

## Under Yellow Moons

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# Under Yellow Moons

by [skoosiepants](#)

## Summary

They stare at each other, half-grinning, and Derek knows it's definitely the absolute wrong time for this, but he *wants*. He wants to grin at Stiles over dinner every day for the rest of his life, baffled over *yams* and *Moon Pie Day*, and, god, *crap, goddamn*, when the fuck did he have time to fall in love?

Or

The life and times of Deputy Stiles and Supernatural Foster Dad Derek Hale

## Notes

So this was originally supposed to be a Tumblr prompt fic, when kewkyc said: *For a prompt, deputy!stiles returning a runaway to derek's huge fosterhome for supernatural kids? And it keeps happening over and over?* But, uh, this turned out to be kind of a monster and so I'm posting it directly here instead.

This is kind of a what-if story about Derek taking off for parts unknown directly after Laura's death instead of hanging around to try and mentor Scott and kill Peter. And then, like, obviously he moves home and starts collecting teenage pack members anyway.

**Some trigger warnings for:** suicidal themes--the character in question is *not* suicidal, but some people around him think he is. There is also some mentions of past child abuse, but nothing explicit.

Also, this deals with a lot of made up crap about the foster care system, so hand-wavy forgiveness is needed for inaccuracies. Title is from Rilo Kiley. Many thanks to my writing buddy, Lissadiane, as always!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Derek is wrestling a wriggling and giggling Sam into her pajamas when there's a knock at the front door. The TV in the den is loud, even over the twins' bickering, Sherry is still sullenly clanging pots around in the kitchen, and the second knock is considerably more forceful for having been ignored the first time around.

Sighing, Derek hefts Sam over his shoulder—she gnaws on the back of his shirt, her little covered feet kicking up in the air to mash into his chin—and stomps down the steps.

He peeks into the den to see Nate and Molly in matching dark furry forms, chins on the back of the couch as they stare at him, ears perked and telescoped forward.

Derek huffs and says, “Stay,” grinning when they bare their teeth a little and growl.

The grin drops off his face when he opens the door to see:

Jason, shoulders hunched, hands jammed deep into the pockets of his surplus army jacket, scowling down at the porch, a uniformed Beacon County deputy standing next to him.

“What,” Derek says.

The deputy raises his hands and says, “No one's in trouble.”

Derek arches an eyebrow at him.

Deputy Stiles, his jacket patch says, smiles wide and says, “We picked up lone wolf here trying to hitchhike down the highway—”

Derek's back tenses at ‘lone wolf’, but Stiles doesn't seem to pick up on it.

“—figured maybe you hadn't noticed you were one short yet.” It's said teasingly, but with a hint of damning. Like maybe Derek can't handle having this many foster kids, and maybe he shouldn't try. He's dealt with this kind of attitude for years, ever since he brought the twins home, but he doesn't know this deputy from Adam.

Derek narrows his eyes, takes in the snub nose, the smattering of moles along his cheek, the long neck and wide brown eyes—young and fresh, uniform just rumpled enough for coming off a long shift.

Derek says, careful, “I appreciate you bringing him home.”

“Sure.” Stiles shrugs. And then he licks his lips and darts his gaze to Sam—now snuffling into Derek's neck—and back to Derek's face again. He shifts on his feet, drops his hands to his belt, seems to realize Derek's *pissed*, and says, “Listen, I didn't mean—”

“It's fine,” Derek says shortly. He jerks his head and says, “Jason, inside.”

Jason wrinkles his nose and mutters, for probably the hundredth time, that Derek isn't his dad, but he slinks by him anyhow, disappearing into the den—Derek hears happy yips from

Nate and Molly, and relaxes a little once Jason says, fondly, “All right, mutts, calm down.”

Stiles is slumped and frowning once Derek focuses back on him. He says, “I think every kid his age tries to run away at least once,” like a peace offering, but Derek isn’t in the mood.

He says, “Thanks again, Deputy,” nods once, and then shuts the door on his surprised face with a small warm glow of satisfaction in his belly.

Sherry pokes her head out of the kitchen, still more upset about Hiro going back to college the week before, Derek knows, than actually having to do the dinner dishes. She says, “Is Jason okay?”

Jason is not okay. Derek doesn’t know what to do to *make* him okay, but sometimes ‘wolves just can’t adjust to having a new, temporary pack thrust on them—the only thing Derek can do is try and help him feel welcome.

Derek says, “I’m putting Sam up, and then we’re all playing Monopoly.”

\*

Jason is fifteen with a dead werewolf mother and a deadbeat, human dad, which is basically the worst kind of situation for a teenager on the scrawny side of puberty. He’ll fill out eventually, and there’s a certain wild rebellion in him that won’t bode well for him without a proper pack. Derek is not a proper pack. He’s a stopover, until Erica can find an alpha who’s willing to take him on.

He’s not like Sam, who’ll be gone within the month, probably, or Nate and Molly, who came to him at that awkward preschool age where puppies stop being cute and mostly just eat all your shoes. There’s still a chance they’ll be adopted out, but at this point Erica knows Derek’s not really willing to let them go.

Sherry, from a small, deep-woods borderline abusive pack, has been with Derek long enough to form an unbreakable bond with Hiro, Derek’s first and longest foster—a rare ‘wolf without a shift, but with all the moon-rage downsides that kept him permanently out of the regular government system. Nineteen now, and aged out, Hiro’s got the finished attic as his own space when he’s home from college, and Derek sometimes finds Sherry curled up in the blankets on his bed when he’s not.

Derek’s pretty sure Jason needs the support and routine of a real pack, not just a slapdash, ever-changing one, but while he’s in his home, Derek is going to do his very best to actually *keep him* there.

Derek sits down on the end of his bed and says, “I know you miss your dad.”

Jason grunts and stares up at his ceiling.

“We’re not trying to keep you from him,” Derek goes on, and Jason finally looks at him long enough to widen his eyes in disbelief.

Jason's dad drank too much and locked himself in his room on the full moon, and Derek knows enough about Jason to know that his full moon howls are broken-hearted and lonely.

The thing is, Derek's not going to be the one to tell Jason that his dad's too much of a coward to come visit him, so maybe this is easier.

Derek sighs.

Tomorrow is Jason's first day of school at Beacon High.

Derek says, "Try not to stay up too late," and leaves the door cracked on his way out.

\*

Sam is not the easiest baby to deal with, but that's mostly because she's an early shifter, and it's hard to keep the world from finding out your six month old can grow fur and sharp teeth when she insists on doing it in the middle of the supermarket.

Derek freezes, because he honest-to-god has no idea what to do. He's standing there like a dumbass, praying for a miracle or even a full shift—it'd be easier to explain away a puppy at this point, even one dressed in a onesie—when Deputy Stiles shows up out of nowhere, his hand basket full of cereal and canned soup.

He stands in front of Derek and judges him, because Derek has Sam cradled up to his chest to hide her face and she's vehemently protesting this position by scream-howling.

"She seems upset," Stiles says blandly.

Derek wishes he could murder him with just his eyes. He bites out, "Yeah." He's pretty sure he's bleeding from where Sam has her claws dug into the base of his neck. He sends silent *go the fuck away* messages to Stiles, but he doesn't take the hint.

Instead he says, "Can I help?" and Derek's growled, "*No*," just sets Sam up to get louder. Jesus Christ.

Next time Erica is babysitting.

Stiles's expression grows more concerned, and Derek grows more alarmed, because the last thing he needs is police intervention here. But all Stiles does is pluck a flat, crinkly lion teething ring from an aisle display. He moves close enough to touch, dangling it just off to the side of Sam's head, and she latches onto it with laser focus and an abruptly cut off wail.

Her eyes flash gold and her claws melt back into fingernails as she grabs at it, babbling.

Stiles grins. "There," he says. "All better."

Sam tries to twist around at the sound of his voice, this time, and Derek's so relieved he lets her. Lets Stiles coo at her, and poke at her tummy, and by the time Stiles's gaze drifts back up to him his panic has cooled enough to leave him clammy and gross.

“First time with one this young?” Stiles says. He makes grabby hands and says, “Can I hold her?”

Derek says, voice hoarse, “No,” and walks away.

\*

Derek doesn’t know why he feels so thrown. Why he sits at the kitchen island when they get home, watching blankly as Sam plays on the tiles with her wooden blocks.

Erica sweeps in twenty minutes later and says, “There’s a young couple in the Ito pack that wants Sam.”

Derek takes a shaky breath. “Okay.”

She eyes him like a wary tiger and says, “Fair warning, if you start crying I’m going to tell her no.”

“Can you do that?” Derek asks.

She shrugs. “Technically, no, if we’re playing by CPS rules. Yes, definitely, if we’re doing this alpha to alpha.” Her gaze is razor sharp, taking in his rumpled, blood stained shirt, the probable bruises under his eyes, and the racket Sam is making all over his floor. “*Are* you going to start crying?” she finally asks.

Derek has no firm answer for her about that. He’s exhausted, but in the grand scheme of things he’s more worried about Jason than Sam.

“What about Jason?” he asks.

Her usually calm, cool and collected face goes slightly strained. “Get ready to be a father again!”

“No,” Derek says. It’s not that he doesn’t want Jason. It’s just that he’s absolutely sure Jason hates his guts.

Erica sighs. “Okay, here’s the deal. I know you think you’re not good enough for him.”

“I don’t—”

She holds up a hand to cut him off. “You do. It’s like, this thing you have, in your head, even though you were amazing with Hiro and got Sherry to calm the fuck down and not actually kill anyone. And the twins *adore* you, okay, and I know, I know in that huge, thick head of yours, that you think those are all aberrations, but listen to me.” She steps up and places her hands on either side of his face. “You are the best place for Jason.”

“He needs a stable pack,” Derek protests.

Erica rolls her eyes. “What, you don’t think we count?”

Sam noisily drags a pan out from a bottom drawer and laughs when it clangs down onto the tiles.

Erica glances down at her and says, “Sammy, dearest, your father doesn’t think we’re a stable pack.”

“I’m not her father,” Derek says, even though a knot forms in the bottom of his throat.

“Alpha, whatever.” Erica pokes him hard in the chest. “Don’t pretend like you’ve *ever* let a kid go before.”

“Because you keep giving me the hard-to-place ones!” Derek says, exasperated.

Erica tsks and shakes her head, like she’s greatly disappointed in him. “I keep giving you the ones who need you the most, Hale. And you’re doing an *awesome* job at raising them so far.”

Derek slumps against the counter, unwilling to actually say out loud that she’s right. “I don’t know what to do about him.” Derek’s pretty sure the only reason he got Jason to go to school that morning was because Sherry strong-armed him into her car.

“I have every faith that you’ll figure it out.” She grins sharply. “Besides, I heard you got all chummy with a member of the Beacon County Sheriff’s department this morning.”

Derek narrows his eyes at her and says, “You heard wrong.”

She picks a grape out of the bowl in the middle of the island and crunches down, still grinning. “I went to high school with Stiles. He’s a cutie.”

“Shut up,” Derek says darkly, but Erica just laughs.

