Scowls and Sarcasm

by dr_girlfriend

Summary

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Whether or not Derek Hale felt that way was hardly a concern to the neighborhood — the very fact of his arrival was enough that the surrounding families seemed to consider him the rightful property of one or another of their eligible sons and daughters. That was, of course, before they met the man.

Notes

This is my Teen Wolf Glompfest gift for Tumblr peep stilinskiiksnilits, who requested a Sterek Pride and Prejudice AU. :-D Thanks so much to my amazing betas, lachlanrose and eeyore9990!
Neighbors

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Whether or not Derek Hale felt that way was hardly a concern to the neighborhood — the very fact of his arrival was enough that the surrounding families seemed to consider him the rightful property of one or another of their eligible sons and daughters. That was, of course, before they met the man.

No one was more excited to hear the news than Stiles, although his thoughts were far from matrimonial in nature. He came skidding into the breakfast room of Beacon House in a flail of long limbs and shouted enthusiasm — enough to startle the new housemaid although the family themselves barely took notice, long-used to his antics.

"Scott! Scotty! Did you hear?" Stiles tumbled into his chair with enough force to send it tipping up on two legs before it clattered back to the floorboards. He managed to smear a triangle of toast with jam and shove it into his mouth without pausing in his delivery of the news. "Someone has finally rented that big old house in the Preserve, Netherfield Park," he mumbled through his mouthful of bread and jam, "and word in the village is that at least one of them is a werewolf — and an alpha, no less!"

That was enough to make John lower his newspaper and Melissa raise her eyes from the medical monograph she was perusing.

"An alpha — this far from the City?" Melissa repeated dubiously. Wolves were notoriously insular, and members of the proud and wealthy pack lineages had settled almost exclusively in the metropolis. "Well, you have to go and welcome them to the neighborhood, John."

"I do?" The sheriff raised an eyebrow.

"Of course you do!" Stiles and Melissa spoke the words simultaneously, Stiles’ eager voice all but drowning out Melissa’s more moderate tones.

"Because," Melissa carried on with a steely glance encompassing both Stilinskis. "If you don’t go and arrange a formal introduction, you know it’s going to be a matter of time until Stiles is caught sneaking around Netherfield to satisfy his own curiosity, and you don’t want to have to be in the awkward position of arresting your own son. Again." Melissa turned back to her monograph with a satisfied air, ignoring Stiles’ indignant sputtering.

"I wouldn’t — I wasn’t going to —"

"Stiles, you absolutely would," Scott interrupted with a smile so sunny that Stiles couldn’t even be angry with him. "So quit while you’re ahead and Dad is already planning to go."

Stiles turned his attention back to his father, who was smiling fondly at Scott calling him ‘Dad,’ something he’d only begun to feel comfortable doing in the last year or so. "Really? You’re going to?"

"You are all behind the times," the Sheriff said gruffly. "I already sent over a card yesterday, telling them I’d call today. It’s only polite."

Stiles squeaked in excitement and leaned forward, barely missing planting his elbow in the pot of marmalade.
“Do you know who the wolf is? Do you think he’ll want Scotty in his pack? Maybe he knows more about that rogue alpha —”

“I already have a pack!” Scott interrupted staunchly. “I don’t need to belong to any snooty werewolf pack when I have my own.”

“Stiles, you know as well as I do that the werewolf authorities have already told us all that they are going to about Scott’s Bite,” the Sheriff added mildly.

“Werewolf authorities,” Stiles repeated sullenly, picking at a loose thread on the embroidered tablecloth. “Like ‘the situation has been dealt with’ tells us anything. Where were they when Scott first turned and I was the one who had to raid the library to figure out what happened? Where were they during Scott’s first moon when he practically tried to rip my throat out with his —?”

At a kick under the table from Scott, Stiles belatedly raised his eyes and caught the Sheriff’s glare. He cut off his words abruptly, shoving another slice of toast into his mouth as he felt his cheeks flush.

“Maybe if you two had informed your father and Sheriff, not to mention Scott’s own mother, what had happened, the werewolf authorities would have been a little more timely in their intervention.” It wasn’t the first time this argument had occurred, and Stiles should have known better than to let his mouth run away with him again.

“You know that was mostly my fault,” Scott intervened, playing the peacemaker as always. “I was worried they would take me away if they knew, send me off to live with some pack of strange wolves in the City. And they might have if Stiles hadn’t gotten me through my first full moon and given me the time to form a pack bond with you all.”

“We never would have let that happen,” Melissa reassured, ruffling Scott’s hair affectionately. “And there’s no point rehashing all of this. Wolf or not, I doubt any of our new neighbors are looking to add to their families or their packs, and we do just fine as we are.”

Stiles grinned at her for the reprieve, his embarrassment already forgotten. “Dad, if you get the chance, maybe you could ask them something I’ve been wondering about, regarding the effects of wolfsbane powder relative to a tincture of wolfsbane in slowing healing…”

Scott was the best step-brother anyone could ask for, but as far as gossip went, he was the absolute worst.

“There’s no point in speculating,” he told Stiles placidly, as if he didn’t even know who Stiles was. “We’ll just have to wait until we meet them ourselves to find out what they’re like.”

And so, Stiles sought out his best friend in the village, Lydia Martin, who always managed to know everything about everyone while at the same time appearing completely unconcerned with any of the petty matters that she related. It was a considerable talent.

It took a fair amount of wheedling and compliments toward her genius before Stiles convinced her to pull her attention away from her mathematics, but when she finally did he was suitably rewarded.

“There are three in the party, that I know of,” she finally disclosed. “Netherfield is being rented out to Allison Argent, and she’s apparently a human, but she’s bringing at least two of her childhood friends and they’re both wolves. Derek Hale is an alpha, whose home estate of Pemberley borders that of the Argents. And Jackson Whittemore is a beta of the Hale pack, whose family manor borders Rosings, the estate of Hale’s uncle and former guardian, Sir Peter Hale.”
Stiles squinted at Lydia. “Do you have a map of their respective properties hidden somewhere under your skirt, or…?”

Lydia’s withering gaze was both familiar and likely well-deserved. “Did you want information or not?”

Stiles nodded, chastened. “Continue, my queen.”

Lydia flicked her hair back, preening. “All three of them are filthy rich and unmarried, and every eligible man and woman in the neighborhood is determined to land at least one of them, sight unseen.”

“Present company excluded, of course,” Stiles snarked.

“Well, I don’t know about you, Stiles,” Lydia sniffed. “Maybe you’ve been spending every night since you heard, dreaming about a virile alpha werewolf sweeping you off your feet…”

Stiles shoved her, ignoring the frisson of heat that raced up his spine at her words. “I like my feet firmly on the ground, thank you Lyds,” he sniped. “And if I’m excited at anything, it’s the thought of what information they might be able to give us to help Scott. You know he still has trouble some moons, and the few books on lycanthropy I’ve managed to get my hands on are probably nothing compared to the kind of stuff an ancient werewolf pack might have.”

Stiles had chosen the right tactic, Lydia’s green eyes gleaming at the thought of new information. Stiles would always be grateful that he had let her in on their secret after the near-disastrous first night of Scott’s first full moon. Between Stiles’ research skills and Lydia’s flair for chemistry, they had worked up a wolfsbane sedative. It took some trial and error, but between the three of them they got Scott through the rest of the full moon without lasting consequences, aside from the four now-silvery scars marring Stiles’ chest that no one else knew about.

“Do you suppose they would have any books on mathematics?” Lydia wondered, and Stiles smiled inwardly, knowing he had secured her support.
Pride

There was nothing like a country ball to bring out the very worst in Derek Hale. He hated the oppressive crush of people. The boisterous greetings of the men and the delighted squeals of the women grated against his sensitive ears. His nose twitched at the sickly-sweet scents of perfumes and colognes that the more werewolf-savvy populace of the City knew to avoid.

“Stop being such a grump, Derek.”

Derek glowered down at Allison as she continued to dimple a smile up at him, undaunted. “You want the locals to feel faint because of your rugged good looks,” she continued, giving him a nudge with her narrow shoulder. “Not your murderous expression.”

“What does it matter to you?” Derek muttered. “You hardly seem to need my assistance to have a good time — you’ve danced every moment since you’ve arrived.”

“As should you!” Allison chided. “There’s no need to stand around looking surly, when you could be dancing and enjoying yourself.”

Derek’s scowl only deepened. “You know how I hate to dance with people I don’t know, and I don’t know anyone here but you and Jackson. It would be a punishment to make me stand up with any of these strangers.”

“And how will you get to know anyone new if you refuse to speak to anyone?” Allison countered. “I’ve never met so many nice young people in my life as I have today, and you would too if you would only give people a chance.” Allison’s eyes were too knowing, making Derek shift uncomfortably under her gaze. “Derek, I more than anyone know why you have such trouble...connecting with people. But these people just think you’re being rude as hell.”

Derek sighed, feeling his ears pinkening a little at the suggestion of poor manners. He knew he carried the burden of representing his pack wherever he went, and even Jackson had danced several times with a lively redhead.

“You are dancing with the only handsome man in the room,” he tried, hoping to deflect Allison’s attention.

For a moment he thought he had succeeded, Allison’s keen gaze turning dreamy. “Isn’t he amazing? He’s the most handsome, kind, wonderful man I’ve ever met!” she enthused. “But anyway, his step-brother is sitting right behind you, and he’s plenty handsome, and I’m sure just as pleasant. Why don’t I introduce you, and you can dance with him?”

“Who?” Derek turned, catching sight of the young man she indicated. He was looking down into his glass of punch and so Derek let his eyes wander over him fully.

He was lanky, but with broad shoulders and a pale, enticing expanse of throat above his collar and cravat. A mess of brown hair topped his head and moles spattered his skin. Derek let his gaze rest on the man’s long, pale fingers and his pink, open mouth, a buzz of arousal running through him at the thought of having those dexterous fingers and that decadent mouth on his body. Derek was still staring when the boy’s long eyelashes lifted and bright, whiskey-brown eyes met his, looking amused at finding himself the object of Derek’s scrutiny.

Derek turned away hurriedly, flushing with embarrassment. “He’s tolerable I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt me,” he lied, cursing his momentary weakness. He was glad that Allison
could not scent his arousal or hear the stutter in his heartbeat. If she had the slightest inkling that he
was interested in someone she would never leave him alone, and so he added a sneer to his voice.
“Besides, I’m hardly in the mood to waste my time on a man that everybody else has rejected.”

“You’re hopeless,” Allison sighed.

“Then don’t bother with me,” Derek snapped. “Your dream man is looking for you anyway, go and
dance with him some more.” He gestured to where Scott was approaching, eyes only for Allison,
with a sunny smile and two cups of punch.

“I think I shall,” Allison said firmly, leaving Derek behind without a second glance, gracefully
intercepting Scott and drawing him toward the balcony with a tender smile.

“So, listen to this,” Stiles said on the way home. The Sheriff and Melissa had left the ball early, but
Lydia had agreed to take Scott and Stiles home in her own carriage, giving them time to gossip.
Well, Lydia and Stiles were gossiping, while Scott was in his own dreamy world.

“I don’t know if his understanding of stupid human senses was so bad he didn’t even know that I
could hear him, or if he just didn’t care. But he pulls himself up all stiff like this —” Stiles
straightened until his disorderly hair brushed the ceiling of the carriage, drawing his face into an
exaggerated scowl. “And he says, ‘Well, he’s tolerable, I suppose, but not nearly handsome enough
for my taste.’” Stiles could feel his mouth twist wryly and fought to maintain the scowl, furrowing
his forehead even more. “And then he said, ‘Why would I even waste my time on a man that
everyone else here has already rejected?’”

Stiles’ Derek Hale impersonation didn’t quite get the laugh he hoped from his companions. Scott
nudged his shoulder sympathetically, while Lydia reached out to pat his knee.

“Don’t you believe that for a second,” she said firmly, and Stiles realized that perhaps he was not as
good at hiding his hurt feelings as he had believed. “You should consider it no great loss, in any
case. He was a disagreeable man, and not worth pleasing in the least.”

Stiles slouched back in his seat, feeling uncomfortably exposed. It’s not like he really cared what
Derek Hale thought of him; the man was obviously an ass. It was just that...maybe there had been a
little too much truth in the man’s snap judgement. Aside from Scott, who had been his best friend
from childhood and his step-brother for years now, and Lydia, Stiles didn’t really have other friends.

He knew that some of the other people their age considered him to be too...well, just, too much. Too
loud, too flaily, too sarcastic. He had trouble keeping his thoughts along a single path, and he
sometimes spoke before he could reconsider the wisdom of his words. But it was fine. Scott and
Lydia were all he needed, and at some point he would travel, and find more people who would
appreciate him. He didn’t need the approval of Mr. Snooty Weresnob, no matter how attractive his
stupid scowly face was.

Stiles felt Lydia’s keen gaze on him, and was suddenly desperate to turn attention away from
himself. “I don’t know why Allison is even friends with him,” Stiles said with a grin at Scott.
“They’re like night and day, aren’t they?”

Scott latched onto the change in topic with enthusiasm. “Isn’t she amazing? I’ve never met anyone
so kind and sweet, and her hair smells so nice, and did you notice her dimples when she smiles?...”
Stiles sat back, letting Scott ramble on about the wonder that was Allison Argent, hoping the moonlight through the carriage windows was dim enough to hide the humiliated flush of his cheeks from Lydia.
The next few weeks were characterized by frequent visits between the residents of Beacon House and the residents of Netherfield. Or to put it more exactly, Scott and Allison frequently visited each other, with Stiles and Jackson, and even more rarely Derek, dragged along for appearance’s sake.

Stiles had to admit that as dismissive and supercilious as Derek and Jackson seemed toward himself, they were unfailingly polite to Scott. And Allison and Scott seemed to be well on their way to falling in love more with every encounter, both of them dreamy-eyed and giggly in each other's presence.

And it's not as if Stiles weren’t partly to blame as well for the tension between himself and the other residents of Netherfield. He and Jackson couldn’t even be bothered with each other; Jackson was an outright jackass and took no care to appear otherwise. Derek, however…

With Derek’s disdain towards Stiles so clearly expressed before they even formally met, Stiles felt no obligation to cultivate the man’s approval. Unfettered by politeness, Stiles rejoiced in besting Derek verbally. As much as Derek tried to appear standoffish at first, Stiles could always manage to draw him out with sarcastic barbs, keeping his tone just civil enough for Allison and Scott not to notice a thing through their haze of puppy love.

It was somewhat of a relief, in a way, not having to temper his naturally sharp tongue. Scott himself was so kind-hearted that he could never fully appreciate Stiles’ wit, and was more likely to gently chide Stiles for his sardonic remarks, pointing out the good in people instead. That left Lydia, and any attempt to exercise his wit with her would no doubt have left Stiles in bleeding shreds.

Derek, on the other hand, seemed to take increasing delight in going toe-to-toe with Stiles. At first he merely loomed silently nearby, observing the conversation of the others but taking no part in it. Stiles managed to tolerate that for all of half an hour before snapping.

He turned to Derek, causing the man to take a half-step back at the sudden force of his attention. “Are you just going to stand there admiring the efforts of those of us who can actually form words, or are you going to participate in the conversation at some point?” Stiles snarked.

He half-expected Derek to take offense and stalk away, but the man actually moved closer, his absurdly multi-colored eyes intent on Stiles' own. “If I were the kind of man who admired the quantity of words and not the quality of them, surely you would be the most admirable man in the county,” he parried.

Stiles felt himself flush with anger at the insinuation. He knew he had a tendency to run off at the mouth, but few were so ill-mannered as to tell him so to his face.

