

Where The Wild Things Are

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Where The Wild Things Are

by [DeadWalker](#)

Summary

Derek finds a boy in the woods. He might not have realized it then, but that is the moment his whole life changes.

Notes

I didn't put this in the tags but **consider yourselves warned**: there is a scene right at the beginning with slightly disturbing non-con elements involving an original character and Stiles. The scene isn't that long and nothing actually happens, but the situation might be unpleasant and trigger, and I'd rather be safe than sorry with this stuff. If you wanna play it safe you can butt into [my inbox](#) and ask, I'll walk you through it.

Title from the novel by [Maurice Sendak](#)

EDIT Oct 10, 2016: Since nothing actually happens in the attempted non-con scene and the whole story turns very sweet and soft (trust me, I just wanna see them happy) I decided to remove the non-con archive warning. If you got any questions, feel free to ask.

EDIT Sep 9, 2018 Now also [translated to Spanish](#), thanks to [yuki_yuki](#)!

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

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

*“You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert,
repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of
your body
love what it loves.”*

– Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*



It was the sound the boy made that pushed Derek over the edge.

When he thought back to it later on, he was sure that had been what had made him snap.

Him and Laura had smelled the pack from afar, the gang of rogue mutts who'd crossed into their territory in the east, reeking like aggression and trouble. It happened sometimes, when omegas and wolves who had banded together to form something that they called a pack but followed no laws would come calling in their territory. His mother called it the mutts 'testing the waters', and it was nothing highly unusual; they just hadn't seen one in years. The Hales had a strong pack and a reputation, and other weres rarely crossed into their land anymore. No-one was usually that dumb.

These mutts apparently were.

Derek had heard their howls from miles away, and they were loud: like they didn't care who heard them. It was a challenge. *Come and get us*, it said.

Derek could smell the strangers, and he hated it. They smelled wrong. *Other*.

Half a mile away, he could hear Peter, Cora, and his mother circling to the other side of the other pack. Laura was just behind him, growling softly. She nudged Derek's side as she brushed past and her eyes flicked to their left. *That way*. Derek huffed an affirmative noise and they set off on a quiet lope.

They barely made a sound as they slunk through the underbrush. Two quiet shadows in the weak light of the evening dusk, blending in with the forest. Their paws made no noise on the forest floor. They followed the smell of otherness, and the howls, and they ran.

It didn't take long before the hoots and yaps of the mutts reached them and Laura stopped. They were near the edge of the preserve, close to the pond where Mom sometimes took them swimming after full moons. Derek could hear them, their ruckus echoing in the otherwise quiet woods, and he wanted to tear through the forest and chase the intruders off their territory — take a bite out of them if that was what it took for them to understand they did not belong here, this land was *theirs*.

Beside him, Laura's hackles suddenly rose and a quiet rumble slipped out of her throat

Derek had been staring off into the direction his mother and the others had gone — he hadn't been paying attention enough to pick out the mutts' voices — and hadn't picked up on anything, but he knew Laura had finally spotted them. Her senses had always been better than his, something she'd never let up about when they went for runs.

He made an inquisitive sound and Laura's eyes flicked to him. Her nostrils flared and she pointed with her nose to a small hill — beyond it the tress grew more sparsely, the dim light filtering through to the forest floor. They slunk closer, crouched low enough that the fur in their bellies whispered against the dead, dry leaves on the ground, they could see the clearing through the ferns and tree branches.

Derek heard it at the exact same moment his eyes landed on the scene before him.

“Please.”

The voice was human, and young. It was weak, barely a whisper, and the end of it tapered off to a whimper as the boy it belonged to covered his face with his hand. The sound of a frantic heartbeat was almost loud enough to drown out the word.

Four wolves stood in the clearing. Two were still fully shifted, mangy-looking beasts with matted fur and foul breath Derek could smell all the way from their hiding place. The other two had shifted to their beta forms, laughing like hyenas. They all reeked of lust and adrenalin enough to make Derek's stomach turn.

“Do it, Bud,” one of the half-shifted mutts said. He looked like he was in his early thirties, dressed in a dirty denim jacket and sporting lopsided mutton chops. He was staring at the boy hungrily. “Then it's my turn.”

The boy flinched and went even paler than he had been before. The heartbeat stuttered. He was sprawled on the forest floor, his shoulders against the tree trunk behind him and his knees drawn in, like he was trying to protect himself. There was blood at the corner of his mouth and trickling out of his nose, and his clothes looked torn.

One of the wolves — the one the other mutt had called 'Bud' — was standing above him, shifted enough to keep his claws and his fangs, and he was grinning like a predator that had just pinned down a rabbit. He was older, clearly the leader. His clothes were just as filthy as the other mutt's, but he was wearing only a t-shirt and cut-off cargo pants shorts despite the October chill.

“Now,” he said. “How'd you like it? On your back, or on your hands and knees, ass up in the air?” The muscles in his arms bulged as he flexed his clawed fingers.

Derek could see the boy trembling all the way from where he was. “Please,” he said, voice brittle like leaves shaking in the wind. “Please don't.”

“Did you hear that?” The mutt asked his friends without taking his eyes off the boy. A lightning-quick movement, and he dug his claws in the boy's upper arms. The boy yelped in pain. “He said *please*.”

The other wolves roared in laughter.

The boy's next words were choked-out enough to make them unintelligible.

“Now, c'mon. I ain't gonna hurt you, darlin',” the mutt said, voice almost a purr. “We just wanna have a little fun.” He flicked one of his claws into the button of the boy's jeans, and it came off completely with a snap. The rest of the wolves hooted and howled, getting louder and louder the more the boy struggled against the guy's hold on him.

Derek's hackles rose. He turned to look at Laura, a low growl rippling from her throat. Her eyes were blazing and Derek knew any chance this might have ended in the rogue pack being just chased off their territory just went out the window — they would tear the mongrels apart.

A sound of fabric ripping made him turn back to the wolves and their prey. Bud had just taken a claw to the boy's shirt, shredding it in the middle and exposing pale, freckled skin to the cold night air and to the jeers of the other mutts. They had circled closer, yelping and snapping their jaws at the terrified kid while Bud yanked the boy roughly up by his neck, and slammed him back down so he was lying on his stomach. “You smell so fucking nice, d'know that?” He said, leaning close to the boy's ear. “Mouthwatering.” He yanked the boy's pants down, leering the whole time. “Can't wait to find out how you *feel* like.”

When he pulled his own belt open and the boy let out a one last sound, an even weaker than before. “*Please*,” he said. It was quiet, and weak, and *scared*. It sounded like someone who had nothing to lose and nothing to gain but still made the one last effort, just for the hell of it.

And Derek snapped. He didn't mean to, he just *did*.

Before he even knew what he was doing – before Laura had time to do more than let out a warning yip – Derek had torn through the cluster of ferns and lunged to the clearing.

His paws hit the soft earth in a thud that sunk his claws in the mud and sent bits of fallen foliage flying as he bounded forward. The look on the mutts faces might have been comical if the situation had been different: the two fully shifted wolves looked like they might piss themselves, and let out a surprised squeaks as Derek bowled them over. He already heard Laura's snarls following in his wake, she would take care of them. Derek's full attention was focused on the now slack-jawed guy standing over the boy. His hands were still on his belt. The boy had covered his face with his arms and had curled up where he was still pinned beneath him.

Derek saw red. He suspected the roaring in his ears must have been his own blood crashing and coursing through his veins, making his muzzle pull back in a growl that shook trees and startled birds from the bushes.

They were in his territory, hurting someone, someone who was weaker than them and pleading for his life. The boy was *scared*.

“What the fu—?” That was all the guy got out before Derek slammed into him from the side and they both went flying, scattering leaves and twigs. His teeth sunk into the guy's upper arm, the metallic tang of blood filling Derek's mouth. He whirled around, twisted, and the guy crashed down on the ground on his back with a loud *oomph*. Derek planted one of his massive paws on his sternum, and roared.

The guy had went pale as a sheet. “Shit, man,” he stammered, heels kicking the ground uselessly. He lifted his hands in a placating gesture. “We didn't mean nothing, I swear, we just wanted to have some fun. It's just one human, and he was totally asking for it. Fucking around all alone in the forest.”

Behind him, Derek could hear Laura snapping her jaws and the other wolf still in human form — the one with the mutton chops — let out a strangled cry. Laura had most likely torn his hamstrings to keep him from escaping — it was her specialty when they went out for a hunt. The two fully shifted mutts had scrambled out into the dark, dank forest with their tails between their legs, but Derek wasn't terribly worried. They had fled in the exact direction Derek knew his mother, Peter, and Cora were waiting out.

Laura grinned sharply at Derek, and threw back her head to let out a piercing howl. *They're coming your way.*

Derek turned back to the guy, still stammering pitifully at his feet. He stank like tobacco and stale sweat and gun oil. His eyes were small, like a pig's, and sweat was beading on his forehead. The guy's eyes flitted nervously over to where Laura was probably convincing his friend trespassing had been a terrible idea. “What – What did you do to Harvey?” His eyes returned to Derek. “I swear, man, just let us go and we won't come back.” Derek bared his teeth and flexed his paw on the guy's chest experimentally. He grinned even wider when that made the guy's eyes widen and reek of fresh fear. “Please don't kill me,” he squeaked out.

The smallest whimper from behind him stopped Derek in his tracks.

He allowed himself a fraction of a second to reprimand himself for not having his priorities straight.

The boy.

The mutt must have noticed Derek's ear swiveling towards the sound, because his eyes flicked over to where his prey still lay, now curled up on his side on the ground. “If you let us go, I can leave the kid,” he said. “You can have him all to yourself.” The guy must have taken Derek's low warning growl for excitement, the idiot, because he went on. “Did you smell him? I bet you're itching to have a go yourself. He smells so fucking delicious, I bet he —”

It would have been easy to kill the mutt then and there — just a snap of his jaws, and the guy would bleed out in less than two minutes. It would have been the quickest way, but Derek wasn't going for the quick solution. This one wasn't gonna be let off easy.

His mother had once said that Derek shouldn't try to grin like a human when he was in his wolf form. She said it made him look wild, and feral, and not at all like he was trying to smile. “You'll scare the birds off the trees, Der,” she'd said. Derek could have argued that was exactly what he was going for — he *should* look wild. He was a wolf, after all.

He pulled his lips back to reveal his blood-speckled teeth, and let the low rumble building in his throat to slip out from between them. The guy snapped his mouth shut, and a smell of urine filled the air. The guy had pissed his pants.

Laura was watching the two of them quietly. Both of her front paws were planted on Mutton Chops' shoulders, and her teeth were inches from his throat. When she caught Derek's gaze, she tilted her head questioningly. Derek nodded. He counted one, two, three frantic thumps of Mutton Chops' heart before the guy's constant whimpers quieted suddenly. He died without a sound as Laura quickly and efficiently tore out his throat.

She let the body thump back to the ground and calmly stepped over it to pad over to where Derek was standing, her charcoal fur speckled with blood. He didn't have to ask. Laura quietly took over standing watch over the other guy, now a sputtering and blubbing mess, as Derek spun on his heel.

The kid was still where he had curled up by the tree, clothes torn and slight tremors running through him. He looked small, and deathly pale in the faint light. His arm was still bleeding from where the mutt had dug in his claws. When Derek carefully nudged the hands covering the boy's face with his nose, he startled like he'd been electrocuted.

“Don't kill me,” he choked out. “Please let me go.”

The whine slipped out of Derek's throat involuntarily. He wished he could talk, so he could explain he wouldn't hurt him.

With careful steps, Derek edged closer. He couldn't get to the boy's face, so he settled for gently licking at the wounds on his arm and the angry red gashes on his hands. That would be soothing. Laura used to do that to him when he was younger and got scraped up.

The boy jerked away, uncovering his face, and Derek came face to face with a pair of big eyes, liquid and the color of old bronze and fringed with thick black lashes. The boy's pale cheeks were scattered with beauty marks and his nose was slightly upturned. If it weren't for the split lip, his full full and gently curving mouth would have been almost pretty.

Now that he was closer, Derek could see the boy wasn't as young as he had initially thought. He still couldn't have been older than twenty.

“What are you waiting for?” The boy asked. His mouth was set on a grim line, but Derek could smell his fear was — a living thing, cloying and clogging Derek's nose, and he stared

back at Derek with a mixture of terror and determination. His heart was like a hummingbird, hammering in his chest. “If you're gonna d-do it, then just do it.”

Derek huffed. As carefully as he could, mindful of his sharp teeth, he took a hold of the waistband of the boy's pants, and tugged them up. He was still wearing his underwear – the mutt hadn't had time to do more than strip him of his jeans — and the button on the jeans was torn off, but Derek still felt the need to try and help the boy cover up. The shirt was a lost cause.

He was stared at Derek with open confusion. “What are you doing?”

Derek huffed out a sound that he hoped would convey how he wanted the boy not to worry and to stay still, and nosed around looking for other injuries. As far as he could tell, the boy thankfully wasn't seriously hurt. The gashes on his chest and hands looked nasty but weren't too deep. The claw-marks on his arms were more on the worrying side, but they would probably heal quickly if cleaned and dressed properly. Derek didn't know for sure — he didn't usually keep company with humans and wasn't very familiar with their physique. He'd have to ask Aunt Rena.

A distant howl had Derek swiveling his head around.

Behind him, Laura tossed her head back and let out an answering howl of her own. Another cry sounded off to their left, somewhere closer, and a third only a half a mile away. A few minutes later, Talia Hale walked out of the forest, back in her human form, naked as the day she was born, and smiling like she was just taking a pleasant walk on a Sunday afternoon.

Her gaze widened just a fraction as her eyes landed on the human lying underneath Derek, but she gave no other indication she was surprised to see him there. She had probably heard the commotion from miles away.

She fixed the mutt under Laura's paws with a piercing stare. “So,” she said, her voice sweet but her gaze hard as iron. “This is one of mutts who decided trespassing on our territory would be a good idea.” She glanced at Laura. “He's the leader?”

Laura made an affirmative sound.

“That explains it,” she said dryly. She stepped over to where Laura was still holding the guy down, and looked down at him. “How many of you are there?”

The guy was shaking so hard his teeth were chattering, but he still sneered up at Talia. “Fuck you, lady,” he spat out.

Without missing a beat, Talia ground the heel of her foot to the guy's throat. “I asked,” she said, calm as ever, as the guy wheezed and gasped, trying to breathe. “How many of you are there?”

Laura dug her claws into the guy's belly. “Four!” He gasped. “Just us four! I swear.”

“Not anymore, there aren't.” She nodded at the dead guy lying where Laura had left him. “That one looks a bit broken. And we took two dingy mongrels down just two miles from here. Dumb things, they were. They didn't smell us even though we were upwind.” Talia smiled down at the guy then, a terrible thing that looked two sharp on a human face. She let her eyes flash red. “Looks like you're the only one left.” She turned her head without taking her eyes off the mutt. “Right, Peter? Cora?”

A wolf the color of sunburned red clay slunk out of the shadows and brushed close to the Alpha. Peter's muzzle was stained crimson, and he was licking his lips with a smirk on his wolfish face. How he managed to look so sardonic even in his animal form was still a mystery to Derek. Peter let out a drawn-out purr and set off on an a lazy pace to circle Talia, Laura, and the now wide-eyed mutt.

Soon after, a tawny wolf emerged from the same shadows, and padded to the clearing. Cora took one look of the mutt, wrinkled her nose, and went to plonk herself down at the edge of the treeline.

Talia took a deep breath. “Right,” she said, tilting her head at the mutt. “If I understood correctly, you haven't only trespassed on our territory, hunted our game, and caused trouble in the close-by neighborhoods, but you have also tried to hurt someone on my land.” Her eyes were still burning scarlet red. “On my watch.”

The guy whimpered pitifully.

“The humans on Hale land are under my protection. Do you know what the punishment is for hurting them?”

This time, he said nothing. The only indication he was listening was the overwhelming stench of fear that wafted off of him.

“We'll get back to this shortly.” Talia turned on her heel, and walked over to where Derek was still standing over the trembling human. The kid's cheeks were stained with tears that made tracks in the dirt caked on his face. Without thinking, Derek turned so he was standing more squarely over the boy, and crouched lower in a protective curl around him.

His mother stopped two feet away, and raised her brows at him. “Don't be silly, Der. I'm not gonna hurt him.”

Derek went stiff. He glanced over to where Laura was staring at him curiously, before looking back at Talia. He knew she wouldn't hurt the kid. Of course not, why would she? To be honest, she was more qualified than any of them to treat his wounds. She was his mother, his *Alpha*. And yet it took Derek closer to half a minute to carefully step out of the way so she could take a look at the boy. It might have taken less, if it weren't for the fact that the human had apparently decided Derek was the lesser of two evils, and had curled two shaking hands into the fur at his chest, and held on fast.

Derek whined softly at the boy, who was watching him with his big doe eyes, and stepped back out of his reach.

Talia turned her eyes, now kind and soft, back to their natural hazel, to the boy. "Are you hurt, honey?" She asked gently.

The boy opened and closed his mouth a few times before he got any sound out. "I – I don't think so."

"Those cuts on your arm and hands?" she pointed to the still sluggishly bleeding wounds.

"They aren't that deep."

"Are there any others?"

The boy pressed his hands carefully to his stomach, then to his side. "No," he said quietly. "Just br-bruises, I think."

Talia nodded at the boy's shoulder. "May I?" She asked kindly. After a slight pause, the kid nodded, and Talia prodded carefully at the edges of the wounds. Her hands skated over the boy's arms and legs, gentle but firm. The entire time Talia's hands moved over his skin, the boy kept his gaze carefully averted.

The corner of Talia's mouth twitched. "I'd apologize for my lack of clothing, but I'm sure you understand. Us born wolves rarely think of nudity as something unusual or noteworthy."

Stiles blushed slightly. "S okay."

She pressed down at the boy's shoulder. "Does this hurt?"

He shook his head.

"How about this?" This time, she carefully bent her wrists first up, then down again.

Another head shake.

"That's good. I don't think anything's broken, at least." She leaned back on her heels to look at him in the eye. "Did they hurt you in any other way?"

Derek knew his mother had probably heard every single word uttered from miles away, and would have been able to smell it if something had actually happened. He figured asking was her way of just keep the boy talking and calm.