\*

Sherry, a senior this year, gets home from the first day of the school year with a heavy backpack, a broody scowl, and no Jason.

“Where is he?” Derek asks from the den doorway. He’s got Nate and Molly and a plate of apple slices at the kitchen table, fighting over crayons. Sam has upended her bowl of spaghetti over her head. He would like today to end, and then maybe reset overnight.

“Detention for fighting,” Sherry says. “Didn’t they call you?”

“No,” Derek says slowly, and then double checks his cellphone to make sure he doesn’t have a missed call.

Sherry shrugs with a, “Huh,” and then, “I’m going to skype Hiro,” and then, louder, “No worms better sneak in to listen,” only with an amused edge that definitely makes it a challenge.

Molly and Nate get suspiciously quiet, and Derek pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Okay,” he says. “Can you watch them? I’ll call Boyd over to help with Sam.”

Sherry gives him a mock salute and disappears into his office to use his laptop, and Derek grabs his keys.

He calls Jason just for fun, after he calls Boyd on his way out to the car, and he’s not surprised when there’s no answer.

He carefully types out a text—*I hope you’re okay*—before he backs out of the driveway. He’s so surprised when his cell buzzes to life in response that he nearly drops it into the foot well. Pulling over, he scrambles to answer the unknown number with a breathy, “Hello?”

“Mr. Hale,” a voice says cheerily. “The Beacon County Sheriff’s department has something of yours.”

“What did he do?” Derek says, relief and annoyance swirling in his belly.

“Nobody wants to press charges,” the voice says, and then, “This is, uh, Stiles by the way. In case you didn’t, you know, recognize my voice?”

“What did he do?” Derek asks again.

“I’m not exactly sure, but I think he may have been trying to liberate some kittens.”

Relief and annoyance churn into worry and fear. “Stealing,” he says. Erica will have to put this in his file. They try to keep as much out of his official records as possible, because a ‘wolf isn’t going to last long in a group home or juvie, but *stealing*. God.

Stiles’s soft voice pulls him out of his haze of budding panic, saying, “Don’t worry, man, I’m pretty sure Mrs. Chan just rapped him on the knuckles with her cane and made him strip off his suspiciously wiggling shirt. He can make it up to her by cleaning cages a couple days a week or something. No harm, no foul.”

“Right.” Derek knocks his forehead on the steering wheel. “He’s at the station?”

“My dad’s feeding him burgers and fries,” Stiles says. “Take your time.”

\*

“You told Sherry you got detention for fighting?” Derek says. The two of them are in his car, Jason slumped and sullen in the passenger seat, fingers of one hand picking at the worn knee of his jeans.

Jason scowls and says, “It sounded believable.”

“Maybe,” Derek says, “if the school didn’t always notify parents of after school detentions.” The whole thing with Mrs. Chan’s kittens is something he’ll bring up later, once he can actually wrap his mind around the fact that that is a thing that happened. He startles at a knock at his window, cursing under his breath that someone could sneak up on him.



He starts the engine to roll down the window and glares up at Stiles.

“Yeah?”

“Hey! Yeah,” Stiles bobs his head at them and Jason snorts, mutters *dork* loud enough to make Stiles flush a little. He rubs the back of his neck, and Derek doesn’t realize he’s staring at the rapid pulse of his jugular until Stiles clears his throat.

Derek blinks up at him, says, “Sorry.”

“No, I mean,” Stiles huffs a small laugh, “I wanted to catch you before you left. How do you feel about barbeque?”

“It’s...okay?” Derek says.

Stiles’s visible embarrassment blooms into a pleased smile. “Excellent.”

Derek looks at him through the window, pointedly doesn’t notice the knobby bones on his wrists, the long fingers that are curled over the bottom of the window frame as Stiles leans toward him. After a few seconds of silence, Derek says, “Okay?” again.

“Right!” Stiles says, scrambling upright and away. “Right, so I’ll see you Saturday.”

Derek is confused, but also kind of relieved by the choked off laugh that comes from Jason, like he’s trying not to find this funny but can’t help himself.

Derek says, “And Saturday is...?” leadingly.

“Meet me here,” Stiles says, grinning. “One o’clock. I promise it’ll be fun.” And then he’s walking away, *swaggering*, and Derek says, faintly, “Was he asking me out?”

“I don’t know if that qualifies as *asking*,” Jason says, but he’s back to glaring down at his lap when Derek looks over at him again.

Derek puts the car in reverse with a sigh and turns them around to go home.

\*

The rest of the week is as quiet as it ever gets for Derek with a baby werewolf that’s more and more mobile every day, two energetic six-year-olds, and two teenagers constantly living in varying degrees of sullenness.

Hiro laughs at him over skype. He calls him *Dad* in that half-mocking, half-fond way he does, and Derek signs off feeling slightly better about the way Sherry heaves melodramatic sighs all over the house and Jason locks himself in his room every night after dinner.

Or, at least, Derek *thought* he was locking himself in his room.

Thursday night, Derek opens the door to Stiles in uniform again. He jerks his thumb over his shoulder toward his cruiser, a rueful look on his face, and says, “Caught him down at the bus

station this time. Edith said he had a ‘runaway vibe’” he makes air quotes, “and called us in to make sure.”

Derek can see Jason in profile, framed by the open back door of the sedan. When Jason turns to look at him, Derek sucks in a breath—there’s blood on his mouth and a bruise darkening his eye.

“Shoulda seen him when I first picked him up,” Stiles says with a strained laugh. “He won’t tell me what happened, wouldn’t let us clean him up, so I figured I’d just bring him straight home.”

“Jason,” Derek says, and the kid must hear the worry in his voice, swipes at wet eyes before stumbling out of the back of the cruiser.

“I’m fine,” he says. “It’s fine.” He folds into himself, and Derek fights off the urge to give him a hug.

He’s not fine, especially not if he still looks like this.

Derek absently says, “Thanks, Deputy,” and hovers over Jason as he slips past him and inside.

Stiles bites his lip and nods, and Derek’s pretty sure he’s still standing there on the porch, watching them, when he shuts the door.

“I’m *fine*,” Jason says again, shrugging off the tentative hand Derek places on his shoulder to guide him into the kitchen.

“You’re not healing.”

“I am a little,” Jason says. He pokes at his split lip with his tongue, and Derek wants to tear his hair out in frustration.

“Are you doing this *on purpose*?”

Jason shrugs, dragging out a kitchen chair and dropping into it.

Sherry glances up from her homework and says, “Jesus, Jason,” wrinkling her nose. “Can you not get blood all over the table?”

“Your concern is touching,” Jason says.

“Either heal it or I’m getting out the first aid kit,” Derek says, crossing his arms and frowning. “I have the antiseptic ointment that stings, and I will use it all over your face.”

Jason spends a few seconds glaring at him before his cuts start to crust over and disappear, the purple of his black eye fading back into pale skin.

And then Derek says, suddenly overwhelmingly tired, “I think it’s time for everyone to be in bed.”

\*

Cora shows up Saturday morning, road worn and grinning. She drops her backpack by the front door, tosses the keys to the Camaro to Sherry and says, “Live it up, kid, I’m here for at least a week,” and Sherry tries and fails spectacularly to stamp down her delighted expression. There’s even an aborted fist pump.

Nate and Molly scream, “Aunt Cora!” and jump on her like little monkeys, hanging off her back and arms as she staggers into the den.

“When did you get so big?” she says, and then collapses them all onto the couch.

Jason stares at her from the bottom of the steps with big, awe-filled eyes, and Derek has to fight off a face-palm.

Cora spots him and says, “New kid!”

“Please don’t call him new kid,” Derek says, but Jason pretty much looks like he’d be happy with Cora calling him anything at all.

Cora rolls her eyes and says, “I wanna see Erica and Boyd. Call them immediately,” and then slides down onto the floor to bury her face in Sam’s belly and give her a zerbert, the twins still clinging to her limbs, beta-shifted now and yipping.

It’s a big pile of happiness. Derek ducks his head and grins, then shuffles out to call Erica, patting Jason on the back as he passes.

Jason spares him a brief, annoyed look before dropping directly back into besotted mode. That’s going to end *terrible*, but in the meantime maybe it’ll keep him in the house.

\*

Erica and Boyd bring pizza.

They have lunch on the floor of the den, and Sam mashes applesauce all over Cora’s face and hair. Jason deigns to slump onto the far end of the couch and eats an entire pepperoni pie all by himself.

Sam naps on Derek’s chest, Erica gives him *I told you so eyes*, and by the end of the day the den smells more like pack and home than it has in months. When darkness falls, they shift and take off for the woods.

Boyd wordlessly volunteers to stay back with Sam, a hulking shadow on the porch curled around her, and Derek nips at Jason’s heels to get him to keep up, to stop lurking like a comma on their ends. Cora, small, lean and fast, darts ahead of them and howls—throaty and hoarse, distinctive enough to make Derek’s insides ache.

Derek picks up the call behind her, joyous, and in the distance a couple of Ito pack wolves answer back.

Cora curls up in his bed afterwards, eschewing the pull-out couch in favor of cuddling and pack-scent, a rarer event than even her sporadic visits between travels. She nudges her nose into his throat and says, “That kid smells defeated,” and Derek doesn’t have to ask her who *that kid* is.

“He thinks nobody wants him,” Derek says.

Cora shifts back so she can look him in the eyes. “*You* want him.”

“I...” Derek pauses, thinks about Jason’s fighting and fleeing, his anger and fear. “I want him to feel safe.”

“There’s no safer place than you, big bro,” Cora says.

There’s a lump in Derek’s throat. A wedge of feelings Cora would tease him mercilessly for. They have years of hurt and horribleness between them; Cora has every reason to despise him. Derek has a carefully constructed world around him where people *need* him; it helps balance out all the guilt. But Cora has never wanted anything from him that Derek could give. Years of therapy are the only thing that makes that kind of okay.

Cora doesn’t leave because she hates him. She doesn’t come and go because she can’t stand to see his face. This is better. This is her working out her demons, the same way Derek is always, *always* working out his. When they clash back together, there’s only love and longing.

“I wish you’d stay,” slips out unbidden, but he doesn’t take the words back.

“If wishes were horses,” she says airily, eyes dark.

Derek forces a wolfish grin. “We’d all eat like kings.”

Cora smashes her palm into his forehead, pushing him back with a, “Gross, *Derek*.”

They wrestle loud enough to draw in Nate and Molly, sleepily scrubbing hands over their eyes, and Cora eagerly gathers them up, her, “Sweet, precious cubs,” and Derek creepily stays up until dawn, watching over them.

\*

The week Cora stays is nearly magical, mainly because Jason only has one fight at school, and nobody gets dragged home by the police.

Sam decides scooting is more efficient than crawling, because she can grab stuff as she goes by. Derek has to tuck everything breakable onto the high shelves, but it’s only a matter of time before she starts climbing the furniture, too.

Cora smugly says, “She takes after her favorite aunt,” and Derek doesn’t even bother pointing out the impossibility of that.