“Well, the very nature of conversation requires an exchange of words, and since you are doing absolutely nothing to hold up your end of the burden, is it any wonder that I must compensate with over-exertion on my part?” Stiles tilted his head, adopting an expression of mock concern. “But perhaps I am being unsympathetic, have you possibly sprained your tongue?”

Derek moved even closer, and Stiles suddenly realized that Allison and Scott had wandered off to the other side of the room, leaving him virtually alone with the alpha. “There is nothing amiss with my tongue,” Derek rumbled, his voice sounding more low and intimate than Stiles would have ever thought possible. “But it is, perhaps, not so quick and clever as your own.”
Stiles’ eyes shot up to meet Derek’s, wondering at his meaning, but the alpha was looking at Stiles’ mouth instead, his eyes intently following the movement of Stiles’ tongue as he nervously licked his lips. If it were anyone else, Stiles might have even thought...but, no, Derek despised him, and so this was obviously some other variety of obscure insult.

“Stiles!”

They both jumped as Scott barged into their conversation, grabbing Stiles by the hand in his eagerness. “Allison is taking us to see her new mare — you have to see her, she’s just the sweetest thing…”

Stiles let himself be drawn away toward the Netherfield stables, his puzzled gaze returning only once to look at Derek, who had turned his back to the room and was now gazing steadily out the window at the park beyond.

Several weeks and many visits later, the tension between Stiles and Derek seemed only to be ratcheting higher. It baffled and frustrated Derek, how Stiles seemed to twist his every word into some sort of veiled insult.

Derek knew he was not adept with conversation, having isolated himself from all but his closest friends over the past decade. But with Stiles he was trying, and yet somehow every attempt at conciliation turned into a sarcastic exchange, with Stiles and his quick tongue managing to needle Derek into equally sharp replies before he even knew it.

It was just after one such exchange that Derek finally stalked away, frustrated, to poke needlessly at the fire. Stiles fell into easy conversation with Allison and Scott, and Derek watched their effortless camaraderie with envy. Stiles’ eyes shone amber-bright in the afternoon sunlight, his quick fingers gesturing energetically as he spoke. He seemed happy and relaxed in a way he never was during his charged, biting exchanges with Derek.

“I’ll wager I know what you’re thinking.”

Derek startled, having been too enthralled by Stiles to notice that Jackson had sidled up to him.

“I doubt that you do,” Derek grumbled, giving the logs one final overly-aggressive jab before returning the poker to its stand.

“You’re thinking how unbearably tedious it would be to spend more time with these people, and I couldn’t agree more. I’ve never been so annoyed with anyone in my life. I don’t know how Allison can stand them for even a moment, let alone seek out their company endlessly.” Jackson made no attempt to keep the sneer from his voice, obviously confident that Derek would wholeheartedly agree with his obnoxious opinion.

Derek felt his cheeks flush in a way that had nothing to do with his proximity to the fire, his hackles rising at the brazen insult toward Stiles and his companion.

“You are mistaken,” he said stiffly. “My thoughts were much more pleasant. I was just contemplating how much a beautiful pair of eyes and a lively personality can brighten a dreary day.”

Jackson’s mouth dropped open as he followed the path of Derek’s gaze. “Stilinski?!?” he sputtered in disbelief.

Derek’s anger made him unusually bold. “Stiles,” he confirmed.
“Seriously?” Jackson shook his head, a smirk curling his lips. “How long has this been going on? Have you finished writing your wedding vows yet?”

“You must have a romantic imagination, Jackson,” Derek returned. “If your thoughts jump from admiration to love to matrimony in a moment’s time, I’m surprised you haven’t already found yourself wed to the inimitable Miss Martin.”

Jackson scoffed. “Don’t try to deflect, Dere—k. I know how hard it is for someone to draw your attention —”

Derek’s nose flared in surprise at the tinge of jealousy in Jackson’s scent, but the man carried on, oblivious. “— so if Stilinski has captured your interest, I’ll consider the matter settled. At least you’ll have a handy father-in-law. Did I mention that when I passed through the village last, I saw him dressed only in his shirtsleeves like a common laborer, hammering away at the roof of Mrs. Robinson’s house? And your mother-in-law may be useful as well, I understand she doctors to the whole village, men and women alike, so I am sure she is hard to surprise, having seen most of the populace with their drawers down around their ankles already…”

Derek tuned Jackson out as he continued with his snide commentary at great length, unconcerned with Jackson’s catty opinions of Stiles’ relations. Instead he let his eyes and thoughts drift back to the object of his affections, wondering what it would, in fact, be like if his admiration followed the path he had so blithely dismissed. He felt something in the region of his gut stir, hot and heavy, at the idea of setting his mating bite to that pale expanse of throat, waking up next to those bright eyes every morning. Being constantly challenged and bettered by Stiles’ presence in his life.

He knew by now how affectionate Stiles was to those he cared for, how fiercely loyal. Was it possible that Stiles would ever be able to turn the force of his affection, his loyalty, to Derek? It seemed unlikely, and yet something akin to hope started to kindle in Derek’s breast.
A few weeks later, Lydia and Stiles were in the parlor of Beacon House, perusing some of the books on lycanthropy that Stiles had borrowed from the library of Netherfield. Scott was supposed to have taken part in the research session, but was so clearly distracted that eventually they took pity on him, and told him to visit Netherfield on his own, as his thoughts were clearly there regardless of the location of his physical form.

That had been no more than an hour past, and so Stiles jumped to his feet, startled and alarmed, to hear the approaching hoofbeats of a galloping horse.

He rushed outside, recognizing the knife-and-boot boy from Netherfield as he slid panting from his horse.

“Mister Scott has been injured at Netherfield, sir,” the boy stammered out. “Mr. Hale sent for Mrs. McCall to attend him, as he is not healing, he said, as a born werewolf would, and so they are uncertain if he needs medical attention.”

“Injured how? How badly?” Stiles asked, his thoughts racing ahead before the boy could even answer. “My mother has gone to the village, to attend to Mrs. Gunther. You must ride there, and send her back to Netherfield on your horse.”

The boy nodded, remounting his horse and setting off at once. Stiles both appreciated his alacrity and regretted that he had not pressed the boy for more information while he had him.

“Lydia, I apologize…”

“Not at all, you must go immediately, and send word of Scott’s condition as soon as you can.”

Stiles agreed, rushing back into the house for his coat as Lydia left in her carriage. It was only when he emerged from the house that he realized that he had left himself without transportation, as Scott had taken their only carriage and horse to Netherfield.

Well, there was nothing to be done for it, and Stiles had grown up in the area enough to know the quickest footpaths through the forest. He pulled his coat from his shoulders once again, folded it under his arm, and began to run.

Derek and Jackson were passing time in the parlor when Stiles came spilling in almost ahead of the servant announcing his presence. His face was pink with exertion, his broad chest heaving under his thin shirt and waistcoat, his coat obviously only hastily pulled on over the top.

“How is Scott? Can I see him?” Stiles asked eagerly, in lieu of a proper greeting.

“He will be fine,” Derek rushed to assure him. “Your mother arrived ten minutes prior, and is confident that he will recover fully.”

Derek saw Stiles’ knees start to sag with relief, and placed a supporting hand under his elbow. His scent was even more intoxicating than usual, rich with the sharp tang of clean sweat.

“What happened?” Stiles asked, his own grip seemingly unconsciously finding Derek’s forearm. “I sent the messenger on for my mother before I had a chance to ask.”
“He was protecting me.” They all turned at Allison’s voice. She was still rumpled, a streak of dirt across her pale cheek, her dress muddy and grass-stained. “We were riding, and my mare got stung by a hornet. She threw me, and then reared up. She would have trampled me but Scott leaped from his horse and threw himself under her hooves instead, driving her back.”

Stiles had rushed to Allison’s side, his arm around her shoulders. “Heroic idiot,” he commented, affection so thick in his voice that it warmed Derek’s heart.

Stiles tried to urge Allison to sit, but she refused. “I am going back to his side, but I heard your voice while fetching towels and knew that he would want you there as well, Stiles. Your mother set his leg, but his ribs will take time to heal, and I know that he would appreciate your company.”

With a grateful smile at Allison, Stiles sent a cursory bow in the direction of Jackson and Derek and followed her to Scott’s sickbed.

Stiles had barely cleared the door before Jackson sniffed loudly, wrinkling his nose in distaste. “He must have run all the way here, he was sweating like a carthorse,” he sneered to Derek. “And did you see his breeches? They were muddy up to the knees. It was disgraceful. I would rather be dead than to be seen in such disarray.”

Derek clenched his hand into a fist. “On the contrary,” he said, letting his eyes flash alpha-red. “I find his loyalty and care for his brother to be admirable. I can understand that you might value your appearance above all else, but fortunately Stiles seems to be of better character.”

He hardly noticed as Jackson tilted his head, exposing his throat in submission. He turned away, unconsciously following the rich, heady scent trail that Stiles had left. “He would make a remarkable addition to a pack,” he mused to himself, breathing deep.

By evening, Scott was sleeping comfortably. Mrs. McCall returned to her own home for dinner, but Derek invited Stiles to stay at least overnight, going so far as to send Mrs. McCall home in his own personal carriage. He could admit, if only to himself, that he resented Mrs. McCall for having the presence of mind to make the carriage wait at Beacon House while she packed a case of clothing for Stiles and Scott. Derek would have welcomed the opportunity to lend Stiles some clothes of his own — dressing him in his scent, improper though it may have been — but Mrs. McCall’s damnable forethought denied him the opportunity.

Instead Derek looked forward to the company of Stiles at dinner, and was disappointed to hear that he had sent for a tray, unwilling to leave Scott’s side until he woke. His admiration of Stiles’ devotion to his brother warred with his jealousy of Stiles’ time and attention. It was frustrating to know that Stiles was under the same roof, perhaps even sleeping soundly in a nearby bed, and Derek was barred by politeness from seeking him out.

Fortunately, by the next morning Scott had healed enough to hobble to the breakfast parlor, his arm slung across Stiles’ broad shoulders as his brother supported his weight. Allison immediately made a considerable fuss over Scott, ensconcing him in a chair and carrying over a stool on which he could prop up his healing leg, while Scott was equally adamant in denying that he needed any special attention.

Allison and Scott soon fell into murmured conversation, leaving Stiles, Derek and Jackson to finish an awkward breakfast and then amuse themselves somehow. Derek settled down in a chair with a novel, suddenly shy now in Stiles’ presence despite how much he had previously craved it.

Jackson attempted repeatedly to engage Derek in conversation, while Derek pretended to be
engrossed in his book. Finally Jackson narrowed his eyes in consideration.

“Stiles!” he said, as the man in question flailed in startlement at the sudden address, almost dropping the novel he had taken up to read. “Take a turn around the room with me.”

That captured Derek’s attention. He knew that Jackson would never deliberately seek out Stiles’ company. Stiles looked equally suspicious, hesitating as if he would refuse at first before he seemed to remember his duties as a guest to indulge his hosts. He shrugged, and, putting his book aside, began a slow amble around the room at Jackson’s side, neither of them appearing inclined to conversation.

“Derek, you seem to have lost interest in your book,” Jackson said silkily after a few moments. Derek startled, caught out, not even realizing that he had closed his novel to follow Stiles’ progress around the room. “Would you like to join us in our exercise?”

Derek harrumphed, opening the book at random and appearing intent on its pages. “There can only be two motives for you both to be wandering the room like this, and either would be defeated by me joining you.”

Jackson bristled. “What do you think he means by that?” he asked Stiles.

Stiles rolled his eyes. “Whatever it is, he’s dying to tell you, so the best way to annoy him is not to ask.”

Jackson, of course, could not resist. “What did you mean by that?” he asked immediately, as if Stiles hadn’t even spoken.

“I just mean,” Derek said, trying to keep his voice light and unconcerned. “That the two of you are either gossipping, or you’re trying to show off your fine figures to their best advantage. You surely know by now that I am no good at gossipping, and if it’s the latter motive…” He leaned back in his chair, letting his gaze slide slowly, hotly, down Stiles’ body. “I can admire you best from my seat here by the fireside.”

Stiles halted his steps, his eyes narrowing as his cheeks flushed pink. “I think he’s making fun of us,” he finally decided, resuming his march around the room as if he were on a mission, his scent tinged with bitterness now. “Are you sure you want to pop the lid on that box, Derek? Because I’m certain there’s plenty to mock over there on your high horse.”

Derek clenched his jaw to keep his silence, frustrated at having been misunderstood by Stiles yet again. The man seemed determined to read insult into every compliment Derek tried to pay him.

“There’s nothing you can tease Derek about,” Jackson protested ingratiatingly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Stiles answered readily. “You’ve known him since childhood, you must have all the best dirt.”

“No, seriously, there’s nothing.” Jackson’s voice sounded a little high and desperate now. Derek shifted in his chair, uncomfortable at the turn the conversation had taken.

“Well, that sounds like the hallmark of a pathetically boring life,” Stiles responded. “I mean, Scott is my brother and he’s the absolute best, but I’ll happily mock his shortcomings until the end of days. To have not the slightest fault in your personality —” he cast a quick glance at Derek, his eyes bright with mischief. “That sounds suspiciously like someone with no personality at all.”

Derek knew he was being baited but he couldn’t help himself, dropping the book on the table at his
side and surging to his feet, unable to resist answering the challenge of Stiles’ bright eyes and the insolent tilt of his head.

“I think Jackson overestimates my virtues,” he rumbled. “I have flaws, just like anyone else.”

“Really? And what flaws would those be?” Stiles was grinning openly now.

“I have a bad temper.” Derek stalked closer. Maybe it was better, for Stiles to know what he might be getting into. “People might even call it resentful. My good opinion, once lost, is lost forever.”

The impudent smile had slowly faded from Stiles’ face. Instead he nodded solemnly. “A fault, to be sure,” Stiles said carefully. “But hardly one I can laugh at, as I share it myself.”

And Derek had known that, had observed carefully and felt nothing but admiration for the unwavering loyalty Stiles felt toward his family — that fierce streak of protectiveness that resonated so deeply with Derek’s own need to care and be cared for. Derek looked down at his feet, suddenly bashful at the intensity of Stiles’ gaze. “Everyone has some flaw in their disposition,” he mumbled.

He heard Stiles resume walking, his voice light again with amusement. “And yours is to hate everyone.”

Derek’s head shot up, a scowl automatically springing to his face before he remembered to control his expression — obviously not quickly enough, from the amusement curling Stiles’ pink lips.

“And yours is to willfully misunderstand them,” he rejoined.

Stiles tilted his head in acknowledgement, the smile spreading across his lips, and Derek couldn’t help but to smile in return. The moment felt charged with some strange tension between them.

“Let’s have some music,” Jackson interrupted loudly, walking deliberately between the two of them on his way to the pianoforte.
Heartbreak

At first, Stiles thought little of the news.

“Mrs. McGinnity has a new lodger,” Melissa mentioned idly over breakfast. “A woman named Kate Argent.”

“Argent?” Scott’s head shot up at the mention of anything possibly related to Allison. “That’s not a common name.”

Melissa shrugged. She really only kept up with the village gossip so far as to learn who was ailing and might be in need of her assistance. She had no interest in personal drama.

“I think she might be some relative of Allison’s — a cousin, or an aunt perhaps? Surprising then that she’s not staying at Netherfield, but perhaps there was a falling-out.”

The exchange was so brief and unremarkable that it quickly fled Stiles’ mind. And then it was driven out altogether by the events of the afternoon.

