To Have Outlived the Night
by stillane

Summary

Derek steps away from the window. “You helped me. They took that as a declaration.”

Notes

This is set in the fuzzy, nebulous realm after season 2 ends, but contains no spoilers beyond aired canon. How AU this’ll be by the actual season finale is anybody’s guess. Derek is an alpha here, Jackson’s still a kanima and Lydia is ambiguously awesome.

Beta’d by the fantastic ariadne83. The title is from Two English Poems by Jorge Luis Borges. Please see the end of the work for warnings, if you would like them.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Derek’s options are limited.

His head’s still ringing from the fall; the bones below his right knee are so far gone that they’re not so much healing as starting over; the heavy, drowning feeling in the left side of his chest isn’t going to fade until he can sit upright enough to get the sharp edges of his ribcage aligned. There’s something wrong with his lower back, not enough to keep him from moving but enough to make it agony when he does.

His phone isn’t getting reception down here, surrounded by the sides of the concrete shaft and the splintered remains of the elevator cage itself. He could howl for his betas, but he’s got no way of knowing if there are more traps and no way of warning them if there are. It’s optimistic to think his lungs would be up for it, in any case.
The only way he’s getting out of here is to heal enough to scale the wall to the first floor. It’s maybe eight feet up – an easy jump any other time, and right now it might as well be the moon. He doubts he has the time.

It’s a small miracle that the hunters aren’t on him yet. He hadn’t thought they’d gotten brave enough to set traps in town, but he should have. The Argents hadn’t been subtle about splintering apart like a pipe bomb, and those of them that are left are too busy picking up the pieces to mind the store. The outsiders rushing to fill the vacuum don’t care as much about discretion or collateral damage.

It’s why he’d been out here in the first place. The train station is an open secret these days, and can’t be the pack’s only safehouse when things go to hell; a nice, abandoned construction zone seemed like a decent fallback.

Idiot. They must have had surveillance - the elevator cable hadn’t blown until he’d stepped in to test the electrical hookups – and there’s no way they won’t have noticed.

And suddenly his time is up. There’s an engine getting closer, and then footsteps running in his direction. He claws his way to his feet and sways there. If he’s going down, he’ll take it standing.

The last thing he expects is Stiles’ resigned face staring down at him. “Oh,” Stiles sighs. “Of course.”

Then he ducks back out of view. It isn’t a surprise when his footsteps head rapidly away. It is when they come just as quickly back. Stiles leans over the edge again with his jacket dangling from one hand.

“There’s nothing else that’ll reach. We’ve got, like, thirty seconds here, so chop, chop.”

It’s stupid, but Derek’s not prepared to have another choice. The understanding that if he takes it, it will be obvious exactly how vulnerable he is right now freezes him in place.

Stiles reads his hesitation and shakes the coat at him. “I don’t see anybody else lining up for the job, okay, so drop the deep interrogation of my motives, Kojak, and grab the damn sleeve.”

He does. With help, he even manages to scrabble up onto solid ground without passing out. It’s a near thing, though, and he’s on his knees trying to blink away the dark spots when Stiles’ voice registers again.

“- and holy Jesus that’s rebar sticking out of… I am going to be scarred for life and we really, really need to go now.”

Stiles ducks under Derek’s arm and drags him along until Derek gets enough of a stagger going to contribute. By the time they make it past the construction fence, he can hear trucks closing in on the other side of the site. The Jeep is sitting in the shadow of the tree line, and Stiles shoves him into it with a muttered, “Come on, come on.”

They’re ten minutes down the road with no headlights behind them before Derek manages to ask, “How did you know I was there?”

“These guys aren’t exactly Einsteins, and they like cheap radios. We figured out their frequencies a while ago. It’s mostly like listening to the All Paint Drying, All the Time station, but they started going nuts about this address tonight. I zip over to find your cranky ass in a sling, and here we are.”

He gives Derek the side-eye. “You’re bleeding on my seats, aren’t you?”

“It could be you bleeding on them.” As threats go, it’s not his best, probably because he is still losing
blood.

Stiles rolls his eyes. Derek will worry about how little he impresses the kid later.

It’s a mark of how out of it he still is that he doesn’t pay attention to where they are until they’re parked. “Your house?”

Stiles comes around to the passenger side before bothering to answer. “I’m guessing the boxcar motel is out for you tonight. If you’ve got other suggestions, I’m open to them. Otherwise…” He opens the car door at Derek’s reluctant nod. “Yeah, thought so.”

They manage the same awkward three-legged shuffle over to the house, Stiles’ arm tightening around Derek’s waist when they get to the porch stairs.

“Oh my god, I am not thinking about what my hand is currently covered in.”

Now would be a great time for an irritated growl. Derek’s getting on that as soon as he stops wanting to pass out.

Inside the door, they both pause at the foot of the staircase. Stiles whines low in his throat, like he’s getting the short end of the stick here, and then sighs. “The shower’s up there, and this is going to be… yeah. I’d rather hose you down than explain bloodstains on the hardwood.”

He at least looks at Derek for confirmation. That’s something. It doesn’t make the climb up any less hellish, but it gives him the illusion of agreeing to it. They’re both panting by the time Stiles shrugs him off onto the edge of the bathtub. Derek focuses on staying upright while Stiles hauls out an impressive first aid kit from under the sink.

“Gravity and I were not best buddies in my youth,” Stiles explains, catching his look. “So, are you ever going to clarify how you wound up needing my personal Lassie skills?”

“I fell.”

“You… fell? That’s it? That’s what you’re going with? Mr. Toothy Badass himself just tripped and, oops, took a little tumble. Where the latest contestants on *Who Wants to Kill a Creature of the Night* happened to be watching. Yeah.”

“I fell really far.”

Stiles blinks at him. “Wow. Fire, water, air… You’re, like, one live burial away from having issues with all the natural elements. Remind me not to be anywhere near you when mudslide season hits.”

“Not a problem.”

“Because you’re leaving town?” he asks hopefully.

“Because I’m going back to avoiding you.”

Stiles runs a pointed glance between them and around the small bathroom. “Right. How’s that working out for you again?”

Derek just grunts. It’s not worth putting effort into a reply.

“No, seriously, is it a werewolf thing? For just three easy installments of $9.95, you too can gain claws, confidence, and the inability to plan worth *crap.*”
A new thought hits Derek. “Your dad isn’t home?”

“No,” Stiles says, face closing right down. His jaw tightens. “He’s doing some contract work with a security company on overnights.”

The Sheriff had always been fair, at least, given all the things he couldn’t know. Derek hadn’t celebrated when he’d heard about him getting fired.

“When do I need to be out of here in the morning?”

“Just stay in my room. He won’t look.” Stiles swallows. “We aren’t exactly talking much right now.”

Sorry isn’t an option, but Derek manages a nod. Stiles fiddles with a roll of gauze for a while and then drops it on the counter to gesture at Derek. “You ready to get on with the process that’s going to haunt my nightmares? Seriously, I think I’m going to have to extract things, and that’s just not in my job description. I’m pretty sure all the first aid classes say to leave stuff in, too, but then every day is opposite day with werewolves, so…”

Derek tunes him out and braces himself for the pain.

He comes to mostly naked, soaking wet on the bottom of the tub. Stiles is standing with his back to him, shirtless and dripping as he finishes turning off the shower overhead. Taking stock, Derek’s lungs are both in working order, and his back has faded down to a persistent ache. His leg’s still out of commission for anything above a shuffle.

Stiles is pale when he hands Derek a towel and helps drag him upright. With distance, the tub looks like a horror movie set, but Stiles doesn’t say anything as they limp down the hall. He steps back once Derek’s on the edge of the bed.

The silence is unsettling, coming from him. “If you’ve got clothes I can borrow, I’ll take the couch,” Derek tries. Even at this speed, he can be gone before anyone else gets through the front door.

Stiles doesn’t play along. He hands over a shirt and sleep pants without comment, and then turns his back like Derek’s got any virtue to preserve. When Derek drags himself toward the door, though, it gets his attention. He lets out a noise of protest and blocks the exit.

Derek does not have the energy for this. “Whatever breakdown you’re having, do it after I get downstairs.”

“Just… Lay down. Sleep, alright?” His eyes flicker over Derek, over the bed. “Some of us aren’t sadistic assholes who get off on watching people suffer, and you… You’re kind of a walking advertisement to wince right now.”

“You once said you’d leave me in the street while I was dying.”

“Well, yeah, but I was frustrated and kidding. Admittedly, maybe not my best comedic timing, but who would really do that?”

“Most people,” Derek says.

Stiles stares at him with his mouth open, like it’s a genuine surprise. “Jesus,” he finally says.
After a beat of silence, he gestures half-heartedly over his shoulder. “I’m going to clean up and then sleep. Downstairs. Yell if you need something.”

He’s out the door long before Derek has any idea what to say.

By the time he wakes up, he’s mostly back in one piece. With his head clear, it’s obvious how badly wrong this has all gone. There are boundaries that need reinforcement. He only hears one other heartbeat in the house, and he’s going to make an educated guess based on the early morning light that he and Stiles are still alone. He makes it to the bathroom with only a slight limp, and by the time he’s done there are jeans and a t-shirt laid out on the bed. Judging by the fit, they’re Stiles’ dad’s. Derek’s pulling the shirt on when Stiles sighs from the doorway.

He’s holding up one of the towels Derek hadn’t had the energy to keep track of last night. “I forgot you were born in a barn.”

_I was born at home_, he thinks. Sixteen hours of labor, and Laura had teased him about being antisocial from the womb. His mother had always called him her shy boy.

“No,” he says instead, smiling with teeth. “But I _was_ raised by wolves.”

Stiles opens his mouth, then closes it and glares. “Impossibly, you’re actually more terrifying when you tell jokes.”

“Wouldn’t want you getting too comfortable.”

“Oh my god!” He flails his hands. “Look, you’ve actively tried to kill and/or maim people I care about, so believe me I am not sizing us up for friendship bracelets here.”

Derek may as well ask point blank. “What is it you thought you’d get out of this, Stiles?”

He makes a frustrated noise through his teeth. “What I am getting _out of this_ is the satisfaction of a clear conscience, okay? That’s it.”

He’s telling the truth. “Fine,” Derek says. “I need to get back to the station.”

“You’re going back to the train? Really? You don’t think that’ll be a super obvious target?”

“We’ve got it covered.” He’d chosen it in the first place for its multiple potential exits, every one echoing like an alarm system to the right ears. The pack can be long gone before anyone will ever catch them by surprise.

“You don’t think they’ll storm the castle?”

They haven’t had the balls to go after an alpha alone until now, and even then only when he was injured. “They don’t have the numbers.”

“Where have you been? You can’t walk down the street around here without tripping over a hunter lately.” He frowns. “They’re like tribbles. Scary, armed tribbles.”

“But they’re all from different factions. Think of them like mafias – they work in small groups, usually families, and most of them don’t do alliances.” It can’t hurt to share a little information. “If
they’re not loyal to the same big patron family, they’ll be just as happy to fight each other as us.”

“Huh.” Stiles stares at the wall for a minute like he’s slotting this into place, and then shrugs. “Well, far be it from me to prevent your untimely demise twice in twenty four hours. Your clothes are in the bag by the back door. Enjoy your subway cave.”

It feels awkward, unfinished. Derek heads downstairs and Stiles trails behind him, like he’s seeing him out. He grabs the garbage bag on his way to the door, but there’s a brown paper sack on top of it. He’s checking inside when Stiles speaks up.

“It’s a sandwich, not a grenade.” He fidgets from against the kitchen counter. “Scott always gets the munchies after he has to regenerate his spleen or whatever.”

Derek blinks, but there’s nothing that comes to mind to do other than nod.

Stiles waves lazily. “Later, Splinter. See, that’s funny, because you’re fuzzy and live underground and herd a bunch of teenagers around –“

Derek snorts as he walks out, but he can’t help closing the door gently behind himself.

The betas aren’t at the station when he gets back. He didn’t expect them to be.

They still come when he calls, still fight when he tells them to. After everything that’s happened, he’s a long way from their blind trust, but he’s still the devil they know. They’re smart and they’re alive. That was always the goal.

Scott doesn’t come when he calls. He does come when asked about half the time, though. Derek’s starting to realize that it’s possible the most they can aim for is sorting out that other half.

The tunnels are quiet, and the damp tile walls hold scent well enough that he knows no one’s been here since Isaac three days ago.

He needs to get serious about the hunters. They’ve all been following the letter of the code up to this point, but the big families are the only ones that ever enforced it fully. They’re only waiting for an excuse, now, just one toe across the line. If they can drag that toe over, all the better. He has no doubt they’d have had a cover story for the construction site, some way to conveniently explain how he deserved it. It’s just as likely there’d be no one to ask questions in the first place.

The pack can handle itself against an open attack from any particular group of hunters. The trick is in keeping it clear to everyone else that the pack aren’t the aggressors, and avoiding getting picked off one at a time in pitched fights. It’s not an easy trick.

If they can stay alive long enough, the hunters without larger families already backing them will go for easier targets. One of the big names will take an interest in the territory, and Derek might have a window to prove that his pack is stable and quiet. If he’s lucky, the Argents might even get their shit together and reassert themselves; it’s the last thing he’d ever thought he’d be rooting for, but they’re the devil he knows.

That had been his strategy, at least, until he wound up at the wrong end of a six-story fall. Now, he’s not sure they have the choice of being passive. It might be better to hit first and hard and try to keep it
quiet.

He feels more like himself these days. It’s a shame. He’d enjoyed being someone else for a while there.

Stiles calls him two days later, just before sundown. “You need to get over here right now. Discreetly.”

“Why would I do that, Stiles?”

“There is a truck sitting across the street with a couple of guys who scream bad news just watching like stalking stalkers and this is so incredibly your fault.”

It’s probably true.

“Wait by the back door. Your window’s too visible from the street.”

Twenty minutes later he’s watching around the edge of the curtains in the Stilinskis’ darkened living room as two hunters stake out the front door. It’s too soon after the construction site to be a coincidence.

“They showed up right after Dad left for the night, like they knew his schedule. How long do you think they’ve been watching me? Why are they watching me?” He’s switched between pacing and gnawing on a fingernail for the full time Derek’s been here. Occasionally, maybe for variety, he does both at the same time. “I mean, what the hell?”