Erica says, “Excuse you,” without any heat, and then suddenly it’s Friday and Cora’s packing up the Camaro with everything from Derek’s kitchen that won’t go bad.

She scent marks him with a quick brush of their cheeks and says, “I promise I’ll come back for Thanksgiving.”

She’s gone before the kids get back from school. She thinks that’s easier, but really it’s only easier on *her*. Derek has to deal with the sudden plummet of mood, even in the twins, with the added benefit of Jason looking at him like he personally drove Cora away. With a pitchfork.

Honestly, the only surprising thing is that it takes till the next Wednesday for him to disappear again.

\*

Stiles greets him with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes and a clipped explanation of where they found him—sleeping on a bench in the park—and it’s late enough, almost two AM, that Derek really doesn’t register that Stiles has walked away before he could...thank him? Shut the door in his face? Until the cruiser is pulling away from the curb.

Huh.

“That was weird, right?” Derek says, and Jason huffs in response, knocking harder than necessary into his side when he starts to walk by.

Derek instinctively reaches out for the back of his neck, cupping his nape with firm fingers.

Derek is not completely awake yet. It takes three whole seconds for his heartrate to climb, for his limbs to tingle into full awareness of what he’s done, and then his hand tightens even more. He holds fast through Jason’s initial flinch, the tensing of his muscles, until the line of his spine suddenly melts and Jason dips his forehead into Derek’s chest.

He tugs Jason into a hug, his free arm wrapping around his back, eyes stinging when Jason lets out a harsh, bitten off sob.

He says, “Why doesn’t he want me?” and Derek doesn’t have any answer for him that makes sense.

He just says, “You can stay here as long as you want,” and, “We’ll never not want you, okay?” and hopes it’ll be enough.

\*

Breakfast the next morning is awkward, with Derek uncertain and Jason red-eyed and neither of them talking about it.

When Jason finally says, “Deputy Stiles is mad at you,” Derek just clears his throat and says, “Uh, yeah?”

It's not surprising. Derek doesn't usually inspire a lot of friendliness. He shrugs like he doesn't think about the broadness of Stiles's shoulders, sometimes, and the way his hips wear his belt and holster.

Derek doesn't have time for anyone but his pack right now, anyway.

It's Saturday, and all the kids are subdued, even with platefuls of pancakes in front of them. They're two days from the full moon, missing Cora, and even Sam is unnaturally cranky, throwing more cheerios on the floor than she's stuffing into her mouth.

These are the downsides to Cora's surprise visits, and how the kids somehow always expect her to stay.

Derek pushes his chair back and stands up, grabbing both his plate and Sam's bowl. He says, "Okay, everybody clean up and grab your favorite car snack. We're visiting Isaac today."

"Who's Isaac?" Jason asks, shoving the rest of his bacon in his mouth before getting up.

Nate and Molly start chanting, "Isaac, Isaac," and Sherry has to grab for their plates before they make a mess all over the floor.

She's grinning now, though, and says, "Isaac's the best. You'll see."

\*

Derek never fostered Isaac, not really. Mostly this was due to the fact that Derek hadn't been mentally ready for that, a decade ago, and also because Isaac isn't a werewolf. Derek's the one who got him away from his abusive father, though, and paid for his education, and introduced him to Deaton, and gave him the money to start his wildlife rehabilitation center in the middle of nowhere nearly three hours away.

There's always something new and adorable when they visit, and this time he's got bobcats. A pair of them, orphaned, with big fluffy feet, climbing all over his long-suffering Golden Retriever, Banjo. Sherry sits down with the twins in their makeshift pen to let them climb all over them, too.

Jason looks like he's in heaven, face pressed up against Shane's enclosure, and Derek curses himself a little for not thinking of this earlier.

Shane, a three-legged white wolf, and his unlikely companion, a feral shepherd mix named Velma, are lounging in the shade of the faux cave leading to their indoor space, watching Jason with sharp, wary eyes.

Derek nudges his shoulder and says, "You can't pet those."

Jason glances up at him, expression hopeful. "So you're saying I can pet something else?"

Isaac whistles, high and long, and Bear, the rehab's longest resident, comes trotting out from behind the main house. Big, black and mean-looking, long-legged and scruffy, the wolf picks

up speed when he spots Derek, circles back around him when he realizes Derek's not alone, and then approaches at a wary angle, one eye on Jason and ears alert.

"He looks like you," Jason says.

Isaac scoffs and says, "Bear isn't nearly as broody."

Bear sniffs at Jason's shoes, his jeans and then the fingers on Jason's outstretched hand before calmly walking into it and angling his head for ear scratches.

Jason says, "Wow, okay," and then slumps down onto the ground so he can give him a hug.

Derek wanders a few feet away to stand by Isaac.

Isaac nods his head and says, "So that's your troublemaker?" with blatant amusement as they both watch Bear roll over onto his back for belly rubs. Jason acts like he doesn't get to give Nate and Molly belly rubs daily, but Derek supposes this might feel a little different. Bear is twice their size, to begin with, and also actually a hand-reared but still unpredictably wild wolf.

Derek shrugs, and Jason's cheeks heat up. Isaac always forgets how much they can hear.

Derek says, "He's a good kid," and watches Jason's cheeks redden even more.

\*

They stay for most of the day. He lets them all shift and run with Bear, tussle with Banjo and the bobcat kits, and Isaac watches them from the main building's front porch with Sam.

At dinnertime, Jason helps feed the hawks, an emaciated puma, Shane and Velma, and a family of skunks.

Sherry takes selfies with Bear and Isaac, they lose Sam for an hour under the porch, Nate and Molly accidentally let out three llamas and a goat, and everyone is dead on their feet by the time Derek starts making noises about driving back home.

Isaac lets Derek scent mark him before they leave. He's not quite pack, but he's never *not* been pack either.

"You should visit more often," Isaac says, and, "Bring Erica and Boyd next time," and Derek tugs his ridiculous scarf back in place around his neck and tries not to get emotional.

The sun is dipping low behind the trees, burning orange across the horizon. A howl picks up. First Shane, and then Bear, a shaky, "*Arrooo*," from Banjo as the old dog creakily pushes to his feet. Velma remains silent, staring at them from the other side of her and Shane's fence.

Everyone's always busy. They mainly just see Isaac at holidays, which is harder to justify when the twins are knocked out in the back of the SUV and Sam is a sleepy ragdoll as he straps her into her car seat. Even Sherry's eyes are drooping, leaning out the passenger side window.

Jason's the only one still wide-eyed and thrumming, even though Derek can smell the exhaustion on him.

He says, "Can we come back next week?" bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Derek doesn't want to say no, but it's a hike and a half to get up here, and long car rides are always tough on the younger 'wolves.

Isaac says, "You get your license and I'll let you help out."

Jason groans and Derek ducks his head to hide a smirk. Jason's got another nine months before he even turns sixteen.

Derek says, "Maybe Sherry can be bribed."

"I can always be bribed," Sherry says, eyes closed. "You just have to figure out what I want best."

*Hiro*, Derek doesn't say. It won't help. He curls a hand around Jason's neck as they round the car, chest warming at the natural way Jason curls into his side in response. He says, "We'll work something out," and clenches his teeth against a pleased, rumbling growl when Jason beams back.

\*

It's Tuesdays, Derek thinks, that are the worst for Sam somehow, and he has to stop picking that day to do the shopping.

He's clutching her to his chest in the middle of the grocery store, planning out an escape route in his head, when Deputy Stiles steps into his aisle like the worst kind of *déjà vu*.

It's not that Derek doesn't *want* to see Stiles. In civilian clothes, even—worn jeans and a soft plaid. Hair a sleepy mess, bleary-eyed with red-bitten lips. He looks tired and comfortable, and Derek really hopes he's just as oblivious as last time, and doesn't notice Sam's suspiciously pointed ears from the back.

Derek nods at him, says, "Deputy."

Stiles blinks and yawns and blinks again before his eyes get just a little sharper and his mouth flattens into a not-quite-frown.

"Hey," he says, and then starts to turn around.

Derek opens and closes his mouth, staring after him, because Stiles has always been weirdly assertive, when they've come across each other, and his, "Are you mad at me?" comes out mostly inadvertent.

He jostles Sam out of a howl-cry, and she grabs for his mouth with thankfully blunt fingernails.



Stiles stops and glances at him again. His, “Why do you ask?” is formal and stiff, and raises Derek’s hackles.

He says, “Did I *do* something?” completely confused by this attitude change. Jason said Stiles was mad at him—for what? Not keeping a close enough eye on the kid?

“No, you...” Stiles visibly deflates, gives him a half-shrug with a self-depreciating smile. “Nah,” he says, “we’re all good.”

Sam has stopped crying to wave a fist at Stiles, suddenly all human again.

Stiles rubs a hand over the top of his chest, says, “That’s my good girl,” before shifting his gaze back to Derek and saying, “She might be teething?”

Derek nods, hating the way Stiles’s eyes cool when he looks at him, but not knowing exactly how to fix it.

“Stiles,” a fierce-looking redheaded woman says from the end of the aisle. “I don’t have all day.” She sends Derek a glare, and he has to brace himself from taking a step backward.

Stiles relaxes, says, “*Sure*, Lyds,” and then gives Derek an absent wave as he walks away.

\*

“Deputy Stiles is *really* mad at you,” Jason says over dinner, stabbing a fork into his mashed potatoes.

Derek grunts and says, “How do you know?”

Jason presses a finger to the side of his nose, but jumps with a yelp when Sherry very obviously kicks him under the table.

She says, “He hangs out at the station after school. I drop him off to do filing, to make up for almost stealing all those kittens.”

“I thought Mrs. Chan was supposed to have you clean cages?” Derek says.

“Mrs. Chan hates him,” Sherry says over Jason’s, “I can tell him *myself*, god,” and there’s enough chaos at the dinner table that it’s almost as normal as when Hiro’s home, except more food ends up on all over the floor.

During clean-up, Jason crouches down to wipe potatoes off the floor tiles and mutters, “I like him,” and, “Did you, like, mortally offend him on your date or something?”

Derek freezes with a napkin full of peas.

Jason’s head pops up over the edge of the table. “What?”

From the sink, Sherry says, “Are you having a heart attack?”

Nate and Molly, fighting over a dishrag in wolf forms, drop it in tandem to swarm him, whining, and Derek unfreezes enough to rub soothing hands down their backs.

Crap, though. Seriously, so much crap.

He very carefully says, “No, to all of that,” and thinks about how he’s going to explain to Stiles that he completely and totally forgot they’d even had a date at all.

\*

It turns out there’s really no explaining that kind of thing. Erica laughs at him. This pity-laugh, like she can’t believe he did that but also like she’s not really surprised.

“It was the day Cora showed up!” Derek says, head hiding in his arms. “How was I supposed to remember? And it’s not like he even really invited me anywhere.” It was more like a meet-me-here wink and nudge, with a sexy slow-mo walk-away thrown in. There was no actual asking out, Derek can’t be blamed for... essentially blowing him off completely. Ugh.