Two spots of color rose high on the boy's cheeks while the rest of his face went ashen. "No. They –" He swallowed, nodded to Derek. "He stopped them. Before they – before they did anything."

Talia smiled at him reassuringly. "That's good. And we'll make sure the ones who hurt you won't have a chance to do it again." At that, she glanced behind them where the mutt was sprawled on the ground under Laura's watchful gaze. Derek growled in agreement. They all knew that wolf wouldn't walk out of this forest clearing alive. She turned back to the boy, tucking an errant lock of her salt-and-pepper hair behind her ear. Derek noticed there was

dried blood under her fingernails. “I realized we're being terribly rude, here. We haven't even been introduced. What's your name, honey?”

The boy's eyes flicked from Talia to Derek, to Laura and the mutt, and back to Talia. He crossed his arms across his chest, hugging himself. “Stiles.”

“Nice to meet you, Stiles. This here is Derek, my son.” She beckoned to him, and Derek stepped closer again to lick the boy's hand and press his nose to his cheek.

The boy — Stiles — winced. “Uh, it's cold.”

“Manners, Derek,” Talia admonished lightly. “I'm Talia Hale, the Alpha of my pack and this territory.”

Stiles wiped his hand over his face, smudging the dirt and dust on his cheeks. “I kinda guessed as much.” At Talia's curious gaze, he hurried to explain. “I knew this was Hale land. I – I wasn't supposed to come here, but they were chasing after me and I lost my phone and I had nowhere else to run.”

“It's okay, hon. It was them who were trespassing. Not you.” Talia extended a hand and gestured to the rest of their family. “That gray one here holding down the mongrel is my eldest daughter, Laura. The one sitting over there and looking displeased is my other daughter, Cora, and he” — Talia gestured to Peter, still skulking around in circles — “is my brother, Peter.”

Stiles only nodded.

“Derek?” Talia assessing eyes turned to Derek, where he was still standing with his eyes fixed on the boy. “Make sure our guest gets some clean clothes and a hot meal. We'll take care of this.”

Derek yipped and shifted closer.

“He will take you to our house, where you can get cleaned up and rest,” Talia said. “Is that okay with you, hon?”

Stiles seemed hesitant — the acrid smell of fear was getting stronger again. “I...” His eyes shifted to the last living rogue wolf. “There aren't any more of them, are there?”

“No. And Derek will make sure nothing happens to you. He'll keep you safe.”

Derek pushed close enough to the boy to nudge his nose between his back and the tree trunk he was leaning on, helping him sit up. When Stiles was upright enough, Derek turned to bend his flank closer to him. He huffed impatiently.

“Always with the chivalry,” Talia said, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Take a hold of his fur. He wants to help.”

Two pairs of hands twisted themselves into Derek's coat, chilly against his warm flanks, and Stiles hoisted himself up on shaky legs. “What happens to him now?” His question was to

Talia, but his eyes were fixed on the mutt.

“We make sure he won't come back for you or anyone else again.”

“You'll kill it?”

“Yes,” Talia said simply.

Stiles' mouth was set in a hard line. He didn't say anything more, only nodded.



They walked through the forest in silence, paws and a pair of human feet soundless in the night.

Beside him, long fingers still curled in the fur on Derek's flanks, Stiles stumbled along. It had taken only a few miles through the rapidly darkening forest before Stiles had given in and leaned his whole weight on Derek. It wasn't like he minded. In his wolf form, Derek was one of the largest wolves in the Hale pack — only Uncle Peter stood taller than him — and he was strong enough to support Stiles effortlessly; even standing side-by-side with a full grown man, Derek's flank would have been level with their waist. Stiles' grip stopped him from actually falling face first into the dirt, but every now and then his foot would get caught in a root sticking up from the ground, or slip on wet moss. Stiles never said a word when he faltered, just held on more tightly.

They had killed the mutt before Derek had led the boy away from the clearing. He had sat patiently beside him while Stiles stood, his eyes fixed on the kicking and flailing limbs of the mutt, before the guy had gone limp, Laura's teeth sunk into his throat. Stiles' gaze had been dark, clouding the brown of his eyes into something stormy, but the hands sunk into Derek's fur had been trembling. Derek had kept himself between the mutt and Stiles, just in case. They had left before the others buried the bodies.

Talia had shifted back and melded into the shadows with Peter and Cora on her heels to make sure the mutt was telling the truth about the size of his pack. A few feet ahead of them, Laura was leading the way back to the house, her tail swishing from side to side.

After a mile or so, Stiles said his first words since leaving the clearing. “Sorry I'm so slow,” he mumbled quietly. He still smelled like fear, the stale sweat and adrenalin clinging to him, even though his heart rate had quieted down. It was still on this side of too fast, but the rhythm was steadier.

Derek turned his head to brush against Stiles' side and whined softly. He had already tried to press as close as possible when he had noticed the goosebumps on the boy's arms — it was uncharacteristically cold for California spring, night was falling, and the temperatures dropped with it — but Stiles was still shivering.

A ghost of a smile touched the boy's features. “I'll take that as a 'it's okay.'”



Only Aunt Rena was waiting for them when they emerged from the forest. She was standing on the front porch, twisting her hands in the hem of her shirt. Her copper hair was glowing dull red in the porch light shining behind her.

“Oh thank god,” she said when she spotted them. Without raising her voice, she turned to the house: “They're back.”

Chaos erupted in the house. The kids started squealing, and Derek could hear his twin brothers, Louis and Levi, trying to forcefully prevent them from running screaming to the front porch. Jeffrey was trying to calm down the bouncing Ava, his and Laura's four-year-old daughter.

“But Dad,” she whined, “I wanna see Mom.”

“I know, hon, but not now. She'll come inside soon.”

Rena was watching Laura, and her eyes widened when they fell upon the blood matted on her fur. As the only human member of the pack, she couldn't have smelled it from afar like the rest of the wolves in the house. “Laura?” She said, concern making her voice high.

Laura shook her head. *Not mine*, she meant, and Rena relaxed.

“The others?”

Laura let out another whine, and tossed her head in the direction of the forest. As if on cue, yet another howl reverberated through the night. The one that meant 'all clear.' There were three distinctive voices, even to human ears.

Rena nodded. “Good. Now.” She turned to Derek. Her pale gray eyes roamed over him, then turned to take in the shuddering human clinging to him. Stiles hadn't said a word since they had into view of the house. “I take it we someone who needs medical attention?”

Derek came to a stop before Rena, and let out a whine he hoped was encouraging to Stiles.

“You're hurt, sweetheart,” Rena said. It wasn't a question.

Stiles let go of Derek and pressed a palm to his shoulder. It was still bleeding. “A little.”

“C'mon. Let's get you warm and cleaned up.”

They went in through the kitchen door, across the hall and into the bathroom on the ground floor where Rena kept her emergency kit ('breakable humans' medical kit, she laughingly called it). The ruckus inside had retreated to the drawing room at the back of the house, which meant Jeffrey and the others had heard the conversation and decided they had better clear the room.

Before they had stepped in, Stiles had realized Derek wasn't following, and he blanched. “Isn't he coming?”

Rena smiled. "He's going to use the door for the four-legged. He'll be right back, after he's cleaned up." She glanced at Derek, looking pointedly at his muddy paws. "Right, Derek?"

Derek yipped, and loped off after Laura.



It took Derek the better part of an hour before he could go back to check up on Stiles.

After leaving Stiles to his aunt's capable hands, he had slipped to the house through the super-sized pet door installed in the laundry room out back, where they could come inside without having to deal with door handles. Laura and Jeffrey had laughed uproariously the whole time they had installed it, but ever since the pack had actually discovered its convenience, the jokes had stopped. Doorknobs and paws did not mix.

Derek shifted, and flexed his sore muscles. He showered in the smaller guest bathroom at the back of the house, washing off the stench of the mutts and the mud off his hair, and dug through the clean stacks of folded laundry for a t-shirt and sweatpants. And the entire time — every minute he spent away from the boy — the wolf in him was whining softly. To go find him, make sure he was okay. Make sure he was safe.

Rena caught up with him before he reached his room at the end of the upstairs hallway. She put a finger to his lips, and pointed to the door hanging slightly ajar. "I didn't have time to empty the guest room of your dad's books, and he was exhausted, the poor thing. I hope you don't mind."

Through the open doorway, Derek could make out a skinny figure, curled up under his covers and snuffling softly.

"Did you call his family?" He asked.

"I tried his house but nobody was home. Stiles said his dad's probably at work, but the dispatch at the station said he's out on a call. Homicide or something urgent, down in Oak Grove."

"The station?"

"His dad's the Sheriff. Stilinski."

In his mind's eye, Derek could see a man in his early fifties with pale eyes and serious mouth. He'd seen his squad car in the town, sometimes, when he'd gone grocery shopping and driven past the police station. He knew the sheriff had a kid, but nothing much else.

"You couldn't reach him?" Derek asked.

Rena shook her head. "Probably doesn't even know the kid's missing. The dispatch lady was really nice, said she knew the Stilinskis and Stiles was like family to him. She said she'd pass on a message and make it urgent."

"What about his mother?"

Rena shook her head again, this time with an edge of sadness to it. “Not around, the dispatch said, but going by how she spoke about it, I don't think she meant that the mother skipped town. If I remember correctly there was a news article about Sheriff Stilinski back when he got elected. It said he was a widower.”

Something must have shown on Derek's face, because Rena patted his arm consolingly. “We'll try again tomorrow. But the kid's safe, that's the most important thing.”

Derek just nodded.

“I also lent him some of your old clothes. I'd have given him Levi or Louis', they might have fit better, but those two actually didn't have a single clean thing in their closets.” She rolled her eyes. “Pretty sure that room has its own ecosystem.”

“It's okay. I don't mind.”

“I made you a bed on the sofa.”

“Thanks, Aunt Rena.”

She leaned past Derek to look at the mound of blankets, moving with Stiles' even breaths. “I heard from Laura those mutts didn't only claw him up real good. That true?” She was still wearing her peach orange cardigan, her hair in gentle curls and her features lovely as ever, but the look in her eyes was pure steel. It was moments like those Derek could really see why Peter was so taken with her. Why he had taken a human mate.

“Yeah,” Derek said. “They tried to...violate him. I stopped them. But they almost succeeded.”

Rena's mouth settled into a hard line. “You got them?”

“They're dead.”

“Good.” Rena smiled and squeezed his arm. “You did good, pup.”

She disappeared down the stairs, and Derek stepped into his room, closing the door behind him. The soundproofing in the walls swallowed the noises wafting up from downstairs, where Talia, Cora, and Peter had apparently just walked into the living room.

As quietly as he could, Derek walked to the bedside.

Stiles was a restless sleeper. Even in rest, he seemed to be in constant motion, fingers twitching, leg kicking underneath the covers, and small sounds escaping his throat every now and then. His eyes were moving back and forth under his eyelids. As Derek watched, a tiny, scared noise escaped Stiles' throat, and he curled up on himself under the duvet.

Asleep and his face relaxed, he looked smaller, and younger.

Both of his hands were wrapped in bandages, and the wounds on his upper arm had been cleaned and dressed. Derek could smell the faint smell of antiseptic, and of Rena's perfume she had left behind on Stiles' skin when she had patched him up.

Now that he was closer, Derek could also smell the rest of him much better. He had clearly washed up, maybe even showered — he smelled faintly of soap, and something fruity. But what really felt like a punch to the gut was the way Stiles himself smelled like, underneath it all. Like spices, nutmeg and lemongrass and sage, like warm earth and what might have been ink. And mixed with all that was Derek's own scent, from the worn t-shirt and cotton pants Stiles was wearing. Derek's clothes.

It was intoxicating. And Derek wanted nothing more than bury his nose into the crook of Stiles' neck, into that place in his nape where his skin met his hairline, and breathe it in.

Derek took a step back, then another. The rogue mutt's words echoed in his head. *Did you smell him?* The mutt had asked, leering. *He smells so fucking delicious.* Was he really so low he had rescued the kid from serial rapists, only to think something like that himself?

He felt sick, suddenly.

Derek turned on his heels, and fled the room.



He didn't dare to go back until next morning. He probably would have stayed away a lot longer, if he didn't need a fresh set of clothes.

By the time he noticed Stiles' heartbeat had changed from the steady rhythm of sleep, and that it was now drumming with a strange uptick, it was too late.

“Oh my god,” a voice said from behind him.

Derek froze, his hands still in his underwear drawer where he had been digging around for a pair of briefs. He turned around and found Stiles staring at him. Or gaping, more like. He was sitting up in bed, sheets pooling around his waist. His mouth was hanging slightly open.

“I was rescued by an underwear model,” Stiles said under his breath.

Derek blinked. “I – What?”

“Are you Derek? The, uh,” he made a weird gesture that might have been a mime for fur and fangs. “The black wolf? Yea high?”

Derek closed the drawer, and turned to face Stiles fully. Bad decision, really, he realized too late when he noticed how his old, worn *Ramones* shirt was just a little bit too big on Stiles, and was hanging off his narrow shoulders. Derek could see a slender shoulder and a collarbone peeking out of the collar. He coughed awkwardly. “Yeah.”

“I knew all the Hales were like supermodels and you were really nice as a wolf but I didn't really expect” — he waved a hand to compass Derek's, well, everything — “that.” Derek watched in fascination as Stiles seemed to realize what he had said, like he had realized too late his brain-to-mouth filter wasn't working right, and he blushed gloriously, vividly scarlet red. “I mean...” He said, and snapped his mouth shut. “I'm going to stop talking now.”

Derek cleared his throat. "Are you hungry?"

Stiles' face lit up like a six-year-old's on a Christmas morning. "Holy god, *yes*."

"My Mom's waiting for you downstairs. I can hear her worrying about you all the way from here."

"I am not worrying," his mother's voice drifted up from the kitchen.

"Kitchen's on the left when you get to the foyer, at the bottom of the stairs."

"Okay." Stiles got up from the bed, rubbing his arms. He looked small, suddenly, and vulnerable in the bright light of the morning sun streaming into the room. "And hey, uh, thanks," he said. His eyes darted to Derek, then away again. "For yesterday."

"It was the least I could do."

His head bobbed. "Still. Thanks." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "I'm gonna go."

"I'll be right down."



After changing into clean clothes, Derek followed his nose to the kitchen. It was a Saturday morning, everyone was home, and it was an absolute chaos. As usual. The noise level alone was astounding.

Stiles was sitting on the kitchen island, one bare foot tucked under him and the other dangling in the air, watching the chaos around him and Talia bustling by the stove. Laura was standing next to her, poking with her spatula at the pancakes on one of the pans.

"Just let me flip it, Mom," she was saying, "It'll burn."

"It's not ready yet. God, Laura, give me the spatula before you poke someone in the eye."

Without taking her eyes off Laura, she smacked Cora's hands with her own spatula. Cora grimaced and pulled back her fingers from where she had been trying to steal a piece of bacon off the pan.

Louis and Levi, Derek's younger twin brothers, were at the table, apparently convincing the increasingly more doubtful-looking Oliver that werebunnies were real, and you could change into one if you just knew how. The six-year-old squinted at his uncles suspiciously. "How come *I* can't do it, then?" He asked. He was holding a spoon in one hand like a weapon, the other one was curled around a tub of strawberry yogurt.

"Well, you see, you gotta have some special skills for that," Levi said. "Only the smartest and those who know how to do it can change into what they want. Like me." Louis kicked him in the shin under the table, hard, and snarled. "Like me and Louis," Levi corrected.

Oliver's eyes narrowed even more. He turned in his seat, spilling yogurt from his spoon as he spun around. "Mom," he whined at Laura, "I wanna be a werebunny."

Derek's father was at the end of the table, setting plates stacked with pancakes and fruit and steaming-hot toast on the table. "Boys, behave. And we talked about table manners, Oliver, remember?"

"Daniel, please." Talia chuckled from her place at the stove. "Like they're going to remember. They were raised by wolves."

Jeremy — Laura's eldest, a quiet boy of eight with unruly hair — was drawing in his napkin with a blue crayon. Peter and Rena's two daughters, Savannah and Viola, accepted their plates gracefully and picked up their forks. The preteens seemed entirely unbothered by the chaos. Peter and Rena were sitting facing each other in the corner seats, Peter stirring cream into his coffee and reading the newspaper over Rena's shoulder. She said something quietly to his ear, pointing to a news article at the bottom of the page, and Peter laughed.

"Where's Jeffrey?" Derek asked Cora as she bustled past, carrying stacks of plates piled with breakfast foods: croissants, toast, fried eggs and bacon swimming in grease, fruit and yogurt and a bowls of granola.

Cora shrugged. "In the garden, or the garage. Doing man stuff." She looked pointedly around. "Avoiding this."

"Smart man," Laura said under her breath.

Derek turned back to Stiles just in time to see one of his nieces crawling into his lap. Ava, still in her *Turtles* pajamas and wearing her fuzzy purple socks, hoisted herself up using the edge of the breakfast bar table, then glared at Stiles until he helped her up and in his lap, looking bemused.

"Are you human?" Ava demanded. She reached out to pinch Stiles' nose, as if that would tell her everything she needed to know.

"Ava, let him be," Laura said from the stove, waving the spatula at the girl.

"It's okay." Stiles turned to look at the tiny werewolf in his lap. "So your name's Ava?"

She nodded gravely.

"How old are you, Ava?"

"Eight."

"She's four," Laura interrupted without glancing back from where she was digging more flour and sugar from the pantry.

"Four," Ava said, just as seriously. "What's your name. Are you a human? Like Great Auntie Rena?"

“Yes I am,” he said. He smiled gratefully at Talia when she placed a mug of steaming coffee and a fresh stack of pancakes, topped with syrup and a clump of butter, before him. “And I’m Stiles. Nice to meet you, Ava.”

Ava squirmed, but made no move to get off. “Why are you here?” Her nose twitched, as she scented the air. “You smell like Uncle Derek. Are you Uncle Derek’s mate?”

Stiles sounded like he suddenly had trouble swallowing the piece of pancake he had just been chewing, and Talia let out a thoughtful hum from where she was frying eggs. Cora snorted, loudly. Peter raised his gaze from the newspaper and fixed Derek with his sharp, assessing gaze.

