on her tiptoes to reach the chocolate milk Derek sets on the counter, with a small “Mmm, thanks, mister.” Derek continues to watch her over the rim of his mug.

“So, ah— You… Had a sister, right? Who was a girl scout?” Jill asks tentatively. She holds her cup close.

Derek nods, with a glance to Stiles. “I had two. My younger sister was in troop 1174.”

Jill smiles softly. “How lovely. Actually, that’s um… Well, sort of why I came here to talk to you today.”

Derek tenses. Stiles leans against the fridge, crossing his arms and hopefully conveying with his eyeballs that he will use Darth Vader’s Force Choke on her if she says anything stupid.

“Recently our other troop leader moved out of state, which means I’m the only one left to organize twenty-three girls. My husband usually helps out when I’m in a pinch, but he’s in Afghanistan until next Spring,” Jill bites her lip, pulling a weak smile. "The thing is, The Girl Scouts require at least two moderators in order to run a troop, and I was wondering… I know this is completely out of left field, and I completely understand if you decline, But I was wondering— If maybe you’d like to be our second moderator.”

If there were pigs in the room, they would be flying, Stiles thinks. He waits for her to start laughing, or for a camera crew to burst through the windows with a “you’ve been PUNKED!” because that's how absurd she sounds right now, but none of that happens. Derek just stares at the woman across from him. It’s a long time before he says anything.

“I… I didn’t know men were allowed to…”

“They changed that rule a few years ago,” Jill offers. “Anyone can help out as long as they’re over twenty-one, which, oh— you are, aren’t you?”

Derek nods, and his voice is unusually quiet. “Twenty-two.”

Jill smiles. “Wonderful. So anyone over twenty-one can do it, who represents the spirit of the scouts of course. You wouldn’t need to give up much of your time if you say yes, just a couple Sundays a
month or so when we have a meeting. Usually the girls just do crafts or put together sandwiches for the homeless shelter for a few hours. They’re really a sweet bunch, all third-graders from Beacon Hills Elementary. But again, I understand if your answer is no.”

Derek is quiet again. He gazes into his coffee cup as small curls of steam drift up to his face. When he finally speaks, it’s just a simple question.

“Why me?”

Jill bites her lip. When she glances up, she suddenly looks a lot less like Stereotypical Rich White Soccer Mom and a lot more like someone asking for forgiveness. “Because… I judged you unfairly. I haven’t treated you with much respect, yet you still came to our table every year and bought cookies without ever forgetting a ‘please’ or ‘thank you.’ I know I don’t know you much beyond that, but your friend seems to think highly of you,” she glances at Stiles. “Truthfully I think the girls could benefit from having someone like you as a leader.”

For a minute, Stiles isn’t sure if Derek is going to storm off or melt into an embarrassed puddle below his barstool (since Derek tends to avoid emotional confrontations like he probably avoids costume parties). The woman is clearly taking a wild chance here, discarding years of assumptions about Derek’s criminal mastermind evilness to trust him with a herd of third grade girls— But then he swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing slowly, and gives the slightest of nods before looking up at Jill.

“Thank you. I’ll do it.”

Jill beams. “Oh, wonderful! That’s— you don’t have to make a final decision right now, of course. You can take a few days to think it over, just be sure—“

“I’m sure,” Derek cuts in. “I… Thank you.”

“Oh, no, thank you! You’re really doing us a huge favor. I actually brought the schedule for the month, if you wanted to take a—“

Stiles takes the cue to give them some privacy. “Hey P,” he whispers, bending down eye level with her. “Who’s your favorite superhero?”

“That’s easy. Spiderman,” she announces.

“Ah, good ol’ Spiderman, huh? You wait here, I’m gonna show you why Batman is five times cooler.”

Which is how he ends up on the rug in the living room with an eight-and-a-half year old girl flipping through comic books, while Jill and Derek are sit at the counter discussing Girl Scout stuff. Go figure.

“I saw you before,” P watches him. “You threw lot’sa money at my mama.”

“Uh, Yeah. Yeah, I did. But I was making a point,” Stiles shrugs. “Did ya win that bike yet?”

“Nah,” Penelope gnaws on her chocolate milk mug. She’s missing two front teeth. “But I already have a bike so I don’t really care. I want the dinosaur pillow, though. If you get a hundred boxes sold you get a great big dinosaur pillow.”

“Nice. A t-rex?”
“Triceratops. Those are better anyway ‘cuz they got big horns that’ll shit-kabob you.”

“Shish-kabob?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Well not exactly, but sure, we’ll go with that.”

“Do you live here?” P asks.

“Yep.”

“Are you rich?”

“Me? Nah. But Derek’s pretty loaded.”

“How,” P scrunches her nose. “‘Cuz your house is so big, but it’s all falling apart. Why don’t you fix it?”

Stiles glances to the sagging staircase. Then he glances at Derek, who’s clearly listening in judging by how his shoulders suddenly tense. “Eh. Sometimes there’s not much you can do. There was a lot of damage done to it.”

“Too much to fix?”

“Maybe. Probably too much to make it what it used to be, but it’s where we live.”

“If you’ve got all so much money, you should just get a new house,” P flips a page in Batman: Gotham By Midnight. “I wanna live in a big ol’ house in Hawaii b’cause mom says that’s where pineapples are grown, and pineapples are my favorite food.”

“That’s because you haven’t tried a Double Double cheeseburger from In ’N Out yet,” Stiles flips a page in Batman Beyond.

“Yes I have, they're overrated.” P counters.

“Oh my god. Nope. No. Sorry. We can’t be friends anymore.”

“I never said we was friends.”

This absolutely does not stab his pride a little. “What? Why wouldn’t you want to be my friend? I’m an awesome person to be friends with,” he argues.

“You’re weird,” P shakes her head. “And you smell like you rolled around in the dirt.”

“Hey. There’s nothing wrong with rolling around in the dirt a little, do you hate dogs and puppies? They roll around in the dirt all the time! And for your information, I slept on the grass last night and haven’t had a chance to shower. Normally I smell like a fu— like a friggin’ garden. Of manliness. A very manly garden of good smelling things.”

“Someone’s insecure in their masculinity.”

“What— how do even know what that means? You’re like, eight—“
“Eight and a half.”

“I was going to say eight and a half! Jesus, you’re like a mini Lydia Martin, all judgy and perspicacious like that. Remind me never to introduce you two because she will immediately fall in love with you and adopt you.”

“I’m already adopted, you can’t adopt someone twice,” P sniffs.

“Heh. Yeah, tell that to Steve Jobs.”

“Isn’t that the apple guy? He, uh… Grew a lot of apples or sumthin’.”

“Mm. The day computers start growing on trees will be the day nerds shall finally reign. I wait in hopeful anticipation.”

“See? You’re weird. Told you.”

When it comes time for Jill to take P and say goodbye, he and P both look up with small “aw”s. Which is terrible, because now it looks like he actually likes kids, which he doesn’t. Kids are snotty and annoying and have sticky fingers and scream in grocery stores and remind him too much of himself at that age, but P is kinda okay. If he had to choose between getting eaten by a giant chinchilla or spending another hour with P, he’d probably pick P.

“Call me when you get that giant dinosaur pillow, I’ll bring a giant Cthulhu pillow and we’ll see who wins in a fight to the death,” he says at the door, as P high-fives him back. Jill casts a small look of concern because he’s already corrupting her child with violence.

“My triceratops is gonna eat your Katoo-loo alive,” P says.

“Alright pretty girl, we’d better get going.” Jill gently laces P’s hand into her own. “Thank you again, Derek. We’ll be in touch.”

“Yeah, bye Derek,” P crosses her arms and squints at him. “You sure are quiet.”

It’s a stilted moment. Jill looks to Derek, and Stiles looks to Derek, and Derek looks at P with the same odd fascination he’s had since she arrived. It gets more awkward the longer he doesn’t speak, and a flicker of worry crosses Jill’s face because she may have just picked a new Girl Scout Moderator that falls mute in the face of children, and the troop has twenty-odd children, all little girls who are going to be laughing and chattering and asking questions that require a moderator to talk and smile and other un-Derek things.

But then, slowly, and with the gentleness that slips through when he thinks no one notices, Derek bends down and holds out his fist to her.

P raises her eyebrows, but tentatively bumps it with a hand one third the size. They pull their hands back, and she cocks her head when he undulates his fingers in the octopus gesture.

“What are you doing?” She asks, with a curious nose wrinkle.


He raises his fist again, and this time both hands part as swimming octopuses. P erupts in snorting laughter.

“Man, it looks funny when you do it ‘cuz your fingers are so big.”
Derek’s eyes stay captivated on the girl. “You’re missing two front teeth,” he murmurs, more to himself than her.

P’s eyes light up as she takes this as a compliment. “Oh, yeah!” She pulls her lips back as far as they’ll go and sticks a finger in her mouth, which she uses to wiggle a bottom tooth. When she talks her voice comes out all lispy.

“Look, this one’s all wiggly! It’s almost out, I can feel it.”

And Derek’s face goes softly shocked, before he abruptly rises and hides by ducking his head to blink at the ground. Stiles steps forward and takes over.

“Bye!” He waves, and ushers Derek back inside the house before he hears a “bye” from P and Jill. Probably rude according to Emily Post’s Etiquette book, but whatever. Bluntness and quick social escapes are his specialty, and people are supposed to use their gifts.

Inside the living room Derek leans back against the dark wood of the door. He stares at the floor with a tiny smile. Stiles goes to mirror him.

“So… You took her offer,” he twiddles his thumbs.

Derek nods, like he can’t believe it either. “I did.”

“Yeah, that’s… Really awesome. And don’t kill me for saying this, but also really adorable. I gotta admit, I was expecting more of a growly response and maybe some child repellent, if they sell that, which they should because some children can be really obnoxious, like the ones that kick the back of your seat at the movie theatre— but I’m just wondering— Why?”

Derek glances back to the mug of chocolate milk on the counter. It’s drained to the bottom. “She reminds me of Cora.”

Stiles follows Derek’s gaze to the mug, eyes widening. “Oh, P. P reminds you of… Well that makes sense, seeing how unexpectedly awesome she is. With excellent taste in superheroes. I’m assuming your sister had excellent taste in superheroes.”

“Jill’s troop,” Derek continues, still looking at the mug. “The girls are in third grade. Cora was too, right before the fire. I’ve missed… I wouldn’t mind another chance to hang out with a little sister. A troop of little sisters.”

Stiles slowly grins at the floor. He thinks of Derek meeting a handful of third grade girls and imagines them running around him, asking how tall he is, if they can pet his stubble to see if it’s scratchy, if he rides a motorcycle and if they can ride his motorcycle. He pictures Derek sitting stiffly in a chair meant for kindergarteners as he watches them make sandwiches, and his ears growing red when P asks if he’s going to talk at all. Derek, choking down a Thin Mint because P wants him to try one.

“Congratulations, then. You’ll be wiping little kid snot from your pants in no time,” Stiles encourages.

Derek gifts a small smile. “No one’s done that before.”

“Done what?”

“Be… Come back to… Apologize to me like that.”
Stiles bumps their shoulders together. “Well, maybe this is the begging of a new era. Girl Scouts: The Final Frontier. These are the voyages of the Hale Enterprise. It’s indefinite-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no werewolf has gone before.”

“That’s… From Star… Trek?”

“You learn fast. The Starfleet Academy is lucky to have you. Now let’s go to the market.”

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Their shoes make “squish-squirsh” sounds against the grass.