The next full moon comes and goes, and Derek has his hands full of Sherry’s rage and Jason’s dogged depression, and Stiles gets relegated to the backburner of Derek’s mind with all the other crap he’s fucked up.

He’s both unsurprised and surprised when Jason does his disappearing act again. Late Sunday afternoon, when they’re supposed to be getting ready for a pack dinner at Erica and Boyd’s.

By the time he checks the bus station, drives up and down the highway, and ducks into every store and diner on main street, he realizes he’s not going to be able to find him if he doesn’t want to be found.

*I am not going to panic*, he thinks, and calls Stiles.

Or, he calls the number that Stiles last called him on, only realizing at Stiles’s lazy, “Hello,” that he hadn’t been calling from his station phone before.

His fear for Jason is enough to push through the awkwardness and he says, “Jason’s missing again.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, more alert. “I’m guessing you couldn’t find him at his usual haunts.”

Derek stares tensely out the front window, watching the sun slowly sink below the horizon. “I can’t find him,” he says, chest tight.

There’s a small pained sound, a faint, *It’s okay, Lydia*, that Derek tries not to think too hard about.

“Okay. Okay, but did you try to super-sniff him out?” Stiles says finally, just when Derek notices Sherry’s car is gone from the driveway, but—he wrinkles his nose, glances over his shoulder—Sherry’s still sitting at the kitchen table, staring at him.

“Shit,” he says. He heaves a big, semi-relieved breath. On the one hand, he’s not entirely sure Jason knows how to actually drive a car. On the other, taking Sherry’s wheels means he’s not planning on staying away. Hopefully. Grand larceny would be a terrible thing to go into his file.

“Look,” Stiles says, “I’m off-shift now, but if you call the station—”

“No, that’s okay, thanks,” Derek says, rubbing his forehead with three fingers. “I think I know where he’s gone.”

\*

It’s too late and long of a drive for the twins, and Sam’s already asleep, so Erica and Boyd both come over to babysit, bringing covered dishes of whatever they’d made for pack dinner with minimal grumbling.

Sherry grouches about coming with him, but gets in the car for the long drive anyway. She flicks on the overhead light and works on her homework and Derek obsesses over all the reasons Jason has run away again. Run away to *here*. Is he just doing it to fuck with him?

It’s safe, at least, and he parks the SUV next to Sherry’s car with relief when they get to the rehab center a couple hours later.

Isaac has the front floodlights on, leaving half of Jason’s body in shadows, standing motionless at the edge of Shane and Velma’s enclosure. Shane is pacing twenty yards back, and Velma is pretending to sleep, curled up with her ears perked just behind him.

Derek sighs and decides not to be mad about this.

Jason flicks him a quick look when he moves to stand next to him, then focuses back on Shane.

They stand in silence for a few long moments, and then Derek says, “Are you okay?”

Jason nods. Derek watches the side of his throat as he swallows.

“Is he... Is he here because he’s lame?” Jason says, nodding toward Shane. The white wolf is sitting now, not as nervous, but still alert.

“No,” Derek says, slow and careful. He knows Shane’s story. It, surprisingly, is not the important one here. He backtracks with, “Maybe, but chances are his pack would’ve welcomed him back, once Isaac got his leg fixed.” Shane moves fast, adapted well, and wolves are loyal, with long memories. Isaac doesn’t like keeping animals that can be rehabilitated successfully back into the wild.

Jason’s smart. His gaze zeros in on Velma—distrustful and mute, scarred inside and out. “He stays for her?”

Derek shrugs. “No one knows exactly why he stays.” Isaac’s given him more than a dozen chances to leave over the year he’s been there. Velma is a street rat. She can’t howl, and

likely wouldn't survive for very long on her own, well past prime years and going blind in one eye.

He hears Isaac step up behind them and Jason twitches, makes himself a little smaller, but doesn't move.

Isaac bumps his arm into Derek's before pressing both his hands down on Jason's shoulders. "Sometimes," he says, "family's got nothing to do with blood."

\*

It doesn't occur to him until much later that Stiles had said *super-sniff*, and it could be a terrible coincidence, or it could be something worse. He tracks Stiles down at the Sheriff station on Monday, says, "Can we talk?" and waits until Stiles drags him out behind the building to say, "Do you know?"

Stiles's disgruntled expression gives way to bewilderment. "Do I know what?"

Derek huffs and curls his hands up, making a clawing motion that has Stiles grabbing for his wrists and saying, "No. *No*, we do not... are you a *child*?"

"Uh—"

"And how can you not know that I'm actually *in a pack*?" He runs his hands through his hair, making it stick up in the front.

Derek blinks blankly at him. In a pack? "You're—"

"No, you know what? We're not doing this here." Stiles turns and stalks away, out toward the parking lot, and throws over his shoulder, "Come on, you're feeding me."

Derek follows him to his cruiser warily, thinking numbly *what pack?* but already knowing the answer. There's only one other pack in Beacon County. He probably shouldn't be surprised.

Stiles says, "I'll meet you at Martha's diner, I'm coming off my shift anyway." He won't look Derek in the eyes, there's a slump to his shoulders, and Derek wonders when all the casual things between them went wrong.

"Okay," Derek says. "I'll meet you there in ten."

It takes him fifteen, because parking on the strip is a bitch, and Stiles's muttered, "Kinda surprised you'd even show," makes his face burn all the way down his throat.

Derek says, "I'm sorry."

Stiles cocks his head at him. "Sure."

"I honestly forgot," Derek says, and Stiles nods like he doesn't believe him and then leads him inside.

They take a booth in the back, sliding in across from each other on squeaking vinyl.

“I remember you. From before,” Stiles says, staring down at his laminated menu. “The fire was a pretty big deal.”

“Yeah,” Derek says, voice thick. He doesn’t want to talk about that.

“And then, you know, ten years ago.” Stiles waves his hands expansively, menu slip-sliding onto the table, “when your crazy uncle went on his killing spree and bit my best friend Scott? Fun times.”

Derek isn’t imagining the bitter note to Stiles’s voice. He swallows hard and says, “That was a rough time for me.” He doesn’t remember Stiles. He probably should.

“Uh, understatement,” Stiles says, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “I’m not—seriously, Derek, I’m not blaming you. I *did*, but I was just a punk-ass sixteen-year-old whose best friend had just tried to eat him. I didn’t get...” He makes a face. “I thought that made you selfish, leaving us to deal with that mess, but in retrospect I’m not actually sure you even knew what was happening, after Laura died.” His eyes are sympathetic.

The only thing Derek knew for sure, back then, was that he got out, and that he’d somehow managed to bring Isaac with him.

“I wasn’t... healthy,” Derek says slowly. He wants to think of other words to defend himself, but honestly there probably aren’t any.

“Satomi stepped up, man. It was the best possible outcome to a shitty situation. Scott wasn’t dealing so well with the *werewolf* thing, and honestly you probably would’ve just made that worse.” Stiles shakes his head. “I thought you’d found out Scott and Kira wanted Sam and decided to be a dickhead about it.”

Derek scrunches his eyebrows. “Scott wants Sam?”

“Kira’s a kitsune.” He makes half-hearted jazz hands. “Turns out fox demons aren’t the best at reproducing. Her mom’s over six hundred years old and Kira’s an only child.”

Derek doesn’t know what to say to that. He doesn’t know what to say about any of this. He doesn’t know how to give Sam up, even though that’s a really good reason. Instead of flat-out saying no, though, he surprises himself by saying, “Can I meet them first?”

Stiles eyes widen. “Sure? But, like, I’m not trying to push you into anything. I’m not going to judge.”

Awkwardness falls swift and terrible, and the waitress hasn’t even taken their orders yet.

Finally, Derek says, “I’m sorry,” again. “For, uh, forgetting about the barbeque.”

“It was pretty shitty,” Stiles says, bobbing his head. “But it’s been pointed out to me that I was kind of an ass about asking you in the first place.”

“You weren’t,” Derek says.

“Dude, I don’t think I even actually asked.” He looks sheepish. “I didn’t give you a chance to say yes *or* no. Jason kind of yelled at me for it.”

“Jason did,” Derek says woodenly.

Stiles takes a noisy breath. “Yeah, so. Over and done with. I’ll stop being weird and mad and we can all move on with our lives.” He smiles brightly over at him. It does absolutely nothing to dissolve the awkward haze around them.

Derek has no idea how to fix that either.

\*

Derek can’t stop thinking about it. How Stiles is in a pack. He knows about werewolves. There would be no hiding, if they dated, and no soul-crushing disastrous reveal. On the other hand, Derek feels that old familiar guilt flare up at the thought of leaving Satomi and Stiles to clean up his uncle’s mess all those years ago. The fact that Satomi never thought to mention it to him makes him feel even worse.

Erica shows up and says, “You *really* want to give away Sam?”

“I want to talk to them about it,” Derek says. He doesn’t *want* to give her away, but maybe Scott and Kira will love her as much as he does. There’s a small, tiny part of him that kind of wants to go food shopping without it ending in disaster and tears. Maybe that’s *why*. Maybe he doesn’t love her enough; maybe she’ll just make him feel guilty for the rest of his life. He doesn’t know. He won’t know until he meets them.

“You have pretty terrible instincts when it comes to other people,” Erica says.

“I’ll know,” Derek says stubbornly. He’s Stiles’s best friend. He’ll know.

She arches an eyebrow at him. “Have you talked to the others about this?”

Derek grimaces. Sherry knows, and she’s not happy. Hiro called and told him he’d respect any decision he made. Jason will probably never speak to him again.

“What if she grows up to hate me,” Derek says, “because she could have been part of this other family?” *and ended up stuck with me instead?*

Erica watches him closely. She taps her sharp red nails on the countertop. She says, “This is Sam. You can be selfish about this.”

Derek can *also* be stubborn. “I still want to meet them,” he says, and Erica tips her head to the side and says, “Okay.”

\*

Scott has an infectious grin and Kira is endearingly awkward and Derek has to fight to suppress a deep well of rage watching them touch Sam, thinking about them possibly taking her away. He's not very successful.

Erica glares at him from where he can't help lurking at the side of the room, hunched in on himself, clenching his teeth to keep them from sharpening. He doesn't want to be anywhere near these two. He wants them gone immediately. He wants to crouch and growl until Erica *makes* them leave.

He squashes those thoughts as deep as he can, crosses his arms over his chest, and glares back at Erica when she mouths *behave* at him.

Scott and Kira are perfect.

Derek wants to rip them to shreds.

He has to dig his claws into his arms to keep from grabbing Sam and running.

Scott gives him a couple wary, faltering smiles, but Kira keeps a sunny bounce to her voice as she talks with Sam. Sam crawls all over them and yanks Kira's hair and laughs at her funny faces.

A haze of red falls over Derek's vision, there's a loud roaring in his ears, but he manages to shake it off when Erica gets close enough to viciously pinch him in the side.

She hisses, "Knock it off, Hale."

The hardest part of all of this is seeing how perfect Scott and Kira are for Sam. No, wait. That's not the hardest part. The hardest part is knowing that that *doesn't matter*.

"This was a mistake," he says.