“Okay, time to go, monkey,” Derek said, ears burning, and hoisted Ava up by her waist. “Let Stiles eat.”

The little girl grabbed a hold of Derek’s shirtfront, and leveled him with a serious stare. “He has a funny nose,” she said. “I like it. I think he should stay.”

You’re not the only one, he thought dryly as his wolf purred happily at the thought.

“Stiles is only visiting us, pup, he probably wants to go home.”

As if on cue, the phone rang. It was the old land line his father had insisted on keeping, the phone trilling in its cradle on the table by the front door.

Derek’s parents shared a look over the hullabaloo in the kitchen. Stiles had stopped eating, and was staring into the direction of the ringing.

“Probably the Sheriff,” Talia said. “Do you want to answer it, hon? Your father must be worried sick.”

A clink of a fork against the counter top, and Stiles got up from his seat. He disappeared to the foyer. Even though the whole Hale family was pretty good at ignoring any and all social conventions about personal space and privacy, they knew when to give someone their space. The breakfast circus resumed with its usual volume, and Stiles’ conversation with his dad was almost drowned out.

Almost.

Derek couldn’t make out what the Sheriff at the other end was saying, but he couldn’t help but focus on Stiles quiet voice. “Hi Dad,” he was saying. “Don’t freak out, I’m fine. I just lost my phone.” A pause. “Yeah. My jeep died, on that back road near the preserve.” Pause. “He didn’t know I was coming over, Dad, so he didn’t know to worry, Scott couldn’t have known.” Pause. “I *know*, Dad, it was stupid but I thought that I was walking in the right direction.” Stiles sighed. “Yeah, I know.” Pause. “At the Hale house. They...” He hesitated. “Some guys came after me, stray omegas or something. They jumped me when I was taking a look under the hood. I dropped my phone somewhere and –”

Stiles' mouth snapped audibly shut and even from where he was in the kitchen, Derek could hear the Sheriff's outraged squeak across the phone line.

"I said I'm *fine*, Dad. The Hales helped me. They got rid of the weres." He swallowed audibly. "I'm safe."

This time Stiles fell quiet for a long time, like the Sheriff at the other end had gone off on a tirade.

After the tinny sound of the Sheriff's voice through the speaker had gone silent, Stiles heaved another sigh. "I promise. And I know. Love you too, Dad."

The call ended with a click as Stiles replaced the phone to its cradle. He returned to the kitchen, looking sheepish. "My Dad's coming over to pick me up," he said to the room at large. "He sounded pretty pissed, and you probably have to witness his 'Stiles You're My Son But You're An Idiot' lecture when he gets here, so... sorry in advance."

Talia patted him on the arm consolingly. "We better go find your shoes, then."



The Sheriff's arrival wasn't a surprise to any of them. They heard his patrol car from miles away as it bumped and rattled its way along the bumpy driveway that led to the Hale house.

Talia went to the front porch to greet him, and the rest of the household abandoned their breakfasts to pile near the front door. Wolves were curious by nature, they weren't even trying to hide it. Stiles stood a bit awkwardly by Talia's side, fidgeting with the sleeve of his hoodie. *Derek's* hoodie.

After they had found Stiles' shoes, he had shyly asked if he could borrow Derek's clothes until he got home and could change. He would bring them back the next day, he said, washed and folded. As nonchalantly as he could, Derek had told him to keep the clothes — and then loaned him a hoodie, ink blue and dug from the far back corner of his closet, that had shrunk in the wash, years ago, and didn't even fit him anymore.

"It's cold outside," Derek had said gruffly when Stiles had stared him with open-mouthed confusion. He had pushed the piece of clothing even closer to the boy, holding it in his hand like it was a live snake. "You can keep it."

Stiles had taken the hoodie.

Derek watched him now, fingers worrying the hem and the edges of his sleeves, and tried not to smell the warm scent of him mingling with Derek's own on his skin.

Five minutes later, the Sheriff's patrol car rumbled to the yard. Almost before it had fully come to a stop, its passenger-side door flew open, and a boy around Stiles' age tumbled out. He nearly took the door off its hinges in his haste to get out.

It happened very fast, after that. Derek didn't know what had first triggered it, or what he had been thinking at all. He only remembered noting a head of unruly, dark hair, tan skin, and an

uneven jawline before the smell of another werewolf hit him like a sledgehammer. He didn't think. All he knew that there was a stranger on their front yard, he was a wolf, and he was heading towards Stiles at full speed.

His wolf went berserk.

Derek had Stiles pinned against the wall behind him, beside the front door, a low growl rumbling from his throat and his eyes flashing a warning blue before his brain had time to catch up.

The strange wolf stopped at the bottom of the stairs, his own eyes glowing yellow. His lips pulled back in a snarl, mouth full of sharp teeth.

“Derek!” His mother snapped at the same exact moment Stiles said “Whoa, hey, Derek. What the hell?”

The other wolf snapped out of it faster than Derek. Ever so slowly he relaxed and blinked once, twice, before the golden yellow winked out of his eyes. “Shit, sorry,” he said to Talia, eyes flicking from the Alpha to Derek and Stiles. His hands were raised to show they were empty, and his head tilted to the side to bare his neck. A sign of submission. “Alpha Hale. Stiles, hi.”

“Heya, Scotty,” Stiles said. He didn't move from behind Derek but placed a calming hand at his elbow. “I'm gonna go give Scott, a hug, okay, buddy?” He said to Derek. Calmly, like he was talking to a pissed-off predator. “Scott's my bro. It's okay.”

He didn't want to glance around to check, but Derek was pretty sure his whole pack was staring at him with varying degrees of confusion and surprise. Except for Peter, who looked only amused, like he knew a secret no-one else did. Laura was giving Derek an odd look he didn't want to examine any closer.

Derek took a step to the side to let Stiles pass, and let the color fade from his eyes back to normal hazel. “Sorry,” he said to Scott. His mother was still looking at him calculatingly, her arms crossed over her chest, so he said it again. “Sorry. I don't know what got into me.”

A tug on his sleeve had Derek glancing down: Jeremy had slithered from his mother's grip and was standing beside him, dark blue eyes serious. “Who's that?” He asked in a stage whisper, gesturing towards Scott.

By then, Stiles was already in motion. He bounded down the steps and took one gigantic leap, crashing straight into Scott. The boy didn't even stagger, just flung his arms around Stiles' waist and squeezed. “Your dad told me what happened,” he said into Stiles' neck, words mashed into his skin. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, dude. I'm...I'm okay. Derek kicked their asses.”

Stiles hooked a thumb in his general direction, and Scott let Stiles slide to the ground on his feet as his gaze returned to Derek. “You're Derek? You're the one who stopped those mutts?”

Derek just nodded.

“That explains it.” Scott was giving Stiles a strange look, his brow furrowed and his dark brown eyes narrowed. “Thank you,” he said to Derek, and so earnestly Derek didn't doubt even for a second he meant it with all of his heart.

“Stiles.” Sheriff Stilinski had stepped out of his car, still in his uniform and looking like he hadn't seen his bed in over twenty four hours, and held open his arms.

Stiles disentangled himself from Scott and fell into the embrace headfirst. He buried his face into his father's shoulder and the Sheriff's arms came around the boy in such a tight hug it must have been painful.

“M okay, Dad,” Stiles mumbled. “I'm fine.”

“That was the most idiotic thing you have ever done in your life.”

“I know, Dad.”

“Do you have any idea what it felt like to get that kind of phone call from Ramirez? That you'd gotten hurt and it was urgent? You could have *died*.”

“I know.”

“You're all I have, kiddo, and it –” The Sheriff tightened the embrace even more, and Stiles exhaled in a shaky breath. “– it would kill me to lose you. You hear me?”

Stiles wiped his eyes in his sleeve, and leaned back. “I'm won't do it again, I promise.”

“I'm absolutely certain you will, but I'll take that promise anyway.” He gripped Stiles' head in both of his hands and pressed his lips to his temple. “Love you.”

“I'm nineteen, Dad. Not a kid.” Stiles covered his father's hands with his own. “Love you, too.”

His mother appeared at Derek's elbow and smiled warmly at the Stilinskis. “Would you and Stiles like to come over tomorrow and stay for dinner?” Talia asked the Sheriff.

Would you like to stay forever, Derek thought a bit hysterically as he watched Stiles, thinking of that Disney cartoon he had watched with Laura when they were kids (*Mulan*, he thought it was called.) *Please stay forever*.

Before the Sheriff drove off, after he had bundled both Stiles and the very clingy Scott into the back seat of his cruiser, he turned to Derek. He had already showered Talia and Rena with gratitude for taking care of Stiles. “I heard what you did for my son,” he said. “I owe you my life.” Derek opened his mouth to dismiss it, but the Sheriff waved his hand. “No, please, I do. I'm pretty sure you and your family are the only reason he's in one piece. So please.” He gripped Derek's shoulder. “If you ever need anything, you know where to find me.”

Derek nodded. He watched the police cruised pull off from the yard — Stiles even waved from the back window — and that was that. The boy was with his father, he was going home, and no harm had come to him. They had done their duty in helping him. Everything should have been absolutely fine.

So why did he feel like something was trying to claw itself up his throat as he waved back at the retreating taillights?

Chapter 2

As promised, Stiles and his father showed up the following day, Stiles looking around the house and the surrounding yard like he was seeing it for the first time. He was wearing his own clothes this time and handed Derek his shirt and cotton sweatpants in a neatly-folded stack.

“I thought you might want them back, anyway,” he said. “So, here.”

He didn't return the hoodie, and Derek didn't ask about it (So what he was pleased that the boy had kept it? No-one would have to know.)

They ate sitting around the large mahogany table in the dining room. Stiles and the Sheriff sat near the end of the table, between Talia at the head and Laura on the other side. Stiles ate quietly while the Sheriff chatted with Derek's mother but every now and then Derek would catch the boy looking at him shyly. He always hastily lowered his gaze when he noticed Derek looking.

After that first dinner, over dessert, his mother turned to the Sheriff. “Speaking of dinners, Sheriff Stilinski, I hope you know you are welcome to join us any evening if you'd like. You don't need to even call ahead, we always have plenty of food to go around.”

The Sheriff blinked at her in confusion. “I appreciate the offer but I'm sure you value your privacy and would like to have your dinners with family only-”

“Nonsense,” Talia said, waving her hand. “When my pack invites someone for dinner, that means they are welcome to come back and eat with us anytime.”

Stiles' father explained he was usually at work at dinnertime, had pulled extra shifts at the station recently, and probably would not make it. He said he would see what he could do about getting an evening off, but declined politely. All eyes turned to Stiles, and the boy got a little flustered even though his expression had brightened.

“I'd... I'd like that,” he answered shyly. “Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Talia said, nodding approvingly.

It became a pattern of a sort, after that.

Stiles came over the following day, then the next. At the pack's curious questions and nosy interrogation, he explained he hadn't managed to find a job yet, and had decided to apply for college after taking a year off, to think about what he wanted to do.

“And I don't like being alone at the house,” he said. “It's...kinda empty when my dad's at work.”

So almost every afternoon, sometimes even before lunchtime, they would hear Stiles' battered blue jeep clunking up the driveway to the house, announcing his arrival. Derek's father bustled in the kitchen, waving his spatula and giving orders while Derek's sisters would all but physically steer Stiles to the dinner table, stacking more food in front of him that was probably necessary to feed a full-grown werewolf. They fed him like a pack member, like part of the family.

It really shouldn't have been a surprise the kids loved him. They took to Stiles like a wildfire to gasoline, and the feeling seemed to be mutual. Even before Stiles could get out of the car there would be at least three very clingy werewolves either hanging off his arms or attached to his clothes. He soon learned he had to remind the kids that he wouldn't heal quite as fast as werewolves did, if there were accidental claws or fangs. "Breakable human, guys!" He'd yell after he'd gotten his car door open. "Mind the goods, handle with care, fragile shipment coming through. Don't break the Stiles."

Ava especially seemed to take a particular shine to him. The minute Stiles was through the door, she would race from her room or the living room and collide with his knees, gray eyes set in determination.

"Up, up, up," she'd say, making grabby hands at Stiles.

And he would always, always give in. "Alright, puppy," he'd say, and swing Ava in his arms. "Where to?"

"The cookie jar, please, Mister Stiles."

"As you wish, ma'am."

It didn't take long before Stiles started staying over for the night. Talia had the guest room cleaned out and made for him, so he could stay over as often as he wanted. His toothbrush eventually migrated from his house to the Hales' guest bathroom, and his clothes started appearing around the house in odd places, just like the kids'. There was a red hoodie hanging at the back of a kitchen chair, and flannel shirts mixed in with the rest of the family's laundry.

Derek soon learned he was chatty, too. The kid talked *a lot*. He could probably talk the ear off Aunt Rena, and Aunt Rena was endlessly tolerant and serene, and would listen to whomever for as long as they needed her to. She had the experience of a mother and the patience of a saint, and even *she* nearly cracked. Stiles talked about his day, and what he'd seen on his way to the house, and about the song he'd heard on the radio and how he wondered if Iggy Azalea was actually named Iggy and how could someone's parents do that to her, wasn't Iggy Pop enough? ("I googled it, Derek. She's actually named *Amethyst*. That's like way worse.") He talked about books, and movies, and things he'd read on the news. He followed Derek around the house sometimes, his new phone in his hands, and read to him aloud about the Battle of Wadi, and Cyclone Lam, and monsoon rain, and the reproductive organs of snails ("they can change *sexes*, Derek. Can you believe that?")

One morning Stiles found out the Hale house had a library, a massive, airy room with floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked full of books dating back all the way to the Civil War era. Derek's parents had given him a permission to explore as much as he wanted, as long as he handled

the books with care — some of them were very old and fragile. His eyes shone like two moons when Derek had led him to the library, and opened the heavy, cherrywood double doors.

“Can I?” He’d asked, hovering right at the threshold and eyeing the shelves like he was a religious man presented with the opportunity to touch the bones of a prophet. “Really?” He asked.

Derek nodded. “The door’s unlocked. You can come here anytime.”

They hadn’t seen Stiles for the rest of the day. He’d been lost among the musty shelves, the smell of old paper and leather lingering on his skin when he finally emerged after the sun had already set. Derek had peeked in at one point, around mid-morning, and found Stiles walking along a shelf, running his long fingers delicately and lovingly along the spines of the old volumes.

Stiles wasn’t freeloading, either, and wasn’t *that* the worst kind of kryptonite for Derek as his wolf whined happily that maybe Derek was so pleased by this because it meant Stiles would make a good mate. He obviously knew how to take care of a household, and he did laundry, helped Derek’s father and the women in the kitchen, and volunteered for grocery store trips. Whenever he was around, he also seemed to automatically drift over to wherever the children were, and suggest he watch after the youngest ones for a while.

“I’m the only child,” he had explained to Laura, shrugging. “I’ve always kinda wanted to find out what it’s like to have younger siblings.”

Laura had grabbed a hold of his upper arms, her eyes wide. “Where have you been my whole life?” She had demanded.

Stiles took them for runs in the Preserve, and bowling, and — on one memorable occasion — to tiny pet shop near the center of the town to look at the parakeets and tarantulas and the colorful tropical fish in their tanks.

A few hours later, he had come back slightly shaken and sat beside Derek on the loveseat where he had been reading a thick paperback. “Someone could have warned me,” Stiles said. “Never have I ever seen two dozen rodents and a cage full of bunnies so absolutely, mind-numbingly terrified.” His gaze was slightly glazed over, like he was reliving it over in his head. “I’m pretty sure Mr Johnson never wants to see a single Hale ever again.” He glanced at Derek. “Sorry about that.”

Derek had only laughed until his stomach hurt and tears streamed down his face, Stiles ineffectually slapping at his shoulder and hissing “you knew, you totally knew and you didn’t tell me!”



One afternoon, they helped his mother in the garden, pulling up weeds, digging and planting seeds in the rich black earth, the scorching sun at their backs.

Stiles burned the tip of his nose — twice — and it took Derek half a day to convince him to put on sunscreen. He shoved the bottle of lotion in Derek's hands and smiled angelically. Couldn't spread it with dirty hands, now, could he, he had said, then laughed at how constipated he thought Derek looked.

"I don't think this is helping," Stiles said. Instead of closing his eyes, he was squinting, cross-eyed, trying to focus on Derek's hands as he worked the lotion in Stiles' skin.

"Stay still." Derek wiped the side of Stiles' nose with the pad of his thumb. "I wouldn't be, if you'd just stop squirming for like two seconds."

By the time they returned back inside, their hands dirty and their backs sore, Derek had had to get a change of clothes because Stiles had tried to shove a clump of damp soil through his collar four times. He'd succeeded once.

"I'm just cultivating nature's true beauty," he'd said, waggling his eyebrows, and nearly collapsed laughing at his own joke.

Derek hadn't deigned that with an answer: he'd only pushed Stiles into the mound of weeds by the compost.

Somehow, at some point, he had become like a member of their pack. No-one complained and no-one seemed to think it was odd in any way. and Stiles slipped into their life like a puzzle piece nobody knew had been missing but clearly completed the picture.

And through all this, Derek was going slowly insane, because Stiles was *infuriating*. He was funny, and gentle, and fierce. He was loyal to a fault, and perceptive, and too smart for his own good. He got excited about anything and everything, a light going on somewhere behind his eyes that made them glint as his hyperactive mind worked overtime. There seemed to be nothing he wasn't interested in at least to some extent, and he soaked information like a dry sponge. He sometimes laughed this full-body laugh that made tears stream down his face, his nose scrunch up and his knees go weak until he almost collapsed — he laughed like he had found all the secrets to life.

The more Derek learned about him, the more he realized he was in way too deep. And there was nothing he could do about it. Stiles had planted his little hooks somewhere deep inside him, beneath his skin, and made himself cozy.

And he smelled so damn good, and Derek couldn't for the life of him figure out *why it was like nothing he had ever smelled*.

Those weeks in late spring that slowly bloomed into summer were probably the happiest Derek remembered ever being in his life. And by the beginning of June, it was hard to believe that the guarded boy they had found in the woods, and the lively young man with the hands and mouth that never stopped moving were the same person.

It hadn't taken him long to fully realize he was so, so, royally and completely fucked.



“You're making it worse.”

“Shut up. I know what I'm doing.”

“Obviously not. Give it here, Stiles.”