The sun casts a yellow warmth over the tables of produce and colorful jewelry, jams and jellies with checkered lids and loaves of crusted sourdough, soft cheeses, ruby red wine, bundles of mint and basil by pastas, and the usual guys selling pierogis and crepes and steaming bags of kettle corn.

The usual white buckets of wildflowers are there in every color of the spectrum, and all the Food with a capital F: hot homemade tamales, sizzling hot links and peppers smoking on a grills, crab cakes, falafel, greasy cheesy pizza from heaven, a million different kinds of hummus, mango salsa and olive tapenade, and the glittering trays of crystalized honeycomb that sparkle like gold jewelry on sticky chain.

Stiles runs to it all eagerly now, since color and noise clicks with him. Sadly and unsurprisingly, Melissa adds via text that Scott and Isaac stayed up until three in the morning playing Mario Kart and were still knocked out when she left the house, so they won’t be joining. But really, how could you play Mario Kart and not stay up until three in the morning?

“No, you know what would be awesome?” Stiles voices around a cracker sample. “If Scott and Isaac could play Mario on our TV, since it’s super big and the Mc Calls only have like a twenty-four inch or something. I know you don’t have a Wii but they could bring it over and plug it in— oh! We could invite Allison and Lydia too, make it a tournament! That would be so fun, what do you—I mean. If you want to. Do you want to do that? I’ll even provide those little plastic bootie thingies to put over everyone’s shoes so your fancy antique rug stays clean.”

Derek’s lips thin a little. “I don’t… That’s a lot of people.”

Stiles’s shoulders fall a little. “Oh. Right, since. I guess Scott’s the only person that’s been over, huh? And Lydia, but that was like, just me and her.”

Derek’s frown deepens. “No, I just don’t think…”

“Here, try a cracker. Your brain seems like the Tin Man before Dorothy gave him an oil tune-up.”

Slowly, oh so slowly and quietly and mumble-y, Derek studies the ground and says, “Would they…
Really… Want to?"

As if Stiles needed any further proof that Derek Hale is a secret child at heart on the inside.

“Dude, Derek,” he says sincerely. "You’re not really the scary, bite-y alpha to them anymore. I mean, I kinda talk about you all the time since I, you know, live with you. Not like the color of your boxers or anything like that, just stuff like ‘Derek makes really good sphagetti’ or ‘Derek tipped the old guy at the gas station fifty dollars when he thought no one was looking.’ Like I know you’re not at a ‘kayaking-on-the-weekends’ level with anyone yet, but they want to be friends with you. If you want that,” he shrugs.

Derek doesn’t say anything. His eyes drift along the lineup of hummus and he pops the cracker in his mouth. “Come on. We need spinach.”

Shopping with Derek is like shopping with a middle-aged dog—and Stiles isn’t trying to make a dog joke, it’s just a very accurate analogy. Middle-aged dogs lack the hyperactive energy of puppies, but they will move at the speed of fucking light if they catch the smallest whiff of hand-rolled sausages or organic beef jerky. Which is what Derek does when he catches the smallest whiff of hand-rolled sausages or organic beef jerky. But otherwise he just sort of ambles along the booths sniffing things but not really taking interest in anything he doesn’t want. Like a middle-aged dog.

Certainly nothing like when Lydia dragged him to the mall yesterday, because shopping with Lydia is a mall-crawl filled with winks and coy smiles, more Lydia-smiles than usual. And if Lydia winks at you more than once within an hour, you should either assume she is winking at someone far superior and good-looking behind you, or be very worried that something terrible is about to happen to you. Stiles tried to tell her that it was no big deal, no it’s not a date, that he and Derek hang out all they time, they literally live together, and her response had been to cup his cheeks and pin him down with her green gaze and say, “Stiles Stilinski, for someone so intelligent you can be so incredibly stupid.”

He gets that now. He’ll have to call and tell her the good news later.

“Ronathan, my favorite people!” Stiles announces, making a beeline to booth with the vegan San Francisco newlyweds and looking hopefully over the cupcake lineup. “Ohhhh man, where’s the red velvet? Am I too late for the red velvet? I’m not seeing any red velvet and it’s unsettling me, you have some emergency backups, right? Does it help if I mention my birthday was two days ago?”

“Sorry Stiles, we’re fresh out,” Ronnie shakes her head sadly.

“Aw,” Stiles mumbles, to cover the fact that his heart just shattered into a million pieces.

“—of stolen passports! But the red velvets are right here,” Jonathan swoops in, and places a tray of the cupcakes from the fluffiest cloud on heaven in front of him. Stiles whoops and maybe accidentally elbows a lady behind him, but he didn’t crack her rib or anything so she’s probably fine. He needs his cupcake. Cupcakes? Cupcakes.

“You guys are the best! Derek, grab my wallet and pay the nice people, would you? My hands are a little tied up transporting godliness to my mouth.”

Derek plucks the wallet from his jeans and hands money over.

“Mmfh. T’ank you.”

“Were you high when they took your school picture?”
“What?” He looks backwards to see that Derek swiped his school ID, which was taken last fall when he got the only photographer with the stick up his ass and wouldn’t let Stiles take the picture again even though he was in the middle of sneezing. He flails and grabs for it.

"No, don’t look at that! And no, I was about to sneeze, thank you. I couldn't redo it."

"You couldn’t think of a better time to sneeze?"

"I don’t get to pick, you Nerf Herder! At least my sneezes don’t rattle the whole house."

“Bilinski?”

Stiles nearly chokes on his cupcake.

“Coach?”

His eyes zoom from Finstock’s bug eyes and grumpy jowls, to the man’s jeans (jeans!), to the bag of strawberries in his grip. It could be an episode of the Twilight Zone.

“Uh, it’s uh—” Finstock clears his throat. “Well this is awkward. How are you, uh. What’s uh— I heard that you, er— “

“I’m doing great, Coach,” Stiles fills in for him. “I didn’t know you shopped at… Well, honestly it’s kind of weird to picture you shopping for groceries, period, but at the farmer’s market?”

“I didn’t, until last week,” Finstock grumbles. “My doc says I need more fiber in my diet to treat my ulcer. Bunch ‘a bullshit if you ask me.”

(Well he does spend a lot of time yelling at lacrosse players).

“Good for you, Coach.”

Finstock rubs the back of his neck. “Listen, uh… I heard about your uh…”

“My dad,” Stiles answers for him. “Yeah, I’m doing okay though.”

“Right. Good, uh. That’s good. You didn’t seem so good last, uh— hang on a minute, do you know this guy? He keeps staring at us and he’s starting to creep me out.”

Finstock gestures to Derek, who’s standing behind Stiles like Creepy Loitering Stranger In Leather Jacket™.

“Oh, yeah, this is—“

“Okay, good, that’s all the info I want, no offense to you, Jim Stark. I’m just not one for smalltalk, so I’m gonna get going,” Finstock jabs a thumb over his shoulder. The bags in his hand are plastic and Stiles can see the cabbage and plums inside, and it is weird.

“Hope your ulcer feels better, Coach,” Stiles waves.

Finstock points a finger back at him. “Mention this interaction to anyone and I’ll deny it. See you back on the field next fall, Bilinski.”

“Yeah,” he murmurs, and it tastes sweet on his tongue.

Melissa is crouched down sniffing a bucket of sunflowers when they find her. She looks deserving
relaxed in a lavender v-neck sweater, jeans and tennis shoes, and wild curls raining loose over her
shoulders. Her trusty mom purse sits on her arm.

“Eeeeyyy, Mama McCall!” Stiles shouts. He grins as she looks up sharply.

“Stiles. It’s about time you got a haircut. You were starting to look like someone electrocuted you.”

“Nice one. Like you didn’t let Scott grow a giant black mop on his head for the entirety of middle
school.”

“Shut up and let me hug you,” she orders, and wraps her arms around him. He inhales happily
against her sweater. She smells like vanilla and green apple shampoo and mom things.

“Good morning,” Derek nods from the background.

“How ya’ doing, Derek,” Melissa smiles. “Gotta say, I’d forgotten how fun Farmer’s markets can be.
I just bought three pounds of blueberries for four dollars!” She holds up a green bag and shakes it
excitedly.

“Nice! Can I come over and—“

“No you may not build a fruit rocket with Scott using my blueberries,” Melissa says sharply,
clutching the fruit protectively. Yeesh.

“We only stained a little of the carpet last time,” Stiles whines.

“One-hundred and thirteen purple stains,” she differs. “I counted. Don’t think I didn’t notice how
you boys tried to move the couch to cover the bulk of it. You still owe me thirty-three dollars and
fifteen cents for the cleaners.”

“What! No, I owe you twenty dollars!”

“Interest. You ruined my carpet last summer,” Melissa clucks. “But here, this is for you. Happy
birthday— I swiped a copy last weekend. Three-year old came in whining about his nose hurting,
turns out he shoved a crayon up his left nostril. Parents were in hysterics.”

She hands over a small x-ray of a crayon lodged in a toddler’s nose.

“Oh my god,” Stiles marvels. "You can even read what color it was— sky blue. Ha! That’s
hilarious!”

Melissa represses a sigh. “It… Was, yes. The x-rays came up and I almost lost it. I thought of you.”

“Thanks, Melissa.”

“You’re welcome, kiddo. Tell anybody I stole that and I’ll kick your ass.” She brushes past him to
stand next to Derek. “Okay, Derek. Who has the best potatoes here?”


And the two of them start walking to the red and white booth, leaving Stiles behind by the flowers.
He watches them, laughs at the x-ray again, and yells at them to wait up.

When Melissa isn’t yelling at him and Scott to “quit playing marshmallow tag and go to bed, it’s
two o’clock in the fucking morning!” , Melissa makes everything better. Her dorky tennis shoes move
swiftly and with purpose on and off the clock, but there’s something about the relaxed air of the
market that slows her down and coaxes a smile on her face. She asks a million questions, mainly to Derek and what he cooks and how he learned how to cook, and some about the stuff they come across like “what the hell is a kumquat? Can I try one?” and some about Stiles and if he’s keeping up with his online classes (and yes he is, thank you. He’s not Greenberg for Christ’s sake).

As always, Derek brings avocados and cantaloupes up to his nose to smell if they’re ripe. Melissa takes advantage of this and makes him smell Mr. Leroy’s entire display of granny smith apples to make sure she gets the most sour ones for some apple pie she has to bake for a monthly nurse luncheon. “The staff is snobbier than you think. Last time I brought a store bought pie, and I was pegged as ‘Nurse McLazy,’” she says.

“Like Instead of McCall?” Stiles asks.

“Yep.”

“ Well geez, they couldn’t be more creative? ‘Melissa McCall’ has all kind of potential, like Melislooth McCall, Nurse McStop-at-the-store, Nurse McCall Doesn’t Care at All—”

“I think I get it, Stiles.”

At a table selling grapes, Stiles demonstrates his grapey-sack skills (like hackey-sack, but with grapes) by bouncing grapes off his knees and elbows before catching them in his mouth. The seller keeps letting him do more because the commotion is drawing a crowd of impressed onlookers, which strokes Stiles’s ego nicely— until Derek steals his thunder by juggling half a dozen grapes with his stupid werewolfy agility and landing all of them in his mouth, like pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop! At which point Stiles starts chucking grapes at him (he’s not a poor sport, just very enthusiastic about grapes) but a few accidentally hit the seller. In the eye. And then they have to leave.

Stiles introduces Melissa to Ronathan and therefore introduces her to the most fan-fucking-delicious cupcakes on the planet. A debate then follows over the human-like resemblance the cupcakes have.