"Yeah, no duh." Erica just shakes her head at him. "I'm pretty sure everyone already knows that, though, so you need to calm the fuck down."

"I—" Derek opens and closes his mouth, sags against the wall in defeat. "I'm sorry."

Kira very graciously says, "Hey, no! We got to meet this little bug. Stiles wasn't kidding about her cuteness factor."

Scott seems a little more dejected, if the slump of his shoulders is any indication, but his smile reaches his eyes when he moves over to shake Derek's hand. "I appreciate you thinking about it, man. It was nice to meet you."

Derek grimaces and says, "It, uh..." before helplessly trailing off. His jaw still aches. He wants to shift and howl for his pack and curl up in a puppy pile for the rest of the day. He wants Scott and Kira to leave, so he can get their scent out of the house. He shifts restlessly on his feet.

Scott's smile turns rueful and understanding. They very helpfully don't even hug Sam goodbye when they go.

"I feel terrible," Derek says after they're gone. He scoops Sam up off the floor and buries his face in her chest. She giggles and pulls on the ends of his hair and he finally feels all his bones relax.

Erica says, "No, you don't."

She's right, he doesn't. "That's why I feel terrible."

He feels her hand on his back and he lifts his face away from Sam to frown at her.

She says, "This is not the weirdest way to build a pack."

Derek, embarrassingly enough, feels his eyes prickly. "This is why you're my second." Her mouth rounds in surprise and he says, bewildered, "Did you... How could you not know that?"

"What about Boyd?" she says, but her eyes are narrow and calculating.

Derek almost rolls his eyes. Boyd is calm in every situation. Boyd is steady as a rock, reliable, and likes being told exactly what to do. Erica is a general. "Please," he says. "How could you *not* know?"

"Does this mean I get to tell you what to do?" she asks, one finger tapping at her bottom lip.

"You can advise me," Derek says. Erica has been bossing him around for years; he very much doubts things are going to change just because she now realizes she's *official*.

"Well, I *advise* you to do something about Stiles," she says, one hand on a cocked hip. She has a judging eyebrow arched at him.

"Stiles," he echoes.

"Yep." She pops her 'p.' "Because you and I both know that he's the only reason you agreed to all this in the first place."

"Not the only reason," Derek hedges.

She clucks her tongue and pats his cheek and says, "Derek, alpha mine, you need to get laid."

\*

If Derek actually needed to get laid he'd go out and get laid. It's not like it's hard.

Hiro says, "I can't talk to you about this," with a scowl that's entirely forced, amusement dancing in his eyes. "You're my dad."



Derek says, “Whoops, bad connection,” and shuts the laptop completely instead of just signing off. He doesn’t know why he bothers. Hiro’s greatest joy in life is to make fun of him.

Sherry peeks around the edge of the doorjamb and says, “Was that Hiro? Did you hang up on him?”

Derek pushes back from his desk and says, “I’m sure he’s still laughing himself sick if you want to call him back.”

She makes a face at him, says, “You really didn’t give away Sam?”

“No.” Derek frowns. “And it wouldn’t be *giving*—you know what, no. No,” he says, louder, “I did not give Sam away. I will never be giving any of you away. Everyone is pack!” He feels ridiculous shouting it, but Nate and Molly start howling and Sherry is grinning at him—a *real* grin—and Jason is bright red and staring at the floor when he stomps past him in the hallway, so he figures everything is okay.

Everything is not *completely* okay, though, because if everything was completely okay he wouldn’t be thinking of ways to get laid other than just asking Stiles out. Just... calling Stiles up and asking him to dinner. Or coffee. Or a stroll through the preserve.

Derek hasn’t actually dated in *years*; he has no idea what he’s doing.

He ends up not doing anything at all.

\*

Derek really doesn’t like getting woken up just before dawn because Deaton thinks they’re being *invaded*—that’s the actual term he used, like they’re going to war—by a coven of witches.

Witches are... okay. Derek normally doesn’t deal much with them. For the most part they’re supposed to keep to themselves, and if they encroach on a ‘wolf territory, it’s usually temporary or inadvertent. Deaton doesn’t seem to think it’s either of those, this time.

Derek sends out a text to Erica, wakes up Sherry to watch the house, and then takes off into the woods all by himself. It’s maybe not his best plan.

He doesn’t actually admit this, though, until he’s hanging upside down from a giant spider web. It’s... not pleasant. And more than a little humiliating, once Erica, Boyd and Stiles show up.

The sun is just breaking through the trees, beams of weak light making everything look fuzzy and faded. He’s getting dizzy, all the blood pooling in his head.

“Satomi called me,” Stiles says, hands on his hips. He eyes Derek up and down and adds, “So this is a sticky situation.”

Erica giggles.

Derek says, “Deaton said this was serious.” It doesn’t feel serious.

Stiles tilts his hand in a so-so motion. “We ran them out of our East Beacon territory last week.”

“And you didn’t think to warn me?” Derek growls. Every time he struggles, the webs just grip him tighter. “They booby-trapped my woods.”

Stiles mutters, “Heh, *booby*,” and even Boyd cracks a smile.

Derek groans. “I hate all of you.”

“Even those of us who brought machetes?” Stiles swings out a massive blade that, frankly, makes Derek a little nervous.

He says, “Do you know how to use one of those?” just as Erica says, “Can’t we just use our claws?”

“This is not my first giant spider web.” He shrugs. “A couple members of our pack got caught before we routed out the problem. Trust me, we need the machete. And, uh,” his eyes widen as he looks over Derek’s shoulder, “we need to use it soon.”

Derek twists ineffectually, trying to see what’s behind him, even though he has a feeling he doesn’t actually want to know.

“Holy shit,” Boyd says, his voice uncharacteristically loud. “That’s the biggest fucking spider I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Great,” Derek says, resigned. Just great. He fucking loves spiders. Bring it on.

Despite his ribbing, Stiles looks supremely comfortable and competent with a machete. He hacks at the webs with a little v of concentration between his brows, and Derek focuses on the strip of skin that flashes on his belly every time he takes a swing. He’s got his sleeves rolled up, forearms flexing, and if anyone had to save him from a giant spider, he’s kind of glad it’s Stiles.

Stiles grunts and says, “Just. One. More,” with a couple of solid thwacks. There’s a sheen of anxious sweat on his face. He’s almost close enough for Derek to bury his head in his neck, if there was any sort of give in his binds.

All in all, it takes less than a minute for Stiles to cut him free, which is good because the click-clicks of a giant arachnid echoing across the preserve is making his skin crawl, and he really doesn’t want to get eaten. The kids would never forgive him.

Boyd catches the brunt of his fall to the ground. When he finally gets his footing, shaking the blood from his head back into the rest of his body, he stares up at a spider the size of his torso. “Jesus Christ.”

It’s not quite big enough to flat out eat them, at least not when they’re not spun up in its web. Small mercies.

“I mean,” Stiles says, head cocked. “She’s kind of cute? I don’t have to kill her, do I?”

The spider clacks its jaw at them and hisses.

Erica grabs Boyd’s wrist and says, “Back away slowly.”

The spider skitters closer. Stiles yelps and stumbles back into Derek, and Derek automatically curls an arm around him, tugging him into his chest.

“Slowly, slowly,” Derek says soft and low, and then Stiles says, “Oh crap, there’s more than one.”

\*

Satomi Ito formally apologizes for not letting them know about the witches and the giant spiders. She’s older than she looks, Derek knows, and her eyes are cold and judging. Derek doesn’t think she likes him very much. It could be the Scott and Kira and Sam thing, or it could be the fact that Derek left her to deal with Peter and the murders and Scott while he tucked his tail between his legs and ran.

Derek nods his head like he understands her folly, while Erica clenches her teeth around a growl next to him. They’re all covered in rapidly drying spider goo. Erica’s really not in a good mood.

Satomi looks amused by her, which only makes Erica get *madder*.

“Listen, bitch,” Erica says, and Derek palms his face and prays Satomi’s pack doesn’t kill them all.

“Erica.”

“No,” Satomi says, her smile losing some of its scary edges. “No, she’s correct. I let the past color my present. It’s inexcusable.”

Traditional packs are families, blood relations, and expanded by marriage. Satomi’s pack is as ragtag as their own, though, and it makes Derek feel marginally more comfortable, even if Satomi Ito wears her agelessness like a god.

Satomi says, “We will help each other with the witches,” like a declaration, and no one in either pack bothers to make any noise of dissent. “First, though,” she says, standing up from the table, “I would like to speak to Derek alone.”

Satomi’s house is on the edge of East Beacon, three miles outside of Derek’s territory in the preserve, overlooking a clear lake at the bottom of a mountain. She draws him toward a deer path, feet soundless on the brush, and Derek feels enough eyes on him that he wonders idly exactly how big the Ito pack is.

Derek says, “I’m sorry I left.”

She says, “You are not,” cutting cleanly into the meat of the lie with no recrimination.

He nods, accepting her words. He's not exactly sorry. He doesn't know what he would have done, if he'd stayed.

She says, "Much can be forgiven by youth and tragedy," without looking at him. She stares off across the lake as they come to a stop by the shore. The afternoon sun makes the water shine like glass. "Tell me, did you feel it when Peter died?"

It's cruel honesty, but Derek can't say he doesn't deserve it.

He clenches his hands into fists and says, "Not really," even though he woke up screaming, alpha power flooding his veins like fire.

She snorts, slants him a look, but only says, "None of my 'wolves touched him."

"Did Stiles—" He cuts himself off, watching her eyes widen the barest little bit. The only tell of her surprise.

"No," she says. "No, it wasn't Stiles."

Derek almost asks who it was, but he's not sure he actually wants to know. He nods.

"Your beta was right," she says, and turns to look at him fully. She's small, but not slight. She stands straight-backed, commanding, but her mouth is soft. "Even as old as I am, I sometimes let prejudices influence my decisions. But I always admit when I'm wrong. That's the only reason I've lasted here as long as I have. Why my pack are loyal." She gives him an assessing look. "Your mother would be proud of you."

Derek heaves a large, stunned breath. He says, shaky, "I don't know."

She arches an eyebrow. "It wasn't a question, Derek Hale."

It feels like one. It feels like the biggest question. Derek was never meant to be alpha. He's not even sure Laura would have chosen him as her second. As a kid he'd complained loudly about being left behind, glaring at Laura's back as she flicked smirking looks over her shoulder, going off for training sessions with their mom, observing meetings with other packs, going on long hikes to map out territory, discuss strategy. His dad always grinned at him, told him that he loved too hard to make clear-headed decisions, and left him to look over his little cousins.

It's hard to not think of himself as a glorified babysitter, even now.

Satomi says, "I am older than you can even guess. You will trust me in this." She curls her hands over his wrists, squeezes them firmly. "Your mother would be *very proud*."

\*

The witches, already driven out of the Ito pack territory, prove only slightly more difficult to oust out of Beacon County completely.

Derek finds himself thrown in with Stiles on stalks around the preserve more than once, and it's like he's suddenly thirteen all over again. His feet feel too big and his face feels permanently hot and he retreats to sullen silences. Whenever he tries to talk he *stammers*. Thirteen had not been a good year for him.

