The Space Within
by hitorimaron

Summary

Derek used his forged identity to secure a spot at the Beacon - a flagship of the Intergalactic Alliance patrolling the edges of the known universe. That should be enough to escape his past, right?

I only own the plot and the art, thank you very much. :)

Notes

A/N: So... hello! If you are wondering how this happened, well... I got sick on a vacation so what better to do than to start writing a fun sci-fi AU. It surely did help me keep up the good mood, so hope it will do the same for you! As always, thank you for reading!

This is a bit more fast-paced than what you are used to from my previous works, but just as fun, I hope! :)

Cheerios~

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“Mr. Kasai,” called out a quiet gentle voice. Derek’s sleep-induced brain didn’t even register it. The hum of the ship in the background lulled him back to deep sleep… almost.

“Mr. Kasai,” the voice repeated more insistently and this time, it was loud enough for Derek to disturb his nap. He grunted, moving his face away from the source, wondering why this dude just didn’t answer yet so that he could have his well-deserved rest. Not that he really could, not really, but he could always try, couldn’t he?

A hand touched his shoulder and he startled, eyelids flying open on their own accord. His shoulder twitched. What? His eyes focused. The fly attendant was looking at him from above, a very
friendly smile on her face ever so present - albeit it was slightly strained at that point.

She was definitely worried about the expression he was carrying. He must have looked as if he had been stabbed. At least four times. He really did not enjoy people touching him like that. Or in any other way really.

“Mr. Kasai,” she said, addressing him. Oh right, that was his name now. He blinked.

Her hand gestured at the medium-sized screen plastered above the air-tight entrance. “We have reached your destination.”

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The Beacon was one of the Intergalactic Alliance ships that patrolled sector 721, more commonly known as the Milky Way. It wasn’t necessary one of the biggest ones. By far. But with the skill set he had, he could count himself lucky that he managed to land the assignment. Forged document aside… one couldn’t really forge a skillset after all. Not even Peter was that good.

Still, he would have wished to serve on a bigger vessel, protected by an even bigger sort of anonymity, but a flagship ranking around fifty crew members could do the same just as well. Especially since it operated this far out of known space.

And it wasn’t like they knew who he was. It wasn’t like they could find out either, unless he would slip up by mistake. And that sort of mistake… he would never ever let that happen again.

Besides, the ship looked real nice. He could at least acknowledge that much. It was way nice than whatever other starcraft Derek ever set his foot on. Modern. Clean. Powerfull. Exactly a place where people would think twice before going in to search for him. And that was certainly something he was looking for in his future reside. He couldn’t have been more lucky.

The door on the opposite side of the wall slid open, revealing a female of an unknown species. Derer actually knew very little about the vast space population so... honestly, he just hoped he wasn’t the main character of this story because the lore would be so weak nobody would read it. That was the sad predicament of growing up so shielded, in hiding. It was also a really bad way to live. The lack of information rarely brought anything good.

“Mr. Kasai, the Sheriff will see you now,” she said, her voice shrill. Uncomfortably so.

Derek looked at her for a bit longer than was necessarily polite. Her hair was like fire, it almost glowed even in the bright-lit corridor. It maybe even was fire for all he knew. Enthralling. But she still looked sort of human.

“Mr. Kasai, if you would,” she said sternly, her face turning away from him. It made her hair swirl rather magically. “The Sheriff has other responsibilities as well.”

Derek nodded, getting up from the retractable bench. He didn’t turn around to watch it disappear in the wall so that the corridor was all clear again. It would make him too suspicious in the eyes of any normal crew member, if he ogled every piece of technology around. He could only allow that when nobody was around.

“Mr. Kasai,” greeted a strong voice to his right. The Captain of the Beacon, obviously human, was
sitting at his desk, watching him from behind his holo screen.

“Captain Stilinski,” Derek greeted as the cabin door slid close behind him.

“Sheriff,” the man smiled, gesturing for Derek to sit down in front of the table. “Captain is a bit of an old-school term for the IA.”

Derek nodded, sitting down. He managed to keep the cringe at the slip-up out off his face at least. Good.

“I don’t get many assignees from the outside of this sector,” the Sheriff started, his finger tapping the screen in front of him. Derek’s files jumped out, covering a half of it. He did not squint to look if all was set. He just had to trust Peter that it was.

“Hagaar, was it?” A trap.
“Malori,” Derek corrected promptly. While he might still be a slightly unresponsive to his new surname at the weak moments, the rest of his supposed “life” was drilled into his brain so many times, that it might as well be tattooed all over his body at that point.

“Oh, right,” Sheriff smiled apologetically. He reached over for a device made mostly out of glass-like material and put it on his face. Glasses, weren’t they? Did the human species have a lacking sense of sight?

“We travelled to Malori with my wife once. Can’t say I enjoyed the food much.”

Derek just stared silently.

“I hope that didn’t offend you. Hundred people hundred tastes, as my dad used to say.”

“Not at all.” As if words like that ever could offend anybody. There were far worse things for an individual to come across.

The Sheriff put his glasses down and leveled him with a studying stare. “For somebody who mastered that many intergalactic languages without an implant, you are suspiciously weak in the matter of basic conversation.”

“So I’ve been told,” Derek admitted, pursing his lips. “Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. Not for your work position at least,” the Sheriff said, humming. “But this is not an AI master ship. Our values might differ from what you were used to on your previous vessel assignments.”

There were no previous vessel assignments in Derek’s work career, so he expected to be fine on that front. His silence obviously did not sound as reassuring to the Sheriff though.

“This is a quite small crew and I, as it’s Captain, try to make sure it works like a clock. All the cogs need to be able to match together so this vessel runs seamlessly.”

Derek did not understand the reference, but the gist of it did not get lost on him. You are an outsider, it told him, and if you don’t fit in, you will be disposed of.

“I understand,” he answered in full honesty.

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“The cabin is nothing much,” said the female, slapping a bracelet against the keypad near the door. It opened and revealed a fairly big room. Granted it didn’t have a window of any sorts, but Derek was used to way worse conditions. This was… clean and nice.

He glanced in, scanning for more beds, but there was just one. Interesting. He nodded trying to not look too excited about the prospect of having enough privacy to do whatever he wanted without prying eyes. He really did owe Peter an antique weapon or something similarly good.

“Your shift starts the next day cycle,” she continued explaining. He just nodded along. “Here is your key.” She threw the bracelet at him. “Do not lose it. It contains all the info you might need. Literally. Starting with Beacon’s layout, right down to the menu in the Nourishment. I guess you already know your way around the tech so I would be wasting my time with a briefing.”

He didn’t, but he nodded anyways. It couldn’t be any harder than operating any other computer-based device, could it?

She stared at him impatiently. “Any questions?” He hair voice mirrored that impatience, whistling at a volume an average listener wouldn’t have noticed.

“Any questions?” she repeated.

“No, ma’am,” he said, tearing his eyes from her lips. He expected her to be insulted by the level of curiosity, but she seemed used to it judging by the smirk.

She snorted “Let’s not go there. We will be working together after all. And it’s Lydia.”

He nodded, wondering for the first time if boarding such a small vessel was actually a good idea - the first name basis after such a short time couldn’t foretell anything good... he would have to remember to be more vigilant.

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He was up before the day cycle even began. Though in all honesty, he was up almost the whole night cycle. He ended up going through his bracelet - to learn how to get to the important parts of the ship, to go through the cards on his future coworkers, to look through the message board (he had to give up on that after being confused by the jargon one too many times), to check on this and that. It calmed him down to know all these things. It helped him slip into his role more comfortably. It grounded him.

Rolling to his side on the floor, he sighed, eying the bed for what could be the dozenth time. No matter how alluring it looked, it was just too soft. He wasn’t sure if he would ever get used to it.

Back at home, they were happy enough to have a thin blanket to cover their bodies with if there ever was one. They didn’t need anything more. But home was gone and there was no use in dwelling on it.

He sat up. There was really no hope in him to fall asleep again. Not when the treacherous thoughts of home slipped into his brain without him realizing. That’s what silence did to him sometimes. Inviting memories in.

Derek snapped his fingers. The lights came on. He did his ritual exercises under the blasing
iridescent glow. Granted it wasn’t exactly a standard procedure and his eyes burned with unshed tears, but be it. He deserved a lot worse.

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With a freshly washed body clad in a crisp uniform, he walked down a corridor. The day cycle did not start yet so all the lights were a bit more subdued than normally. Or so he assumed.

There were a few life forms, that passed him on the way, their eyes lingering curiously, but he did not stop to chat to them. He wasn’t sure he would do a very good job at it right then anyways.

The Root station was in the middle of the ship, how literal. He managed to get there without bringing up the layout even once. He smiled to himself proudly, turning his wrist to feel its insignificant weight and then brought it up to press against the pad next to the door.

It slid open revealing four working stations, two of which were occupied. An unidentified life form covered in some sort of a suit turned around to glance at the opened door and the eyes behind the mask lit up instantly.

“Oooh, new arrival is here!” It could be a female, if the high tone was anything to go by.

The human male right next to her looked up, watched him for a bit and then returned back to work.

“Oh don’t mind Isaac, he’s a bit shy around strangers,” she said, then shrugged and jumped from her seat striding right into his personal space.

“Come in, come in,” she said, grabbing his biceps to drag him in. Her hands were covered by surgical sort of gloves. It was all rather sterile - the mask covering her face, the helmet-like visor over her eyes, the artificial and loose material over her skin. Derek’s nose tingled.

She snorted, waving at her get-up. “Oh these? I would have fancied up a bit more if I knew you would have caught our shift by arriving this early,” she said laughing. “And before you ask or make your own weird assessments, no, this is not a BDSM thing. I am just no good with germs. I used to be reaaaal sick all the time, horrible. I am under treatment now, since my AI insurance covers it, but it’s still a long way to go, so… ya know, that’s why all the wrapping.”

Derek nodded, feeling slightly out of place. He glanced over at the other guy, but he didn’t even react, his eyes turned to the screen full off red rows. He tapped on one, typed in the command and it turned orange, filtering into a different section.

“Derek Kasai, was it?” the female asked. Derek looked back at her. She might have been human too. She probably was. Interesting. Such a humanoid crew wasn’t really the usual thing… maybe the Sheriff liked it that way, since he was a human himself.

She smiled. “I’m Erica.” Or at least Derek thought she was smiling under the mask. She could also be flashing her teeth his way, but that was not something humans usually did.

“May the stars never lead you astray,” he muttered, a bit embarrassed to use the phrase. He never did use it before, but it seemed to have been the standard with all the AI facilities.

“Wow, well, no need to be that official with us.” She laughed, slapping his biceps. He hoped he
won’t have to work with her all that often - tactile life forms made him uncomfortable.

Luckily he was saved by the day cycle starting. The sounds of the daily reboot filled the room and the red lines on all the screens doubled.

Erica looked around and sighed. “Lots of work ahead of you and Boyd,” she noted. “It’s only so much one can solve on the night cycle what with most of the people sleeping.”

Derek found it a bit rude to call them all “people”, considering there were other species on this vessel as well, but he didn’t want to appear rude, so he decided not to react to it. It’s what a human would do and he looked like a human to any outsider right then anyways.

“Right, well we will be on our way then,” she said just as the door slid open and a dark-skinned human walked in, yawning.

“See ya at the end of your shift!”

With that last sentence over and out Erica and her coworker Isaac, who didn't even look at Derek anymore, walked out of the Root station and Derek was left with the third human. Another human.

He stood there awkwardly at first, unsure what station would be his.

“There are no assigned stations really,” he heard from his right. Boyd reached into a slot in the wall for a cup of a steaming brown liquid, that might have been coffee. Derek really didn’t like the smell.

“I see,” he said still hesitating.

“Derek, right?”

“Yes.”

“Boyd,” he said, still standing next to the slot and sipping at his coffee leisurely, while the screens blinked with red lines. Now, Derek knew that was probably nothing critical for a vessel this big. He remembered Peter’s ship blinking with a lot more unsolved tasks, but it was still a bit concerning to be standing there and having a chill small talk when who-knows-what could be going on.

“Right.” Boyd said, walking over to Erica’s table to put down his cup. “This is how it works here: Each workstation is logged into one of the four main systems of the Beacon.”

Derek nodded. He never saw it being done like that, but a bigger ship obviously had other rules than small old vessels outside of the main IA line.

“A bit outside of the protocol, but it works.”

Derek didn’t know what that meant, but he nodded either way. It would seem his stay here will include a lot of automatic nodding.

“Right, well.” Boyd sat down and glanced at the screen. “I don’t think I will be able to move from this one for a few hours, so be my guest and choose whichever.” How much was an hour again? He couldn't remember even though he did brush up on his human jargon yesterday. Damn it, get it together, Hale.

Derek pursed his lips and looked at each of the three workstations to guess which one would be the least demanding. His uncertainty must have shown on his face somehow or probably was just
hearable in his silence because Boyd looked back at him, his hand hovering over the red line on top of this screen.

“How familiar are you with the procedures?”

“Technically or theoretically?” Derek vagered.

“Right,” Boyd muttered and reached over to pull Isaac’s former seat closer to his own. “Let’s do a bit shadowing first then before I will let you sit on your own here.

~o~

He was a lot less ready to do this work that he had anticipated, which was well… slightly worrying, even though Boyd kept telling him that it was only natural, since the Beacon was not exactly a standard-working vessel. Not that Derek knew what a standard-working AI vessel was actually like other than by what he had learnt in the past quanton from the materials Peter managed to get for him. And who knows where those came from.

“This one needs medical procedure approval,” he read, scrolling down the line. “So I just approve?”

Boyd hummed, scanning his own screen before turning to check Derek’s.

“Go down.” He did so.

“Right, here it says the Sheriff needs to approve this, so send it over to Lydia. She will either plan it in for him or do so herself.”

Derek typed in a forwarding ID and sent it over.

“Why didn’t that go to Lydia automatically?”

“It usually would,” Boyd shrugged and returned back to his own work. His station, Derek learnt before, was connected to the command bridge and all the tasks tied to it, so it was much more complex than any of the other three workstations. Usually a team of two could manage the whole Root on Beacon, because the other two stations never had anything too urgent coming in. Which was lucky, because Derek was real slow in working through his own screen.

“There might be a virus in the message board,” Boys spoke up suddenly as if it only now came to the front of his brain. He was multitasking like some sort of siamese life form, si a delay in thoughts was nothing extraordinary.

Derek already forgot what they were talking about. Ah right, the misplaced message. A possible virus.

“I will run a scan in the background and check for that then.” He nodded. Finally something he was familiar with.

Boyd tapped his screen, moving along the lines a few times and then picked up the conversation again. “Good.”

“If that’s okay, I would run it through all the external communication channels too. It will take
longer, but most of the viruses latch in from there.”

Tapping, a sigh and then an answer. “Not needed, AI firewall wouldn’t let that through.”

“It does when it’s glued to the AI seal. It’s a loophole since those are not scanned. Granted nothing big gets through, but once it spreads,” Derek explained, typing in the algorithm for a whole-body scan. He did not approve it though, his fingers hovering above the button, because he suddenly noticed the lack of tapping next to him.

“Ehm or...,” he said and then looked to his left, doubfolded. Boyd was watching him with a calculative sort of look on his face.

“I’ve never heard of that,” he said, squinting at him.

“I was lucky enough to shadow under a very good Rootman, otherwise I wouldn’t have known that either,” Derek said, keeping his voice even. He turned back to his screen and hit the start button on the scan.

He did not look back at Boyd, just kept on working. The next red line wasn’t that hard to solve so he typed in the given procedure and moved to the next one.

It wasn’t long before the tapping next to him resumed. “Please write it into the Root log,” Boyd said then. “I want Erica and Isaac to have that or any other info that you might be able to forward.”

“Understood,” Derek said.

~o~

“You guys, food time!” Erica yelled as the door slid open. Her arms were full of packages of unknown origin, though judging by her words there wasn’t really much doubt that it was food. Derek - a master of deduction.

“I brought all kinds of them, since I didn’t know what Derek liked,“ she said, smiled (he thought at least), pulled the table from the wall and deposited all the packages on it.

“Boyd, come on.” Erica walked over to him to pull him over to the table. It was a rather impossible task, but in the end she did succeed.

“You didn’t have to bother,” Boyd said, eyeing the huge pile of food.

“Yes, but if I didn’t, then you would have pulled poor Derek into your workaholic mess and what then?”

“I wasn’t really hungry yet,” Derek lied, trying to defuse the tense situation, but Erica just laughed at him and pushed the food into his direction. Derek had to wonder if she could hear his stomach growling or if she was playing it by the ear - a very poor choice of words in this case, he knew.

“I had to get up for my treatment anyways and Nourish is on the way,” she shrugged.

“I didn’t see any cabins that way,” Derek noted, reaching over for a food package labeled as meat and potato salad. “Did I miss...?”
Boyd snorted, making Derek lose the end of his question. He frowned, put the food back down and activated his bracelet. Before he could pull up the layout of Beacon though, Erica jumped over and covered the holo with her gloved hand.

“Alright, well, it was not on the way,” she confessed sheepishly. “I just didn’t want you two to starve.”

“Oh,” he said, moving his wrist away from her to turn off the bracelet. “I see.” Such a level of concern was a bit too much for him. He wasn’t exactly sure what to think of it. He didn’t know her well enough to… to what, thank her? Return the favor?

His eyes skimmed over all the food on the table and his lips thinned. She really did bring a lot. Was that much available on the ship for everybody? Did she have to pay for all of it?

“Do I...?” he asked, juggling his bracelet.

She frowned. “Hm?”

He reached over for the meat combo package and held it out in front of her. “How much was this? Can just transfer…”

“Ohhh, like thaaat,” she exclaimed, waving her hands around in a declining gesture. “That’s not how Beacon works. There are no rations here. You can just take whatever you want as long as you won’t go overboard. I wrote it down as a Root section order. We can keep the food in the fridge here and ya know… eat whenever.”

Boyd was watching him weirdly again, but Derek wouldn’t understand why? As far as he knew rations were a normal thing on the AI vessels. Maybe he missed something?

“Oh, my bad,” he said quickly. “I didn’t get to read on everything yet.”

Erica shrugged. “No biggie.” It seemed nonchalant, so he guessed there wasn’t that much suspicion left after the conversation. Still, he originally planned to remain silent and just observe for the most of his first few cycles and he was already failing at that - the crew was tied so tightly together that he wasn’t able to remain invisible. Alright, he will just have to try harder.

Erica suddenly got up again and waved at them, her eyes lingering on Boyd.

“Well, I gotta go now, so back to work, slaves! Don’t leave too much stuff for us, alright?”

And with that she was gone.

“At least she brought food this time,” Boyd muttered and dug in into his Tangerian fry-out.

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The food was really good. It was surprisingly rich - enough to fill his stomach and make him feel full too. He never really could achieve that back with Peter.

Boyd was obviously really hungry too, because he opted for one more package, just like Derek, which… lucky. Derek would have been embarrassed to eat more than him otherwise.
With the food safely stored in the fridge, the table cleared out of the way, their cups filled with clear water and all their other side-business done, they resumed their work.

Derek felt he was still a bit lost when it came to solving each red line. He had to acknowledge the fact that he might be a bit lost for a while still and just go with it. Some processes were really over his head and once they checked that it wasn’t urgent enough, Boyd opted to leave them to Isaac, for which Derek felt a bit bad.

He wanted to earn his place here. They were giving him free food and a personal cabin and there was no way he would just use them without doing anything. (He was ignoring the fact he was actually using them just by simply being here, since that was something he wasn’t able to pay back at that moment.)

“Would it be a problem, if I stayed for the night cycle too to shadow Isaac? Or?” He wondered uncertain. Isaac did not seem the kind who would appreciate being crowded and Derek understood that way too well.

“Just to learn as much as possible soon,” he added quickly, glancing over at Boyd. He waited the needed while until Boyd finished his current task.

“Your choice,” Boyd answered finally, starting up with another red line that was blinking on his screen.

Derek just nodded and turned back to his own screen. They worked in silence for the rest of the cycle. Well, silence that was disturbed only by Derek’s work-related questions.

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“I thought I said work hard, not leave soooo much behind,” Erica whined as the night cycle took over the vessel. They came slightly earlier to check over the progress and have a small briefing as to which tasks were left behind intentionally and yeah, she was right, it was still a lot of work.

“I-” he started to say, feeling really bad about the small amount of work he was able to do.

“Tsss, just kidding, come on,” she said with a smile and then pushed at his shoulder playfully. Derek moved out of the way and shrugged.

“I bet you did well,” she said glancing over at Isaac’s screen who was already typing away at some programing error Derek wasn’t able to solve earlier that cycle.

She walked over to Boyd leaving Derek to stand awkwardly where he was and glanced down.

“I went for the ones that needed personale first, as always,” he summed up for her. “You can leave these twelve behind for the next cycle, I am waiting for an action approval from the AI main system.” He moved his fingers vertically through the mentioned lines and marked them orange, typing in a timestamp as to when they can turn back red. They moved automatically at the bottom of the list, which wasn’t even visible. The tasks just kept on accumulating, as always.

“Roger that, that’s quite a chunk of work, Boyd, great job.” She nodded, stretching her fingers. Isaac just muttered something that Derek shouldn’t have heard, but he of course did. It was a “good for you” in a rather dejected tone.
“Derek found a virus in the main communication channel,” Boyd said over Isaac’s tapping. “We won’t be getting those stray messages anymore. He rebooted the filtering system.”

Isaac looked up for the first time since he entered the root station. “Firewall loophole?” He caught up quickly and then turned around to look at Derek. “Where?”

“It’s the AI seal,” he said and shrugged as if it was nothing special. “I know about it from my previous shadowing though, so… nothing I would have found.” Or used, his brain added silently.

“Hmmm,” Isaac hummed to himself and nodded, turning back to his screen. He brought up the scan’s log and went over the numbers. Erica leaned over as well.

“Quite a few of them were infected,” she said, pointing out the discrepancies. “Here and here, update batches from the AI mostly. Here too, supply documentation? That’s a bit weird.” It’s really not that weird, Derek thought, but decided to hold his tongue.

“It is,” Isaac confirmed. “Those are all certified suppliers.” Derek kept silent at that one too. He really didn’t want to start that sort of conversation. He kept silent even when Erica looked over at him and raised her eyebrows as if she expected him to answer and explain.

“Is this common? Maybe we should inform the AI command center?” She looked over at Boyd. He was technically their boss, after all.

“It’s hardly anything major,” Boyd said shaking his head. “I will write a report and send it over but I doubt somebody will even look at it. Especially if it comes from the Beacon, you know how they get.”

“Mmm, true,” Erica mused, scrunching her eyebrows up and down. Her fingers twitched as if she wanted to scratch there, but obviously couldn’t so she just groaned instead.

“I did put a manual tracking scan into the firewall though, so it will scan the incoming seals now and move the unwanted virus tags into the vault,” Derek added helpfully, which made all of them nod.

“Right. Well that’s that. I am off to bed.” And with one last look at his screen, Boyd left the station.

“Off to sleep too?” Erica asked, filling in for Boyd at his workstation. She opened a bottle full of a brown sparkly liquid and put in a straw filtering device that could fit into the shielded opening on her mask. Just to be sure it was all safe, she sprayed it with some soft of disinfectant too.

“Actually, if it’s alright... to stay and shadow both of you…,” he started hesitantly. He was sure, he saw Isaac squirm uncomfortably at that, but Erica just waved for him to sit with her for now and started to go through the lines Boyd has left for her.

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“Alright, so this one,” Erica said as she tapped on the next red line. “Boyd already tried to fix it from here two cycles ago, see. He thought it was a software bug only. It’s this log here.” She pointed at the advanced algorithm that Derek has never seen before and hummed.
“That didn’t work, so he issued a mechanical check, but the summoned droid did not find any technical issue,” she continued, pointing at the lower part. “It would seem the functions deteriorated even further though. See these levels here. The scan Boyd made in the last cycle shows a delayed responsivity and bunch of other minor things.”

Derek hummed to show he was listening and concentrated on trying to read the algorithm that Boyd put in upon first discovering the bug. It was quite impressive. No wonder he was their superior.

“So the next step here would be?” Erica turned to him. It was a curious thing, but she never actually told him the solution right away. She waited to see if he would figure it out. She was testing him. He expected as much though so the answer came easily.

“Manual check,” he guessed. There wasn’t really much else to do in these sort of cases anyways. He wasn’t used to having droids at hand to fix all the minor stuff anyways, so it would have been his first choice.

“Yes.” Erica smiled, turning back to the screen. “We only got one engineer slash mechanic here, so that’s why Boyd left the task unsolved for our cycle. He works mostly during the night cycle, yanno.”

Derek wondered what kind of a species that could be, but there were so many that preferred night that he wouldn’t be able to guess anyways. And asking would be too rude.

“Speaking of whiiich,” she said and chuckled manically, sliding her fingers over the screen. The red line duplicated onto a small holo screen on the side of the big one. She reached over to take it off and give it to Derek. “You will need to go there personally.”

“Are there still some messaging bugs or…?” Derek frowned not understanding. “Can’t we just…?”