The hunters haven’t made a move to leave the truck. From what Derek can catch of their conversation, they seem to be rock-paper-scissoring for the last Krispy Krème. Derek steps away from the window. “You helped me. They took that as a declaration.”

Stiles runs his hands roughly over his head. “How do I un-declare it?”

Derek keeps silent. Stiles already knows the answer.

His bowed head a second later confirms it. “Shit.”

That about sums it up.

“If they’re watching me, they’ll start looking at everybody around me. Scott, Jackson, Lydia… If they figure out any of them aren’t normal…” Stiles says. If he keeps rubbing the back of his neck like that he’ll draw blood. “What are we going to do?”

“We?” It trips out of him.


Derek watches him pace for a while before he tries again. “Nothing.”

“What?” Stiles asks, head back in his hands.

“Don’t do anything. We stay away from each other, and they figure out you’re not worth their time.
Try not to be around any of the others when they’re feeling stupid.”

Skepticism is written all over him. “I’m the original advocate of sticking your fingers in your ears and singing ‘till the coast is clear, but you really think that’ll work?”

“I really think I’m getting rid of them soon.”

“Great.” The hands on his hips are just obnoxious. “Let me know how that works out for you.”

It turns out Derek doesn’t have to let him know anything. Hitting first would have gone better if this group of hunters hadn’t bought out an army surplus store’s worth of electronic alarms for the block surrounding their warehouse hideout. Simple reconnaissance gets switched to a frantic dash with one interrupted laser beam.

It’s just becoming clear how utterly screwed the pack’s retreat is – the hunters have the advantages of both rooftop high ground and home turf – when Stiles brakes to a screeching halt in front of them at the mouth of an alley. The betas drag each other into the back without hesitation.

“Why does this always happen on my nights on radio watch? Danny takes turns. This could happen on his nights. Why does it never happen then?” Stiles’ eyes flicker between mirrors, watching for the hunters that he’ll never see coming.

Derek jumps in and slams the door. “Drive.”

“‘Drive,’ he says.” Stiles keeps bitching, but the Jeep accelerates. “Do you have any idea how inconvenient it is having to save your asses on a school night? While ditching a tail, I might add."

Erica looks up from poking Isaac’s bruises and smirks. “You couldn’t have sent Scott?”

Stiles sighs. “A) That hurts me, right here,” he lays a hand on his chest, “and B) it kind of defeats the purpose of keeping under the radar to send Scott towards the guys making a list and checking it twice. Seriously, you all suck at Clue, don’t you?”

“But we’re pretty awesome at Twister,” Isaac says mildly.

“Not bad at lacrosse, either,” Boyd adds from his spot under Isaac.

Stiles opens his mouth, and then gives in to a nod. “Yeah, touché.”

He doesn’t argue when Derek tells him to head for the train, and the only sounds for the rest of the drive are Erica’s huffed laughs every time the boys try to find a better way of arranging themselves.

When they get there, Stiles climbs out like he’s staying with them. Derek blocks his way. “Go home.”

“What? You’re joking.” He searches Derek’s face. “You’re not joking.”

“Go home, Stiles.”

“And, what? Twiddle my thumbs waiting for the next time you and the Pipps need a ride away from certain death?” The set of his jaw is furious.
Derek doesn’t care. He has all the vulnerable spots he needs. The less Stiles is involved, the less of a target he paints on himself, so Derek crosses his arms and waits.

“Fine.” Stiles breathes out angrily, but he gets back in the Jeep. He’s still grumbling about taxi drivers and tips as his lights disappear around a building.

Boyd clears his throat from the doorway. He doesn’t say anything else, but he doesn’t need to. Derek heads for the stairs and the frustrating decision of what to do next that waits at the bottom of them.

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His phone rings at two in the morning with Stiles’ number on the display.

“What now?” He’s less than pleasant this late. It’s a character flaw.

He gets a distant echo in reply. He’s about to hang up and lament how his life turned into being assdialed by teenagers in the dead of night when a voice comes through. It’s not Stiles’ voice.

“We have something of yours. If you want it back, you’ll be at your old house in an hour.”

His mind races. The best he can do is stall for time. “Who is this?”

The voice chuckles. “Awful loud, isn’t he? Real firecracker.”

“I think you’ve made a mistake. Nothing of mine seems to be missing.” He smiles to make sure it comes through in his tone.

There’s a sound then, father away from the phone. It’s the distinctive whine of electricity charged and released. Derek fucking hates that sound. A half-beat behind it is a choked scream, and that is

Stiles’ voice.

“No, still think you have the wrong number,” Derek says pleasantly, and hangs up.

He allows himself one long breath with his eyes closed, and then he dials Boyd.

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That the hunters have trapped the house is a given. Also obvious: they’re armed, they’re dangerous, and they’ll be expecting Derek to bring his betas along.

There’s nothing he can do about any of it. He sends the others to come in separately through the woods and drives up to the front, parking next to where they’ve stashed the Jeep. One of the hunters – balding, broad shouldered, shotgun in hand – is waiting in the open door. He escorts Derek into the living room and then backs away to the far wall.

Stiles is sitting upright in a chair in the center of the space, his arms pulled behind him. There’s duct tape over his mouth, blood from his nose trickling down over it, but his eyes are angrier than they are afraid. That’s good.

There’s another hunter, taller and leaner than the first, standing beside the chair. He has a revolver
aimed at Stiles’ head and an air of satisfied control to him, and that’s less good.

The man smirks. “You’re a little early.”

“Traffic’s good this time of night,” Derek says.

The man hums in amusement. “Could have been here even sooner if you didn’t bring your pack. That was stupid, by the way.”

From the frustrated sound Stiles makes, he seems to agree. Derek ignores him and cocks his head, letting through a smirk of his own. “Why’s that?”

“Oh, we were ready for them.”

Derek doesn’t let his eyes flicker to the movement at the window across from him. He’s very careful not to react as the balding hunter standing next to it slumps and is caught, lowered to the floor silently by an arm over the sill.

“Are you sure about that?” Derek asks, and lets himself shift.

The tall hunter turns his gun on Derek, self-preservation instinct kicking in just a little too late. He fires off a shot when a dart hits him in the neck, but his aim’s off and he drops before he can manage another. Isaac slinks out of the shadows of the kitchen doorway. “I like these,” he says, twirling the blowgun through his fingers.

Derek leaves him to his admiration and works on getting Stiles loose. The second the duct tape is off, though, Stiles is talking. “Less fondling your stick, more running. This isn’t all of them.”

“We know,” Erica says as she and Boyd come in through the front door. She’s smirking, but there’s a tension about them both that gets Derek’s attention. “This crew’s down for the count, but they got off a call to somebody.”

“Shit.” He spares a glance for the hunters on the floor, but they don’t have a choice. If there are more of them out there, he can’t take the chance they won’t start an open war over anything further he does here tonight. “Let’s go.”

Stiles gets upright and staggers gamely for a few steps before Derek throws an arm around his waist and drags him the rest of the way to the cars. “Keys,” he demands, tossing the Camaro’s to Boyd. Stiles doesn’t even whine about handing them over, although he does grumble when Derek doesn’t finesse second gear to his liking.

Boyd takes the opposite turn when they get to the main road. Derek watches his mirrors all the way to the Stilinskis’, but no one follows them.

Stiles walks into the house under his own power. He doesn’t question it when Derek follows, and doesn’t seem concerned his dad will be back any time soon. Derek doesn’t push it.

Upstairs, Stiles stalls out for a while, blinking at himself in the bathroom mirror. In good light, the bruising looks minimal. There’s still blood under his nose, but it’s dry; when he grabs for a washcloth, Derek notices for the first time that his knuckles are scraped. He lets him wash his face
before shoving him lightly aside. Stiles just perches on the edge of the tub without protest.

The first aid kit is where he remembers it being. Stiles hisses when the alcohol hits his skin, but turns his hands over obediently when Derek goes for the fingernail cuts on his palms.

The room is so quiet that it’s almost startling when Stiles speaks.

“What was on the darts back there?”

Derek reaches for the antibiotic cream. “Jackson gave a donation.”

“Huh.” He watches Derek’s thumb swipe over his knuckles. “That’s… kind of cool, really. Totally the wrong approach, but cool.”

That's irritating as a wasp sting. Derek’s planning to relish the deeply screwed look on that last hunter’s face for a long time. “I’m all ears.”

“You couldn’t call the cops?” he asks like it’s obvious.

Derek glares. “You never want to call the cops.”

“Putting aside how you know that… I never want to call them when they’re my dad, and when the thing they’re up against is a supernatural shitshow. Asshole kidnappers with guns? Totally their turf.”

There are about a dozen ways Derek can see that ending badly. Beacon Hills doesn’t have a swat team, there’s no subtle approach to the house by car, and no one fully human could make it on foot without being noticed, not with the hunters expecting attack. Stiles could have been dead in the middle of Derek’s living room before the cops got within sight of the front door. The thought makes him uneasy.

Stiles, meanwhile, has moved on.

“So, do you have an actual plan yet for dealing with these guys, or just a general winging-it strategy?”

“Figure out where the rest of them are hiding, take them out.” It’s not ideal, but it’s better than the alternative of waiting for an ambush.

Stiles is not gratifyingly impressed. He gapes for a minute and then snaps his mouth closed. He looks, of all things, pissed off. “Could you knock it off with the Evil Mastermind life plan? Because, honestly, not to be mean here, but you suck at it.”

“No, I don’t.” is somehow what comes out of Derek’s mouth before his brain catches up.

“You fake it awesomely, don’t get me wrong. I mean, I bought it, Scott bought it, your little toothy minions bought the hell out of it.” His movements have gone sharp and clipped, either from anger or from the rest of the night catching up with him. “Thing is, everything made a whole lot more sense once I figured out you’re scared shitless most of the time.”

Derek’s shoulders tighten automatically. He doesn’t have the luxury of fear, and less so the luxury of anyone knowing about it.

Stiles reads his body language and his jaw sets a little more firmly, even as his voice levels out. “I’m not complaining. I just think we’d cut out a lot of unnecessary tension if we could skip directly to the rational, well thought out decision part.”
It’s not actually a bad idea, as much as Derek hates to admit it. He stalls for time putting the kit away under the sink. When he’s done, though, that unswerving look is still fixed on him.

“It’s not… It’s not that simple.” Talking about this is uncomfortable, like picking at a scab. “The pack… magnifies everything.”

“Oh.” And that fast, Stiles’ mood shifts like a train switching tracks. Resolve becomes fascination at whiplash speed. “Oh, crap. It’s a feedback loop.” He bites his lip. “Whatever you’re all feeling, you just keep bouncing it off each other until something spins you out of it.”

Derek nods cautiously. “Close enough.”

“So when you turned everybody, you were freaking out, and then they were freaking out, and then everyone was freaking out,” he says. “That… makes a lot of sense, actually. I’ve been calling it the Magical Douchebag Effect, but this is better. Does it work the other way?”

“What?”

“If somebody starts thinking happy thoughts, does everybody get mellow?”

“Sometimes,” Derek acknowledges. “It’s part of why I went after Scott, why I chose Boyd. They’re calmer.”

“Okay. Okay, then. I can work with this.” Stiles’ face goes very somber. Suspiciously so. “Derek, be the change you want to see in the world.” He shrugs. “Or just the pack. I’d settle for the pack.”

He’s swaying slightly in place. With the anger gone out of him, it’s suddenly obvious that there’s not much else keeping him upright. Derek rolls his eyes. “Enough. Plot later, Machiavelli.”

It’s not a surprise to Derek when Stiles’ knees buckle under him the second he stands up. It is a surprise to Stiles, though, going by the sound he makes when Derek catches him with a hand in the center of his chest.

Stiles blinks. “Hello, adrenaline crash, my old friend. Also, I think maybe tasering is painful. Who knew?”

Derek snorts and pushes him vaguely more vertical. “Bed.”

Stiles makes a noise of agreement and straightens a little further himself. Derek keeps a hand ready to prevent another faceplant attempt, but they make it all the way down the hall without incident. Stiles does sink onto the edge of his bed, though, like a puppet with its strings cut.

Derek ducks out to grab an icepack from the freezer in the kitchen – he’s somehow not shocked that there are plenty in there – and comes back to find Stiles hasn’t moved. He has a hunch he’ll fall asleep like that if allowed.

Sighing in resignation, he crouches and reaches for one of Stiles’ feet. He’s tossing one sneaker to the side when Stiles says, “Thanks. For coming to get me.”

His voice is soft, their heads bowed next to each other. This close, Derek can see his eyelashes smudging into the circles under his eyes, maybe there from the hit earlier, maybe just from weariness. There’s something under his tone, in the scent of him, something subtle and layered that Derek doesn’t recognize.

Derek eases the other shoe off and backs away.
Stiles slumps over onto the bed and curls his legs in with a light moan. “I’m serious about the anger management, though,” he mumbles into his pillow as Derek’s on his way out of the room. “How do you feel about yoga?”

Downstairs, Derek locks the door behind him and heads for the trees behind the house. He doubts they’d try anything else tonight, but it can’t be more than a few hours before Stiles’ dad comes home. It’s easy enough to stay until then.

Scott’s waiting for him in the station when he comes in late the next evening. Derek smells him the second he gets to the door.

There’s no point in holding off until he gets down the stairs, not when Scott can hear him from the top. “You shouldn’t be here.”

As usual, Scott doesn’t seem to care. “You should have called me.”

“To do what? We handled it.”

And now that Derek’s at floor level, he can feel the anger coming off him in waves. It’s not until Scott raises his head and pins him with his stare, though, that the fear comes through.

“He’s my best friend, and you should have called me.”

He ought to look like the reckless boy Derek first met. He doesn’t. It makes Derek’s voice quieter than he intends when he says, “I knew we could get him out without exposing you. We need every advantage we can get right now.”

“Next time –” he starts, but Derek doesn’t let him finish.

“There won’t be a next time.”

Scott searches his face for a long moment, and then he nods. He heads for one of the tunnels without another word, and Derek chooses to take it as agreement that he’ll keep his head down for now.

He owes Stiles, more than once over; he knows it, and he always pays his dues. With the pack safe for the moment, keeping an eye on him from the end of the street when his father’s away seems like the reasonable thing to do. Stiles doesn’t have to know anything about it.