A letter arrived for Scott. Stiles left him in privacy to read it, assuming it was from his ne’er-do-well father, who only stirred himself to write to Scott when it suited him. Scott was always upset after reading one of his letters, but never so much as Stiles found him now upon his return to the parlor. He was pale, almost trembling with emotion, and Stiles rushed immediately to his side.

“What is it — what’s happened?” Stiles asked, his hand gripping Scott’s shoulder.

“It’s a letter from — from Jackson,” Scott began, his voice unsteady.

“From Jackson? Is — is Allison hurt?”

“No.” Scott took a deep breath, appearing to take comfort in that thought. “I believe she is well. It’s just that Jackson says they are leaving Netherfield — have already left, in fact — and have no intention of returning. He apologizes for not having the chance to say goodbye, and wishes us well.”

“What?” Stiles grabbed the letter from Scott’s hand, quickly scanning it himself. “This must be some kind of a joke. Why would Jackson of all people? — and there’s no way that Allison would leave without saying goodbye to you, or intending to return.”

“I don’t know.” Scott bit his lip, and it broke Stiles’ heart to see the uncertainty and devastation in his usually-sunny expression. “Maybe she just didn’t feel the same way about me that I felt about her. I mean, she is pretty amazing, and I’m —”

“You’re amazing too!” Stiles interrupted indignantly. “She would be lucky to have you! But I mean, you must have — you spent so much time with each other, surely you must have talked about the future, or told her how you feel —” Stiles’ words trailed off as he realized he was only making Scott more despondent.

Scott shook his head forlornly. “We never — I thought it was presuming too much, to talk about a future with her. And as for how I felt, I thought she must know, but perhaps — she must be used to that kind of attention. In the City, people must be hanging all over her. Maybe she was just being polite to me. She is very kind, after all.”

“That’s bullshit!” Stiles couldn’t control his anger, the letter crumpling in his fist as he started to
pace the room.

“Stiles, it’s okay. I’m — I’m not mad,” Scott said softly.

“Well you should be!” Stiles thundered. To hear news like this, and from Jackson, of all people. He would have thought that Allison would have at least written Scott personally, but then he didn’t really know her that well — had given Scott and her as much privacy as he was able, when they were all together. But why wouldn’t Derek —

Stiles suddenly arrested his pacing, surprised into stillness at his own thoughts. Why was Stiles thinking that Derek would have contacted him to let him know he was leaving? Why would he? Allison at least seemed to care for Scott, Stiles was under no illusion that Derek felt that way about him. And yet — there did seem to be something between them. Something not easily explained, even in the privacy of Stiles’ own thoughts. A friendly rivalry, at the very least, and maybe even a spark of greater interest.

Stiles huffed, dismissing his errant musings. Obviously he was mistaken. The Netherfield party were typical rich City folk, considering the people in this country village to be no better than bumpkins — suitable to pass a boring afternoon, and then brushed off as easily as dust from riding boots when it was time to return to the metropolis.

Stiles could handle it — it’s not like he had developed any feelings for that scowly bastard, much as he liked to spar with him verbally. It was Scott he was worried about — it was always Scott he worried about. Scott had always been too tender-hearted for his own good, and now, to have his heart so cruelly stomped on by someone he trusted —

Stiles felt the letter in his hand crumple further as his thoughts raced ahead, with terrible foreboding, to the next full moon.

“Dad — Melissa — just back out of the room. Slowly.” Stiles’ voice was tight with tension as he slid in front of his parents, trying to keep Scott’s attention on himself.

“Stiles, let us —” The Sheriff cut his words off abruptly as Scott swung his head and snarled, his fangs gleaming in the moonlight, his eyes glowing an unearthly gold.

“Dad, please.” Stiles tried to push all the urgency he felt into his voice. “You haven’t seen him like this, but I have. Just — trust me."

To his relief Stiles felt his dad backing away, drawing Melissa with him. They moved through the doorway, although keeping the door open, no doubt so they could charge in again if needed. It would have to do.

“Scott….buddy. Look at me. It’s Stiles, okay? Remember me? We got through this before, we can do it again.” And dammit, Stiles felt the thump of a lie in his own heartbeat. It had never been this bad, even on Scott’s first full moon. Stiles wasn’t certain why, his research was still frustratingly incomplete, but he had a pretty strong suspicion.

Scott raised his head, pinning that luminous gaze on Stiles’ eyes. His clawed fingers grasped at empty air, although whether he was trying to hold himself back or simply imagining Stiles’ throat under his claws, Stiles had no idea.

“That’s it,” Stiles crooned, as Scott stalked closer. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

Stiles would have laughed if it weren’t so heartbreaking — the way Scott’s pointy ears flicked
forward, his enlarged forehead wrinkling further, head tilted like a curious dog.

“I’m sorry, brother,” Stiles said, bringing the handful of powdered wolfsbane to his mouth, blowing a cloud of purple dust off his palm just as Scott leapt.

“It was horrible, Lyds,” Stiles groaned. He had caught a glimpse of himself in the hallway mirror on his way inside, and he looked horrendous — hair standing up on end, dark circles under his eyes, a shallow scratch running from his temple to his jaw.

Lydia pulled him into the parlor, although whether she was concerned for him or simply concerned to be *seen* with him was anybody’s guess.

“What happened?” she asked, and Stiles could already see the thoughts whirring behind her green eyes.

“The usual dose hardly had any effect at all. I had to use the ‘bane powder — not even work up to it, but use it first thing, just to knock him out. Then I had to chain him — *chain him*, Lyds! Sweet-tempered Scott who wouldn’t hurt a fly, and I had to chain him up like a rabid dog so he didn’t kill his own family.”

“Oh no.” Lydia looked suitably distressed. She curled up against Stiles’ side, an arm around his shoulders. “What happened then?”

“Then…” Stiles sighed, exhausted. “Then me, Dad, and Melissa sat up in the kitchen all night, just listening to him howl and howl and struggle himself bloody against his shackles.” He shook his head. “It was awful. I can’t — this can’t be the way that things are from now on.”

“Of course not.” Lydia sprang to her feet. “Scott deserves better than this, and we are going to get some answers.”

“From whom?” Stiles lay back on the settee, his eyes starting to droop.

“Who do you think? From the only two idiot werewolves that we know!” She paused thoughtfully. “Scott excluded, of course.”

“You mean —” Stiles bolted upright. “Derek and Jackson? Why would they tell us anything?”

Lydia smiled the smile of a cat with a full dish of cream. “Jackson will tell me anything I want to know, because I’m going to be his wife,” she said blithely. “As for Derek —”

“What?” Stiles was on his feet now. “His wife?! That — that jackass?!”

“I won’t have you speaking ill of my future husband,” Lydia warned sharply. “Jackson needs some work, but I’m just the woman for the job. Plus, he’s rich, and he’s well-connected in his pack and in his social circle. He’ll let me pursue my mathematics research, as long as I look devastatingly gorgeous on his arm at social functions. And I will.”

“Oh, Stiles.” Lydia’s voice was uncharacteristically gentle as she settled at Stiles’ side, her arm around his shoulders again. “I’ve never been half the romantic that you are. I’ve always been a practical woman, and Jackson is a practical man. Together we’ll be a force to be reckoned with.”
Stiles nodded. Even if it was hard for him to imagine doing so himself, he could see the sense of marrying to such an advantage. Lydia was sharp as a tack, and that kind of brilliance was wasted in a village like this. She would thrive in the City, and if Jackson was her vehicle to getting there…

“If it makes you happy, that’s what’s important,” Stiles said, a little disconsolately. Scott was in danger, and now he was losing Lydia too. “At least promise me you’ll visit, or that I can visit you.”

“Oh, you’ll visit,” Lydia asserted, with a gleam in her eye. “In fact, you’re going to be my man of honor, and Derek is Jackson’s. And we won’t let those two leave the chapel until they give us some answers.”

Stiles couldn’t help but laugh. “I love you, Lyds. You scare the hell out of me sometimes, but I love you.”

Lydia’s smile was beatific. “That just proves you have good sense.” She jumped to her feet again. “Now help me pack. The wedding is next week, and we have plans to make.”
Revelations

Stiles was running even more errands for Lydia in the village, his arms piled with packages, when a woman walking toward him stumbled. Unthinkingly, he reached out to steady her, sending both of their packages tumbling to the ground.

“I’m so very sorry!” The woman smiled up at him before kneeling down to help him pick up the packages. “I’m so clumsy, I’m always tripping over my own feet!” she exclaimed, her voice pleasantly raspy.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Stiles said gallantly as he held up a package, trying to determine if it was one of his or if it belonged to his new acquaintance. “Besides, I’m not one to judge, I’m kind of famous for my lack of coordination.”

“I don’t know how that could be true.” The woman smiled up at him shyly through her eyelashes. “You certainly acted quickly, catching me as you did.”

“It was my pleasure,” Stiles said, and then as the woman appeared to be waiting for something he remembered himself. “Stiles Stilinski, at your service.”

“Kate Argent.” The woman’s gaze was direct, a look of surprise crossing her face at whatever Stiles’ reaction to the name told her. “We are not acquainted, are we? I feel as though I would have remembered meeting you before,” she added warmly.

“No, not directly. I knew an Allison Argent until recently, however,” Stiles said cautiously. It was only now that he was remembering Melissa’s offhand comment about a relative of Allison’s staying in the village, eclipsed as it had been by the events of the afternoon.

Kate’s face grew sad, and Stiles immediately felt guilty as she bit her lip, the shimmer of tears appearing in her eyes. “Yes, Allison is my niece. My father and brother had a falling out many years ago, so I have not had the chance to make her acquaintance since she was a little girl. I had hoped to meet her while I was in the village, but...my timing was unfortunate. She —” Kate dabbed at her eyes with a gloved hand, and then smiled thankfully at the handkerchief Stiles offered her. “She left just as I arrived. I’ve been extending my stay, hoping she will return, but...”

Stiles felt the familiar anger well within him again. Here was yet another person harmed by the callous actions of the Netherfield party. Allison must have heard that her aunt was nearby, and wanting to reconcile with her, and instead she had frittered off to the City, uncaring of the injured parties she left in her wake. And now here was Stiles, in the uncomfortable position of being the bearer of bad news.

“I...” He drew Kate to her feet, uncertain how to soften the blow. “I am so sorry to tell you, but I have heard on good authority that they do not plan to return. I think you must go to the City now, if you wish to meet Allison.” He was surely unable to keep the bitterness from his voice as he added, “They have left us all behind without a second thought, it appears.”

“Oh.” Kate looked downcast for another moment, before tossing her golden hair back and smiling bravely. “Well, I suppose we’ll have to make the best of the situation, and take comfort in the new friends we meet along the way.”

“A good philosophy,” Stiles agreed. “And now, I’m sorry, I must be going —”

“Of course,” Kate agreed. “Perhaps we will meet again.”
That meeting happened much sooner than Stiles had anticipated. Later that very afternoon, Stiles was in the parlor, studying a new book on lycanthropy that had arrived by post the day before.

He was much surprised to hear Kate announced, and most relieved that Scott was out walking, so as to not have his heart injured further by the mention of the Argent surname.

“I am sorry to disturb you at home,” Kate began, her fingers nervously plucking at the corner of a wrapped package. “But I found one of your parcels had become mixed in with mine, and I feared it might be important —”

“That is very kind of you,” Stiles reassured her, before encouraging her to sit down and calling for tea. “I was running errands for a friend of mine who is to be married at the week-end, and I am sure that this parcel is just as vitally necessary as the hundred others she has me fetching and carrying,” he teased with a smile.

“My best wishes to your friend, then,” Kate answered. They spoke pleasantly for some time, Stiles asking how Kate liked her lodgings in the village, and Kate speaking favorably of Mrs. McGinnity and others in the village with whom she had been acquainted. She seemed to be a mild-mannered, pleasant individual, and although Stiles felt no great charity for Allison at present, he was sorry for Kate’s sake that she had been stymied in her attempt to reconcile with her niece.

“Have you given any thought to seeking out your niece in the City?” Stiles finally asked, his curiosity possibly getting the better of his manners.

“I —” Kate looked hesitant. “I had considered it, but it seems awkward at present. From what I understand, she is staying with a friend of hers, whose acquaintance I — would rather not make again, for both our sakes.”

“Do you mean —” Stiles began, before stopping, trying to rein in his own impertinence.

Kate seemed to hesitate again, before leaning in. “It is a Mr. Derek Hale I speak of,” she confessed. “Do you perhaps know him? I had heard that he was part of the Netherfield party as well.”

“He was.” Stiles bit his own tongue to prevent himself from venting his feelings about the man fully. “I had not realized that you were acquainted.”

Kate looked downcast, turning her teacup in her hand. “Of course he would not have spoken of it, unless you were much in his confidence,” she explained.

Stiles could not help the scoff that escaped him. “I suspect there are not many in Derek Hale’s confidence,” he said. “So cold was his manner that I often wished for a fur coat to protect myself from frostbite when conversing with the man.”

A strange look crossed Kate’s face, so quickly that Stiles could not make sense of it, before she looked down at her teacup. Her eyes shimmered with tears again, her voice growing even raspier than its usual smoky tones.

“It was not always so,” she said softly. “More than ten years ago, before the estrangement between my father and brother, I often visited at Argent House, which borders the family estate of Pemberley, where Mr. Hale — Derek — had lived since infancy.” Something about the way she said Derek’s name — soft and bittersweet — sent Stiles’ stomach turning uncomfortably.

“We were very close, then.” Kate looked up, her eyes swimming with tears. “In all confidence, he had sworn to marry me. But then the tragic fire occurred, and —”
“Fire?” Stiles repeated in confusion.

“You did not know?” Kate dabbed at her tears, her lips trembling. “Of course, you must have been so young then.” She drew in a shuddering breath. “A fire took Pemberley, while all of the family was asleep. Everyone in the family perished — Derek’s parents, and all of his siblings. Derek himself was only spared because he had come out in the night to meet me.”

Stiles felt his belly roil again, and he swallowed dryly before managing a sip of tea. He had no idea Derek had suffered such tragedy. He thought of the death of his own mother, and imagined that pain magnified by the loss of so many loved ones — it was inconceivable.

“I had hoped to comfort him, to make a new life and family with him, but —” Kate’s voice broke on a sob, and Stiles reached out to support her with an arm around her shoulder.

“You do not have to recount a story that brings you so much grief,” Stiles assured her.

“No.” Kate pulled in another deep breath, squaring her shoulders. “It is good to have a friend, with whom I can speak. So few know the story, and of course that is only right, but — it is so kind of you to listen.”

“Of course,” Stiles said, although honestly he would rather not hear any more, already struggling mightily with the information she had recounted so far.

“After the fire, Derek’s uncle, Sir Peter Hale, took guardianship of Derek, and Derek went to stay with him at his estate, Rosings Park. I had hoped that he would send for me shortly, but it was not to be. Sir Hale learned of our connection, and disapproved.”

“What? Why on earth? —”

“Sir Peter holds very strong views about humans,” Kate said, bitterness entering her voice for the first time. “I told Derek that I would wait the two years for him to reach his majority, that we could still be together, but —” Kate wiped at her eyes again. “I never heard from him again. And worse, Sir Peter obtained some of the letters we had exchanged, and sent them to my father. He was outraged, and would hear nothing of my sincere belief that Derek and I were to be married. He packed me off to live with relations in France from whence I have only recently returned.”

She shook her head sadly, pulling in a deep breath and letting it out in a sigh. “I have not set eyes upon Derek Hale again since that time. And so, you can understand why I am reluctant to approach my niece while she remains in residence at his house in the City.”