“Oh, no no.” Erica answered shaking her head theatrically. “If we want it done, you have to go there personally. Trust me. That’s just how this guy works.”
He only needed to glance at the holo layout once or twice to make sure he was going the right way. The darkened lights, though a bit unnecessary, were a welcomed guideline. Just by following them he would end up in the most frequented places of the vessel and one of those was definitely the Technical station.

He kept his eyes on the holo layout anyways, although he wasn’t really tracking his progress after the first two intersections - it was just to avoid any possible conversation with other members of the crew.

A few of them did indeed pass him, yawning sleepily or hurrying to some station or other, but
seeing that he was preoccupied by his holo, they've left him to his own devices.

“Derek!” came a shout from behind him. Well, his avoidance strategy was obviously not as good as he thought it was.

He turned around to the sound of a shrill voice.

“A bit peculiar finding you here,” Lydia noted, running her fingers through her hair. “I am sure I assigned you to the day cycle.”

He could see her eyes travel down to the layout displayed over his bracelet. Maybe it was just common curiosity, but Derek was pretty sure she was checking out where he was headed at this time.

“I thought it would be beneficial for my performance to extend my cycles before I could fulfill all my tasks at a reasonable level of independence,” he said. It sounded too stiff and too much like a trained excuse even to his own ears. Judging by the look Lydia was giving him, she definitely thought so too.

“Erica sent me,” he added awkwardly, waving the small holo screen with the red line still blinking at it’s top.

At that Lydia nodded. “Don’t extend your work too much, we need you at your best in your own cycle. There could be a red alert at any time.”

“Understood.”

With a click-clack of her shoes, she strided away from him, heading for the Medical station. Probably. It could have been any other station too for all he knew.

Derek watched her go, listening in to the gradually disappearing sound of her heels and then turned back to resume his walk to the Technical. He made sure to not stray with his eyes too much, to not look around too curiously.

The bracelet was definitely tracking his movement as it did with each crew member but that probably wasn’t enough. That could be misused way too easily. They definitely had his eyes on him in other ways too. Be it just because he was a newbie or because he was an outsider, they definitely did follow him more closely that anybody else on the ship.

The dot on his holo blinked once, announcing the arrival at the Technical station. He slapped his bracelet against the pad. The door remained closed through, a red light flashing over the screen. He frowned, putting his bracelet against it more sternly but the response did not change.

“You won’t be getting in that easily,” said a voice from down the hallway. “Only people with proper clearance can get in.”

Again with the “people”. He ignored it and turned to face the approaching man. There wasn’t much to describe him by, since he was a human too and Derek was starting to think there was some sort of silent agreement with the AI that this vessel would be mostly composed by a human crew - not that that was actually a bad thing, but the faces were all so similar. Derek was starting to worry he won’t be able to distinguish between them at all. Albeit there were only 50 crew members for him to remember. Not all of which he had to remember, but still… he guessed he will have to remember each and every one in this sort of tight environment...

Derek looked pointedly at the door and then back at the human male with unruly hair. He did not
wear his uniform, so Derek wasn’t able to place him, but he guessed it must be the main technician. He did look like...

“Don’t look at me, boy, I am not into that technical mumbo jumbo.” He laughed as he stopped right in front of Derek. He extended his hand in some sort of gesture and when Derek did not react, he pulled it back in without a twitch on his face.

“I am the Coach,” he said as if that would explain anything.

“I did not grow up in this sector,” Derek answered apologetically.

“Oh right, I run the Physical,” he said, eying him. “Not that you seem to need it.”

Derek didn’t exactly have an answer for that so he just kept silent. While it was true that he could build up muscles really easily, he didn’t think it was anything special per se. Not at this state anyways.

“Well anyhow, if you are looking for the technician, he is probably out and about somewhere. Wait or track,” the Coach said. He clapped him on the shoulder and jogged down the corridor Derek came from. *Perfect*.

Next time when Erica asks him to go somewhere and leave the comfort of the Root station, he might fake tiredness and go to his cabin. All these encounters are only making him more and more nervous. Not to mention he was still not done with his original task.

Grumbling under his breath, he pulled out the layout again and tapped the human icon in the corner. *Of course it was a human icon, what else.* Scrolling through the list of the crew members he tapped at the main technician and watched the scan run through the whole layout. The red dot appeared at the far end of it - that was just Derek’s luck it would seem.

At first he contemplated if it even made sense to go that far and waste his time. Surely he could come in later once the technician was back, but he didn’t know when would that be and he definitely did not want to return back to the Root without any results. It would be yet another thing he failed to solve.

With the new resolve painting his features, he set the locator on and started to jog down the corridor.

~o~

There was nobody there. He was standing right on top of the red dot but the corridor was empty, void of any human or nonhuman presence. He tapped his holo and slid his fingers over it to make it three dimensional.

Maybe he went down the wrong level? No, the dot remained right there. He looked around again, wondering if the life form could be some sort of invisible species, but his senses did not confirm that. He would have at least heard something if nothing else. He didn’t. The corridor remained eerily quiet.

Maybe there was some secret shaft in the walls that was shielded from the tracking device? He reached over to slide his fingers over the metal surrounding him, but didn’t find anything more
than the bench activator.

Maybe it was a malfunction in the locator. Same as with the message board. Just another fluke.

He frowned, walking down the corridor. There was a door to the Reactor station and he really did not want to go and try to open it just because his log would then appear on it and it would be too suspicious for somebody like him to try and gain access there.

But if the technician was in there, then maybe he could wait here? He looked around again, walked back and pressed the bench-activating button. The piece slid out of the wall and he sat down on it, leaning back.

He didn’t know how long he was waiting but eventually, there was a scuffle on the ceiling, a panel popped down and a young human jumped down onto the floor right in front of him. Derek watched his back stretch, his feet bounce a bit, and his head move from side to side. He looked perfectly human, but there was something odd about him. He listened in a bit more carefully and caught a hum unlike any other he had heard before. Or rather...

“Oh, uh, hi?” the humanoid said as he caught the sight of him in the corner of his eye. “Do I know you?” He smiled, patting his hands over his hips as if he was trying to get some excess dirt off. There wasn’t really any real dirt on this ship though, so the gesture was rather redundant.

“Derek Kasai, the new Root engineer,” Derek said, standing up. The bench got pulled back into the wall automatically.

“I see,” the humanoid said, nodding to himself. He brought up his own bracelet and tapped to activate it. He then made an attempt of scrolling through a sea of red lines, but it was obviously too much for him so he just turned it off again and shrugged.

“Missed the memo, I guess.” He pointed to the small holo screen Derek was still holding. “That for me?”

“Yes.”

He offered the screen to the technician, who studied it for a second, moving his fingers along the lines and numbers.

“Yeah, I will have to check that out later,” he said giving the screen back to Derek.

“Not now?” Of course Derek wasn’t really willing to leave before the task was finished. He needed to feel like he had not failed at everything he has been assigned to this cycle.

“Mmmm,” he hummed and then brought up his own holo again, looking pointedly at all the flashing lines. “I am kinda busy, how about in a few cycles?”

Derek frowned, glancing down at his own holo screen. “This waited for a few already,” he said, his tone uncertain. “The readings are getting worse with each passing cycle.”

The humanoid snorted, pointing onto his own screen. “Yes and this first one here is a possible reactor malfunction. And don’t get me started on this one - air filters. This one? Jammed water reservoir switch. This one here? Some unidentified error in the thrusters. I know I am a fast one, but seriously.”

Derek’s brows moved closer together in response to the blunt words, his lips thinning.
“You Root guys and your tiny tasks,” the technician nagged, shaking his head. “You do realize I must prioritize the top tasks coming from the main computer.”

Derek could feel his frown deepening on its own accord. *Just don’t*, he told himself, keeping the growl from his throat. *Don’t.*

“Come back when I have less work to do or better yet, tell the Sheriff to get *me* a helper instead. I don’t know why he insists on taking in more Root guys when I am struggling to keep this freaking ship going on my own. But of course nobody would…”

“I can just send it to your feed and you can look at it whenever you want?” Derek tried.

“Oh no no, man, don’t pin your own tasks on me, alright? That’s not how I roll…if you try to pin it, I will send it back with a virus that will turn your eyeballs around.”

Derek pursed his lips. This life form was proving very hard to negotiate with. He should just leave and forget about it, but the holo screen was itching between his fingers. He didn’t want to return empty-handed.

“When can I come back with this, then?” Derek asked, willing his frustration to fade in the background. He wasn’t sure where he stepped over the line with this particular life form, but he needed to set it right before it would explode into his face.

There were plenty of tasks waiting to have technician over each cycle. He couldn’t afford failing to go through all of them just because some humanoid didn’t take liking in him. He couldn’t afford getting thrown off the Beacon, not after all the hassle he and Peter had to go through to get him there.

He forgot to listen in for the reply, but it was probably somewhere along the lines of “How about never?”, since the next thing he caught up to was: “Honestly, I am not even supposed to work a full cycle with the research grant and what not, but of course… leave all the reds to the silly human who is “playing around all day”.” The words sounded bitter.

“You are not though, are you?” Derek said before he could stop himself. “Human.”

“What...?” Oh, suddenly there was anger on the humanoid’s face, his stance becoming more threatening. “Who told you what? I want names. Now.”

“I don’t-”

“Lies. Those fucking gossipers. How long have you been here? And you think you already know everything about me just because somebody else tells you?” he spat, pointing at himself. “Yes, I ain’t fully human, I am a Hybrid. Boo-hoo. And yes, I am the Sheriff’s son, but you better think twice before you think that I take any of my work for granted and play around all day. So if you think you can just prance in here and impose your tasks-”

“It’s just the humming,” Derek interrupted, getting a bit lost in the tyrade of words. The Sheriff’s son? Now that it was mentioned, they did have a similar shade of amber-colored eyes. He wouldn’t have noticed otherwise.

“What?”

“The humming,” Derek repeated unsure how else to explain it. He managed to include a wave of his hand encompassing the technician’s body. “It’s like... a lullaby. I didn’t hear humans do that before… or is that a normal thing?” It wasn’t. Otherwise he would make sure to generate it as well.
“My bad then.”

They stared at each other for a while.

“No, it’s-,” the technician said, running his palm over the front of his chest. His shoulders slumped back down. “It is a Hybrid thing, yeah.”

Derek sighed. “My apologies for mentioning it.” It had been rather rude. He wouldn’t have liked if somebody went ahead and dissected his physical responses in such a way.

“I didn’t think people could hear it.”

He was indeed “people” for all the other crew members and he would like to keep it that way, so he just said: “I barely can.” He could hear it very clearly though.

“I see….”

Silence.

Derek had to use that for his advantage.

“Look uh-”

“Stiles.”

“Look, Stiles, just to be clear. I didn’t mean to move my tasks onto you or any of that. I don’t think that’s how this works anyways.” He frowned. “Rooting is just about creating connections. I only make sure the problem,” he waved the holo screen, “gets to the best possible problem-solver,” he waved at Stiles.

Silence.

Derek signed. “So, we have this problem in the navigation system. It’s giving us wrong readings. We couldn’t fix it from the inside and the dispatched droid found nothing. When would you have time to look at it?”

Stiles hummed under his breath, the melody of it in synch with his internal humming. With a quick glance at his bracelet, he scrolled down the feed.

“I guess I can make a window for it here.” He pulled the two red lines planned in for the next night cycle and beckoned Derek closer. They put the small holo screen next to Stiles’ feed and then moved the red line there. With one last tap of the finger, Stiles tagged it blue, adding an alarmed reminder and then closed the feed.

“Look dude, sorry, I was just a bit on the edge before,” he explained sheepishly.

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

“No, not really,” Derek confessed on the second thought. It’s not like he knew what exactly triggered Stiles to behave like an animal driven into a corner, but he didn’t exactly care. He didn’t want to care.

“Right,” Stiles said. “Well then, I will send my report to the Root when it’s all done. I guess I wasted enough of my scheduled time standing around. Reds are waiting.” And with that he strode
down the corridor, opened the Reactor station and disappeared behind the reinforced door.

~o~

“So, how was it?” Erica pried right when the door slid open in front of him. It was as if she could hear him approaching, which she probably didn’t. She was most likely just watching his dot on the location scanner. That did seem more probable than her hearing anything much through that sterile suit of hers.

“He agreed to have a look at it next night cycle,” Derek said dejectedly. It was a small victory for him to at least have moved the task where it belonged if nothing else.

“Whoaa, honestly? He never really plans in the reds so fast if they are from us! Well not unless I bribe him with some curly fries or something similarly inedible,” she said, grinning.

“Surprised he even took it,” Isaac muttered under his breath, earning a light slap at the back of his head from Erica.

“You are just no good with people, Isaac,” she chastised, looking back at Derek. “Good job, rookie. I didn’t think you would pass this one.”

“Neither did I,” he admitted, returning the small holo screen back to her.

“I will send you next time too!”

“Please don’t.”

She just laughed at that, returning to her workstation. It would seem he had actually done something good at last. (The message virus fix-up did not count because that was not something he was proud of knowing.)

Still, the encounter with Stiles made him feel really drained. Or maybe he was just tired after taking on almost two work cycles. Or maybe it the whole new environment- the cycles were were a lot longer than what he was used to after all. Either way, it was time for him to retreat.

And so he bid them both farewell and walked slowly back to his cabin, where he fell into a restless sleep huddled on the floor with the soft blanket woven tightly around his body.

~o~

The alarm didn’t go off yet and he was already up doing his ritual exercises. It was a good thing he had a cabin of his own. He didn’t have to move out of the reach of any prying eyes to do what he needed to do quickly and methodically.

Since he still had some time left before the day cycle would begin, he decided to walk to the Nourishment station to grab some breakfast.

Ignoring the bracelet that could have offered him help navigating, he set off to the left and walked
down a few quite long corridors. There were already some “people” littered around, but none of them gave him a second glance, busy with their own routines and sleepiness.

He entered the rather small station with 5 large tables at its center and a few slots to the right. There was nobody at the nearest slot, so he walked over to it, put his bracelet against the pad and scrolled down the available menu. It was quite an impressive array and Derek wondered how come the AI had so much food available but none of it ever got to the supported colonies. Not that he was bitter about it or anything, but he definitely was.

He scowled at the package that fell down the slot. It contained dry meat of sorts - he didn’t exactly know how the animal it came from looked like, but that wasn’t important. As long as he got the needed protein from it.

It was rather loud around. Not really packed full, but it was still quite a lot for Derek’s taste. That was, until he turned around with his package and a bottle of clear water and the station suddenly went a lot more silent.

At first he thought it was something he did. But nobody was looking at him. They were all staring into their bowls whispering.

Then he thought the Sheriff maybe came to grab some food so the crew naturally got a bit subdued, but that wasn’t it either. It was a certain someone who was always accompanied by a silent soothing hum.

“Are you done with that slot?” Stiles asked from where he stood next to him. He was pointedly turned away from the assembly of tables.

Derek just nodded and stepped away, standing there awkwardly for a bit. He didn’t really know where to sit. Didn’t really think he actually wanted to sit in that “big” group of whispering people. Plus, he didn’t see anybody he already knew so it was far from compelling.

When he decided to eat his food at the Root station and started to move in the direction of the opened door, Stiles obviously finished his food selection and turned to go the same exact path. Their arms brushed and they both startled, stopped and stared at each other for a while before Stiles frowned and ran out of the station, leaving Derek quite confused.

“Dude, you should keep away from that Hybrid,” said a human who was sitting at the nearest table.

“Why?” Derek asked. He understood why he was startled, but why would Stiles have such a negative response to him too, he had no idea.

“You might catch it,” he whispered in a volume that was far from a whisper. The female next to him nodded… he could actually see a few other members of the crew nodding along as they watched them talk.

“Catch what?”

But he didn’t get an answer anymore, because the Sheriff walked in with Lydia on his heels and the crew returned back to their food and their day-to-day conversations.

Derek did not linger to talk to anybody. Instead he walked out of the station with his food and drink still untouched, lost in his thoughts. It would seem the crew wasn’t woven as tightly together as the Sheriff might have thought. Good. That was good for him.
Work went a bit better this time, but only because Isaac managed to clear so much from the list of reds at his workstation that Derek was allowed to move to the lesser ones on the other two remaining stations.

He was sitting at the other side, updating the drivers and the firewall with the new patches that came over from IA a few cycles ago. It was a rather easy task, though he did get lost in the vast system at first. Thankfully Erica was still there at that point, so she showed him round.

Isaac’s station beeped with an updated task status and he looked around to glance at the screen.

“I can’t now,” Boyd said belatedly, typing away to decipher some sort of important IA documentation that came in last cycle. He was the only one with the access to such files and since he wasn’t available sooner the task was issued the highest priority in their cycle. The Sheriff needed those files as soon as possible apparently.

Derek jumped from his seat and slid his finger over the red flashing line. It was Stiles’ task. He had apparently already finished the red and sent it back to them with a little side note at the end of his log: “Found some time sooner.”

“It says we need to order a new navigation chord,” he read uncertainty, his finger hovering over the AI ordering template. Should he fill it in or?

Boyd was tapping away for a while and then stopped to look over at Stiles’ report. One had to admire how seamless and calm he looked when working. Then again he used to work this station all alone so he must have been used to a lot of multitasking.

“Check the flight schedule here.” He pointed at the corner of the screen. “If there is a planned stop at a suitable place within twenty cycles, you can order it there and we can just send somebody to pick it up. The standard AI order would maybe take a week or two if not more.” (How many cycles was a week? 25?)

“Alright.” Derek nodded, scrolling through the schedule of the future stops. There were two of them, the first didn’t have any available database for spare parts, but the second listed an IA supplier that should be able to provide what they needed.

He sent out the message via the official channel and completed all the formularies - it was quite easy when the templates were already pre-filled. He would have to thank Isaac for getting all that ready for them.

And with that out of the way, he was done. He remained sitting there for a while longer though, the red line opened on the screen, the report right in front of him. He glanced back, seeing that the update was still running and then looked back at the note Stiles added to the report. Don’t get him wrong, he still thought Stiles was a little shithead for whatever the attitude yesterday was, but… maybe he was less of a shithead than he gave him credit for.

He added a short note to his own log and sent a sharing link back to Stiles, so that he wouldn’t be out of the loop. The note read: “Thanks.”
The lunch came and went without Erica stopping by this time, but Derek did not find that disconcerting in the least. He ate two packages again, packing up on meat, eggs and kartmanchs and returned to work on the third station.

If Boyd was tapping at his holo screen a bit more forcefully, he barely noticed.

It was only at the end of their cycle when the door slid open revealing only Isaac, that he realized that something must have been amiss.

“Erica?” Boyd asked immediately.

“Didn’t return from the treatment yet,” Isaac answered as he entered the Root station. “It’s one of those cycles again.”

“Right.” Boyd nodded and turned back to his screen. “I will stay behind to continue on this one then.”

Isaac pursed his lips, something unspoken passing his face, but the only thing that got through was a sigh. He walked to the slot to refill his cup and sat down at his usual place to check over the red lines.

Seeing that there was nothing immediately urgent, he turned to the third station, his eyes landing on Derek who was still sitting there.

“Anything there?” Isaac asked. Those were probably the first words he had actually spoken directly to Derek or weren’t they?

“Just three left and I can be done for the cycle. Nothing else came in yet.”

Isaac hummed under his breath and walked over to the fourth station. Before he could sit down though, Derek reached over and put his hand on the chair.

“Maybe you could jump in for Boyd and I can take care of this one? I think he needs the rest more than me. I sleep very little anyways. Space lag.”

Isaac’s eyebrows climbed higher, but he didn’t say anything in response. He only looked over at the first station.

“I am fine,” Boyd said after the highest red line was taken care of. At that point Derek thought to not push it anymore and returned back to his own screen to finish the remaining three reds. Maybe one of these days, he will even get to the orange ones.

“You should go,” Isaac said out of nowhere and Derek looked up, thinking it was meant for him, but the attention was not on him this time, it was on Boyd.

“It would help Erica if you visit. You know how she gets in that chamber.” A visible shudder passed through Isaac’s body.

“I don’t want to return to an overflowing-”

“I can take care of it. I did before. Will just leave the impossible ones to you.”
The tapping finally stopped and Boyd turned around on his chair to look at both of them. He seemed to be still torn between the two options, so Derek made sure to nod reassuringly when his eyes were on him. Isaac apparently had the same idea, because he nodded quite vigorously too.


“Gotcha,” Isaac confirmed.

After Boyd left they shared a very tentative smile together and returned to their silent work. This time, Derek did not need to break the silence by questions, since the fourth workstation had such minor tasks that he could solve them without any help. Good. He didn’t think we would be able to handle anything too hard at that moment anyways.

~o~

It was the end of the night cycle and Derek’s eyes were so dry, he would feel his lids scratching off his eyes - it was excruciating. He wondered for a bit if he would maybe go blind if he kept up the work. Probably not. But at least he managed to clear off a huge portion of the reds on the fourth screen, so there was that.

A customary glance at the third screen told him that the main computer was feeding them more and more reds still. It was a never-ending circle. The second screen was not doing any better either, but at least Isaac seemed to have cleared enough from Boyd’s station so he wouldn’t get a heart attack once he returned.

Isaac signed and leaned against the back of his chair, rubbing at his eyes. He got up then, filling up his cup and stopped near the second screen, staring at it as it personally offended him.

“Should I?” Derek spoke up, but he didn’t get an answer because Isaac just hummed contemplating the screen. Two more reds appeared on it, the list growing even longer. A grimace passed over Isaac’s face. “I guess…”

“You should both go get some rest,” Boyd said from the door and they both blinked up at him, blinded by the light of the day cycle. Has it really been that long?

Isaac nodded soundlessly, put his cup down and was out of the station before anybody could say anything.

“You can go too Derek,” Boyd said, walking around to check the state of the screens. “Four and third are in perfect state, I won’t be touching those, so…”

“There are still some reds left though,” Derek admitted, pointing at the few lines at the top that were still blinking in crimson.

“There are always some reds,” Boyd said, tapping at Isaac’s screen to check on the status. “It’s a gargantuan task this station. You must learn to let go and rest.”

“Is that an order?”

“I’m afraid so. See you in two cycles.”
“But what about…?”

“Erica should be fine for her next cycle. They already released her.” There was something kind in his eyes as he said that, but Derek pretended to be blind to it.

Instead he just nodded and left.

As reluctant as he was to abandon his post for the cycle, he actually welcomed it. It was not that he wasn’t used to working all the time. It was more of a stationery problem - sitting and staring at a screen over two cycles would leave a toll on anybody.

He trudged back to his cabin and lied down on the ever-so-soft bed. Being so tired had one advantage - he had no trouble falling asleep on it this time.

~o~

What?

Derek’s eyes flew open as he regained consciousness. He glanced around the darkness and took a deep breath in. There was no smoke. He took another deep breath in just to be sure. He glanced around. There was no fire.

Then why?

It slowly dawned on him it had been just a nightmare. It was just a nasty memory infesting his mind once he grew weak from sleep.

He exhaled a few times and sat up. There was no use in trying to go back to sleep anymore, he wouldn’t be able to lie still anyways. He needed to move.

Luckily (or not) he only managed to sleep through the whole day cycle and a small portion of the night cycle, so he still had enough time for whatever he would wish. And what he needed the most now was to get out of the cabin and move. Move away from the thoughts, away from his past, away from the ghost smoke that was trying to gauge him.

And so she ran. He ran up and down the corridors without a genuine destination in mind. He wished there was a forest around him that he could get lost in, the smell that would cover his own odor of sweat and fear, but such luxuries were not for him to have. They never would be.

His lungs burned as he pushed a bit harder. There wasn’t enough air, but still he ran. He could feel his muscles contracting, could feel them working. He wanted to let go. He wanted to be able to dive deep into his nature and succumb into it, but it was not meant to be. It was too dangerous.

And so he ran. And ran. And ran. A few times around the vessel. A few times in some small circles that brought him back onto the main corridor. He ran until he hit a dead end.

Funnily enough, it was exactly in front of the Reactor station. Shit.

He turned around and walked up the corridor to get back to the main one, hoping that nobody would catch him smell about this particular section again, but he knew his hopes were futile. Especially once he caught the sound of approaching footsteps.
“Stiles,” he said before the technician could even round the corner.

“Oh.” Stiled stopped in his tracks, his hand extended in front of him as he went through his list of reds. His eyes squinted in suspicion. “Another… oh, on a run?”

“Yes,” Derek admitted, running the back of his hand over his sweaty forehead, his breath coming out in wheezes.

“Got a ghost chasing you?”

Derek froze. Did he know? Was he that obvious?

“Uhh, is just,” Stiles stuttered waving his hand. “That’s some major workout, dude. Why would you do that to yourself?”

Derek slowly exhaled again, forcing his hand down. “I like to run.”

Stiles squinted. “Right.”

“I do.” Derek shrugged and then closed his mouth before he could say anything else - he would have liked to share how much he missed the forest back home all around him, but it was not allowed to say any of that. That forest no longer existed anyways. He was officially never there.

The corridor went weirdly silent. Derek wanted to move again. And it must have been really obvious, because Stiles took a step closer to him and blurted out: “Before you go… I uh, I am sorry about earlier.”

“So you’ve said already,” Derek noted.