“Derek doesn’t know what he’s talking about!” Stiles dismisses. “Just look, Melissa, tell me that tiny triple swirl chocolate cupcake doesn’t look like Scott. He’s your son.”

Melissa squints at the cupcake. “Actually… If Scott was a cupcake, it would probably be that one.”

Derek frowns. “It’s a cupcake.”

“That looks like Scott, yeah. Brownish frosting, smaller than all the other cupcakes— not that Scott is tiny, I mean heck, he could probably lift me with his pinky. Look, uh… There! That one is so totally Lydia.” Stiles announces, pointing out a red velvet cupcake with a cut strawberry on top.

“I don’t get it.”

“No c’mmon, look harder— Creamy white color, pretty and curvaceous, strawberry blonde on top. Boom. Lydia.”

“Oh, yeah. I totally see it,” Melissa agrees.

Derek huffs and shakes his head and moves on to the next booth.

Which happens to be the spices and herb booth, which is Derek’s secret pride and joy. Little kids love Disneyland, Derek loves spices— or at least has an odd fascination with weird ones that nobody likes.
“You put it on popcorn,” Derek explains, about a freaky yellow seasoning that looks like somebody mashed up maggots, loaded them into a Super-Soaker, blasted a windshield, let it dry before scraping it off with a chisel, and then packaged it as ‘nutritional yeast.’

“Maggot flakes!” Stiles accuses.

“It’s good. It tastes like cheese,” Derek insists.

“Okay, but that’s what parmesan cheese is for. What’s this stuff even made out of, anyway?” Stiles wrinkles his nose. “It’s not… You know, have anything to do with a…?”

“Yeast infections are far worse than anything you’ll taste in your lifetime, sweetie.” Melissa pats his shoulder as she passes. He shudders.

“No, it’s a fungus that grows on beets, and then it’s dried and packaged!” The booth seller says, like a total nerd.

“Ew!” Stiles flinches back. “Nah, nope, no thanks. Fungus belongs on old man toenails and the school locker room shower floors, not in my body.”

“Just try some.” Derek presses his finger to the sample plate. The yeast sticks, and he offers it. Stiles rolls his eyes and licks the offensive seasoning, cringing against the texture of the flakes. It slowly melts in his mouth and tastes like— huh.

“Cheese?” He exclaims.

“We’ll take a bottle,” Derek tells the seller.

Melissa smiles knowingly, eyes flicking to the dumb grin on Stiles’s face, and to the red patch on Derek’s jacket.

But at Pietro’s booth her mouth drops to the floor when Derek starts speaking in Italian. Stiles fills her in with, “Derek speaks like, four languages, five if you include Eyebrow.” And then Derek starts taking forever to talk to Pietro so Stiles beckons Melissa on to the next booth, selling brightly colored cherries and nectarines. He grabs a bag and starts vigorously squeezing the nectarines.

“Derek only likes the hard nectarines,” he explains. "Anything softer than a rock and he rejects it. Does Scott do that? I’m thinking it’s gotta be a wolf thing, you know? Like ‘grr, gotta establish dominance over my food and show the strength of my canines, rawr.’”

“Now that you mention it, I have seen Scott suddenly take a liking to eating regular carrots with ranch instead of the baby carrots,” Melissa muses.

“But baby carrots are adorable! I however, do not discriminate against soft fruit and veggies.” To illustrate he takes a hearty bite of soft nectarine, grunting his approval of the sweet taste. Melissa watches him with a little twinkle in her eye. He hands over a few bills for the fruit and takes another bite and slurps at it, juice rolling down his chin. She’s still staring at him.

“You’re staring at me,” he tells her. “Staring is rude, staring makes me feel self-conscious, like you’re judging my fruit-eating abilities.”

“Grow a thicker skin,” she suggests. “It’s just nice seeing you back to yourself again.”

He blinks. "Oh. Well that’s… Thanks, I guess. Hey, let’s— there’s uh, a booth with some… Rocks, or something, like cool rocks, I’m just gonna—“
His feet take off in a random direction as he leaves his nectarines with Melissa. And it’s dumb because his cheeks are suddenly burning and he has no idea why they’re burning, it’s really just so embarrassing to be embarrassed because his whole face turns red like a Hot Tamale, the candy, not the food, and unlike the food the candies are disgusting.

“Stiles, honey—”

Her hand lands on his shoulder and he stops, but he keeps his head tucked out of her sight. She, of course, because she’s one of the best damn people he knows, walks in front of him so she can see his face, to make sure it’s not melting or on fire or if there’s a giant spider on it or something, probably.

“Stiles, it’s okay. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Nyagh.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Well I’m embarrassed I was ever not myself. I was just so— I was so rude to you when you helped me move out of my old house, and I was so rude to Derek—”

“Honey, listen to me.” She pins him down with her eyes, but there’s a reassuring smile there. “That’s what happens to people when they lose someone they love. I’m just grateful you’re not one of the kids who channeled that grief into drugs, or alcohol, or hurting yourself. What I meant is that three months ago, you were a walking ghost. You didn’t speak, you didn’t smile, and you didn’t use your hands to compare and contrast the difference between The Millenium Falcon and The USS Enterprise. Your eyes stared straight ahead instead of darting around observing everything like they’re doing right now, and you couldn’t talk to Scott even though I know deep down you wanted to. And Stiles? I am so proud of you for getting past it.”

He licks his lips. “So… Does this mean you’ll let me tell you the pros and cons of The Millennium Falcon and the Enterprise?”

She flicks his head. “Do I look like a woman with that kind of time on her hands?”

“It would only take a few hours.”

“Once was enough. Try me again in another decade.”

“In another decade I plan to be on the USS Enterprise. In space. But I don’t think NASA can pull that together for me in time.”

“I thought they were trying growing potatoes on Mars,” she muses, and begins to lead them back to the nectarine table.

“Hey, Melissa?” He blurts.

“What’s up, honey.” She stops walking.

His fingers fiddle wildly. "I guess I wanted to ask you, since I asked you before and you were kind of vague, but now I kind of get it, but I still— Why did you tell me to move in with Derek last January?"

Melissa bites her lip.

"I mean, you told me that Derek would be 'good for me,' which I didn't really believe at first," Stiles barrels on quickly. "But you hardly knew Derek then. Or, you actually just knew him as the guy who got arrested a lot in his teens and stole muffins from bakeries and violently fought kanimas and werewolves in his more recent years."
She looks over her shoulder and moves closer to him, like she’s checking if they’re out of werewolf-earshot. "I was a nurse in training when he was admitted to the hospital after the fire. The nurse I was shadowing was assigned to treat his burns, so I saw him when he was just a kid. I don't think he remembers."

Stiles stares at her. "You…?"

"He was… Young," she sighs. “Too young to lose his whole family like that. When we came in to dress his burns he hardly spoke. He just looked— like someone who suddenly knew what grief was. So I knew that he would be able to watch out for you better than Scott and I could. I work thirteen-hour shifts six days a week and live in a two-bedroom house with two boys. Derek spends all day in a quiet mansion. When he offered to take you in, it was a no-brainer which living situation would be better for you."

He wants to reach up and erase the apology in her eyes. Like she feels bad for putting him in the hands of a near stranger when he was at his weakest, especially when knowing it would make Stiles hate her for it— at first.

He takes her by the arms and meets her eyes. "Thank you," he tells her.

She smiles wanly. “You’re welcome, sweetie.”

“Thank you,” he whispers again, and because it’s not enough, he wraps his arms around her and presses her close.
They pull apart when Derek politely clears his throat behind them. Bulging bags are in each hand, one of which he holds out for Stiles to take. Melissa checks her watch.

“Well, ah— This was fun, but I think I hit my grocery limit two jars of jam ago,” she smiles wryly. “I’d better get going before I’m tempted into buying piroshkis from the guy at the last booth.”

“Would you like to join us for lunch?” Derek blurts. Stiles’s eyebrows fly to the moon.


Derek nods. “We could make something at the house.”
“Your house? The big… Mansion,” Melissa says slowly, like she knows what a big deal (honor?) this is and wants to make sure Derek didn’t accidentally snort wolfsbane somewhere in the flower booth. She also flutters her fingers around when she says ‘mansion,’ which Stiles finds very amusing.

“Yes?” Derek says it more like a question. He shifts on his feet like he’s suddenly nervous, so Stiles claps him on the shoulder.

“Sounds great! I’m starved. Plus we just bought a bunch of weird groceries, we can totally make something from all of it. Hooray for home economics!”

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The floorboards creak beneath their feet as they step into the house.

Melissa’s head subtly swivels around to take in the cracked windows and the weathered walls, but she helps unload the groceries like it doesn’t bother her. Derek puts her bags of produce in the fridge to stay cold, and soon the usual haul of farmer’s market food line the counter; baguette for spaghetti dinner, Derek’s array of weird cheeses since he likes weird cheese with crackers in the afternoons, swiss chard and spinach, tangerines, pink grapes, olive oil, smoked paprika, pasta from Pietro, olives, nectarines, peppered sausages, blackberry jam, and an extra red velvet cupcake Stiles may or may not have already eaten in the car.

“You can’t just add wolf after everything I do and make it a name,” Derek says.

“Yes I can. And I find it works totally well,” Stiles mutters to Melissa. “Like look. Derek is fond of carbonated lemon soda. Fizzywolf. Boom.”

“Or for the next time Scott tries sliding down a curtain to impress Allison,” Melissa muses. “Dummywolf.”

“Yeah! Like that. Although for the record, Scott has much better control over his claws now. But nom nom, am’miright?” Stiles burps as he pokes a soft package of gnocchi. Derek swats his hand away when he dents a little potato lump. “Whadda we feel like?”

“Amazing you’re still hungry after packing away two cupcakes,” Derek mumbles.

“Actually, I’ve had a hankering for your mom’s mac and cheese ever since I saw Derek made it,” Melissa leans on the counter and raises her eyebrows. “If that’s alright?”

“Oh, frick yeah!” Stiles hops on the counter and dives for the weird cheeses. “Look, we even have—uh, gruh-yeh-reh cheese! Is that good for making macaroni?”

“Gruyère,” Derek takes the cheese from him. “And yes. Don’t sit on the counter.”

“Yeeeeahhhh, macaroni time,” Stiles lays down and props his head on his elbow, crossing his feet against the fridge.

“And don’t lay on the counter,” Derek deadpans.

“But I’m good enough to eat,” Stiles fishes out an apple and sticks it in his mouth. “See?”

“Stiles, get off the counter,” Melissa dotes. “Derek, where can I find a boiling pot?”
“In the cabinet underneath Stiles.”

“Draw me like one of your French bread girls,” Stiles begs as he tries poking Derek with a baguette.

“We’re low on milk,” Derek’s voice says from the fridge. “Melissa, do you mind if we substitute some of the cream you bought?”

“Go ahead, I just need a splash for the pie anyway. Do you want to use the pasta you got from the market?”

“Carpe diem. Peas the day, boys!” Stiles tells the bag of snap peas.

“There’s a better package in the cupboard. Behind you, the tall one.”

“Mrs. Cobinson, you’re trying to seduce me, aren’t you?” Stiles slowly peels back the leaf to an ear of corn.

“Er… Pasta, pasta, pasta…”

“Third shelf I think.”

“Oh! Found it.”

“Frankly my dear, I don’t give a clam,” Stiles tells the oyster sauce.