“What’s wrong?” Stiles’ head was spinning with this new information. How utterly cowardly of Derek, to dally with Kate — to promise her marriage — and then to abandon her at the whim of his uncle’s prejudice! How hypocritical that Derek would act so proud, so self-righteous, when all along he had behaved so poorly toward the woman who had loved him! And yet how consistent with the recent actions of the Netherfield party — with their sudden departure, and the injury to his own beloved brother’s heart, from which Stiles now feared he might never recover.

Stiles comforted Kate, and then sent for the carriage to return her home so that she would not have to walk the distance while so distressed, but the whole time he was burning with anger. He had already been disposed to think poorly of Derek Hale, but the revelations of the past hour had surpassed anything he might have imagined. In just a few short days he would see Derek Hale again, and Stiles looked forward with grim determination to taking him to task for the many injustices he had perpetrated.
Rather than being soothed by time, Stiles’ temper only burned hotter in the days before Lydia’s wedding. Scott had been invited to the wedding, but declined to go, more clearly heartstuck with every passing day. Stiles would miss his company but thought it for the best; Scott could only be injured further by meeting Allison again.

Lydia had gone up to the Whittemore estate, Hunsford, several days in advance of the wedding, and so Stiles traveled alone, finding a warm welcome by Lydia when he arrived. Even Jackson appeared more conciliatory, his dismissive manner softened already perhaps by his obvious happiness at having secured Lydia’s hand.

Stiles had expected to pass the evening before the wedding with a small dinner en famille at Hunsford, but to his surprise he found that they were to dine at Rosings Park. “At the express invitation of Sir Peter Hale,” Jackson related proudly, “to celebrate our upcoming nuptials.” Lydia rolled her eyes, but conceded that Sir Peter had been very generous, offering the Rosings chapel to host the ceremony as well.

Although Stiles had been prepared to meet Derek and Allison at Rosings that evening, upon arrival he found that they had been delayed, and would only arrive in time for the ceremony tomorrow. Stiles wondered if this were a true delay or more cowardice — a reluctance to face the ones they had treated so poorly. Ultimately, however, he could not help but feel some relief at their absence, as dinner with Jackson and Sir Peter would be likely to strain his nerves enough.

After hearing Kate Argent’s confession, Stiles was predisposed to feel nothing but contempt for Sir Peter Hale. Acquaintance with the man only confirmed and deepened this predisposition. Sir Peter Hale was arrogant, lecherous, and condescending — so obviously self-satisfied with his own consequence that he saw no need to be pleasant to others.

Stiles was content to let Jackson and Lydia bear the brunt of Peter’s conversation. Jackson’s comments were nauseatingly sycophantic, compliments and flattery that their host seemed to consider no more than his due, and then immediately dismiss. Lydia was a more intriguing conversationalist, adept at turning Sir Peter’s little barbs about her upbringing, manners, and humanity back at him with the sweetest of smiles and tones so dulcet one could almost miss the poison dripping underneath.

Stiles only contributed a comment or two, providing distraction when the exchange teetered too close to open acrimony, ignoring the way Peter’s eyes often dwelled on Stiles’ lips or hands, even as he addressed his comments to Lydia without pause. Stiles silently cheered Lydia on while trying to uncharacteristically keep his silence, fearful that he might give vent to the anger burning within him if given the slightest opportunity. For this reason, he was quite dismayed when Sir Peter urged Jackson to provide Lydia with a tour of the portrait gallery, while he and Stiles viewed the library.

“Lydia enjoys reading as well, I’m sure she would be disappointed to miss —”

“Nonsense,” Sir Peter interrupted firmly. “Lydia will be residing practically at the gates of Rosings, she can explore the library at her leisure. You, though, my dear boy, have such a short time here, and I would be remiss if I let a single moment fly by without acquainting you with the Hale collection.”

Lydia hesitated, but at Stiles’ nod she allowed Jackson to draw her away. Stiles had to admit that his distaste for Sir Peter’s company was warring with his curiosity as to why the man wanted to speak with him alone.
They walked in silence for some time, Stiles’ skin crawling with Sir Peter’s propensity to walk closer to him than strictly necessary.

Finally, Sir Peter broke the silence. “From what I’ve been told of you,” he began, “I would have expected you to demonstrate a livelier personality.”

Stiles raised an eyebrow. “I must admit my surprise that you’ve been told of me at all.”

“You mistake me.” Stiles adopted an air of indifference, although animosity welled deep inside him. “My only concern is for your own boredom. It must have been tedious to have heard tales of a country boy with whom you have neither acquaintance nor connection.”

Sir Peter swung open the door to the library with a flourish, gesturing Stiles through. “I wouldn’t say that,” he said, and Stiles tried not to shudder at the feeling of the man’s gaze on his back. “After all, I have a vested interest in the actions of my closest remaining family — my nephew, Derek Hale. And he was recently visiting in your part of the county, was he not? Quite near to the village of Beacon, if I understand correctly.”

“You are quite correct,” Stiles said, wondering at the man’s meaning. Was he trying to imply that Derek had spoken of Stiles to him? It hardly seemed likely.

“Such a good boy, Derek,” Peter continued, running a languid hand along the spine of the nearest row of books. “So upstanding. So loyal.”

Stiles gritted his teeth. “Would you describe him so?” he asked, struggling to keep his voice as indifferent as possible.

“Of course I would,” Sir Peter growled, his eyes flashing alpha-red for a moment before he looked away. He appeared to gather himself, falling back into an amused drawl that did not fool Stiles in the least. “Why, just recently, I heard, he had occasion to save his good friend from a most imprudent marriage. If that is not the mark of a most upstanding and loyal friend, I don’t know what is.”

Stiles turned away, pretending to be engrossed in a book he pulled from a shelf at random. There could be no confusion about Sir Peter’s intimation — Derek had so few friends that it could be none other than Allison to whom Peter was referring.

“Did he really?” Stiles asked idly, trying to control his heart rate and breathing despite the rage flaring inside him.

“Well, perhaps I am speaking out of turn,” Sir Peter said with an air of telling a confidence, his cold pale eyes watching Stiles avidly. “The details were not fully related to me, but from what I understand, his friend found herself besotted of a young man of ignominious birth and few prospects.” Peter leaned back lazily against the row of shelves, examining his fingernails. “You know the type — with nothing to recommend them, they are always grasping at the coat-tails of their betters.”

If Stiles were not so livid, he would laugh at the implication. As if Scott had any care for Allison’s circumstances, aside from her dimples and her pleasing personality! He would have been equally besotted if she had been a scullerymaid, but there was certainly no point in trying to explain as much to Sir Peter.

“And Derek was able to thwart this imprudent union? It doesn’t seem to me that his friend was as much in love as she declared herself to be, if a few words from your nephew dissuaded her so
“No, you lessen his triumph needlessly!” Sir Peter protested. “From what I understand it was no easy task, but rather took many words of entreaty to talk sense into the woman and convince her of the folly of her attachment, and even more to convince her to come away from the area before she was inextricably entangled.” Sir Peter smirked, his gaze lingering on the pulse Stiles could feel thudding at the base of his throat. “But I forget myself! You are from that area as well! Perhaps you know even more than myself about this matter.”

Stiles snapped the book he was perusing shut and put it back on the shelf, pulling out another. “Hmm? I can’t say I keep up with the village gossip so well. What is to have happened to the young man?”

“Oh, who cares?” Peter said with a shrug. “People like that will always land on their feet. No, we must rejoice in the narrow escape of such an estimable young woman, rather than spare a jot of pity for that young man.”

“Cause for celebration indeed,” Stiles said grimly. “I am only sorry that we do not have glasses with which we can toast to his misfortune.”

Peter turned away, smiling to himself, apparently well-satisfied that his message had been delivered. As to his reason for delivering it, however, Stiles could find no motive. All it had done was further his antipathy toward Derek Hale, with a host of new sins to lay at his feet.

Although Stiles had deplored the actions of the Netherfield party, not once had he supposed that it had been at Derek’s urging that Scott’s heart had been broken. Why would he suppose such an outlandish thing — that Derek would be the cause of all that Scott had suffered, and still continued to suffer? And yet, here was the man’s own uncle, relating that Allison had only reluctantly abandoned Scott, at Derek’s insistence.

It reflected poorly on both — on Derek for his officious interference, and for Allison at yielding to the whims of her friend on such a vital matter. Stiles could hardly contain his rage — that Derek should not only inflict such misery on Scott, but to boast about it in such a way to his uncle! It was intolerable.

Stiles concentrated on regulating his breathing, trying to maintain a calm demeanor. He hoped that the conversation was now at an end and they would rejoin the group, but he was not to be so fortunate.

“And how about you, Stiles?” Peter asked after a pause. “From what I understand, Beacon House is a residence provided by the town to the Sheriff, and your family will be turned out when your father retires. Do you have any prospects of your own? Is there any young country man or woman who has stolen your heart?”

“No,” Stiles said shortly, hoping to end this line of questioning, but to no avail.

“Really?” Sir Peter marveled. “You should make haste. You find yourself in a precarious position. I would surmise that any young man of middling looks but sufficient cleverness, such as yourself, would recognize the need to expeditiously find himself a nice, solid partner. Perhaps a local farmer, or clergyman. Someone to bind to before that first flush of youth fades, and leaves you without prospects.”

“You concern for my well-being is touching,” Stiles replied through gritted teeth. “But I hope to make my own way in the world, by way of hard work and scholarship rather than matrimony.”
Peter sighed, moving close and placing an arm around Stiles’ shoulders. “The optimism of youth!” he remarked. “Nonetheless, it is dangerous to have airs above one’s station in life.” The hand on Stiles’ shoulders dropped, now brushing slowly down his spine. “You might find yourself flying too close to the sun, on wings of wax...only to fall on that delicious backside of yours.”

Stiles stepped smartly away before Sir Peter’s hand could reach the body part under discussion, grabbing the man’s wrist while his other hand clutched the vial of wolfsbane in his pocket, ready to thumb free the stopper. “I’ll watch my own backside, thank you,” he growled, with not the slightest attempt to keep his voice polite any longer.

Stiles knew he had no hope of restraining an alpha werewolf should Sir Peter truly use his strength, but after a tense moment the man only smirked and shrugged, turning away as Stiles cautiously released his forearm.

“Shall we rejoin the others?” he asked as if nothing had occurred, and Stiles agreed.
The day of the wedding dawned bright and pleasant, and Stiles tried to rejoice in Lydia’s happiness despite his misgivings about her soon-to-be husband. Still, the majority of his thoughts were preoccupied with seeing Derek again, and calling him to task for his egregious actions.

Sir Peter had offered the chapel at Rosings for the ceremony, and Stiles had to admit it was charmingly situated. Sunlight streamed in through stained glass windows to light the pews in colored streaks, the aisle and altar draped in white flowers and colored bunting.

Stiles would be walking Lydia down the aisle, and so he remained closeted with her in the minister’s office. Stiles thought wryly that the usual roles were reversed — any last-minute jitters were all on his part, with Lydia as serene and confident in her decision to marry Jackson as in all things.

“You’re certain?” Stiles couldn’t help asking. “Just say the word, Lyds, and we’ll go on the run. I’ll disguise you as a stable lad and I can be a traveling troubadour, I’ve always had a way with a story —”

“Enough, Stiles.” Lydia’s voice was fond. “Jackson is not perfect, but he is perfect for me. And he does love me, in his own way, and that love will grow as we become better acquainted with each other. I am perfectly satisfied, and ask only that you make sure that my veil is straight and that my train does not catch as we walk the aisle.”

“That, my queen, I can do.” Stiles bowed mockingly low before Lydia, and no more was spoken.

Stiles had to admit, as he walked Lydia down the aisle, that Jackson did seem truly enamored of her. His eyes were eager on her form, a soft smile replacing the usual sneer on his lips. As Stiles stood next to Lydia, dutifully holding her bouquet, he tried to attend to the happy couple, but found his eyes continually wandering to Derek, standing tall and proud as ever at Jackson’s side.

Stiles didn’t know what he expected Derek to show — some level of remorse, or surprise, but he was as cold as ever, his face an expressionless mask. And if on some occasions when Stiles’ gaze wandered to Derek and found him regarding Stiles in return — well, he was probably just taking note of any failings in Stiles’ dress or figure, to mock later to his snobby friends.

Stiles was never one to quail before another’s criticism, however — it was part of his own particular brand of stubbornness that his courage only rose at attempts to intimidate him, and so he was determined to request to speak with Derek alone after the ceremony, so he could finally vent his anger on the man who was the cause of it all.

It was much to Stiles’ surprise, however, when as soon as the carriage holding Lydia and Jackson set forth, Derek approached him.

“May I have a word with you alone?”

Although quite taken aback, Stiles could not deny the benefit of acceding to the request which so mirrored his own wishes. “I would much appreciate a word with you myself,” he simply said, following Derek down a hedge-lined path that led away from the chapel and toward the lawn at Rosings.

Stiles was determined to hold his tongue until he was sure they would not be overheard by the other werewolves in the wedding party. He still felt his blood thumping in his veins, the angry words he meant to unleash upon Derek hovering at the tip of his tongue. Before long, however, he found his
ire, if not dispelled, to be subsumed by his growing confusion at his companion’s manner.

Derek Hale seemed much unlike his usual self — all his typical composure and hauteur gone. His hair was disarrayed, as if he had been running his hands through it in the few short moments since the ceremony, and he alternated between pacing energetically ahead of Stiles and then realizing his mistake, shifting uncomfortably in place until Stiles could catch up with him. At times Stiles even believed him to be muttering under his breath. This agitation was so uncharacteristic that Stiles was quite confounded, and before he could even begin to tax Derek with his grievances, Derek rounded on Stiles, grasping his hand tightly between both of his own.

“In vain I have struggled,” Derek began, his voice harsh with tension. “It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed.” He pulled in a deep breath, the rest of his words tumbling out in a rush. “You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and — and love you.”

Stiles was so dumbfounded, he could hardly make sense of the words, so completely opposed were they to any that he might have expected to hear.

“You what?” he repeated stupidly, but Derek simply carried on.

“I understand that — although my manner may have led you to believe otherwise — please know that I hold you in the highest respect. My initial disinterest, in fact, was feigned. Immediately upon seeing you I was struck by a most decided attraction, and time and observation has only deepened my affection. You are not only beautiful, but quick-witted and kind, and —”

Stiles yanked his hand away, finally pushed out of his stupor by this absurd recitation. “Are you mocking me?” he cried. “Is this some kind of — joke to you, that you would pretend affection for me to — to what? Forestall the utter contempt in which you must know I hold you?”

Derek startled back as if he had been struck. “Contempt?” he repeated.

“Utter contempt,” Stiles spat back. “Even if you had any sincere wish to marry me, and this were not all some horrible jest on your part, do you think that any consideration in the world would tempt me to accept the man who has been the means of ruining — perhaps forever — the happiness of a most beloved brother?”

“What?” Derek’s brows drew down, as if he had the gall to feign confusion. “Scott?”

Stiles seethed with anger at Derek’s incredulous tone. “Of course, Scott! Don’t even try to deny that it was at your urging that Allison left Netherfield, ruining Scott’s chance at happiness! Your uncle told me how you boasted of it. I had to chain him, do you understand that? Gentle, kind Scott, who would never try to hurt a soul, and I had to chain him so he did not kill us all! Can you hear that and still regret none of your actions?”

“I didn’t —” Derek seemed discomposed further by this news. “I didn’t know she was his anchor, I hadn’t suspected it was more than —”

Stiles was still puzzling over these words, unfamiliar with the notion of an anchor despite his own suppositions on the subject, when something seemed to strike Derek.