“No, I mean, not earlier earlier, but earlier.” The only thing one could offer to that confusing sentence was a frown. “At the… food…” Stiles waved his hands around in some weird pattern, pointing out a few directions as if he wasn’t sure which one was correct. Not anybody could be blessed with a good orientation sense, that much was true. “I probably caused you some trouble, but I promise it was not intentional. Not… this time, anyways.”

Derek just stared trying to wrap his head around the conversation. Maybe it was his brain being still muddy from the lack of oxygen or something, but...

“I mean the incident,” Stiles hissed, “with the…” He waved his arm around.

Derek’s lips thinned. He really didn’t want to go that way. He didn’t want to reveal why he was so adverse to touching or any kind of invasion of his personal space. He didn’t want anybody to know anything about him.

“You can’t catch anything from me, I promise,” Stiles added, nodding seriously. There was a sort of nervousness around that declaration, the skittish eyes, the twitchy fingers.

“I see.”

“You don’t look so convinced.”

“I have a good immune system, so whatever it is...” Derek shrugged. His system would probably reject any kind of sickness different species could carry around. He was yet to discover some that might harm him in a more long-term way.

Stiles snorted at that. And then he giggled. And then he started to laugh. “I have a feeling you got
no idea what I’m talking about.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “Because I don’t,”

Stiles snorted even more violently. “Alright, alright, jeezus.” He stopped to catch a breath. “You are so clueless it’s almost cute.”

Derek could feel his eyebrows sinking low on his forehead. “I will go before you explode.”

“Haha, don’t go, let me have a better look at that confused baby face,” Stiles called to his retreating back, clutching at his sides. “Come baaack.”

“Go back to work Stiles,” Derek yelled back and sped up before there could be any reply.
Chapter 3

The dry-cleaning pod was the worst experience one could actually have in a day-to-day life on a space vessel, but it was better than remaining all sweaty after a run, so Derek decided to suffer.
through it - look at him, being grumpy about normal daily things. What an achievement (sarcasm included).

The ritual almost felt like a blessing after such a horrendous experience. His muscles ached, but in a pleasant way, stretching, contracting. His stomach growled and... well that wasn’t exactly pleasant, but it was something that could be easily solved.

And so he headed for the Nourish. This time he didn’t even glance at the tables. He just walked to the nearest free slot, grabbed whatever he felt like chewing on on the way to the Root and walked out.

The human male that talked to him the previous cycle was watching him, his mouth opening and closing as if he wanted to say something, maybe to add something to the yesterday’s unfinished conversation, but Derek did not dawdle around this time. He hurried to work.

“Derek, hi!” Erica called out as they passed each other in the corridor. “Running a bit late I see.”

“Well...” He squinted up at the night-mode lights around them. “Not really?”

“Or maybe I am just running from work a bit earlier.” She giggled, shaking her head in a mocking disapproval.

Derek didn’t know how to answer that so he didn’t, standing there rather awkwardly. He could sense a pattern there. Awkward silence was starting to become his signature move when in a populated area.

“Don’t worry, I am doing fine,” she said, her hand flying up to pat him on the shoulder. He was wondering if it still bothered him since her hands were covered in such airtight gloves... but yes, it did. He chose not to jerk back this time though.

“I wasn’t going to ask,” he admitted unsure. Asking about the status of her body would be rather rude after all.

“Ahh, don’t say that.” Erica smiled, jumping away from him to head down the corridor. “I know you caaaaare.”

Derek watched her disappear behind the corner. The energy behind her step was fake to his eyes though and the slump of her shoulders as she left him obvious. *Was her treatment going well?* Derek caught himself wondering, but banished such thoughts almost immediately. They didn’t belong into his head.

~o~

Derek was already stationed behind Isaac’s screen when Boyd strode in.

“It will be a busy cycle,” he said instead of a greeting. “We have reached Europa.” Derek wasn’t sure what planet that was or what the purpose of them hovering over it was, but he didn’t really care as long as it was out of the way of the main intergalactic path.

“It’s a level 3 moon orbiting Jupiter,” Boyd supplied helpfully. *Ah, that meant ressources.*

“What?” he guessed, reading a log in an urgent report. It would seem they needed to order some more parts for Stiles. He set on filling in the details.
“That too,” Boys confirmed sitting down at his workstation. “We wouldn’t have needed it that bad, but it would seem there was some malfunction in the filtering system that couldn’t be repaired, so the docking at Europe’s orbit might be extended over the customary time.”

“I am filling in the orders for the parts Stiles requested right now,” Derek informed him, copy-pasting the serial numbers of parts he never heard of. Then again he never resided aboard a self-sustainable vessel, so...

“Good, once you are done with that, head over to the docking area,” Boyd instructed, already tapping away at his screen. “Workstations two, three and four can be left running by themselves. We will catch up to those once we are out of orbit.”

“Understood.”

~o~

The Docking station was all the way at the bottom of the vessel. Derek already knew that because that is where he came in through as well. It was rather obvious though, since most vessels had it glued to the bottom of the ship - since that was the most practical way.

He walked past a few Dock workers hurring to and fro and headed for one of the side entrances. The reinforced door slid open to the corridor leading him past the control center. There was a pair of older men watching the droids on the screen fly around in preparation for the supplier to reach them.

It probably wasn’t save for Derek to linger around this place for too long - who knew what kind of life forms went through here. Some of them might recognize him or his species somehow, but he couldn’t have just said no. It would be far too suspicious.

“Derek,” Lydia greeted him as he entered the common area. It was the place where most of the pilots chilled before their ships were prepared or their goods were unloaded. Especially when it took longer than the required amount of time.

“I don’t think you have met doctor Alan Deaton before, have you?” she asked, pointing out the dark skinned man standing right next to her. The lack of hair on his head wasn’t as disturbing and the clickety-clacking inside of him. An android then. Great. Just great.

“Greetings,” Deaton said, bowing his head with a small jerk-like motion. One of the older ones then.

“May the stars never lead you astray,” Derek greeted back, slightly unnerved by the lack of movement on the surface of the android’s body and the huge contrast of what was going on inside of him. One never knew what weapon was getting ready under that metal shell.

“Alan here is our expert on all things living,” Lydia explained.

“All things living is a rather incorrect description,” doctor Deaton noted, his face emotionless. “I am merely an scholar studying living organisms with below Ragnus’ level of intelligence, which feed on organic matter, typically having specialized sense organ and nervous system and able to respond rapidly to stimuli.” It sounded like something one could find in a very scientific report.
“So animals,” Derek noted.

“Yes, though that is rather an outdated term in the current scientific circles and a quite outrageous one at that if I might add,” said Deaton in a voice that... well, sounded quite lifeless.

“You can educate Derek on the matter later,” Lydia interrupted helpfully. “It would seem our special cargo has finally arrived.”

The screen on the wall above them showed a small layout of the Docking area, divided by a few dotted lines to mark the designated places for different sizes and shapes of ships. Two of them were already marked red. Those would be the ones taken by the Beacon’s own shuttles. (The third one was probably either patrolling the space around them or went down to the surface - Derek didn’t really know. He did remember there were three of them from some sort of log he was going over previously though.). The five others were empty.

There was a red shape moving through the layout. A few scans went through the screen, making the shape blink a few times and then turn green as it stopped at it’s designated space. *Nothing dangerous aboard,* Derek noted for himself. The light on the pad turned green and Lydia did not hesitate to press her bracelet against it.

The door opened and she hurried hastily to the ship with Deaton on her heels, who moved with carefully measured steps. It was a rather amusing sight.

“Hullo. Here for the malfunctioning droid?” Derek could hear from behind him. Stiles was standing just a bit further up the corridor, his head stuck in the control room of the Docking station. Weird, it was the day cycle. Wasn’t that a bit too soon for him to work?

There was a mix of annoyed voices - the men there were grumbling one over the other. Derek could not distinguish the words but it sounded rather unpleasant.

“Understood,” Stiles answered, his ears red and his lips thin. He closed the door and hurried up the corridor away from Derek.

“Derek, can you come over and check over the delivery?” Lydia was signing the delivery documents, checking over the proper seals, while maintaining a very friendly conversation with the human pilot. He hurried over, bringing up the order on his holo screen and then walked around to the back with one of the suppliers. Also human, if somebody would wanna know.

The door opened revealing large pods full of liquid. He couldn’t see much because the pods were mostly covered by a protective foam, but his actual tasks did not require that much of an inside look anyways, so he went ahead and counted if their number of pods was right, if their status was good and then beckoned to the control center to dispatch the droids for unloading and then checked each pot with a flashlight to see if it really contained whatever was on the order. Deaton stood right next to him to confirm.

Derek didn’t know the aquatic species inside. They didn’t resemble anything he ever saw before, but it didn’t seem like they were something that one would eat - too little flesh. Neither were they anything spectacular visually, so maybe they had a different purpose?

He didn’t ask, he just kept counting and checking each pod for a possible leakage and once he was done he nodded in Lydia’s direction. She smiled, shook the pilot’s hand and with a single click transferred the payment.

After that the droids grabbed the pods and followed Deaton out of the Docking area.
“Good job,” Lydia said as the door closed behind them and the pad turned red. The shuttle was leaving.

Derek just nodded acknowledging her words. It wasn’t like he deserved the praise. He didn’t really do much.

“The next shuttle will be here in an hour,” she said, straightening her skirt. “I will see you here then?” Though the sentence was a question she did not wait for him to answer, but rather hurried away, the holo screen already in front of her full of her own tasks.

Derek had probably just enough time to hurry and get some food, which he was in dire need off if the rumbling in his stomach was any indicator. At least he hoped he had. The human time was still a bit confusing to him.

He set on walking up the corridor, ignoring the control center. He was almost out of the station, but before he could reach the exit he heard a voice coming out from one of the opened cabins.

“Now, d’Artagnan why would you do this to me?” Stiles whined talking to… Derek didn’t really know who, he didn’t hear anybody else in there. “I could have been sleeping right now.”

Now, Derek’s original plan was indeed to head to the Nourish real quick, but curiosity winned him over and he approached the door slowly to just peek inside. He wasn’t gonna go inside or start a conversation. He will just look what was going on. Maybe it had something to do with the shipment or the shuttle. He needed to know if it had. Of course.

Stiles groaned. “Come on, buddy, work with me.” There was a dull slap of a hand hitting metal and Derek frowned, looking into the cabin.

It was a droid yard, half-empty, half-full with droids of all sizes hanging in rows and rows all the way down from the ceiling. There could be at least a hundred of them inside at that moment if not more.

Stiles was sitting on the floor on the right between the rows of racks, his hand inside a droid marked as a team leader, whose screen was blinking in a harsh red.

“Perfect, just perfect,” Stiles grumbled, pulling his hand from the droid, looking offput. “Stupid piece of shit.”

“Is there something wrong with the team leader?” Derek asked curiously. His voice caused Stiles to almost jump out of his shoes.

“Duuuude,” he wheezed, pressing his hand against his heart. “Who does that?”

“I imagine a lot of people ask you questions,” Derek answered, playing innocent. He shrugged, walking into the room. He was quite proud of himself for using “people” instead of “life forms”, it sounded very human.

“Seriously…” Stiles rolled his eyes, pouting down at the broken droid. “But to answer your question, yes, d’Artagnan here is freaking malfunctioning. And of course the customary scan did not reveal anything wrong with his system nor his assembly and it was so really important to get him fixed so they re-rooted me here right away.”

“Wasn’t me,” Derek said quickly.

“Yeah, it was probably Boyd, the cheeky bastard,” Stiles grunted, watching the droid’s screen as if
it would reveal its problem automatically.

“"It must have been important then.”"

“Well yes, it is, the huge ice shipment is coming and this little fella here is the only one who has the right programing in him to take care of it. I guess we could use some other team leader, but they want this one, of course, assholes. Granted, he was there the last and only time Beacon had an ice shipment, experience makes there droids better, but still, it’s not like ice is any sort of fickle material,” Stiles muttered. “What is wrong with you, tiny bro?”

Derek knelt down to Stiles and leaned over to glance at the wires inside.

“Don’t tell me, you are an expert in droid fixing and you think it would only take a second.” The sentence was delivered by a weird two-finger gesture he didn’t understand.

“Not really,” Derek admitted. “But I—” he stopped, his head suddenly whipping up.

There was a slight tremor passing through all the droids, so soft it would have been almost impossible to hear and yet Derek was sure it was not just his imagination.

“Wha…”?

“Shh,” he hissed, looking up at the droids hanging above them. He could see them tremble. The vibrations were getting stronger with each moment.

“Get down,” Derek commanded urgently, pushing at Stiles’ shoulder.

“Wha…wh—…” Stiles started to say, but he didn’t finish the question, because he could probably hear it too then - the clacking of metal as the droids swung all around them.

Suddenly, the whole vessel made a sudden aborted movement. It was small, but Derek didn’t have a good feeling about it at all.

And then it came.

“Get down, now!” Derek yelled as the whole vessel jerked violently to the left.

Stiles, who wasn’t ready for it, lost the ground beneath him and was almost shot away into the nearest stand full of droids.

But Derek was fast. He grabbed him by the biceps, holding him in place, his other hand clenching the base of the rack on the other side.

The malfunctioning droid was flung away from them, down the lane, hitting some hanging droids in the process. Sparks flew in the air.

Before they could even blink, the ship jerked back to the right just as strongly and Derek hit the rack with his back, Stiles colliding into him with a heavy thud.

They sat there, breathing heavily, waiting for the next big quake, but it didn’t come. The droids stopped shaking, the metal’s vibrations slowly got weaker and weaker.

“What the fuck,” Derek whispered, holding onto Stiles just in case it was not over yet.

“Too long at the orbit, I’d vager,” Stiles answered shakily. “Europa must have entered the area with Jupiter’s strongest gravitational pull. It pulls even the ice on its surface apart deforming the
planet itself, so of course Beacon...”

Derek didn’t tear his eyes off the droids, their movement the only indicator he had.

“Don’t worry, the thrusters only take a second to counter that, so it probably won’t happen again. Weird... I did fix the malfunctioning thruster. I don’t understand why there was an earthquake like that. A loop in the system would be impossible. Pfft, unless somebody didn’t turn on the dampers before we entered the orbit and forgot to do so upon hearing that we will remain longer than usual. Ugh, what a moron.”

“Right,” Derek said, not really listening to the rambling. He concentrated on the vibrations, making sure they weren’t picking up again. Judging by the eerie quietness, it wasn’t gonna be the case.

“So yeah, it should be fine not, you can-,” Stiles paused. “You can let go now.”

Derek noticed his hand still gripping his biceps, holding him close. Chest to back. He could feel the warmth coming out of his body and... well, his theory that Stiles was a hybrid android was probably not correct, he mused.

He slowly let do, relaxing his muscles.

“Those are some killer reflexes,” Stiles acknowledged as he pushed himself off the ground. He patted down his uniform off the nonexistent dust and smiled down at Derek, who was still sitting pressed against the rack. “You,... ya know, kinda saved me.”

“I definitely saved you,” Derek corrected, leaning slowly away from the metal parts of the rack. His back hurt. Not too badly but it did. Exactly where it connected with the rack before.

“You okay?” Stiles frowned, stepping around him to glance at his back.

Derek shrugged, shaking his head. “Yeah, it’s nothing.” But it wasn’t. Even the shrug hurt. Could he have broken something? No, this is not how broken bones felt. It was probably just a crack. He moved his shoulder blade. Yep, a cracked rib.

“It doesn’t seem like nothing.”

“It is. Just bruised.”

“Those will be some nasty bruises alright.” Stiles nodded, pursing his lips. “I’m sorr-”

“Don’t.” There won’t be any bruises tomorrow, Derek wanted to say. The cracked rib can be fixed. I am fine. I will be fine. I could have been already fine but I can’t do anything while you stare at me. You would know the truth then and I can’t have that. Instead, he got up swiftly, faking through it. It wasn’t that hard. He had lived through hiding broken bones before. And this was only a minor crack.

Stiles watched him thoughtfully, but Derek ignored him, walking down the lane.

“We should try and fix the team leader,” he said, reaching down to grab the droid front under the rack where it rolled after the quake stopped. “Or?”

He looked back at Stiles. “Can we even fix it in time?” He brought up his bracelet and checked the time.

The latest log in their schedule noted that the shuttle will be slightly delayed due to the stronger
gravitational pull, but it should be arriving soon anyways. Lydia was probably already on the way to the Docking area.

Stiles watched him for a bit longer, as he chewed on the inside of his lips and he was so uncharacteristically silent that Derek was starting to think he knew something. *Did he notice?* No, he was careful not to let it show.

“I can fix it right away.” He nodded, glancing back at the door. There was nobody around it. At least not hat Derek could hear and he could hear a lot.

“But you said-”

“I know what I said, but you kinda saved me just now and I don’t wanna owe a Rooter,” he snapped, walking to the door to slide it close. “So I am gonna fix that droid using my “Hybridium” as I secretly call it and you are gonna leave with a functional droid.”

“How is that even-.” Derek frowned. “I don’t actually care if you fix that droid of not. Not that much anyways. Like you said, it’s just ice, it doesn’t have-”

“Shut up and give him to me,” Stiles ordered sternly as he grabbed the droid and put it on the ground. “A favor for a favor.”

“I beg to differ, this is not a favor of any kind to me,” Derek grumbled in confusion. “I would very much like to choos-”

“Oh hell no,” Stiles snapped, plopping down on the floor right in front of the droid. “I will fix it up real fast and we will be even.”

“I disagree.”

“I wasn’t asking anyways,” Stiles retorted and lifted his right hand. “Now quiet. It’s hard enough to do this after such a long night cycle. I don’t need you interrupting my concentration.”

Derek opened his mouth to argue some more, but a soft light caught his eyes. Now there were a lot of small lights around them - the door pad, the small bulbs on the droids, the lights over their heads, but this one… this one was coming out of Stiles’ palm.

Derek closed his mouth. The natural gentle hum coming off Stiles got more intense, filling the air between them and the light within his palm got so bright, Derek could actually see the bones in his hand.

Stiles opened his eyes suddenly. They glowed like molten metal and same did his hand. Derek had to blink a few times, it was that bright.

The glowing orbs, that were his pupils now, moved slowly to look down at the droid and with a deep exhale, he pushed his hand against the top of the machine. Derek could see light travelling down the veins of his right arm, like lava sliding down a hill, until it disappeared beneath his palm and into the droid.

Derek realized he was holding his breath. The air came rattling in. Stiles didn’t even blink, just stared down at the droid, his eyes moving minutely to and fro as if he could actually see inside of the machine in front of him.

And then, the screen on the team leader rebooted and flashed green a few times, before listing in the usual general information. The malfunction was gone.
Stiles closed his eyes, his fingers digging into the droid’s metal and his palm started to pull the
glow again as if he was sucking the lava back into his body. It travelled up his arm, in paths
mirroring his veins and then disappeared into his chest.

And just like that, the droid was fixed.

Just like that.

Derek stared.

He couldn’t help but stare.

Stiles pulled his hand off the droid and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I hope that makes us even,” he
muttered weakly.

“Yeah,” Derek whispered back.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sooo, I was so energized from all your wonderful comments, I just had to post earlier! <3 Also, I am kinda undecided on the pic for this chapter, so if you have some suggestions, let me know! I would love to draw something you choose this time as a huge thank you for all the support. :)

EDIT: Pic done! Thank you for the lovely suggestion @different_isgood57

__________

“Oh good, I thought you got lost,” Lydia said as Derek hurried over to her. “I was about to send a medical team to find out if you didn’t injure yourself during the flight difficulties we experienced.”

“I’m fine.” Though I did crack a rib. A rib that was hurting quite a bit when he took a deep breath in, so he kept his breathing as shallow as possible, which in turn made him look like he was wheezing from a run to the docking area. Whatever.

She nodded, her presence almost perfect. “I was luckily at the command bridge at that time and the artificial gravity is more reliable on higher levels.” Oh, so that’s why.

“I see.”
Derek glanced at the screen. The shuttle was just being guided to the selected parking spot, the scan in progress.

“Of course we wouldn’t have to go through such troubles if a certain someone fixed the thrusters in time.” Lydia scowled, ranking her fingers through her long hair. “But—”

“What…?” Derek frowned, tearing his eyes away from the screen.

“Well, I’m not sure if you met our technician yet, but he is a rather air-headed human.” She sniffed, turning to walk through the door as soon as the bulb above them turned green. Derek walked close behind her.

“Stiles?” He frowned even more. Are they talking about the same life form? “But... he fixed it.”

Lydia snorted. “No offense as to how well you are informed about the processes on our vessel, but I shall hope the pilot would know better. And if he says the thrusters were still malfunctioning and that’s why he couldn’t equalize the gravity then that would be true.”

And with that their conversation was closed. She walked over to the pilot, shook what was the equivalent of a human hand and beckoned Derek to go check up on the ice.

The team leader stood by, dispatched from the depositary as Derek walked through the back into the shuttle and checked over everything. And once that was all done, all he had to do was touch the droid and he summoned a group of similar droids, organizing the onloading and delivery to the needed station.

It was rather good that Stiles managed to fix him.

Stiles.

Just thinking back on what he had witnessed, Derek felt a spike of curiousness hit him. (Although, maybe that was the cracked rib actually.) Still, he couldn’t allow himself to linger. Not then and not ever. He needed to be ready to run, to detach, to ignore, to keep his head down and not pull any unwanted attention. And any attention was unwanted, were it from a technician because of some prying questions or from a captain because of not doing his work properly.

And so he left Stiles in that cabin, saying he needed to catch up to Lydia. Which he did. There was no lie in that. But were it not the case, he would have left anyways. That was just the kind of life he was leading now. That was who we was now.

And the fact that the crew obviously had a vendetta going on against Stiles for some unknown illogical reason was none of his business. Nor the fact that Stiles had some sort of magical… no, magic wasn’t real, anyways. Besides, it was time to stop thinking about it.

With that in mind, he confirmed the order to Lydia, who sent the signed documents to the Root and then Derek hurried back to his post - to a quiet day full of staring at the screen and trying to conceal a cracked rib.

~0~

He was rather successful concealing his pain, which would have been no surprise to everybody who formerly knew him - his shift ended without a second glance from his fellow Rooters. The only thing he had to do now was to walk safely all the way to his cabin, triple lock it against
foreign forces that might disturb him and perform the ritual to get rid of the troublesome cracked rib. Finally.

A simple plan, wasn’t it?

He was just walking down the corridor, not too far away from his cabin, when he heard the voices. Not that it mattered to him, no matter what the topic of the conversation was - his imperative was to get to his cabin as soon as possible and it didn’t matter than he caught Stiles’ voice down a separate corridor, all angry and… Derek honed in almost automatically. It was just common curiosity really, he wasn’t gonna stop or anything. The noise was just gonna go through one ear and out the other without...

“...in the report?” was the start of the conversation for Derek. “Are you fucking kidding me? You know full well it was not the thrusters!”

“If I ssay it wass the thrusterss, then it wass the thrusterss,” the other voice hissed. Oh, Derek didn’t even need to see this life form to know it was a Whittemorian. What surprised him more though was that there was one (or possibly more) serving on an official IA vessel. Weren’t they too dangerous and uncontrollable to keep around?

“That’s a load of bullshit and you know it,” Stiles argued.

“And what are you going to do about it? Run to your daddy?” the voice mocked accompanied by the sound of a light scuffle.

Derek squinted, stopping in his tracks as he listened in. He couldn’t really see them yet, the branch of the minor corridor which they were occupying still not within reach, but he could see some other human walking by. Their eyes glanced into the corridor, pulled in by movement and then once they recognized what was going on, they looked away quickly, walking away.

Derek watched that happen, doubfolded.

“We bottth know you won’t do a ttttthing,” the hisisng continued.

And okay, Derek was planning to just ignore them too and go to his own cabin (of course), but seeing that other human scurry away without a second glance... He could understand his own reasons for remaining passive in this kind of situation, but if it were his fellow species, he would never... if it was Peter.

He walked over and looked down the corridor. Stiles was standing there all agitated, the Whittemorian pushing him against the wall, it’s tail swishing around in a mocking display of power.

It must have heard him walk around but expected that he would just avert his eyes and repeat the same pattern as the passersby previously, but... but. Were this Peter, he thought, were this his kin.

“Is something the matter?” he spoke up, nearing the pair of them. Stiles looked over almost immediately, surprised to see him there, though the anger in his face did not dissipate just yet. That was some ballsy attitude when being around a Whittemorian, Derek had to give him that.

“Notttthing that shhould concceerrn you,” the Whittemorian hissed, not even looking at him.

“I’m afraid it does concern me,” Derek said stopping right next to them... in a good enough distance to be able to handle the tail were it necessary.

“The thrusters were on my list a few cycles ago. I personally checked over the report and the
readings after it was fixed,” he continued evenly. “If there was a problem with them, then I am afraid I will have to pull it back up to check more thoroughly. Could you send all your previous readings to the Root as soon as possible?”

The Whittermorian let go of Stiles and his ugly face turned to Derek. He only hissed at him to start with, scanning his face for any sign of weakness. As if that sort of posturing would work with Derek.

“I apologize if I didn’t perform the task into the necessary detail,” he said calmly. “I will make sure to…”

“You are the new guy,” the Whitteemorian spit out, but Derek didn’t think it was a statement that needed to be confirmed really. So instead he went on: “When will you be able to send the readings?”