That lasts until his phone buzzes. Stiles opens with, “Were all the other good lurking spots in town taken?”

“Just passing through.”

“Uh-huh. It’s like a glacial passage, though, right? Because you’ve been doing it for about three hours now.”
There's really nothing to say to that.

Stiles laughs under his breath. “Just get in here. I can turn off some lights, make a blanket fort for you to brood in, if that’ll work.”

When Derek tries the back door a few minutes later, it’s unlocked. “That was stupid,” he calls out.

“It’s only been open for thirty seconds and I figured my new guardian wereshadow had things covered,” Stiles returns, not bothering to look up from the notebook he’s writing in at the dining room table. The whole surface is covered with a scattering of books and papers, and there’s a radio scanner spitting static low and constant from the sideboard.

Derek rolls his eyes and pulls out a chair. Twenty minutes later, he’s on the brink of gnawing his own leg off to stay awake. Outside, there would at least be the rest of the world to keep him busy; in here, there’s only Stiles’ regular breathing and the white noise of the scanner and the leak under the downstairs bathroom sink and they’re all conspiring to lull him. Inspiration hits when he remembers the bookshelves in the living room from his last time here. He heads for them like a lifeline, and grabs the first book that’s familiar.

“Oh, thank god. I was getting contact boredom just being in the same room,” Stiles says when he gets back. He tilts his head sideways to read the title. “Really? That’s what you’re going with?”

That’s hardly fair. “It’s your book.”

Stiles face softens. “Not mine,” he says quietly. His lips twitch, caught somewhere between smiling and not, and then he shakes it off and clears his throat. “I wasn’t criticizing… Just…” He waves the conversation away.

Derek settles in again at the table without explaining and the background noise of the house is perfect for this. He has to stop for a moment when he realizes that he still hears Aslan in his father’s voice. When he glances up, Stiles is watching him. He looks away quickly, though, and Derek goes back to reading.

He’s a good chunk of the way through the book when Stiles turns around to crank the radio volume up. Someone over the channel is talking about going for a late dinner on Third Street. Derek watches Stiles for a signal that they need to move, but Stiles catches him looking and shakes his head, reaching for his laptop.

He types furiously for a bit, tongue held between his teeth. When Derek leans over his shoulder to look, though, there’s a chart and a map with notations that make no sense whatsoever on the screen.

Stiles nods at his questioning grunt. “Every hunter group gets a Girl Scout cookie name. We keep track of how many of them there are, where they hang out, all that jazz.” He grins. “If anybody asks, I’m mapping cookie sales in relation to proximity to scouting centers. Trust me, it won’t be the weirdest off-topic topic they’ve seen from me.”

“The ones on the radio are the do-si-dos?” He gets the logic, even if the actual words make him feel idiotic.

Stiles bobs his head. “Yep. They’re the easiest to keep an eye on. They’re always in pairs, they’re nuttier than a peanut butter cookie, and they seem to have a pickup fetish.” He points at another line on the chart. “The tagalongs are the paramilitary types, and the thin mints are the ones who slink around in the black jumpsuits like ninja wannabes. Credit where credit’s due, they really are kind of a bitch to track.”
Derek looks at the map again. Some of it matches up with what the pack’s managed to observe, but some of it’s new information.

Stiles looks back and forth between Derek and the screen. “You want a copy?”

They spend the rest of the night hunched over their own projects, Derek memorizing the map and Stiles working what look like Trigonometry problems. Eventually, Stiles gives up and announces he’s going to bed, and Derek waves him off without looking up.

The tiny map notes all blur together after a few hours, and he settles on the couch with the book instead. Somewhere after three in the morning he lets himself doze for a while, confident he’ll hear anyone trying to get in. When Stiles’ father’s SUV turns onto the block, he slips the book back in place on its shelf and ducks quietly away.

It’s a sad commentary on his life that he feels more rested than he has in a while.

The second night, the door is unlocked and *Prince Caspian* is already waiting on his side of the table.

Stiles makes it a full hour without starting a conversation. Derek’s grudgingly amused by the fact that he can see it coming a good ten minutes ahead of time just by the abandoned tics Stiles makes in his direction every thirty seconds or so.

“Alright,” Stiles starts, “so we’ve got the bestiary to help us out with the creature feature side of things, but I feel like there needs to be a textbook on hunters, too. And there isn’t. Anywhere.”

He gives a suggestive little head tilt in Derek’s direction, eyebrows up and face open like he’s waiting for Derek to run with this. It feels like being called on in class always had. Derek absolutely does not squirm in his seat uncomfortably.

“You want me to tutor you in Hunters 101?”

Stiles shrugs. “I don’t see anybody else volunteering. They’re keeping Allison on the need-to-know schedule, and everything they tell her is going to be pretty heavily written-by-the-victors style. We all need to be on the same page.”

It makes sense, at least. It’s still not any easier figuring out where to start. “There are big families, old names that control it all. They mostly stick to the code and stay out of each others’ way. The newer hunters try to catch someone’s attention until they get brought in under one of the old names. It’s very… political.”

“So our little cupboard of Girl Scout cookies are all newer, trying to make their bones by capping a pack?”

Derek nods. “The old families will stay away and play nice, just in case the Argents get their act together again, but unofficially… Taking us out would be a ticket in with one of them.”

“They’re *ambitious* homicidal jerks. Great. What else?”

“That’s it,” Derek says.
Stiles flails incredulously. “Seriously? Favorite weapons, standard tactics, what the ever-loving hell is in this code that nobody actually follows…”

“I don’t know.” If it’s written down anywhere, he’s never seen it. “They’re not supposed to hunt anyone who hasn’t spilled human blood. There’s more to it, but what the rest is…” He shrugs.

“But how can you not know this? It’s your history, right?”

His first response is anger. He’s making an effort these days to be more productive, though. “What do you know about the War of 1812?”

Stiles looks thrown for all of three seconds. “Us, the Brits, and the National Anthem are pretty much it. Why? Is there a giant werewolf conspiracy at the heart of our country’s founding? Come to think of it, Ben Franklin did look like a fairly fuzzy dude…”

Derek waits him out until the rabbit trail leads all the way back to the right conversation. Stiles bobs his head to show he’s ready. “War of 1812. What?”

“Why don’t you know about it? It’s your history, right?” Derek parrots. It’s possible he’s still a little irritated.

“To be fair, the one day we spent on it in fourth grade was in the middle of my Spiderman phase, and we had those little desks with the pocket in the front so you could read things out of Mrs. Jenkin’s view - I made it all the way through to Unlimited before she caught me. Also, it’s not like it’s hugely relevant to daily life,” Stiles says, and then his expression clears. “Ah. Starting to see where you’re going with this.”

“Hunters, the code… None of it had anything to do with us. We were quiet, we didn’t start trouble… We thought we were safe.” The last part comes out vicious.

“They never taught you how to fight,” Stiles says, like the pieces are coming together. “You’re learning on the fly.”

“Our parents taught us how to be people.” On his worst days, he’s still bitter about that.

The third night, Stiles walks him into the living room and sits down, looking serious.

“This isn’t going to work,” he says, fidgeting.

Derek raises an eyebrow. “Look, if you’d rather get killed, fine, but I’m not coming after you next time.”

It’s a depressingly bad lie.

“No, but…” Pain flickers across his face for a second before he gets back on track. “My dad, the trained investigator, he’s going to notice some guy lurking around eventually, and he’s definitely going to have issues with it being a guy he arrested a couple of times. The creepy assholes who keep following me need an excuse for us to know each other that does not involve me being a lightening rod for every supernatural being in town. We need a cover story.”

“So say we’re friends.” It’s a simple enough lie.
Stiles’ expression says otherwise. “I know you don’t exactly cohabitate with ‘normal,’ but seriously? Friends who prowl around in abandoned buildings and have slumber parties and oh goddammit that might actually work.” He’s the first person Derek’s ever seen pull off despairing enlightenment. “I hate my life.”

Derek raises the other eyebrow and waits him out.

Stiles buries his face in his hands. “Love makes you do the wacky.”

“What?” When in doubt, it’s the single syllable that serves him best around Stiles.

“Line from a TV show. Oh god, I’m explaining this to a guy who lives like an Amish man with a leather fetish. Why?”

“TV… That’s the magic box with the people inside, right?” Derek deadpans.

Stiles lifts his head, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You just like to screw with us, don’t you?”

If Derek’s lips curve up at the corners, nobody can prove it. “Back to your master plan.”

And Stiles snaps into it like a rubber band released. “Right. Look, just… I am aware of exactly how this sounds, and believe me I would like to strangle myself pre-emptively here, but try not to get your furry panties in a bunch. Here it is: I think I need to date you.”

“Really.” Derek doesn’t make it a question.

“Well, you… look like that, and my track record for good decision making hasn’t been great in the public sphere, and nobody really knows you well enough to anticipate your brand of crazy, so… I think people might buy it? Briefly?” He winces. “At least people who know us from behind the barriers of disappointed parenthood and creepy stalker binoculars, respectively?”

There is so much wrong with this Derek doesn’t know where to start. Unfortunately, all the tailspin between his ears catches on the way down is, “And you think your dad will take this well?”

“Nope.” He laughs bitterly. “I think he’s going to chalk it up as another of my recent epic fails as a son, but I also think he’ll want to keep the closest eye humanly possible on both of us, which might also stop the hunters from making a move.”

“You’re underage,” Derek tries.

“Dude, you haven’t even bought me dinner yet.” Stiles snorts. “Pretty sure that’s a level of verisimilitude we don’t need to aim for. You can’t get arrested for something you haven’t done.”

Derek doesn’t even have to say it. Stiles’ brain visibly catches up with his mouth. “… and that’s not something I should be saying to a former fugitive of the law. Got it.” And Derek almost thinks he’s given up, until Stiles lets out a slow breath and drops all the humor from his expression. “Look, I’m open to suggestions, but this is all I’ve got.”

Derek crosses his arms. “This is a terrible plan.”

“It really, really is,” Stiles agrees.
You might as well use the front door this time, Stiles texts him late in the afternoon.

When he gets there, the former Sheriff of Beacon Hills answers his knock.

“Just so we’re clear, I’m not remotely okay with this. You’re here because, out of all the ways he could be inventing trouble right now, you’re easiest to monitor.”

Derek nods. He’s sure there’ll be more.

There is. “Good. Here are the rules: When you’re together, it’s under my roof. I’m not stupid enough to think I can keep you out of the house when I’m not here, and the damage he can do here is minimal. If his grades slip, you’re gone. If he breaks any more laws, you’re gone. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” he says, fighting not to be surreally amused.

Stilinski reads his expression, and then nods sharply. His shoulders relax as he turns and heads for the kitchen. “I’m grabbing some eggs for dinner before I head out. Join me.”

It’s not a request, but it’s not hostile, either. Derek follows as much for entertainment value as anything else. Stilinski already has the pan heating and the carton out on the counter. He looks ridiculously domestic in jeans, spatula in hand.

“Scrambled okay?” He waits for Derek’s nod before turning back to the stove. “Oh, and did you kill Kate Argent?”

Derek feels himself freeze. The absolute lack of his breathing is obvious, even over the sizzle of the eggs. There’s no way Stilinski doesn’t notice it. “No.”

Stilinski nods and stirs the pan. “But you knew she arranged that fire, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have a badge anymore, and not many friends left at the department.” He turns to stare straight at Derek’s face. “So if anything happens to my son because of you, you won’t be going to jail.”

It’s the plainest, most sincere threat anyone’s ever made against him. Derek could have this man dead before he hit the floor. His lips twitch involuntarily.

“Something funny?” Stilinski asks calmly.

“You just reminded me of him,” Derek says, and oddly enough, it’s a compliment.

Stilinski sits back and watches him. Derek lets himself be watched.

“Okay,” Stilinski says finally, and reaches for dishes.

When they’re done with the most silently uncomfortable meal Derek’s ever had – and that is a strangely long list – Stilinski leaves a covered plate of leftovers in the fridge before he heads out. It’s a telling gesture, as is the way he frowns and flicks his eyes to the staircase as he’s smoothing the plastic wrap in place.

Derek waits a few minutes after he’s gone to find Stiles in his room. He’s flat on his back on the bed, arms at his sides and eyes on the ceiling.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says without moving.
“Great,” Derek says, and ignores the white knuckles of Stiles’ hands.

Stilinski’s car is gone the next evening. Derek is just as glad to avoid the awkward parental interaction, although the food had been good. He skips the door altogether and heads for Stiles’ open bedroom window. He’d make a point about that, but honestly, if the hunters made it as far as the roof, a pane of glass wouldn’t do much anyway.

Stiles waves when he climbs over the sill, but doesn’t look away from the computer screen he’s glaring at.

Derek glances at it. “I thought Lydia’d finished translating the bestiary.”

Stiles nods, still frowning at the text. “Yep. And now it’s my pain in the ass to deal with. This would be so much easier if they’d just rhymed everything. You know, like, ‘Leprechauns ain’t funny, they’ll kill you for their money,’ or something.”

“You’re… memorizing it? All of it?”

“That’s the idea. It’s slow going, but I figure it’ll be worth it, if only so that when the next big bad shows up I can scream out the right name as it eats me.”

The bed looks like the best option for working space, so Derek spreads the hunters map and notes out and settles in to look for patterns. There might be something about the way the tagalongs and the do-si-dos are never in the same part of town at the same time. Maybe they’re particularly hostile with one another.

He’s trying to put his finger on why that doesn’t quite feel right when he senses eyes on him. Stiles is all the way turned around in his chair, staring like he’s been doing it for a while, and his expression is somewhere between manic and hopeful. Derek braces himself.

“Okay, here’s the thing. I’ve been thinking about the whole feedback loop of doom problem, and I’ve got a plan.”

“Does it involve Kumbaya?” Derek asks with healthy skepticism.

“See, that! That right there!” His flail takes in most of Derek. “There are these moments where I kind of almost like you, and I can’t like you because you’re an evil dick. So it’s either get you to stop having those moments or get you to stop being an evil dick, and while the first one is probably easier, the second one is probably better in the long run.”

He spreads his arms wide like a ringmaster. “Consider this your Evil Dick Intervention.”