“Hands off, wolfman. I'm not afraid to use this as an offensive weapon.” Stiles waved the big wooden spoon menacingly.

It was a Tuesday morning, rainy and slightly chilly, droplets of water weeping down the windowpanes, and the house was silent. The kids were at school — final days before it let out for summer — Peter had driven Rena to a nearby gardening tool outlet and they'd taken Ava with them, and Derek's parents had decided to take advantage of the quiet and gone for a run through the Preserve. Laura, Jeffrey, and Cora wouldn't return from work until in the afternoon. Derek had the whole morning to himself.

Or he would have had, if Stiles didn't have a key to the house.

He had woken Derek up by jumping in his bed and shoving his absolutely freezing feet under his back. “Rise and shine, Derbear!” He had singsonged while tugging at Derek's comforter. “Time waits for no-one.”

Derek tried to growl as menacingly as he could. “Get the hell off me, Stiles,” he grumbled. “I'm trying to sleep.”

“But I'm hungry.”

“Then go get breakfast.” He shoved his face deeper into his pillow. “Get off me.”

“Feed me, Sourwolf.” Stiles shoved his feet even further under him and wiggled his toes. Seriously, the guy was like a walking corpse, temperature-wise. “And technically, I'm underneath you.”

“Get out.”

“But my feet are cold. And you're warm.”

“Get your own body heat, you thief.”

Stiles had been silent for so long after that that Derek had to crack one eye open to see if he had left. But he was still sitting beside Derek, half buried in the sheets and covers, his cheeks faintly pink. “What if I want yours?” He said quietly, then closed his mouth like that wasn't what he had intended to say *at all*.

You asked for it, Derek had thought. “As you wish,” he said, and before Stiles could do anything about it, he'd grabbed the boy in a suffocating hold, mashing him between the mattress and his own body. Derek couldn't decide if he was infinitely grateful or super pissed that he was still shirtless. He could feel Stiles' body heat soaking through the thin cotton of Stiles' shirt, and his messy hair tickled Derek's nose as he writhed and guffawed under Derek's weight. “Foul play!” He shrieked. “You win, I give up! I give up!”

After they had finally made it downstairs to the kitchen, Stiles flushed and laughing, and a smile tugging at the corners of Derek's mouth, Stiles had declared it would not be a breakfast unless he had chocolate chip waffles this instant. And he had wanted to make them from the scratch. Which was the cause of the mess of bowls, dirty measuring cups, and the counter top coated with flour Derek was now staring at in dismay while Stiles waved his spoon warningly.

"I know how to cook, I can handle this."

"I know you can cook, but obviously *baking* is something you can do unsupervised. Give me the spoon, Stiles."

He held the spoon closer like he was cradling his firstborn child. "No."

"Fine." Derek heaved a sigh. "Are you gonna clean up this mess when you're done?"

"Of course."

"What about the mess on your face?"

Stiles' eyes narrowed, then went very, very wide as Derek stepped closer and swept the smudge of melted chocolate from the corner of his mouth. "Oh," Stiles said faintly. "That mess."

"You know you can't make chocolate chip anything if you eat the chocolate before it make it into the waffles?"

Stiles huffed and turned back to his bowls and dough. "Eat me, wolfman," he said blithely, but his heartbeat was jumping in his chest like a jackhammer.

They ate the waffles by the breakfast bar, knees pressed together under the table, Stiles looking like he had invented the wheel again. "Pretty good, huh?" He said smugly, shoveling another whipped cream covered waffle piece into his mouth.

Derek kicked him in the shin under the table. He hated to admit it but they were probably the best waffles he had ever eaten.



Derek was fairly certain the moment his sisters had realized something was up was that one evening when Stiles, Derek, Laura, and her kids had piled into the living room after dinner to watch *The Hobbit* trilogy, snuggled in with mounds of blankets, pillows, and enough snacks to feed a small army. The BluRays were a Christmas gift from Laura, given to him wrapped in a horrible red and green wrapping paper with a *Merry Christmas you nerd* card taped to it.

He was sprawled in the bend of the corner sofa, feet kicked up on the ottoman in front of him and Stiles beside him. At the start of the movie they had at least a foot of space between them. By the time Bilbo was exchanging riddles with Gollum on screen, Derek had rested his arms at the back of the couch, and Stiles had slid close enough to lean on his side. His fingers were playing absently with the hem of Derek's Henley.

Derek wasn't watching the movie. His face was turned towards the screen but his focus was entirely on the boy beside him. And he had absolutely no clue what one was supposed to do in a situation like this. Derek didn't have many friends, he hardly knew anyone outside of his pack. He knew he was broody, and sulky, and unfriendly. He knew if he didn't make a conscious effort, his eyebrows discouraged anyone who might want to approach him to veer off in the last minute. One time, the barista at the local coffee shop had tried to flirt with him. He honestly hadn't tried to hurt the girl's feelings, she had actually seemed very nice, but he just wasn't interested. He'd left the coffee shop carrying an eight-dollar latte and the guilt of almost making the barista cry.

Derek didn't care much for people. It wasn't that he disliked them, or even found them somehow distasteful: he just didn't understand most of them. People, especially humans, were loud, and irrational, and illogical. They stuck their noses in things that didn't concern them, and turned dangerous when they were afraid. They didn't make *sense*.

People and him did not mix.

Yet here was Stiles, acting like he never got the 'do not approach the surly werewolf, he gets people hurt and he's not worth the trouble' memo, burrowed snugly to Derek's side, head resting on his shoulder and acting like he didn't know any place safer. What was Derek supposed to do? What was he supposed to do with the feeling like his heart was made two sizes too big for his chest?

Laura's eyes were not not the movie, either: she was watching the two of them with a look of dawning realization in her face. *Oh my god*, she mouthed at Derek when he made the mistake of glancing her way. Her gaze flitted to Stiles, then at Derek and back again. Her eyebrows had climbed all the way to her hairline. *You...Oh. My. God.*

I know, Derek wanted to say. He turned back to the TV just in time to see Gollum's final riddle.

"Time," Stiles mumbled beside him. "Say *time*, Bilbo."

I'm in deep, deep shit.



"So, what's he like?"

Through the speaker, Derek could hear the scraping sound of Erica filing her nails. He cradled the phone more securely between his shoulder and his ear, and reached out to run a hand gently through Stiles' hair. He was fast asleep, head pillowed on Derek's lap and snoring lightly. No-one was there to see. No-one would have to know. "I can't wait for you to meet him," he said quietly.

Stiles shifted under his hand, murmuring in his sleep. His ridiculous mouth was hanging slightly open, the fingers of his right hand curled in the fabric of Derek's jeans.

You should see him, Derek wanted to say. *He's beautiful.*

“You'll like him.”

The huff Erica let out crackled down the line. “I bet I will. I can't wait to meet the person who makes Derek Hale sound *fond*, of all things.”

He made a face. “I don't sound 'fond.’”

“Do too, and don't make faces at me. I can practically *hear* you abusing those eyebrows.”

“What if I do? I'm...” He searched for a word that wouldn't sound awkward. “...affectionate.” He decided it was definitely the wrong choice.

Erica snorted. “Not with anyone who isn't your family or pack, you're not.”

A light clearing of throat had Derek turning in his seat — mindful of the sleeping Stiles on his lap. His father was standing in the doorway, a kitchen towel in his hands. “Dinner's ready.”

Derek angled the phone away from his mouth. “We'll be right there,” he told his father. “I gotta go, Erica,” he said into the phone. “I'll see you next week.”

Erica's laughter echoed tinnily through the speaker. “Right,” she said. “You've got more important things to do. You know I can hear him breathing through the phone, right? And It sounds like he's asleep. And if I can hear him, you must be pretty cozy there.”

“I didn't wanna wake him up,” Derek said but he could feel the tips of his ears turning red. “He fell asleep when we were watching *Mad Max*.”

“Sure he did. Oh, and boss?”

She knew he hated when she called him 'boss'. Ever since she'd found out, she had made it her personal mission to say it at least once during every conversation they ever had.

“Yes, Erica?”

“You better have made some progress by the time we arrive. I don't wanna see you skulking and pining and spreading your sad-wolf stench all over the place.” The connection rustled and hissed, and a male voice said something in the background Derek couldn't make out. “Boyd says get your shit together,” Erica chirped. “He also says hi. Bye, boss!”

She ended the call with a click before Derek could get a word out of his mouth. He glanced back at Stiles, his hand still absently petting the boy's hair. His father hadn't moved from his place by the door.

And Derek had forgotten to remove his hand.

“I'll be there in two minutes,” Derek said to his father quietly.

His father smiled at him, a warmhearted and fond smile that made him look years younger. His gaze flicked to Stiles, then back to Derek. “Take your time,” he said. “The food's not

going anywhere. Or, well. Not if Levi and Louis don't get to it first.”

Even though he didn't say anything else before disappearing back to where the smell of pot roast was wafting from, Derek knew his father had heard the phone conversation. And even though Derek knew he'd never say anything about it, he knew the hand cradling Stiles' messy hair hadn't gone unnoticed.

“Shit,” Derek said under his breath, to no-one in particular.



The morning Erica and Boyd's flight was scheduled to arrive, Derek went grocery shopping. Not of his own free will, of course, but because he had been ambushed. A pack of wolves ate a lot and the arrival of the two betas — the only two non-Hales adopted into the pack and Derek's closest two friends outside of it — meant two extra mouths to feed. Before Derek had even gotten his eyes properly open, his father had thrust a shopping list as long as his forearm and an unsuspecting Stiles — conveniently loitering near the stove, sampling foods from the pots and pans — to Derek, and pointed them to the door.

“And hurry back,” his father had said. “I need some of these by dinnertime.”

That was why 11 am on a Thursday morning found Derek pushing a squeaky cart through Shop 'n Save, Stiles trailing after him and touching *everything*. He was like a five-year-old in a candy store, or like someone who had never seen the contents of a fresh produce aisle before. He poked and he prodded. He peered into the displays holding cakes and pastries (“Look at the birthday cake, Derek! It's Batman!”). He pulled cans and packages from the shelves, skimmed his fingers over fruit and tugged open door in the dairy aisle to peek inside. Even when Derek had already put something in the cart, Stiles would swoop in from god knows where and pick up the item.

“What's this?” He asked, holding a small glass jar of spice.

“Cardamom.”

Stiles popped the lid, brought the jar close to his nose, and sniffed. “Smells nice,” he said. He gave the jar an experimental shake, then picked up a bag from the cart. “And what's 'arrowroot’?”

“It's like cornstarch. Rena likes to bake with it. ”

He made a face at the jar. “You're making these up.” He put the cardamom and the arrowroot back and poked at a vacuum-sealed package of blood red meat, as big as his head. “Beef?”

“Venison. And do you have to touch everything?”

Stiles ignored him, picked up the slab of meat, and weighed it in his hands. “Dude, how much do you guys *eat*?”

“Put it back, Stiles.”

Stiles just rolled his eyes but did as he was told, and drifted over to the next shelf. "Sourwolf," he muttered to himself as he rounded the corner.

The next time he saw Stiles, he was standing by the massive freezers full of ice cream and frozen pastries, rubbing his arms absently. The day was warm but the air conditioning in the store was cranked up high and he was still wearing only his thin cotton t-shirt.

Derek slid off his leather jacket, and held it open for Stiles. "You're cold," he said when Stiles just stared at him, eyebrows raised.

"Don't you need it for your 'friendly neighborhood murderer' act?"

Derek rolled his eyes. "Take the jacket, Stiles."

"Fine," he said. He held his arms back as Derek slid the jacket on his shoulders. Whatever Stiles did or did not admit, he burrowed into the warmth of the jacket as soon as he had it on. "What are you gonna do now that you actually look more approachable?" He asked. "What if someone talks to you? Are you gonna just grunt and do your eyebrow mime and hope they understand?"

Derek tried to keep a straight face as he stared the shit-eating grin on Stiles' face. "You better get lost before I decide I want it back."

Stiles stuck out his tongue and wandered off, flopping around the slightly too long sleeves.

At one point, Derek realized he had lost sight of him completely. Last time he remembered seeing Stiles was when he spotted him talking to a fair-haired woman by the frozen food section. A boy no older than five had been tugging at the woman's hand, trying to get away while she chatted with Stiles. If Derek heard right, the woman and Stiles had been neighbors once. Derek was usually aware of Stiles' steady heartbeat and his general location, but this time he had been so engrossed staring two almost identical packages of corn flakes, trying to remember which one of them was the one Boyd liked, that he hadn't noticed how far it had retreated. And how frantic it sounded.

It took him almost four minutes to locate the tripping and stuttering pulse, following Stiles' familiar scent of spices and honey.

Derek rounded the corner, and found Stiles in the aisle lined by canned vegetables and beans. His back was to Derek, and he was standing with both of his hands raised, palm outwards, in a unmistakably placating gesture. Three boys, around Stiles' age, were facing him in the aisle. The boy closest to Stiles had a shock of dark hair, curling over his ears, and his eyebrows were dangerously close to forming a unibrow. The two other guys standing behind him looked like they had dressed with wardrobe coordination in mind, both wearing almost identical basketball shorts and sleeveless white shirts. Both were grinning like foxes in a hen house, eyes on Stiles.

"Why don't we just agree to disagree, and we all go our separate ways, okay?" Stiles was saying. His usually sweet scent was slightly soured by his obvious anxiousness.

Unibrow let out a derisive sound. "Aw, but we've missed you, Stilinski," he said, taking a step closer. "I say we go outside and go a few rounds. How 'bout that?" He walked close enough to lean right into Stiles' personal space, his face inches away, and sneered. "How about we find out if you still squeal like a little piglet like you used to back in junior high?"

Stiles made an attempt to step around the guy, but Unibrow moved to block his way. "C'mon," Stiles said. "I don't want any trouble."

"No-one's asking you, now, are they," Basketball Short #1 piped up. He turned to his identical friend to slap a high-five, looking immensely pleased with his retort.

"Stiles?" Derek asked. He left his cart at the end of the aisle and walked to stand right behind Stiles, at his shoulder. "You okay?"

The guy all up in Stiles' space was looking at Derek in dismay, but took a step back.

Stiles turned to face him. The smile he offered didn't look very convincing, not with his hummingbird pulse jumping in his chest. "I'm fine, Derek," he said and eyed the guys. "They were just leaving."

Basketball Shorts #1 and #2 were looking at Derek, glancing between him and Stiles uncertainly, but Unibrow evidently wasn't done yet. "Like hell we are," he spat out at Derek. "This doesn't concern you, so you can just fuck off."

And then he did quite possibly the stupidest thing he had ever done in his whole life.

He reached out a hand and made a move as if he was going to grab Stiles.

That hand never made contact. In a flash, Derek had Stiles pushed behind his back, and Unibrow's wrist in a grip that made his bones grind against each other beneath his skin. His other hand had twisted itself in the front of the guy's shirt, tight enough to make him wheeze. A low growl, deep and rumbling and a whole lot angrier than he had intended slipped from Derek's throat, and he let his eyes flash blue.

"*Hands. Off.*" he ground out.

An elderly lady at the end of the aisle stopped mid-movement, reaching a can of corn on the upper shelf, and turned to stare.

Unibrow let out a surprised yelp of pain and tried feebly to get away, his eyes as big as saucers.

Only Derek wasn't done yet. "That was the last time you are ever gonna try and touch him," he said, low and even and deadly calm. "Is that clear?"

Unibrow swallowed. "I'm not afraid of you," he said, his chin tilted up.

"Yes you are. I can smell it on you."

The guy blanched. Behind him, Stiles let out the tiniest snort of amusement. Unibrow's friends were still standing frozen a few feet away but they looked like they were seconds from bolting. "Dude, come on," one of them said to Unibrow, voice a little wobbly. "Leave it."

Derek ignored them and tightened his grip. "Approach him again, and I'll dig out your spine through your mouth," he said. "*Touch* him again, and I'll dig it out through the other way."

By now, Unibrow was so pale he was a little worried where all the blood had actually gone. Derek might have felt a bit sorry for him — the guy obviously hadn't realized what he had gotten himself mixed up in — if it weren't for the still-lingering scent of fear wafting off of Stiles.

A hesitant hand landed on Derek's arm. "Derek?" Stiles said quietly. "Let's go."

Derek let out one last growl, one that made the Unibrow's twin friends retreat half-a-dozen steps back. He let go of the guy. It took Unibrow pitifully long to get himself together enough to flee the scene. He swayed, and almost tripped on his own feet — thankfully, this time, deciding to keep his mouth shut. The trio flitted one last glance at Stiles before turning on their heels and fleeing. They didn't run, not exactly, but it was a close thing.

The old lady from the end of the aisle had drifted closer. "Are you alright, darling?" She asked Stiles. He nodded, and the lady nodded approvingly. "Those boys looked like trouble." She tutted. "Good thing your boyfriend knows how to put his foot down."

She disappeared around the corner, the can of corn in her hands.

Stiles was rubbing his arms, shoulders hunched and his eyes on his dirty sneakers. Derek was pretty sure he wasn't looking at his shoes, his gaze was that thousand-yard stare you usually only saw on the faces of people who had been through some shit and come out of it seemingly alright but the war still coursing through their veins. When Derek was in high school, he had passed this one kid on his way home every day and he had had that same exact look on his face — that resigned, numb acceptance. And it made Derek's blood boil.

They barely spoke during the rest of the shopping trip. They gathered the rest of the items on the list in silence, paid at the check out, and bagged their haul of food. Stiles stuck close the entire time but he was uncharacteristically quiet. It wasn't until the shopping bags, bulging at their seams with groceries, were loaded into the trunk and Derek had slammed the driver's side door shut behind him that Stiles spoke again.

"Don't you want to know what that was about?" He asked. He was picking at his sleeve with his short nails, buried so deep into Derek's jacket his face was almost hidden.

"Not if you don't wanna tell me."

Stiles didn't say anything, and Derek started the car. They drove in silence the whole way. The only sounds in the car were the steady purr of the engine, and the radio turned on low, murmuring quietly. He had already begun to think that Stiles wasn't going to say anything

more about it — and it was fine, he didn't owe Derek an explanation — until they pulled up before the house and parked next to Laura's minivan.

“I used to go to school with them,” Stiles said quietly.