The Whittemorian’s tail swung around dangerously, but Derek kept his eyes on his face, making sure to watch him move only with his peripheral vision. It would be a sign of weakness to get distracted by a little movement.

“I can always ask the Root major to issue a command for the main computer to gather those for me, if you won’t have any time,” he added.

Now that probably wasn’t the right thing to say, because the Whittemorian hissed violently and moved closer, his tail tensing. “You better watchhh your back.”

And then... he just walked away? Oh, okay. Derek was actually surprised that this Whittemorian was that calm. He was expecting there to be a fight, but who was he to complain.

“Dude, that was hella smooth,” Stiles whooped, punching the air in front of him. He walked in closer and smiled.

Derek only lifted his eyebrows. He honestly didn’t feel like talking to anybody anymore. He just wanted to go to his cabin and fix his goddamn rib. Was that so much to ask after such a long cycle?

Stiles grinned. “A smooth criminal.”

Derek remained silent still, but his expression definitely changed - he pulled his eyebrows together. The words hit way too close.

“It’s a song, ya know,” Stiles explained, which did not explain much but at least he knew there was nothing to worry about after all. His cover was probably safe.

He couldn’t help saying: “You should have done the same. Not engage illogically. With such an aggressive life form at that.”

“Alright Spock.”

Derek was lost in all of these references. Why wouldn’t “people” just keep their cultural specifications out of their language?

“But Jackssssson is a jackass,” Stiles continued. “He hates my guts for some reason.”

Derek nodded. “A quite large sum of the crew does.” Of course he noticed that. Of course he did. But it wasn’t his business. It really wasn’t. Even if he did not understand what the actual problem was. (He just wished he didn’t have to repeat that to himself that often. It was annoying even for
“They’re just scared,” Stiles shrugged. “And Jackson is the same, but Whittemorians react to fear a lot more violently than the usual human would.”

“I see.” He was not going to ask.

Stiles watched him for a bit, his lower lips moving a bit as if he was biting it from the inside. He squinted his eyes. “Aren’t you gonna ask why?”

“No,” Derek answered resolutely, folding his arms over his chest.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t care.” That much was true.

He signed, tired of the conversation dragging on unnecessarily. He really just wanted to go back to his cabin now.

“Send me the readings from the thruster if you find the chance. I want to go through them to issue a statement,” he said, turning away.

“Wait,” Stiles said, his hand jerking forward as if to grab him. But he stopped himself when Derek got all tense.

Stiles coughed. “You… you were serious about that?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well… that helps.”

He stared.

Derek was about to leave. He really was this time, but the uncertainty in the heard voice made him pause. Instead of walking away he pointed at Stiles. “You could have just done the same. Not—”

“I know, yes, but…”

“But what…?”

“I don’t want them to think I am misusing my dad’s status, yanno,” Stiles explained, moving his hand up to run his fingers over his short hair.

Derek took a deep breath in, trying to conceal his exasperation and his cracked rib stung, making him flinch. That wasn’t probably the most encouraging reaction he could have had at that moment, but… why the hell was this his responsibility anyways?

“This isn’t about any sort of blood connection between you and the Captain,” he grunted with annoyance. Humans… just for once… why couldn’t they pull their heads out of their own asses and focus on the bigger picture? “This is about you being the head of the Technical station. And it is your responsibility to take care of whatever your position on this vessel requires you to. If there is even the slightest chance of a malfunction you possibly could have overlooked, then you should do whatever needed… and it doesn’t matter where the doubt originates from, be it lies… mistrust… hatred? What you need to do furthermore, is your job. Because if you don’t, if you just choose to stubbornly believe in your own faultlessness and run around consumed by illogical emotions… then this vessel and all it’s crew will have no chance at surviving.”
Having said that he left without a second glance, leaving Stiles stand there in silence with a slight frown on his face.

~0~

The ritual was harder to complete than it usually was. It was an excruciating effort, trying to fix his cracked rib in such an ossificated state of mind and body (blame it on all the sitting he did since he got here), but in the end he somehow managed to get it done. It did leave him tired and hungry though. And not only that. It left him wanting to burst out of this shell around him and run… run through the trees, through the forest… the sounds of his kin nearby filling him up with ease. But he remained there in his cabin.

He had told Stiles to not wallow in his own emotions and yet there he was, sitting on the floor all naked and sweaty, in a totally dark confined space, wallowing in his own misery, mourning and feeling guilty. This is what the ritual did to him when he remained in his real form for too long - this is what it did to him now.

It wasn’t good for his head to perform the ritual more than necessary, but walking around with a cracked rib was less preferable, so what other choice did he have? It always brought up bad memories to go through it. But he was usually able to suppress them. Not this time though.

They crawled down his throat and latched themselves onto all his organs. He could barely breathe… and when he did manage to take some of the air in, it stunk of smoke.

He sighed, curling up on the floor.

It was fine, Peter would have said. It was fine… it was fine as long as he only did it in his free time. As long as nobody else was affected by his stormy emotions. As long as he did not endanger anybody by it. As long as he would suppress it back under the lid when the time came. It was fine to be lost in sadness and hatred alike. It was fine. Just for now.

He wished Peter was there with him. He wished he could press up against his uncle’s warm body to leech out some of the comfort, but that wasn’t possible. He was alone. And it was all his fault.

Derek didn’t sleep at all that cycle.

~0~

Getting up was hard. The dimmed lights were pushing his eyelids back down into a sleepless fit almost right after he tried to lift them. His limbs felt heavy, wooden. The healing obviously took a toll on him. Maybe he should have waited… it was too late for such thoughts now.

He sighed and rolled on his back. Prodding at his rib did not bring out any pain. Small victories.

Pushing himself up, he took care of all his usual rituals like clearing, dressing, relieving - all except the most important one. He knew that if he were to immerse himself into the ritual of his people right now, it would drive him crazy. Skipping it wasn’t much better either, not for this body he had
to occupy now, but he didn’t care.

Instead, he set off for the search of some nourishment, feeling his face pull itself tightly together from grumpiness. He could swear hearing his joints creaking with each aborted movement, but he forced himself to not listen in to double-check. Food. Food was important right now. He burned way too much by healing his rib.

First he will get food, then he will go busy himself with the ever-flashing reds of the Root station. Avoiding everything and everyone. Yep. Good plan.

“Thiss one isss taken,” a voice reached him. He frowned and looked around. Oh right, he was just heading to the slots to get some food, but something blocked his way. Or… someone in fact.

The Whittemorian he met a cycle ago was standing right in front of him, gesturing at the slot which he was heading to.

“In fact, all offf them are taken.” The Whittemorian grinned, the scales around his mouth deforming.

Derek blinked. Was there any food left back at the mini fridge? He really wasn’t in mood to engage with this life form right now.

“Did you happen to send me those readings by any chance?” he said loud enough for the humans scattered over the tables to hear. “On the thrusters. I seem to recall that-”

“There are no readingssssss,” the Whittemorian hissed, his tail weaving slowly around his back to get closer to Derek.

“No readingssss,” he repeated more sternly.

Derek nodded. “Right, well I guess I will see about that once I start my shift.” He tried to move right to get to the slots, but the tail swished through the air, blocking his way.

The Whittemorian bared his long sharp teeth. “I ssssaid there isss no food for you now.”

There was no way he could take him on in this state even if he did want… or was there? It’s true he was stronger than any average human and at least three times so agile, but with bones heaving him down like this, he would have been infected by the poison sooner that he would take him down.

He weighed his choices. And then shrugged and left without a second glance. Honestly, he was used to quite a bit of starving with a lot serious fractures, so who cared.

Giggles and whistling followed him out of the cabin, but he barely paid any attention to them, already thinking about work.

~o~

Before he knew it, it was the end of his shift. To his utter disappointment Erica did not show up halfways through with her arms full of food packages but other than that, he barely noticed the time moving.

At some point he saw the report on thrusters being updated with data from a manual check-up,
which was rather unusual given that Stiles normally didn’t work through the day cycle. He opened it up, watching the readings load for a bit and then nodded to himself. According to them the thrusters were running up to 98%, which was rather remarkable.

To investigate further, he called up Boyd to allow him access into the main computer’s registry, clipping in the readings from the exact moment the thrusters had the supposed malfunction. The readings on their performance were optimal throughout the whole time but for the one little thing - the time when they were turned on to full power and the time when the gravitational pull occurred did not match up with the pre-planned flight plan, which meant that Stiles was right. Duh.

He smiled to himself, tipped in the command for the pilot to log in his report on the matter, because it was still missing (obviously) and then issued a time stamp so that the whole thing would be send to the Captain. If somewhere in between that an updated copy of it all was sent over to Stiles for no reason whatsoever, well… that might have just been a typo on his side, nothing else.

~o~

“Honestly Derek, you look like a ghost,” Erica exclaimed as she walked into the Root station just before the night cycle began. “Don’t even think about staying for our shift.”

She threw a food package into his lap, which was full of something called “scrambled eggs” and went to sit down next to Boyd, talking about their progress.

“So the thruster drama continues,” Isaac said from beside him. He sipped at the water bottle in his right hand, his eyes glued to the screen.

Derek sighed, following his line of sight.

“Don’t sweat it, this sort of thing is normal with the pilots,” Isaac said, tapping the screen to open the report. The Whittemorian’s part was still blinking red.

“Oh my god, is that that the Jackson thing?” Erica asked. The question was followed by a loud snort. “Well, we are definitely leaving that for the day cycle to solve. No way I’m gonna ask for it.”

Isaac nodded seriously.

“We can send it over without his statement too,” Boyd muttered from his station, his eyes still the screen. He was finishing his last red. (“Last” as in, he will leave the rest as it was. There was no such thing as a last red.)

“True, it’s not like it’s gonna reach the Sheriff anyways,” Erisa said, shaking her head. The material of her suit was filling the air with gentle squeaking.

“Lydia will definitely remember to erase that one from the Sheriff’s task list, since her and Jackson are banging,” she whispered when Derek just stared without any sort of understanding.

“Erica,” Boyd chastised.

“Whaaat, it’s true.”
Isaac joined her. “It is.”

“Still, that’s no way to talk about a-”

“Pfshhhh,” Erica hushed. She spun around to pat Boyd’s shoulder and then gripped it to pull him off the chair. Her sing-song voice resonated around the cabin. “Off you go boss, our shift is starting.”

“You too, Derek,” she called when Derek did not get up or move. Well, he would lie if he said he wanted to stay longer. He was glad to be out before the lights were beginning to dim down all around the vessel.

~o~

He was sitting at the floor of his cabin, unmoving. He knew he ought to do something other than that, but he felt too tired. The stiff feeling in his body did not leave at all during the day cycle, it actually got worse.

He leaned his head onto the soft matrace of the bed nearby and stared at the wall. Before he could slip into another sleepless night cycle full of painful memories, there was a ping from his bracelet and the holo materialized with a message sign hovering in the air.

He read Erica’s note glued to it in the corner, telling they received a message for him and it was done encrypting and scanning so it’s been forwarded to him. Usually all the forwarding is done automatically, but it would seem Erica took particular interest in his correspondence so she took it upon herself to speed up the process.

He tapped the sign and it blinked red demanding him to enter a password first. He tipped in a long string of numbers - the exact coordinance to his long-lost home planet - and the sign unfolded, revealing a short message from his uncle.

Dear nephew, I wish I could have gotten to writing you earlier, but I have been buried in my research of ectoplasmic life on Lianmar for quite a while. I write to inform you that I made quite a breakthrough in analyzing their reproductive cycle, which does not bring me closer to the actual matter, but it does fill me with enough professional satisfaction to continue on this foolish path. I hope your days are filled with the same professional routine as mine and that you are adjusting to the new vessel well.

Peter

Derek re-read the message a few times, searching for all the hidden clues and once he was satisfied with having understood what his uncle was trying to get across, he set on to write his response.

Glad to hear your research had been going well. Though it’s not a path that I would find fulfilling enough, I do hope you manage to conclude it in good health - make sure to stay away from the
Having written that, he checked it over a few times to make sure it sounded as normal as possible, without any obvious cyphers in case somebody did manage to crack past their password. It seemed innocent enough, didn’t it? A bit too official maybe but his resume did state that he was from a military family, so the structure would fit his heritage.

He encoded the file again and sent it back to Root for Erica to take care of in the express line.

Hearing from his uncle made him feel a bit better. A lot better actually. He exhaled a long breath, wondering when he might hear from him again. Would he be done with his revenge plot until then? Or would he still be out hunting?

Either way, just knowing there was somebody out there still, somebody the same as he was, somebody who was alive and breathing, poured back some life.

He stood up, stretching his muscles and closed his eyes… he let the thoughts of his uncle lull him into the ritual. They always did it together after their planet was destroyed, on their cramped tiny ship and it never felt like he was trapped in a metal can as it did here, because his uncle made it feel huge. He filled it with memories that weren’t painful. With kinship that wasn’t forced. With anything their species might need. And though it wasn’t perfect, it was well.

His muscles stretched and pulled, his bones cracked and rearranged. Back and forward, back and forward, a cycle. And when he was done, back in his human form, he opened his eyes again and watched as his fingers moved - bending them experimentally was easy enough, rolling his shoulders, moving his spine - everything was as it was supposed to be, healthy and renewed.

He decided to go test it out. He stepped out of his cabin. The dampered light shone the way to the training area as he moved along the corridors.

He did not bother turning the lights on when he reached his destination. It was better that way. He welcomed the darkness inside and set on taking turns on each of the machines - running until he was all sweaty, spinning until his muscles protested, lifting until he couldn’t even breathe properly anymore.

It felt great to be back at full power and he promised himself not to skip the ritual again for whatever reason - be it a nasty nightmare or some sort of depression - he promised his uncle the same before he left. The message from him had only proven that his uncle was worried he might slip again and stop taking care of himself. He promised he wouldn’t. And he won’t. Not again. The past was behind him. He couldn’t change it. He decided to live a long time ago and changing his mind now would be like...

It was then when the door slid open and the lights came on, the cabin filled with a hum of a gentle song.

“Oh, is anybody-” Stiles started, his eyes registering the movement on his right. “I… oh hi Derek.”

“Stiles,” he grunted. He didn’t stop pulling the weights up, didn’t stop to wave or anything else. If
he would have stopped at that point, he wouldn’t be able to force himself to continue anymore. He was really tired, his muscles screaming with exhaustion, but he had to push it a bit more, had to make up for the lost time, otherwise his muscles would return back to their fossilized state.

“Why didn’t you put on the lights?” Stiles wondered. He walked a bit closer, his eyes scanning Derek lying on the bench, but Derek did not answer, nor did he acknowledge that he caught him staring from the corner of his eye.

After a bit it did start to get slightly annoying though.

“What did you want Stiles?” he asked, his voice breathless. It was getting harder and harder pulling the weights up.

“What makes you think I wanted something?” he heard from his left.

“You tracked me via holo,” he explained, his eyes jumping to the screen where he could see the Beacon’s layout if he strained his eyes well enough. He guessed normal humans would struggle seeing what’s on it since Stiles was standing quite far away, but Derek didn’t care how suspicious that was at that moment.

Stiles snorted. “Maybe I just came to repair something.

“Did you?”

“No.”

“Well then what do you want?” When the silence continued, Derek dropped the weights down and sat up to look at Stiles directly. He was standing there, looking very unsure.

Derek lifted his eyebrows in question. “Stiles.”

“I heard what happened with Jackson,” Stiles blurted out, his hands fidgeting at the sides of his body. “With the food? I shouldn’t have gotten you involved, I know. But don’t worry, I can make it all right again.”

Derek frowned, unsure where all this was leading. So instead of answering he opted for wiping the sweat off his forehead and concentrated on calming his breathing. Stiles would definitely get to the explanation even without prompting.

“We will just have to stage a fight.” Alright, that took a weird turn.

Derek shook his head. “I don’t fight.”

“Not a real fight,” Stiles explained, shrugging. “A stage fight. You call me a few names, I call you some back, loud enough for the right people to hear or preferably see and then you’ll be off the hook. I can give you a list even.” He grinned.

Derek could feel his frown deepening and he wasn’t sure if that was because he didn’t fully understand what was going on or because he disapproved of the whole plan to… to what? Rescue Derek from Jackson? He didn’t need that. Not now when he was up to his usual strength.

“Don’t worry, it worked with Erica,” Stiles said, as if trying to reassure him. And when that didn’t earn him an answer either, he continued with: “See, she understood this whole deal since she… well it’s not exactly the same with her of course, but the suit and all, it didn’t do her any favors in her life either, so… yeah we got along. Too much. She went through some tough shit because I let
her fight my fights. I was stupid to let her, I know that now, so... I won’t let the same happen to you too. You don’t deserve that.”

Derek sniffed, mulling it all over. The frown did not disappear from his face though no matter how much he thought about it.

“So the next cycle, we can meet at the-”

“Stiles,” Derek interrupted. “No.”

“This is gonna work, trust me,” Stiles urged. He took a step closer, nodding eagerly. “We just have to play it right. Then you won’t have problems getting your food anymore and-”

“I said no,” he repeated, a bit louder this time.

Stiles startled, then frowned. “Dude, being a martyr for the sake of moi is not gonna bring you anywhere. I am trying to help you here.”

“I don’t need your help,” Derek answered honestly. He lifted his hand to slide his fingers through his hair. It was dripping with sweat.

“But-”

“I don’t,” he said, cutting himself off before he could growl in frustration.

“But I owe you for the thrusters,” Stiles said miserably. “I owe you, you stood up for me and you said all of that… stuff which was really something … and Jackson won’t just stop.”

The muscles thrummed under Derek’s skin at that, wanting to stretch a bit more, wanting to be stretched up to the point of snapping. Maybe a Whittemorian would be a worthy enough opponent. No, stop. “I am not afraid of the Whittemorian. He has nothing that would-”

“Dude, have you seen him?” Stiles exclaimed, with a snort and a wave of his hand. “I know you got some beef but a human is no match for a Whittemorian. You might think he wouldn’t fight you since he is a IA official but he will, trust me. The only reason he did not dare to go up against me too violently is my dad… he doesn’t want to leave this vessel because Lydia would kill him if he did. But you are a whole different story. You think you are strong enough to stop him? Just because you can lift… what? How much is…,” He stopped staring at the weights, his eyes going down each component. He reached the lowest one and then went back up to double-check the result. His expression turned into disbelief and Derek blanched, turning his eyes to look as well. How much….? Shit… shit shit shit.

“That’s like… over 900 kilos,” Stiles whispered and then looked up at Derek. “And you were going at it as if it was-”

“There is a damper,” he said way too quickly. It was a lie of course, but he couldn’t think of anything else. Shut, why was he not careful? He should have let it go the moment Stiles entered the cabin or even pretended he couldn’t lift it. It was too late now though.

Stiles ignored his comment, looking at him, suspiciousness leaking into his voice. “I thought you were human. Are you some sort of hybrid too…? Is this why you are helping me that much?” Shut the fuck up. Shut the fuck up. This is none of your business.

“I am not helping you, Stiles,” Derek said. He got up from the bench and folded his arms over his chest. “I am just doing my work. There is no kinship going on between us. I am here to do my work
and my work only. I suggest you do the same before I report you slacking off on your shift.”

He did not wait for Stiles to answer. He just walked past him and left the station without a second glance, promising not to let anybody else get that close to him and his secrets ever again.

~o~

The plan was all nice and logical, but when there is a Whittemorian blocking one’s way to nourishment, one does have to reconsider his options. He was still nerved from his previous conversation with Stiles when he reached the slots and Jackson did not help it by stepping in front of him again to scare him off.

“Thessse are all taken,” he whispered slyly, staring right up into his eyes. If it was to antagonize him more or to see the fear and bath in it, Derek didn’t know but he was not gonna give in anyways.

Derek felt his muscles tense in a welcoming way. He yearned for a fight after the unfinished exercise, but doing any sort of too much would probably give up his “human” cover. And he couldn’t do that. Not when that many of the crew were watching them.

“I’ve been to Mandoria once,” Derek said, letting his eyes slide down Jackson’s body, lingering at the sturdy muscles over his stomach.

“What did you just-?”

“You heard me.” He smirked, baring his teeth. They were in their regular human form, but he imagined it couldn’t have been any less terrifying. “I quite enjoyed the cuisine.”

Jackson hissed and his tail cut through the air faster than a plasma cannon. It aimed for the shoulder, which was the closest body part he could reach, but before it could split up Derek’s flesh, he sidestepped and grabbed the tail right beneath the poisonous goad and held it still.

There was silence in the cabin as everybody watched them. Jackson was too shocked to even try to pry his tail out of Derek’s hand, which was rather fortunate, because Derek wasn’t about to show off any of his strength.

“This ends here,” Derek warned so silently only the two of them could hear it. His words were accompanied by a tight squeeze of the muscle beneath his fingers. Then he let his thumb slide over the softness right under the goad where the trigger was. “You understand?”

Jackson hissed then nodded and when he pulled his tail away, Derek let it slip out of his hold making a big show out of it - he made it look as if he was too weak l.

The crew watching them turned away as Jackson glared at them all. He then glared at Derek too for a good measure and stalked out of the cabin, emanating anger.

Derek couldn’t care less. He was glad to get some food before his shift began and overall be done this this prick.
“Derek, before you go for the night, the Sheriff wanted to talk to you,” Boyd said just as Erica got to Root to start her cycle. She was always a bit earlier in than was necessary. Said it was her only opportunity to socialize with ‘normal people’. “Derek is being called in?” She laughed. “Ohh, busted!” Or maybe she just didn’t want to miss on all the fun.

He frowned, jutting his jaw forward. Why would the Sheriff want to see him this soon after he joined the crew?

“What did you do Der-bear?” Erica asked, nudging his side. He ignored her for the sake of turning to his superior.

“Is there a problem with my performance?” he asked Boyd. There could have been. He was doing his best, true, and he was indeed getting more and more independent while solving the tasks at the 3rd and 4th station, but the 2nd still left him doubting his skills most of the time. Maybe Boyd decided to recommend him for reevaluation?

“I actually don’t know the exact reason behind his summons,” Boyd said, shrugging. “Nothing to do with Root business, I would say. Your performance has been more than satisfactory for now.”

Derek exhaled.

“I bet it’s just one of those catch-up talks,” Erica said. She plopped down on her chair and spun around. “Ya know. To see how you’re holding up? It’s not like you were involved in something outside of Root, were you?”

She stopped, studying his expression. He tried not to look guilty. Not that he had anything to feel guilty for… other than his reason for being on this vessel. And his whole existence… and basically everything up until a few cycles ago. Could it be that the Sheriff found out? No way.

Erica smirked. “Or you know… maybe it’s the fact you got Jackson upset. He probably ran up to Lydia crying-”

“Erica.”

“What, everybody knows they’re banging, it’s not a secret,” she said, grinning. “Same with Jackson getting all the-”

“Erica.”

“You better hurry along,” Boyd chastised from his place, his eyes tearing from the screen to glare at her. She pouted in response (or at least Derek assumed she did from the way eyebrows moved under the mask).

“Just saying.” She shrugged.

“You better hurry along,” Boyd urged Derek, waving his hand in the direction of the opened door. Then he resumed his furious typing. Apparently there were quite a few things to be solved before they would reach Earth - their next stop.

“Understood,” Derek answered. Erica waved him off and then turned to look at the screen on front of her, checking in on the current status.

The door slid closed behind them and Derek hurried down the corridor, up to the front of the ship.
Be barely ever went there on any official business, only during his run.

He didn’t need to pull out the layout though, he had a good enough memory to be able to retrace his steps from the first cycle he spent on the Beacon.

“He is already waiting for you,” Lydia said without any greeting. She didn’t even look from the screen in front of her. Her voice was weirdly cold - the shrill in it hearable. Not that Derek knew what was normal for her, but when he compared it to her friendly professionalism from before, it seemed a bit too clipped.

He wondered what of her behaviour had to do with the Whittemorian and what with the fact that she was already busy when he came, but he didn’t get to think too long about it, because the door slid open and revealed the Captain’s cabin.

It looked quite different from the last time he was there just a few cycles ago. For starters, there was a huge window looking out into the space. Derek could see a small red planet not too far away. It would seem there were some sort of settlements on its surface - something akin to huge domes… he did not remember there being a window the last time, but it might as well been closed off.

The Sheriff was standing right in front of it, staring out into space. He turned around when the door slid closed behind Derek.

“Derek,” he greeted, nodding. “How are you holding up?” He walked over to his table and sat down.

“I am not sure I can evaluate that myself, sir,” Derek answered cautiously and sat down at the opposite side of the table when the Sheriff beckoned him to do so. “I am sure you would know more.”

“That I indeed do, son,” the Sheriff confirmed. He tapped the screen on his left and glanced over at it. Sadly, Derek couldn’t see anything from his side because it was locked to a single-view. A special feature not many had access to on an IA vessel.

The Sheriff smiled and looked back up at him. “I would want to hear your own assessment first though. Being faced with self-reflection tells a lot about a person.” *A person*, Derek refrained from scowling.

Was this some sort of a trap? Maybe he somehow did manage to figure out what Derek was and why he came to this vessel… maybe for all Peter had done, the IA would have a much better firewall than they had thought. Could it be?