This is the problem with Stiles. Violent threats only work about 10% of the time with him and Derek never quite knows what to say the other 90%. Silence only serves as encouragement.

Case in point: “You need a hobby,” Stiles says.

Derek’s left eye twitches without warning. Stiles sees it and nods.

“Yeah, hear me out. Every time things go to shit in this town, I almost die. In the interests of not dying, it would help a lot if everyone would just chill the hell out, right?” His wide eyes are full of
Derek’s going to regret letting this play out, he knows he is, but it’s like watching a train crash in slow motion. Stiles keeps going regardless.

“The way I see it, it’s not entirely your fault that you’re kind of destructive and terrifying.” He waves off Derek’s glare. “You’ve got a boatload of issues, I get that, and it’d go better for pretty much everyone if you had some healthy channels to express yourself. You get less cranky, the pack gets less cranky, maybe the hunters get less cranky, maybe we all live to see 30.”

“There are diagram of this somewhere, aren’t there?” Derek asks out of sick fascination.

“Excel is my bitch,” he agrees. “So what we’re going to do is wean you off bloodshed. Like cigarettes.”

“I don’t smoke.” He carries a lighter because it’s practical, not because he has any desire to smell like ashes.

“And that’s both surprising, given your otherwise obsessive adoption of the Traditional Badass Code, and commendable. Your body is a temple.” His eyes do a weird skip over Derek then, too quick to parse. “But I was going more symbolic, there, actually. They don’t make patches for violence withdrawal, so you need another substitute.”

Derek follows the thread back to the beginning. “A hobby.”

“A hobby.” Stiles nods. “Like… macrame, or motorcycle racing, or Monopoly. And those are just the Ms! There is a whole alphabet of fun, non-homicidal activities out there just waiting for you!”

“I’ll get right on that.”

“What, you don’t have time in your busy schedule between ‘copious bleeding’ and ‘perfecting werewolf Blue Steel’?” He takes in Derek’s expression and sighs. “All I’m saying is, this could help. What could it hurt, right?”

When Derek’s face doesn’t change, Stiles sighs again and swivels the chair back around. “Option B: Continue Being an Evil Dick it is, then. Don’t think this is over, though.”

His attention goes back to the bestiary, and his shoulders hunch in as he squints at something. After a while, he clearly forgets Derek’s there and starts mumbling around a pencil about the horrors of Latin declensions. Eventually even that trails off.

“Music,” Derek says into the silence, not entirely sure why.

Stiles hums distracted agreement. “Yeah, I can put something on. Requests?”

“Music is a hobby.”

Another hum, cut short as he whips his head around with a surprised grin. “Yes! Yes, it is. You didn’t have to stick with the Ms, but hey. Progress. You want to start with concert tickets?”

“No,” Derek grits out. “Music is what we did.”

Stiles waves encouragement and his grin widens. “Like, in your garage? Because that would explain a lot about the leather jackets, honestly…” He trails off, gazing somewhere into the distance.

“Like at school. My parents signed us up in first grade.”
Stiles blinks once, long and slow. “You… were in the band. The school band. Where there are band geeks – oh my god you were a band geek, weren’t you?”

Derek doesn’t have to take this. “It was an orchestra. Music is good for discipline. We played sports, too, when we got old enough to fake it.”

Stiles is not deterred. “Let me guess, you were a drum guy.” His face does something unholy. “Or, no. Flugelhorn. Tell me you picked the flugelhorn.”

Despite himself, Derek snorts. “The idea wasn’t to encourage hitting things. Or to scar us for life.”

Stiles’ grin mellows but sticks around. “So, what was it? What instrument soothed the savage beast?”

And Derek opens his mouth to say it, and finds gravel in his throat where the word should be. It must show on his face, because Stiles’ expression has sobered by the time Derek finally forces it out. “Violin.”

He’s still expecting a joke, something about how delicate he isn’t, maybe, but Stiles just sits back. “Huh,” he says eventually, and when Derek checks, he’s looking at Derek’s hands.

Stiles has the rare ability to make Derek uncomfortable with silence.

“Laura played the cello. When we needed the money and we didn’t think the hunters were close, we’d play for tips.”

“Bet New York was good for that.” It’s not mocking, just conversational.

He doesn’t know how to explain that New York was just the last stop on the road, that the Hale on his driver’s license had been an act of defiance. “No,” he says in the end. “It wasn’t safe for us to stay in the same place with each other for very long.”

It’s cold comfort to know that he’d been right, that they should have stayed together and on the move. Looking back, that was the first battle he should have fought harder.

Stiles tilts his head. “She took it seriously, looking out for you.” His voice is thoughtful.

Derek hears the criticism in it anyway. “Maybe if she hadn’t she’d still be alive.”

He stares at the floor until Stiles goes back to his reading.

Now that he’s aware he should be looking, the traps in town are easier to spot. The parking garage basement on the east side suddenly has a working surveillance camera system where there used to be dummies in place; the old rec center, abandoned since the new one opened, has tripwires on the doors; three low-traffic warehouses on the south edge of town are seeing a lot more action, judging by the footprints in the dust. The hunters are smart enough to cover their scent, but there’s not much they can do about dirt.

He makes notes on the back of Stiles’ map, adds the betas’ observations when he meets with them, Scott’s when he calls to check in. He’s trying to limit contact between all of them as much as possible for now. There’s no sense advertising anything, not with this kind of scrutiny. If any of the hunters haven’t got the memo identifying Erica, Isaac, Boyd, or Scott, he’s not going to make it any
easier.

It leaves him with more free time in the average day than he honestly knows what to do with. He trains, he makes plans that he can’t put into play without provoking an attack, he buys a few books on tactical strategy… When he finds himself making an attempt to straighten up the train car, it’s clear a change of scenery can’t hurt.

The empty Stilinski house is tempting from his cramped seat in the Camaro. He makes it through another hour with *Small Unit Leadership: A Commonsense Approach* propped on the steering wheel before he gives in. The house is still ridiculously easy to break into, and there’s a perfect reading chair in the living room.

Stiles doesn’t even blink when he eventually walks in after practice. He drops his backpack at the doorway and trudges straight past Derek with a grunt.

“Lydia thinks this plan is hilarious. She keeps waiting until we’re surrounded by large crowds of people to ask targeted questions about our sex life. Which, if anyone asks, is non-existent because I am waiting for marriage.” He keels over onto the couch in a dramatic flop. “Fuck.”

Derek feels for him. Really. “Poor baby.”

Stiles lifts his head from the pillow. “I am Lydia Martin’s sassy bi BFF. How is this my life?” He drops back down. “Again, fuck.”

“I thought you liked spending time with her?” Derek tries for innocent, but he doesn’t try all that hard.

“It is because of you that I am never going to get laid in this lifetime, so you can just stop with the judgments, okay?”

Derek rolls his eyes. “We get clear of the hunters, have a public break-up, and someone takes pity on you in the aftermath. Lydia will get distracted eventually.”

Stiles groans. “Have you *met* Lydia?” Then he cocks his head. “Wait, have you met Lydia? I mean, aside from the odd homicidal quest here and there, have you ever been formally introduced?”

Derek opens his mouth to answer, but Stiles cuts him off. “Jesus, what am I saying? That’s like offering to hook up gunpowder and gasoline; there would be no survivors.” He shudders.

Derek wonders, idly, which one he is.

“Hell of a lightshow, though,” he says, just to watch Stiles’ wheels spin.

He waits until Stiles gets up to head for the kitchen and then stretches out on the couch. Stiles grumbles satisfyingly when he comes back, but relocates to the chair without staging a real protest.

*Small Unit Leadership* is amazingly dry. The third time Derek reads the same page without catching any of it, he has to admit it’s not working. He’s got a choice of leaving his stolen spot unguarded to wake himself up with movement, or to rest his eyes for a while.

It’s tempting. The evening light is honey-colored through the curtains, and the house is comfortably warm. He’ll hear if there’s trouble; the last time he slept deeply enough to be a problem, Laura had been in the next room.

He lays the book on the coffee table and closes his eyes.
He wakes up with the smell of smoke in his head. It’s been a while since he had that one. He listens around the house, just to be sure, but there’s nothing out of place.

He hadn’t known what his home smelled like after the fire until he came back to town, but he’d been coming pretty close while asleep for years. From experience, he knows his best method it to replace all of it with the sensory input of whatever place he’s in. Scent is the hardest to convince, so he leaves it for last.

He’d curled into himself while he slept, but one of his hands is pressed against the cushion by his head. It’s easier, with the couch under him being leather. Leather is irregular and imperfect, real in a way cotton never is. He lets his fingertips explore the soothing unpredictability of it.

Stiles’ breathing is slow, deep ins and outs through his mouth. It’s the clearest sound in the room, and Derek tilts his head on the pillow to look at him. He’s asleep. His face is tucked into the back of the chair, and his throat is one long, exposed line in the low light through the windows. He’s sprawled gracelessly, shoulders loose and one hand dangling over the edge of the seat, the other on his belly. His fingers jerk, not content to be still. He shouldn’t look comfortable, but somehow he does.

Derek lies there for a while longer, letting leather and house dust and the sleep-warm scent of another body crowd out the smoke, and then he heads for the kitchen to find dinner.

He’s quiet about it, though. There’s no reason not to let Stiles be.

It’s not all the time. Stiles stays over at Scott’s occasionally, and his father only works half the week. There’s no reason to be on watch those nights.

Stiles’ dad seems to be thawing a little on Derek, although why remains a mystery. The last few nights he’s even seemed almost relieved to have him there, which is both new and confusing.

This time, he waves Derek in on his own way out the door, and Derek watches him stand in the driveway for a long moment before leaving. Derek shrugs off the disquiet and heads upstairs, tracking Stiles by the light and sound spilling out of his open bedroom door.

He finds him sitting cross-legged on the floor with papers and textbooks radiating out in all directions. He’s sucking on his lower lip in concentration and one index finger is absently keeping time with the music coming from his computer. It’s a classical piece, intimately familiar despite Derek not having heard it in years. Massanet’s *Meditation*, although he’s never caught anyone else so inclined to break the rule of down-bow on it.

Derek sucks in a breath as he realizes why.

Stiles’ head snaps up, and his mouth falls open like he wasn’t expecting him yet. “I found some recordings in the band library at school,” he says faintly, after a moment.

Derek’s vaguely aware of the way Stiles’ eyes follow him across the room, of the tension that sparks through Stiles like a live wire, but he’s more aware of the music. The recording quality isn’t perfect, but his breath falls in line with the phrasing all the same.

“You were good,” Stiles says, surprised and quiet with it.
Derek listens, and refuses to feel the slip of strings under his fingertips. In a little town in Iowa there’s a safety deposit box under a name that isn’t Hale. His violin is tucked in the back; for a while, he thought he’d go back for it, but he knows better now.

The piece ends, and there’s the applause of a small-town audience. The memory of who would have been in the crowd that night makes him close his eyes and try to pick the sound of them out of the rest.

They’d had band practice after school on Thursdays, him and Laura. He’s never been sure whether Kate knew that or not when she picked her moment.

It’s the last track on the recording. Something current with a low, soft voice comes on after, and the vice around Derek’s chest eases a little. “I’ll burn you a copy,” Stiles says, and then flinches at his own word choice.

Derek nods, not trusting his speech yet. Eventually, he crouches over the papers spread on the floor in search of something to break the awkwardness. Most of it looks like homework, but next to a Spanish textbook there’s an open folder with a mugshot paperclipped to the cover.

“One of the hunters has a record?” It’s rare; the ones that are both sloppy enough to get caught and unconnected enough to have charges stick don’t stay in the business long. This could be good news.

Stiles hums distractedly, but his focus sharpens as soon as he spots what Derek’s looking at. His quick slap to shut the file isn’t subtle. “No. No, that’s… something else.”

The evasion is infuriating, all the more so for how raw his nerves are at the moment. “You’re the one who wanted us all on the same page. If there’s more going on here…”

“It’s not… It doesn’t have anything to do with wolf stuff, okay?” He looks at the folder, and then up at Derek. It’s another long, held minute before he seems to come to a decision. “It's one of my dad’s old cases.”

Derek cocks his head and lets his expression ask for more.

“One of the other deputies when Dad first started here, Sullivan… He was into some really dirty stuff, had a lot of debts to bad people, and Dad brought him up on charges. He’s out on parole. No big, right, but there was this whole thing where he made some threats against Dad way back, and we had a cruiser on watch for a couple weeks. It was a mess. My mom,” and that specific catch in his voice is starting to be familiar, “she freaked out once when I went over to Scott’s without telling her. Drove me everywhere for a month.”

Derek glances away from his face. “You think he’s coming back?”

“Dad thinks so. He kept a copy of Sullivan’s file – which, hey, you’re really not supposed to do – and I found it on his desk yesterday. Put together the rest on my own.”

It’s none of his business, but Derek reaches for the file anyway. Stiles doesn’t fight him over it. Sullivan is a nasty piece of work; it shouldn’t still surprise him how vicious even normal people can be.

“He didn’t tell me.” Stiles keeps his eyes on the floor. “I mean, he might not have told me before, but now… Now I wonder if it’s more like he’s trying to keep the delinquent kid that got him fired out of the way, you know?”

It’s not impossible. Derek’s not a fan of empty white lies. “He cares about you,” he says instead,
because that much is just fact.

Stiles doesn’t look any less miserable. “It might be easier if he didn’t,” he says quietly.

Derek doesn’t have anything to say to that. He realizes his hand is going unconsciously for Stiles’ shoulder and checks the movement in surprise. His arm hovers there awkwardly, wavering between following through and backing down.

After a beat, though, Stiles visibly shakes off his mood. He squares his shoulders, and his face settles into determined lines. “Okay, screw this. To the kitchen,” he commands, standing up.

Derek follows him downstairs out of sheer confusion.

Stiles flips the kitchen light on and heads forward like a man on a mission. “There will be cookies. Kind of like ‘There Will Be Blood,’ but with more chocolate chips and less terrifying milkshake analogies.” He’s talking to the inside of the fridge. “Seriously, I couldn’t order a chocolate malt for months. It was awful.”

Derek laughs under his breath and sets the oven to preheat automatically. When he turns around, Stiles is watching him like he’s done a neat trick.