Derek killed the engine and turned to look at him, but Stiles was staring out the passenger side window. Derek didn't say anything, just waited patiently.

After a while, Stiles went on. “They used to do that, every now and then, between classes and on lunch breaks. Walk up to me and shake me up, then leave me be again. Maybe they were bored, or just...” Stiles wiped his palms to the fabric of his jeans, a gesture that looked like a nervous tick, like Stiles was doing it unconsciously. “I know rub some people the wrong way.”

“They're idiots.” The hand Derek still had curled around the steering wheel was white-knuckled, and he let go when he noticed the leather was groaning under his death grip. “What about your friends?” He asked. “Allison and Lydia and Scott?” Derek knew Stiles had friends, he spoke about them all the time. “Didn't you go to the same high school, at least?”

Stiles nodded. “Scott knew. He could smell it on me, I guess. But he also knew I wouldn't wanna make a big fuss about it, so we didn't really talk about it much. He just stuck close, took as many of the same classes as me, made sure I never sat alone at lunch, stuff like that. But...” Stiles lifted one narrow shoulder to shrug. “It didn't always work.”

“They won't bother you anymore.”

Stiles smiled, even though it was a little bit brittle on his face. “I know,” he said. “Ryan looked like he was gonna piss his pants. But you didn't have to do that, I could have handled it myself.”

“I know,” Derek said. “Doesn't mean you have to.”

When they were unloading the groceries and setting the bags neatly on the ground to figure out how to carry them all inside in one go, the door to the house crashed open. Erica was standing in the doorway, her blonde hair a mad cascade of curls haloing around her head. She was wearing blood red lipstick, a pair of jeans and a worn t-shirt, and there was the sort of unholy light glinting in her eyes that usually made Derek want to turn tail and run.

She smiled like a lioness after a kill. “Hey boss,” she chirruped at Derek. Her eyes slid to Stiles. “And you must be Stiles.” She took a deep breath. “KIDS!” She yelled, unnecessarily loud, into the house. “UNCLE STILES AND UNCLE DEREK ARE HOME!”

The screaming and thudding started in seconds. The younger children, all five of them, followed by Levi and Louis who were trying to trip each other up all tumbled out of the house, screaming and yipping and snarling, shoving each other out of the way. Erica had joined the chaos, howling just as loudly. They were also running at full speed towards them.

“Oh no,” Stiles said, very quietly.

“Oh no,” Derek agreed.

Stiles had a few seconds to brace himself before the screeching horde reached him. He was bowled over, and buried underneath the pile of werewolves in a blink of an eye. Stiles let out a yelp as the children piled on top of him. “Squishy human in the mix, guys!” He yelled “Squishy, breakable human!”

Boyd strolled over to Derek, Jeffrey trailing after him, as Stiles was squirming on the ground. He smelled faintly of stale airplane air, and he looked a little worn out.

“Hey, man,” Boyd said. He stopped beside Derek to consider the pile of flailing limbs on the lawn. “Is my fiancée in there somewhere?”

“Yeah. She's somewhere near the bottom.”

“Thought so.”

“How was your flight?”

Boyd shrugged. “Fine. Boring.” He shrugged again.

Boyd really wasn't a man of many words but that was usually why Derek appreciated his company so much — he was a great listener but didn't talk unless he had something worth saying. He and Erica were in the middle of their studies, putting themselves through Uni all the way in Boston, and they only visited during holidays and the summer. And Derek had *missed them*.

He gave Boyd's shoulder a squeeze. “Good to have you back,” he said, and got one of the man's rare smiles in return.

“Good to be back.”

They turned back to the human pyramid attempt.

“That's the biggest one the pups have made in a long time,” Jeffrey said over the squeals and excited howls of the kids. He had walked over and was standing on Boyd's other side. He tilted his head. “How's it feel to be so popular, Stiles?”

“I regret everything,” came a wheezing gasp from somewhere in the pile.

“You better get him out before he's squished to death.” Jeffrey picked up two armfuls of groceries, handed some of them off to Boyd, and they disappeared back into the house with the food.

Derek rounded the pile until he saw a familiar tumble of blonde curls sticking out of one side. Erica was mashed against Stiles' front, her cleavage inches from his face.

“So, what was your name again?” Stiles asked, eyeing warily at the she-wolf on top of him.

Erica looked like, well, a wolf that had just been presented with a lamb on a silver platter. Her eyes were gleaming dangerously beneath her heavy eyeliner.

“Who's biting me!” Savannah was squeaking from somewhere under Ava and Jeremy wrestling on the very top of the pile, tiny fangs out and flashing in the sunlight.

Erica ignored the commotion. She didn't even break eye contact. “It's Erica,” she purred. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“How are you, Stiles?” She squeezed her impressive chest even closer to Stiles' face and his alarmed expression. “Do you like it here?”

“I, uh, yeah. It's great.”

“Erica,” Derek interrupted. “Okay, puppies. Time to let Stiles go.”

The ensuing commotion and a cacophony of groans and whines nearly drowned out Erica's voice. “Oh, right,” she said, and smirked. She raised a pointed eyebrow at the leather jacket Stiles was still wearing. “You already called dibs on this one.”

He wasn't going to rise to the bait. He was *not*. “He's not werewolf-proofed to handle that kind of treatment. Let him go.”

And if Derek let his hand linger on the small of Stiles' back after the kids had crawled off from on top of him and Derek had helped him on his feet, that was nobody's business but his own.

As soon as Erica had dislodged the last of the little werewolves from on top of her, she skipped to Derek and flung herself into his arms, wrapping him in a hug that punched all the air out of his lungs. “Missed you, sweetums,” she crooned into his neck. She took a deep breath through her nose and buried her face even deeper into Derek's shoulder. “Boston sucks without you.”

“Derek hugged her back tightly, nearly lifting her off her feet. “Beacon Hills sucks without you. I'm glad you're here.”

She pulled back to smile devilishly at him. “But I've heard it has sucked less, lately.” She glanced at Stiles who was hauling the last of the grocery bags up the front steps, the kids at his heels. “He's cute. Hope you don't chase him away with your grumbly, grumpy grandpa routine.”

“I'm not grumpy.”

“Says he, grumpily, while looking like he might be either severely constipated or plotting for murder. Possibly both.”

Derek tried to relax his face and straighten the frown he could feel pulling the corners of his mouth down.

“Yeah, no,” Erica said, arms crossed. “That's not helping.” She reached up to pat his cheek. “Alright, gramps. Let's go back inside. I can smell your dad's cooking that lasagna of his and let's face it, that's the real reason I came to visit.”



One evening, Derek came home like a rolling thunder. He didn't have a job — the sizable wealth of the Hale pack meant that they were never short on money, and didn't have to work unless they wanted to like Laura and Jeffrey did — but Derek did volunteer work sometimes. His favorite places were the local animal shelter where he fed the stray cats and homeless dogs, and the Beacon Hills public library.

He liked his work. He actually enjoyed helping out when they were short-staffed and someone just needed to re-alphabetize the biographies. He didn't mind spending a few hours every week sitting at the front desk, surrounded by the calming hush of the library and the scent of old paper and ink.

Marge, the library manager, always said he was good for 'business'. “Not that this is business, but still,” she said beaming at Derek. She was a round woman in her fifties with bright orange spectacles and a heart of gold, and she was probably the only person outside of Derek's pack that had ever dared to pinch his cheeks. Like she had done just then. “Mrs Peterson says she and the Women's Health Club girls only come in here on the days they know you're working.” She winked. “Whatever gets people to read is good if you ask me.”

But that particular day had been a nightmare. Marge had hustled off to her lunch break and left Derek to deal with a noisy, messy crowd of teenagers, and one particularly difficult customer who didn't want to be 'served by a werewolf', and demanded someone else show her where they kept the self-help books.

You definitely need all the help you can get, lady, he had thought as he stalked to find the other library assistant.

Derek hated people.

Well, Derek hated *most* people. All day as he had been listening to the arguing and pointless complaints of these strangers that made his skin itch, he had been dying to get home just so he could find Stiles. He could ask if Stiles wanted to watch a movie with him, or cook dinner with him, or ask him to show Derek that collection of hand-drawn maps he had made of the California packs around Beacon Hills, the ones he was so proud of it made his whole face light up when someone asked to see them. Derek didn't even want to talk, not necessarily. Just listening to Stiles' easy chatter would be enough.

Derek crashed into the kitchen, and his mother turned around. She took one look at him and went back to cutting the carrots on the chopping board.

“He's outside, hon,” she said. “In the backyard.”

He didn't even bother asking how she knew, just turned around and stalked to the patio door.

He found Stiles near the back corner of the yard, sitting beneath the old maple tree. He was balancing a worn leather-covered book in his lap, long fingers tapping an absent rhythm on its spine. His feet were bare.

Derek stopped a good fifteen feet away, and took a deep breath through his nose. It smelled like warm sun-baked earth, wet moss, and pine trees. The sun dappled the grass beneath the tree with golden patches of light. Intertwined with it, there was the soft, spicy scent of Stiles: honey and ink and the electric smell of thunderstorms. Like warm skin.

Stiles' smile lighted up his whole face when he spotted Derek. "Hey," he said. "Everything okay?"

Derek shrugged. "Fine." He was, now. He could practically feel the tension draining from his shoulders.

"The kids still playing Monopoly?"

"Yeah, still the same round they started this morning. I gave up hours ago when it got bloody."

It was odd, really, how fast they had fallen into territory where their communication didn't require words. Derek didn't ask for permission, and Stiles said nothing when Derek sat beside him on the grass, their legs stretched out side by side. Stiles didn't hesitate to turn and lay his head on Derek's lap, and Derek absently plucked a leaf from his hair. Stiles' head was a warm weight, the body heat soaking through Derek's jeans.

Stiles thumped the book closed on his chest, finger marking the place. "You lost?"

"I surrendered." Derek corrected. "I was picked clean by Ava."

Stiles grinned, face upside down to Derek. "Bested by a four-year-old. That's gotta sting."

"You lost to her too, yesterday. Twice."

"I let her win. Because Ava likes Uncle Stiles and Uncle Stiles is nothing if not nice."

Derek raised an eyebrow. "Uncle Stiles?" He asked.

"I –" Stiles blushed furiously. "I mean. That's what Ava and Jeremy started calling me, and then Viola and Savannah joined in, and it kinda stuck." He was tugging blades of grass from the lawn, snapping them and twirling the tiny blades in his fingers. "I kinda liked it."

"It suits you." Derek flicked off another piece of vegetation from Stiles' hair, this time a stray flower petal. "They don't call anyone 'uncle' unless they really like them. It's a ringing endorsement from them."

A pleased grin lit up Stiles' whole face. "I'll take it as an honor, then." He squinted up at Derek. "You were at the library?"

"Yeah."

“Bad day?”

“Kind of. I think I'm gonna stay as far away from humans as I can from now on.” Stiles' face fell for the briefest of moments before he seemed to catch himself and schooled it back to a neutral expression. “Except for a chosen few,” Derek corrected. “Congratulations, you made the cut.”

Stiles' expression brightened instantly. “Aw, Derbear,” he cooed. “Does this mean I'm your favorite squishy human?”

“No, you're the worst. I only keep you around 'cause you're useful.”

Stiles had already snuggled in and gone back to his book — he tried to halfheartedly slap Derek without looking but it turned into something that was more petting than anything else when his hand finally made contact with Derek's face. “Definitely your favorite,” he said.

Stiles got lost in his head again and Derek went back to pretending he wasn't watching Stiles. After an hour, Derek's leg fell asleep. After two, Stiles nodded off, the book tipping over and bumping him on the nose. He didn't wake up.

So Derek sat there, watching a human boy drool on his jeans, and wondered when his life had gotten like this.

Chapter 3

They held a barbecue party that evening in the backyard where cicadas chirruped in the still evening and the scent of the forest was mingled with the smell of roasting meat.

Talia decided it would be the perfect opportunity to get everyone now associated with the pack acquainted with each other, so they invited the entire 'extended pack', including Sheriff Stilinski, Scott and his mother, and Stiles' friends. Most of the Hales had been on the front steps to welcome their guests, and Derek had stood near the back of the crowd, Stiles by his elbow practically vibrating with excitement.

Scott was the only one of Stiles' friends Derek had met, but he recognized Lydia on sight by her strawberry blonde hair. She drifted over after politely greeting the Alpha and the older members of the family and handing Talia a bottle of expensive-looking wine. Of all Stiles' friends, meeting Lydia was the one Derek was the most nervous about. Stiles talked about her a lot — she seemed like someone whose opinions he held in high esteem.

As it turned out, she was maybe even more terrifying than Stiles had made her out to be.

“So,” she said appraisingly after she had enfolded Stiles a gentle but firm hug, and turned to face Derek. The once-over she gave made him feel like she was staring right through him, all the way into his soul. “You're Derek.”

It didn't sound like a question but Derek nodded anyway. “Nice to finally meet you. Stiles talks about you a lot.”

Lydia shot a sharp look at Stiles that for some reason made him almost squirm. “Likewise,” she said. “Right. Bend down.”

“What?”

She beckoned impatiently with her neatly-manicured hand. “I'm wearing four-inch heels but you're still too tall. Bend down.”

Derek didn't know why, but somehow obeying her seemed like a wise decision. He bent down slightly, and Lydia stood on tip toes, wrapped her arms carefully around his neck, and pressed a light kiss on to his cheek. She smelled like lavender and strawberry wine.

She nodded approvingly. “There. Good.” She turned to Stiles, adjusting her mint-green cardigan. “I thought you were exaggerating but I guess not. Nicely done.”

After Stiles had blushed all the way to the tips of his ears, a lovely shade of red that spread on his fair skin like wildfire, Lydia turned on her heels and strode purposefully up the steps to the front door.

Sheriff Stilinski shook Derek's hand when he arrived. His handshake and the accompanying smile were warm — something Derek suspected had something to do with the Sheriff's

eternal gratefulness for saving Stiles from those wolves — and Derek tried to shake back just as firmly. Melissa McCall was all dark curls and the sort of steel in her eyes that made Derek think of his own mother. Even Scott gave Derek an awkward wave and a 'hello' before stepping aside and introducing him to the girl standing behind him.

“Derek, this is Allison, my girlfriend,” Scott said. He gestured to the pretty girl with delicate features standing beside him. Her hair was chestnut brown and styled in soft curls. “Allison, Derek.”

“Nice to meet you,” Allison said, and her smile carved two dimples on her cheeks.

She seemed kind, and nice in the same way Scott was all puppy dogs and sunshine, and Stiles' face lit up when he hugged her in the same way it did when he saw Scott: Derek found himself smiling back to her genuinely.

Stiles and Scott even had a werewolf friend: a placid, quiet boy around their age with a head of messy curls and a hesitant smile on his face. He had looked like he had wanted to bow down to Talia, had nearly fled when Erica had bounded over to sniff out the new arrivals, and was now standing before Derek, Allison and Scott nudging him forward encouragingly.

“And this is Isaac,” Scott said.

“Isaac's great,” Stiles interjected. “And he doesn't have a pack either.” He dug his elbow into Derek's side. “Yet.”

Dozens of introductions later, they all piled into the backyard. Tables and lawn chairs were dragged into the shade of the old maple tree in the back corner of the yard, and the massive barbecue was set in a place of honor near the back porch. Cora and Laura carrying out plates, glasses, forks, and knives, the twins were roped in to set out napkins and condiments, while Laura's kids ran around the yard screaming and flailing too much to be of any real help.

Derek set the tables while Peter — Savannah and Viola trailing after him, arms laden with foods — was carrying vats of steaming potatoes and green beans and bowls of salad outside. The last time Derek had seen Erica, she was carrying quite frankly a worrying number of six-packs of wolfsbane-laced beer.

“It ain't a party if no-one passes out!” She had said cheerfully and plonked some of the bottles in a tub of ice by the table before carting the rest of them to the fridge.

Stiles sidled up to him as Derek was halfway done and stole a stack of plates from his hands. “They like your family a lot,” he said quietly. “Allison and Lydia and Isaac.” He scent was warm and sweet with contentment and he looked relaxed, happy. Derek still couldn't look at him for long after he'd gone home to change and shower, and shown up wearing a soft gray button-up and black skinny jeans so tight Derek thought he might pass out.

Derek bumped his shoulder lightly. “They like them, too.” He smiled. “And so do I.”

Sheriff Stilinski stood by Mr Hale and Rena by the grill, patting reverently at its stainless steel side. “Quite a barbecue you have here,” he said, like a man presented with the

opportunity to touch the Holy Grail itself.

Rena smiled and flipped the venison steaks, corn, and chicken wings sizzling in the grill expertly with a pair of tongs. “Has to be. You ever tried to feed a pack of wolves?”

“Can't say I have. Though I suspect feeding Stiles and Scott comes pretty damn close.”

“Well, you're about see something quite spectacular, then.”

When Aunt Rena declared the food ready to be served, the dishes were laid out at the center of the long tables and the Hales and their guests gathered around. Derek's parents sat at one end while the guests of honor, Sheriff Stilinski and Melissa, had been seated on either side of them.

The Sheriff was eyeing the plate of green beans, grilled corn, new potatoes, and the massive steak like a man having a religious experience.

“You know this is a one-time thing, right, Dad?” Stiles said, pointing with his fork. “It's right back to salads and lean meats when we get back home.”

The Sheriff didn't even take his eyes off the slab of meat. “Yeah, yeah, kiddo,” he said. “Just let me have this moment in peace.”

They ate with ardor, the wolves destroying almost every single scrap of food on the table. leftovers were not a thing in the Hale household. Laughter echoed in the warm evening air and any way he looked, Derek could see faces aglow with contentment. Stiles was seated a few chairs down on the opposite side of the table but even from his seat Derek could see the relaxed set of his shoulders as he watched his friends and two families get along. At one point, he caught Derek's eye and smiled so warmly it made Derek's stomach drop out.

Night fell, and the party moved indoors where refreshments (regular beer and sodas for the humans, wolfsbane-laced beer for werewolves) were easier to get to and the mosquitoes couldn't follow them. The pack and their guests sprawled in the big living room, lounging on couches and armchairs and — when the space ran out — on the floor piles of throw pillows and rugs.