Derek scanned the Sheriff’s eyes for any sort of suspicion but did not find any, which on itself did not mean anything if truth be told. He decided to remain vigilant..

“I realized that even after all his time, I still have a lot to learn about Rooting. Luckily Boyd is a very skilled and knowledgeable leader and I am glad to be under his service,” he said at last, keeping his words as neutral as possible.

“I heard you are doing a really good job for somebody who just got out of schooling,” the Sheriff confirmed. “Major Waag must have been a very good teacher.”

“Waloor, sir,” Derek corrected right away.

“Ah, right, my mistake,” the Sheriff nodded. Another test, wasn’t it? Derek did not expect anything else if truth be told.
He kept his eyes on the Sheriff and strained the rest of his senses to catch any possible life forms in the room in case there would be somebody concealed waiting for Sheriff’s order to apprehend him. He couldn’t sense anything, but still...

“I am glad you are enjoying Root so much,” the Sheriff said. “We do have one of the best Rooters here.” Derek nodded despite of not agreeing. It wasn’t that Erica, Isaac and Boyd weren’t good… they of course were, definitely for this sector, but Derek guessed the IA had far better masterminds than these three could ever be on some of their huge flagships.

“How about the rest of the crew,” the Sheriff asked. “How are you getting along with them?”

“As professional as possible,” Derek said seriously, thinking back on what Erica told him before. If this really was about Jackson than he might as well mention it. The Sheriff would get to it in due time anyways. He opted for a neutral: “Which I must admit is a bit harder than what I am used to.”

“How so?”

“I’ve never worked on such a small vessel,” Derek stated, feigning honesty. “The whole environment is of course a lot more…” he mulled over a few words before he was able to find the right one, “…personal.”

“Indeed, we pride ourselves on that. Being a very tight group, similar to a family or a clan where everybody looks out for each other, helps and enhances each other. It makes one very precise watch... out of the whole crew. I bet not that many IA vessels have that,” the Sheriff said, his tone making him sound proud.

Derek nodded. “A very admirable achievement, if I might say so myself.” 

“And that is why I take every indiscretion toward anything but a good behaviour very seriously. Especially from an outsider.” Ah, here we go.

The Sheriff leaned forward, bracing his elbows on the tabletop. He entwined his fingers, resting his chin on them. “So tell me about Jacks’son.” His pronunciation was on spot if nothing else.

Derek had to be careful what he said now. If there was any sort of possibility that the Sheriff was already fed some information, he could in no way jeopardize his own position by standing up against the Beacon’s crew. He was still an outsider and his word would not weight enough.

“I don’t exactly have enough information about him to give you any sort of assessment,” Derek admitted to stall before he formulated the actual statement. “I briefly came into contact with him a few times because of the thruster issue.”

The Sheriff frowned. “Rooting business aside.” Aside? That was the main problem at hand. Not that Derek was gonna point that out though.

“What about the commotion at the Nourishment station recently?”

“A commotion, sir?” he asked, lifting his eyebrows. He hoped to draw more information about the other side of the story by asking but the Sheriff was not that forth giving: “Yes, what can you tell me about that?”

Shit, what now? He could just say everything as it was, but that would put him at risk. The Sheriff might rather believe his crew than him even if all the signs and evidence points in the other direction, especially when he puts his crew at the same level as one would a family - no matter what the reality of that situation is.
“I admit that there might have been a misunderstanding on my side,” he said slowly, studying the Sheriff for any sign of mistrust. He couldn’t tell.

“How so?”

“Well, if I might be that honest, I have only come across very hostile Whittemorians,” Derek continued, choosing his words very slowly. Or rather, choosing his calculative lies. “I am sorry to say I might have misinterpreted Jackson’s behaviour as such. I can assure you it will not happen again.”

The Sheriff studied him for a bit and Derek let him. He didn’t really think there was anything else he would want to add to that statement.

“Well, I must say I did not expect such level of racism and prejudice from an outsider,” the Sheriff admitted, tapping his screen a few times.

Fuck you, Derek thought. You dare to accuse me of something so vile? He remained silent though.

“But given the circumstances, I am willing to let you off with an oral warning only,” he continued, his tone conveying his disappointment. “I hope we will not have to talk about this sort of thing ever again, son. Otherwise there will be more serious consequences.”

Derek nodded. “I understand, sir.”

~o~

As Derek lied on the floor, the thin blanket crumpled under his head, he kept thinking back on the Sheriff and his words earlier that cycle. He couldn’t afford making enemies on this vessel, not that it would be that fatal for him, but what other choice did he have than to keep up the act and stay within the lines?

Go back to live with Peter? If these past ten quantons could even be called living - wasn’t it more like a mixture of hiding, observing and plotting? He was sick of it. Sick of the hiding, sick of always looking around for danger, sick of being alive but not living at all - not that this was any better. He was still in hiding, mind you, but at least he didn’t have to fear being caught. Not yet at least.

No more conflicts, he decided. He was stupid to pity Stiles, stupid to feel any sort of compassion. So what if he was a rare kind of a Hybrid. So what if he… whatever, it had nothing to do with Derek. Derek was no Hybrid, Derek was no… shit. Anything else than simple professional relationship was out of question and that was the end of it. He will not interfere with anything other than his own business from now on.

Damnit. Why was this vessel such a complicated social network? It wasn’t supposed to be. But there wasn’t really much he could do about it right then - only stare at the ceiling and wonder what he could have done better in the past few cycles.

Luckily, his thoughts were soon interrupted by urgent beeping. The holo jumped out of his bracelet, the Root logo flashing on the screen. He wasted no time - not that he had something to waste his time with, he was still in his uniform - and ran out of his cabin.

The lights in the corridors were still subdued and the whole ship was rather quiet so Derek figured that the alert wasn’t as urgent as it might have been, but he still didn’t slow down. The run was a
welcome distraction.

“Whoaa, 35 seconds!” Erica exclaimed when he entered the Root station. “Ya kidding me?”

“I was nearby,” Derek lied, looking around the cabin. “What’s the emergency?”

“Well not an emergency per se…” she started saying, her words making Derer frown. This wasn’t some sort of a joke, was it?

“We will be docking above Earth in a few minutes,” Isaac spoke up from his place. “The protocol requires us all present in these cases.”

“Level B planet,” Erica added, nodding.

Derek turned to look up at their main screen that contained the feed from the command bridge. They barely ever had it on - if one wanted to see space, he could always just turn it on in his free time (not that anyone ever wanted), but still… he could see a planet right ahead of them, its rich blue color stark again the darkness of the surrounding space.

Earth - the cradle of the human species - was a rather small planet, unsurprisingly - what was surprising though that it carried so many humans… how much was it again? He knew their population went up to a few trillions in the known space and that didn’t even have all hybrids accounted for.

Such a small planet, Derek’s stomach twisted at the sight of it, how was it that they got to keep it alive when their got burned into ashes?

He didn’t get to dwell on the poisonous thoughts for much longer though, because Boyd arrived and started to organize them into action.

“Before we start, I just wanna point out that I was out the last time,” Isaac said, his hand high in the air for some reason.

Boyd looked at him and sniffed. “Right, well…”

“And I absolutely can’t go because of my fragile health,” Erica added, one of her hands in the air too. Her second was pressing against her chest. Derek was getting slightly confused - was she feeling unwell?

“Right, well…,” Boyd’s eyes switched to him. “I have to remain on board, so… Derek, your IA vaccination should be up to date, correct?”

What vaccination? “Yes, sir.”

“That settles that then,” Boys said nodding. “Hurry along to grab a flight. It would seem you will be the one from Root to go down to Earth this time.”
So Derek was going to Earth. Saying that he was excited about the prospect would be an utter understatement. The last time his feet touched the surface of a planet was when Peter had to bodily drag him off their own homestead. He remembered stumbling between the dead bodies, the blood and guts sizzling in the fires left behind by the explosions and he couldn’t help but feel a bit sickly walking down the corridor to the Docking.

*Don’t think about that*, he ordered himself sternly and, took a deep breath in. He slammed his bracelet against the pad.

“Wow, dude, what did it do to you?” Stiles asked from behind him making Derek jerk in surprise.
He was obviously so deep in his thoughts that he didn’t hear him approach at all. *Shit. Stop it. It’s just a fucking planet.*

“Silent treatment it is, I see,” Stiles commented bitterly from behind him when he didn’t answer. They entered the Docking and walked down the highlighted line that was leading them to the shuttle. “No worries, nothing new for me.”

He then sped up, walking past Derek and waved to the pilot standing in front of the shuttle, who was doing some last check-ups via the bracelet. Surprise, surprise, it was a human too.

“Danny, my man,” Stiles greeted, grinning up at the… muscled human who kinda looked like a slightly darker and younger version of the Coach. Derek could definitely see some similar shapes on his face at least and that’s how his species mostly defined different individuals - by their shapes. Naturally.

“All set to go? I got a list of fun stuff to do down there,” Stiles continued, laughing.

“Just waiting for the Sheriff,” Danny answered, tapping away on his holo.

Stiles groaned. “Well, no fun stuff on the itinerary then. What a shame.”

“Myeah,” Danny muttered absentmindedly. He then looked up at Derek as if he only now noticed the second person there and his eyebrows jumped up. Silence rose up between them with Stiles glancing to and fro with a maniacal grin on his lips. *What the hell was he smiling for?*

“Derek Kasai,” he decided to introduce himself.

Danny blinked. “Oh, yeah… right, the new guy. A pleasure.”

Silence again. Derek squinted. Stiles giggled and Derek shot him a glare, which just made his smile wider.

“So uh, you… uhh ever flown in a shuttle?” Danny asked out of nowhere pulling his attention back from Stiles.

“Yes?” Derek answered with uncertainty. *Was that some sort of a trick question? Wait. “As a passenger only that is,”* he said adding the lie just in case.

Danny cringed for some reason, making Derek slightly uncomfortable and then sighed waving them to follow him inside. “Well, hm… if you would want, the co-pilot seat is mostly free on these kind of transfers so you could...” (Stiles was somehow enjoying this conversation way too much although he wasn’t even taking part in it. *What was going on? *) “...enjoy the ride right at the-”

“I am fine with the usual seat, thank you,” he said irritably, interrupting Danny before he could finish laying down the offer.

“Yeah, Danny, concentrate on the actual flying for now,” Stiles sniggered, sitting down on the bench along the left side of the trunk.

Danny said nothing at first, redness creeping up his cheeks, but then he seemed to have caught a second breath because he rolled his eyes and said: “You better buckle up Stilinski, it will be a bumpy ride.”

“Oh boy,” Stiles mocked. “My bits are jiggling with excitement already.”
Danny turned around to walk to the front of the ship and sit down behind his station. Derek actually wished he had taken him in on the invitation because listening to Stiles was slowly giving him a headache. Good thing he could just take his seat and close his eyes. He didn’t actually have to talk to anybody until the shuttle landed… though considering his luck that wouldn’t be the case. And it wasn’t.

~o~

“Right, boys, ready to depart?” the Sheriff asked when he entered the shuttle. Lydia wasn’t with him this time, instead it was Deaton.

“Dying of excitement,” Stiles mumbled, but the Sheriff either didn’t hear or didn’t acknowledge because he silently walked to the front to pat Danny’s back and talk to him while the back door of the shuttle closed.

Deaton sat down at the far end of his bench and strapped himself in. After that, his head sagged and he entered hibernation without a word to them. Good for him. Derek wished he could do that too sometimes.

He could feel Stiles’ eyes on him, but instead of confronting him he just turned to watch the Sheriff sit down beside Danny. The shuttle shuddered at first, then the stabilizers kicked in and everything went smooth. What could be better than actual IA tech? Nothing… well nothing the official market could offer anyways.

Derek leaned back, folding his hands over his chest and closed his eyes, thinking back on the briefing Boyd gave him before he left - pick up the ordered goods, deliver the cargo from Europa and wait for the Sheriff to finish his official business. They would have to stay on the planet overnight - though if that was a short of a long time, he didn’t know. Earth wasn’t really something he ever took any particular interest in.

Just as he was about to doze off, a light behind his closed lids brought him to the surface faster than an air balloon. He thought it was some sort of fire at first, but no, it was just Stiles.

Before he could say anything though, the Sheriff spoke up: “Not now.”

Stiles glared up at him. “You know I don’t like to fly without checking….”

“Stiles,” the Sheriff repeated, looking down at him as if one look could say everything that needed to be said. Derek wondered what the actual problem was with Stiles using his… glowy things. He wondered and then he made himself stop wondering. It had nothing to do with his work.

“Stiles,” the Sheriff repeated.

“Dad.”

“Not now.”

Stiles was looking at his father, some sort of defiance passing his features (oh, Derek knew a thing or two about this sort of parental defiance alright), but in the end he just called the light back into his body and looked away.
Derek wasn’t gonna pry.

“I apologize,” the Sheriff said to him. “I hope it didn’t make you uncomfortable.”

This again. He shook his head.

“You are welcome to sit in the front if-”

“It’s alright, sir-”

“Really, it’s no trouble, son,” the Sheriff smiled, gesturing for the seat next to Danny that was free at the moment. He could see Stiles watching him from behind his father’s back, looking sort of hurt and honestly he should have just gone sit where the Captain wanted him to.

But…

But this whole shebang was getting annoying. Not much, but just enough to rub him the wrong way. He couldn’t help himself. Even if he should be just quiet. Damnit.

“Why would any of...,” he paused waving his hand, but not even that could help him find a proper word for the lights, “... that be dangerous? It seems rather harmless. Usef-”

“Oh no, son, of course it’s not harmful,” the Sheriff said shaking his head. “I would never allow anything malign to remain on the ship. It’s just the sickness it’s associated with I fear. You see my late-”

“He didn’t exactly ask for our family history, dad, did he?” Stiles interrupted, his voice cold. He then turned to Derek and spoke to him as well: “And I will have you know it’s rude enough to ask about ones species, but to go as far as to ask about the biological-”

“I meant no off-,” Derek tried, but Stiles just snorted, jumping back in: “As your indirect superior-”

“Stiles,” the Sheriff spoke up, shutting him up. “Our crew has all the right to know if there is a danger of-”

“You know there is no danger, not for them. Isn’t that enough?” Stiles said, bracing his palms on his knees. His hold looked way too strong to be just for practical purposes. Actually, his whole posture looked rather rigid and angry. Derek wished he could just stop the conversation altogether at that point.

“Do we really have to involve every-”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Stiles questioned. “It’s not their-”

“It’s our crew, we-”

“We don’t have to-”

“We do-”

“Why?” Stiles argued, gesturing at Derek. “Why do they get to know my whole origin story as if it was nothing private? They don’t tell me their-”

“Because, Stiles, I am the Sheriff of this AI vessel and if I deem any sort of information beneficial
for my crew to know, then I will share it with them,” the Sheriff said, pulling himself up into his full height in a solid display of authority. “We will not be having this conversation again, son. Not now. Disinformation creates only mistrust. And I will not be fueling rumors. We don’t work like that here.”

Silence.

“Now, son,” the Sheriff said, some sort of unspoken order hidden between the short words. He gestured at Derek.

Stiles pursed his lips and looked back at Derek, his eyes filling up with fluid that was being held off by some sort of miracle only. “I am a Hybrid of the Nano race. It basically means my body produces biological nanobots by millions... I can learn to control them... to some extent anyways.” His damp eyes watched him for any sort of reaction, but Derek wasn’t going to give him any. He heard about Nanos, heard how beneficial they were to have on a ship. How was that anything but good then?

The Sheriff coughed and Stiles’ upper lip twitched, the corners of his mouth sinking down as if he was getting sick from the flight - but that couldn’t be, the stabilizes were still on after all.

“Nanobots often go haywire when not taken care of properly,” Stiles continued at his father’s prompting, “They can cause all sorts of failures to their host - tumors, dementia, carilo… that sort of fun stuff. Not curable by usual medical means of course, what else. Often we just die...” he paused, “...like my mom…” His lower lip trembled, but he managed to hold his tears in anyways. Too proud. Way too proud. He shut his mouth and looked away defiantly.

“There is nothing to worry about though, son,” the Sheriff said, picking up the sentence. He did have a heart after all. “These sort of things only affect the Nano race. The nanobots would not survive within any other organic matter, not long enough to cause...”

Stiles sniffled, trying to be as inconspicuous about it as possible. Derek noticed anyways. This whole situation was all sorts of awkward. Derek didn’t want to know any of this, he just wanted to know what the fuck—... I shouldn’t have asked anything. Why did I? Nothing he could say now could make the situation better anymore though, could it?

The Sheriff continued talking - explaining how the Nanos in Stiles’ body worked in full detail, but Derek stopped listening. He had no right to this sort of information, not when he couldn’t be as sincere back.

Stiles glared at the back door, Derek watched him silently and Sheriff kept on talking as if his words were nothing but breaths he had to take to save his own life.

~o~

The shuttle landed as smoothly as if a feather fell down on a windless summer afternoon. Or maybe it was just the stabilisers that made it feel all smooth and Danny was actually a very shitty pilot using the stabilisers to his own advantage - but Derek doubted that to be true.

They have reached the Docking of the biggest interstellar port on Earth somewhere in the middle of the European continent in less that... 2 hours, Danny had said. Impressive. Derek wished he could get his hands on a shuttle like this at some point of his life.
Deaton lifted his head as soon as Danny cut off the engine, powering up again. He sat there unmoving, staring ahead. Kinda what Derek did most of the awkward ride too. Good to know he wasn’t the only one drawn to such behaviour...

Danny walked past them soon after, reaching here and there to switch some things off and then pry the back door open. Sheriff walked right behind him, followed closely by Deaton’s stiff body that jumped up with a mechanical whirring sound.

Derek glanced over at Stiles, but he was already on his way outside as well, ignoring him altogether. That was a good thing. It was.

The port wasn’t as big as he expected. And he barely even saw any interesting ships docking around them, aside from those which were owned by the IA. Good. Less chances of somebody recognizing him.

The rest of the crew was already standing around the Sheriff, listening in to him and so Derek hurried over as well.

“...ny can go over with Deaton to take care of our cargo and Derek,” he said pointing at a hallway on their right. “Go get the parts we need with Stiles. We will meet up at the AI barracks or latest here for the departure. All clear?”

Stiles did not object and neither did Derek, but he did catch the lingering look Sheriff gave his son as if he was daring him to say anything. He didn’t though, already fumbling with his bracelet.

“This way,” Stiles beckoned him without any preamble and walked to the nearest exit hallway. Derek followed, his eyes lingering at the panels sliding out from under the shuttle.

“What are those creatures in the pods for?” he asked Stiles, but he got no answer.

The door slid open and Derek was greeted by a rabid mixture of sounds. They ended up in a long hall with a few exist doors alongside their own and a few gates made for different kind of travellers and cargo.

The space between him and the other side of the room was full of people moving in a steady yet weak stream - some large crew was approaching the gateway at the far end of the hall with an anti-gravity plate full of grey boxes. On the other side, families were approaching the slots. All humans. Well most of them anyways, some crews had, similarly to their Whittemorian, one token species with them, but other than that, there was nothing else that would have indicated this to be a frequent visiting place for different life forms. That’s because it wasn’t, Derek noted with satisfaction.

“Welcome to Earth, the cradle of the human civilization,” said a soothing female voice above them and when Derek looked up, he saw a holo above, stretching over the whole opposite wall. A human female was greeting them all over and over in all known languages. (It seemed rather unnecessary though given the species ratio.)

“Are you just gonna stand there?” Stiles shouted, raising his voice from where he approached an empty gateway. He was quite far away already. Derer hurried over.

Turned out, they just had to slap their bracelets over the scan and the rather bored-looking gatekeeper would let them through. IA had an easy entry to almost all dwellings in the known galaxy - and by “known galaxy” they usually described the worlds and races that joined them. Rest didn’t even exist officially.
“Here.” Stiles said, waving as the dispenser at the end of the gate. It was full of goggles… or glasses, weren’t they? Stiles took one and put it over his eyes. The temple tips snapped around the back of his ears with a silent thud.

“Just put those on.”

Derek took them but hesitated. He looked down at them to study the material, then looked through them, but nothing in his vision changed exactly. *Wait* …. there was some sort of feed running down one side of it. And there were some buttons on one side of the temples.

“What are these for?”

“Just cancels the noise, adjusts the picture,” Stiles shrugged, pressing a few buttons on his own glasses. “Keep you updated, the usual.”

Derek was still skeptical.

“It’s the same as the IA bracelet, but for a whole planet, ya know,” Stiles explained, gesturing at their wrists. “Helps you stay connected. *Wait* … here.” He came closer to Derek and pressed a few buttons. “The alien mode,” he said, grinning.

Derek lifted them again and looked through the lenses. An arrow appeared on the screen and a voice joined it coming out of the temple tips: “Please proceed to the underground travelling system to get to your selected destination. Please enter your destination for further instructions.”

Derek didn’t find the glasses any more appealing than he did before he knew what they were for. His face must have spoken of his dislike, because Stiles decided to close their conversation with a “Suit yourself.” and went on to follow their designated route.

Derek put the glasses on his head and followed him downstairs, though small crowds of people waiting around various parts of a big underground place full for different platforms. Each had a number, a map and a destination. It was all clearly organised and Derek… well, he was kind of surprised by the whole level of… he didn’t exactly know how to call it. This is why he never wrote a diary or anything, the words would just sound as if a simpleton slapped them on a paper… probably.

“Platform 5-21, a last call to board the shuttle to the Prague main station. The shuttle will depart in 38 seconds,” informed the same soothing voice from before.

“Platform 28-18, a shuttle to Moskau main station will depart in 5 minutes 25 seconds, we ask the passengers to board within the time slot,” she continued.

He could hear announcements like that from all around the place, naming all kinds of… what were they, cities? Or just… maybe he should have checked with his glasses. Before he could do that Stiles gasped and started to run.

“This way,” he heard as they hurried to one of the closest platforms. The holo above the platform informed them they only had 15 seconds to get on board. Luckily Stiles was almost there and Derek was fast, so…

The door beeped loudly and flashed with red light as the time ran out. Then everything closed up, the long shuttle lifted up from the ground and started whizzing on its way into the nearest tunnel.

Derek sat down on the bench right next to Stiles.
“Don’t get too comfortable, we are getting off in about 5 minutes,” he said gesturing for the holo above the door, which had the shuttle’s travel plan displayed. Derek was tempted to go over and tap it for a different language (or use his glasses) but he refrained himself. He understood enough - they were heading to the closest city, which was in turn also the biggest one. A city called -

Something green caught his eyes. It was the holo above one of the seats on his left. No… could it be?

"Forests?” he asked in wonder. Stiles looked up from whatever he was reading on his lenses, his eyes following his line of sight. “Uhh, yeah like… what do they call those… natural reservoirs? Earth doesn’t have any wild nature anymore.”

Derek nodded, his excitement deflating a bit, but not enough for him to not consider the options. Maybe… maybe he could… he pursed his lips and remained silent, studying the trees printed on the flyer. How accurate was the color on them? It did look sort of artificial, but weren’t it for the different shapes, they would be quite similar to those he used to run around as a child.

He felt a longing inside he hadn’t ever felt before - it wasn’t bitter, angry and full of regret, it was bubbling deep within him, urging him to….

But that wasn’t going to happen. Not now, not ever. He came to the Beacon to hide from the space. He came there to be safe from those hunting them. He came there to stay in line, unnoticed and invisible, awaiting his time. Frolicking around a forest on his first time out in the open was not an option.

“Why…? Have you never…?” Stiles asked, but then bit his lip, frowning. Perhaps he was worried Derek will freak out again. Honestly though, it wasn’t really a classified information.

“I did. A long time ago,” he admitted, a nostalgic feeling swelling up in his chest. His eyes lingered on the holo, but then the shuttle stopped at their designated place and the spell was over.

“This way,” Stiles beckoned, hopping onto a conveyor built in on the left side of the platform. Derek got on too and watched as they passed through the masses of people. He honestly wasn’t able to process much of it. It was a densely moving crowd full of noises and colors… but all very organized and… mindful? Was that the word? He wasn’t sure.

He reached up and pulled down the glasses. “Enter destination” was still flashing in the corner. When he looked at the wall full of holos, a few hints popped up on his lenses wondering if he needed translations or further information about the given topic.

He lifted the glasses up and surveyed the surroundings without them for a bit. Then he put them down again. Ah, there was a door at the far end of the platform that didn’t show up on the glasses. Same went for a man that was just getting into one of the long shuttles. Interesting...

Just as he was about to ask Stiles though, the conveyor turned into moving stairs and they climbed up out of the underground into the outside world for the first time. Finally.

And what greeted him there was kind of unexpected. Blue sky. Fluffy clouds drifting through it. Sunshine. *Real sunshine.*

He stopped in his tracks, blinking into the warm sun. It was still way too loud him around. But as for the rest… all around them were high buildings but the sun was right above them as if nothing could stop it from reflecting from each reflecting surface, to bring warmth into their bodies and stinging into their eyes. *Whoa.* After all those quantons under artificial light, it was more than
overwhelming for Derek.

“I bet you were expecting some shithole, weren’t you?” Stiles asked from beside him. He honed in on the voice and blocked out all the rest to become a functioning individual again.