“I grew up in a house, you know,” he says tightly.

Stiles’ expression shifts into something harder to identify. “Yeah. I’m starting to get that.”

For a long moment neither of them moves. Stiles shakes it off first and goes for a cookie sheet. He slaps spoonfuls of dough onto it with enthusiasm, popping the utensil in his mouth as he heads for the oven.

“You’ll get Salmonella,” Derek warns.

“Honestly, you think any of us are going to get knocked off by something that mundane?” He holds out the spoon. “Live dangerously.”

Derek rolls his eyes and takes it. It’s childish, but he will not be beaten by a lump of dough. Stiles grins like he can read him loud and clear. Derek would like to say something about having eaten far worse things raw, but that’s just inviting a joke that will require retaliation of the physical kind and he doesn’t feel like following through.

He licks the spoon clean just to be annoying and lays it deliberately on the counter. Stiles turns away quickly to check the oven. For a second there’s a hint of something different in the air, but its lost under the smell of the cookies the second Stiles opens the oven door.

It hits Derek then, mouth full of melting chocolate and sugar, how much he enjoys this. He goes still as it also registers that it’s the very first time he’s ever thought of Stiles as a threat.

When the hunters go after Scott on a Friday night, it’s almost a relief.

Stiles’ Biology homework has somehow segued into a discussion of the finer mechanics of werewolf transformation, and Stiles has somehow convinced Derek to shift his fangs repeatedly in the name of science. His jaw is just starting to ache with it when Stiles’ text alert chimes. Stiles takes one look at
it and freezes, and Derek goes on alert. “What happened?”

He shoves the phone at Derek wordlessly and scrambles for his keys.

at swings w A. GI joes here.

Derek’s moving for the door when Stiles makes a confused sound. “What are you doing?”

There’s really no point in denying it. “Helping.”

“No, you’re not.” He shrugs into a jacket. “Look, buzzcuts, camo? Sounds more like tagalongs than our nutty nighttime audience. We can’t cross the streams, dude. I’ve got a legit reason to be hanging out with Scott that doesn’t involve him secretly having fangs; you don’t. If they don’t know yet, I’m not giving them a hint.”

As usual, he’s irritatingly right. “Fine. Call if there’s trouble.”

“You’ll hear me screaming like a rabid hyena,” Stiles vows, and then he’s out the door.

The house is conspicuously quiet.

He’s planning to wait on the couch with a book, only he can’t settle. He changes titles three times, gets up to grab a drink from the kitchen, then goes back for a snack. The crawling, uneasy shiver under his skin doesn’t let up. It’s about the time that he realizes he’s pacing the house like a caged animal that he decides to go for a drive instead. The usual pickup is even helpfully gone from its spot in front of the house.

He makes it as far as the Camaro before the shiver turns into a twist in his gut and he knows it’s more than just nerves. Scott’s in real trouble. If they’re lucky, Stiles isn’t yet.

Any hope he’s got for that dies the second he gets close enough to the elementary school to see Stiles’ Jeep in the lot and a familiar pickup blocking it in. There’s nobody in either vehicle, or within eyesight. He parks far enough away and with enough cover that he’ll have a shot at the element of surprise.

He’s barely out of the car, though, when Erica melts out of the shadows behind him.

“You felt it?” he asks, and she nods. She looks nervous, but under control; the last few months have been good for that, at least.

“Boyd and Isaac are doing recon,” she says. On cue, they slip around the school building and head straight for Derek. Both of their faces are grim.

Boyd doesn’t hesitate. “They’re holed up in one of the kindergarten rooms. At least ten of them, mix of the pickup guys and the army types. They’re armed to the teeth and they definitely know Scott’s one of us. Doesn’t look like anybody’s hurt yet, but they’ve got him chained up way better than Allison or Stiles.”

Shit. “Any idea what they’re waiting for?”

Isaac nods. “Reinforcements, and us.”

It makes a twisted kind of sense. Neither group has the numbers to go after an alpha or the full pack on their own terms, but together… It’s a big enough prize to get over their rivalry, apparently.

The how of it doesn’t matter much at the moment. They’re fucked if he doesn’t figure something out
before the rest of the hunters join the party. The only plan that’s coming to mind is to go in now, hard. He knows Erica and Isaac and Boyd will follow him; he also knows the chances that all of them will make it back out are low. The chances that any of the three currently tied up and defenseless will are worse.

The sound of an approaching engine gives him the sinking realization that they’re out of time, right up until he recognizes it. Nothing the hunters drive could mimic a Porsche.

Jackson and Lydia get out of the front, faces set in tandem resolve. Danny unfolds out of the back. “It was my night on radio watch,” he says wryly.

And just like that they have a chance.

Between Isaac’s kanima-venom blowgun and the direct application of Jackson’s claws, most of the hunters go down without a fight. It helps that they’re scattered throughout the school on patrol, and that they’re almost as wary of each other as they are of the pack. That last part gives Derek an idea.

There’s one tense moment when it’s down to the last three of them in the room with their hostages, but Lydia’s improvised version of a flash-bang grenade turns out to be extremely effective as a distraction.

Stiles and Allison are both out of their handcuffs before the last hunter has hit the primary-colored carpet squares, apparently having been waiting for their chance. Scott remains shackled in a chair proportioned for a five year old while Allison picks his locks, too.

The others start piling paralyzed hunters in the middle of the room, buzzcuts on the left and the rest on the right. Erica comes in with rolls of scavenged duct tape and they get to work propping tied-up and gagged hunters in convincingly hostage-like poses.

Stiles rubs his wrists. “I’m guessing this is not about taking up a career in performance art.”

Derek snorts. “We need to hurry.”

His team knows exactly what they’re doing, and it only takes a few minutes to finish. Stiles visibly takes it all in - the fact that there are three hunters in camo left untied with unloaded guns, the fact that all of the “hostages” have longer hair - and lights up with understanding.

“Oh. Oh, I see what you did there.” He rubs his hands together gleefully. “The classic double cross maneuver.”

Derek’s phone vibrates with the signal from Danny. “Time to go.”

They’re all congregated back at the cars by the time the hunters’ reinforcements arrive at the school. It’s recognizable from the satisfyingly enraged shouting and scattered shots.

“That’s not going to keep them occupied for long,” Allison says, sounding worried.

Derek lets himself smirk. “Wait for it.”

He knows the second Stiles hears the sirens. His open mouth, ready to launch his own questions, wavers uncertainly and then curves into a slow, wicked grin.
Next to him, Scott cocks his head. “You called the cops?” he asks in shock.

Derek shrugs. “Someone told me this is their turf.”

Stiles starts laughing, quietly at first and then so hard his shoulders shake. “Oh, that’s… that is beautiful.” He bounces on his toes, and Derek has all of a half second to brace for it when he flings himself into his space. It’s a quick, there-and-gone hug, and then Stiles is ricocheting off to sweep Scott up next. “I love everything right now.”

Allison meets Derek’s gaze from Scott’s other side. She smiles tentatively, but there’s something thoughtful in her eyes. Derek’s not up for deciphering it tonight. “Keep you heads down for now,” he tells the lot of them, just in case. He gets smirks from Erica and Lydia, half of a salute from Isaac, and a raised eyebrow from the barely-re-clothed Jackson. At least Boyd nods seriously.

Derek snags a hand in the back of Stiles’ shirt and tugs him toward the Camaro. “I’ll drop you off at home.”

Stiles whines, “But the Jeep…”

Derek doesn’t bother to stop tow ing him along. “Is parked in and currently surrounded by cops.”

“I’m going to wind up explaining this to my dad, aren’t I?” He sounds resigned more than surprised.

“Yep,” Derek says, and shoves him lightly at the passenger door.

He follows Stiles into the house mostly out of habit. He doubts there’ll be more trouble tonight, in any case.

Stiles heads straight for the dining room and the radio there. He flips it on and they listen to the police channels for a while in the low light coming from the single lamp. If the reports flying back and forth are right, there’s a good chance most of the hunters in town are in custody.

They’re both still keyed-up with unspent tension. It works its way out of Stiles in random motions - a leg bouncing under the table, a hand tapping out syncopations against his thigh. He goes to the fridge three times without taking anything out, and finally plunks a glass of juice down in front of Derek absently.

Derek sips at it for lack of anything better to do and watches him with a touch of amusement. “I’d tell you to have a drink, but your dad’s still a decent shot.”

Stiles snickers. “Like you wouldn’t heal. You’re just scared he’ll give you the disappointed eyes when you come over.”

Except if the hunters are out of the way, Derek doesn’t need to be here. He goes still as the thought settles in.

Stiles gets it, then, too. “Huh. I guess this concludes our regularly scheduled programming.” He shuffles awkwardly in place. “Yay?”

And that’s it. Derek should go now. There’s an uncomfortable, unfinished feel to it, though, and for once he knows why. They aren’t even yet. He stalls for time, rubbing over the rim of the glass in
thought. A drop of juice collects on his thumb and he absently licks it off.

Stiles’ breath catches, and when Derek looks up his eyes are locked on Derek’s mouth. There’s a warm, salty-sweet hint in the air around him, strong enough that Derek can finally place it. It’s the third time he’s caught that from Stiles, and this time he’s sure. It’s about Derek, for Derek.

It’s an answer to the question at the front of his mind, this honey-on-rock-salt trace that could finally settle their score. He ducks his head and allows a smile, relieved to have an easy solution for a change.

He watches Stiles from under his lashes as he stands and stalks around the table, slipping into character, advance as deliberate and smooth as he can make it. Stiles frowns in confusion and takes a step back for every one Derek takes forward.

“I’ll admit, not the kind of favor I thought you’d go after, but I can work with it.”

“Wha- Hey, no, what are you –“ Stiles keeps backing away from him but his eyes track Derek’s mouth and he licks his own lips.

Derek walks him right into the wall and then some, until there’s an inch between their eyes and less between the rest of them.

“I thought.” Stiles swallows with a dry click. “I thought we agreed you’d stop with the big bad wolf routine.”

“Oh,” Derek says, “but I can be very good.”

Even in this light, he can see Stiles' pupils blow wider. Derek fits his hands to Stiles' hips and nudges a knee between his legs in reward. Stiles' head drops back with a soft whine.

And this, this is not the worst thing Derek’s done. Not even the worst he’s done lately. It’s not a hardship to give Stiles this. He rests his nose in the hollow behind Stiles’ ear and takes a hit of the bar soap and clean sweat and faint grass smell of him, still there under the electric rush of sex.

“My, what big eyes you have,” he whispers against skin.

“Wait, wait.” The roll of his hips into Derek’s says the opposite. His breath hitches when Derek’s thumb slips under his shirt. “Favor?”

Derek traces a knuckle down the trail on Stiles' belly and gets a low moan for it. He hides his satisfied grin in one collarbone’s hollow. “You don’t think my mouth can cover my debts?”

He’s focused enough on the flush he can taste scattering ever lower that it takes a moment to realize the muscles under his hands have gone rigid.

“No,” Stiles says. Breaths in, and then stronger, “No. Stop.”

When Derek pulls back, there’s no give in Stiles’ expression.

“Whatever it is you think this is supposed to be, whatever it is you think I want, it’s not this. Back off,” he says, and Derek steps away from him.

Stiles wants, Derek can still feel it coming off him like a hook set between his own ribs, but he’s also not lying. He doesn’t want Derek. Every line of his body is screaming not to be touched.

Derek’s worked hard to be the monster under the bed ever since he realized all the other roles were
full, but it never seemed to take with Stiles. That maybe he got there in the end after all hits him like a bucket of cold water now.

Derek backs across to the door slowly and Stiles watches him from against the wall the whole way.

“Find me when you figure out what it is you’d rather have,” Derek says finally as he eases outside.

He listens until he’s out of range, but Stiles never says a word.

They’d planned it out right at the very beginning, how this whole act would end. It needs to be in public, with plenty of witnesses, and the more final, the better.

It’s easy enough to keep his end of the deal. Derek shows up in the school parking lot over lunch hour, and Stiles picks up his cues flawlessly. Stiles’ father’s disapproval, their different lives, and Derek’s emotional unavailability all make loud cameos. It’s a little Hollywood, but not bad considering neither of them has ever had a normal breakup to their name.

The only hitch comes when someone in their audience makes a crack about Stiles not putting out just loud enough to be heard. The color drains from Stiles’ face, and Derek stumbles off rhythm.

“I don’t want anything from you,” Stiles says in the end.

Derek isn’t naïve enough to believe that. He’s not sure if it would even be better if he could.

The local news covers the showdown at the elementary school and the surviving hunters’ arrests as a bizarre gang war. The unregistered weapons violations alone take up a few pages. He’s not sure who came up with that angle, but it works in the pack’s favor. The Sheriff’s Department takes a special interest in anyone unfamiliar coming through town, and Derek stops catching sight of hunters around every corner. If there are others left, they’re staying under the radar. No new tracks appear around the warehouses downtown, and the tripwires at the old rec center aren’t reset after he disables them.

Things get quiet. It’s the first time since he became Alpha that there’s been no looming threat. It’s… unsettling. He keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop; if there’s one thing he’s learned, it’s to never doubt the world’s supply of crises. More often than not, he winds up prowling around town or the woods like he can walk off the prickle under his skin.

When he comes back to the train station two weeks in and gets hit at the door with the twin scents of Stiles and anxiety, it’s almost comforting. Disaster he can handle.

Stiles is hunched over on one of the old crates on the ground floor, waiting for him. The second he catches Derek’s steps on the stairs, though, he’s on his feet and meeting him at the bottom.

“You realize being here cancels out everything we did, right?” Derek says.

“Yeah, not so much giving a damn right now,” Stiles returns. His hand is fidgeting in the cuff of his hoodie sleeve; as Derek gets closer, it’s obvious he’s been biting his nails again.
“What’s Scott done?” It’s unfair, maybe, given how much he’s grown up in the last year, but there are a limited number of things that can put Stiles in this kind of state, and none of Derek’s pack feel like they’re actively in pain right now. Scott’s the best bet for a slow-burn crisis.

Stiles shakes his head, though. “It’s not… He’s fine. They’re all okay, I think.” He licks his lips. “It’s my dad.”

That’s definitely on the list of those limited things. Derek just hadn’t expected to be involved, in that case.