“You wanna get down yet?” Derek suddenly appears ominously behind him. Stiles cranes his neck back and boops the oyster sauce to the werewolf's nose.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m having a grand old time—a grand old lime, heh.” He grabs a lime and polishes it against his invisible sports coat.

Instead of laughing like a nice person, Derek grabs Stiles by the ankles and pulls him off the counter. “Well now you can have a grate old time,” he says, and places a cheese grater and the Gruyère into Stiles’s hands.

“Good one,” Melissa compliments, from where she’s filling the boiling pot with water.

“Hey! What the hell, did you not hear all those grocery puns I just fired off? I was on a roll, where’s my compliment?” Stiles squawks. “And cheese grater duty? Lame.”

“Scared to use the grater, Stiles?” Melissa remarks. "And I thought you Gru-yere self a pair of balls."

Derek ducks his head and chuckles. He goes to the spice rack beside Melissa and they exchange discreet high fives as they pass each other.

“Nerf Herders,” Stiles grumbles.

For the first time in Stiles doesn’t know how long, there are three place settings at the dining table. Glasses of Pellegrino, bread rolls, a steaming pot of macaroni with little bits of sausage, and some sort of weird cranberry salad Melissa and Derek insisted on are sitting there, too. Melissa returns from outside with a handful of flowers.

“Phew, it’s warming up out there. Derek, where can I find a vase?”

Derek stares at the bouquet of color in her hand. “You… Flowers?” He says eloquently.
“Don’t worry, there’s no wolfsbane or mistletoe in here. But yeah, you live in a forest in case you didn’t know. Hardly had to take two steps out the door before I trampled them. Now where’s that vase? Or are we putting them in a mug?” She starts opening cabinet doors at random.

“I vote we put them in my Yoda pencil cup,” Stiles offers. “That way it’ll look like flowers are exploding out of his brain. ‘Like a garden, I shall smell!’”

“Um… I don’t think I have any vases anymore,” Derek looks to the cabinet under the sink, like that’s where they used to be.

“Well that’s alright. Stiles, go get your geek cup.”

“It’s a nerd cup, don’t insult me,” Stiles kicks off from the counter he’s sitting on.

As they sit down at the table there’s a nice sound of three wooden chairs scooting in. Derek turns the macaroni dish to point the spoon towards Melissa, but his eyes linger on the wildflowers shining as the centerpiece. It’s easily the brightest spot of color in the whole mansion, and it seems to soften the lines around his face a little—pastel pinks and golden petals, a peppering of white daisies and long, frilly strands of bluebells.

“Thank you for the flowers,” Derek says.

“Oh, no problem. I’m jealous you two can pick them for free anytime you want.” Melissa spoons a large scoop of macaroni on her plate, eyes lighting up when the cheese sticks in strings. “Hell yes, this smells delicious.”

“Yeah, you can tell whoever grated the cheese really made it perfect. That’s the key, you know. Good grating. Or should I say—”

“Say ‘grate grating’ and I’ll put your favorite shirt into the washing machine with red socks,” Derek warns, as he calmly serves himself salad.

“Bluffing,” Stiles accuses as he shoves a bread roll into his mouth. “You don’t ave any red socks.”

“I’ll buy some.”

“I assume this ‘favorite shirt’ is white?” Melissa guesses.

“Yes. The one with the Mets—”

“The Mets logo on the front,” Melissa finishes Derek’s sentence. “And the blue ring around the collar? Stiles has had that thing since 8th grade.”

Stiles makes grabby-hands for the macaroni spoon. “Well that’s creepy you remember that. Although I am flattered you like my style enough to memorize my outfits.”

“Actually, I was just looking through that box of old photos I’ve been holding onto for you,” Melissa admits. “Which I’ve been meaning to ask, is that something you want back yet?”

Stiles pauses. Right. The box of family photos Melissa found in the closet when she was helping him pack up and move out of his house. He was kind of a rock that day, so he just remembers sitting on his bed and mumbling something about trusting her to save what needed to be saved, since he couldn’t find the courage or the energy to go into his dad’s room or the closets. She had put away the extra stuff in boxes and tucked them away in her house.
“Oh, right. Yeah, that’d be great, actually,” Stiles tells her. “I think there’s a picture of me and Scott asleep on the floor at Christmas in there— Mmmmff, man, this macaroni is so good. Derek, you should totally see how adorable Scott and I were as little dudes with heads too big for our bodies. Oh! And me in my soccer uniform from middle school. OH! Oh ohhhhh my friggin’ holy Millennium Falcon on a toasted bun, Derek—!”

He flails his arms and his bread roll goes rolling across the floor. “My mom! Derek, you can see my mom!”

“Really?” Derek blinks at him.

“Yes! Well yeah, we’re talking photos going back to— hell, what was it? 1988? When my parents met at the protest! The same protest your parents met at!” Stiles yells excitedly, and accidentally knocks his glass of Pellegrino over. Derek catches it before it hits the floor.

“Sorry, what did you say?” Melissa frowns at him.

“Our parents! My parents and Derek’s parents— oh, unless you want to tell her?” Stiles whips his head to Derek. “Should I tell her? Can I tell her?”

“You seem to be on a roll already,” Derek glances to the bread on the floor.

“Was that— was that an intentional pun or an accidental one?” Stiles squints at him. “Because I just tried to make a very funny quip about being a grate grater and you threatened to—“

“Stiles.” Melissa and Derek say at the same time, and that is scary.

“Yeesh, okay! Okay, right. Our parents! So once upon a time in 1988, dad met mom at a protest, right? Where dad was a police officer and mom was up in a tree? Cool. So Derek’s dad was actually the CEO of the company that ordered the trees to be cut down, and Derek’s mom was the leader of the environmental protest my mom was in! And then I guess a bunch of faith, trust, and hippie dust happened, plus a few years and a little bow-chicka-wow-wow if you know what I mean, and boom! Baby Stiles and baby Hales are born!” Stiles throws his hands up and does magical wiggle fingers.

Melissa looks between them with wide eyes. “Shit,” she breathes.

“I know right?” Stiles shovels another mountain of macaroni in his mouth. “Life, man.”

“How do you know?” Melissa demands suspiciously.

“Stiles broke into my ex-uncle’s apartment and found some newspaper articles, then stole them.” Derek sips his Pellegrino.

Melissa’s mouth falls open. She whirls on Stiles like she’s ready to scold him into the earth, so Stiles flings his hands up protectively and blurts, “I was looking for Derek! Don’t yell at me! I’m sure there’s some law that says it’s okay to break into someone’s apartment as long as that someone is evil.”

“Why would Derek be in his ex-uncle’s apartment,” Melissa interrogates him.

“Oh god, this is gonna turn into such a long story,” Stiles sighs. “But that’s okay, because I’m an expert at entertaining people for extended periods of time. So Peter was all, ‘come to my apartment, Derek! Muahahaha I’m so evil,’ and then Derek was like, ‘okay, sure—“

“He texted me. He made it seem like life or death,” Derek clarifies.
“Right, okay. So then Derek goes to— where did you go, again?”

“A warehouse in Ferndale. Peter shot me and tried to kill me. But the gun backfired and killed him instead.”

Melissa gapes. “Shit,” she whispers again. “How does that even happen?”

“Derek had this lucky fortune cookie wrapper in his pocket,” Stiles explains.

“Lucky… Fortune cookie.” She glances to Derek. Derek nods solemnly.

“So then Derek apparently decided that he was going to walk home with a massive hole in his side —“

“It was just a flesh wound. That was my best option.”

“Yeah well, meanwhile everybody’s favorite human, Stiles —that’s me— used my detective skills and was like, ‘hmm, something is amiss here’ because the coffee was wrong and there were no sticky notes, but then I went to Target and strung Christmas lights up everywhere and ate some ice cream, and accidentally threw a glow-in-the-dark bouncy ball through the window. And then I took the jeep to look for Derek but at first that was only productive as far as yelling at Girl Scout troop leaders go.”

Melissa gives him a strange look. She leans over and starts rummaging through the flowers.

“Uh… What are you doing?” he asks.

“Looking to see if there’s any weed in here.”

“Oh my god, we’re not growing a weed farm in the forest!” Stiles slaps his forehead. “Although… That could be very profitable. How come we haven’t thought of—“

“No,” Derek says.

“Okay. So anyhoo, I thought maybe Derek was kidnapped, since this is Beacon Hills and Derek has a terrible track record for landing in unfortunate situations, and the person who hated him most was probably Peter since Peter just secretes this slimy aura of creepy evil hate, you know? But since I didn’t have a key to his apartment I had to scale the side of the building and go through a window— don’t give me that look, I’m not nearly as clumsy when I’m climbing so it’s all good— but then the apartment was empty and I tripped and saw this fancy box which had all these weird articles in it about Derek’s family, so I took them. Oh, and then Derek came home and collapsed all dramatically.”

“You would too if you were half-dead,” Derek deadpans.

“Jesus,” Melissa breathes. Her eyes are giant saucers. “Just— I need a minute here, this is a lot of information. Stiles, you’re lucky you didn’t get arrested. Derek, are you okay now? You seem okay.”

Derek nods, with a tiny smile. “Much better.”

“Good.” She takes a deep breath and stares at her plate. “I want to beat the shit out of this town for constantly endangering you two.”

The first spot of silence washes over the table. It’s hard to think of something to say, because her
expression looks so much like his father’s, and the ‘you two’ doesn’t go unnoticed. He glances to Derek, who’s eyes are flicking over Melissa with a new softness that seems reserved just for her.

“Hey, don’t worry about it—” Stiles starts.

“But I do worry,” Melissa looks up sharply. “You kids are always the first to step forward and risk your lives to save each other, but I work a job where I get paid to save people and somehow I can never do anything to help. I’m just a— well, a human. A very able-bodied human, but one that’s stuck behind the desk of a hospital.”

It’s something his dad used to say, but his dad had a Sheriff title to feel powerful.

“Here,” he says, and fishes the badge out from his pocket. He slides it across the table until it’s tucked under her hand.

“What—?” She blinks at him in confusion.

“Take it,” he says.

“Stiles—”

“For a little while. I’ll let you know when I want it back. I mean, uh,” he scratches his neck. “I don’t need it under my pillow anymore or anything. B’ sides, he’d probably want it to be shared. Since it’ll help convince you that you’re just as badass as the rest of us. And since you miss him too.”

Melissa’s lips pull to a small smile. There’s something in the way her fingers tighten around the small pearl at the end of her necklace, just over her heart; Melissa is the most grounded person Stiles knows. She never fiddles or bounces her leg in anxiety like he does, never lets her curls down, never squeezes her necklace for anyone except those she loves.


“Yeah,” he echoes. “Just don’t accidentally drop it in the toilet or anything, ‘kay?”

“I’ll guard it with my life,” she promises, and he knows she will if it comes down to it.

“Oh, oh! N’ugh, oh! Yes, yes—!”

“Nyyagh!” Stiles jumps in his seat. He stretches backwards to try and reach his buzzing cellphone on the counter.

“Stiles,” Melissa snaps. “That is horrendously offensive!”

“It was an accident! I didn’t mean— n’aat! That’s not on purpose!” He shrieks, as he scrabbles to answer it. “I was trying to make my ringtone the Organian speech! You know, Star Trek? Season one episode twenty-si—!” The phone clatters to the floor. “Shit, episode twenty-six, the original series! But I accidentally downloaded a— well, an—"

“Oh, OH! OHH! YES!” His phone rings. Derek shakes his head judgmentally and eats another forkful of salad.