“An Outsider like you-”

“I didn’t expect anything,” he admitted. He could feel Stiles’ eyes on him for a bit, but then they headed down the street and the rest of the conversation was lost.

~0~

Stiles got them some sort of a vehicle that just drew around on autopilot - everything was so automatized on Earth, but yet so... he couldn’t find the right word for it. It was as if he wasn’t seeing it all.

While they were riding, both squeezed together at the back of the vehicle, Derek searched his holo for more information on Earth. He should have probably used his glasses, but he wasn’t all that comfortable using the new tech yet. It was easier to just go through the bracelet.

Compared to him, Stiles was an actual tech wizard. His eyes kept darting here and there, issuing all kinds of kinetic orders to the glasses. His lenses were so full of all kinds of separate windows that Derek doubted he could see much of his surroundings. Derek was slightly jealous of that. Stiles probably grew up with these sort of things all around him - the sounds, the colors, the technology… it couldn’t compare to what Derek’s childhood was for him.

Do not go there.

He tapped on the log for Earth and scrolled down the general topic field. He wasn’t sure where to start.

“Here,” Stiles said from beside him and reached over to tap through a few links on his holo. His fingers were long and nimble. That was a very good shape for fingers. Handy, Derek thought absentmindedly.

The holo jumped to a short summary of Earth for visitors and Derek nodded to Stiles in thanks, even though he wasn’t sure if he was paying attention anymore.

Earth is the third planet from the Sun, a star in the middle of what is regionally known as the “Solar System” (aka Sector ////-///-). It has been a level D planet (see IA Levels ) up to the start of the IA colonisation, which granted the Earthians the needed technology to move between the interstellar entities and thus the upgrade into a level C planet.

Contrary to all beliefs, the Earth is a colony run by an AI, that had developed its own sentiency and intent before the colonisation even reached the planet, but which had up until the IA initiated its protocol operated in seclusion from the main awareness of the Humans. (see. AI reforms )

Earth remains a secluded Sector even after quantons of regular contact not only due to its position at the edge of the main travel paths of the known universe, but also because of its lack of
Derek looked up from the text when their vehicle stopped near a huge building branded with the IA seal. They have reached the main Tech center of Earth - the place where they will recover the needed parts for Beacon. Why it wasn’t situated right at the Docking station, Derek wasn’t sure, but he didn’t ask either way. It would be a rather useless question anyways.

Entering the building via the main sliding door, they found themselves once again in a vast hall with a lot of windows at the end. He was starting to wonder if Humans were that fond of queues or if their culture just was that much based around all kind of organisation. Maybe it was just the AI’s rule that made the planet as it was now.

Most of the windows were operated by an automaton but the one that Stiles led them to seemed to be taken care of by an actual human. That’s also where most of the humans were standing patiently.

Derek squinted.

“Why-”

“Because my bracelet is locked against trade with bots,” Stiles snapped before he could finish the question. “For obvious reasons.”

Derek nodded silently and looked at the woman standing in their window, discussing something with the client. She then winked something into her glasses and beckoned the man to wait next to a slot on the right. The needed parts slid out just a bit later.

The next man had a much longer conversation with her. He handed over his glasses and waited patiently until she recognized the piece he was looking for. Then they began discussing the price and the… why couldn’t the man just use a recognition system or order it via that?

It was an obvious question, but one Derek knew an answer to - socialization was something not many species could live without. No matter how advanced their technology was to keep them alive without any help, it was still something life forms used only as crutches and not as recipes for life. It was something Derek understood rather well. Without his pack, a Shifter would be nothing. Ironically enough, that’s exactly what Derek was - nothing. Not by choice though.

He looked over at Stiles, who was browsing through his glasses and then back down at the holo, wondering if he should resume his reading, but he didn’t feel like it. They would grab the parts and then head back to the IA headquarters. There was no point for him to research Earth in any more detail than he already had.

~o~

Turned out Stiles was obsessively obnoxious when it came to the standard parts. Derek wasn’t sure why they couldn’t have them delivered to their huttle at the Docking, but now he understood.

Stiles took one look at the offered part, scrunched his nose and started furiously negotiating for a
different model. And when the woman at the window shook her head, he pulled out a list of alternative parts from which he could then put together his own, “better” alternative all the while muttering something about Earth being below the official AI standards - whatever that meant.

It went on for each part on their order list… up to the point where Derek thought the people behind them must have been getting restless, but no. Some of them just stood there browsing through their glasses, calm and collected. Other’s talked to their neighbour, their lenses clear and perfectly see-through. It was all rather idyllic.

Once Stiles was finally satisfied with all the components, he ordered them to be shipped to their shuttle right away and slapped his bracelet against their pad to complete the purchase. The woman in the window looked rather relieved that she was done with them.

“The nerve,” Stiles shook his head as they were leaving. “Trying to rip us off each and every time. Ugh, these IA techs.”

A thought occurred to Derek. “Did I order the wrong parts?” He could have. Or there could have been an error in the message that would render their form harder to open. Or-

“Nawh,” Stiles said, shaking his head. “The parts weren’t that bad. But I’ll be damned if I won’t get the best for my Baby.”

Derek didn’t understand what that meant per se, but he didn’t pry. Stiles seemed to take that as a sign to keep talking.

“I could have installed the same exact navigational panel, but since we need an old part, it only came second-hand from a different IA ship, that was taken apart on the Moon a while ago and… yuck. I don’t want that in our system, can you imagine?”

Derek couldn’t exactly imagine what was wrong with scavenged parts for as long as they worked fine, but he guessed with the budget IA was offering to each ship, it wasn’t really hard to fall into pickiness.

“Like I don’t wanna boast, but I can put together something way better and durable with the new parts I ordered. And they were altogether a lot cheaper that that old crap of tech too. Since they don’t make that model much anymore. It was the last one around here, yanno. Quite lucky, but still…”

_Oh_. Derek blinked. “That’s… actually quite smart,” he admitted, feeling a bit stupid for assuming otherwise.

Stiles looked at him suspiciously. “You sound rather surprised.”

Derek just shrugged and looked away.

Stiles seemed to have decided it wasn’t worth digging into because the next thing he said was: “Anyhow, since we still got some time, why don’t we go check out those reservoirs?”

_Wait… what?_

Derek’s eyes snapped back to him.

“What…?”

“Well, you know,” Stiles said shrugging. “The forests? We could take the educational path and
walk around a bit or something. It’s not that far away either.”

“But-”

Stiles shrugged again. “Better than waiting around at the IA place, trust me.”

Derek was torn and Stiles took his hesitancy as a sign to continue: “I’ve been once as a child, but I don’t remember much of it, so it might be totally boring, but it’s not like we got anything better to do anyway.”

Derek didn’t know what to say. He didn’t even know if what he felt was a positive kind of excitement or utter terror at entering an environment that was so familiar yet so alien to him. Could they really…?

“I thought you had other plans,” he said weakly.

Stiles shrugged. *Wasn’t that like a fourth time already?* “I don’t. And besides, I could use some bonding with the Mother Nature myself. I haven’t hugged a tree in years.”

Derek stood at the gate to the reservoir, his chest heaving and his eyes far too wide for their own comfort. He couldn’t believe that what he was seeing was true, but it unmistakably was, since he could smell it in the air - the moisture, the earthiness, all the different plants - so different from his home planet yet so familiar.

He walked down the path a bit, passing a family with three little children that were chasing each other down the soft gravel. His fingers trembled slightly as he reached out and pressed the pads of his fingers against the tree trunk in front of him.
“Please stay within the marked path,” he could hear from his glasses, but the voice was too far for him to register. He slid his fingers over the rough wood and his pads tingled with anticipation.

He looked up at the branches above him. He never saw leaves like that… if they could even be called leaves. They looked more like needles of sorts. He reached up and poked the end of the closest needle. It wasn’t as sharp as he had imagined.

“Done fondling the pine, dude?” Stiles teased from behind him. Derek found he didn’t mind it just as much anymore. He probably wouldn’t care even if somebody decided to stab him in the spleen just then either. That was how busy he was taking it all in.

He stepped from the tree, back onto the gravel. It made a pleasant sound under his shoes.

“What are those needles for? Protection?” he wondered aloud.

Stiles just rolled his eyes and lifted his hand to tap the glasses sitting comfortably on his nose. “Why don’t you just use these?”

Derek shrugged, then pushed the glasses from the top of his face down onto his nose and looked back to the pine.

The lenses offered him a short summary of the main attributes of the tree, but after reading a few words, he realized he didn’t care much of the actual text. He was in a forest. An actual forest. He might as well enjoy the nature as much as he could. The glasses would just be in his way.

~o~

Derek could feel eyes on him, but he ignored the feeling as they walked through the reservoir. He didn’t care if Stiles watched him front the corner of his eye. All the things around him were too marvelous,... too visceral to ignore - the rustling green leaves and grass blades, the buzzing tiny wings, the brown dirt crunching under their shoes - at some point Stiles just pointed wordlessly down a smaller path and then down and even smaller one, obviously following some map on his lenses and the population around then grew sparser and sparser as the gravel got swallowed by the dirt… and then it was just the two of them and the nature.

Every once in a while he could hear his glasses trying to inform him about this or that, but he didn’t have the capacity to listen to any of it. He filed it under “read about later” and let his eyes soak into the green shades enveloping them.

God, how he wished to run through that foliage and let go of this weak disguise, but… this was fine too. This was more than fine, he told himself, smiling. This was more than he was ever hoping of experiencing again. This was like home. (Not really, but you get the jist of it.)

“I didn’t know you were even able to smile, dude,” Stiles said, snorting as he walked next to him.

Derek did not deem the words worthy of an answer. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath in. This deep in the forest it felt almost free of the artificial cleanliness of the air filters in the city. It was a bliss. How long was it since he breathed in naturally-produced air?

“Pretty cool, isn’t it?” Stiles asked, stopping just a few steps in front of Derek. He crouched down and put his hands on the grass, his fingers sliding between the individual blades.
Derek smiled a bit more. And then his smile wavered as he caught a pair of very silent voices somewhere in-between the trees at the other side of the green wall.

“That one,” said the first voice.

“Which?” the second wondered. There was a barely hearable rustle of leaves as a body leaned forward. Derek turned his head up, pretending to be enjoying the sun filtering through the branches and listened in.

“The skinny one.”

“How so?”

“Nano.”

Derek blinked and walked down the path to be closer to Stiles just in case. Stiles was talking about something, but he didn’t pay any attention to this words anymore. Instead he focused on the voices. Where were they? He couldn’t look. It would be way too suspicious if he started to look around. He could more or less pinpoint the direction by ears only but that wasn’t enough. Not if he didn’t know if they were armed or not.

“Don’t look like Nano,” the second voice said, sniffling in disbelief.

“Hybrid I guess.”

“Still a win,” the second voice admitted after a bit of thinking.

“Fucking yeah,” the first voice said, a grin almost hearable in thee tone of his voice.

Shit.

He made a show out of looking down at his bracelet, considering their options. How to get Stiles off here without without to much ruckus? What would be a good thing to say? That the crew is waiting for them, so they should hurry back? Stiles wouldn’t be able to play along since he couldn’t hear as far to know what was brewing behind the foliage. A charade like that would blow up in his face. There must be a better option. Think. Think.

“What about other dude?” the second voice asked and Derek pursed his lips, waiting.

“Nah, human,” came an answer, making Derek exhale a bit more deeply than he usually would. Luckily, given the surroundings, it wasn’t really a suspicious action on his part.

Would they risk to attack them just to get to Stiles? Derek wondered as he crouched next to him and reached over to stroke his fingers through the grass too. It barely registered. They probably wouldn’t, or?

There was a barely audible rustle from their position, a third life form joining them. A woman.

“You fool, look at those readings,” she said.

Damn it. What kind of a scan did they have?

“You okay?” Stiles asked, looking over at him.

“Yeah… yeah,” he muttered, nodding. But on the inside he could feel the panic rising. If they had a substance scan, it wouldn’t take them long to figure out he wasn’t human… and then they of
course wouldn’t hesitate to snatch them up. Stiles on his own was probably worth a lot. If you count Derek into it… it was an opportunity nobody would want to miss.

“A bit too perfect for a human, dontcha think?” she said after a while. He should have been more careful. Damn it. Too late now.

“No malfunctions anywhere. It’s too perfect.”

Stiles’ hand moved closer to his as he leaned over to glance over at his face. “You sure, you’re fine? Is the green making you dizzy?”

“Think Nano too?” the second voice asked.

“Scan would show that,” she answered. “Might be a Holo suit.” That conclusion wasn’t any better, albeit it was not true.

Derek reached over and grabbed Stiles’ hand. He looked up at him. They had to go. Now. But if they made any suspicious moves now… they obviously had weapons with them. Was it worth it?


“I don’t have a plan,” Derek whispered, trying to communicate with Stiles via his eyes only. Not that it was working much. Stiles looked rather confused - he glanced down at his hand and then up at Derek again.

“Oh…?” he said, frowning a bit.

“You will have to trust me and not do anything stupid,” Derek mouthed urgently, squeezing Stiles’ hand.

“Dude, you are kinda freaking me out.” Stiles bit out, snatching his hand away. “What…”

He could hear the woman mutter a command as they approached. “Disable the filters.”

“Just trust me,” Derek repeated and then closed his eyes. There was a click of three safeties, a rustle and the voices finally joined them out in the open. He could hear Stiles exhale in surprise and then curse under his breath.

“Hi fellas, why don’t you join our private party?”

~o~

Derek didn’t fight and neither did Stiles, which was actually kind of surprising. He just shared a short glance with Derek and then nodded. Lifting his hands to show he was unarmed he stood up. Calmly. Smartly.

They both waited to see what would happen. Another smart move. It turned out these three were not a pack of regular snatchers one could simply outsmart - the way their formation left no room to disarm any of them, the manner with which they managed to dispose of their IA bracelets without a worry line on their human faces, the simple fact that they weren’t concerned about taking them
there and then… it meant something.

These were not to be messed with and Derek would rather stay conscious enough to come up with a plan than to wake up in a pod that was sending him who-knew-where for a who-knew-how-high price. Apparently, Stiles was thinking the same thing. Smart indeed.

They walked deeper into to the reservoir, the two men walking behind them with guns trained directly at them the whole way. The woman was walking in front of them. And nobody reacted even as they crossed a more populated area…no women screaming, no children crying… nothing. People just walked with their glasses tightly on their noses as if nothing was happening.

The glasses obviously had a perception filter on them to block out the undesirable pictures and sounds. How was it that these three were on that list of exceptions? Derek could understand maintenance or some other individuals, but for snatchers to have a this high position on a planet… wouldn’t that mean this whole place was some sort of a charade?

He glanced over at Stiles, unsure. He didn’t know what to do in this kind of situation. Remain calm and what? What would Peter do? He would just kill these three… but Derek couldn’t. Not with bare hands, not as a human, not without risking exposure. They didn’t know who he was yet… and they won’t know until quite a bit later - he needed to keep that card in his sleeve and wait for the right opportunity.

Wait.

Wait some more.

Waiting wasn’t any better than fighting. But it was the smarter option here.

~o~

It didn’t take long before they reached a maintenance tower rising above the trees of the reservoir, shiny and gleaming. And on top of it, Derek could see a small shuttle with a logo made out of three trees on it.

They used a small elevator - one man going up with Derek first, not even blinking in those few moments they had to themselves. It was an opportunity indeed, Derek knew, but he couldn’t take it. Not yet.

And it was good that he didn’t, because once they’ve reached the top of the tower, the guy waved over the edge signaling the rest of them that they could follow after. Derek would have never known that a middle finger was the sign and all the previous waiting would have been for nothing. Patience , he told himself, patience .

Once the whole group was back together, the snatchers maneuvered them inside, shoving Stiles to one side of the cargo bench and Derek to the other. The door locked behind them. Stiles looked up at Derek, his lips forming a thin line… they both knew what the locked door meant. It meant their chances of escaping just sank even lower.

Stiles’ eyes moved pointedly to the right. He could open the door at any time - Derek understood - they just had to…
“No plotting, boys,” the woman said from when she was standing in the doorway to the small pilot cabin. She was holding a needle in her hand, smiling rather unpleasantly.

“I… I wasn’t-,” Stiles whispered in terror, which startled Derek slightly. Those were the first words any of them had actually spoken ever since the safeties went off. What was going on? Did Stiles finally snap under the pressure?

The woman walked into the cargo area. “Oh, well even if you wanted to…”

She grabbed Stiles’ biceps and Stiles blanched.

“No, don’t,” he snapped, jerking away, his eyes glued to the needle. “I won’t-”

The woman tsked, her grin revealing her white teeth. “A promise ain’t enough, darling,” she chastised, reaching out to grab Stiles. He tried to jump out of the way, but the space was cramped, so he only hit the door. She backed him into the corner fast enough.

“No, please, please don’t,” Stiles begged as she towered over him.

Derek wasn’t sure what was going on - if there was something dangerous in her needle or what, but the tone of Stiles’ voice unsettled him. Maybe they should risk a-

“Nah-ah, bucko,” he heard from the door. One of the men was standing there, his gun trained in Derek’s direction. Since they still didn’t take off yet, shooting inside was not a problem. He couldn’t risk it. Or maybe he could… but he just couldn’t. Not like this. They would know. And they couldn’t know. For now he could only watch...

“No, no-no, please,” Stiles begged, but the woman pushed a gun under his chin, forcing his head to the side. “Please, I won’t, please… please…” But she didn’t acknowledge the words in the slightest and showed the needle right into the side of his neck.

Stiles whimpered, his face contorting - not in pain, but in pure terror. Derek had to bite the inside of his lip so he wouldn’t do anything stupid.

“What was that for?” he asked. “We were cooperating.”

Nobody answered. The woman pulled Stiles upright, strapping him in, while the man did the same with Derek. The straps were adjusted to work as immobilisers as well, pinning them to the benches and to the walls. They reinforced his in case his Holo suit had enhancements. Well, shit, this wasn’t looking good.

Stiles didn’t struggle, not voluntarily, but he was shaking and sounded out of breath as if he just ran a marathon. Derek didn’t like it. He tried to catch his eyes, but they were unfocused… the humming he heard around him was suddenly unhearable, somehow muffled. Derek didn’t need to know what was the needle for anymore.

“It will be okay,” he whispered unable to help himself. The woman laughed and so did Stiles. His chuckle was a lot more breathless though. He leaned back, banging the wall with the back of his head and then just closed his eyes as he breathed through the panic attack on his own. Derek could feel the quilt seep into his heart with every startled breath Stiles took in. He should have done something back at the reservoir, cover be damned. It was too late for such thoughts now though.

“Lucky you, we don’t have a jammer here,” the woman said, smiling from where she sat down next to him. She put a hand on his knee, stroking it gently, lovingly. Derek wanted to throw up.
“But no worries, we will pry it off you sooner or later. Or you know, the buyer will.”

The look she gave him reminded him of no. He blinked a few times, chasing the memory away with brute force. This was not the time to dwell on the past. He needed to remain as clear-headed as possible. Especially since Stiles was out for now.

“Don’t play with the goods,” said the man in the doorway. He spat on the floor in disgust.

She turned to her partner. “I wouldn’t if we just took the fuck off already. What’s taking them so fucking long?”

The man shrugged and at the same time the back door opened and three more snatchers pilled inside.

“What? Nothing?” the woman asked, cackling. “We win!”

The door locked once again and the shuttle fired up its engines, lifting off to fly them to who-knew-where.

~o~

It was cramped in the cargo area with four snatchers sitting with them - one at each side of Stiles, one at Derek’s right, the woman on his left.

The air turned heavy way too quickly and Derek had trouble breathing properly - it wasn’t for the fact that the woman kept stroking his knee, her nails digging into the muscles of his thigh - no, it was because the air filter wasn’t built for sustaining the crew in space. Yep. They were no doubt out in space, which was just grand. Fuck. If they had stayed on the Earth, their chances would have been bigger, but if the snatchers planed to bring them to their vessel, in the middle of fucking nowhere, the chances of escaping were down to a minimum.

Stiles must have been thinking the same, because the sides of his mouth sank more and more with each tremor, that shook the shuttle as they were passing through the atmosphere. Now he just sat there, staring at the ceiling, looking tired and dazed. But at least the panic attack passed. Not that that was any improvement on their situation.

Shit.

Shit.

~o~

It didn’t take long for them to dock, which meant they were approximately as far from the Earth as the Beacon was, just a tad further. Not that that was any helpful to know, but it gave Derek hope. The vessel might have been on the totally opposite side of the Earth, shielded by the planet, keeping the distance from the usual orbital points of the IA, but it was still better than knowing nothing.

Well… he learned only a mere moments after that he was wrong, so very wrong.
They detached them from the benches, leaving them partially strapped in the immobilisers and pushed them out of the shuttle. Derek looked up and... oh no. This was not a spaceship, that much he could already understand from the way the dock was built. But then... where? Could it be they were still on Earth? But how come...?

His mind was racing with questions he didn’t dare to ask while they ushered them between all kinds of maintenance shuttles. Derek saw ones marked with tech logos, some with the same trees as their own had... this charade obviously ran deep. Deeper than he’d expected. That realisation made his heart sink - the escape might not even be possible anymore. Shit.

He glanced over at Stiles, who looked back at him with the expression of total surrender. Well, double shit.

“You’re late!” an old woman greeted as they exited the dock area. She was dressed in a handmade sweater which was way too big for her, making her look even smaller. Not that that mattered, but Derek was too distraught to focus on practical things.

“The auction is almost over.” Ah, maybe...

“Let’s hurry then,” the woman ordered, dragging them down the well-lit hallway on the right. “We have to get rid of these fast, it’s IA merch.” Nevermind.

The corridor wasn’t long. It ended with a small door in front of which was a trio of snatchers with a scared looking female alien form. Her speakers were torn out for obvious reasons. Derek’s heart started hammering against his chest. This wasn’t good. This was way too fast. If he didn’t do anything, they would... what was the chance of them-

“Don’t,” Stiles muttered from beside him. “It’s not worth it.” He must have noticed Derek’s muscles tensing. He just didn’t understand, Derek could actually burst out of the bonds at any time. He didn’t know they could have been free a long time ago.

Derek was a coward though. Even now, he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“Stiles,” he whispered, looking over at him. They shared a look and in one terrifying moment, they found comfort in not being alone in this mess.

But then the door opened and the snatchers in front of them pushed the female inside and Derek caught a glimpse of the huge oval construction which was in fact a very modern medical scanner and the moment was over. He gulped, panicky, backing up. The muzzle of a gun pushed against his back made him stop though.

No, no no... it was indeed a medical scanner at the center of the room, surrounded by hundreds if not thousands floating cam bots, that circled the scanner in a lazy motion. Each of them greeted them with a red dormant light.

The woman was forced inside of the scanner, which clicked a few times and then one after another, few of the cam bots, moved closer, the light on the top of them turning green.

The door closed tight, obscuring Derek’s view, but he didn’t need to see more. He knew what was going on. He knew what was at stake. His cover wouldn’t hold against that sort of a scanner. He needed to-

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“Now, now, let’s not make this all more difficult than it already it,” the woman said patting the medical pocket at the side of the attire. “I would rather not damage the goods before the auction, but I will if I will have to.”
So, it was her and the guy with the gun behind him and… four more snatchers. The odds were small, true, but-

The door opened again and the man on his right grabbed Stiles, pulling him along. He didn’t resist, but he did turn around to look at Derek one last time. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed. “This is all my fault.”

_No. No, it wasn’t_ , Derek wanted to shout, _you don’t know anything_. But he couldn’t bring his mouth to work. He could only watch helplessly as they guided Stiles through the room full of cam bots and into the scanner. Stiles turned his back to Derek.

The moment the scan clicked, a vast majority of the bots circled Stiles and turned green. The door closed again before the winner of the auction could be determined, but Derek knew… that was the last time he would see Stiles if he didn’t fucking _do something_. The last time. And it wasn’t about Stiles being his colleague or friend or acquaintance or whatever… he was a life form and life forms should not be sold like some sort of slaves.

A growl erupted from his throat.

The woman in front of him startled, her hand grabbing a stun gun from her medical pocket but she was too slow. Derek already rammed into her sending her sprawling. There was a shot and electricity passed through Derek’s left calf, but he paid it no heed. He could grow new muscles, new body… he couldn’t grow freedom. Nor for him nor for Stiles.

He turned around and forced the muscles on his arms to expand. They couldn’t tear thought the bonds though, not right away anyways. He was too slow, too fucking slow, not used to combat shifting. He should have taken Peter up on that training offer. Too late now. Too late.

There was another shot. And another. The snatchers were not wasting any time. He could feel electricity run right through him, but took a step forward anyways. Another stunner hit him. And then one more. He wasn’t even sure how many it were until he couldn’t take it anymore and fell to the ground. His muscles were unresponsive, convulsing. _Fuck! Come on!_

The door opened again and two snatchers grabbed him by the bonds and pulled him inside. He would have fought against it, but the stunners were way too strong - they were calibrated to knock off a high-tech Holo suit after all and he was nowhere near that powerful right now nor could he shift. His muscles didn’t want to listen to him.