“Are you — were you hurt?” he asked frantically, his hands reaching out seemingly unconsciously, his eyes raking over Stiles as if he could detect any injury through his clothing.

“Don’t pretend you have the slightest concern for me or any of mine!” Stiles protested indignantly. “I have no idea what farce you are playing with this — ridiculous profession of affection when you have shown nothing but derision for myself and all those for whom I care! From the first moment I
met you, your arrogance and conceit — your selfish disdain for the feelings of others — made me realize that you were the last man in the world that I could ever be prevailed upon to marry.”

Derek drew back, the shock on his face transforming slowly to anger. “You think you know me so well, then,” he said, his voice an icy lash. “You seem to have no doubts about my character to reject me so incivilly.”

“Reject you!” Stiles found himself flailing his arms in agitation, and he crossed them at his chest to prevent more unintended expressions — or even worse, to strike out at Derek as he so longed to and sign his own death warrant. “If I thought that there was even the slightest shred of sincerity in your expression of feelings, I would attempt to be kind — kinder at least than you’ve ever bothered to be, in your dealings.”

Derek clenched his jaw mutinously. “Tell me then — aside from leaving Netherfield with Allison — what injustices you would lay at my feet.”

“How about your dealings with Kate Argent?” At those words Derek paled, faced with his wrongdoings. Stiles even felt a pang of sympathy for the man. He likely had thought the matter to be long buried, never to be discovered.

“I don’t blame you entirely,” Stiles added generously.

“You...you don’t.” Derek repeated woodenly.

“Of course not. You were both young and impulsive, but Derek — once your families disapproved, to cast Kate aside without a second thought? To continue to enjoy the wealth and security of your pack while her own family shunned her? Young though you were, those were the actions of a coward.”

“I—”

“You can only be thankful that her family in France took her in,” Stiles continued severely, warm with indignance now on Kate’s behalf. “Otherwise her death in the poorhouse would have been on your conscience.”

Derek had turned away toward the hedge that lined the path. Stiles could not see his face, only the stiff line of his back, hands clenched into fists at his side. “Your good opinion of her seems very set,” Derek growled. “As much so as your bad opinion of me.”

“What would you have me do — ignore all of Kate’s kindness and genuine liking for me, and at the same time ignore all of your obvious contempt for me and those I love? What reason would Kate have for telling such a tale to a stranger, if it were untrue?”

“Because she knows what you are to me!” Derek roared, and his face when it turned toward Stiles was half-shifted — his brow wrinkled, his fangs gleaming in the sunlight. “And she is determined to ruin my happiness in any way that she can!”

Stiles had taken a step back instinctively at Derek’s shifted state, his hand finding the bottle of wolfsbane in his waistcoat pocket. He could hardly counter Derek’s words, unable to believe for a moment that Derek’s happiness depended in any way on Stiles’ good opinion of him.

“That’s absurd! And as for...this —” Stiles gestured at Derek’s face, causing him to step back with a startled blink of his alpha-red eyes. “You think to threaten me into compliance?” he spat. “That this show of...ferality...would change my opinion of you in any way?”
“That’s not —” The wolf melted from Derek’s face, the claws retracting back from the hands he held up now as if in surrender. “I didn’t mean to —”

“You seem to cause a lot of damage without meaning to,” Stiles sneered. “And I am glad to be returning to Beacon tomorrow so as to be removed from your path of destruction.”

Something about Stiles’ words seemed to strike home with Derek, a look of utter devastation crossing his face so that Stiles might actually have pitied him if he were not still so angry at all that Derek had done.

“You’re right,” he muttered. “I shouldn’t have — “ He took a step back, sketching a quick bow at Stiles. “Forgive me. I will bother you no more,” he said through gritted teeth, and then he was gone, disappearing down the walkway, leaving Stiles stunned and wondering at all that had occurred.
Stiles returned to the wedding reception, attempting to smile and dance as if he didn’t have a care in the world, and all the while his mind was spinning. What could Derek possibly have meant by that farce of a proposal? At the time Stiles had been certain that it was a joke, and yet Derek’s manner — his agitation before speaking, and his anger upon being refused — seemed to prove otherwise.

How Stiles longed to share these revelations with Lydia! He could not, however. Much as she would likely enjoy the gossip, he could not distract her from her own wedding. At least that was his rationale, although he acknowledged to himself that there were other reasons behind his reluctance to expose what had occurred to anyone else. Something about the interaction — about Stiles’ feelings as he thought back upon it — was too raw, too fraught with emotion. It should be simple — Derek Hale was an ass, and Stiles had finally told him so to his face — but somehow it seemed more complicated than that.

Stiles’ mind was no more quiet the next morning, and he woke early from an unrestful sleep and dressed, determined to walk to relieve some of the agitation of his spirit before he had to spend hours in a closed carriage. He resolved to stay along the wall of Hunsford, far away from Rosings, and so it was even more to his surprise when he encountered Derek, waiting at the gate.

Derek looked no more composed than the afternoon before — rather, he, like Stiles, appeared to have spent a sleepless night. His eyes were shadowed, his shirt was coming untucked, and a smear of ink smudged his cheekbone. Nonetheless, his expression was once again all haughty arrogance.

“I have been waiting for some time, hoping to catch you before you departed,” he said. “Would you do me the honor of reading this letter?”

With that, he pushed a letter into Stiles’ hands, waiting not a moment for an answer, and stalked off. Stiles opened the letter, sure that its contents could bring him no pleasure but nonetheless alight with curiosity.

*Please do not be alarmed, dear Sir, that this letter will repeat any of the sentiments which last afternoon were so disgusting to you,* the letter read. *I ask only a few more moments of your time, and then I will ask no more.*

*There are few who know what I am about to relate to you, and I beseech you for your discretion above all things. In truth, I do not know why I am breaking the silence of almost a decade — all the rules I have put into place to protect myself from the avid curiosity of others — to tell you the truth about what occurred so many years ago, but I only know that I cannot rest easy unless I have answered the charges you so fiercely leveled against me yesterday.*

*You accused me of several injustices, which — if they had been true — would have been egregious indeed. The first was that Allison left Netherfield at my urging, resulting in the unhappiness of your brother, and that this was willfully and maliciously done by me in order to prevent their union. The second, was that I dishonored and then abandoned Kate Argent when we were both youths. To explain the first of these circumstances, I find I must begin with the second.*

*I was a middle child, loved by my family despite not having much in particular to recommend me. I was quiet and awkward, solitary despite my love for my pack, and never had the knack of speaking to others that so many of my peers enjoyed. Allison, the only child of the Argents, was my best companion, and the only one who did not seem to mind my silences and the abruptness that resulted*
from my shyness and difficulty speaking to others.

In the summer of my fifteenth year Allison’s aunt, Kate Argent, came to stay for awhile at the Argent estate. She was quite a bit older than myself, and glamorous, and in retrospect I was so flattered by her attention to me as to fancy myself in love with her.

We met frequently, and I expressed my feelings. We made plans to marry as soon as we were able. On one particular evening, she had urged me to leave the house at night, to meet her in the woods. I waited, but she never arrived. After many hours I made my way back toward Pemberley, only to realize that the pink glow in the horizon was not the sunrise, but rather the flaming wreckage of my home, burned to the ground with all of my family within.

The loss of my pack, and the transfer of the alpha powers to me, was such misery as I hope you never can fathom. I was mired in grief for a long period of time, making arrangements in a daze. Kate sought me out to comfort me, but her manner was somewhat odd and I was too distraught to give her the attention and reassurance she craved.

Uncle Peter invited me to stay with him at Rosings, and I agreed. Kate followed me there, and urged me to marry her immediately, at Gretna Green if need be as I had turned sixteen a few weeks before. I saw no need for this rash action, and approached Uncle Peter. Despite Uncle Peter’s belief in the superiority of werewolves over humans, I hoped by introducing Kate to him, and after knowing her, he would give us the permission to wed that my own parents could no longer grant.

This is the part that pains me the most to relate, as it shows my utter foolishness so clearly that I cringe to recall it. In my eagerness to be flattered by Kate, and with my still-emerging adolescent senses, I had not perceived what was immediately apparent to my uncle — that Kate did not care for me at all, and that her every word and action was a falsehood, a honey-sweet seduction that concealed a bitter and abiding disgust of all that I was.

At first I refused to believe it. I thought it was an attempt by Uncle Peter to separate us. And yet, there could be no denying it after what occurred next. My uncle was now the guardian of my fortune. He threatened to disinherit me. I told him that I did not care, that Kate and I would run away and make our own way in the world.

Kate laughed to my face, mocking the very idea. She contemptuously informed me that the only thing remotely interesting about me was my fortune; that every hour she had to spend with me had been a torment that she could only endure by consoling herself with the thought of the wealth she would gain once we were wed.

She admitted her disgust for all werewolves, and for me in particular, in such virulent and violent tones that I quite feared her. Stiles, I would not say this lightly, but so sudden was her transformation, and so vicious were her views on werewolves, that I began to fear that she may even have had some role to play in the death of my family — either as a crime of hate against their race, or in order to secure for herself the whole of my family’s fortune, or both.

She threatened to ruin my good name and the name of our remaining pack, and so Peter, always more pragmatic than moral, offered her at least a taste of what she wanted all along — a hefty sum of money in order to leave the country and speak no more of what had happened between us. She agreed avidly, and I saw no more of her from that day until the day several weeks past that she arrived in Beacon.

You can imagine my concern, then, when I heard that she had arrived at Beacon. I knew it could be no coincidence. I expected her to confront me there, to demand more money, but whatever scheme she has is more insidious than that. I still do not know what it is, but only heard that she was asking
questions in the village, and that your name arose more than once in connection to myself.

Stiles, this is where the foolishness of my past becomes the foolishness of my present. You say that from the moment of our first meeting I disdained you, and from that point on showed you no sign of affection — rather, I treated you with arrogance and contempt.

In truth, when I first saw you, I was struck by your beauty and your lively manner, so much so that when Allison taxed me about it, I childishly disavowed any such interest in order to allay her suspicions. To you, I now realize, I seemed haughty and cold. In my own mind, you fascinated me like no other person ever has.

My wish to be near you at all times, to hear you converse even with nothing to add myself to the conversation, to witness your ease of manner and lively wit — like any fool in love, I thought myself to be blatantly obvious to all. In fact, only those who knew me before — Allison and Jackson, who knew how much I had detached myself from society after my experience with Kate — could perceive the difference in me. They alone could accurately gauge how ardently I admired you by the amount of time I spent seeking out your company, barbed and contentious though our exchanges were at times.

Because of this — the affection that was in my mind so blindingly apparent to all, but was in fact obscured even from its object — I reacted to Kate’s reappearance with near to panic. I could not determine what she wanted, and when I found that she had been asking questions about you, began to fear that she simply wished to hurt me again, by means of hurting someone for whom I cared.

I cravenly fled, and urged Allison to come with me, in case she might become the object of Kate’s deranged vengeance as well. I will admit that I did not take Scott’s feelings into consideration much at this point — I knew him as an amiable young man, and knew that Allison liked and cared for him deeply, but had not imagined the affection to be returned to such a degree as to make a separation unendurable.

In this way, I will admit I was wrong again — I mistook Scott’s ardor for a generally warm-hearted and sunny nature, and had no notion that Allison had become his anchor to humanity. Although Peter no doubt has his own motives for the lies that he told you, there was a grain of truth to them, in that I urged Allison to come away with me with no word to Scott.

I hoped that word would circulate in the village that we had gone away, never to return, and therefore any partiality to you the villagers might have related to Kate would be disproven by my abrupt departure. In my imaginings, Kate’s attention would move elsewhere, and you would be safe from whatever schemes she has in mind. In seeking to protect you I have unknowingly hurt you and your family, and for that I apologize deeply. Just know that I would never deliberately cause you pain, and that I will forever regret that I have done so.

This is many more pages than I had intended to write, and I have begged your indulgence for long enough. If you doubt the truth of these statements, I can appeal to the testimony of Allison Argent, who was my friend and witness to all that occurred, much though it pained her to learn such ill of her relation. I only hope that I will find you this morning, and you will do me the honor of reading this letter, and considering what is written within with all the intelligence and fairness of mind which I know you to possess.

— Derek Hale

Stiles had begun the letter not knowing what to expect, and yet what was contained within defied any reasonable expectation so completely as to set his thoughts and emotions into a turbulent roil.
At first he was determined to dismiss any statements Derek would make, certain that no possible apology or explanation could justify his actions. And yet as he read, he could not deny how clearly and honestly the facts appeared to be set forth, and if so, how horribly he had misjudged. Derek’s candour, reluctant though it may have been, shone through in every line, and reading what he had suffered had Stiles cringing again and again in mortification as he recalled the baseless accusations he had flung at him regarding those events.

Stiles paced up and down for hours, stopping again and again to unfold the letter and re-read it, until he was certain he had every word and line memorized. He hardly knew what to think. That Kate could be so evil — so malicious — as to have taken such advantage of Derek as a young boy! And yet, what did he know of Kate’s character beyond their brief meeting?

The more he thought of it, the more it seemed obvious, and Stiles castigated himself for not having realized it earlier. How deliberate, it now seemed, that Kate had bumped into Stiles, forcing an introduction! How artless it had appeared, and yet contrived it must have been, for her to retain one of Stiles’ packages, necessitating her visit that afternoon! How unseemly it had been, in retrospect, for her to tell her tale to a veritable stranger!

And yet Stiles had not the slightest suspicion. His own damnable wounded pride, eagerly encouraging him to think the worst of Derek, had caused him to hang upon her every word, sopping it up like a sponge, with not the slightest question as to her motivations for telling it. How bitter the irony, that Stiles had accused Derek so often of the sin of pride, when his own had resulted in him being so gullible, so uncritical, as to let Kate use him as a tool of her vengeance!

Stiles felt his cheeks flushing with shame, his heart pounding in his chest in mortification. He had always prided himself on his astute character — his good judgment, and the ability to form his own opinions unswayed by the gossip of others. How blind he had been! What did he know of Kate’s true character, beyond her easy manner and kind voice? And, conversely, how oblivious he had been to Derek’s true nature, so determined from the moment Derek had first slighted him at the dance to find any possible fault with the man!

“I have acted despicably,” he told himself. “Pleased by the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, from the first moment of our acquaintance I have turned away all reason, all evidence, except that which supported my awful prejudice.”

What a humiliating discovery, to see his own vanity, his own folly, so clearly exposed! And yet how deserved was his agony! Stiles hardly gave notice to Derek’s statement that he could appeal to Allison for the truth of these events. To know that Allison knew all and remained Derek’s best friend, while so clearly shunning her aunt, was evidence enough.

Thoughts of Allison caused Stiles to stop again, unfolding the letter and re-reading again the part of it that pertained to Allison and Scott. He remembered as well Derek’s words outside the chapel — how surprised he had seemed to learn that Allison was Scott’s anchor. To Stiles, Scott’s ardor had been obvious. However, he had to admit now, that this was from the perspective of a brother, who had known Scott for many years. With a new fairness of mind, he acknowledged how Scott’s generally amiable nature, and his own modesty may have obscured the force of his affection for Allison from the Netherfield party. Scott considered Allison to be so high above him, so perfect, that apparently he had never been bold enough to discuss his intentions of a future with her.