Derek was sitting in the big loveseat in the corner, and Stiles was snuggled next to him, toes shoved under his thighs. He was wearing the ink blue hoodie over his button-up, the same one Derek had given him on that first morning and told him to keep, and it still smelled like Derek.

He was a little drunk, Stiles smelled like pack and home beside him and would lean over every now and then and whisper a horrible joke or a bad pun into Derek's ear, snickering at his own brilliance. Never had he ever so badly wanted to lean over and kiss someone. Just lean over a few inches, that's all it would have taken.

It was *torture*.

At some point, after Stiles had gotten up and wandered to the kitchen after Cora and Isaac to mix more drinks and Derek was left alone nursing his single bottle of his wolfsbane beer, he realized he'd spaced out completely. He was startled out of his thoughts when Boyd flopped on the seat Stiles had vacated.

The look on his face made Derek bristle involuntarily. "What?"

"You're smiling."

"And?"

"You've been doing it more often. Lately."

Through the living room doorway, all the way from the kitchen, they could hear Stiles laughing to something Isaac was reciting to Cora. If he leaned back just slightly in his seat, Derek could see the breakfast bar in the kitchen where Stiles was leaning on its granite top, head thrown back in delight, his back an elegant curve as his hip rested against the edge. All the way from here, Derek could single out Stiles' steady heartbeat.

Boyd patted his shoulder. "I'm glad," he said quietly. "You deserve it."

"Would you believe me if I said I have no idea what you're talking about?" Derek was pretty sure he knew — he wasn't stupid and neither was Boyd — but he could always try.

Boyd snorted and sipped his beer. "Nope." His eyes followed Derek's to where Stiles was now mock wrestling Isaac, trying to get the bottle opener from his hands. "Have you actually gathered the courage to do something about this?"

"No." Derek turned the bottle around in his hands and picked at the label. He was glad the din of the conversations and the music around them drowned out their words, and no-one would be able to listen in. "Not yet."

"Any reason why?"

Derek thought about all the myriad of reasons why it wouldn't work out, about how Stiles could do so much better, could find someone that was good for him. Who'd be right, and good, and unburdened. He thought about that moment, what it would be like, if he ever gathered the courage and just asked him out. If Stiles would look at him with those wide, gorgeous eyes, all sympathy, and then let him down easy. "I'm too old for him," he said instead.

"You're twenty four, not some forty-year-old creeper." Boyd pointed into the direction of the kitchen. "If I were you, I'd finish that beer, walk up there, and see what comes of it." He got up, and patted Derek's shoulder again, this time leaving his hand there reassuringly. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." One last pat, and he was gone.

Well. Shit.

After the thought lodged itself in the back of his mind, he couldn't get it out of his head. What if he did just stand up — what if he just walked in there, threw the dice, and found out what

happened? What was the worst thing that could come of it? Would Stiles get angry, or appalled? Would he be confused? Or maybe he would pretend like it was fine, act like he didn't mind but secretly be shocked, walk out that door and never come back.

But more than anything, Derek was really afraid of never finding out what could have come of it *if he felt the same way?*

Derek finished his beer, set the bottle on the coffee table, and got up. Laura was giving him a piercing look from her seat, Jeffrey under one arm and Ava curled under the other. How she could have possibly known what he was about to do was a mystery to Derek even to this day but her eyes widened when Derek passed her, and she gave him the thumbs up without moving her arm from around Ava.

Through the living room, across the foyer, and the sweet, honeyed scent of Stiles reached his nose. Derek didn't know how his sisters were doing it — they must have been meddling with some pretty heavy voodoo magic or something — because as soon as Cora spotted him, she grabbed a hold of Isaac.

“We're gonna relocate back to the living room,” she announced as she dragged Isaac out of the kitchen. “I think I can hear Jeffrey try to put on Mariah Carey again and someone needs to stop him.”

Derek stepped around Stiles, staring after them with a bemused expression, and went to lean on the counter top across from him. “Hi,” he said, a bit pointlessly.

“Hi.” Those crinkles at the corners of Stiles' eyes were back. “What's up?”

“Taking a break.”

“Got tired of the party?”

Derek lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Kind of,” he said. He pushed himself off the counter and took a step closer. “Got boring.” Another step, until he was standing right in front of Stiles.

“How come?”

Derek rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms to his jeans. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* “You weren't there.”

“Oh.” Stiles didn't say anything else, but he didn't move away, either. Derek had made sure to leave him room to step away if he wanted.

It was ridiculous, really. Here he was, a full-grown werewolf, capable of turning into a beast that could take down a two-hundred-pound buck without breaking a sweat, and he was rendered helpless by this 140-pound human who was looking at him curiously with his whiskey-brown eyes. He didn't smell anxious or apprehensive, not exactly. He just looked inquisitive. Expectant, maybe.

“Derek?” He asked quietly.

One more step, and Derek was almost flush against him. They were nearly the same height and Stiles only had to tip his head back slightly to look Derek in the eye.

Derek's gaze flicked to Stiles' mouth then back again. "Tell me if you want me to stop," he said. He reached out a hand to run it lightly up the hand still curled around the edge of the counter top, up Stiles' forearm, all the way to his neck. He left the hand there, Stiles' pulse jumping against his palm.

And Stiles still didn't move.

So Derek leaned forward, closing the last remaining distance between them, and pressed his lips to Stiles' very, very carefully. He couldn't be sure, because his brain had apparently decided to take a vacation and was currently offline, but he thought Stiles might have leaned forward, too, before closing his eyes. It started as gentle, and light, and sweet. Cautious. Until Stiles let his mouth fall open and let out this...this *sound* that was half moan, half whimper, and one hundred percent the downfall of Derek's resolve to take this as slowly as possible.

It was like floodgates breaking open.

Stiles' hands came up to cradle Derek's face before burying themselves in his hair, and the kiss turned hungry. He tasted a little like wine — that one glass the Sheriff had allowed him at dinner — and a lot like the blueberry pie they had for dessert. Derek's hands looped around his waist, slipping beneath his shirt, the hoodie where Derek's own scent still lingered to mingle with Stiles' own, to seek warm skin. He pressed even closer until Stiles was pinned between him and the counter. He tasted so good, even better than he smelled, and Derek knew he was a goner, like getting lost in the woods, dark and vast and empty, and walking off a cliff in the darkness. And he wasn't sure if he should try to find his way back or run towards it.

They probably wouldn't have found their way back in a good while if Stiles didn't have to come up for air.

"Shit," he said, in a voice barely above whisper. He stood there, eyes closed, licking his lips like he was trying to commit the taste to memory. "Shit. Okay," he said. "That was nice."

"Just nice?"

"Fine. Hot as fuck." He pulled his bottom lip to his mouth, and Derek couldn't help but track the movement. Stiles opened his eyes. "I'm gonna say something really unsexy now, and this is definitely gonna ruin the mood, but I really, really need to pee."

The laugh spilled out of his mouth before he could stop it. "Okay," he said. "And I need to go get some air before I do something really stupid."

"Like?"

"Like ruin that nice shirt of yours by trying to remove it without undoing the buttons," he said and watched as Stiles' eyes went dark. "Meet me back here?"

“Hell yeah. We better.” Stiles' hands slid down until he had two handfuls of Derek's ass, and he grinned impishly. The smell of his excitement was a spicy, warm scent cloying the air, making Derek's head swim. “I have some unfinished business here.”



Derek had only been outside for five minutes, the laughter and music spilling from the open windows to the back porch, when he heard the patio door slide open behind him.

“Mind if I join you, son?”

Derek turned around from where he had been sitting at the edge of the porch, staring off into the distance. The Sheriff was standing in the open doorway, an opened bottle of beer in his hands. “Not at all,” Derek said. He gestured to the lonely rickety lawn chair beside him, and the Sheriff took a seat.

Neither of them said anything for a long while. They just sat there, listening to the nightly symphony of the cicadas and the last birds singing to the sunset, both sipping their beers in content silence. A lone owl was hooting in the night.

The Sheriff shifted slightly before he spoke. “My son seems quite taken with you.”

For a very brief and very terrified moment, Derek wondered if the Sheriff was carrying a gun right at that moment. And if he'd be inclined to use it. He wondered if that statement was just an idle remark or if the Sheriff knew what had happened just twenty minutes ago. He decided to take the safe path.

“Sir?” He asked, voice guarded.

Sheriff Stilinski adjusted the collar of his dress shirt and brushed non-existent crumbs from his shirtfront. “This is the happiest I've seen him since...well. Since his mother passed.” He turned to look at Derek with something raw and exposed in his gaze. “He likes it here.”

“We like having him here. He's basically part of the pack.”

“Yeah,” the Sheriff said, nodding. “He seems to be.” A pause as the Sheriff took a sip of his beer. “That boy doesn't do anything by halves,” he said with a sigh.

Derek smiled wanly. “I've noticed.”

“I mean it. When he puts his mind to something, he really puts it there. A lot of people write him off as just a spazz, and it may seem like he's paying attention but that's not true: he's got a keen eye, and he's a good judge of character. He doesn't trust many people but those that he does, he trusts with his life. When he doesn't like something, he hates it with every fiber of his soul. And when he cares about something or someone,” — the Sheriff leveled a steady gaze at him, and Derek resisted the urge to fidget — “he does it with everything he has. Being important to him is a privilege not many people have earned.”

The Sheriff fell into a silence, like he was waiting for an answer.

Derek wasn't sure what the question even was. And he was pretty sure his mouth had been hanging slightly open, so he shut it carefully. "Sir?" He finally ventured.

The Sheriff pointed at him with his beer bottle. "You better be serious about this, because you seem to have earned yourself that very rare privilege."

At a loss what else to say, Derek decided to not play dumb, and went with the thing that had been bothering him the most. "I am serious," he said. "But I don't know if I'm good enough for him."

The sheriff sighed. He took another swig of his drink, long and deep, before he spoke. "I never thought I'd say this, because fathers aren't supposed to think someone's ever good enough for their kid. Worthy of them, you know, but..." The Sheriff trailed off. The corners of his eyes creased into a webwork of small wrinkles. He turned to look out in the backyard, but Derek didn't think he was looking at the trees or the flowerbeds. His gaze was distant. "I think you come pretty damn close," he said finally. "You've got a good heart, kid."

Derek remained quiet for a long time. He was glad the Sheriff couldn't hear the way his heart was hammering away in his chest. "I won't ever let anything hurt him," he said. "I'll die before I let that happen."

"I know, son," the Sheriff said, patting his arm. He got up from the lawn chair. "Take care of him, alright? He really is all I've got."

He gave Derek's shoulder one last pat before getting up and disappearing through the patio door.



When Derek went back inside, Scott was waiting for him. His arms were crossed across his chest, chin tilted up, and he looked like whatever he was going to say, he had practiced it in front of a mirror.

"Derek," he said.

Derek stopped in his tracks. He didn't want to cross his own arms in the fear of looking too defensive or — even worse — aggressive. He settled on putting them in his pockets, then instantly regretted it when it made him feel even more awkward. He cleared his throat. "Let me guess," he said. "If I hurt him you'll dig out my spleen through my mouth?"

Scott blinked like a two-week-old puppy seeing the world for the first time. "Uh, no?" His brow furrowed in confusion. "I was gonna say that in case it hasn't come up, Stiles really loves that diner in the corner of Main and Elm Road, the one with the purple booths?"

A brief silence fell when Derek just blinked in surprise. Scott was looking at him oddly.

"You should take him there sometime."

Derek still said nothing.

“Order three servings of curly fries just for him, he's human but he eats that crap like a starved wolf.” Scott squinted at him. “Dude, are you okay?”

“Uh.” Derek cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

“You don't look okay.”

“I'm fine.”

“Right.” Scott's eyes narrowed. “And if it makes you feel any better, I *will* hurt you if you break his heart, I just wasn't planning on warning you beforehand. And no-one will find the body.”

“Scott?” They both turned to the end of the hallway where Stiles was staring at them suspiciously. “You aren't doing anything stupid, are you?”

“Me?” Scott smiled at his friend angelically. “I never do anything stupid.” As he passed Derek on his way back to the party, he leaned close. “Allison owns a crossbow,” he whispered. “And wolfsbane bullets.” The hand he slammed between Derek's shoulder blades might have actually broken something if he wasn't a werewolf. “Nice talk, dude.”

“What was that about?” Stiles was staring into the direction Scott had disappeared to.

“He wanted to know where we keep the beer.” Stiles' eyes narrowed but his expression lightened when Derek kissed him lightly on the cheek. “C'mon. I think you're dad's getting ready to leave.”



After everyone had left, after they had stood in the front yard and waved off the Sheriff, driving off in his cruiser, and Melissa with Scott, Isaac, Allison, and Lydia piled in her battered blue Toyota, Stiles led Derek upstairs by his hand. They passed the open door of the guest room — Stiles didn't even slow down — and into Derek's bedroom. As soon as Stiles had kicked the door shut behind them, Derek had him boxed in against the door.

Stiles' eyes were slightly glazed over, pupils blown wide and scent sharp with lust. He licked his lips as Derek's hands settled on his narrow waist. “You look like you wanna eat me,” he said. His own hands had worked themselves under the front of Derek's shirt, fingers splayed over his bare stomach.

Derek let his eyes flash blue. “Maybe I do,” he said. He leaned closer until he had Stiles firmly pressed between him and the door. “Do you have any idea,” he murmured right into Stiles' ear. “How long I've wanted to do this to you?”

The heartbeat pressed against his chest stuttered and stumbled. “I dunno,” Stiles said shakily. “Can't possibly be as long as I've thought about it.”

“Really?” Derek pulled back to look him in the eye. “How long?”

“Well, that first time I saw you I honest to god thought you were gonna eat me. In the very bad, unsexy way, mind you, although that still would have been a better option than what that —” Stiles swallowed. “— that guy was gonna do to me. And then I found out that even though you looked like super sulky ninety-eight percent of the time, you were, right in here—” Stiles poked him in the chest, over his heart. “The biggest fucking marshmallow and squishy nerd I’d ever seen.”

Derek made a face. “I’m not a marshmallow.”

“Please,” Stiles said, rolling his eyes. “You didn’t even know me, and you let me sleep in your bed that first night. I *know* how fussy you werewolves are about smells so don’t even try to pretend that wasn’t a big deal.”

“I didn’t mind. I was fine on the couch.”

“And you gave me this.” Stiles plucked the front of the dark blue hoodie he was still wearing. “You gave it to me ‘cause you thought I might get cold and you told me to *keep it*. I couldn’t believe it, honestly, I was sure I was having a vivid hallucination because there you were, a dude that looks like an airbrushed underwear model from the Calvin Klein catalog, looking at me — some random spazzy teenager who didn’t have any friends beside Scott for the first fifteen years of his life — all worried as hell and offering his clothes to a complete stranger just because you thought it might be chilly outside.”

A silence fell, during which Stiles just looked at him, like he was searching for something. His hands were back on Derek’s skin, lightly running over his shoulders and up his neck, palms on his cheeks and thumbs sweeping over his cheekbones, the corner of his mouth, over his lips.

“The moment I knew I was in trouble,” Stiles said, “was that one time when you were changing the light bulb in the kitchen, and I was sitting there on the counter Googling the history of light bulb production. Because, you know, my brain just sometimes goes off on a tangent and I don’t realize that nobody probably gives a shit and I should just stop talking.”

“I like to listen to you talk,” Derek interrupted.

“I know. When I snapped out of it I thought you were gonna look super irritated, or bored, or you might have just gotten up and left.” Stiles smiled faintly. “It’s happened before, with other people. But then I turned around, and you thought I wasn’t looking, and you had this tiny, fond smile on your face.”

His fingers played with the hem of Stiles’ shirt. “Can I?”

Stiles nodded. He watched under his lashes as Derek undressed him, unhurriedly, one piece of clothing at a time. First the hoodie, that was unzipped, pushed off of Stiles’ shoulders, and left it where it dropped on the floor. After Derek had carefully unbuttoned the shirt, he slid it off the same way, then urged Stiles to lift up his arms to allow him to pull off the soft cotton t-shirt he was wearing underneath. Stiles stood patiently still as Derek gave in to the urge and ran his hands reverently over the smooth, creamy skin. This was the first time he had seen so

much of it at once and he didn't quite know how he could handle the rest if the sight of Stiles' shirtless was almost too much.

After half a minute of Derek just standing there, his hands splayed over Stiles' stomach, Stiles tilted his head to look at him. "You alright there, wolfman?" He asked carefully.

"Yeah." He unbuckled Stiles' belt, and watched as it whispered against the denim as he tugged it off. It hit the floor with a dull thud. "I was just thinking if you have any idea" — he looked up to see Stiles studying him, mouth slightly open and pupils blown so wide his eyes were almost black — "what you do to me."

"That makes two of us, then."

Before he unbuttoned Stiles' jeans, he glanced up questioningly. Stiles nodded. His eyes were on Derek's fingers.

Derek pulled the zipper down, then the jeans, until Stiles was standing in front of him wearing only his black boxer briefs. He looked like he wanted to cross his arms. "Yeah," he said. His laugh was a little nervous. "We aren't exactly evenly matched."

"No, we aren't." Derek ran his hands up Stiles' arms, watched his skin break out in gooseflesh at his touch, until he had his face cradled between his palms. He kissed Stiles softly. "You're way too gorgeous."

Stiles kept his eyes closed but he looked pleased. "God. I must have done something really right in my previous life to have this."

Derek pushed him gently down on the bed, on his back, and set out to commit to memory everything about the body laid out before him. He wanted to taste every single beauty mark on that skin, trace the veins that ran up his arms under the smooth, pale skin, find out what his heartbeat sounded like when there was nothing between them but skin and flesh and bone. He wanted to know what he tasted like.

"No fair," Stiles whined when Derek trailed kisses along his chest and all the way back to his lips. He pulled insistently at the hem of Derek's shirt. "You next. Arms up."

After they had gotten each other undressed, after Stiles had rid Derek of his clothes like a child unwrapping presents on a Christmas morning and there was nothing between them but bare skin and Stiles' breathless laughter, Derek decided he wanted to take him apart, piece by piece

"Can I taste you?" He asked, and Stiles nodded frantically, face hidden in his hands.

"Yes, please. *Fuck.*"

Going by the noises Stiles was making, he was doing something right. There were desperate little gasps and breathy moans. Long fingers buried themselves in Derek's hair and raked blunt nails down his back. Stiles cursed, breath hissing through his teeth and back arching

until finally, the only coherent word he managed to get out of his mouth seemed to be Derek's name.