He couldn’t do anything else than let them pull him across the room with the cam bots all around and put him in the centre of the scanner. The electricity racing through his body was gone in the next instant, so that is would not interfere with the flash. It was too late though. Too freaking late. They would know… they will all know.

Before he could even stand up, the scanner clicked and clacked and all the cam bots in the room went batshit crazy when the readings got to them.

Derek was screwed.
Derek watched the waves of green envelope him, creating some sort of a glowing cave that moved all around the scanner - a mad dance of frantic bidding that scared the living hell out of him. He didn’t know what was going on behind the lenses. He didn’t know who was actually winning the auction, nor how high the price ricocheted, but he knew that somewhere among those cams, behind those feeds, they lurked, watching him, elated. They got him. Their search was over. There will be no stopping them.

Derek pushed himself up on his elbows, looking around frantically. The green was blinding him, the lights smearing into lines all around him, creating some sort of a glowy tornado.

Maybe they have actually bought him already. And if they did… then there was no doubt in his mind that they will use him to bait Peter, to get them both. He couldn’t let that happen… he couldn’t cause any more deaths in his-
Before anything more could happen though, the room went totally dark. It wasn’t just the lights, but also the bots, which… how? An orchestra of metallic thunking filled the room as they fell to the ground, unresponsive, dead. Derek looked around, startled.

Despite the dark around him, he could see the trio of snatchers move from the wall where they were cheering till now, moving in to grab him. He will have to fight them off this time no matter what. It was a good thing that he had an advantage of actually seeing what was going on around him, even in the dark. Derek stood up, ready.

The snatchers stopped when the devices in the corners moved. Lights erupted from them, blue and vibrant and criss-crossed in front of Derek. Pixels rose up, building a three dimensional face. A face that Derek recognized - it was the woman he saw on all the screens in the docking station, the owner of the voice that was filling his ears through the glasses, the woman who no doubt caused the outbreak as well - the Earth’s AI.

~o~

There wasn’t anything special about her features. One would have expected her to be perfect, symmetrical, but she looked so ordinary, Derek only now noticed that her eyes were way too close to each other and her nose was a bit too upturned. What skin color did she have under those blue hues of the projection? He couldn’t tell. While he had seen her before, she was utterly forgettable.

“This individual has been categorized as an endangered species and is therefore pardoned,” she announced.

The woman from the trio of snatchers did not look pleased about that. Figures.

“What? Come oon,” she grumbled, but the man next to her grabbed her arm to yank her back, shaking his head resolutely. The word of the AI seemed to equal law here as well.

“What about the Nano I was with?” Derek asked.

She ignored his question. “You may leave this facility as a free life form and—”

“I am not leaving without him,” Derek stated.

The AIs lips thinned and although it would have been a very human gesture, it looked somehow trained on her face. Like something artificial was moving the muscles into the needed position. Or maybe Derek was just prejudiced. He probably was… given the situation.

“The Nano Hybrid has been categorized as a property of the Moon and is therefore not a free life form with any sort of rights in this facility,” she recited. “The—”

“I am not leaving without him,” Derek repeated tersely. He knew he was playing with fire, he knew he could have just went and reported back to the Captain in a vague hope that Stiles will be saved… but he couldn’t do it. By the time Derek would get to the Beacon, Stiles could he already halfway through the Solar System in a pod that was untraceable and a destination that was encrypted. He couldn’t leave him behind. Even if he had to risk them keeping him chained up as well.

“Any imprisonment of an endangered species is a direct violation of the Source Code. The
pardoned individual will -"

“What about the IA laws? You can’t just-”

“The Intergalactic Alliance has no authority over the Moon-”

“The Earth belongs to-”

“The Moon is not registered as a part of the IA cluster and is therefore under no obligation to respond to such laws,” the AI said. Great, a loophole. A loophole the IA probably knew about and tolerated for the sake of their own profit. A loophole that made whatever points Derek might have had to appeal for Stiles’ sake invalid.

The AI smiled as if she knew there was no way around her reasoning and the door behind her slid open. He was free to go. And by the looks of it, if he wouldn’t leave by himself the snatchers would just pull him out themselves. In fact, one of them already stepped in closer to the scanner, beckoning him.

“Come on, bucko,” he said. “We will get you back down.”

Derek hesitated. It was tempting of course, but … think, there must be a way.

“We will get you off the Moon, either way,” the man added, waving his stunner.

The AI started to dissolve. She was obviously done with this conversation, having said all she needed, but Derek wasn’t… he wasn’t. There had to be something he could say.

He watched the pixels fly off her face, dissolving above her. Saw the stunner flicker in the corner of his eye. Think, Derek, think … he had to save Stiles. If he didn’t then who… wait.

“You know the identity of the Nano, don’t you? Open his IA file, authorization Derek Kasai 170/1999,” Derek said hurriedly. He side-stepped to get further away from the snatcher and concentrated on his muscles while he talked.

“The AI vessel on the orbit - find the file on Beacon. Search for the Captain!” He tensed his muscles and the bonds snapped. The snatcher stopped, watching him cautiously. He beckoned to the rest of his trio to help him out. Derek didn’t have much time, the AI holo was almost gone, but he knew she could still hear him. She definitely did.

“Access his file, same authorization code. Open his evaluation logs,” he ordered hurriedly. “And now reevaluate if the risk is of keeping the Nano here is really worth it.”

Derek was going in blind. He wasn’t really sure if the Stilinskis were that close to each other even despite the strive between them, but he could have imagine that… there must have been some sort of a bond between them. The Captain lost his wife, Stiles lost his mother - that… if that wasn’t a reason enough to wreak havoc to get his son back…

They were all waiting for the result - Derek and the snatchers alike.

“Invalid,” she said and that was when the first stunner hit him. He didn’t dawdle around though. He grabbed the wire, his arms strong and steady, and pulled with all his might. The stunner flew out of the man’s hand and landed on the floor.

The woman tried to hit him as well, but Derek jumped to the side, diving and rolling on the floor. His right leg was still under electricity, so he reached over quickly and tore the hook out from
under his knee.

“Get him!” the woman yelled at the men, but Derek was already at the other side of the room behind them, speeding up…

He grabbed one of them and threw him out of the opened door, then pushed the woman to the floor and kicked the legs from under the remaining guy.

He grabbed them both and threw them out as well. They landed on the man that was already in the middle of standing up. They flattened him to the ground.

There was no time to lose, Derek turned around and ran to a side-door he noticed while he was talking to the AI. It was locked of course.

“Escort the pardoned individual-” he could hear all around him, but he ignored the AI’s voice. He needed to get to Stiles. He needed to find him and get him out of this fucking place.

He rammed his fist into the door, it didn’t bulge. He rammed it in again, forcing his muscles to shift, to get stronger, to do his bidding. The metal bent slightly. Not enough…

“Get him off the auction room!” somebody yelled from the hallway and he could hear several voices squabbling about using guns. Their argument was settled by an old-sounding voice. Apparently the AI wanted to preserve his life. How kind.

Derek took a few steps back, shifting as much as he could in the small amount of time he had left. His body grew bigger, stronger, more agile and far superior than any ounce of metal gilded into a simple door could be.

The snatcher woman screamed as she saw the change happening and her stunner fell to the ground. One of the men who was talking to his holo stopped and stared as well. Derek had other things to do than to enjoy the attention though. He ran against the door and broke through with one swift movement.

He didn’t stop, he couldn’t… he ran down the corridor following the scent. Stiles. He went this way. He turned left and then right, plummeted through a few humans on the way who were armed with stunners. They did try to stop him but he ignored their attempts and just ran on.

Another door stood in his way. It was closed and didn’t seem to be opening any time soon, so he sped up, sinking down to all four and rammed into it. Something in his shoulder crackled, splintering through his flesh, but the door gave in a bit and he was able to push it out of the way at least enough for him to pass through.

It was just another hallway, but that was okay. He could just follow Stiles’ scent until… the fans in the wall whirled at full speed, filtering the air in the hallway. The scent he was tracking disappeared in an instant. All he could smell was clean artificial air. Shit.

The door down the hallway opened revealing a few snatchers armed with stunners. He could hear footsteps from behind the broken-down door. He was cornered.

Derek growled, shifting even further to reveal his long sharp teeth. The snatchers stopped, keeping their distance, but that could only hold them off for so long, especially when the AI kept chanting her annoying words over and over again: “Escort the pardoned individual-”

There were two doors down the hallway, one a bit closer to the snatchers waiting for him and one closer to him, a bit more to the left. Just as he was about to head for the closer one, a stunner hit
him in the neck. He could feel his muscles convulsing, the electricity triggering involuntary shifts, but... one stunner was nothing. He reached behind, tore it out of his flesh and ran for the door.

He jumped at the wall opposite of the door, used it as a stepping-stone and rammed into the door in full strength. He probably broke his shoulder blade doing that, but the door gave in with a haunting creak and he slipped inside with a painful whine tearing out of his throat. Frantic footsteps followed after him, but he used the busted door to barricade himself in the cabin.

*Now what?* - he wondered silently as he leaned against the heavy door, willing his shift to fix his broken bones. The bones refused to fix though, his mind wasn’t in the right place for such a ritual - he was too panicked, too unfocused.

He stepped away from the door, falling down on all four (actually three because the broken shoulder blade wouldn’t let him move his right arm) and exhaled through his long teeth. It hurt quite a lot. He could... he couldn’t... for fuck’s sake. Derek closed his eyes, breathing erratically.

The snatchers were trying to get in, trying to trigger the emergency override on the broken door, the AI could not help them with that, they needed to send somebody to get some heavy machinery for that. The AI dispatched some droids, which meant he still had a bit of time.

He looked around the cabin in hope to find something that could help him. Anything. And what he saw... the cabin was full of transport pods. They were lining the walls in a few rows on each side, leading to another door that was so reinforced Derek would be in no shape capable of getting through it - which meant only one thing. That was a door that led out into the Dock. Which meant...

Derek looked around the pods, ignoring the ones with a red light near the control panel casing - those had a closed window and he couldn’t see in without the code anyways. That was fine though. Red meant empty.

The closest green one was housing a life form Derek didn’t know the name of - it was already wired up into the pod’s internal system, sleeping a dreamless cryo sleep.

He turned around to the row on the other side of the cabin and spotted the woman that was sold before Stiles. Her eyes were open and full off terror, but she wasn’t moving. She was probably wired in for a while already, so the drugs must have kicked in. She would be asleep in no time.

So then... his eyes skipped to the last green pod on the left and met with Stiles’. He had his hand on the small glass window, staring at him with eyes full of disbelief.

Before any of them could say or do anything though, the door was broken through and a volley of stunners hit Derek, forcing him to the floor. He fell, boneless, his body flopping around like a life form who was forced out of the water. He couldn’t do much... not when the snatchers walked in grabbing him by the legs, not when they started to pull him out. He reached out, trying to sink his claws into the floor, but his arms were weak and his muscles were shifting in a way that was not natural to him. He couldn’t even breathe properly. Grabbing was a concept foreign to his brain at this state.

The big reinforced door opened and Derek saw the shuttle from the reservoir ready to load him in. *No, no* ... he looked up at the pod that had Stiles in it. He had to... he had to somehow... *no*.

“Stiles!” he yelled, the word coming out as a howl. “Stiles!”

He could see him watching through the thick glass of the pod. He could see him frowning in
confusion and disbelief, his hand pressed against the plexi and… Derek couldn’t actually see any of it. His brain was feeding him all of this on its own.

The snatchers dragged him out of the cabin right into the Docking area and the reinforced door slid closed. He wanted to fight, wanted to bust through the door and… but he couldn’t. He couldn’t even move properly. The electricity was too much.

That was when he realized the truth of the situation: He couldn’t save Stiles. He wouldn’t be able to save him.

They restrained his flopping body with bonds he knew were designed for a far greater threat then he was and then they pulled him into the shuttle.

It was a small consolidation that the electricity was cut off once the engines kicked in. It was a small consolidation that he had survived… free. He left Stiles behind. And though he didn’t think of Stiles as anything more than a colleague and although he barely knew him and although they were practically strangers… the fact that he alone was allowed to go and Stiles had his freedom forcefully taken from him… it dug in way too deep.

He failed him. Same as he failed his pack all those quantons ago. Nothing changed. Nothing ever will.
Derek didn’t struggle when they pushed him off the shuttle, still bound, still in the air. It wasn’t really that far off the surface, but he landed painfully anyways. His broken bones protested loudly enough for Derek to grunt as he hit the platform at the reservoir. They didn’t wait around for him to get free, nor did they check if he was all well. They just flew away, back to the Moon, probably to collect their payoff.
There was somebody else on the platform. A young human girl stood at the edge and once Derek registered her, he contemplated to roll right into her and push her off the platform. Because he was just that angry. But she wasn’t the one who needed to be punished.

“Whoa, what are you?” she asked, moving a bit closer to get a better look at him. She looked as old as Cora was when… no, stop, focus.

It was dark outside and even darker so in the reservoir. He wasn’t sure if it was the same platform as the one before,… His sense of space was all over the place. He growled at her, struggling in the bonds. He couldn’t get them off, not even in this form.

“Dude, stop struggling,” she said rolling her eyes. She didn’t seem to be worried about much. “Wait... wait, just let me. Jeezus.”

She reached over and pressed a magnetizer against the pad on the bonds. The assemble went slack almost immediately and he was on his feet just as fast, baring his teeth at her. She jumped back a bit, watching him cautiously.

“You wouldn’t hurt your driver, wouldya?”

He contemplated that for a bit and then shook his head. She nodded back at him satisfied.

“So you are actually the first one that got pardoned in a very long time, dude. Suck for you I guess,” she said, turning around to head to the elevator. “Come on, I will get you back home. Or you know, to the port anyways.”

“I need to get back,” he said, the growling and a mouth full of fangs probably making his words indistinct.

She stopped, peered back at him and then shrugged. “No, can’t do, I’m afraid. Why would you want to go there, anyways? They ain’t gonna sell you anyways. Try elsewhere.”

“No,” Derek admitted angrily. “They… they have my…” He didn’t know how to finish that sentence.

“It’s too late, man. Come on, let’s get you back,” she said, pushing the button on the elevator.

Derek didn’t know what to do. He didn’t understand what was happening. It was all way too bizarre. He was up there just a few moments ago, fighting a dozen of snatchers and now he was here - back on Earth - and this girl was just acting as if nothing was happening. As if she was just some… driver to get him back from a fun night out. But that...

“Come on,” she said as the elevator door opened.

Derek swallowed, looked back at the sky and then back at the girl.

“But I need to,” he repeated dumbly. What did he exactly need to do? He couldn’t get back to the shuttle, it was nowhere to be seen. It was… and even if he did manage to somehow get back to the Moon station. Stiles was probably gone already… he was...

“I need a shuttle to go back,” he tried to explain, but his words slurped.

She sighed, letting the door close. “Look, I don’t think Imma the right person for this kind of shit. You can’t go back. This is not how it works. So… why don’t you tell me which port you need to be exported to, so I can finally go home today.”
Derek didn’t think he understood what was going on, but he guessed he had no other choice anyways. He was tired and hurt and he didn’t even know where he was and how to get back to the Sheriff. He didn’t have his bracelet, nor his glasses and he didn’t have… Stiles, he thought bitterly.

“So are you coming or not?” she asked impatiently.

Derek looked down at his shifted body and pursed his lips. “I need to change back first.” His clothes were in pieces. Right.

“And I… need some clothes,” he added awkwardly.

The girl looked at him then down at her coat and sighed.

~0~

“So what’s the deal here? Why the special treatment? Gimme all the stuff,” the girl asked as she drove him through the silent night streets of the city. There weren’t many humans out and about, only here and there a few walked around in loud groups. It was way past 3am she had said as if that was supposed to mean anything to Derek.

She couldn’t stop asking shit. But he didn’t deem her questions worthy of answering. He was barely keeping his eyes open at this point. His bones ached, not exactly broken anymore but… but he was glad for the pain, for the exhaustion. He relished in it, forcing himself to accept it as a part of his punishment and approval at the same time.

“Can’t imagine such cool alien not getting sold. What you like change into other animals too?” she went on.

Derek didn’t even care for being called an alien, an animal at that. Even if that usually would be unacceptable. He barely cared about anything at that moment.

“Seriously though, wontcha tell me? This is like the most exciting thing that happened to me, apart from petting a real dog a few years back, yanno. They sold him too. A Rarity. Speaking of which, your other form—”

“Why are you people doing this?” Derek asked suddenly unable to listen to her blabber anymore. “Why?” He needed to know.

She hummed, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

“Like what exactly? The Moon business?” she asked casually. It was pissing Derek off. He wanted to break something. Her for starters and then work himself down the list, all the way down to the pod keeping Stiles sealed away. That was the last and most important thing.

“Why?” he asked again, growling. He could feel his teeth getting sharper and welcomed it.

“Pfsshhht, I dunno.” She shrugged. “Some economic thing or other. I am just a driver honestly. You want me to understand these things?”

“But it’s wrong!” he barked, hitting the panel in front of him.

“Wow, dude, calm down,” she said quickly, reaching over to pat the panel.
“I don’t… I don’t understand,” Derek muttered, actually feeling bad for almost attacking the girl. It wasn’t her fault that this whole planet was twisted.

“Ugh, well, of course you don’t,” she said. “It’s not like you know how it was before the AI. It was like… well I dunno but we were all shitty and everything was going to shit and yanno… shitty situation. I mean look around you. Looks all super nice doesn’t it. Like… this is how it works. And it actually works. And it’s fair now. We all get just enough, but not too much. And most people don’t care that this is how it works, since they are not in the business. I mean I barely am, I am just like… around it sometimes. But yanno. We get to have this,” she gestured around. “And all the shit ain’t even here, it’s up there. So what if we sell a few illegal things. It sponsors the whole thing down here yanno.”

Derek scowled.

“I wouldn’t expect an alien like you to understand. Your world is probably all shiny and hyper modern and… oh don’t give me that look, I bet you guys have your own shit. Don’t blame us for joining the bandwagon.”

“So you just sell strangers-”

“What? No dude,” she said shaking her head. But then she sniffed and frowned. “Well, I guess yea, but like… anything yanno. Whatever is good to sell. Sometimes it’s our stuff, sometimes it’s stuff we find I guess. I dunno. Useful stuff.”

Derek wasn’t sure if he was able to scowl a bit more than he already was. “You wouldn’t be so lenient, if they decided to snatch up you or your friend,” he pointed out angrily.

“Naw dude, I wish, but humans don’t got much value in the galaxy in case you didn’t notice,” she said with a hint of sadness. “People can join the auction though, but they barely get sold. Nothing usable about these weak bodies, yanno - well I guess depends. I heard a bunch of people won an auction for some dude across the universe who had some sort of a bar or some shit. We are super resistant to alcohol or… whatever he was selling.”

Derek never heard of something like that happening, not through official channels, nor through their own channels, but of course… life forms barely ever talked about this galaxy. There wasn’t really much here and what was left, humans claimed for their own after the arrival of the IA.

He should have made a better research before he went down here. He should have… wait.

“So there is a way of knowing where those sold in auction were sent to?”

She grimaced. “I see where ya going with that but… ugh well I guess, I dunno. Maybe it was just a rumor yanno.”

“But there is a way,” he repeated looking over at her.

“Well I guess it’s in the database or some shit,… but nobody is gonna give you the info no matter what you do,” she admitted, shrugging. “I guess some dudes up there on Moon know too, but you will never get to them either.”

“Can’t you find out?”

The vehicle screeched and stopped in the middle of the road. She turned to him and glared. “You listen here,” she ordered sternly and tapped her glasses. “I am not going to go against the Source Code alright? Those who go against it end up badly… nobody would willingly go against the
Code, not in this System anyways. Do your illegal shittalk elsewhere.”

Derek was in loss for the words.

She nodded as if she was satisfied by his expression and then resumed the drive in silence, the light on her glasses blinking gently.

Derek didn’t speak for the rest of the ride.

~o~

The girl got him all the way to the dock, her glasses opening up all the side-doors so they could slip in unseen. Literally unseen - at one point they were passing a family of four humans and they didn’t even blink at his attire. Weren’t he paying enough attention himself, one of the children would have run right into him.

They passed through the bracelet check without any complications as well. Just slipped through without any of the employees even sparing a look their way.

“Right, so… this is where I leave you,” she said, stopping right after they crossed the entrance to the docks. It was rather silent for an international station, but Derek paid it no attention. He had other things to think about.

He looked at the girl helplessly. “I-” he shrugged, feeling defeated by the system and somehow swept along and… just all kind of negative stuff.

“Don’t make that face,” she smiled, patting him on the shoulder. “You can keep the coat. They can pay me back. See? Everybody is taken care of in the end. Ain’t that a lovely thing.”

Derek just nodded and watched her walk back through the gate.

And since he had nowhere else to go, he headed over the platforms, following the lines on the floor. He found their shuttle not too long after. It was really hard to miss - the only IA shuttle in the whole dock after all - those things tend to stand out, even if this one was nothing fancy.

He sat down at the base of the shuttle and waited.

~o~

“What in the name of…?”

Derek stood up so quickly the vertigo caught up with him in no time. He blinked, forcing the drowsy nap from his eyes and refocused on the Sheriff who was walking to the shuttle, followed closely by Danny and Deaton. Danny had an amused look on his face, looking up and down the bright red coat wrapped around his naked form and Deaton was… well, pretty much lifeless when it came to expressions.

“Did Stiles take you out partying?” Danny laughed.
“Where is-” The Sheriff started but the look on Derek’s face stopped him. “Where…?”

Derek gulped. “She… they… they took him,” he babbled, unable to look him in the eyes.

He had to give the Sheriff one thing, he caught up pretty quickly. “They… the Moon?”

Derek nodded. The Sheriff’s face remained without any sort of emotion. “I see.” He looked over at Danny who nodded and went ahead to prep the shuttle. Derek followed him with worried eyes.

“Are we… going to the Moon?” he wondered aloud.

“No, son… we are going back to the Beacon,” the Sheriff said, shaking his head. “Our business here is done.”

An army of skin crawlers passed over his spine. He could feel the hair on his body rising with a horrendous premonition.

“But… what about…?” he asked, his heartbeat quickening.

“The Moon chooses who it needs to choose, it’s not up to any of us to question those decisions,” the Sheriff said sternly. “We are returning back to the Beacon. Now.”

Derek couldn’t believe his ears. Was he hearing well? Was this a father that had just lost his son to the vicious charade dirtying this beautiful planet? Or was he perhaps trapped in a pod, drugged, sold, living through a horrible nightmare.

“We are on a tight schedule and the IA-”

“What about Stiles?” Derek whispered, horrified.

“Stiles has served his purpose-”

Derek took a step away from the Sheriff as if he was worried the disgusting mindset will envelop him too.

“How can you-”

The Sheriff shook his head and beckoned to Deaton, who promptly grabbed Derek’s biceps. The hold was strong, so strong it hurt him, but it was nowhere near the pain and confusion he was feeling inside of his chest. What kind of a father would leave his son to slave-traders? What kind of a Captain…?

“We are leaving,” the Sheriff ordered, waving his hand at the opened door.

Derek shook his head. “No. No we are not. We have to-”

“Mr. Kasai may I remind you that I am your Captain and any violation of the AI codex will leave you unemployed before you can even blink,” he said, his voice reminiscent of a sharp steel shrapnel. “Not listening to my orders is such a violation. Now get into the shuttle before I strip you of your rank.”

Derek pursed his lips, but he still didn’t move. He couldn’t. How could he? He knew it was too late to save Stiles by now, but the blatant refusal to acknowledge something bad has happened made his stomach reel, made his limbs unmovable, his expression harden.

And yet.
And yet.

He couldn’t stay on the planet. Oh, how selfish was he for considering it, but what other choice did he have? The Beacon was his only escape route out of here. It was his only way out. By now, they were definitely on their way to Earth and endangered species or not, they would catch him eventually. He couldn’t let that happen. He promised Peter he wouldn’t let that happen.

And so, with a churning stomach and a sickness rising within him, he looked back at the Sheriff and saluted, following him into the shuttle like a scrabby obedient mut that he was.

~o~

Derek was sitting in the back, his elbows braced on his knees as he leaned forward and watched the floor. He couldn’t stop thinking of Stiles - where was he now and how insignificant it all seemed for the people around. Was he the only one who cared? Was this a cultural thing? Maybe Shifters really were different than the Humans. Maybe-

“All good Sheriff,” Danny said as he walked to the back of the shuttle. Derek forced his head up to look at the pilot and frowned. “We are out, Jackson will take care of the rest by remote.”

“Alright,” the Sheriff nodded. He was sitting opposite of Derek, still and stony... up until then. His schooled expression slipped and a worried look settled deep in his wrinkles.

“How did that happen? Did you take off your bracelets?” he inquired, looking at him. Derek frowned at the sudden tension in the air, but did not hesitate to answer as fast as possible “Of course not, but-”

The Sheriff cursed under his breath. “He didn’t turn them off,” he muttered. It was more of a statement than a question. “He was supposed to turn them off, so that scanners wouldn’t detect…”

“I don’t-” Derek started, but the Sheriff continued with his own tirade, paying little to no attention to him: “He didn’t… that foolish...”

“Stiles kept the Nanobots on,” Danny supplied as if Derek would need that info. He didn’t.