And that brought Stiles to the last issue, the one he had from self-preservation been reluctant to fully turn his mind to. To know that he had captured Derek’s heart, all-unknowing, and then broken it so cruelly! To realize, all too late, that he had behaved in the most abominable way to what Stiles now realized was one of the best men he may have ever been privileged to know!
After Derek’s sudden departure, Stiles had allowed his own hurt feelings to strongly influence his recollection of events. Now, as he looked back, he remembered the pleasure he took in Derek’s company — how their sarcastic exchanges challenged and excited him, how he reveled in the charged tension that set his pulse pounding whenever Derek was near. He had been blind to Derek’s partiality for him, but to no less extent he had been equally blind to the own partiality he had been developing for Derek!

Stiles felt his knees grow weak, and leaned against a tree for support. The revelation of what he truly felt for Derek struck him like an arrow to the heart. It was all suddenly so clear — why he had been so inordinately upset that Derek had left Netherfield without a word, and how terribly disillusioned he had felt when Kate had convinced him of the despicable nature of Derek’s past actions.

He had rationalized his acute disappointment as concern for Scott and then Kate, when in fact it was the consequence of his own injured feelings. Oh bitter irony! Only now, when the possibility of reciprocation was lost to him forever, did Stiles realize that he had been in love with Derek Hale for longer than he knew.
The carriage ride home to Beacon House flew by, so distracted by his thoughts was Stiles. He worried and he agonized, formed plans and discarded them one after another. He thought of writing to Derek, of apologizing, but would a letter from Stiles only bring more pain? After the way Stiles had treated him, Derek would be justified in feeling only hatred and disgust for him.

And what could he tell Scott? The welcome news that Allison did in fact return Scott’s affections was tempered by Derek’s failure to indicate that the party would ever return to Netherfield. Understandably — for as long as Kate remained in the neighborhood, Stiles thought them wise to stay away. He himself was determined to avoid Kate if at all possible, and to give her no hint that Derek had communicated the truth of the matter to him.

For that reason, he decided to keep all that had occurred at Rosings from Scott, at least for now. Scott was so incapable of deception, it was better to keep him ignorant. He had no acquaintance with Kate and no reason to form one, and in fact Stiles was uncertain how he could even begin to explain her true character without betraying the confidence with which Derek had entrusted him — something he was determined above all not to do.

No, it was better for Scott to remain in ignorance. If he were reunited with Allison, then Stiles’ knowledge would be old news. If they continued to be separated, then knowing that Allison returned Scott’s affection would only cause him more pain.

With such thoughts weighing his mind, Stiles was happy to return home, to seek comfort in the company of his brother and parents. It was difficult to relate the events of the wedding to his family without his thoughts drifting to the many other revelations that had followed, but his family seemed to consider his subdued mood as the expected result of having lost his friend and companion to marriage.

Scott was holding up bravely, but Stiles could see that his heart had still not healed. His usual sunny expression had turned to a distant pensiveness, his pleasure in simple pastimes such as riding or walking in the forest had dimmed. Stiles dreaded what the next full moon would bring.

For once the family was all at home, in the parlor, when the sound of an approaching horse in the lane roused them from their individual pursuits. Assuming it was a messenger for his father or mother, Stiles remained reading, still determined to improve the wolfsbane formula they used to control Scott’s shifts. Scott continued to stare listlessly into the fire, and so it was up to Melissa to move to the window and look out upon the lane.

“It’s a lady,” she said with interest. “I believe it is...is that Allison Argent?”

Stiles reached out, gripping Scott’s hand tightly as his brother’s face grew pale.

“It is all right,” Scott said, recovering quickly. “I was just...surprised. But we shall meet as friends.”

Stiles had hopes for more, but he could hardly dare share them with Scott at such a time. Instead he settled for giving Scott an encouraging smile, straightening his brother’s coat as he stood, and ringing for tea.

Allison was announced. She was as beautiful as ever — her hair a bit damp and curly from the light mist outside, her cheeks flushed red. Scott appeared struck dumb by her appearance, and so Stiles stepped in to offer greetings.
“We had no idea that you were to return,” Stiles said, attempting to keep his voice as neutral as possible.

“Yes, well.” Allison looked down at the riding gloves in her hands, fiddling a bit with the seam. “I had not been certain, but then —” Her eyes darted up, a soft smile gracing her expression as she looked on Scott. “I found I could not stay away.”

Scott’s smile in return was incandescent, and Stiles busied himself with pouring tea so as not to betray his own emotion. Whether Allison had returned against Derek’s wishes or with his blessing, she seemed determined to continue her courtship of Scott, and Stiles felt all the joy befitting one brother seeing the other happy again at last.

The conversation over tea was a bit stilted, but John and Melissa assisted Stiles in keeping up some semblance of an exchange in which Scott and Allison only minimally participated, so distracted were they by trading cow-eyed looks at each other.

To everyone’s relief, Allison suggested a walk after tea. The elders declined, and Scott and Stiles accompanied her outside. Stiles quickly fell behind under the guise of examining a loose heel on his boot, and was gratified to see that all awkwardness had fled — Scott and Allison walked with their heads bent together, deep in earnest conversation.

Stiles did his best to remain lagging behind, giving the couple as much privacy as possible until Scott saw Allison to her horse and away. Then he could no longer contain his curiosity, and hurried up to Scott. His brother looked dazed, but the dopey smile slowly spreading across his face told the whole story.

“I can’t believe it,” Scott said, grasping Stiles’ arm. “She — she wants to marry me!”

Stiles pulled Scott into his embrace. “Of course she does!” he cried, thumping Scott hard on the back in his excitement.

Scott shook his head against Stiles’ shoulder. “Can it be true? I feel like I’m dreaming!”

“It’s true,” Stiles grinned. “You will be married and have adorable little dimpled curly-haired children, and will be so kind-hearted that people will forever be taking advantage of you both.”

Scott gave Stiles an affectionate shove. “Is nothing safe from your sarcasm?”

“Nothing. And you had better get used to it because bitter, sarcastic old Uncle Stiles is going to be a frequent visitor, dandling his adorable little nieces and nephews on his knee.”

“Oh, Stiles.” Now Scott pulled Stiles into a warm hug. “You will find someone to love, and you will be every bit as happy as Allison and myself — I am certain of it!”

Stiles was glad that Scott could not see his expression. His very heart longed to cry out to his brother: “I did find someone to love! But I mistreated him abominably, and now I will never be happy again!” But he held his tongue, and did his best to rejoice in his brother’s happiness rather than mourning the loss of his own.
Scott and Allison became almost inseparable once again. Stiles tried to determine what Allison had told Scott about the Netherfield party’s sudden decampment, but it appeared that Scott had been too overjoyed at Allison’s return to ask any questions, and Allison hadn’t volunteered any further information. She no doubt felt, as Stiles did, that any true exposure of Kate’s actions would risk disclosing details that Derek would wish to stay private, and therefore it was better not to start at all.

Scott, for one, seemed to have forgotten all about Kate, and there was little mention of her in the village as well. Stiles had even hoped, perhaps, that she had moved on, and so he was disconcerted for many reasons to run into her again, coming out of the bookseller’s shop in the village as he tried to enter it.

“Stiles!” she exclaimed, smiling widely. “How lovely to see you again!”

Stiles attempted to smile in return, fearful that his distaste for the woman was written all over his damnably expressive face. “You as well! I’m sorry, though, I’m in a bit of a rush —”

“Of course!”

For a moment Stiles thought he was free, but the detestable woman followed him into the store. “I have plenty of time, I’ll keep you company on your errands!” she chirped.

“So kind of you,” Stiles managed. “But I really just have to pick up this one book and then I’m off home again.”

He waved at old Mrs. Soraya to try to speed her along. “The book I ordered has come in?” he prompted the bookseller when she simply blinked at him placidly from behind her enormous spectacles. “Stilinski?”

“Yes! Yes! Oh my, yes. I’ll just…” She tottered off to the back of the shop, and Stiles shifted from foot to foot, never so impatient with the doddering old woman as he was today.

“So how was your friend’s wedding? Lydia, wasn’t it?”

Stiles’ head snapped around, and he belatedly tried to hide his surprise. “I hadn’t remembered mentioning her name, but yes, it was Lydia. And it was a beautiful ceremony. Quite scenic.”

“And I understand she married Jackson Whittemore, one of the party that was so recently at Netherfield! What a small world it is indeed!” Kate’s wide smile suddenly appeared sharklike, menacing.

“Village gossip appears to have been quite comprehensive on the subject,” Stiles said. “Mrs. Soraya, are you having any luck?” he called out toward the back of the shop.

“In a minute dear, in a minute.” The quavering voice carried through the musty shop, and Stiles resisted the urge to hit his head against the counter.

“I hope I didn’t put you in an uncomfortable position,” Kate continued, her brow now furrowed in apparent concern. “I would not have confided in you so fully for the world if I had known how soon you would be seeing our mutual acquaintance again. Because he was the best man at the wedding, wasn’t he, and you for Lydia? How much I regret causing you the pain you must have endured to meet the man again, knowing what he really was!”
“Yes, it certainly was a revelation,” Stiles said, fighting to keep his voice neutral despite his building fury at the woman’s unmitigated gall. “Amazing how appearances can be so deceiving, and how quickly things can change when you understand a person’s true character.”

An unreadable expression crossed Kate’s face, and Stiles worried that his anger might have caused him to speak unwisely. Fortunately they were both distracted by the return of Mrs. Soraya.

“Wonderful!” Stiles said, with a disproportionate amount of enthusiasm for the circumstances. “I’ll just —”

But Kate was quicker, snatching the book from Mrs. Soraya’s hand and scanning the title.

“Why, Mr. Stilinski! I had no idea that you were interested in lycanthropy!” she exclaimed, playfully dangling the book just out of his reach. “But then again I shouldn’t be surprised. I understand your step-brother is now one of that...particular breed.”

Stiles’ fingers twitched to strangle the life out of the woman, but he pasted a false smile on his face, handing over the bills to Mrs. Soraya and then holding his hand out patiently for the book.

“Yes, my brother is, as your seemingly inexhaustible font of village gossip seems to have informed you, a werewolf. That understandably piqued my interest on the topic.”

“Naturally.” Kate finally handed the book over. “Your loyalty to your brother does you credit. And do you hold such affection for any other werewolves of your acquaintance?”

Stiles busied himself stowing the book in his knapsack, thinking furiously. There could be no other interpretation of Kate’s words, she must be speaking of Derek, and yet he couldn’t even begin to know how to respond to them.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” he said. “The werewolves of my acquaintance, just like the others of my acquaintance, please or displease me based on their actions of the day. I have a very changeable nature.”

“So I see,” Kate said, her voice cold, but when Stiles’s eyes darted up her expression was as bright and guileless as ever. “Well, I see you’re in a hurry, so...”

“Yes. Until we meet again, Miss Argent.” Stiles sketched a quick bow and made his escape, cursing himself silently for being so transparent.

He hurried homewards, thoughts tumbling one after another. Kate had to have perceived the change in his manner, but what could he have done differently? He was not so talented an actor as to be able to pretend affection for the woman, knowing her to be so conniving and malicious that just looking upon her turned his stomach. Could Derek have been right in thinking that Kate might target Stiles? What could she possibly still want here in Beacon, now that Derek was gone from the place?

Around and around went his thoughts, and he was so intently focused on deciphering the interaction that he didn’t hear the approaching thunder of hoofbeats until it was almost too late.

Stiles leaped aside just in time, tumbling off the path and into a small gully, the breath quite knocked out of him for a moment. He heard the horse canter to a stop and then turn. He struggled to his knees, readying to run as soon as he was able to draw breath, but it was too late.

Kate’s head appeared above the embankment. Every aspect of her demeanor had changed at once, the warmth and shyness falling away like a mask to reveal a cold, sharp smile and a maniacal glint in her eye, but Stiles had eyes for nothing except the brass-barreled pistol gripped expertly in her gloved
"So clumsy," Kate scoffed. "Why don’t you join me up here in the road?"

The barrel of the pistol stayed steady on him, Kate backing up slowly as he stood. He hissed in pain as he put weight on his right ankle but managed to climb up the embankment, muddy and scraped, ankle throbbing with every step. He had to admit Kate had timed it well — Stiles was still quite a bit from home, but few would pass by this path at this time of the afternoon.

“What are you hoping will happen here?” Stiles asked, fear making his heart thump loudly in his chest. “What can you gain by killing me?”

“Oh, I don’t need to kill you. At least not yet.”

Stiles had just a split second to consider running, injured ankle or not, and then he found himself on the ground again. He was dazed, his ears ringing, uncertain what had happened for a moment before the veil of numbness dropped and his shoulder blazed with pain.

He bit back a cry through clenched teeth, his hand coming up to press against the wound. He hadn’t even realized he had closed his eyes until he opened them to find Kate looming over him, looking smug.

“It’s a lovely invention, isn’t it?” she crowed, turning the pistol as if admiring the design. “The French are so innovative with their weaponry. Double-barreled, which means I still have one to put in your head if you cause me any trouble.”

“If you’re trying not to kill me, shooting me is a bad start,” Stiles gritted out.

“Oh, don’t be like that. My aim is excellent. That one was just a warning.”

Stiles tried to slow his panting breaths, feeling some of the dizziness fade. The pain still blazed in his shoulder, but his head was starting to clear a bit. “A verbal warning would have been sufficient,” he snarled.

“Would it?” Kate leaned in, pressing the toe of her boot against the wound in Stiles’ shoulder. This time he could not suppress his scream, hands scrabbling uselessly at her boot until she released the pressure, stepping back again. “But this is more fun.”

“You’re mad.” It nothing more than realization on Stiles’ part, his mouth working without permission while his head was still trying to think through the haze of pain, but Kate’s face twisted in anger for a moment before she schooled her expression.

“You’re mad.” It nothing more than realization on Stiles’ part, his mouth working without permission while his head was still trying to think through the haze of pain, but Kate’s face twisted in anger for a moment before she schooled her expression.

“Up!” she said sharply, punctuating the utterance with a sharp-toed kick to Stiles’ ribs. “I don’t plan to kill you, but I’m more than happy to improvise. Get up and walking or I’ll let the horse drag you, and take my chances as to whether you’re still breathing when we get there.”

Stiles rolled effortfully to his good side, gulping in sharp ragged breaths, and then slowly pushed himself up on his elbow. He managed to straighten to an unsteady stand, Kate’s watchful gaze on him the whole time.

Kate untied the horse. He was sweating and stamping a bit, obviously unnerved by the gunfire and the scent of blood, but he appeared to be well-trained. Kate prodded Stiles ahead, walking behind him, managing to lead the horse with the gun held steady.

“Just where are you planning to take me?” Stiles asked, thinking furiously as he limped along. Much
as he wanted to keep Scott away from danger, leaving a trail for his brother to follow was probably Stiles’ best chance at survival. Stiles tried to imperceptibly ease up the pressure he was holding against his bullet wound, feeling the blood start to trickle down his left arm again.

“I hate to tell you, I’m not exactly feeling up to a vigorous hike at present,” Stiles babbled. Perhaps if he kept talking, his voice would cover up the sound of the droplets of blood that were slowly pattering to the forest floor every few steps.

“It’s not far,” Kate prodded him in the back with her pistol again. “Maybe you’ll even get there before the wolfsbane in the shot kicks in,” she added spitefully.

It took another sharp prod between his shoulder blades for Stiles to realize he had stopped walking, and he resumed stumbling through the forest, trying to think through the haze of pain and exhaustion. Christ, wolfsbane ammunition — that was something Stiles hadn’t even known existed.

Wolfsbane was not as deadly to humans as it was to werewolves, but it was still toxic. Stiles ran through the symptoms in his mind — nausea, dizziness, uneven heart rhythm, hallucinations. He was already weak and dizzy from blood loss and pain. The pistol ball couldn’t have held much wolfsbane, but if any of it had entered his bloodstream, it was a matter of time before he would no longer be able to implement any sort of rational plan.