“—And I forgot to change it! Organian, guys, Organian!” He trips and conveniently lands by his phone. He jams his finger down to swipe the screen and brings it to his ear. “Hello!”

“…Stiles? This is Terry.”
“Oh. Terry? Hey man, uh… What’s up?”

Terry is his honorary uncle and the master of snuffing out candle flames with his fingertips, but Terry doesn’t usually call him on his cell phone.

“You sound out of breath, are you alright?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah yeah, I was just performing a high-energy monologue in my defense.” He taps his fingers on his waist as Derek and Melissa watch him. While eating more macaroni. And dammit, they’re going to devour it all before he gets back to the table.

“Right. Well, I have some news for you, kid.”

“News?” Stiles’s fingers stop tapping. “Like, good news? Or bad news? I don’t really like bad news so if it’s bad news you should just hang up now. Or send me a box of cupcakes with frosting spelling out the bad news, to make it easier.”

Terry chuckles. “Relax, Casper. I think you’ll be pretty happy.”

Derek and Melissa have their forks down now, and have their eyes set on him.

“Oh… Well, what is it?” He swallows.

“The board here at the station finally got approval from the county. The paperwork for these things take a while, but we got it done. You know Beacon Park down by your high school?”

“Yeah…” Stiles says slowly. “Everyone does, it’s like our watering hole. Summer concerts, the ice cream guy, the grassy field where the stoners take a trip to the moon.”

“Well the county’s gonna build a new fountain there in the center— in honor of your dad. I’m staring at the papers right now, and the engraving’s gonna say, ‘In honor of Sheriff John Stilinski: for his tireless work, unconditional care, and dedication he gave into making Beacon Hills a better place.’”

Stiles grips the countertop for balance when he staggers.

“—pretty good size, the construction company says it’ll be done in a couple months. And we want you to cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony— if you’re okay with that.”

A breathless laugh flies out of him. He drags his hand down his cheek and over his mouth, and his fingers quiver.

“What is it?” Melissa whispers, but he knows Derek heard because Derek’s eyes grow round and his bunny teeth appear.

“Yes!” he screams a little at Terry. “Yeah, of course! Jesus, of course I will.”

“Congrats, kid.” Terry smiles through the phone. “Drop by the station tomorrow and we’ll go over the details. I gotta get back to work now, but I just wanted to call and tell you since I just heard.”

“Thanks, Terry. I’ll see you tomorrow.” And he stares at the phone in his hands after hanging up.

“Stiles?” Melissa stands uneasily. “What happened, is everything okay?” Derek stands too, with a small smile.

He’s— he’s getting a fountain."

Melissa’s hands fly to her mouth. “Oh! Oh, that’s—!"

He starts giggling, shoulders shaking with this weird hysterical happiness that’s making his breath short and choppy. “I know! And to think he— he always complained that the water fountain at the station squirted him in the eye!”

He blinks and suddenly Melissa’s wrapped around him, laughing into his shoulder. His phone clatters to the ground again as he clings to her, and hell if this isn’t an occasion for a group hug.

“Get over here, big guy!” He motions to Derek, but Derek’s already pressed against his back with an arm around Melissa, sandwiching Stiles in the middle. He hasn’t been hugged like this since he was a kid, but it’s just as warm and safe as he remembers, even though it’s different people this time. And hey, when did his eyes get wet?

“Aw, hell,” Stiles wipes his cheeks. “I’m so happy you people are in my life.”

“Ditto, kiddo,” Melissa kisses his temple.

Derek squeezes his hand, a quiet proclamation that he agrees.
Melissa leaves, badge in hand, when the bread basket is empty and the macaroni dish has been scraped clean.

He and Derek bypass the dishes in favor of flopping on the couch with bellies full. It isn’t until after Stiles comes to the end of his fifteen-minute monologue on the pros and cons of the Millennium Falcon versus the USS Enterprise that the werewolf speaks.

“So…” Derek starts tentatively. “How do you play Mario Kart?”
Stiles side-eyes him in interest. “Imagine how fun it would be to swim in a pool of Jell-O, and multiply that by three. You’re halfway to how fun Mario Kart is.”

“You could have just multiplied the Jell-O fun by six. Also, that’s disgusting. And that wasn’t my question.”

“Whoa, why the attitude, ‘Stienwolf? I’m getting to your question, but first it’s important to establish the soul-deep fun that Mario Kart brings forth, although now that I think about it swimming in a pool of Jell-O is probably way more fun than Mario Kart. Mario Kart is a racing game, but better. It comes with these plastic wheel things that you turn like a car wheel, which controls your characters on the screen, and you race against other people while getting power-ups and trying to squash the other players with bananas or turtle shells. Or you can just run them over yourself, if you have Star Power. You know that song? *Dee-dee-dee, de-doo-de-de-de-de, doo-doo-dooo, doo doo*—“

“That sounds ridiculous.”

“It is. And there’s also really obnoxious music and technicolor racing roads.”

Derek studies the TV in front of them. “If you wanted to invite them over, you can.”

Stiles rests his arms behind his head. “Do you want to invite them over?”

Begrudgingly, and with some intimidating eyebrows, Derek nods. Stiles smiles. Then shrieks a little.

“What the hell?!” Flies out of his mouth as a mouse races under the coffee table. He jerks his legs up and the mouse squeaks, drops a piece of popcorn it must have found beneath the counter, and zips beneath the couch in a flash of tail and fuzzy ears.

“So looks like we have a new roommate,” Stiles broadcasts, but Derek sighs and rises from the sofa.

“Get the popcorn out from the cupboard.”

Stiles obliges. Meanwhile Derek pushes the coffee table away from the couch like it weighs nothing (and it weighs a million, because it’s antique mahogany and Stiles nearly threw his back out trying to move it when he dropped an M&M underneath). He hands the bag of white cheddar popcorn to Derek, who flops down on his stomach and sprinkles a few pieces on the carpet in front of the couch. Stiles lays down beside him, and they peek under the upholstery to where the mouse is currently camped out cowering in the corner. It stares back at them with beady eyes and a little rapid-fire pulsing chest of fluff.

“Seems like you’ve got a routine down,” he observes, picking up one of the popcorn pieces from the floor and popping it into his mouth. Derek bats his hand away.

“Stop that. It’s for the mouse.”

Stiles raises an eyebrow. “So… We’re just going to wait for it to come out? Adapt it as a pet and name it Stewart? Let it build a little yellow airplane to fly around in?”

“When it comes out I’ll put it back outside.”

“I dunno, what if it has like, diseases. From the woods. Woodland diseases.”

“I’d be able to smell it,” Derek says. “This one’s clean.”
“I take it rodents in the house has been a thing before?”

Derek shrugs, which looks kind of funny in his current position on the carpet with his head on his arms. “They come out every year after the rain. Usually when the weather turns warmer, and then in the fall when it starts getting colder. I’ve tried boarding up the insulation under the house but they just chew through the wood. It’s rotting down there.”

“Do mice like rotting insulation?”

“Just looking for shelter. A rabbit ran in when I left the door open last year.”

“Did you eat it?”

“I didn’t eat it.”

“Huh. You’re kinda like Snow White, with all the little critter friends. Except she was a princess, and you’re a dude. A wolf dude. With a much lower voice.”

Derek flips over on his back, splaying his arms out by his sides. Stiles continues watching the mouse, who is now cleaning it’s whiskers with it’s paws and looking pretty cute.

“Stiles.”

“Hm?”

“It’s not going to come out if you keep staring at it.”

Stiles scoots back so he’s side-by-side with Derek. Directly above them is the chandelier, a glittering ball of dusty chains and missing crystals.

“I hate that chandelier.” Derek mutters.

Stiles steals a side-eye before looking up at the chandelier. He kind of hates it too. “It’s pretty cool, actually, if you’re a snobby duchess from the 1800s who has a taste for girly post-apocalyptic decor.”

“It fell down during the fire,” Derek says. “I put it back up because my mother liked it. But I always thought it was tacky. I still think it’s tacky.”

Stiles twiddles with his thumbs, staring at the crystals and how they catch the light of the late afternoon. He waits.

“I hate the wallpaper, too. In the kitchen,” Derek continues. “Most of the original burned, so I spent two weeks hunting down the same print online and ordered some. I always wished we had a fabric couch, but I bought another leather one instead so it would be the same. I got the same color bath mats, matched swatches for the same paint… All the furniture is still in the same spot, too.”

“So the house would still feel like home,” Stiles ventures quietly.

Derek licks his lips. “I think that’s why I try so hard to hang onto it. The leaks just get worse every year. I can hear the walls creaking at night under their own weight. I try everything to keep it in tact, but… It doesn’t. It doesn’t feel the same.”
Stiles responds with something totally weird and instinctual, which is to reach out and stroke his thumb along Derek’s arm, smoothing the hair there forwards and backwards.

“What are you doing.”

“I’m petting your arm hair.”

“Why.”

It’s a statement, but it’s probably the closest to a question Stiles has heard from Derek’s mouth.

“Just because.”
Derek blinks at the ceiling, and swallows again. “Oh.”

Looking at the ceiling from this angle is probably the prettiest Stiles has seen the mansion. Dark wood stretches overhead, blackened in some places, most of the swirled lines worn away. The antique carpet is rough and fuzzy against his skin, and outside he can hear the distant chirps of birds mixing with the quiet air inside the living room. In the corner, the bookshelf stands tall and warped.

“Stiles.”

Derek says his name quietly, something important about it enough to make Stiles peek up at him.

“Derek.”

Derek swallows, blinks up at the ceiling.

“I think... I think I'd like to move out.”

Stiles breathes. He slips his fingers into Derek’s hand and squeezes once.

“Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

***EDIT 3/24/17 REGARDING LAST CHAPTER UPDATE*** Hey guys, I'm aiming to post the last chapter sometime this June/summer. The art is turning out to be very detailed and I've also been battling Lupus, so I need the extra time. However, rest assured that I work on Home every day (you can see the sneak peek art I've posted on my tumblr at stiles-and-the-sourwolf)! I'm making progress slowly but surely. See you in the next few months! :)
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Take a chance now to get your laptop, settle somewhere cozy, and put on your favorite music. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
ONE MONTH LATER

The sky shines clear blue as Derek stares up at the mansion.

His eyes wander up, up, over the rafters and blackened door, the weathered porch, the window to Cora's bedroom, the spot on the roof where his kite got stuck in third grade, the balcony where he and Laura used to hide when they were in trouble, the place his dad used to barbecue by the garage, and the patch of dirt where his mother's sunflowers used to turn towards the sun.

Sometimes they would gather in the living room and tell ghost stories when the power went out, and later Cora's tiny footsteps would wander into his room at night and crawl into bed with him. He remembers peeling corners of the upstairs bathroom wallpaper while waiting for the shower to grow hot, the scolding his mother gave him about it two weeks later, how Laura would leave the couch pillows askew just to annoy him, and the same pillows being used as protective padding the time his dad insisted on showing him how to ride a bike.
When he was little his dad used to tease him about being too short to see out the kitchen window, or pick plums from the tree that used to grow by the garden hose. In June the air would fill with burnt rubber from the circles Laura would drive in the clearing when their parents went on vacation, July reeked of sweat the one time the air conditioning broke, and August knew no scent better than hot dogs on the grill. One summer his dad painted the whole exterior of the house blue, and three days later his mom painted yellow over it, a color no longer visible beneath the rotting wood.

A hand slips into his. Red sneakers squeak against the leaves at their feet. The hand squeezes.

"You ready?" Stiles asks.

Derek nods. "Yeah."