Stiles returned the favor, grinning devilishly and absolutely delighted at the discovery that he could render Derek into an incoherent mess just with his those beautiful hands of his, with his clever fingers, tongue caught between teeth in concentration.

And when Stiles curled up against him, back against Derek's chest and hand pressed over the arm Derek had wrapped around him, Derek felt like his heart might stop. If he didn't know it before, he knew it now: he would never be able to let Stiles go.



Derek woke up to a weight on top of him, a familiar scent in his nose, and the opening notes of some horrible pop song on the radio.

He blinked his eyes open slowly, and squinted at the reason he had a sharp elbow digging in his solar plexus.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” Stiles crooned. He was leaning on Derek's chest, his arms crossed and his face resting on his forearms. His leg was tapping an uneven rhythm on Derek's calf, almost in time with the music.

“What the hell?”

“Shh.” Stiles reached out to press a finger to Derek's lips. “Listen.” His hair was a mess, mussed on the top and flattened on one side, and his eyes still looked sleepy, like he'd woken up just minutes before Derek. His neck and throat were mottled with hickeys and faint bruises and it made something primal and possessive curl inside Derek — *he* had made those. Stiles' bottom lip was caught between his teeth. “This is the best part,” he said. He bobbed his head a few times before the intro ended, and then sang along: “Every breath you take, every move you make, every bond you break, every step you take, I'll be watching youuuuu.”

“Is this your way of telling me you've been watching me when I sleep?”

“I always watch you when you sleep, chicken pie.”

Derek blinked. “What did you just call me?”

“I think we should start using endearments.” Stiles wriggled down until he could press his cheek on Derek's stomach. His eyes were shining with mirth. “I like chicken pie.”

“No.”

“How about honey boo?”

“No.”

“Cuddle cakes?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Honey bear?”

“Stiles, no.”

Stiles snapped his fingers triumphantly. “Honey *wolf*.”

“Stiles. What the hell? How do you even *come up with these*?”

“I have a system.” He chewed his lip thoughtfully. “How's hunnybun sound?”

“That's not a word.”

Stiles sniffed. “Is too.” He reached out to trace one long finger along the curve of Derek's cheek. “What about sweetums? Cupcakes? Derbear? Tootsieroll? Derek why are you blush—”

Derek snatched a hold of both of Stiles' wrists. “I'll blow you right now if you swear you stop talking.”

Stiles froze where he was, his mouth hanging open, eyes as big as saucers. “I —” He slapped a hand to his mouth. “Deal,” he said, voice muffled by his hand.



When they eventually got out of bed and shuffled into the kitchen, it was empty besides of Cora, Laura, and a very, very smug-looking Erica.

Her head snapped up the moment they stepped around the corner. She took a pointed whiff, and smiled sharply. “Congrats, boss,” she said. Her blonde hair was piled messily on top of her head and she was ripping pieces off a croissant with her red nails. “I see you finally got your shit together.” She leaned around Derek to look at Stiles. “Morning, Stiles.”

“Oh my god, Derek, did you try to eat him?” Laura was holding the morning paper in her hands, staring at the hickeys on Stiles' throat over the top of it.

“Maybe he really has gotten rusty,” Cora mused.

Before anyone could say anything more, Derek took a hold of Stiles' hand. “I think we're gonna have our breakfast in the living room,” he said. “You're all dead to me.”

They left the women in the kitchen, their uproarious laughter echoing after them.



After breakfast — and after Stiles had made it very, very hard for Derek to actually focus on eating — Derek left Stiles with his second helping of french toast, and searched out his mother. She must have sensed something was troubling him because as soon as he was close enough for her to pick up his scent and heartbeat, she turned around from where she was weeding the flowerbeds out in the backyard.

“Derek? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah.” Then he realized that wasn't quite the truth, and hesitated. “I'm...not sure?”

Talia wiped her hands on her apron — she wasn't wearing gardening gloves, she always said she liked the feel of wet earth on her bare hands. “Sit down, honey,” she said, patting the grass beside her. “Tell me.”

Derek sat there in silence as the damp grass soaked through his jeans, digging his claws into the wet earth and just thinking for a long time. His mother said nothing, just waited patiently.

“I want to ask Stiles to be my mate,” he finally said.

Talia reached out and laid a warm hand on his cheek. “I'm so happy for you, puppy,” she said. She smoothed his hair back from his temples. “I have to admit there was a time when I thought you would never find someone you would consider asking again. Not after Paige.” The hand in his hair stilled but didn't pull back. “It's so good to see you so happy again.”

Derek tugged at a small, wiry weed poking out of the earth between the chrysanthemums. It came off in his hand with a snap. “My wolf likes him,” he said quietly.

“You remember that time last Christmas when your father's cousin Sammi tried to set you up with her daughter?” Talia had gone back to pulling up thistles and dallisgrass from the soil.

Derek grimaced at the memory. “Yeah.”

“And right after that, when she tried to put you on a blind date with her coworker's son, only you turned around the moment you saw him because you said it would never work out?”

“They felt wrong,” he muttered. He pulled another weed from the flowerbed. “They all felt wrong.”

A small smile curled the corners of her mouth. “And how does Stiles feel?” She asked.

“Stiles is different. He's...” *He's just Stiles. He's pack. He's home. He's mine.* “He feels right.”

“I can see that, hon. It's all over your face.”

“Do you think he'd even consider saying yes?”

“We are pack animals, Derek. Bonding for life runs in our blood. But he's human, and young.” She smiled at him kindly, wetting her thumb to swipe an imaginary smudge of dirt from his cheek. “I don't think he'll refuse you but if he doesn't want it, you have to understand he's not yours to keep.”

“I have to let him go,” Derek said. The thought alone made his stomach turn and his chest ache.

“Yes, puppy. But only if he says no.” His mother reached out to smooth her hands over the back of his head again, warm hands comforting on his neck, just like she used to do when he

was a kid. Derek leaned into the touch. “The only way to find out is ask.”

“What if he does say no?” He hated how pathetic he sounded.

“I don't think he will.”

“What makes you say that?”

Talia smiled, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Please,” she said. “You don't see how that boy looks at you when he thinks nobody's looking.” Her other hand came up to cup his face in her hands. “I'm happy for you, puppy. You haven't looked at anyone like that in a long time, either.”



He should have known it wouldn't last.

Nothing good ever did.



They came early one morning, and there were eight of them.

His mother pressed a hand to Derek's mouth before shaking him lightly awake. “Quietly, now,” she whispered. She waited until Derek nodded his understanding before removing her hand. Her features looked ghastly and fierce in the light of the dawn. “They're here.”

Derek shifted in the bed, trying not to jostle Stiles sleeping beside him, and scented the air. Through the window cracked open to let in the gentle breeze, he could catch the smell of strange wolves, at least half a dozen of them. And he recognized at least one of those scents. His hackles rose. “Deucalion,” he said, as quietly as he could.

His mother nodded.

“What do they want?”

“I don't know. I'm guessing we'll find out soon.” She tucked a lock of hair, iron gray at the temples, behind her ear. “Get dressed and come downstairs. We'll meet them out front.”

“The kids?”

“Laura and Jeffrey already woke them and Levi and Louis are with them, they're keeping them quiet. They'll be safe.”

Stiles woke up, mumbling and disoriented just as Talia closed the door behind her.

“Whuzhappenin'?” He slurred, rubbing his eyes and blinking slowly. “Derek?”

“Shh, it's okay.” Derek pushed his hand into Stiles' hair — he leaned into the touch, eyes closing. “Go back to sleep.”

“Somethin' wrong?”

“Unwanted guests. We'll take care of it.”

Stiles bolted upright, his eyes razor-sharp and alert in an instant. “What?” Derek held a finger to his lips, and Stiles lowered his voice. “Who?” He asked in a whisper.

“Remember when I told you about those alphas that passed through here years ago, who tried to take the Preserve and our territory?”

“Yeah.”

“They're back.”

Stiles' eyes widened. “Shit.”

“Yeah.” Derek pulled on his clothes and stood up. “It'd be safer if you stayed here.”

“Screw that,” he hissed. “I'm coming with you.”

By now, Derek had learned to recognize that flash of fire and steel in Stiles' eyes. Arguing would lead them nowhere.

“Then get dressed.”



They met the rest of the pack downstairs. They were standing in a loose circle by the front door, his mother in the center, eyes burning red. Cora and Laura flanked her on either side, their claws out and shoulders tense. Peter, Daniel, Jeffrey, Boyd, and Erica hadn't fully shifted, either, but their eyes were wolf-yellow and their fangs out. They all looked like they were readying for a fight, standing lightly on the balls of their feet, eyes sharp and ears pricked. Like they expected nothing less than a bloodbath.

They were probably right.

“I see you lost your fight, too,” Peter said lightly to Derek as he spotted Stiles trailing after him.

Rena bristled from her spot near the kitchen doorway. “Like hell I'm going to let you out there while I stay indoors.” She flashed a grin at Stiles. “In for a penny, in for a pound. Right, hon?”

“Hell yeah,” Stiles said. Then his brow furrowed. “Is that a baseball bat?”

“Rowan wood,” she said, hefting the bat she was holding in her hands and running her fingers lightly along the length of it. “Carved with some carefully picked runes and coated with wolfsbane.” She smiled fiercely. “Won't kill anyone but any damage I cause won't heal for a while.”

Stiles was staring at her with his mouth hanging open. “You're like my new hero right now,” he murmured.

Talia turned to the wolves gathered in the foyer. “You ready?” She met each of their eyes in turn, her posture tense but composed: she stood tall and proud, like the Alpha she was.

They nodded in unison.

Before Laura pulled open the door, Stiles turned and pulled Derek down for a kiss. It was with an edge of desperation, like a man going to war. “Just in case,” he said quietly. He took Derek's hand and held on tight.

Laura opened the door, and they stepped out into the chilly dawn.



They came out of the shadows, one by one, as the Hale pack stood on the front steps.

Kali was first, slithering out of the mist like a black panther. Deucalion followed soon after, relaxed and a crooked grin on his face as if he was only taking a stroll through the woods, tapping his cane against the forest floor with dull thuds. Five of the wolves that slunk out of the dusky forest Derek didn't recognize but it wasn't like he was surprised: it was pretty common the Alpha pack would take in stray omegas or betas looking for a pack or a good fight, keep them around for a while to use as brute force, then chase them off or just kill them. Ennis was the last to emerge. His leer still made Derek's stomach turn, and he made sure to put himself squarely between the wolves and Stiles.

His mother took a step forward. “What do you want?” She asked evenly.

Kali laughed. A tinkling sound, but not one that was particularly musical — it rattled like shards of bone in a stone cup, hollow and dry and full of threat. “Oh, nothing,” she said blithely. “We just came by to see how things are. How the Hale pack is doing these days.” Her gaze drifted over to Rena, standing beside Peter, her hand curled around his forearm. “Though if you've changed your mind, Rena, I guess we could do turn this little visit into something productive. Had enough of these mongrels, yet, darling? Want to join a real pack?”

Peter's warning growl almost drowned out Rena's answer. Her lip curled. “Go to hell, Kali.”

“No need to be rude,” Kali tutted. “I was just offering. Pity.” She was already turning away when her nostrils flared, and she tilted her chin to draw an exaggerated breath. “But, my, what is this? Do I smell another human? Have you taken another pet, Talia?”

Behind him, Stiles shifted and laced their fingers together. Derek tried to take a step to block Stiles from the Alphas' eyes but the movement alone was enough to make their eyes snap to him.

“Well,” Deucalion said, voice silky soft. He had walked closer, despite the low growls rumbling from the Hale pack wolves fanned out on either side of Talia, and smiled like a

shark that had just scented blood. "That's a nice one you got there." He sniffed the air. "*Very* nice."

"If there is nothing else, Deucalion, I'm going to ask you to leave," Talia interrupted. "Peacefully."

He went on like she hadn't even spoken. His eyes never left Stiles. "Say, Derek. Would you be inclined to part with that toy of yours? Ennis here has been talking about getting himself some entertainment, and we all know his particular taste for humans, especially ones that bruise nicely." His eyes roved over what he could see of Stiles, partly hidden by Derek standing between them. "We'd be happy to take him. Wouldn't we, Ennis?"

"I wouldn't mind a taste," Ennis leered. His smile was all teeth.

Derek's answering warning snarl was louder than he meant it to be. It carried an edge of fear, and outrage, and fury in it Derek was sure Deucalion did not miss.

"I see," the alpha said lightly. "Quite attached to this one, are we? Never really understood the Hale" He stepped closer while the eyes of the pack followed his every move. "Alright, Talia. Here's my offer." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "We really didn't come here looking for trouble."

Peter snorted somewhere left of where Derek was standing.

"Yes," Deucalion said. "I know, I can hear your disbelieving noises of disagreement, but we really are just passing through. Or we were until I spied with my little eye something interesting." his eyes flicked back to Stiles. "And since you so rudely disposed of that little gift I sent you, since apparently they couldn't resist taking a little sniff at that little human of yours, I say we make a deal."

"Those mutts were part of your pack?" Talia asked, her voice hard.

"No, they were the ones who were too dumb to make the cut, so I thought I'd point them in the right way and set them loose." Deucalion grinned. "They kept things interesting, did they not?"

Talia said nothing.

He tapped his chin thoughtfully with his forefinger, like he was considering something. "My offer is that you give us the boy, as a gift and show of good faith of sorts, if you will, and we all go home healthy and happy..."

Talia crossed her arms. "Or?"

"Or you refuse, and we slaughter you right here and now, leave the boy for last, and he can watch before we kill him, too. Or have Ennis do what he wants with him." Deucalion spread his hands amicably. "Your call."

Behind him, Stiles' hands twisted themselves into the back of Derek's shirt. His warm breath ghosted over his shoulder in the damp morning air.

“He's not on offer,” Talia said.

“You sure about that?” Deucalion's eyes roved over the members of the Hale pack, taking in each of their faces and tense postures. Erica was on Derek's right side, her eyes blazing like molten gold. Boyd was to his left and he looked equally tense. Low growls rumbled from the throats of both Peter and Jeffrey: they stood side by side with their mates, coiled tight as springs. Deucalion's eyes landed on Derek's father, standing beside the Alpha. He didn't look tense and his calm demeanor might have fooled some but Derek knew better.

“What about you, Daniel?” Deucalion asked him. “You going to let your Alpha get your whole family killed? For one human?”

Daniel tilted his chin up. “Like my wife already told you,” he said. “He is not on offer.”

“Very well.” Deucalion shrugged. He sighed, like he regretted whatever was about to happen, yet it could not be helped. “This could have gone the easy way.” He turned to speak over his shoulder to Ennis and the mutts pacing behind him, his voice like the surface lake in the dead of November: still and cold and deceptively calm. “Get the boy,” he said.

It all happened like in a slow motion film.

Kali lunged for Rena and Peter. Ennis and three of the Alpha pack betas sprung into motion, already shifted in their beta forms, and headed straight for Stiles. Erica was fast — she tackled one of the mutts into the ground with a growl at the same time Boyd attacked the one closest to him — but she wasn't fast enough. The mutt took a swipe at her and they both went down snarling and biting.

What happened next was something Derek would beat himself up about for as long as he lived. As the wolves charged, Derek's full and absolute focus was on Ennis. He wouldn't let the alpha get to Stiles, he would die before letting him touch a hair on Stiles' head. He should have known it would go wrong — of course he would fuck it up — because that was the general pattern in Derek's life. Right after he'd dug his claws into Ennis' chest, pinning him to the ground, he remembered there had been three of the mutts.

And the last one of them was holding Stiles by his collar, the boy's feet kicking uselessly as the wolf dangled him in the air. One of Stiles' hand scrabbled at the fingers on his throat but the mutt just tightened his hold. Stiles' other hand was, for some bizarre reason, in the pocket of his jeans.

“End of the line, little bird,” the mutt said, grinning.

Stiles bared his teeth. “Suck my entire ass,” he spat out. He pulled the hand out of his pocket, opened it palm up right in front of the mutt's face, and blew.

Whatever the purplish powder was in his hand, the mutt inhaled it, blinked a few times in surprise, and then let out a piercing howl of agony. He hoisted Stiles even higher and *threw* him, all the way across the yard.

Stiles hit a tree trunk with a dull thunk, crumpled to the ground, and didn't move again.

The din of the fight going on around them subsided into a background noise. Derek knew that his pack was still in motion, tearing and growling and lunging at the Alpha pack wolves, the still morning air filled the sound of snapping bones and claws connecting with flesh. He barely heard any of it over the ringing in his ears. It all sounded muted, distant — like someone had turned the volume down with a button. His vision swam. He left Ennis where he lay, healing slowly but both legs still broken and a deep gash on his throat, and lurched to his feet.

Erica was calling his name from somewhere nearby. “Derek!” Her voice sounded frantic. “Derek, what are you —?” And then her eyes must have landed on Stiles, because she covered her mouth with her hand. “Shit.”

By the time Derek reached the mound of clothes and limbs on the ground that had just moments before been a breathing, living human, his legs had gone numb. He went on his knees beside the boy. His hands were shaking so bad he had to shake them out a few times before he could reach out.

“Stiles,” he said. He tried to feel around for a pulse, but his own heartbeat thundering in his ears made it hard to focus, and he couldn't be sure if he felt anything. Stiles wasn't breathing. “Please wake up.”

And suddenly he was six again, standing in front of his mother in the parking lot of Walgreens, cradling the body of a tiny bird in his even tinier hands. Its wing hung in an awkward angle, and it wasn't breathing. It felt stiff and cold in Derek's hands, and somewhere deep inside he knew that baby birds weren't supposed to feel like that.

His mother had taken one look at the body, and laid her hands on Derek's shoulders. “Come, pup,” she had said. “We'll go home and bury it in the backyard.”

When the hole had been dug and Derek had laid the small body in it, his mother took a hold of his hand and squeezed. “We all must go, puppy,” she said. “We all come from the earth, and when it's time, we all must return to it.”

Derek understood that. He knew that. But it wasn't Stiles' *time*.

Not like this.