“This way.” Kate indicated a narrow path, mostly overgrown by brambles. Stiles recognized it as a path that led to Purvis Lodge, an small estate that had been long-abandoned and had fallen into disrepair. Stiles had to reluctantly admit that it was a good hiding place.

As they got closer, Kate directed Stiles down yet another path, this one even more overgrown, nigh near impassable. Stiles stumbled even more frequently, his vision starting to waver, the sounds of the forest becoming distant and muffled. He tripped over a root and crashed to his knees, his head hanging between his arms for a long moment before he managed to raise it.

He heard Kate saying something, but couldn’t make out the words. He felt a sharp tug on his hair, and found himself standing again. He blinked, trying to clear his vision. There was a small stone dwelling a few hundred yards ahead, almost obscured by shrubbery — the Lodge’s old gamekeeper’s cottage. He focused on it, managing a slow shamble forward again. Time seemed to skip — he thought he was still a distance away, and then suddenly he was leaning against the wall, watching Kate shove at the door, rusty hinges giving way with a reluctant shriek.

Kate prodded him through the door, but he stumbled on the threshold, his foot catching on an uneven stone and his injured ankle giving way under the strain. He landed on hands and knees on the dusty floor, a shock of pain running up his arm to his injured shoulder, and then he remembered no more.
“Stiles. Stiles, wake up.” Stiles felt something wet on his face.

“Mama?” He opened his eyes, blinking as his mother’s face appeared before him. Her eyes were so like his own, concern clear in the amber depths. Distantly, he could feel a throbbing pain, but all he could focus on was his mother’s expression, her hands gentle in his hair. Her lips were moving, but he couldn’t hear what she was saying.

“Mama, I — I can’t —”

“Wake up!” Stiles’ neck jarred, his cheek stinging with the slap, and when he opened his eyes again his mother was gone, Kate Argent’s grim expression staring him down.

“Where? —” Stiles started to say. He tried to sluggishly move his limbs, hearing the clank of metal as his left arm and leg only gave an inch or two. His shoulder was throbbing steadily now, in time with his head. He looked down, blinking at the darkness a few times before he could perceive the manacles holding his feet to the chair legs, a matching cuff of metal securing his left wrist to the arm of the chair. They looked like the kind of restraints Stiles had been forced to use on Scott, and Stiles wouldn’t be surprised if they were laced with wolfsbane as well.

Kate pulled sharply on his hair, tugging his head up again. “Awake now?” she sneered. “Finally. Pick up the pen. I need you to write something.”

“What?”

The fingers in his hair let go. His head dropped sharply before he stopped it, the pounding pain intensifying with the sudden movement. He blinked again, his eyes focusing now on the blank paper, pen, and inkwell in front of him. He realized his right hand was free, and he brought it up to brace against the edge of the table.

“Write.” The command was so unexpected that Stiles would have thought he was hallucinating again, but Kate was already dipping the pen in ink and pressing it into his hand.

“Write to Derek. Say that you have something vital to tell him and Peter, and he must come to Rosings immediately.”

Stiles’ numb fingers grasped the pen automatically.

“Why do you need me to write it?”

“He knows your hand. The lovelorn idiot, he keeps a letter you wrote him in his breast pocket!”

Stiles met her eyes in shock. “I —” He had written to Derek, thanking him for the use of his carriage to take Melissa home after Scott was injured. Just a few simple lines, a courtesy. Derek had kept that modest communication — even treasured it?

“Money can buy me any information I seek, and Derek’s valet is as greedy as anyone. I know for certain that Derek will know your scent, and your hand, and he will not countenance having you at Peter’s without him, the protective idiot. Now write!”

Stiles swallowed again, his throat feeling scraped and dusty. “You mean to kill them both,” he realized aloud. “You can’t get to Derek in the City, and you want to draw him away. Take your
revenge on both of them at once.”

Kate smiled, a terrifying clash of teeth, her eyes wild. “The lines of mountain ash are already laid, ready to be activated. Rosings will burn just as Pemberley once did.”

“You did do it. You killed Derek’s family.”

Kate began pacing, muttering almost to himself. “A middle son would never amount to anything. He had it all, and I gave it to him! And how did he show his gratitude? He cast me aside, on the advice of that bastard dog of an uncle. Ten years I spent in exile, imprisoned in a hovel by my own brother when he found out what I had done —”

She hardly seemed to have remembered Stiles was there, and he felt his mind drift a little as a wave of dizziness washed over him, his stomach roiling with nausea. Kate was ranting about Chris, and some escape — a soldier she had seduced and killed. How his gun, horse, and purse were the only useful things about him.

Stiles tuned her out until her words were a babble, his head starting to droop again. Kate was suddenly before him again, her hand pressing the pen back into his nerveless fingers.

“Write!” she screeched.

Stiles hated her, and yet he pitied her. This was her plan all along, the reason for his abduction?

“Never,” he said, and almost wished she were a werewolf so that she could hear the truth of his words. “I’ll never write it.”

“You will!” Kate’s shriek made him wince, the throbbing pain in his head kicking up a notch. She reached out, digging her left thumb into the wound on Stiles’ shoulder, the right hand still holding the gun on him. “Write it!” she screamed.

The pain jolted through Stiles, making his whole body arc against the restraints. She kept the pressure up for endless moments, grinding into the open wound, and Stiles could do nothing but whimper and pant through it, trying to maintain consciousness.

Finally she eased up, stepping back and forcing the pen back into his hand with bloody fingers. “Write!”

Stiles wrapped his fingers around the pen, trying to steady his grip, and set the pen to paper. He leaned forward, as if to better see what he was writing, and Kate unconsciously leaned forward as well. Stiles suddenly stabbed sideways, driving the pen deep into the wrist of Kate’s gunhand. She screamed, her grip reflexively loosening. Stiles grabbed for the pistol, but Kate managed to tighten her grip. She crashed her left elbow into Stiles’ face. He heard something in his nose crunch, his throat filling with salty blood as his face exploded with pain. He saw the pistol arcing toward his head, and then darkness swallowed him up again.

Stiles seemed to slip in and out of consciousness. His thoughts were sludgy, muddled. Visions seemed to come to him, but whether they were dreams or hallucinations he hardly knew. He saw his father, deep in drink, every sip a silent accusation blaming Stiles for his mother’s death. His mother’s face appeared again, this time gaunt with illness, but her fingers were still soft and gentle in Stiles’ hair. Once he thought Scott was there, six or seven years old again, showing him a favored toy, and he tried to smile back at him even though his face ached.

Kate continued to rail at him, but her words were difficult to understand, slithering away like silver
fish as Stiles tried to grasp their meaning. At times he could hear his own voice, the words oddly
slurred, but he didn’t know what he was saying. On one occasion he found the pen in his hand
again, and his heart suddenly thumped an uneven beat wondering if he had done as Kate wished and
not known it. When he focused in on the words he had put to paper, however, they simply read,
“Never never never never never never…”

At one point he thought he heard a roar, so loud it seemed that the walls of the cottage would shake
down around him. Scott, he thought wildly, but he had never heard Scott sound like that. Then
there were other sounds — thuds and bangs, the crack of bone and a repulsive wet gurgle. He
thought he saw Derek’s face, the alpha-red eyes fading to beautiful multi colored irises, wet with
tears.

“No,” he heard himself slur. “Y’re not here. I d’int write it.” He seemed to blink for a long time,
and when he opened his eyes again it was Scott’s face instead, and then his father’s.

“Dad,” Stiles said. “‘M s’rry, Dad.” He tried to remember what he was sorry for. He thought it was
dying, but that didn’t make sense, did it? While he was still trying to remember, consciousness
slipped away from him once more.
Stiles awoke slowly this time, consciousness creeping in bit by bit. The first thing he perceived was blessed silence — Kate’s screeching voice finally absent, nothing but the distant sounds of birds echoing in his ears. Next came the pain, still throbbing but not as overwhelming as before — localized now to his shoulder and his face.

Stiles pried his eyes open, blinking into the sudden sunlight. At first he could only see a blaze of white, but then slowly his vision cleared, the familiar contours of his own bedroom emerging, and then the even more welcome sight of Scott, slumped in a chair at his side.

“Hey, Brother,” Stiles rasped, wincing at the way the words scraped out of his dry throat.

Scott jolted awake, a sunny smile slowly spreading across his face as he looked at Stiles.

“You’re finally awake! I’ll get Mother!” he said, but Stiles grasped his wrist, urging him to stay.

“What happened?”

“Here.” Scott poured water into a glass from a pitcher on the bedside table. Stiles gulped it thankfully even as he gestured to Scott to continue, chafing at the delay.

“Everyone’s fine, first of all,” Scott said. “Except Kate. She’s kind of...dead. Which I suppose I should be sorry about, but Brother, after seeing what she did to you, I can hardly even —” Scott appeared to become choked with emotion, and Stiles patted his arm.

“Finally, we find the limits to your willingness to think well of others,” Stiles snarked, wincing as his smile pulled at a cut on his lip. “But, truly, everyone else is well? I thought I saw Dad there, and Derek —”

“No,” Scott said, a little too quickly. “Derek wasn’t there. Just Dad and me, and some werewolf authorities, who took care of Kate when she refused to yield.”

“Scott.” Stiles may have had his wits scrambled by the barrel of Kate’s gun, but even so he could tell when his brother was trying to hide something. “Why won’t you look at me?”

“Scott.” Stiles may have had his wits scrambled by the barrel of Kate’s gun, but even so he could tell when his brother was trying to hide something. “Why won’t you look at me?”

“No reason!” Scott jumped to his feet. “I’ll get Mother — she said you’d mend quickly, the gunshot is healing cleanly without infection, and your nose is set, so —”

“Scott.” Stiles made his tone of voice severe, tightening his grip on Scott’s wrist. “Tell me the truth.”

Scott blew out a frustrated breath, casting his eyes upward as if seeking strength from above. “I told him! I told him I was the worst liar ever, but he kept insisting…”

“Who?”

Scott sat down again, scooting his chair even closer to Stiles’ side. “Derek Hale,” he confided. “He made me swear not to tell you he was there, but I told him I can never lie, least of all to you.”

“He was — he was really there?” Stiles repeated. He had the vague memory of seeing Derek’s eyes, but he had thought it was yet another hallucination.

“He was the one who found you!” Scott ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up on end.
“Stiles, when you didn’t return home from the village, and then we found your knapsack in the ditch, we were so afraid! Dad was looking all over, and I tried to track your scent but I was getting so turned around — you know I’m no good at that kind of thing. And then all of a sudden Allison and Derek and even that weird Uncle Peter were there, saying something about Kate’s scent on Derek’s valet. And then Derek was all red-eyed saying he smelled your blood, and he followed your scent like it was calling to him, and Allison had her bow and arrows, and then Derek knocked down the door of that cottage, and Kate tried to shoot us but Allison put an arrow in her hand, and then Peter ripped Kate’s throat out — and, Derek had eyes for no one but you! He ripped the cuffs off of you even though it burned his hands terribly, but then once you were home he said to pretend that he was never there but I knew it would never work, and Stiles, why didn’t you tell me he was in love with you?”

Stiles had gone from lacking information to now having received too much of it at once. His head spun as he tried to make sense of all that Scott had told him, but his heart kept catching on that last question.

“There’s so much I have to tell you,” Stiles groaned. “And so much I have yet to understand myself.”

“There will be plenty of time for explanations later,” Scott said pragmatically. “For now, you need to rest, and focus on healing. Oh! Look what Derek showed me how to do!” Scott’s hand covered Stiles’ bare wrist. Slowly, lines of black crawled up Scott’s fingers and up his forearm, just as a rush of pleasant warmth washed over Stiles, the pain seeming to drain away from him.

“What is that?” he tried to say, but found himself slurring the words as he slid once again into a pool of unconsciousness.
Correspondence

Stiles chewed on the end of his pen, trying to put aside the wild tumble of his thoughts and emotions. A simple thank you, that was all he needed to accomplish, and he could do it without embarrassing himself. Possibly.

To Mr. Hale; he wrote. He stared at the words, before inserting one between. To Mr. Derek Hale; the letter now read. Stiles chewed on the end of his pen some more, before finally crossing out the To and adding a word before it. Dear Mr. Derek Hale; the letter now read.

“You are ridiculous,” Stiles told himself, and then pushed onwards, writing quickly so that he could not second-guess himself.

There are many things I wish to tell you, but before I begin, I have strict instructions that the first communication be relayed from Scott, who quite maturely says, “I told you so.” And, from that, you might correctly deduce that Scott is, in fact, as abominable a liar as he told you he would be, and that he was unable to keep the truth of the circumstances of my rescue from Kate Argent secret from me for hardly more than a few moments.

I do not fully understand why you wished for your involvement to remain a secret — if it was, in fact, simply a result of your natural modesty, which in the past I have been so grossly mistaken as to interpret as pride — or, if you simply wish to ensure that I do not read more into your actions than was intended.

Please be at peace on either account — I have no wish to intrude further upon your kindness, and if you wish for your actions to remain secret from all else, they will not hear a word of it from me or any of my family. My father, as Sheriff of this county, has been able to cloak the events of that day in the guise of a lawful investigation, and as Peter turns out to be, in fact, affiliated with the werewolf authorities (and I will withhold my own opinion on the wisdom of that appointment) Kate’s demise was recorded as a justified execution of someone engaged in the act of attempting to kill a werewolf.

It grieves me considerably that it was under these circumstances that your fears of Kate’s involvement in your family’s murder was confirmed, and I can only hope that her death, while bringing you no satisfaction, may at least give you some sense of justice having been served. I know I, for one, will sleep more soundly knowing that she is no longer of this world, and based on her actions I take comfort in knowing that I am equally unlikely to encounter her in the next.

In any case, I digress from the purpose of this letter, which is to express my sincere and heartfelt thanks for the providence of your arrival in Beacon at such a crucial moment, and your assistance to my family — nay, your single-handed accomplishment — in effecting my rescue from that horrible woman.

Regards,

Stiles Stilinski

Stiles started to chew on his lip, and then winced as the still-healing cut re-opened. He transferred his nervous chewing back to the quill as he contemplated that closing phrase. So distant, so far from what he would truly wish to write! Affectionately, he longed to sign it. Ever yours, he only wished he could say. Perhaps even With love.

“Aargh!” Stiles quickly crossed out the closing. Your friend, he wrote instead, and quickly sanded,
folded, and sealed the letter before he could change his mind.

Stiles spent the next two days both convincing himself that Derek would never reply and yet anxiously awaiting any response. Still confined to his bed by his convalescence, he nonetheless hobbled to the window any time a horse arrived, hoping for the post and some word.

Fortunately for his ragged nerves, a reply was swiftly forthcoming. Scott brought it upstairs with a knowing smile and Stiles snatched it out of his hand, fingers trembling with eagerness to read its contents.

*Dear Stiles Stilinski;* the letter began, and Stiles squinted intently at a blot which preceded this opening. Was that the shape of an *M* and an *y* which had been meticulously cancelled out?

*I received your letter, Derek continued, and find myself astonished at the graciousness with which it was written. How you can thank me at all, when I brought such pain and misfortune into your life, is beyond my understanding. I would not be at all surprised to hear that you blame and revile me for the anguish Kate Argent caused you, as she only did so because of your connection to me. Nonetheless, I will accept your kind forgiveness in any manner in which it can be obtained…*

“Oh!” Stiles said aloud. “Stupid, *stupid* man! How could he possibly consider himself to be responsible for the actions of that madwoman?”