"Cool." Stiles holds up two fingers. "Peace out, Hale house."

As a final goodbye Derek smiles faintly at the mansion, thanking it for the years it served as his home, and asking for good luck as he steps towards his new one.

The Camaro is parked behind him, packed with the last of the boxes. Stiles's jeep already at the loft — they had enough money to buy the whole building, but it was a mutual decision to just sign for one floor, third stop on the elevator with a view of the town stretched out before the living room. In the mornings, the sunrise will shine through the window over the kitchen sink. In the evenings, John Stilinski's small couch will serve throne to any movie night or study session. The floors are plushly carpeted so footsteps will lack the lonely echo they had on hardwood, and the only smell of smoke will be from when Stiles ultimately burns pancakes.

"Remind me again why we aren't stopping for breakfast burritos?" Stiles yawns as he clicks his seatbelt.

"Because everyone's bringing food. And you ate one an hour ago."

Derek double checks his pockets for the keys, almost disappointed that he didn't forget them inside the house. His hands sit like stones on the wheel.

"Hey," Stiles says lightly beside him. "If you need another minute, that's fine."

Derek considers it, replays the way he triple and quadruple checked all thirty-seven rooms for items he forgot to pack, running lingering fingers along every wall, memorizing doorways he'd already memorized, but he knows a million minutes still wouldn't be enough. He reminds himself of the illusion lying in the walls— he ate dinner with his family in the house, but the house isn't his family.

"Let's go," he says, and the engine roars to life.

"That's fine too," Stiles grins.

They pull out of the driveway and into the forest. The weeds guarding the porch flap in the breeze, almost as if waving goodbye, and Stiles revs the radio up and the windows down. Derek doesn't look back.

"So if we have four floors of neighbors now, what are the odds that someone is going to own a cat?"

"Hopefully none."

"A kitten? Just promise me you won't try to eat it."
Derek wrinkles his nose. "Very little protein."

"Don't even kid! By the way, Allison and Lydia have dibs on decorating the guest room. I think they just want to make it a secret girl cave where they can have fashion shows and spill nail polish everywhere, or pull out yearbooks and rate everyone according to hotness, intelligence, and personality. Although in fairness, I'd probably join in the last one."

"Good, one less thing I need to keep an eye on," Derek mutters. "I'll consider today a success if nothing blows up and less than six things get broken. Get your feet off the dashboard."

"Dude, chill," Stiles grins behind his sunglasses and flops his foot down. "Melissa's coming too, remember? When I was eleven, Scott, Scott's grandpa, me, and my dad all got sick with the flu on Christmas, and she managed to take care of us all while cooking dinner for twelve and juggling a shift at the hospital. The roasted turkey was amazing. Well, before I threw it up at least. Still. A plus bird."

Derek grunts.

Three weeks ago the first supernatural creature of the year popped up — a troll, even uglier than the dolls — that tore up half the woods and covered all the trees with blue snot. Just a baby, apparently, but one with a severe allergy to trees. Chris Argent called Deaton, and Deaton called Derek and Scott, and then Derek told Stiles who immediately called Lydia. To Derek's surprise, Stiles had leapt up from the couch with a gleam in his eye and a cry of, "don't bother calling ghostbusters, we got this bitch!"

Stiles and Allison dropped a vile of sleeping powder on the troll from an overhead tree while Derek, Scott, and Isaac distracted it. Lydia provided snacks and clean towels afterwards (because snot), and Argent and his crew hauled the thing into the SUV to take it back to the mountains it escaped from. Somehow, it turned into three hours of hanging on the couch with snacks and Prada yipping at his heels while Isaac and Stiles fought over the remote.

Two weeks ago Melissa asked him to come over and help paint her kitchen. They peeled the wallpaper and taped the edges, and she tackled the walls while he rolled the ceiling since he had the height. She talked about what Scott was learning in school, he shared pieces of the languages he knew — soon it became digging into takeout at the table, blue paint streaked on their arms.

Last week, Stiles slowly ran his fingers through Derek's hair as they took a break from packing, sagging against the "kitchen" box together with a sigh. "We should go ice skating," Stiles had said. "What?" Derek had replied. "Ice skating. It's fun. We need a break," and the two of them grabbed their jackets and argued over how to work Siri until they found Ice Chalet on Cherry Boulevard. They got kicked out twenty minutes in because Stiles was using his blade to shave ice into snowballs and throw them at people.

And still, Derek still hasn't grasped that it all might mean family.

"Aw man, I can't wait 'till summer," Stiles sighs. "Everyone will be out of school, the beach will finally be warm and that weird old man will be out with his little ice cream cart that has the strawberry cheesecake bars that I can't find in any store anywhere. I think they might be illegal."

"Bunyip breeding season is in Summer. You might want to get a new bat by then," Derek points out.

"Oh, for sure. And bunyip bloodstains are really hard to get out, aren't they? Lydia was complaining about that last year. Better stock up on Oxy-Clean too."
The blinker clicks off as Derek turns onto Wysteria Street, the street of their new living space. He can see a few figures standing outside the loft building— Isaac's tall frame, Lydia's mane of red hair, Melissa leaning against the small moving van they hired for a few furniture items. A swell of nervous tingles rises in him, but his heart pulses warmly, too.

"Sweet, grab that parking spot right in front!" Stiles is already unbuckling his seatbelt, craning his neck out the window and waving wildly. He bangs his hand on a passing tree trunk and yipes.

"Stiles," Derek sighs.

"Stiles!"

"EEEeeeyyyyyyyyy!" Stiles crows, leaping out of the car as Derek neatly glides parallel to the curb.

"Eeeeeeyyyyy, bro!" Scott crows back. Everyone else rolls eyes in unison.

"Whaddup, ladies and wolves! Stiles is in the hoousee! Or, loft, yeah. It's actually a loft."

"Stiles. Lovely to see you, now if you could please open the door to the building, these heels really aren't meant to be on concrete," Lydia clucks, but hugs Stiles anyway. "Hello, Derek. New haircut? It suits you."

"Lyds, I can't believe you wore heels, you know we're on the third floor, right?"

"Elevators, Stiles," Allison says sweetly.

"Could be broken," Isaac proposes.

"Alright guys, I have a shift at three so let's be efficient about this. Girls, you help me with the boxes in my car, werewolves— get all the heavy stuff from the moving van," Melissa organizes, and pops her trunk. Inside are the items she saved back in January from the Stilinski house— photo albums, John's personal belongings, mementos from the attic. Allison and Lydia grab large plastic bags filled with what smells like enchiladas, potato salad, watermelon, and guacamole.

"The best thing about having werewolf friends is that we don't have to hire furniture movers," Stiles chirps.

"What's that?" Derek asks.

"Boom box," Isaac grins, hoisting it over a shoulder as he follows the group to the front entrance. "Borrowed it from Danny."

"I know what it is, I was talking about the crap inside," Derek shakes his head and plucks the Imagine Dragons CD out. "No."

"Alright, you be DJ then. Which box has your iPod?"

"Derek doesn't do iPods," Stiles explains as he unlocks the door to the loft. "There's a box labeled 'Looney Tunes' that has all his archaic CDs."

"What box am I holding?" Lydia raises an eyebrow at the labeled, 'Munchies' box in her hands.

"My snacks. Very important."

"More like… Marshmallow fluff, Nutella, doritos, hostess cupcakes, red vines… Goldfish crackers?" Scott recites, and Derek gets the feeling the two of them have been living off it all for over a decade.

"Yep, you forgot Oreos. Double-stuffed, I don't play."

They all cram into the elevator— Lydia and Allison neatly tucked together, Scott grunting as he lifts the ‘plates and stuff’ box over his head, Isaac and Stiles smooshed against the door beside Melissa, and Derek with a ring of space around him as he presses the third button.

"Have you met your neighbors yet?" Melissa asks.

They have; Mr. and Mrs. Johnson on the first floor, who smell like soap and prunes and spent fifteen minutes telling Stiles and Derek all about their four grandchildren and their respective accomplishments, like getting potty trained and earning participation awards in soccer. Stiles thinks they might be ninety years old. Derek thinks its good because they probably won't make a lot of noise.

"Just the old people on the first floor, but I'm hoping that Ian McKellen is on the second, Bill Nye is on the fourth, and Bruce Wayne and Alfred have transformed the basement into the Bat Cave," Stiles supplies.

"Dude, or like, if The Rock was your neighbor!"

"Please Scott, he's in Hollywood. Don't be ridiculous."

"Isaac, honey, you're stepping on my foot."

"Sorry, Ms. McCall."

The elevator dings, and everyone grows silent as the parting doors reveal the loft.

"Ta-da!" Stiles jumps out and twirls around. Lydia steps out first, boots clacking as she surveys the room. Her nose swivels to the dust collected in the corners, the bare windows, outdated kitchen cabinets and utter lack of furniture. The room holds it's breath, until—

"It needs a thorough vacuuming, new paint, and those curtains must be burned immediately, but I think it will make a lovely new home," she decides, and Derek thinks he agrees. She turns wide eyes towards everyone. "Well, what are you all waiting for? You have my blessing, now go grab more boxes."

And the moving party commences.

The smell of enchiladas wafts throughout the floor as Melissa unpacks the food, dodging frisbee'd paper plates before shooing Scott and Stiles back down the elevator. Lydia perches atop the counter and directs the incoming furniture to different parts of the room, nodding approvingly when Allison whips a knife out of her pocket and stabs the curtains, slicing until the fabric falls in tatters to the floor.

The space slowly fills with little pieces of life—a couch, lamps, a coffee table, stacks of dishes in the kitchen, desks in the corners, towels in the bathroom. Each time Derek steps out of the elevator he stares at it all a little longer than last time, usually until Stiles claps him on the shoulder and says, "c'mmon, big guy, these boxes won't carry themselves."

Amongst the cargo are boxes of photo albums Derek inherited from the closets in Peter's empty apartment. Derek has only peeked at them in private so far, where his eyes can glimmer and drown
in the images in secret, until he's ready to share them.

It becomes a race against Scott and Isaac to see who can nab the elevator first. Losers take the stairs, and the one time he and Stiles aren't quick enough, Stiles crashes into a man coming from the door to the second floor. Comic books launch through the air and skid across the floor, eliciting shrieks from both the man and Stiles, who dive to the floor.

"Grab the mint editions! For the love of God grab the mints and the Spidermans first! Jesus Christ —!"

"Shoot, I keep saying they should dust the stairwell more! I'm sorry for— wait a minute, you have *Batman versus Superman: Age of Argon?*"

"Yeah, dude!"

"And *Wonder-Woman, the Wonder Years*?" The man gasps, pushing up his glasses. "The one where Diana meets—"

"—Harleen Quinzel in the grocery store twenty minutes before they find out—"

"—That they're mortal enemies!" They yell in unison.

"Gee whiz, you wouldn't happen to be my new neighbor, would you?" The man cradles the comic books to his chest. He looks about in his early thirties, with pants too high and too many buttons buttoned on his shirt.

"Heck yeah, man, I'm Stiles, and this is Derek. Derek doesn't know much about the Marvel and DC worlds yet, but I'm educating him. If you're willing to lend me any editions of Spiderman printed between 1980 and 1986, you can totally borrow some of mine."

"Sweet! I'm Brian, nice to meet you," Brian chirps. He holds out a hand to shake, but Derek's too busy staring at the small, horrifying ball of fluff peeking around the doorframe—

"You have a kitten?" Stiles screams.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, meet snowball." Brian picks it up and strokes it. It stares at Derek with wide, hideous blue eyes. "I just got him a couple days ago, but he's kind of an escape artist, as you can see. I wouldn't be surprised if he wanders his way into your loft."