“Please,” he said, and it came out half a choke, half a sob, and so quietly he wasn't sure if he was actually saying any of it out loud. Whatever sounds did make it out sounded pitiful even to his own ears. “What do I do, Stiles, I don't know what to do.”

He shouldn't have let Stiles come outside. He should have made him stay indoors. He shouldn't have given in, why didn't he argue more? Why didn't Stiles *listen*?

He buried his face into the crook of Stiles' neck — still warm, still with that familiar smell on his skin — and gathered the limp body in his arms. Why couldn't he hear a pulse? There should be a pulse. Was his neck broken?

A gasp, and a sputtering cough. “I can't breathe, babe, you're squeezing me too hard.”

Derek let go of him so fast Stiles' head almost hit the ground. "Stiles?"

Two chestnut-brown eyes, wide and a little unfocused, fluttered open. Stiles took a deep breath, then another. "I'm okay. Derek," he said as Derek kept patting him down, looking for blood, fractures, anything. "I'm fine."

Derek deflated like someone had let all the air out of him. He sat back, pulling Stiles with him until he had him gathered in his lap — completely ignoring the fact that Stiles was a grown man and his limbs weren't exactly the shortest. "What did you do to that mutt?" He asked the top of Stiles' head that was tucked under his chin.

"Wolfsbane powder."

"Do you just always happen to have spare wolfsbane in your pockets for emergencies?"

Stiles made noncommittal noise. "I like to be prepared."

Derek let out a long breath, half a laugh, half a sigh. "You are unbelievable."

Now that he had the reassuring rhythm of Stiles' heartbeat in his ears again, Derek actually remembered they were still in the middle of a fight. And it was eerily quiet.

"You with us again, boss?" Erica asked him. She was standing behind them, eyes scanning the surroundings with sharp focus — Derek belatedly realized she had obviously decided Derek couldn't be trusted to watch his own back and was watching over them.

He nodded. "Everyone okay?"

"We're all fine."

"The Alpha pack?"

Erica grimaced. "Sadly, none of those mutts are dead. The hired muscle decided this was way above their pay grade and Deucalion and the other alphas apparently decided it wasn't worth the trouble."

"They ran?"

"Slunk with their tails between their legs, more like." She glanced at Stiles. "You okay, sweetums?"

"M fine," Stiles mumbled. "There's just this really clingy werewolf trying to crush me into a diamond."

Derek helped Stiles to his feet and they walked him back to the house, Erica trailing after them. Talia was inspecting a cut on Cora's arm as they approached.

"It's already knitting itself back together," she was saying. "It should be fine." She scanned the yard as Rena came over, Peter hovering right behind her, a scrape on her cheek and her

copper hair a mess, but otherwise seemingly okay. The baseball bat she was still carrying had a smudge of blood on it.

"Everyone alright?" Talia asked.

Rena nodded. "Nothing that hasn't healed already."

"Kali is getting sloppy," Peter said.

Stiles stopped in front of the Alpha and he suddenly looked very small, rubbing his arms there in the frigid morning air in his torn clothes and wolfsbane-dusted hands. "Sorry I caused trouble," he said to Talia. "I should have stayed inside."

She held up a hand to quiet him before stepping in and enfolding Stiles in a tight hug. "This has nothing to do with you," she said. "And if you hadn't been out here, they would have found some other flimsy reason to attack." She leaned back and swept her thumb across Stiles' cheek to wipe out a smudge of dirt. "They like testing the waters, feeling for weaknesses, and if it hadn't been you, it would have been something or someone else they would have used as an excuse."

"It's not your fault," Cora said. She looked rattled but she was smiling. "They've been stirring trouble for as long as I can remember. This wasn't the first time and it sure as hell won't be the last."

"Will they be back?"

"Some day, yes."

Talia studied Stiles' face carefully. "Are you alright, hon? Are you hurt?"

"Just hit my head."

"I heard that mutt howl like the demons of hell were after him. What did you do?"

"Wolfsbane powder," Derek said from behind them, smiling proudly. "Blew it right into his face."

Laura let out a startled bark of laughter. "Oh my god, Derek," she said as the rest of the pack laughed with her, the sort of laugh borne of adrenaline and relief and tension draining out of them like sand through an hourglass. "This one is definitely a keeper."

They ended up in the kitchen, right where Stiles had first walked into the house, all those weeks ago. The same emergency kit Aunt Rena had used to patch Stiles up that first night was dug out from under the sink, and Derek set to work. Stiles sat on the counter beside the stove, Derek sitting on a stool between his legs.

"I'm not actually hurt, you know," he said as Derek dabbed the single small cut at the back of his head. "Just a concussion, I think."

"You're bleeding."

"I can't even feel it, Derek. It can't be a big cut, I'm —" He bent down to catch Derek's eye. "Derek? You okay? Your hands are shaking."

"I..." And his hands really were shaking. They were trembling so hard he was barely able to hold the swab of cotton in his hands. He let his head fall on to Stiles' chest. "Fuck," he said under his breath. And then just kept talking, face buried into Stiles' belly, letting all of those things out that were scrambling and clawing at the inside of his skull, the things he had frantically regretted not saying to Stiles in that brief, horrible moment he had thought he would not have the chance to say anything to him ever again. The words were so muffled they were almost unintelligible.

"What?" Stiles asked. "What did you say?"

Derek spoke without moving his head. "I said I love you."

A pause. Then, slowly and carefully, Stiles' hands came up to cradle Derek's head. They ran up over the nape of his neck, then back down again to his shoulders. "I love you, too."

"Will you..." Derek trailed off, then lifted his head. This, he had to say face to face. Stiles waited patiently with his head tilted to his side. "Would you join the pack officially, as my..." Derek paused. Took a deep breath. "As my mate?"

Stiles didn't even miss a beat. "Yes," he said.

"Really?" As Stiles rolled his eyes, Derek continued hastily. "I mean, do you know what it means, what it involves?"

"I've had a werewolf as my best friend since I was in kindergarten, Derek. If you really think I haven't read anything and everything under the sun about them including mating habits, you really don't know me at all."

The warmth started somewhere in Derek's belly and snaked upwards, coiling under his skin and through his ribs until he was sure it was going to stop his heart. "So that's a yes?"

"Yes, Derek." Stiles took a hold of his hand. "Listen to my heartbeat, tell me if I'm lying." He pressed the hand to his chest. Unblinking, steady and calm he said: "I want it."

And, beneath his palm, Stiles' heartbeat remained steady.

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"You'll stay. With me?"

A smile. "I'll stay. For as long as you'll have me." The smile got impossibly wider. "And from what I've heard, you wolves are pretty big on that forever thing, so if I were you I'd mentally prepare myself to see this face every morning from here on out."

He couldn't help it. Derek's chest felt like it was about to crack open, his blood coursing through his veins so loud he was sure even Stiles could hear it. He felt dizzy, and *giddy*. And Derek wasn't the sort of person to feel giddy. Erica would have probably pissed herself laughing if she could have seen him right then and he was so glad the rest of the pack had piled into the living room to give the two of them some privacy. He leaned forward, and rested his forehead against Stiles'.

After a while, Stiles leaned back to look Derek in the face. "There it is," He said. He touched his finger to Derek's cheek, just at the corner of his mouth. "That's what I mean."

"What?"

"You're smiling. You should do it more often" Stiles' own smile had turned soft. Warm and happy and affectionate enough to make Derek's insides squirm. "Looks good on you."

"*You* look good on me."

Stiles' eyes widened. "Oh my god," he said, "That was an actual joke. With *innuendo*. Derek Hale made a funny." He pretended to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye. "I'm so proud of you, baby."

"You are such a jackass, you know."

"Yes I am." Stiles said smugly. "But I'm *your* jackass, now."

Epilogue

“Are you ready, baby bro?”

“Yes,” Derek said evenly. Breathed in, breathed out. Rolled his shoulders. “No. Maybe.”

Laura let out a snort. “No-one ever is,” she said. “It’ll be fine.”

They were standing in the front lawn in front of the Hale house, just at the edge of the treeline, the dusky late summer evening buzzing and murmuring around them. Cicadas sang their welcome to the sunset. Somewhere in the treetops, a blue jay was whistling softly. The air smelled like rich black earth, rain, and the forest.

And *Stiles*.

Even from miles away, from where Cora and Erica had taken Stiles an hour ago, even with his whole family gathered around (including Isaac — now a new member of the Hale pack — Scott, and Sheriff Stilinski) standing on the porch and radiating excitement, even with the scent of the preserve teeming with life around them, Derek could pick up his scent. The scent so familiar he could single it out in a room with a hundred people in it. It was like a beacon, calling to him. He closed his eyes, and breathed it in, nostrils flaring.

“Down, boy,” Laura said. “You’ll get to him soon.”

A howl cut through the quiet evening — Cora’s, by the sound of it — and she smiled.

“They’re ready for you.” She patted his arm, and leaned to press a light kiss to his stubbled jaw before playfully shoving him towards the forest edge. “Go get your mate, Derbear.”

Derek shifted. And he ran.



He ran for what felt like hours, but couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes. Time felt abstract, meaningless, in that place. His wolf didn’t care for counting time or distance, so Derek didn’t either.

All he had was the thudding of his heart and the warm blood gushing through his veins, chanting, singing, seeking.

Stiles.

The sun was hanging low in the sky, liquid and shimmering and casting the Preserve in a thick, syrupy light that made the forest look unearthly, almost otherworldly. Thrushes and starlings were singing in the treetops and bushes blooming with sickly sweet flowers. His muscles bunched and rippled under his fur, burning as he ran. His claws sunk in the warm, black earth and fallen leaves with each step, but his paws were soundless on the ground.

The only noise for him was the steady thrum of a single human heart in his ears.

Derek grinned his wolfish grin, and ran faster.



He found Stiles by a small creek, sitting on a mossy boulder overlooking the slowly running stream that pooled into a pond. Its water was clear as glass and reflected the forest around it in brilliant colors.

Stiles was shirtless, his torso covered in the intricate runes and symbols of the mating ritual. Derek had painted them himself with the rusty red ochre, mixed according to the old Hale recipes and charmed by their emissary. The pattern started from Stiles' neck, just below the nape, and curled around his shoulder blades to dip down along his spine on both sides. It disappeared under the waistband of his shorts, but Derek knew it curved right down to his sharp hipbones. Derek had made those marks, pressed both of his own paint-covered hands to the sharp juts of Stiles' hips. He had kept his eyes on Derek, two spots high on his cheeks and a flush spreading down his chest, but still a devilish curl in his smile.

Tickles, he had mouthed when Derek had raised a single eyebrow questioningly.

Stiles was sitting with his back to him, but Derek knew the pattern by heart — he knew two triskele-like spirals snaked down his chest, on each of his pectorals, and his flat stomach was dotted with horizontal lines like fresh wounds on his pale skin.

Dried, the paint looked like old blood. Like Stiles had taken down a prey himself, dipped his hands in the warm blood of the carcass, elbow deep — like he had eaten in with his hands. It made him look feral. Savage. It made him look *wild*.

And Derek had never seen anything so beautiful in his whole life.

He was humming a little tunelessly, to what vaguely sounded like *Hungry Like the Wolf* by Duran Duran.

“You gonna come closer, Cujo?”

The humming had stopped. Stiles was looking at him with a raised eyebrow and a teasing grin on his lips. His eyes shone in the late-evening sun, the color of butterscotch and honey.

“Depends.” Derek took a step closer. “Are you gonna run?”

“Maybe. That's the point, right?”

Derek took another step, then one more, until he was standing right by the mossy boulder.

Stiles dangled his bare feet over the edge and smiled at him. “You better close your mouth before something flies in there,” he said after a stretch of silence.

Derek closed his mouth. It had evidently been hanging slightly open in awe. He reached out a hand — still stained in the same ochre red Stiles' skin was from painting the runes on him

— and ran it down Stiles' calf. There was a slight uptick in his heartbeat at the touch. He traced a finger down a line that connected the swirl on Stiles' foot to the twin handprints on his hips. “You're beautiful,” Derek murmured.

Stiles' smile softened to something so fond and pleased it made Derek's chest feel too small for whatever was squirming between his ribs, trying to find a way out.

“Then catch me if you can, Sourwolf.” With a surprising speed and agility, considering he usually tripped on his own feet even when walking on flat surfaces, Stiles jumped down from the boulder, over the creek, and bolted into the forest, his laughter echoing between the trees.

Derek let out a growl, more thrill than actual menace, and chased after him.

Stiles was fast — Derek had to give him that. They both knew he wouldn't have been able to outrun a werewolf, not if Derek had really tried to catch him. It was a charade, a game, and they both knew it. It didn't mean they couldn't play along.

They ran for a quarter of a mile, over rocks and roots, through meadows dotted with wildflowers, across streams that ran cold despite the warm summer air. Ferns whispered against their feet and all Derek could see before him, darting between the thickets and jumping over falling logs while laughing riotously, was Stiles and the blood red runes on his skin.

Until Stiles abruptly stopped. That was something Derek actually wasn't prepared for, so he ended up running straight into Stiles, tackling him down. He wrapped an arm around Stiles' waist and twisted mid-fall, so that he was the one that actually took the impact, and they tumbled into the undergrowth under a big oak tree at the edge of a small clearing.

“Gotcha,” Derek said as he rolled them over. A bit pointlessly, since he was currently pinning Stiles to the ground with his whole weight, his hand cradled around the curve of Stiles' skull.

“I stopped on purpose. You were too slow.”

“I was letting you get away.”

Stiles flashed him a brilliant grin. “Sure you did, Fido.”

“Dog jokes. Very funny.” He watched Stiles twist and turn beneath him. “Can you be still even for a few seconds?”

“No, it's —” Stiles kept squirming, twisting and back arching where he was lying sprawled under him. “I think I've got ants in my boxers.”

Derek raised a single eyebrow. “Maybe you should take them off, then.”

The wiggling stopped abruptly, and Stiles looked at him with wide eyes. “Oh my god,” he said, mouth open. “That is the worst come-on ever, holy shit.”

“Shut up.”

“I mean it. The *worst*. You're the hottest person on this side of the planet and your come-ons are so *awkward*. Tell me, how did you hook up with people in the past? Cause it can't have been those lines that worked. Did you just take your shirt off or something?”

Derek said nothing.

“Oh my god.” Stiles looked so delighted Derek was worried he might pass out. “Holy shit, you weirdo, I love you so much.”

Without dislodging Derek or getting up, Stiles twisted until he'd gotten rid of both his shorts — still streaked with mud from running across that half-dried riverbed — and his boxers. He dug a hand into his pants and presented Derek with a tiny squirming insect. It looked pissed off. “The dude bit me. What is this, a Fire ant?”

“Fire ants aren't native to United States, and as far as I know they've only spread to the southern and coastal areas of California. There shouldn't be any in Beacon Hills.” Derek squinted at the tiny thing between Stiles' fingers. “That's a common Argentine ant.”

“Mm, yeah, talk dirty to me you nerd.”

“You like it.”

“Yes, I do.”

Derek settled on his elbows, trying not to put his whole weight on Stiles, and just studied him. He brushed his hand along the curve of his neck, long and pale and smooth, left clean of the red ochre paint on purpose. “You ready?”

Stiles' hearts skipped a beat but he smiled. “Yeah.” He tilted his head to the side even further to expose his throat. “I am.”

Derek let his fangs slide out and very, very carefully, he pressed his teeth to Stiles' neck, close to his nape. The bite wouldn't need to be deep, only break skin.

“Go on,” Stiles said. His hands were making soothing patterns on Derek's back.

So Derek rested his teeth on on the soft skin, and very, very carefully, he bit down.



They stayed until the night fell. The moon came out, huge and round and the color of old ivory, washing the meadow in its pale light. Stars dotted the inky sky. That's what Derek liked about the Preserve, about the wilderness: here, far away from light pollution and people and noise, the light from streetlamps and storefronts couldn't swallow the stars.

Stiles lifted a hand and pointed. “That's the Big Dipper, right?” He asked. They were lying side by side on the mossy clearing, close enough that their shoulders brushed. “Ursa Major. The one that looks like a cup with handle?” The moon washed the color from his skin and made it look like fine porcelain.

“I only know the North Star, so I wouldn't know.”

“I know a few. That's Orion.” He pointed to a cluster of stars, three of which seemed to make a line. “That's Leo.” That one looked like a question mark joined with a lampshade. “And that's Canis Major.” Stiles grinned. “The Greater Dog.” This time Derek didn't know where he was even pointing, he couldn't make out any shape in the sky, but it wasn't like he was trying very hard. His eyes were on Stiles.

“Dude, you can't see what I'm pointing at if you're looking at me.”

“I know.”

Stiles swatted his arm without looking — and missed by about a mile, ending up poking at Derek's hip — but his scent had turned delighted. Pleased. “You sap.”

They fell quiet for a long time before Derek gathered the courage to say what he'd been turning over in his head for a long time. What had worried him ever since Stiles had promised to stay. “Are you happy?” He asked quietly.

“Can't complain. I've got a thousand stars above me, soft moss under my ass, and a hot guy staring at me like I'm dinner.” He paused. “In the sexy kind of way. So, yeah.” His teeth flashed as he smiled. “I'm happy.” His face fell when he took in whatever must have been happening with Derek's expression. “Wait, what, are you asking me because you honestly think I might say I'm no happy?” He asked incredulously. “Are you kidding me?”

“I mean like...” Derek hesitated. *As my mate, as a part of this pack, as a family member.* “With me?”

Stiles rolled over on his stomach so he could place a hand on each side of Derek's face. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I am. More than happy.” He kissed Derek softly. “Are *you* okay?”

Derek pulled back but didn't move his hands. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I think you're crying? Kind of.”

Derek wiped his eyes to the back of his hand. It came out wet.

“The good kind or the bad kind of tears?” Stiles asked. His fingers played absently with the fresh bite mark on his neck.

Derek pressed his face between his palms and kissed him, long and deep and fervent. “The good kind,” he said. “Definitely the good kind.”

End Notes

This was something that just ran away from me (again) and I decided to run with it. That being said, I constantly keep second guessing if I should post these at all or just keep them to myself — I honestly can't sometimes tell if I'm doing okay or if this is horrible trash that shouldn't see the light of day — so if you like it and wanna feed my constant need for validation, leave a comment, they mean the world to me. Because I'm trash. Welcome to my dumpster.

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