Stiles takes it all in stride, though, and Derek is depressingly aware that Stiles probably thinks this is his normal. That Derek has no interest in him. That Derek isn't just a crumbling mess of emotions deep down inside.

The small talk is *killing him*. Stiles swings his arms and says stuff about the weather, which Derek can only grunt noncommittally about. He rambles about his dad, about Scott and Kira, about how much he hates Deputy Haigh, about the rapidly approaching holidays and something called Ito Pack Moon Pie Day. Derek doesn't know what to say to any of that.

The patrolling becomes more routine once it's apparent that the witch coven has probably moved on. Stiles hacks at any webs they find, but they never spot another spider.

By the beginning of November, Derek has moved on from stammering to glowering, and he hates himself a little for it. God, he's *pathetic*.

Stiles has a cheeky grin and a confident stance and it only gets a little awkward when Derek asks him what he's doing for Thanksgiving. It comes out rough and terrible, and Derek wants to stuff the words back into his mouth, but Stiles is already over it, grinning at him with a slight questioning tilt to his head.

He shrugs and says, "We usually just have Scott and Kira and Scott's mom over."

"The pack doesn't get together?" Derek asks, mind already racing with bad ideas.

"Satomi only celebrates the werewolf holidays," Stiles says, waving a hand. "You know. Solstice, Lupercalia, Moon Pie Day."

Derek says, "You should eat with us. Our pack. If you want. All of you." *Jesus Christ*.

Stiles grins wider. "Don't sound *too* enthusiastic, dude."

Derek forces his shoulders to relax, to roll his eyes like his heart isn't trying to pound out of his chest.

Stiles claps his arm and says, "It's really nice of you, but we'll be okay."

"I—" Derek opens his mouth, but can't think of anything to say.

He must look more upset than mad, though, because Stiles just says, "Although I could be persuaded. You don't just heave a dead deer on the table, do you?"

"Ass," Derek manages, mouth twitching.

"*There* you go, big guy." They're back by the cars at the edge of the preserve by then, and Stiles gives him finger guns as he backs away. "Count us in. You better have enough food to

rival Moon Pie Day, though, I've seen Scott eat an entire turkey all by himself."

Later, Derek will panic about what he's done. What he's brought upon himself, and his home, and his pack. Now, though, he just yells after Stiles, "Seriously, what the hell is Moon Pie Day?" and Stiles's laugh echoes across the empty grit and gravel lot and through the trees.

\*

Cora stomps through the door two days before Thanksgiving and says, "Look at this loser I picked up in Alabama," as Hiro shoulders his way in after her, arms loaded down with their bags.

Sherry squeals at the top of her lungs from where she's been sitting on an armchair and launches herself across the den at him. They both collapse in a pile of limbs and luggage.

Derek, grinning so hard his face feels weird, says, "You said you had too much work."

Hiro's voice is muffled by Sherry's armpit. He says, "Cora made me come."

"I didn't *make* you do anything, dork," Cora says, kicking at his side. She looks up at Derek and says, "He missed you. He called and cried and begged me to swing by and get him before heading home."

"Scandalous lies!" Hiro says, but he staggers to his feet, now with a hysterically giggling twin under each arm, and he looks almost blindingly happy to be home. He carefully tosses Nate and Molly on the couch, lopez over to Derek and squeezes him hard enough around the waist to lift him off his feet. Hiro has a couple inches on him now. That will never stop being weird.

Derek says, "You need a haircut," and tugs on his ridiculous hair bun. Hiro has the look of a man who's been living off Reece's Pieces and fried cheese. Derek didn't realize how much he's actually missed having him there in person before now.

"I'm hoping it'll grow down to my butt," Hiro says, giving Derek one last squeeze before letting him go.

He moves on easily to Jason, who's hanging back, arms crossed over his chest awkwardly. Hiro rings an arm around his neck, though, and drags him down for a swift kiss to the top of his head. He says, "Hey, J," like they hadn't only known each other barely a month before Hiro left for school.

Cora says, "Am I a pariah now? Nobody loves me?" standing with her hands on her hips in the middle of the room.

Nate and Molly obligingly screech, "Aunt Cora!" and Cora goes down laughing harder than Derek's heard her laugh in years.

\*

They shift and run that night. Hiro straps Sam onto his back and crashes just as swiftly through the trees as the rest of them. It's the first time the entire pack has been together since Jason arrived, and Derek lifts his head and howls, long and loud, pride and love warming him when all his 'wolves, even Hiro, raise their howls as well. It echoes through the forest, through the valley, rolling, rolling.

They stay out till sunrise, resting at the top of a cliff facing Satomi's land and the lake beyond. Sam a sleepy puppy in Hiro's arms. Hiro leaning against Sherry, her wolf still gangly with youth, panting open-mouthed, like she's grinning. Nate and Molly dark, furry pill bugs curled up at Cora's feet. Erica and Boyd sleeping heart-shaped together, front paws curled over the rocky edge. Jason lying on his side, back pressed up to Hiro's thigh.

Derek rests his snout on Hiro's shoulder from behind, snorts a noisy breath to mess up his hair even more than it already is—slip-sliding out of its bun, tangled with leaves.

The cresting sun is a fiery, bright orange. There is nothing subtle about this morning.

Soon all the pups are dozing in the sunlight and Hiro reaches up to scratch at Derek's ears. Derek chuffs and lets him, using the opportunity to rub his face all over Hiro's neck.

Hiro laughs quietly, with his whole body, and it's a good twenty more minutes before everyone starts moving again.

Hiro says, "I'm *starving*," and, "My ass is numb, I wish you guys were big enough to ride."

\*

Most of the day is either spent cooking or preparing to cook. Cora makes baked ziti with Sherry. Derek gets Nate and Molly to help with the pies. Jason looks lost until Hiro sets him up with an entire bowlful of fruit and a paring knife.

They watch *The Sound of Music* and make peanut butter & birdseed pinecones after an early dinner, and then Thanksgiving morning Hiro helps Derek rearrange the picnic tables out back into one long table on the patio. It's a nice, clear fall day, and not everybody would've fit in their dining room, anyway.

Hiro says, "So is there a reason you invited some of Satomi's pack to eat with us?" as he billows a tablecloth over the rough, weatherworn wood.

"No," Derek says, feeling a traitorous blush burn across top of his ears.

Erica slams open the backdoor and throws her arms out and says, "Stiles!"

Derek says, "No," again, scowling.

Erica just grins and says, "Derek has a crush."

"Is this about the deputy that kept bringing Jason home?" Hiro says. "Sherry said he was cute."

“Sure, if you like *old dudes*,” Sherry says, coming out of the house with her hands full of cutlery.

Stiles is younger than him. It kind of hurts Derek’s soul that Sherry thinks *he’s* old. He should probably stop collecting teenage pack members.

Jason says, “Derek blew his chances there,” even though he’s bright red. Probably from being reminded about all the times he’s run away. “Is Isaac coming?”

“Isaac’s coming,” Cora says, patting his back. “We’re gonna have a full house.” She catches Derek’s gaze across the backyard, a small grin on her face. They haven’t had this many people in one place since their family died. This many of *their own* people.

It’s...nice.

Derek nods at her, and then starts helping Hiro with the second tablecloth. They’re going to need place settings for fifteen, and an open space for Sam’s highchair. He says, “Will we all fit? Do you think we need a kid table?”

Sherry says, “I’m not sitting at a kid table,” and Hiro rolls his eyes.

“We’ll be fine,” he says. “Besides, you can squish in next to your crush, right?”

Derek fights off a blush and says, “No.”

“You’re starting to sound like Sam,” Erica says, right as Sam screams, “No, no, no!” and makes grabby hands for Derek.

He pretends his stomach doesn’t flip over when she adds, “Da!”

Cora says, “Awww,” only half-mockingly, and Derek says, “She’s just trying to say Derek,” even though he not-so-secretly hopes that isn’t true.

“Nice try,” Boyd says. *Boyd*, who is always on Derek’s side. Or should be.

Derek scoops up Sam off the grass with a huff and says, “C’mon, squirt. We’re going to go watch cartoons and nap.” He deserves it.

\*

Dinner starts off slightly awkward, mostly due to the fact that the last time Scott and Kira were at his house he was openly hostile.

The sheriff deftly ignores any tension and shakes Derek’s hand as he steps inside. Scott’s mom, Melissa, starts to shake his hand, too, only to give up halfway through and gather him into a firm, long hug.

Derek’s baffled by the way he melts into it, lifting his own arms to rest around her back, and then it’s like this fog of uncertainty hisses and dissipates, leaving only the scent of nutmeg and roasting turkey and pumpkin pie.



*Mom hug*, Scott mouths behind Melissa's back, grinning.

Kira has a box full of warm pies and Stiles has two fresh loaves of bread and a covered dish of mashed potatoes.

Erica and Boyd bring green bean salad and brussel sprouts. Isaac shows up with a crockpot full of corn chowder.

There's barely enough room to move in the kitchen, and Derek shoos almost everyone outside to get the kids out from under his feet. He watches from the kitchen window over the sink as Nate and Molly go screaming through the trees, Isaac close behind them.

Boyd and Kira stay, and Derek tenses only a little when Kira sidles up next to him, following his gaze toward the yard.

She says, softly, "We're talking with Erica. About, you know, what you do?"

"What I do?" Derek says, slanting her a genuinely bewildered look.

She waves a hand out, gesturing toward where Hiro is giving Sherry a piggyback ride. "With your kids." Her smile only wavers a little. "I think it would be good for us. Besides," her grin grows brighter, "there's only so many you can take in, right?"

Derek wants to tell her that there isn't any one of them he would turn away, but he doesn't think that's her point. He nods. He says, "It isn't right for everyone."

Her mouth goes firm, eyes serious. "It'll be right for us."

"Hey," Scott says, poking his head inside, "I don't know what your dinner rules are? But I think the twins caught a squirrel."

\*

The meal itself is chaos. It either lasts at least five hours or only twenty minutes, Derek can't tell. He's squished between Hiro and Scott, who can fit an entire turkey leg in his mouth all at once, and across from Stiles, who keeps giggling for no discernable reason every time someone says, "Pass the candied yams."

After dinner, Derek's just contemplating what to tackle first in the kitchen when Erica stalks in, her cell clutched tightly between her hands.

"What's wrong?" Derek says, heart pounding.

"Jason's father wants him back," she says grimly.

An instant cold sweat breaks out over Derek's entire body, and he's having trouble feeling his hands. "What?"

Erica slumps against the counter, takes a deep breath. "He's got another month in rehab," she says, "but he's already started the paperwork. My boss just called to warn me. If we want to

stop it, we have to do it now.”

Derek stares at her blankly. Her blond hair is mussed and her throat is red, like she’s been rubbing at it. She does that when she’s upset.

“Derek,” she says. “I need to know what you want to do.”

“Do?” Derek says numbly. What *can* they do? He’s never had this happen before. He feels like throwing up.