“He hasn’t touched his backup gun since they fired him.” Stiles swallows. “He’s been carrying it the last two days.”

Derek nods to show he’s listening.

“I followed him to work last night,” Stiles says, “and I wasn’t the only one. The guy I told you about, Sullivan - he was there, too, and he… Look, I know what somebody on the hunt looks like by now, okay? And he’s going to try something.”

“And you’re going to stop it.” Derek wishes that were more of a question.

Stiles’ chin comes up. “With what happened with the Department…” He shakes his head slowly. “There’s nobody watching his back.”

“Where do I fit into this fantastic plan?”

Stiles blinks, like that part was obvious. “I have kind of a long history of getting in over my head when left to my own devices.”

“Scott turned you down?”

“I didn’t ask him.” That determined set is back in his shoulders.

Derek’s beginning to see where this is going. “You don’t want his help?”

“Scott wouldn’t be able to hurt anybody, not on purpose.” Stiles doesn’t flinch. “You would.”

Because Derek’s always good for something in the end. “You’re calling in your favor.”

There’s a sick satisfaction in knowing the world still works the way he knows it does. To his credit, Stiles looks uncomfortable. “If I have to,” he says with conviction. And then he softens. “But I’d rather ask a friend for help.”

He doesn’t mean Scott.

He doesn’t mean Scott, and he’s dead serious. People don’t ask Derek. They demand or they order or they suggest, if they’re feeling somehow entitled, but they don’t ask. Whatever ground they’re on here, it’s nothing like solid.

Stiles’ right hand is wrapped around the railing of the stairs hard enough to turn his knuckles white. If he were a wolf, he’d be denting it. Derek should not be thinking about that.

“This is my dad, Derek. My dad. He can’t…” His mouth is a tight line, and his expression is helpless.

_My, what big eyes you have_, Derek remembers. Nobody’s looked at him like an answer in a long
“He won’t,” he says, before he knows he’s going to.

He grabs his jacket and heads back upstairs without letting himself analyze it too much. Stiles jogs to keep up with him, but doesn’t complain.

“I’m not your weapon,” Derek says over the Camaro’s roof, trying to regain some ground.

Stiles shakes his head, though. “No, I know. With luck, I can get Sullivan on video breaking his parole and he’ll never even know we’re there. I just need some backup.”

He slides into the passenger seat and gives Derek directions, and then doesn’t speak again for the next hour.

Stiles’ dad’s overnight gig is apparently an art museum out in the valley. Derek parks at the closed restaurant down the street to get the lay of the land. The museum entrance is well lit and designed perfectly to make a theft difficult; the parking lot is pitch black and designed perfectly to make an ambush easier than hell.

Derek takes one look at the place and makes an executive decision.

“Stay in the car.”

“What?” Stiles genuinely blinks at him.

“Was that too complicated?” He raises an eyebrow. “Sit. Stay.”

“Look at you, with your ironic deployment of dog jokes.” The humor doesn’t go near his eyes. “No.”

Derek growls, but Stiles refuses to be intimidated and short of leaving him in the trunk, there’s not much Derek can do about it. Doesn’t stop him from thinking longingly of the idea as they circle the perimeter and Stiles fails to move with any kind of stealth, but to be fair, Derek gets the impression he’s trying.

It’s really obvious, then, when Stiles freezes in place. His heart speeds up, and Derek follows his eye line to a car parked a block down the street. “Sullivan’s?” he asks, and Stiles nods.

They’re at the back of the building, facing a set of loading docks maybe a hundred feet away. He can see the red lights of surveillance cameras from here; he can also see that the one above the folding door is out. As they get closer, it’s clear the door itself has a good two-foot gap at the bottom, plenty of room for someone to roll under.

“Who’d you say got your dad this job?”

“An old friend from the Depart… Shit. He’s in on it,” Stiles realizes.

Derek tilts his head in agreement. He can’t hear anyone waiting inside, and nothing happens when he slips under the door with Stiles behind him. He gets a whiff of gun oil heading into the main museum and follows it. Sullivan’s accomplice must have taken care of the internal cameras, too,
because no alarms go off.

They’re crossing from a room full of paintings into one with aggressively modern statues when they catch up with Sullivan. He’s waiting by the room’s far exit with a pistol in his hand, posed like the definition of an ambush.

Derek recognizes his own fury right about the time he crashes into Sullivan’s unsuspecting back. The gun goes spinning off into the dark, and he’s dimly aware of Stiles sprinting after it, but mostly he’s focused on getting a good grip on the spineless asshole writhing out from under him.

Sullivan manages to get a hand free and then suddenly there’s a flare of pain in Derek’s ribs and he’s automatically letting go. They wind up crouched face to face with a few feet between them, and the muted floor lights glint on the blade in Sullivan’s hands. Derek’s all but healed already, but he’d rather not shift if he can avoid it and Sullivan’s not going to go down without a fight.

“Shit shit shit,” Stiles says somewhere off to the left, and then there’s a splintering crash and an alarm that could wake the dead.

Sullivan looks back and forth between Derek and the room’s exit, decides it’s not worth it, and takes off for the loading dock. Derek and Stiles are only a few seconds behind him, but his car is right there. There’s no time to do anything even if they could catch him, not with the cops probably on their way. Derek drags Stiles to the Camaro and gets busy retreating at as sedate a pace as he can manage.

“So I think I just destroyed something really expensive and artsy.” Stiles’ eyes are wide. “In my defense, it was also ugly like the mutant spawn of hell.”

“Shut up,” Derek says, trying to listen for sirens behind them.

They all seem to be headed straight for the museum. At the next red light, Stiles clears his throat.

“I know where Sullivan’s staying.” At Derek’s look, he shrugs. “It’s amazing what you can find out when breaking the law is a relatively minor consideration.”

Sullivan’s place turns out to be a trailer in the middle of nowhere. There aren’t any lights on and no sign of his car, and Stiles scrambles out of the Camaro before it’s fully stopped moving. He’s halfway across the yard before Derek catches up with him.

“What are you doing?” Derek hisses, keeping his voice low just in case.

“Getting proof that he’s a parole-violating son of a bitch before he tries again. You got a better plan?”

Derek really wishes he did. This one feels like a disaster waiting to happen.

It’s confirmed when Stiles is reaching for the door handle and Derek suddenly becomes aware that he’s hearing one more heartbeat than he should. Derek holds up a hand and Stiles freezes, but Sullivan’s already walking around the end of the trailer. He’s got the knife out and a mean grin on his face.
“Thought you might be along.” He cocks his head, gesturing between them with the knife. “Now this one I don’t recognize, but you… You look just like your mom, don’t you?”

Stiles straightens, anger pouring off him in waves. “You’re not getting away with this.”

Sullivan actually laughs. “You’ve got no proof, kiddo, not a damn thing that will stand up in court. Trust me on that.” He bares his teeth like a shark. “I’ve heard about you, too. You think anybody’s going to listen to you when I do put a bullet in Daddy?”

Derek is momentarily distracted by the thought of how satisfying it would be to break this man’s neck. He only sees it in his peripheral vision when Stiles moves; by the time his head is turned, the gun from the museum is out of the pocket of his hoodie and leveled at Sullivan.

Sullivan’s face doesn’t change, but Derek hears the trip in his heartbeat. “You going to shoot me with the safety on, kid?”

Stiles’ arm doesn’t waver. He doesn’t even glance at the gun. “Yeah, that always works in movies, doesn’t it? Never hurts to be sure, though.” He shifts just slightly and fires over Sullivan’s shoulder. “Nope, it’s off.”

That shakes Sullivan up. It’s obvious that his calm is cracking, but he’s still aiming for slick conviction. “Come on, now. Little junior lawman like you? We both know you don’t want to do this.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” Stiles says in a flat voice Derek’s never heard from him.

It sets something off in Derek’s spine, a little spark of intention that has him shifting into the form that could never be mistaken for human. He stalks forward with a low rumble in his chest.

Stiles just draws himself up straighter in surprise, but Sullivan takes it badly. He gets in one good swing with the knife before Derek grabs his wrist and wrenches until it snaps, and then he flattens himself against the wall and scratches like he can claw through it. He reeks of fear and makes a strangled, high noise when Derek leans into his personal space. It’s immensely rewarding.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Stiles recalibrate on the fly. It’s only a beat before the confidence comes back into his stance. “I didn’t want to have to do this, but you left me no choice. Meet my friend, Cujo.”

Derek’s growl kicks up a notch in irritation, but it has the added benefit of making Sullivan piss himself a little. Derek would roll his eyes if it weren’t completely breaking character.

“Yeah,” Stiles continues, “Cujo here, he’s really protective and surprisingly resourceful. Like a big, hairy velociraptor, only better with doors.”

Derek obligingly holds one hand in front of Sullivan’s face and flexes his claws.

“And this is the best part: Once he’s got your scent, there’s pretty much nowhere he can’t find you. You ever see that Mythbusters where they try to get away from the bloodhound? Spoiler alert: nothing doing.” There’s a grin in Stiles’ voice now. It’s full of sharp edges, but Derek will take it. “I don’t actually have to spell out what happens when Cujo catches you, right?”

Sullivan is barely daring to breathe. His eyes flicker from Derek’s eyes to Stiles and then back to Derek’s teeth.

“So here’s how this is going to work,” Stiles says, taking that for an answer. “You’re going to find
religion or head for Mexico or join a circus, I don’t really care, but we never hear from you again. And if anything happens to my dad or me… well. No one will hear from you again. Okay?"

Sullivan doesn’t move. Stiles grunts. “You can let up a little there, big guy.”

As soon as Derek takes a step back, Sullivan bolts. Derek blocks his way to Stiles, but he heads in the opposite direction. He doesn’t stop running until he gets to his car somewhere far back in the woods, and then tears out with a spin of tires. If they’re lucky, he’ll get picked up on a traffic violation.

Show and tell over, Derek shakes off the change and works his jaw to get the kinks out. When he looks over, Stiles is staring at his feet, scrubbing one hand through his short hair. The gun is still in the other, hanging at his side.

Stiles blows out a long breath. “So. I think that went well.”

Stiles spends the first half of the drive back taking the gun apart and rubbing all the pieces with the bottom of his shirt. It’s obviously not a new skill, long fingers confident and comfortable with the motions. He catches Derek watching.

“Cop’s kid,” he reminds him, and doesn’t say anything else until he tells Derek to stop before the next bridge. It’s late enough that there’s no traffic. He crawls out of the car and over the barrier to reach the outer edge, and then drops the gun’s parts into the water. He smells like the night air when he climbs back into the passenger seat, and something else underneath that makes Derek uneasy.

He holds off on starting the car.

“I would have done it.”

When Derek glances over, Stiles is staring at his hands. Palm-up and empty, they’re perfectly steady.

“I know.” Derek’s not sure what response he’s supposed to give. It’s just the truth.

“I could have killed him and not even felt bad about it.” The hollow note in his voice is distracting. “I always knew I could do it, if I had to, but I thought… You’re supposed to feel bad, right?”

“There’s not –“

“What does that mean? What does that make me?” Stiles asks, talking more to the dashboard than to Derek, but sounding like the answer is vital.

The familiarity of it hits Derek hard, steals the words from him for long enough to let silence fall again. Something else occurs to Stiles then, judging by the way his head snaps upright.

“Oh, Jesus. My dad can’t know… Whatever else happens, I don’t care, he just can’t ever know, okay?” He links his fingers behind his head, movements sharp and sudden. His neck bows again, and his heart takes off like a horse from the starting gate.

“Stiles…”

“Shit.” One hand rubs over his chest, and the look on his face melts into disbelief. His laugh is
ragged around the edges. “This is stupid. God, this is so stupid. People keep dying in front of me and I keep almost dying and this is what I fucking can’t deal with?”

Derek wants to do him the courtesy of ignoring him right now, but his heartbeat is rabbit-fast in Derek’s ears and the feel of him is raking over every nerve Derek has. He’s like a thunderstorm rising fast, or an earthquake coming on.

“Oh, fuck,” Stiles says, curling over his knees. His breathing hits a hitching rhythm and Derek lays his hand over the frantic rise-fall of Stiles’ back on pure instinct. He gets a low, choked noise in return. He runs his hand up and fits it around the bones of Stiles’ neck and just holds there.

For long, suspended minutes nothing changes. Derek squeezes and releases and can’t come up with a single other thing to do or say, and then the tension seeps out from under his palm. He works his thumb in slow circles until Stiles lets out a shuddering sigh and draws an almost normal inhale after. He should take his hand away, then; he doesn’t.

It’s been long enough that the car’s stopped ticking in the cooler air, and the loudest sound around them is the chirping of the river frogs from under the bridge. When Stiles’ body loosens to a softer curve, Derek finally reaches for the key.

“It makes us strong,” he decides at last, miles down the road with nothing beyond the headlights. Stiles rolls against the headrest to face him. “We do what we have to, and if they’re safe at the end of the day...”

“What happens to us then?” His voice is a soft vibration over the engine.

Derek hates him slightly for asking. Hates himself more for wondering the same thing.

“I’ll let you know when I find out.”

Stiles’ father’s SUV is in the driveway when they get back. There’s a lamp on in the living room, too.

Stiles stares at the house for a long time. The light is gray this close to dawn, and it gives him a resigned, distant look that Derek doesn’t like. Stiles reaches for the door handle without a word and Derek grabs for his arm.

“What are we going to tell your dad?”

He blinks like Derek’s said something unexpected, but some of the blankness melts out of him, at least. “I ran out to the store, I guess. The Jeep broke down and I forgot to charge my phone. You were just driving by.”

There’s a questioning note in that last part, and Derek nods to show he’ll go along. It’s a decent story; he doesn’t have any other explanations on hand that won’t get Stiles in just as much trouble and himself possibly arrested.

“Okay, then,” Stiles says, and gets out of the car.

Stilinski must see them coming up the driveway. He meets them on the porch, and if Derek couldn’t
spot the stark terror around his eyes, he might mistake it for anger.

“Where the hell have you been?” His voice is hoarse, and Stiles flinches.

Derek watches the mask come over him as he opens his mouth. “The milk smelled funny and we’re out of cereal, so I was going to get some, but the Jeep started making this grinding sound and Derek drove by and saw me but that took, like, hours, and we had to move the Jeep so it wasn’t on the road where –“

Stilinski holds up one hand. “Okay.” His heart rate’s dropping back down, and weariness is settling over his shoulders. “Upstairs. We’ll talk about it after we’ve both gotten some sleep.”