Well, there was nothing for it but to write back, informing Derek of the error in his thinking in no uncertain terms, so that he would have no choice but to be convinced of the truth of it.

It was thus that the exchange of letters between Derek and Stiles began.Hardly a day passed that a letter was not sent or received by one or the other, and often Stiles would fold and stamp a letter only to remember some other point he had wished to make, and would begin another, filling yet another quarto within the same day and posting them both at once.

Stiles would almost be embarrassed by the frequency and length of his communications with Derek, if Derek did not write back so promptly as well. Although his letters were shorter — his style more concise and restrained than Stiles’ own ramblings, especially at first — he wrote just as frequently. Stiles had only to ask a question in a letter and it was answered in another dated on the day of its receipt, and as their exchange continued, Derek became more forthcoming, speaking not only of his current interests and engagements, but also of his past, and even the family he had lost.

Through these letters Stiles became familiar with a side of Derek he had only seen glimmers of previously — a thoughtful, just, and kind man with a dry sense of humor. Derek’s ease in writing, in comparison to speaking, allowed him to drop the facade of coldness that he used to mask his shyness. The warm, engaging personality that was exposed through his missives would have ensured Stiles’ falling in love with him if he hadn’t already been so lost to that emotion before they even began.

And yet, Stiles tried to cast thoughts like that from his mind, because in all the words exchanged, and all the growing familiarity of their greetings and closings (Stiles could open a letter with *My Dear Derek* without a qualm now, in comparison to the painful indecision of that first attempt), Derek had never once indicated that he felt anything for Stiles beyond friendship.

Stiles tried to focus on the positives. He told himself, over and over again, that his friendship with
Derek and the joy he took in their correspondence was sufficient. It was only understandable if the admiration Derek had once felt had been extinguished forever by Stiles’ heartless refusal of his proposal. It was ludicrous to hope that after such a disgraceful reception of his first proposal, Derek would ever be willing to proffer another. And yet — Stiles, in his most secret heart, still hoped.
Stiles was at his writing desk, sealing and addressing yet another letter to Derek, when he heard a commotion in the lane. He had only recently been given leave by Melissa to come downstairs and walk for short periods of time, and remained under her watchful eye, and so Stiles took care to proceed slowly and carefully to the window to determine what was causing such a fuss.

It was a team of horses, and a carriage larger than any that Stiles had ever seen in Beacon. He had but a moment to place the coat of arms on the door of it before Sir Peter Hale himself was stepping down.

Stiles barely had time to give Melissa a shrug before he sat down at his desk again, cultivating an air of unconcern, as Sir Peter was announced by a humbled and breathless housemaid.

“Sir Peter,” Stiles said, rising as smoothly as his still-weakened ankle would allow. “To what do we owe this honor?”

“Stiles,” Sir Peter greeted coldly, favoring him with barely a nod of acknowledgment. “And that lady, I suppose, is your mother?”

Stiles confirmed this supposition, sending a grimace of sympathy to Melissa, who seemed as though she was a hair’s breadth away from striking Sir Peter over the head with the fireplace tongs for his insulting tone.

“I understand you are...still injured,” Sir Peter sniffed, his eye traveling from the fading green-and-yellow bruises on Stiles’ face to where the bulk of bandages was evident under the fabric of his jacket at his shoulder. “How fragile human bodies are, and how slow to heal! I do not know how you can stand it. But, I suppose, you are well enough for a turn in the garden?”

Melissa looked as though she might object, but Stiles squeezed her hand in a silent plea. Much as he detested Sir Peter’s company, he did in part owe his life — or at least Kate’s death — to his intervention. Even more importantly, Stiles felt a lively curiosity as to what the man could possibly want.

Melissa’s sharp gaze sent an unspoken warning to Sir Peter, but she let Stiles go with only an admonishment to take a walking cane.

They were several paces away from the house when Sir Peter turned to Stiles, his pale blue eyes cold.

“I suppose you must know why I am here,” he began. “Your own heart — your own conscience — must tell you why I have come.”

“On the contrary,” Stiles replied. “I can think of nothing I have done to warrant such an honor.”

“Do not trifle with me, young man!” Sir Peter warned sharply. “I have heard a scandalous falsehood — that you are shortly to be married to my nephew. I know it must be false — it is impossible! — and yet I cannot rest easy until I hear the assurance from your own lips.”

Stiles looked down, tracing a design in the dirt with the tip of his walking stick to hide his surprise. “If you believe such a thing to be impossible, Sir Peter, I wonder that you took the trouble of coming so far.”
“You impudent child!” Sir Peter’s face was growing quite red in his fury, and Stiles suspected that he rarely had the experience of being disobliged in such a manner. “I would never allow it! The noble lineage of Hale rests upon my nephew’s shoulders. Do you think I would sacrifice it to the upstart pretensions of a young man without family, connections, or fortune? To a weak, spindly human when my nephew could choose from amongst the most distinguished wolves in the land?”

And truly, Sir Peter looked so horrified at the notion that Stiles hardly knew whether to be offended or entertained by the man’s prejudices, and he could not resist teasing him a bit more.

“Surely, if your nephew has in fact chosen a weak, spindly human above all the distinguished wolves in the land, you do not have much say in the matter?”

“Enough of this!” Sir Peter snarled. “Answer me clearly. Has my nephew made you an offer of marriage?”

Stiles carefully drew another shape in the dirt. Obviously Derek had not told his uncle about the proposal he had made to Stiles at Rosings, and any attempt at denial would be betrayed by Stiles’ heartbeat. “You yourself have just declared the impossibility of such an event, and so I’m surprised you think it worth the breath to inquire about it,” Stiles deflected.

“You insolent, headstrong boy!” Sir Peter paced a few steps and then returned, aggravation in every line of his body. “I have come here with the sole purpose of obtaining your promise never to marry my nephew, and I am not accustomed to disappointment.”

“That will make certainly make today’s events harder for you to bear, but it has little effect on me, Sir Peter.”

“Tell me once and for all!” Sir Peter advanced on Stiles. “Are you engaged to him?”

Stiles was tempted not to answer, simply out of unwillingness to oblige Sir Peter, but he was suddenly weary of this game. It was too much to have his wildest hopes presented to him as actuality, and it gained him nothing to antagonize Sir Peter more.

“I am not,” he finally admitted truthfully.

He could see Sir Peter assessing his heartbeat, and the man nodded with satisfaction. “And can you promise me that you will never become engaged to him?”

“I will make no promise of the kind,” Stiles answered, equally truthfully.

Sir Peter gritted his teeth. “And now we get to the heart of the matter,” he said, his voice dripping with disdain. “What is it you want for such a promise? Name your price.”

Stiles felt his cheeks pinken with the heat of his indignance. “I cannot, because I have none. You have widely mistaken my character, Sir Peter. My affections, or lack thereof, cannot be bought at any price.”

Sir Peter’s surprise quickly gave way to an assessing scrutiny. “So there’s something else you want, then?” he sneered. “The Bite?”

Before Stiles could react, Sir Peter had half-shifted. He grasped Stiles’ left wrist, wrenching his injured shoulder as he pushed up his cuff almost to the elbow, his bared fangs hovering just above the skin of Stiles’ forearm. “Derek isn’t the only alpha of the Hale pack who can offer you that, you know.”
Stiles shuddered at the feel of Sir Peter’s breath against his skin. He carefully pulled his arm free from Sir Peter’s clawed grasp. “I have no wish to be a werewolf,” Stiles said as calmly as he could manage. “And now that you have insulted me in every way possible, I must ask that you take your leave.”

Sir Peter’s gaze remained calculating, as if Stiles had surprised him once again. “You are resolved to have him, then?” he asked.

“I am resolved to act in the manner most likely to result in my happiness — and even more importantly Derek’s happiness — with no reference to you or any other person uninvolved in the matter.”

Sir Peter took a step back. “Very well,” he said. “I now know how to act.”

With nothing left to say to each other, they turned back toward the ostentatious carriage in silence, Sir Peter striding along angrily while Stiles tried his best to keep pace without showing too much of his injury.

“I take no leave of you, Mr. Stilinski,” Sir Peter haughtily said as he boarded his carriage. “I send no compliments to your mother. You deserve no such attention. I am most seriously displeased.”

Stiles bowed. “And I will try to valiantly endure the heartbreak of having caused you such displeasure.”

Sir Peter gestured the carriage on without another word, and Stiles hobbled back to the house, weary and confused, wondering what all that had been about.
Happiness

Stiles was determined to dismiss Sir Peter’s visit from his mind, but unfortunately his mind was not so cooperative as to abide to his wishes. Late into the night he found himself tossing and turning in bed, wondering again at the impetus for Sir Peter’s visit.

The idea that rumors of an engagement between himself and Mr. Derek Hale were so widespread as to reach the ear of Sir Peter! Stiles could feel his cheeks heating up just to contemplate it. What if such rumors had reached Derek’s ears as well? What if he even thought that Stiles was the cause? Could Derek possibly think that Stiles was so presumptuous as to be intimating to others that he still held Derek’s affection? Stiles was mortified at the very thought of it.

By the time dawn broke, Stiles had given up on sleep. He dressed before the rest of his family had awoken, and set out to walk off some of his agitation before Melissa could chide him for overexerting himself. The morning was beautiful — crisp and dewy, fog still thick on the ground but the air clear and bright. Stiles walked for some distance, down the lane and along the road toward town, before he stopped to rest, leaning up against a small retaining wall to catch his breath.

When he heard the clatter of hoofbeats he levered himself up to sit on the wall, out of the way in case the rider could not see him in the last traces of mist.

The horse thundered by, but had only passed a short distance beyond when it slowed, wheeling around in an elegant demi-pirouette before cantering back.

To Stiles’ astonishment, it was Derek atop the magnificent horse, looking almost as surprised to see Stiles as Stiles was to see him.

“Derek?” Stiles said, hopping down from the wall to grasp the horse’s harness. “Is all well?”

Derek dismounted gracefully. His eyes — even more beautiful than Stiles had remembered, with those expressive multi-colored irises — seemed to examine Stiles’ face intently.

“Yes,” Derek said after a long pause, as if just remembering that he had been asked a question. “At least — I hope that it is. I was on my way to Netherfield, to stay for a while, in hopes of coming to visit you at Beacon House.” A blush pinkened Derek’s cheeks. “At a more decent hour for visiting, I mean.”

“To visit me?” Stiles felt his heart leap in his chest. “Why?”

Derek’s mouth twisted with frustration. “Stiles, I know that you are too generous to trifle with me,” he began, his voice rough with some emotion. He grasped Stiles’ hand, enfolding it in his own. “I spoke with Uncle Peter last night, and what he related to me has awoken a hope I have scarcely allowed myself before.”

He pressed Stiles’ hand to his chest, holding it flat between the layers of his coat and shirt with his own warm hand, until Stiles could feel the thumping of Derek’s heart beneath his palm. “My heart is unchanged since I last asked you to be mine. If your feelings are as well, you only have to say one word and silence me forever. If, however —”

And Stiles could stand it no longer — he darted forward, silencing the rest of Derek’s words with a clumsy, unpracticed kiss.

For an instant Derek’s lips were still with surprise beneath his own, but it was only a moment before
his shocked intake of breath was released on the most delicious, soft little noise of entreaty. He lunged forward, deepening the kiss, his arms coming up to encircle Stiles even as he pressed him up against the retaining wall with the bulk of his body.

Derek kissed Stiles as if he wanted to devour and savor him at the same time, his mouth hungry and hot against Stiles’ own even as the muscles in his back bunched with restraint beneath Stiles’ hands. Stiles lost himself in the feel of Derek’s soft lips, the leather-gloved hands cradling his face, the incredible warmth of Derek’s body pressed so close against him.

Derek traced his lips to the edge of Stiles’ jaw, and then placed sucking little bites down the line of his neck, growling in approval as Stiles threw his head back to better bare the expanse of tender skin to Derek’s mouth.

“Tell me,” he rasped, capturing Stiles’ mouth in a lush, clinging kiss before he had a chance to respond. “Tell me.”

Stiles found himself distracted again, licking and nipping at Derek’s mouth as he drew back, diving in again to coax another kiss from him before he managed to draw breath and remember himself.

“I’m yours,” Stiles said plainly. “I have been for —” And that was as far as he got before Derek was kissing him again, soft and deep, rumbling with happiness.

Derek finally pulled away only enough to bury his face in the crook of Stiles’ neck, breathing in his scent. “Mine,” he repeated softly, his voice reverent and awed.

“As you are mine.” Stiles drew in a shaky breath. “I’ve been such a fool,” he admitted. “From the start, I let my injured pride blind me to your true character — ignoring everything I felt for you. Only when it was clear how wrong I had been, was I able to admit to myself that I had been falling in love with you all along.” Stiles lifted a trembling hand, cradling Derek’s jaw, as if he could convince himself that Derek was real with the rasp of stubble against his palm. “And then I thought I had lost you forever.”

Of their own volition Stiles’ fingers traced to the nape of Derek’s neck, tugging on the short hairs there as he pulled Derek forward. They kissed fiercely, their tongues tangling, both of them desperate with the thought of what they almost lost. Finally Derek gentled the kiss, indulging Stiles for long moments more before he broke away, brushing their kiss-swollen lips together in one more chaste contact as if he could hardly bear to be apart.

“My feelings never changed,” Derek confided. “But you were right. I leave destruction in my path. The death of my family was only the beginning. And as much as I tried to protect you from it, I only put you in greater danger. I thought after all that Kate did, you would hardly be able to bear the sight of me.”

“You idiot.” Stiles pressed his forehead to Derek’s, as if he could will the force of his conviction into the man’s thick skull. “You remind me only of the cruelty of my words, and the ignorance from which they sprang. If it is foolish to have been duped by Kate Argent then I am equally so, because she had me fooled as well, and it was only your warning that put me on my guard toward her. The destruction wrought was by her, and you are no more guilty than any of her victims.”

“I hope I may someday come to believe that,” Derek said softly. “But if your feelings changed so long ago, why did you give no sign?”

Stiles shook his head. “How could I ask you to propose marriage a second time, after having so cruelly dismissed you the first? I thought your love for me had been extinguished by my abominable
behavior, and hoped to make myself content with your friendship.”

“We have wasted so much time,” Derek complained. “You could have come to me at any moment and asked me to set the date, and I would have leaped to do so.”

Stiles also mourned the hours of happiness lost, but could not be entirely dissatisfied with any chain of events that had resulted in this moment of transcendent contentment, here in Derek’s arms.

He kissed Derek again simply because he was allowed to do so, sampling his mouth tenderly, his chest feeling near to bursting with the joy welling up inside him. Relief made his usual playful demeanor reassert itself, and he could not resist teasing. “Well, I had it on good authority that your good opinion, once lost, is lost forever.”

Derek snorted. “I would be an idiot to let my damnable pride keep me from what I most desire.”

“And what is that?” Stiles raised an eyebrow in challenge.

“Your happiness,” Derek said easily, his expression open and sincere. “And, in granting it, my own.”

And Stiles couldn’t help rewarding that pretty speech with another kiss, this one slow and lazy, ending with a saucy little nip to Derek’s lower lip.

“And how about you?” The quirk of Derek’s mouth showed that he was teasing Stiles in return, and Stiles could admit to himself that he found that expression devastatingly attractive. “I had it on good authority,” Derek continued, a mischievous glint in his eye, “that I was the last man in the world that you could ever be prevailed upon to marry.”

Stiles groaned, burying his face against Derek’s neck to hide his blush. “You’re going to hold those words against me forever, aren’t you?”

“If you’ll allow me to,” Derek replied, holding Stiles close. “It would be my greatest pleasure.”

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