"No." Derek shuts that down.

"This is awesome," Stiles says gleefully.

"No," Derek says again.

"Want to hold him?" Brian offers.

"I'm allergic," Derek dodges.

"To cuteness," Stiles scoffs, and makes grabby hands. The thing mewls pathetically and Derek wrinkles his nose.

"You knoooooww, if you ever need a cat-sitter, Derek and I can totally watch this little guy," Stiles croons. "I'm going back to school in the fall, but Derek is really good with animals. Really in-tune with them, you know? Almost like he's part animal." And before Derek can step on his foot—
"Wow, really? That would be great, but I thought you were allergic?" Brian looks at Derek. Derek glowers at Snowball.

"Between you and me, Brian? I don't think he'll sneeze as much as he wants you to believe," Stiles winks, and Derek drags him up the next flight of stairs before Brian can say 'gee, whiz' again.

No further incidents occur on the stairs— but in the kitchen a sea of enchilada sauce covers the floor.

"I-wanted-more-sauce-but-we-couldn't-find-the-can-opener-so-I-used-my-claws-and-it-exploded—" Scott gushes with wide eyes. Melissa shakes her head like she might as well have pushed out a potato seventeen years ago.

"Are those… The curtains?" Stiles asks.

"We also couldn't find the mop," Isaac explains, as Scott pushes the fabric around in the puddle.

"Derek, where are you going?"

"To get more boxes." He states the obvious, but Isaac touches his sleeve to corral him back.

"Dude, we grabbed the last of them while you and Stiles were making out on the stairs. Sit and eat."

Melissa shoves a plate in his hands as he looks to where Lydia and Allison are patting the couch between them. Isaac crouches before the TV, fiddling with the controls as Danny feeds him instructions over the phone, but it's the smaller details that entice a smile from him—a vase of fresh flowers glitters on the counter, and someone took a vacuum to the dusty corners.

"Okay," he says.

Five minutes later the cable is set up and Stiles manages to find a Mets game, although Lydia and Allison jabber over it, choosing instead to show Derek random photos on their phones. He learns that Prada has a favorite blanket, Lydia can't decide whether to order shoes "A" or "B", Allison can't decide whether to buy car "A" or "B," each girl has a gallery labeled "snapshot blackmail photos," Lydia's mom got a giant bouquet of balloons for her birthday, "look at this drawing I found in the hallway," and "here's a snake I found in our garden last week." Derek doesn't say much throughout the slideshow, but a new part of him appreciates it anyway.

"And this—" Lydia preens, flipping to a glittering red ensemble. "—is my prom dress!"

"Oh right, that's in a few weeks, right?" Stiles pipes up.

"Yeah, Allison's still on my ass about finding the right tie," Scott mumbles.

"Just pick one from the links I sent you, babe."

"Who'd you end up saying yes to, Lydia?"

"She had twenty-seven guys lined up to ask her just in the first hour after the theme was announced," Allison clues Derek in. "I had to help her carry all the roses to her car. One guy brought her a teddy-bear the size of Scott."

"It was atrociously ugly," Lydia picks an olive from her plate. "I used the stuffing to insulate a vase I shipped to my grandmother for her birthday. But to answer your question, Stiles, I didn't say yes to any of them."

"What?" Stiles tears his eyes from the TV to look at her. "Why?"
"They were all either dull as lead, assholes, or both," she quips. "Besides, I was going to ask Isaac."

Isaac chokes on the other side of the couch. Scott claps his back until a wad of half-chewed enchilada plops back onto his plate, and when his face calms from purple to red, he sputters out—

"What?"

Lydia swishes her hair over her shoulder. "Well, I suppose if you want to be official about it— Isaac, will you be my prom date? As friends, naturally."

The room watches Isaac swig his soda to buy some time. He looks utterly confused. "Um… But—"

"Isaac, you are much too sweet and valuable to spend prom night sitting at home alone playing video games because you think no girl will say yes to you, or because you think that you won't have any fun because you're too afraid to dance," Lydia sniffs.

"How did you— were you listening to our conversation?" Scott's eyebrows knit.

"I was breaking into Greenberg's locker for the Snickers he owes me, and locker rooms echo. But beside the point. I would be much happier with you on my arm than any other ignoramus that insists on asking me, so is that a yes?"

Isaac's eyes flick across the room, face pinkening until they land on Lydia's gentle, encouraging smile.

"Okay," he mumbles, and the room cheers. There's clapping and grinning and whooping, and the cheesiness of it all somehow it coaxes a smile on Derek's face, too. Stiles catches it and pecks a quick kiss there, sealing the moment with jalapeño lips.

An open conversation follows relaying all the latest prom gossip, and the rest of the enchiladas disappear as the sun sinks lower into the horizon. Boxes are stacked strategically in front of the window to keep the glare off the laptops Isaac and Stiles pull out, which are used by Lydia to scour IKEA and Allison to show Derek classmates on Facebook.

This morning Derek expected "moving party" to mean a few hours loading and unpacking everything, but with each passing minute spent watching Scott and Stiles roughhouse on the couch and learning to play Uno with Allison and Lydia, it's clear that the boxes will remain stacked in corners at least until tomorrow. As the Xbox controller is passed around in turns and Isaac sprinkles chip crumbs in his hair for fun, he wonders if he's finally experiencing the "hangout with friends" he always yearned for as a kid.

Friends— it's a word he used to dream about using, but now he needs two hands to count the ones he has.

"Whatcha' smiling about?" Stiles plops down beside him with a brownie.

Derek holds up six fingers.

"Let me guess— the number of times you've beaten Lydia so far?"

"He's only beaten me twice so far," Lydia clucks, as she moves her rook forward a few squares. "Check."

Derek moves his king back a space. "Soon to be three."
"I voted for Chinese Checkers," Allison says gloomily. "These two will play to the death, even if that's six decades from now."

"That would leave hardly any time for shopping," Lydia advances a pawn. "Which reminds me, would you two care to join us next Saturday at the new Hartford mall? Allison and I need swimsuits and I don't expect you two to keep wearing henleys and hoodies in the Summer."

"I'd have to check my very busy schedule, rearrange some things you know—"

"He'll come," Derek takes the pawn. "We'll come."


Things start winding down when the shadows spill longer across the floor, and people realize the brownies are gone amongst idly cracked knuckles. Leftovers are packed, monopoly pieces are collected from the corners of the room where they were thrown in frustration, and a surprising number of hugs are exchanged as people step into the elevator. Isaac promises to replace the monopoly pieces he threw out the window. Lydia gives them each a kiss on the cheek and says to call if they need any extra blankets or bathroom towels, she has plenty. He and Stiles are invited over to Scott's next week for Indian takeout and ultimate frisbee, a proposition that Derek is secretly looking forward to.

The loft is quiet but not empty as the doors close, leaving only him and Stiles in the center of their new beginning.

"Okay. Yeah, wow," Stiles whistles. "This is our loft now."

Derek skims his fingers over a support beam. He wonders if they might wrap tinsel around it for Christmas, or strings of holly.

“A Chubacca statue would look great in that corner. What do you think?” Stiles gestures.

“Do you really want that to be the first thing you see every morning?”

“Sure!”

“Or at two am when you get up in the dark for a glass of water?”

“Excellent point. How about a popcorn machine?”

Derek considers this. “Maybe.”

Warm hands land on his shoulders, sliding comfortably behind his neck. Twinkling amber eyes smile as Derek’s arms slip around his waist.

“How you doing?” Stiles asks softly. It takes a second to remember what the word is, but—

“Happy,” he says.

Stiles beams, mirroring Derek's own expression. But a flicker of fear darts through Derek when Autumn comes to mind, which shows in the sudden creases on his forehead. Stiles sees it and cups his hands around Derek’s face, rubbing reassuring thumbs over the stubble there.

“Hey,” Stiles breathes, with his elvish lilt. "Listen. This is going to be the best Summer ever, with popsicles and flip flops and crappy West Coast ocean water. And when I go back to school in August— no hiding indoors by yourself, got it? You're a werewolf, not a hermit. I expect snapchats
of all the fun you’re having outside while I’m slaving away trying to avoid getting hit by Mrs.
Dankirk’s spit flecks in the front row of Calculus. Lydia and I will set you up with an account, so
decide now if you want your username to be ‘Grumpypants93, I_AM_THE_ALPHA, or
AllHaleKingDerek. Don’t worry. You’ll have people, Derek. You already have six.”

And with that he lands a gentle kiss on Derek’s nose and walks to the nearest box, labelled
‘Treasure,’ and pulls out his dad’s badge.

“Shall we start with the decorating?”

Derek approaches the box, selecting the pink rabbit inside. They carry them to the windowsill, a
choice picked without needing to exchange a word, and place them side by side to watch the sunset.
Fur and bronze shine gold together.

“They’ve got a pretty nice view, don’t you think?” Stiles muses.

Derek watches Beacon Hills sparkle below them, stretching from the emerald forest to the bustling
downtown, to the small trees that once housed a protest. As the first lights of the evening flicker on in
tiny yellow specks, he smells garlic bread from the restaurant down the street, soap from the
laundromat, chili from the residents upstairs, wet cement from the construction site by the school, and
the collective tang of life nearby. He can see trees like before, but they don’t block the panorama.

“Yeah.”

But it’s the view behind him that he finds more interesting, so he loops his fingers into Stiles’s and
turns around, drinking in the sight of what he now knows “a humble abode” to be. A space for
sharing, for making dumb jokes and losing things in the laundry, for adventure and calamity, and
boring Tuesdays. It’s barren but not empty, with buttercream walls ready for crooked nails and
mismatched picture frames, bookshelves for filling with books out of order, cupboards for food for
more than one person. The best part is that there’s no chandelier.

And for the first time, Derek isn't afraid of what the future lacks, but excited for what it holds.

“Welcome home, sourwolf.”
"She's pretty."
"Yeah, even when she got oreos caked in her teeth. Which happened a lot. My childhood was filled with junk food. Good times back then."

"This morning you spent an hour picking out all the marshmallows from the box of Lucky Charms so you could have a bowl of 'Lucky Mallows' for breakfast."
"And it was delish. Man, I remember that pool. We pretty much lived in it during the summer since we had no air conditioning,

I swear you could hear a sound like velcro whenever someone’s legs detached from a chair."

"You look exactly the same."
"You mean pasty, freckled, and adorable? Hell yeah."
"Are you at Baker Beach?"

"Maybe? We used to go there on weekends sometimes and I'd play soccer with dad on the field, and then my mom would cover me with sand up to my neck on the beach. Wow, he really looks young here."
"This one, too."
"Oh… Yeah. Mom smiled up until the day she died. Ate ice cream every day, too."
"My dad loved ice cream, too. My mom used to yell at him because he always tried eating it straight from the carton with a spoon."
"Looks like the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, then. Which reminds me, we need more cookies in cream— looks like someone finished off the entire thing last night."
"I was hungry."
"So, how was school yesterday?"
"Terrible. How was poker with Argent yesterday?"

"Terrible."

"Yeah. First time I played him I lost everything in my wallet and my Nike sneakers."

"Dude, is he even your size?"

"Nah. He just puts them on the mantle whenever I go over to see Allison to remind me he has them."

"Kudos for being brave enough to date his daughter, bro."
"By the way, do you know what a Ketawaka-quetzel looks like? I couldn't find anything online so I substituted a picture of Jabba the hut."
"Oh! Here, try one of these before you go, Derek, I just finished icing them."