Now that the bullshitting is out of the way, Stiles deflates at the reprieve. He heads into the house with one last look back at Derek, and a grateful little nod once he’s behind his dad’s back.

“Thought you weren’t seeing each other anymore,” Stilinski says when they’re alone, tone neutral.

Derek matches it. “We’re not. I was just in the right place at the right time.”

He’s expecting to see relief, maybe even some kind of triumph. Instead, Stilinski just looks more tired. After a moment, he nods and offers his hand to Derek.

“Thanks for getting him home.” His grip is firm, but not challenging. Solid and comfortable, and it occurs to Derek that he likes this man.

He returns the nod, his eyes tracking to the stairs without his permission. “He’s a good –” and he can’t finish it, can’t say kid, because Stiles isn’t. Not like he should be. He’s always refused to be what Derek expects.

He realizes he’s been silent too long. Stilinski’s just watching him, though.

“Yeah, he is;” he says quietly.

Derek goes back the next night to check, but there’s no sign of Sullivan at the trailer or near the museum. It’s possible he’s still running like hell. The rest of that night is like a sore tooth that he can’t stop working at, but that much at least was fantastic.

He stays away from Stiles. Keeping his distance is the smart thing to do, Derek knows it, and he’s on a new mission to only do the smart things. None of them can afford otherwise. When Derek cares, he makes mistakes.

He hadn’t counted on Stiles disrupting the plan, but he’s also somehow completely not shocked to find the train station once again smelling like him. Derek doesn’t see him at first, but there’s a flash of movement from inside the train car and Derek follows it.

He’s barely through the folding doors, lips curling involuntarily, when he recognizes his mistake.

The man sitting in the train isn’t Stiles. He’s wearing a lacrosse jersey with Stiles’ number on it; under it, though, is tight black clothing. Derek has half a second to comprehend exactly how fucked he is before something small and sharp sinks into his back and his vision tunnels.
He makes it one snarling step towards the hunter in front of him, but the man just smiles. “Night night.”

He’s shifting forms before he’s fully awake, on his feet before his eyes are open. It doesn’t do him any good. The manacles around his wrists hold, and the chain leading from them to the floor pulls him up short the second he gets upright. At least his hands are in front of him.

The same hunter’s waiting calmly a few feet out of reach. He’s taken off the jersey, but the all-black motif and faint air of smug asshole haven’t changed.

“Morning, sunshine.” He smirks. “Well, middle of the night, actually, but who’s counting.”

Derek knows where he is at a glance. The old condemned rec center gym spans out around him in all directions. They must have torn up the wood flooring to bolt his restraints into the concrete, but the rest of the place looks undisturbed. He glances at the second floor balcony expecting more hunters, but there’s only a clutter of old weightlifting equipment.

“Why not just kill me?” He has a hunch he knows. He’s hoping he’s wrong, though.

He’s not. “Now that wouldn’t be very efficient, would it?” The bastard tuts. “No, we’re going to wait right here for the rest of your pack to come charging in.” He holds up Derek’s phone. “I love technology. Don’t you?”

He isn’t stupid enough to have programmed anyone in under their real names, but he doubts it matters.

“With Papa Wolf out of commission, how long do you think it’ll take for us to pick them off?” Derek’s hands jerk unconsciously, and the hunter’s smirk widens. “It’s a chilly night. Maybe we’ll have a nice, big bonfire right here in this old firetrap.”

Derek won’t give them the satisfaction of seeing him react further. Hollow victories may be all he gets.

“There’s a nice symmetry to it, don’t you think? Poetic,” the hunter keeps going. “You could even...”

And then there’s a whistle of air and something white and round bounces off his head. His expression melts into confusion, and he drops like a stone.

A voice comes out of the darkness to the right. “More of a limerick guy, myself.”

Derek knows that voice. Stiles jogs the rest of the way over to his side and grins wildly. “Like, ‘These hunters, they each have a gun / I wish they were so much more fun...’” He’s got a lacrosse stick in his hand, but he drops it to reach for Derek’s manacles. “Lame, I know. Sue me later.”

“You hit him with a ball?”

Stiles shrugs. “Hey, you don’t schedule your heroic rescues in advance, you take what you can get.”

Somewhere outside the rear of the building, there’s an explosion, and then a grating reptilian scream. Closer to the front, a scattering of gunshots is followed by Isaac’s roar. He sounds more angry than
hurt, at least.

“And that’d be the cavalry. Not subtle, but effective.” Stiles’ fingers brush his wrist around the manacles. “Damn it. They couldn’t just go for handcuffs like normal people?”

There are footsteps headed toward them. Whoever’s coming, Derek doesn’t recognize them and they smell like gunpowder. They’re out of time.

“Stiles. Go.”

Stiles grits his teeth and doesn’t answer. He switches from the manacles to the padlock on the chain running to the floor. It snicks open just as a blonde dressed in black walks out of the corridor, pistol first. Two others, both men, trail her out a beat later.

Her smile is casual. “It’s almost cute, really. You know what they say about a boy and his dog, Stiles.”

Above them, Derek sees Scott start weaving through the exercise equipment. He catches the shape of a longbow out of the corner of his eye, working around the balcony to get a clear shot at the hunters.

Derek snarls through his fangs to get their attention back on him, but Stiles doesn’t play along. He raises his chin like an idiot. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced.”

“Oh, we’ve heard all about you. Turns out, radio signals aren’t very secure. Who knew?” she asks flippantly.

And suddenly it all comes together. Why this group never made a move, why they’d never been seen in significant numbers… They’d just had to hang back and let all the others do their dirty work for them, mapping out the opposition and waiting for their moment to strike. He should have seen this coming.

The realization almost distracts him from the flush of anger that washes over Stiles’ face. He knows the instant Stiles opens his mouth that things are about to go sideways.

“Yeah, see, here’s the thing. That whole part where I exhibited some basic human decency and didn’t just leave somebody to die in a fucking elevator shaft? I keep trying to tell everybody: That was not a declaration.”

And then he steps in front of Derek.

“This is.”

The hollow chill that surrounds every shitty thing in Derek’s life settles in his chest. “Stiles.”

Stiles ignores him. He stares the woman down, solid and unblinking. “You want him, you go through me.”

The hunter cocks her head. “Fine.”

Distantly, Derek registers the sound of the shot, the sound of Scott’s scream, the sound of an arrow released. It’s drowned out by Stiles, knocked back a step into Derek and already falling as Derek twists a hand into his shirt.

It’s instinct to drag him to the ground, to hunch over him before looking up for the next attack. The other hunters won’t be far behind.
Except they will. They’re standing frozen with their guns only half raised, and Derek tracks their line of sight up to where Allison holds steady aim. “Put it down,” she says, and there’s steel in her voice.

Nobody moves. In the silence, the dripping of Jackson’s claws somewhere in the shadows and Stiles’ ragged breathing are suddenly deafening. It’s gone silent outside, too, and his pack feels closer.

One of the hunters stares hard at Allison’s face. “You think there aren’t others? You think you can win this?”

“I think I’ll give you three seconds before I drop you next to your boss.”

Another beat, and the men ease themselves into a crouch and lay the guns down. By the time they’re fading into the shadows, Derek’s back to human form.

“Boyd, Jackson: follow them. Erica, pull the arrow and get rid of the body,” he rattles off without looking away from Stiles. The hole in his shirt is so small that Derek’s hand fits over it with room to curl over his ribs, but the ground under him is already staining dark.

“We’ve got this. Take my car,” Allison says, suddenly beside him and handing her keys to Scott, and Derek blocks out the sound Stiles makes when he lifts him.

The ride to the hospital seems impossibly long.

People like to pretend that blood smells like copper. It doesn’t; it smells like blood. It feels slick and warm on skin if there’s enough of it flowing continuously. There’s enough of it, in the back of the car.

The closer they come to the center of town, the more streetlights there are to see by. They paint Stiles’ skin strange shades of orange, but it’s better then the ashen contrast with Derek’s jacket between lights. They catch in his wide, dark eyes and on his lips where he’s mouthing Derek’s name.

He’s afraid. He’s dying, and he’s afraid, and Derek wants to break everything he can get his fingers on because he can’t fix the damage under his hands right now.

“My dad,” Stiles murmurs, barely louder than the tires over the road. “Watch him, okay? Please.”

Derek doesn’t have any more promises to give. He makes it anyway. “Yes.”

And Stiles relaxes, goes that little bit heavier against Derek’s hold, and Derek snarls, “Don’t.”

From the driver’s seat, Scott makes a noise that no one would mistake for human, and then the car is slowing and Derek is already springing for the door handle. He turns toward the hospital and Scott’s blocking his way, only the color of his eyes giving away the wolf. “You can’t go in there.”

Derek moves to slip around him. Scott steps in closer. “If you want them to let you anywhere near him, you need to go right now.”

He’s right. It’s the smart play, and a detached part of Derek is even proud of Scott for seeing that. It doesn’t make it any easier to lay Stiles in his arms and watch him go.
The morgue is private. There’s not much traffic, little chance of him getting caught, and it’s quiet enough that he can focus on a specific rhythm two floors away. He cleans himself up as much as he can, finds bolt cutters in a closet for the manacles, and settles in a dark corner, closing his eyes to focus better.

When he opens them again, Allison is watching him from a few feet away. He tenses automatically, but she only folds herself slowly down to sit on the floor.

“Have they said…” he starts, voice rough to his own ears, but she shakes her head.

“No word yet.”

He nods, and watches her take a slow look around them. She frowns. “You get that this is creepy, right?”

He avoids that one. “How did you know I was here?”

“Erica. She said it’s your favorite place to make friends.” The frown gets deeper.

“Inside joke,” Derek says, even though it isn’t. “Why are you here?”

When she straightens like that, raises her chin just right, he can see the fighter in her. “We need to talk.”

“Now?”

“I don’t think we’re going to get a better time.”

She’s probably not wrong. He nods.

“We’re both going to have enemies after this,” she says. “They don’t have to be each other.”

Of all the people he would have expected that from, he hadn’t seen it coming from her. It’s no secret how little she likes him. “You want an alliance.”

“Before… before Kate,” and he can respect the way she rides through the pain, “things were okay. Your family lived here, and we left you alone. Nobody got hurt.”

“You think we can go back to that?” He doesn’t bother to cover the bitterness.

“No.” She shakes her head. “I don’t think we should. We can do better.”

Despite himself, he wonders where this is going. He keeps his mouth shut.

“My family’s been trying to save the world for a really long time. We’re an army against the darkness out there. We go where we need to and we do what’s right, when we follow the code.” She looks him straight in the eyes. “But you want to know what I think?”

“I think I don’t care. I think if everybody else wants to tear each other apart, they can go for it. I’m eighteen and I’m in love and I want to wake up tomorrow and not wonder if anyone I care about is going to die. I think you can understand that.”
“I’m not eighteen,” he says. He hasn’t been that young or that innocent for a long time.

She smiles faintly. “That’s not the part I meant.”

He swallows, not thinking about a room two floors away. “And you think you can stop it?”

“No.” Her smile tightens. “But I think we can. Your pack, Scott, the hunters who’ll follow me…
Jackson, Lydia, Danny. Stiles. We make a decent team.”

It’s a nice fantasy. “Let me guess who’ll be in charge.”

“Does it matter?” She doesn’t flinch, and her voice doesn’t rise. “Why did you give them all the bite, Derek? The truth.”

“Power,” he says easily, and lets his eyes flash.

She just stares him down, though, waiting. 

*Go to hell* is on the tip of his tongue, but somehow stays there. “Survival,” he grits out, finally.

She nods like she already knew. “So pick the one that means more to you,” she says, and stands up.

It hits him, sudden and painful, that it’s not Kate that he sees in her. It’s Laura.

“Come on,” she says, and deliberately holds out her hand. “Let’s find you something else to wear.”

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They pass deputies at various points in the halls. The cover story is apparently that Scott and Stiles were in the woods and happened to be very unlucky; in the grandest possible sense, it’s even true.

Their worry makes it easy to feel Boyd somewhere close, Erica and Isaac farther away. Neither of them are fond of hospitals.

Jackson and Lydia are holding hands from adjoined chairs in the waiting room. Whatever they are or aren’t to each other at any given moment, apparently they’re still this. Jackson meets Derek’s eyes and nods. Whether that means the other hunters are gone or dead, Derek doesn’t actually care right now.

He’s not prepared for Stiles’ dad to be sitting next to Scott. When he raises his head, his eyes are raw and frightened, and he’s making no effort to hide anything.

“Sir,” Derek says, for lack of anything better. He wishes, suddenly, that he were wearing his own clothes.

Stilinski clears his throat roughly and nods. “Have a seat.”

It’s a strange comfort, being allowed to share this.

An hour passes before he has to move again. The vending machines are visible down the hall, and they make as good an excuse as any. He doesn’t comment when Scott stands and follows him.

They’re contemplating the relative merits of candy neither of them will probably eat when the rhythm
he’s been following for hours now slows, stutters, and Derek holds very still until it picks back up. Beside him, there’s the sound of a long breath, and when he looks Scott is watching him.

“He’s still here?” Scott asks softly.

“You can’t hear him?”

Scott shakes his head. “Allison’s the only one I can pick out of a crowd.”

Most heartbeats sound alike from a distance. Stiles’ doesn’t, although Derek can’t explain why. He realizes he’s been silent too long when he feels Scott’s eyes drilling into him. Derek knows what’s coming before he opens his mouth.

“Give him the bite,” Scott says quietly.

Derek doesn’t look at him. “I can’t.”

“Bullshit,” Scott growls, still keeping his voice low. “Bullshit, Derek. You can, and you will, because you are not letting this happen, you can’t… You can’t…. I know he matters to you, you can fake it all you want but I know, and he did this for you. He’s dying for you, don’t you –”

“It won’t help!” He doesn’t realize he’s shouting until the silence settles in after. Down the hall, Stilinski and Mrs. McCall freeze and turn toward him. He focuses on the floor until they go back to talking, and he’s quieter when he tries again. “How long was it before you started healing the first time?”