Erica moves slowly toward him, places a hand on his arm. “He’s fifteen and you’re his alpha. We don’t—” she pauses, swallows hard, “we don’t know how he’ll handle the full moon without you now.”

They do, though. The answer is: *not well*.

Derek says, voice choked, “His father’s afraid of him.”

Erica’s mouth tightens. “So we stop the paperwork from being filed. Once it goes to the judge there’s nothing I can do.”

“What if he just files the paperwork again?” Derek asks.

Erica stares at him, eyebrows arched.

Derek scowls. “I’m not going to threaten Jason’s dad.”

She shrugs, but there’s a tenseness along her shoulders that belies the gesture. “I don’t see why not.”

“I can’t.” He can’t think. He doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t want Jason to go back to his father, a man who thinks—who’s called Jason a monster to his face. How can he do that? But he knows Jason would never forgive him if he didn’t tell him. “This has to be Jason’s choice.”

Erica grits her teeth and says, “He’ll make the wrong one.”

Derek feels like he’s dying inside—there’s a vice around his heart, strangling it. “It doesn’t matter,”—*it matters*—“we’ll just make sure he knows he can always come back.”

Derek knows Erica’s mad at him. That she’s upset, that she thinks he’s wrong, and he wants to wipe the watery sheen out of her eyes and cradle her head to his chest, but he knows that she’d probably gut him if he tried.

It isn’t until she leaves the kitchen, her silence damning, that he notices Stiles. He has his hands full of dirty dishes, framed by the backdoor.

Stiles says, “Wow. I’m... surprised by how you handled that, big guy.”

Derek scowls like his heart isn't breaking and says, "What, you expected me to do anything else? Kill his dad?"

Stiles shrugs, moves forward to place the plates on the counter. "It's what Satomi would have done."

Derek barely holds back a flinch. "No, it's not."

"Man, I love that woman, but she's pretty intense. Maybe she wouldn't *kill him* kill him," he says, grinning a little wryly, "but she definitely wouldn't let Jason go."

"I'm not—"

"It's not an insult to you," Stiles says, holding up his now empty hands. "Dude, I think it's admirable. Plus, you know, I'm a big fan of the law."

Derek's mouth twitches, amused despite everything else. "You are."

Stiles nods. "Shocking, I know."

They stare at each other, half-grinning, and Derek knows it's definitely the absolute wrong time for this, but he *wants*. He wants to grin at Stiles over dinner every day for the rest of his life, baffled over *yams* and *Moon Pie Day*, and, god, *crap*, *goddamn*, when the fuck did he have time to fall in love?

Derek doesn't know exactly what's showing on his face, but he feels light-headed and clammy and Stiles's expression rapidly grows alarmed.

"Hey, Derek, are you okay?" Stiles says, taking a step closer to him.

He's broad-shouldered and lean everywhere else and almost as tall as Hiro—even if Derek straightened up, he'd probably still have over an inch on him.

Derek swallows hard and says, "Stiles," palms tingling, wondering just how soft the pale curve of Stiles's throat would be under his hands, just as Scott bursts through the back door and yells, "Spiders!"

\*

"Any ideas, Isaac?" Cora asks as they all hide in the kitchen and watch two giant spiders demolish what's left of their outdoor meal. They're both black-brown with bright red, circular markings along their segmented bodies, about the size of Nate or Molly *without* counting their long, spindly legs.

"This is kind of outside my wheelhouse," Isaac says. "Flamethrower? Raid?"

Sherry ducks down underneath the sink and comes up with a can of Ant and Cockroach. She shakes it and makes a face. "I don't think we have enough."

Derek isn't necessarily worried for his picnic tables, which will probably collapse at some point under their combined giant spider weight. He's just not entirely sure what the spiders are going to do after that. Come for the door? Attack his neighbors? Mrs. Peabody, an acre to his left, has a miniature schnauzer; he'd really hate to see Wicket get eaten.

"You didn't happen to bring your machete with you?" he asks Stiles, only half joking.

"No," Stiles says, tapping the corner of his cell on his chin, "but I might have an idea."

Scott winces and says, "You're calling Lydia?"

Stiles nods, slow. "Yeah," he says. "I think I have to."

The smile he musters up when he presses a few buttons and lifts the cell up to his ear is stiff but not completely forced. Derek can hear, "Stiles, what?" faint and annoyed from where he's standing a couple feet away.

"So I know you're probably busy," Stiles says, "but we're having kind of a spider crisis here."

There's a long-suffering sigh, a, "Text me the address," and then Stiles tells them all, mostly unnecessarily, "Okay, so Lydia is on her way. The real question here, folks, is do you have earplugs, and maybe a plastic tarp?"

\*

*Lydia* is the impatient red-head from the supermarket. Lydia is also, apparently, a banshee. She takes one look at the kids assembled in the den and says, "Nope, no," and points a finger at Sherry. "You, you look old enough to drive, take them all for ice cream."

"I'll go," Hiro says, when Sherry looks like she's going to spout fur and rip Lydia's face off. He curls an arm around Sherry's shoulders and she instantly settles, disgruntled but not entirely unhappy about ice cream and Hiro.

"Tarps?" Lydia asks Stiles, an eyebrow raised.

"I feel like we should go for, like, brain bleed, not out-and-out explosion here," Stiles says. "Derek's neighbors aren't *that* far away."

"I don't know what you expect of me, Stiles," Lydia says, "but I really don't practice levels of screaming in my apartment during my spare time."

She's lying. Or, at least, she's not being entirely truthful. She drops the tarps, though, which is good because Derek doesn't actually have any, and then they all make their way through to the kitchen where they can still see the giant spiders gnawing on turkey bones in the yard.

"They're certainly...large," Lydia says, head cocked. "And pretty. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm sure I don't want them terrorizing the entire county," the sheriff says.

Lydia turns to look at him. “Fair.” She takes a deep breath and steps toward the door. “All right,” she says, slowly turning the doorknob. “Stay here and cover your ears.”

\*

It’s sort of anticlimactic, in the end, despite having to make a bonfire to dispose of the bodies.

Stiles says, “I’m going to miss them,” watching the smoke and flames billow around their blackened shells.

Derek says, “Me, too,” but what he really means is that he’ll miss patrolling the preserve with Stiles a couple times a week.

Lydia says, “You’re welcome,” before Derek can even thank her. She straightens and tugs on the end of her shirt, then busses Stiles and Kira on their cheeks as she passes them, nods to the sheriff and Scott’s mom, and sashays out the door. She ignores Derek and Cora completely, with the exception of a mild glare thrown over her shoulder before the door closes behind her.

“Lydia doesn’t like me very much,” Derek says to Stiles, frowning after her.

“Yeah, well,” Stiles shrugs, “she sort of helped kill your uncle after he almost mauled her to death. There’s like,” he holds up his finger and thumb, pinching them close together, “a minuscule amount of residual resentment left in her for the entirety of the Hale family.”

“Minuscule,” Derek says flatly.

“She helped with the spiders,” Stiles points out.

Isaac says, “Technically, she helped *you* with the spiders.”

“Or she could’ve just been acting like a decent human being,” Stiles says, eyes narrowed. “You know, by not letting everyone die. On *Thanksgiving*.”

Isaac raises his hands, surrendering, and Stiles mutters something under his breath about *who wears that many scarves indoors?*

Other than *that* though, other than the Lydia thing and the giant spiders, and the way they smell like burnt hair and melting plastic, Derek decides that Thanksgiving has gone far too well for him to tell Jason about his dad that night.

Instead, they watch *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* after everyone else has left—Sherry and Jason both moan about it, but sit through the whole movie with Cora and a bowl of popcorn between them. The twins fall asleep twenty minutes in, but Derek doesn’t bother to move them from where they’re curled into each other on the overstuffed armchair. Hiro sits on the floor, his side pressed against Derek’s leg, and it’s well past the time Derek should’ve put Sam up in her crib, but he keeps her tucked up under his chin anyhow.

Derek doesn’t remember the last time he’s felt this content in the moment. He sneaks little worried glances at Jason, until Jason catches him at it and clenches his jaw and glares at him.

Even that seems blessedly normal now, a warmth blooming out from the center of Derek's chest.

He could do it. He could make Jason's dad go away. Jason wouldn't even have to know about it. Derek wants Jason huffing and grudgingly tolerant around him for the rest of his life. Derek's had a lot of practice living with guilt—what's one more transgression?

But then Jason's glare gives way to an eye roll and a half-smile and Derek hates himself a little for even thinking of taking this choice away from him. Jason should stay because he wants to, not because Derek somehow tricked him into thinking no one else cared about him.

Hiro nudges his calf and says, "What's wrong with you?" in a low voice that absolutely everyone hears anyway.

Derek sighs, rubs his hands on his knees and says, "Nothing," and, "Who wants more pie?"

\*

Derek waits until Saturday morning to talk to Jason, even though Erica sends him a million texts about it. If they're going to do anything to stop it, they have to do it before Monday.

He dithers about where to talk to Jason over breakfast, pushing his eggs around his plate while Hiro eyes him weirdly and talks about when he needs to catch his plane back to UA. He drove in with Cora, but he'd never make it back in time if he hitched a ride again. Besides, Derek's pretty sure Cora's staying relatively close by until after Christmas.

But...Jason. The office seems too formal. Jason's room seems too much like he's cornering him. Outside—too many places for Jason to run and hide.

He still hasn't decided by the time everyone's cleared their plates, but Hiro cocks his head and says, "How about a run?" while wiggling his eyebrows at him, so...

Derek grimaces and says, "Jason, uh, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Hiro herds everyone except Sam out, and Derek wets a paper towel and starts cleaning her face and hands and thinks about how to start this excruciating conversation.

Derek is still looking at Sam when he says, "So, Erica told me your dad wants to file paperwork to have you live with him again." All he hears is a swift indrawn breath.

When Derek finally glances up at him, Jason's frozen with a white-knuckled grip on the edge of the island counter.

Jason says, "What?"

Derek reaches for his arm, but Jason flinches back. Trying for gentle, Derek says, "Your dad. He wants custody. And if he finishes out his time in rehab, the judge is probably going to give it to him." He's doing this wrong. Judging by the look on Jason's face he's doing this *really* wrong.

“You don’t want me here anymore?” Jason says, which is... god, how can he even think that?

“No,” Derek says, careful to move as slow as possible into Jason’s space. “No. This has nothing to do with me or the pack, okay? Either way, I can still be your alpha.”

“Either way? What do you mean, either way?” Jason’s voice is high and panicked, and Derek clasps a hand around his nape, stubbornly holding on even when Jason doesn’t relax an inch.

“Erica can—” Derek stops, starts again, “The paperwork can be misplaced for a little while. We can talk to your dad. I’m not telling you to leave, Jason. I’m telling you that we want you to stay.”

Jason’s breath is hiccupping, but he turns to press his forehead into Derek’s chest, prying his fingers off the counter to curl into Derek’s shirt.

In the background, Sam’s decided she’s tired of being ignored and is banging on her tray with a spoon.

Jason says, voice muffled, “So I can stay.”