"Store-bought."

"Scott, I didn't raise you to be a snitch. Go ahead, Derek. I'll pack some for you to take home. Will I see
you at the 4th of July barbecue next Sunday?"

"Oh, I… I didn't know I was invited."

"Yeah, honey. You're part of the family now."
"Pass the matches, I dropped mine again!"

"Stiles, I swear to god. That was the last one."

"Hey, why can't any of you be were-dragons, huh? Then we wouldn't have this crisis on our hands!"
"Here, light it using mine—"

"Hurry, the fireworks are about to start!"

"Right, there are plenty of couches inside to hide under if you need them."

"Stiles."

"My sparkler's working! Yeah, baby!"
"Okay, what the hell. You're lying to me, this can't possibly be the first time you've ever played
"Mario-Kart!"

"You're just upset because you're last."

"Because somebody threw six freaking turtle shells at me! Jesus, slow down! Fall, fall!"

"Can we do Rainbow Road next?"

"Absolutely not."
“Honestly, Stiles. What’s the point of going to the beach if you’re just going to hide in the shade like a hermit crab?”

“Skin cancer, Lyds. It’s a thing. Have you seen all the moles I already have?”

“So one of them will turn into cancer anyway. Try a tan, toast is better than bread.”

“Nope, gonna stay doughy and white, thanks. You ready for school next week?”

“I’m always ready for anything. Are you ready?”

“Yeah.”
"Hey Stilinski, nice to see you back."
"Thanks, Greenberg."
"Mmmmmooohhhmigod. Cancel all my appointments, I'll be here eating this for the next three days."

"You'll miss lacrosse tryouts."
"True. Still, this is the best macaroni we've made. Actually, this is the best September 17th I've ever had."
"…On this beautiful day, to honor…"
"…The officer, father, and friend…"
"…Who served Beacon Hills for twenty-seven years, gifting his bravery, diligence, and loyalty…"
"…May this fountain invoke happiness and peace, just as he did."
"Derek, can I have the red back now?"

"No."

"You've had it forever!"
"Well, I'm still using it."
"Bilinski, welcome back. You look different. Did you get a haircut?"

"He got a hottie, coach."

"Shut up, Isaac. I got a haircut, coach."

"Greenberg, get your ass back on the field! Bilinski, you look very sharp. Now shut up and start throwing balls."
"Huh. Stiles is…”

"Terrible."

"Yeah. I thought he was exaggerating."

"Lacrosse? No, he and Scott really are the worst. But he's actually come a long way since last year—Ooh! That's gotta hurt."
"Hey."
"Oh, hey sweetie. How's— are you enjoying the party?"

"I brought you a box of kleenex. You've been standing over here for like ten minutes, so I figured they were needed."

"Oh. I— Thank you Stiles."

"I used to get all leaky when I looked at these pictures too, but now I just laugh at how high-waisted his pants were."

"They just about came up to his armpits, yes."

"You know what's funny, is that he was probably like, twenty-eight in this picture, but today he would be turning fifty-six and his pants would still be as high."

"Absolutely. Higher, probably."
"Stiles, you know you don't have to wear your costume today, right? Halloween isn't until this weekend."
"I gotta break it in, Lydia. The best wookie is a flexible wookie."

"Well, you're shedding fur all over my pumpkin."

"I'm going to ask my dad for more knives, I feel like you're about to snap yours in half, Lydia."
"So, what's the verdict? And by the way there's only one right answer, don't disappoint me."

"I guess…"

"Yeeeeeess?"

"The curly ones are better."

"Damn straight."
"Dude, why is there a hole in the back of your hoodie?"
"Derek, honey. Your gravy is amazing! Thanks for helping out, it's nice to have someone in the kitchen who actually knows what they're doing."
"Scott doesn't really know his way around a cutting board, huh."

"Gosh, no. One time I had to cut up his shirt because he got the electric mixer stuck in it while making cookies."

"When Stiles first moved into the mansion, he nearly sliced his hand off cutting an onion."

"Jesus, that kid. Did he faint when he saw the blood?"

"Almost."

"John used to take him to me to get shots. Out like a light every time before the needle even touched his skin."
"Wow, she's beautiful."
"And her choice of dress is very forward for— what did you say? 1990?"
"Yeah."

"Oh! Derek, is that you? Look at those eyes— and your wolf friend!"
"What's it's name?"

"He doesn't have a name."
"Stiles knows, doesn't he?"
"Yeah. He took one sock from each of my pairs until I told him."
"That brat. Always be sure to have one of his comic books hostage in case you need to get something out of him. He's particularly fond of *Batman and Robin: Joker's—*

"—*Revenge, 1984 edition? I caught him kissing it the other day, with a napkin between his lips and the cover so he wouldn't soil it."

"Well at least he was thinking ahead. Did you share that hot dog with your sister, Derek?"
"She stole a couple bites, I think."

"Good. Now let me have a couple bites of your pumpkin pie."
"Isn't Derek's birthday in a couple weeks?"

"Christmas Eve, yeah."

"Why didn't I get an invitation?"
"Oh— well I mean… I haven’t planned anything yet? I’ve just been so busy with—"

"Stiles Stilinski, we absolutely need to plan something! Shame on you for putting greater importance on finals than Derek."

"Well I was going to say busy with studying Druid magic to keep us all alive, but sure. Y’all can come over next—"

"Nonsense, I'll have it at my house. It's bigger and it'll be easier to keep the whole thing a surprise. Now, what is Derek's favorite cake flavor?"
"And what time will you bring him?"
"Six, Lydia, six! Is there a reason you've asked me three times already?"

"Because it's important, and we both know how slippery your focus is. I bet you're doing three things at once right now."
"For your information, I'm doing two. Ordering the cake, putting bullshit answers down for my history paper,

and talking to— that's, that's three, isn't it?"

"Yes. And what time will you bring him?"
"Six!"
"There you are, Derek!"

"What—?"
"Stand still, I'm giving you a birthday hug. I wore my tallest heels so I'd be able to reach."
"—Okay? Mm, yes, look at me, I'm Allison! Full of cheer and wonder with my little bow and arrow and my flirty dresses, aren't I totes adorbs? Yeah, so shut up. And to think I came here and scalded my taste buds because you insisted I try a stupid pumpkin spice latte of death. Which I repeat, is disgusting. It's sugar milk with cinnamon in a five dollar cup. And I will personally go out and set fire to every Starbucks so you can never have one again if you ever repeat what you just saw.

Now, we came here to discuss the new additions to the Beastiary, so let's make like Nike and just do it."

"You totally keep a picture of Derek's butt in your wallet."
"Stiles, come on, I want the hat!"

"Uh, you see I would, but I'm currently Stiles Claus, so."

"All'hon, t'eese po'ha'hos 're amashing."

"Scott, don't talk with your mouth full."

"Don't worry, buddy. I'll translate. He says your potatoes are amazing, Allison."

"Actually, my dad made those."

"Allie, where is your dad?"

"Probably still sharpening his throwing knives to carve the rest of the ham."

"Mom, can I have some wine?"

"Sure, the minute you turn 21."

"But Lydia's drinking wine!"
"Lydia won the bet."

"What bet?"

"That Stiles would keep a spring of mistletoe in his pocket to hold over Derek whenever he pleases."

"Lydia!"

"Stiles?"

"Check your pocket, sweetie. We all know it's there."
"You think it's sexy when I lick a spoon, don't you."
"Don't flatter yourself, Stiles."

"You think it's sexy when I lick a spoon, don't you."

"Yes."
"It's been a long year, dad. I miss you. I don’t miss your snoring, though."
"But only my mom and I know your real name?"

"Well, now you, your mom, and Derek know my real name. Turns out it's not even that weird compared to his middle name."

"No way, what's his middle name?"

"Nah. You'll have to ask him yourself."

"What, why?"

"Because. Are there any more red skittles in there?"

"Stiles, c'mmon dude, tell me!"

"No. Now give me the red skittles, I can see you hiding them in your palm. Also, I totally killed you there."
"Guess what."
“What.”

“Chicken butt.”
"Hey, you don't happen to know what year Abraham Lincoln got elected, do you?"

"…"

"Didn't think so."
"Can we go visit them today?"

"Of course."
"Are you ordering the usual tonight?"

"Nah, let's pick something special for our one year anniversary."
"No, like this. And if you want to be kosher about it, wiggle your fingers for potatoes, fries."
"Er, that's great, Derek... But what does this have to do with guns?"

"Fridge?"
"Yeah."

"Derek, we need to talk about something."
"No, no, don't give me that eyebrow of doom. I mean it, this is important. So listen up, fuzzbutt. It deeply disturbs me how you eat Oreos."

"…How I eat Oreos."

"Yes! God, you don't even know, do you? You just bite into them whole like a savage. And look, I get that savagery is kind of your thing, being a werewolf and all, but Oreos, man. That's just barbaric, biting into them like you would a regular cookie."

"What's wrong with that."

"Well for starters, you have no tactic. Take it from me, a professional Oreo-ologist. My personal approach is to twist the cookie counter-clockwise, so you split the creme perfectly on one half. You following me here?"

"Mm."

"Good, I'm educating you. Next, you dip the plain chocolate half into some milk—the milk is very important. So once you eat that half, then you get to savor the creme half for last, so the flavor lasts on your tastebuds after it's gone. Smart, right?"

"Very smart."

"Don't mock me. You're mocking me, I can feel it."

"Stiles."
"What."

"Shhh."
"Closer, gentlemen, closer."

"Isaac's practically on top of me!"

"I bet you like that, huh Scott."

"Shut up, Stiles. Are you posting this on Facebook?"

"Facebook is archaic now. This is going on Instagram."

"I thought we were going to go on rides, not take pictures. Come on, I want a corn dog."

"Alright everyone— smile!"
Sometimes there are rainy days.
Sometimes clouds blanket the sky for an entire winter.
It's cold enough that even extra socks and good coffee can't remedy the chill.
And so quiet that even favorite bands can't fill the silence.
Questions are thrown at the sky: "How does it get better than this?"
It seems like Summer was ten years ago.
Twenty, even.
But rain can't reach inside a cozy house—
Clouds can't be seen inside a movie theatre.
It's cold; a hug will do.
It's quiet; sometimes whispers are louder than concerts.
Caps are thrown at the sky.
"He would've been proud of you, kiddo."

"I know he is."
It seems like winter was ten years ago.
Twenty, even.
Because Home isn't where you live
It's the memories you make there
Made there
And with whom you make new ones.
My dearest readers,

When I published the first chapter in January of 2015, I never EVER imagined that it would grow so popular, or that it would have 251 drawings, 14k kudos, or that I would make so many friends because of it. I feel strange because for the first time in 2 and a half years, I don't have any Home drawings to do. The past 10 months I've worked especially hard every day to make the art for this last chapter as beautiful as possible, to illustrate that life can still be beautiful after hardship, something I've learned through experience.

Currently I'm working to publish the illustrated book(s) version of Home, and it would mean the world to me if you followed its progress at my book!blog (http://authorjbo.tumblr.com) where you'll find new art and story developments-- it's very close to my heart, so I hope you will at least take a peek :)

Thank you all for your support, kudos, comments, patience, and love, right when I needed it most in my life-- and as always, thank you for reading.
Until next time,

Julie (TheTypewritergirl/stiles-and-the-sourwolf)

Works inspired by this one: [At Little After Midnight, January First](#) by TheTypewritergirl

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!