The understanding rolls through slowly, dragging the fight out of Scott’s shoulders. “It won’t be fast enough, will it?”

Derek shakes his head. “No.”

There’s nothing more to say. He buys a cup of coffee and goes back to listening for that specific cadence. Scott follows him back after a while, and this time his posture isn’t warning Derek away.

The cup’s long gone cold in his hands by the time a doctor comes out to pull Stiles’ dad aside. The doctor’s too seasoned to give anything away in her own body language, but the wave of relief coming off of Stilinski would be heavy enough to take Derek out at the knees if he were standing.

Stiles sleeps for the first two days. He’s high as a kite for the next three, and then they start to wean him down from the good drugs. He’s hurting, but more exhausted than anything; once the effects of blood loss and shock fade, he’ll still have a course of physical therapy to get through. They’re optimistic he’ll be okay in the long run, though.

Derek knows most of this second-hand. At first, it’s just more practical to come by at night. Stiles’ father is there during the day, and the others drop by in the evenings after school. It makes sense for Derek to take the night shift, slipping in unnoticed between nurse’s rounds.

It’s on the sixth night that he gets caught. Stiles shifts in his sleep and whines softly behind his teeth when the pain hits, and Derek goes still in the shadows at the corner of the room.

He thinks he’s in the clear until Stiles grins.
“Chair’s over by the window,” he says, voice rough with sleep. He doesn’t bother to open his eyes, and he’s out again within a few breaths. There’s no question he knows who’s there with him; Derek can tell just by his tone.

It leaves him unsettled, although it’s hours yet before he can put his finger on why.

He needs a way to keep Stiles as far from all of this as it’s possible to be in Beacon Hills. Stiles will never do it by choice – not when everyone he knows is in the firing line – so Derek can’t give him one. The solution, when it comes to him, is ridiculously simple. It’s even got the added benefit of fulfilling the letter of a promise made.

Stiles won’t forgive him for this. Derek’s paid worse prices for less.

He waits until Stiles is scheduled to be released. Stiles’ dad comes back from the hospital pharmacy, and Derek stops him in the empty corridor a few turns down from Stiles’ room. “We need to talk.”

Stilinski nods, stepping around him. “Just let me get him settled in at home.”

He keeps walking, eyes on the prescriptions in his hand. Underneath the atmospheric disinfectant, Derek can smell the gun oil on him. He’s been armed since Stiles was shot.

“It wasn’t Sullivan.”

Stilinski freezes. “What did you say?” he asks without turning around.

“It wasn’t Sullivan. He had nothing to do with this.”

“And how do you know that, exactly?” Now he does turn, and the air is the shade of still before a bomb goes off.

“Because I know that he’s not a threat anymore.” Derek doesn’t blink. “And because I was there.”

Stilinski’s face hardens. He doesn’t need to ask where.

“Your son has a habit of picking fights that aren’t his,” Derek says. It’s a struggle, not to look away from the man’s expression. “If it means anything, I wouldn’t have wanted him anywhere near this one.”

“The person who shot Stiles was after you.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I exist,” he says, and it means something that it comes out more resigned than bitter. Maybe just that he’s tired of being angry.

“This person… Where would I find them?”

Derek gives a shake of his head. “You won’t.” Stilinski doesn’t look like his law-abiding tendencies are going to kick in. Derek keeps going. “There are others who could still be a problem, though.”

“Others. Jesus.” His jaw clenches tighter, and the paper bags in his hand rustle. “You’re going to tell me everything.”

“I think it’s time someone did,” Derek agrees. “I said I’d protect you; I didn’t say how.”
“Protect me.” Stilinski looks almost amused. “That’s nice, son, but—“

Derek lets the change come over his face, eyes and teeth and all. Stilinski doesn’t flinch away or reach for his gun, just stops breathing and stares for a long time. His heartbeat kicks into a new range, though, and the color drains from his face.

“Holy shit.”

Derek shifts back. “That’s only the beginning.”

He keeps his guard up – no one goes out alone, everyone checks in at least once a day, no one gets directly connected with him if they can help it – but there’s every indication the hunters are actually gone this time. With Allison’s last name in play again, there’s a chance any others will hesitate to make a move. It might be politics that saves them in the end after all.

He’s too cautious to say it aloud, but he thinks they might have weathered this particular disaster.

That’s why it comes as such a shock to feel Erica’s agony loud and clear from halfway across town in the middle of an otherwise uneventful Saturday afternoon. She doesn’t answer her phone, and he doesn’t waste time calling the others.

When the feeling leads him to the trees behind Stiles’ house, his racing heart stutters. It’s sheer confusion, though, that stops him in his tracks at the back yard. Erica is definitely there, and she’s not alone. Lydia’s next to her, both of them relaxed and apparently swapping tips for their next Bio exam.

“What’s going on?” His voice can’t seem to choose between alarmed or bewildered.

Lydia smiles at him sunnily. “Oh, good. You’re here.”

“Yes,” Derek agrees slowly. That much he’s sure of.

“Conveniently, so is Stiles,” Lydia says.

“First window after the garage. You know the way,” Erica continues.

They move away from him in synch, light with the confidence of a job well done. Derek decides that irritation is definitely the emotion to go with. “The idea is to stay away from him.”

“Oh, we know,” Lydia says, and underneath the brightness is a layer of pure fury. “He’s not up to tracking you down yet, and we’re all sick of watching him be miserable. You clearly weren’t ever going to get over yourself, so we fixed it.”

He’s expecting Erica to have the decency to be sheepish, but her arms cross defiantly over her chest. She’s not giving ground, either. The absolute lack of a sudden appearance by the rest of his pack clues him in to how premeditated this must have been.

“How did you fake the pain?” he asks at last, grudgingly impressed. He wouldn’t have thought that was possible.

Lydia looks at him like he’s too stupid to live. “We didn’t.” She shrugs. “I stabbed her with a
barbeque fork until you got close.”

He can’t help staring at Erica. “It’s for a good cause,” she assures him.

The slow, terrifying realization comes over him then: They’ve bonded.

He sighs and crosses his own arms. “I have my reasons.”

“And they’re bullshit,” Lydia says, nodding. “But at least go tell him what they are. You can sort it out with him now or wait until he goes looking for you, but if he tears his stitches you’ll only feel like more of an idiot.”

He remembers a time when they were all afraid of him. Well, when some of them were afraid of him. He tries to tell himself he feels nostalgic for it as he swings up onto the roof, but even he’s not buying it. Besides, giving Stiles whatever closure he’s looking for here isn’t a terrible idea.

Stiles’ window is open. He’s sitting at his desk with his back to Derek, mountains of paper and books covering all available surface area. His hair is a little longer than Derek’s ever seen it, his shoulders are set in a tired line, and the white strap of a sling stands out against the arch of his neck. Derek stops at the windowsill, cataloguing it all.

“Telling my dad was a dick move,” Stiles says without raising his head.

Despite himself, Derek’s lips quirk up at being caught. “You don’t think he needed to know?” It’s the truth, even if it’s not all of it.

Stiles is silent for a minute. “I thought he could fix it, you know, back at the beginning? But then...” He shrugs with just the good shoulder, and winces anyway. “I couldn’t let him try to protect me, not with what was at stake.”

What’s at stake is exactly the problem, Derek thinks. Stiles finally meets his eyes, though, and it’s like he heard anyway.

“I get what you were trying to do. It’s not going to work,” he says levelly. “I keep trying to tell you, Derek, your plans usually suck.”

The smile teasing at the corners of Stiles’ lips is frustrating. Derek can’t pinpoint exactly when he lost control of this conversation, but it’s slipping through his fingers nonetheless. “He won’t let you be involved with this.”

The smile doesn’t fade. “Yeah, that’s what I thought, too. Turns out, though, that he still knows me better than either of us thought.” There’s a note in there, a little rueful, a little awed. “He gets that I can’t leave this alone. Doesn’t like it, but he gets it. He was a cop for a long time, remember? And we both think I’m safer with backup.”

He’d been so sure that he could count on Stilinski to be stronger than Derek in this. “You’ll get killed.” He doesn’t pull the punch, lets it be stark and honest. “You want to leave him alone like that?”

“No,” Stiles says, just as honest. “Alone is the last thing I want anyone to be.”

And just like that, Derek knows he’s going to lose this fight. He can taste it in the panic on the back of his tongue, but he’s never been able to just lie down.

“Maybe I just wanted you out of the way.”
“Maybe it’s a little late to pretend not to give a damn,” Stiles returns gently, and Derek closes his eyes and goes under.

“You weren’t supposed to do this,” he says eventually.

_This thing where you get under my skin and then shatter like glass_, he means. _This thing where you itch and sting and I still can’t find all the pieces to get you out._

Stiles laughs. “It’s not in my lifeplan to get shot again in the near future. For one thing, Dad’s insurance is going to get suspicious eventually.” He turns woeful eyes on his desk. “For another, the homework buildup is ridiculous.”

He goes back to sorting through the stacks on his desk, apparently content to let Derek have his silent breakdown. Derek leans back against the window frame and tries to decide which direction is up. With his guard lowered, it’s easy to spot the circles under Stiles eyes, the lines of pain that haven’t faded from around his mouth yet. He makes a frustrated noise and shifts the sling’s strap an inch higher, rubbing at the skin exposed.

Of all things, it’s that sound that finally gets to Derek. He swings the rest of the way into the room and hovers with no real intention other than to be less far away, to be inside instead of out. Closing the space between them unlocks his ribcage a fraction. His finger reaching for the line of bruised skin on Stiles’ neck eases it a little further, but it’s still not enough until he’s bending down to fit his closed mouth to the same place.

Stiles smells like blood just under the surface, and still like soap and sweat and cut grass.

It’s terrifying, not hiding this weakness. Derek noses along the arch of his spine and over the hollow where it dives into his skull and is careful not to touch him anywhere else. He keeps his intrusion contained to just this necessity.

Stiles sighs quietly. “You have the worst timing.”

It’s not at all what Derek was expecting to hear. “This isn’t the first time I’ve tried,” he says against skin, the only thought that comes to mind.

“Last time, you tried to Pretty Woman us out of being friends,” Stiles corrects him, still gentle.

“It was safer.”

“Probably,” Stiles says, and tips his head back onto Derek’s shoulder like it’s a bone-deep relief. The weight of him is solid, perfectly settled into the curve of Derek’s collarbone. Derek’s arms curl around him of their own accord, carefully and with the chair still between them.

A minute later, Stiles hums tiredly, and Derek realizes he’s falling asleep right there. He’s pliant when Derek pulls him to his feet and over to sit on the bed, but easing the sling off brings him back around. He jolts fully alert when Derek sinks to a crouch between his knees.

“You had to pick the only time since puberty when I could not be less interested in sex?” His eyes are wide and tragic.

“Stiles,” and Derek can’t keep the grin out of his voice, feels it in the lines around his eyes, too. “Shut up.”

“Yeah, okay.” His breath moves Derek’s hair when he talks, their heads bowed close together, and there’s a flash of déjà vu to it all. Derek’s fingers are dragging one sock over a boney ankle when he
places exactly why this is familiar. The last time they’d been like this, Stiles had smelled like exhaustion and pain and want, too.

Stiles’ good hand comes up to lie cautiously against the back of Derek’s head, though, and abruptly it’s not the same at all. Under all the rest, Stiles smells like the powder softness of contentment, too weary for happiness but open to the possibility. Derek presses his nose to Stiles’ wrist and breathes that in, and long fingers weave through his hair in reward.

Stiles’ palm slips along Derek’s face and tilts his chin up, eyes searching, and then he leans in until his lips are just shy of Derek’s. “Can I?” he whispers.

It’s the fact that he asks, that he means it, that catches the yes in Derek’s dry throat. It must be all over his face, though, because Stiles’ eyes crinkle into a grin and he closes the gap.

Derek has never kissed anyone like this. It’s careful, warm lips moving against his like an exploration of new ground, slightly chapped and real as they find a new angle, try a new pressure. Derek keeps his eyes open, and the reaction when he brushes his tongue against Stiles’ bottom lip is fascinating. Neither of them breathes until Stiles suddenly remembers to, a shaky exhale rushing over Derek’s mouth.

He feels it when Stiles leans that little bit too far and reminds himself that he hurts. Derek pulls back enough to rest their foreheads together, and Stiles beams at him. “We are going to be amazing,” he breathes.

Derek huffs a laugh and goes back to getting the other sock off. When he’s done, Stiles lies down without protest, curling over on his good side toward the center of the bed, and Derek feels every ounce of his gaze as he crosses to the other side and toes off his own shoes. He stretches out facing the center, too, and there’s a moment where neither of them breaks the silence.

True to form, Stiles finds his words first. “This isn’t some fucked up gratitude thing, right?”

“No.” He leaves out the part where he is both fucked up and grateful. It’s irrelevant.

Stiles groans softly. “Good enough for me. Crash time now.” His eyes are already closing, the words slurring into a yawn. “Guessing that was your game plan, brief diversion into foot fetish territory aside.”

He makes one last nudge across the bed that ends with his head tucked under Derek’s chin. Everything about the move is confident of its welcome, but his heart gives him away. Derek strokes a thumb over his hip in answer, and Stiles relaxes into the real heaviness of sleep like a light switched off.

It’s still early evening. Derek’s not at all tired, but he has no intention of moving. The sun is lazy on its way down, and the bed is comfortable.

They’re not safe. He’s not sure that he believes in safety anymore. At worst, Allison’s plan will fail horribly and leave them all scattered in the wreckage. In this one specific moment, though, he’d rather think that it won’t.

Downstairs, the sounds of running water and the gas stove ticking to life tell him that Stiles’ dad is starting dinner. In a little while, Derek will wake him and they’ll head down. Derek may have to explain his presence; then again, he may not.

For now, he presses his cheek against the top of Stiles’ head and lets himself enjoy this.
We are going to be amazing, he tries out, and it doesn’t feel like a lie.

End Notes

As far as warnings go, there’s one scene that might be considered edging around dubious consent. It doesn’t go very far and there is no violence involved, but if you’re sensitive to consent issues, please know that you may want to have a pre-reader or give this one a pass.

There’s also some violence at a couple of completely separate points (although probably less gory than on the show), and a character’s panic attack is observed from the outside.

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