“Yes,” Derek says, grip tightening.

“Or I can go,” Jason says.

“You can. But I just—” Derek breathes deep, closes his eyes, adds, quietly, “I would’ve told Erica to burn the paperwork. I would’ve threatened your dad to keep away, if I thought you’d ever forgive me for it.” He shakes Jason a little in his grip. “Okay?”

There’s a snuffle, and then a very small, “Okay.”

\*

In retrospect, he should have expected it.

Saturday evening, the twins are in the bath, Cora’s rocking Sam in the nursery, Hiro is packing for his morning flight—Derek answers his cell with soapy hands, a pleased hum in his chest when the display says STILES.

“Hey,” Stiles says, “so you know and I know and, at this point, even my dad knows that Jason’s probably just leveling up his broody werewolf antics to, like, extreme lurking gargoyle, but unfortunately the rest of the sheriff’s department is under the impression that there might be a bigger problem.”

Derek straightens up from his crouch by the tub. “What?”

“Did you know that since the law offices of Whittemore and Whittemore had that monstrosity of a tower built in sleepy little downtown Beacon Hills we’ve had two people leap to their deaths and one drunken teenager fall in a dumpster and break his back?”

“Stiles,” Derek growls.

Hiro pokes his head in the bathroom, face concerned. Derek jerks his head silently toward Nate and Molly and Hiro nods, sliding around him and gathering towels to dry them off and wrangle them into pajamas.

Stiles says, “I think he’s okay, Derek, but I’ve got an ambulance, the fire marshal and half the department here trying to talk him off a ledge.”

Derek knows Stiles is probably right. That Jason is a werewolf, a hard-to-kill supernatural being who’s hurting, hiding, and contemplating the unfairness of the universe. Derek would’ve chosen to lose a few days in the heart of the preserve, most likely as a wolf, but the fact that Jason’s on top of the seven story Whittemore building doesn’t necessarily mean he’s thinking about jumping. It still feels like he’s swallowed his heart whole, and he grips the steering wheel tight to keep his hands from shaking as he pulls out of the driveway.

It takes Derek fifteen minutes to make it downtown, and another three to shoulder his way through the gathering crowd.

The sheriff claps his back when he gets to his side and says, “Stiles will go up with you, son. To make it look official.”

The Whittemore building is sleek, all metal, glass and sharp edges, an eyesore among the brick and stone surrounding it. Derek stares up at the small figure, slumped precariously over the edge. He thinks: how could he not have *seen* this? Why didn’t he make him play a board game, instead of letting him disappear into his room after dinner?

“Derek?”

Derek pulls his gaze away from Jason to look at Stiles. He’s out of uniform, a rumpled plaid thrown over a grey t-shirt. There’s a hole in the left knee of his jeans.

Stiles hooks a thumb over his shoulder. “Ready?”

“This is my fault,” Derek says.

“Oh, hey, no.” Stiles shakes his head. “Dude, what, you told him about his dad?” At Derek’s nod, he says, “That’s Jason’s dad’s fault. This is Jason having problems with his *dad*, not you.”

“I could have—”

“Not told him, yeah,” Stiles says, nodding, “and then it probably would’ve made everything worse. C’mon.” He tugs at Derek’s sleeve, and the way he casually refuses to let Derek brood sort of hotwires Derek’s body, makes him automatically start to follow him inside. “Let’s go get him down.”

\*

The roof of the Whittemore building is ugly and tar-lined, with a giant AC unit in the center, a constant burring hum that builds like a headache in the back of Derek’s mind.



Jason is toward the front, leaning into the knee high wall surrounding the edge and looking down.

He says, “I didn’t mean to make them panic,” as soon as the rooftop door closes behind them. His voice sounds dull. It makes *Derek* panic.

Derek says, “It’s okay,” creeping forward like he’s coming up on a nervous dog.

“This isn’t even the first time I’ve been up here,” Jason says, finally throwing a look over his shoulder at Derek. “It’s a nice place to think.”

“Nice,” Derek echoes, and the small, answering smile on Jason’s face makes his chest crack open with relief. “God.”

Stiles says, “You need a *new* place to think. One without the possibility of this many spectators.”

Jason peers down, leaning even further over the edge, and Derek can hear the faint gasps of the crowd below. He fights the urge to lurch forward and grab onto the back of Jason’s shirt.

Jason says, “How many people down there do you think really *want* me to jump?”

“None,” Derek says quickly. “Why would any—” He stops when Stiles places a hand on his arm.

Stiles says, “Everyone down there wants this to end happily, with you coming down the elevator with us and going home.”

Jason grimaces. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” Derek says, feeling helpless.

“I just.” Jason turns fully around to look at them, folds his arms over his chest and hunches his shoulders. “I feel like a terrible person.”

Derek moves closer, hands out and palms open. “You’re not,” he says. “Why would you think that?”

Jason shrugs without loosening his arms. “I don’t know. I always thought, I mean... I should *want* to go back with my dad, right?”

“If you don’t want to live with your dad,” Derek says carefully, “that doesn’t make you a terrible person.”

Jason snorts.

Derek opens and closes his mouth, sends Stiles a *help me with this* look, because he has no idea how to make this better. Derek wants to gather Jason up in his arms and never let him go.

Stiles makes a face at him but says, “Look, Jason, since several points of this conversation are bound to be *highly illegal*, I’m gonna be brief. Erica wanted to get rid of your dad’s forms without telling you about it at all. She wanted Derek to risk a precarious truce with local hunters,” he gives Derek a *you didn’t think about that one* eyebrow arch, and Derek ducks his head, cheeks burning, “to go *persuade* your dad to give up all custody rights. You’re a supernatural badass with monthly rage issues, and kids with *secret wellness issues* are gonna take priority for her as a supernatural social worker. You get what I’m saying?”

“Uh, no?” Jason says. He’s standing more open, though, staring at Stiles with his head cocked.

“You’ve got people on your side who’re willing to go above and beyond to keep you safe. You are not a terrible person for wanting to stay in a healthy living environment,” Stiles says. “Most kids don’t get to make that decision or distinction, okay?”

Jason’s quiet. He stares at his feet, swipes a hand under his nose and sniffs. “Okay,” he finally says, even though he looks like he still doesn’t quite believe it. He bites his lip and asks Derek, “Are you really gonna threaten my dad?”

Derek sighs wearily. He curls an arm over Jason’s shoulders, steering him toward the stairwell, and says, “How about we figure out how to talk to him together?”

\*

It’s not that easy, Derek knows. It’s going to majorly suck. He really hopes he doesn’t have to actually threaten Jason’s dad. That it won’t get that far.

It’s late when they finally make it home. Derek nudges Jason up the stairs to get ready for bed and then walks straight through the house and out the back door. The motion lights flicker on, flooding the patio with warm golden light. He stands on the edge of the flagstones, half in shadows, staring out into the dark patches of trees that bump up against the edge of the yard. He doesn’t know how long he’s there, listening to the TV in the den, the low hush of Cora and Hiro’s voices, Sherry humming under her breath, the scratch of her pencil on paper, before he hears a familiar car pull up.

There’s a crunch of boots on concrete, the rustle of grass and leaves, a soft curse at a stumble over a tree root along the side of the house.

And then he’s next to him, quiet breaths, hands on his hips, arm companionably close—spreading warmth without touching.

“You always were really good at lurking in the dark,” Stiles says.

Derek scowls over at him, but his heart isn’t really in it.

Stiles grins cheekily back at him. “Good job tonight,” he says.

“Right,” Derek says gruffly.

“Don’t tell me I have to give you the pep talk too?” Stiles knocks their shoulders together. “That kid thinks you’re the bee’s knees. And it only took,” he frowns down at his hand, counts on his fingers, “four months!”

“That’s not bad,” Derek says defensively.

“I’m saying it’s *great*,” Stiles says.

Derek pointedly doesn’t look over at him. “Oh.” He says, “Thanks,” and, “You weren’t even on duty tonight, were you?”

“Eh, I will be soon enough,” he says with a shrug in his voice.

Derek says, “Right,” again and doesn’t know what to do with his hands. After a long silence he says, “So you’re....here...to...?”

“I thought it was obvious,” Stiles says.

Derek turns toward him, fingers fiddling with the ends of his sleeves. They’re standing too close to be casual, and Stiles is smiling a little, a nervous waver softening his mouth.

Stiles says, “You’re kind of running hot and cold with me, dude, but I’m the king of pushing past mixed signals.”

Derek thinks he’s been obvious. He thinks *Stiles* is the one that’s been hard to read. He says, “Stiles, what—” only to cut himself off, body frozen, when Stiles slowly reaches up, fingers loosely curled until they touch the edge of Derek’s jaw.

Stiles says, “Let me know if I’m wrong about this,” before his hand slides all the way across Derek’s cheek. He pauses, though—stops with his mouth inches from Derek’s, gaze darting from his lips to his eyes, a hint of a wrinkle across his forehead. He says, “Okay?”

There’s a fluttering in Derek’s belly, an embarrassing amount of anticipation, and he covers the nervous hitch of his breath by stepping even closer into Stiles’s open stance and kissing him.

Stiles makes a surprised, pleased noise in the back of his throat.

Derek wants to clutch him tighter, wants to slant their mouths and bite at Stiles’s lips, wants to tug Stiles’s up against him and press him into the lone picnic table that survived the giant spider invasion, except... he can hear giggling. And a single, soft, “*Gross*,” followed by exaggerated gagging sounds.

Derek pulls away to tilt his forehead against Stiles’s with a sigh.

Hiro says, “Does this mean we have to call Stiles ‘Other Dad’?” and Stiles snort-laugh before covering his mouth, turning to bury his head in Derek’s shoulder.

Derek glares at all his kids trying to cram into the doorway. “You’re all grounded.”

“You can’t ground me,” Hiro says, grinning wide. “I’m leaving in the morning. Should we call him *Papa*?”

Stiles’s entire body starts to shake against him in muffled laughter.

Derek carefully weighs his options: continue to try and get Hiro to shut up—*unlikely*—or take everyone out for ice cream.

He nudges a hand into Stiles’s belly and whispers in his ear, “Do you know how late Dairy Queen is open?”

\*

“Is it always like this?” Stiles asks, slightly awed as they sit side-by-side on the red bench outside the Dairy Queen.

Nate and Molly run screaming past them while Jason scrambles to cut them off before they get to the parking lot.

Hiro is holding his and Sherry’s sugar cones high above his head, laughing as Sherry attempts to climb up his back and reach one.

There’s a screech of tires and maniacal twin laughter and Jason shouting, “Watch where you’re going, asshole!”

The only ones missing are Cora, who volunteered to stay back for Sam, and Erica and Boyd, who just sent *haha no* and *good luck* when he texted them what they were doing.

Derek shrugs and says, “Usually it’s much worse. I’m thinking about getting rid of some of them.”

“Liar,” Stiles says, leaning into his side.

Derek grins down at his ice cream cone, two scoops of vanilla covered in rainbow sprinkles. He slips his free hand into Stiles’s and says, “Yeah, well. Maybe not.”

## End Notes

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