“I didn’t know he can turn them off,” he said curiously. Like, of course he understood why Stiles didn’t want to turn them off on a regular basis, ever even - he didn’t want to end up like his mother probably? But why wouldn’t he do that if he knew… Derek’s lips thinned. He knew why of course. It was probably the same reason as he had for not wanting to change into his original form.

The Sheriff swore under his breath, but continued with his questioning. “When did they take him? Do you know the exact time? Or at least... how long ago?” He turned over to Danny. “Maybe the auction didn’t start yet? Maybe we could negotiate…”

“They took us both before the sun went down,” Derek admitted slowly. He didn’t want to reveal all of it. Just the important details. “They just... didn’t sell me.”

“I shouldn’t have allowed him to come,” the Sheriff croaked, his fingers digging into his forehead. “I shouldn’t have…”

Danny reached his hand over to him. “You didn’t know he would disregard your-”
“I should have known!” The Sheriff cut off angrily. “I should have known,” he repeated slower. “I should have.” He got up and walked to the front of the shuttle, agitated. Derek wasn’t sure what to make of it. It was different than what he was used to from the Sheriff till now.

“Sorry about that charade down there,” Danny said out of nowhere. “We had to play it cool, the AI is everywhere back on Earth, it’s not good rebelling out in the open.”

Derek thought back on the girl who took him back to the Docks and nodded hesitantly. “I thought—”

Danny laughed. “I know full well what you thought. I could see it in your reaction.” The laughter was gone in the next instant though. “I know what it looks like to Outsiders, a ship full of humans.” He gestured between them. “No other ship in the IA has that many humans on board, not ones that come from this system at least. But that has a reason, you know, and it’s a different one that you probably had in your head till now.”

Derek wondered how much of that is true and how much is Danny’s positive attitude. Although they didn’t know each other much, he had a hunch that might be it. At least to some extent. But still… could it be that he missed this one thing?

“Humans have little value to the auction, which I am sure you have noticed firsthand,” Danny said as if he was reading his thoughts. “It would be too dangerous for a valuable life form with the AI’s Source Code in effect. The Sheriff wanted to avoid… well exactly this happening.”

“But then… the pilot?”

Danny sat down next to him and hummed. “Well, I guess that’s why Sheriff looks out for him that much. You know that Whittemorians are a delicacy on Mandoria?”

Derek nodded dumbly.

“Well… there is definitely a Mandorian or two looking for a nice meal in that auction. There are all kinds of people… sorry, life forms, there.”

It was starting to dawn on him. He looked to the front of the shuttle, skimmed the sagged shoulders of the Sheriff who was standing with his back to him and… he couldn’t actually believe he didn’t consider there being a reason behind his actions. Other than the obvious one of course.

Still...

“But then… the whole… Stiles situation…,” he asked, without actually asking.

“Well, Stiles is… Stiles,” Danny shrugged. “Like… I don’t know, okay? I get what you mean… this whole bullying situation on the ship, but… he is kinda in fault too, he is a very… antagonizing individual. Rules are a bit…”

Derek frowned at him and Danny put up his hands in defence. “I didn’t mean to…” He sighed. “Yeah okay, relationships are hard, man. I don’t know… I don’t move in those circles much you know. I keep to the Docks and out in the open. Like I guess? But I don’t know what’s going on most of the time. I guess you’re right… it is a situation and the Sheriff is probably unsure how to solve it, I guess. Stiles is his son, yet he needs to remain objective. Like I said, I don’t actually know what’s going on, but you are right, there is something going on.”

Derek wasn’t sure what to say to that, so as per his personal rule, he didn’t say anything. This wasn’t really important at that moment anyways.
“But he cares.” Danny added confidently. “He cares about his crew and that’s what’s important. That’s what’s going to get Stiles back, believe me.”

He honestly didn’t know if that will be enough in this situation, but he didn’t have to react because that was when the shuttle shuddered as the stabilisers turned off. They have reached the Docks on the Beacon.

The Sheriff walked back and beckoned them to follow. “Called an emergency meeting at the bridge. Let’s go.”
Chapter 9

Contrary to the popular belief there was no huge window pointing out into the vast space on the Bridge. In fact it resembled more the assembly they had back at the Root - with more screens and more stations, but overall - the general feel of a stuffed can floating in space with just a few sensors to see through would be a rather fitting description.

The Captain’s station was a regular set-up with a table and three screens, standing above the rest on a smaller rise at the back of the Bridge. It was the first thing one saw when entering the cabin - the back of the Captain commanding rows and rows of smaller set-ups in front of him.

Derek would have compared it to a human class. If he knew what a class looked like, anyways.

That of course meant that the rest of the crew was working with their backs to the actual big screen at the front of the cabin. Now having the crew facing the Captain and out of the view of the huge
screen had its merits - at least that’s what the IA experts said - for one, they weren’t distracted by whatever was going on in the space around them. They handled the stress better and they were more prone to just sit on their bloody asses and concentrate on their own particular task.

Derek personally thought that was a bit of… well a tad more than the usual bullshit, but that was just his opinion. It might have had something to do with the fact that Peter’s ship was a four-member crewed steered by just the two of them and they both trusted each other not to get distracted in dangerous situations… but of course, the IA took in all kinds of people and most of them would obviously get distracted by giant screens in front of them. That... actually didn’t speak well for the IA, but whatever.

Now, Derek didn’t actually have any time to contemplate any of this, because the moment they walked in, they headed to the row with most of the Bridgers standing around and the Sheriff asked him to recap what had happened after they were taken. Which he did… in less detail than was needed, but the basics were there - they jumped them in the reservoir, took them to a shuttle, flew them to the Moon, then there was an auction and Derek was disqualified right after they sold Stiles to who-knew-who. And that was basically it - they just flew him back and dropped him off at the same place where they took him and the girl led him back to the Docks.

Jackson smirked up at him, his tongue flitting out of his mouth and he went up and down his body. “What’ssss up with the whole…get-up? What exactly were you doing in that reservoir with Ssssstilinski?”

Derek wanted to growl and rip his face off with his own bare hands for even trying to make fun of the whole situation, but luckily the Coach was faster. “I would recommend you hold your tongue if you have nothing productive to say. This is a serious matter, boy.”

“Juust saying,” he snorted, shrugging. Nobody looked amused, not even Lydia. Maybe only the man standing next to him in whom Derek recognized the “Nourish” guy.

Jackson continued: “I mean I wasn’t the one who went down there promenading valuable alien features for all of them to see.”

“Be so kind and shut up, boy,” the Coach said, scoffing in his his direction. “Save that for when I ain’t around.”

“Agreed,” Boyd muttered almost soundlessly. Derek shared a grateful look with him. Not that that shut the Whittemorian up: “Why all this fusssss anyways? I-”

The Sheriff pushed himself from the back of the table set-up and turned to face him. “That’s enough. Stiles is a crew member of the Beacon and you will not question the reasons behind this emergency briefing. You know I don’t tolerate unequal treatment on this ship. Were it you on the Moon we would be holding the same exact briefing now, discussing how to get you back, so either participate or you will be dismissed.”

There was a hissing sound but Lydia hummed under her breath and it stopped. His tail lowered down and he nodded - which looked a bit weird on a Whittemorian since they didn’t usually nod. This one though, seemed more human than lizard… it was all posturing with him, Derek realized, but the vicious grandior his species possessed was not present.

“Now,” the Sheriff started, looking over at the only female in their group. “What’s the status on your side Lydia?”

She raised her wrist to bring up her holo and scrolled through the list. Clicking on a line, she shook
her head. “I contacted the authorities back on Earth to see if there is anything to be done via the official channels. Sometimes it happens that an auction can be at least reopened if given terms are met-”

“And?” the Sheriff interrupted eagerly.

“Well, they can’t do anything about Stiles’ auction sadly.”

That didn’t really surprise Derek considering how the girl back on Earth was viewing the whole Moon business. If that went for each Earth-based human then… well it was still stupid, but that’s apparently how things went down there. Selfish human bastards.

“Why not?” the Sheriff asked.

She squinted at the holo in front of her. “The buyer apparently paid extra for a non-negotiable deal.”

“Probably saw the uniform,” Boyd said nodding.

“Could be,” she answered, shrugging.

“We can double the price maybe or something?” said a man standing next to the Coach. Derek never saw him before, but judging by the color of his uniform he must be working on the Bridge too. “Ya know outpay the buyer or-”

The “Nourish” guy, a stern-looking man with glasses scoffed. “Like how do you propose we get such money, Parish? It’s not like we can sell the ship and I doubt anybody would-”

“Then how do we get him back?” the Sheriff asked, his voice rising over the man’s voice. “Any ideas?” He looked around them. “Any at all? There must be a way,”

A few heartbeats filled with silence were suddenly interrupted by Boyd. “Can’t we hack the system to find out where they’ve sent Stiles?”

All eyes shifted over to Danny, who was standing around rather awkwardly. Well all but for Derek’s.

“Dude,” Danny whined, rolling his eyes. “That was years ago, alright? And it’s sealed, so I don’t know how you know about it, but no… no. Like even if I were up for it... hacking her? That’s a whole new level of impossible.”

“Any friends of yours willing to take the job?” asked the man standing next to the Coach. There was something in his features that reminded Derek of Stiles for some reason - maybe his light-colored eyes. Parrish, they said?

“I haven’t been in touch with any of them for years,” Danny said, folding his arms over his chest. “Even if I was, nobody is suicidal enough to hack her. Even if someone was skilled enough, she would find out for sure. And you know what she does to those who break the Source Code.”

A pregnant silence fell over the cabin. Derek was glad for it. He didn’t want to know what’s the worst thing the AI could do given the chance..

Still, Deaton probably didn’t care about how the atmosphere turned, because he spoke up as if the conversation didn’t break into pieces just a few moments ago: “I humbly propose to report back to the IA and-”
The Sheriff nodded. “I can ask a few IA friends….” But even having said that he still looked a bit clueless as to that to do.

“Anything else?” he asked looking up at each of them respectively. People shook their heads, Jackson hissed and Derek… well, he didn’t say anything. He had his own wheels turning inside his skull. But those he couldn’t really share. Not in front of all of them anyways.

~o~

“How did it go?” Was the first thing Erica asked when they entered the Root. Well actually she jumped right off the seat and bombarded them with all kinds of questions, but this was the one Derek’s brain registered first.

Honestly, he had no answer for her.

“Just connected the Sheriff to the official IA channels,” she recapped, pointing at Isaac who was typing behind Boyd’s station. “Is there anything else we can do?”

Boyd shook his head. “It’s quite the dead-end, I’m afraid.”

Erica didn’t look all too happy about that. “Then how are we gonna get him back?”

Boyd looked over at him and then back at her, a hopeless look painting his features. “We have to wait for what the Sheriff finds out,” he decided to say in the end. It was a rather general answer.

“Is there nothing else?” She scowled. “There must be something. We can’t just sit around doing nothing, while they…” She left the end hanging in the artificial air, the truth of the situation veiled behind her silence. Derek didn’t want to think of where Stiles might be at that moment - probably in a stasis in that fucking pod - living, breathing, feeling, but frozen until the pod opens to a whole new kind of hell.

“Did they ask Danny to-”

“Yes, they did, but he doesn’t know anybody who would be willing to-” Derek did though, didn’t he. Didn’t he?

Isaac sighed. “Honestly, nobody is that good. Or crazy for that matter.”

Oh, but Peter surely is, thought Derek bitterly. Was it worth to blow his cover even more than he already did? If he was any sort of rational and selfish, he would have left it all at that, happy that the only life form who saw his real form from this vessel was out of the picture. But he couldn’t do that. He wasn’t that sort of a person … not because he was parading a human body to fool everybody, but because… he couldn’t just let somebody behind. Not again.

He looked down at the floor, his brain full of oxymorons. Should he do something or should he keep hiding? He came here to hide, he came here to stay undercover and mere cycles later, he has not only broadcasted his whereabouts to the whole outer community, but also led Stiles into danger.

Somewhere out there are his enemies, searching for him, probably heading this way already. And if he won’t be careful, they will find him and not even an IA flagship will stop them.
He needed to lay low… he needed to there were many things he needed to maintain, but was he really willing to trade another life form’s freedom for that? *Shit.* Stiles wasn’t his kin, he wasn’t his blood, his pack… and yet. And yet, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he needed to do something. Something *more* still.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” Erica said. “Not to any of us. The Beacon was supposed to be the safest thing there is in this whole system for aliens. We were supposed to be off-limits. Stiles was supposed to be-”

Boyd folded his arms over his chest. “That’s true, but Stiles wasn’t really careful. And now...”

“Still,” she muttered. “He doesn’t deserve to be left behind.” She shook his head. “This isn’t right, Vernon.” She sniffed, tears spilling from her eyes. “He wrote up my treatment under his Nano health insurance… if he didn’t I…”

“I know,” Boyd said, reaching over to put his hand on her shoulder. “I know, but…”

“We have to help him somehow,” she said, crying. Before more snot could spill out from her nose, she retracted her arm from the sleeve and her bare hand appeared behind her visor, wiping at her face.

“Is there nothing we can do?” she asked when her face was cleaner.

Boyd’s lips thinned and he looked over at Derek. “You were there when they sold him and I know you probably already wrecked your brain a dozen times… but was there something that might help us? Something you heard? Maybe saw?

“You were on the Moon?” Isaac asked horrified. “Like actually-”

Derek nodded, slightly self-conscious. It’s not like that was an achievement. It would have been if they had escaped from them before anything bad could have happened. That was probably the one thing that would have saved them and Derek will regret for a long time that he just didn’t grab Stiles’ hand and didn’t run for it when he first honed in on the Snatchers behind those trees. Damn trees. Damn nostalgia.

“They snatched us both for the auction,” he admitted. “Didn’t sell me though.”

“Oh gosh,” Isaac breathed.

“Yeah, I… I tried to get him out, but…” He shrugged, words stuck in his throat. He could still feel the stunners on him, the electricity piercing through his body. “I got to the pod where they were keeping him, but they pulled me out before I could even...”

“What the fuck, dude,” Isaac breathed, watching him. “Like I wouldn’t even be able to-”

Erica walked to him and gave him a very awkward side-hug. Or well… it was awkward for Derek because he wasn’t sure what to do when she circled his torso and trapped his arms, but still. It was a sort-of nice gesture.

“I’m fine,” he said dumbly. He looked over at Boyd, feeling a little helpless, but he just gave him a shrug and a smile back.

“Glad you are,” Erica said sniffling.

Isaac snorted. “Being human has its perks after all.”
“Myeah, still...”

Erica finally let go of him, retracting her hand once again to take care of the tears and mucus expelling from her face.

“They didn’t hurt you though, did they?” She asked then, which... okay, she was actually the first person who wondered about that. It was oddly nice.

“I’m fine,” he repeated.

“Good good,” Isaac said. “Now can we address the elephant in the room?” The.. what? “What’s up with that coat?” Oh.

Derek looked down. Right, he was still just covered in that bright red garment the girl gave him. “My uniform got messed up,” he admitted.

“But you are fine,” Isaac stated, Derek nodded.

“But your uniform was messed up beyond a usable limit,” he added, looking at him. Derek nodded again.

Isaac took a deep breath in and shrugged, turning back to the screen to input a few things into the opened log.

“Any news?” Boyd asked.

“Judging by how short the calls were... but let’s see.” Isaac typed in the command and the logs opened up with the automatically transcribed text. They all moved closed to the screen, skimming through the words. “Doesn’t look like-”

Erica sniffled again.

Boyd sighed.

It was hopeless.

Shit. Shit.

Derek gulped. His throat was dry. His heart was beating erratically in his chest. He had to risk it. He had to. If there was nothing else to save Stiles, then there was no other choice. He wouldn’t be better than the ones hunting him if he didn’t. Shit. Okay.

“I know a guy,” he heard himself say with a shaky voice. He steeled himself. “But I would need a black-out line to get in touch with him.”

They all looked at him with various stages of curiousness and suspicion. Boyd straightened up, a thoughtful expression on his face. “So... you want me to authorise a shielded, clipped, no-trace, no-log, no-anything, one-way channel for a person who didn’t even pass the trial period yet?”

“Well...” Derek shook his head, laughing helplessly. He waved his hand in the direction of the screen logs.

“I could get suspended for such a thing,” Boyd informed him sternly. “All of us could.”

“I know,” Derek said nodding.
“Are you sure this person can get us the info?” Isaac asked.

“Yes.”

“100% sure?” Erica questioned.

Derek nodded again.

Erica and Isaac looked over at their leader and after a short contemplation gave a short nod.

Boyd took a deep breath in and then nodded as well. “Alright then. Let’s do this.”

~o~

Derek was sitting in his cabin, the holo in front of him showing an establishing connection. He was all alone, just as requested, the Root team back at the station setting up all the needed configurations.

Derek himself still didn’t exactly believe they have let him do this. But obviously desperate times call for desperate measures and well… these were such times.

The holo blinked and Peter’s stern face appeared on it. His human features were put together in their usual way - there was a certain shape he always went for, one that reminded Derek of his mother a bit too much. But of course, as per custom he did the same with his own, so...

“Twenty nine, five, ninety six,” Peter said.

Derek knew exactly what the suited answer to this code was. “Eleven, six, ninety,” he muttered.

Peter’s face relaxed a bit and he nodded in acknowledgement. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked. “I wouldn’t have expected a black-out line from you. Not while on the IA vessel anyways..”

“I need your help,” Derek admitted.

Peter squinted, as if trying to see who else is there with him. Though by default a black-out like is as shielded as it can get, he was still paranoid about it. But who wouldn’t be. It shouldn’t even be possible to set-up one on a IA vessel.

“So who is covering for you?” Peter asked, following his thoughts to the last letter. “The Captain? What did you tell him?”

“Nothing. Nobody knows anything,” he said. Except maybe for Stiles, his mind supplied, but he wasn’t about to say that aloud. “The Rooters set this up for me.”

Peter waited for a proper explanation. He wasn’t the type to beat around the bush.

“We’re docking at the Earth,” he supplied as if that were to explain everything. He wanted to add more, but Peter interrupted him, always ready to display his set of knowledge.

“The Solar system giving you trouble already? The Earth is no trouble for an endangered species like us, so…” he squinted his eyes. “It’s somebody else, isn’t it?”
Derek confirmed his words with a curt nod. “The head of the Technical station here. A Nano Hybrid. We went down to the Earth, got snatched, they let me go, but the Hybrid was sold in the auction on the Moon.”

Peter nodded, waiting for him to get to the point.

“We need to find him. Find where he was sent to at least and there is nobody willing to get us the information… to hack the system for it.”

“And for a good reason,” Peter said, chuckling. “Of course if I wanted to, but the question remains, dear nephew, why would I take on such a risk?”

Derek’s lips thinned. He was ready for the question, but he still couldn’t bring himself to admit the actual truth why… he could be actually projecting a bit. He was unable to save their pack, he was the cause of their doom and he let it all happen. And now… he couldn’t let that happen again… not anymore. It was ripping up something inside of him just to think he would just ignore Stiles in the time of need. Just leave him behind for his own selfish reasons… just… no.

Peter must have seen something on his face because he sneered. “Why would you risk calling me from an IA vesel, Derek? Could it be you’ve already found a mate? You were always so susceptible.”

That stung. But it was necessary of course.

“It’s the right thing to do,” he said.

Peter rolled his eyes. “Oh so a guilt-trip, isn’t it? We’ve had this conversation before and as far as I remember the logic always overruled your reasoning, so-”

It was time to bring out the big guns, it would seem. The only thing that could actually work on Peter was a way to get closer to his revenge after all. And Derek had that.

“They scanned me at the auction,” he started. “There were hundreds of recipients, all of them got the info and all of them bid for me.”

Peter’s eyes got that sort of a maniacal gleam they always got when the conversation slipped to this sort of thing. “And you think…?”

“It’s a possibility at least,” he admitted.

Peters smile was wide and full of sharp teeth.

“And since you will be already there,” Derek continued. “You might as well check out the coordinates to which the Nano Hybrid got sent to.”

Peter wasn’t really listening to him anymore, his eyes got slightly unfocused as if already planning what he will do next.

“Peter,” Derek spoke up. His uncle blinked and looked over at him, his eyes were gleaming red and Derek’s responded in their own color.

“You are playing the bait now, Derek,” Peter said out of nowhere. “Be careful.”

“The coordinates.”

“Don’t let them find you,” Peter continued. The same old song.
“They won’t,” he said, shaking his head. “The coordinates, don’t forget.”

Peter blinked, the glow was gone. And so was the blue glint in Derek’s.

“I will send them to you,” his uncle promised and then his face was gone and the black-out line folded in on itself, eating itself up like a hungry ouroboros, all the data lost.
Sheriff squinted at Boyd, but no matter how much disbelief he tried to convey with that look, the coordinances on his holo remained solidly embedded in the screen.

“How did you get this?” he asked for the second time. He didn’t get an answer the first time, Boyd’s silence coating the cabin in a thick layer, and he wouldn’t get an answer now either. The Rooter remained silent.

“Boyd. How?” he repeated, shaking his holo. He looked around the cabin, his eyes stopping at each of them, searching, wondering. Nobody said anything.

“How?”

Coach spoke up: “From a Source willing to hack the AI, obviously.”

“There is no log about the Root contacting anybody though,” Lydia pointed out as she scrolled
through her own holo.

“And we all know what that meansssss,” Jackson said, leering at Boyd and Derek.

The Sheriff bore his eyes into Boyd again, his eyebrows pulling together. “A black-out line... you know full well creating a connection like that is against the IA constitution.”

“As are many things on this ship.” Boyd answered. “And yet, here we are.” Nobody opposed that statement, not even the Sheriff. Instead he just pursed his lips, sighed and looked back down at his holo.

“Is this legit?” he asked after a while.

“I can’t exactly confirm that,” Boyd answered carefully.

“But I can,” Derek joined in. “At least superficially. The logs check out with the timeline of our abduction to the point.” Lucky for him Peter obviously scraped any mentions of Derek or any other mentions as to what he was up to on the Moon. It would have been a rather unfortunate thing if the Sheriff would see something about his Shifter abilities, especially since he still takes Derek for a human.

The Sheriff nodded and turned to the navigator. “Parrish, check the coordinates.” They put their holos together and copied the needed information.

Derek already suspected they are not going to find anything in the official IA logs, but maybe the navigator was resourceful enough to find out what it was without Derek supplying Peter’s additional information. He decided to remain silent for now. It wouldn’t do much good if he appeared too knowledgeable.

“Alright, so a plan,” the Sheriff started, pacing around while they waited. “The Beacon will continue on on the official route and I-”

“You can not leave the ship now,” Lydia cut in. “You are required to stay on the ship during a Solar, remember? Standard IA procedure.”

The Sheriff dismissed her almost immediately. “I don’t care.

Lydia scowled. “But I do. We all do. None of us wants to lose our Captain. Without you in command-”

“I have to-”

“You don’t.”

Boyd lifted his hand, but Lydia stopped him before he could even start. “The chief Rooter? I don’t think so.”

“I was just gonna say-”

“The skeleton crew needs to be present during a Solar. We can not perform the maneuver then and how else are we gonna power the ship?” Lydia scoffed. “It’s bad enough we are missing the Technical at this point of-”

“Issue an official request to Earth. We will need a substitute for the time being,” the Sheriff said. It might have seemed heartless to ask for somebody to fill in the spot this fast, but if a Solar was
really this close, there was really no other option, Derek knew. Also, it would seem rather suspicious if he didn’t, did it?

Sheriff was obviously thinking somewhere around the same lines. “It will be less suspicious if we fill in the position right away.”

“What if Stiles…?” Parrish left the questions hanging in the air.

Lydia was the first one to answer. “Nothing. The AI is only responsible for the goods up until the delivery is signed off. Once Stiles’ pod arrives at its destination…”

“He is free to be stolen back,” Parrish grinned from behind his holo.

“Good to know, so-”

“What about me?” Derek spoke up out of nowhere. Not even his own brain knew we was gonna suggest such an atrocity.

It wasn’t for Stiles though. Surely not. Peter told him to stay safe and the Hunters were probably on their way to the Earth and if he’d had remained on the Beacon there was a chance they would find him too fast. They saw his uniform, they knew. He needed to get as far away from this system as possible, at least for now - that seemed like a solid enough reason, right? That fact that he had to backtrack to find a it after he actually said it all was secondary.

They were all staring at him. He looked over at the Sheriff.

“I can’t ask that of you, son,” he shook his head. “You have nothing to feel guilty for.” He looked over at the navigator who was still tapping away at the holo, but Derek couldn’t just let him dismiss his intentions now. Not when he actually had a secret agenda to fill.

“You need somebody who knows their way around the Outer Space,” he said sternly. “With military training, at best.” His personal logs stated he was from a military family of IA officers or various ranges. Good. “Someone who is not part of the skeleton crew because of the scheduled Solar?” And someone good enough to get in and out without people knowing, with needed connections , with experience in the dark areas of the Space , his mind added. “Who better than me?”

“I agree,” Coach said, nodding. “He would be a good choice.”

Boyd put his hand down. He was holding it up all this time. “I was gonna suggest that,” he said, scowling Lydia’s way. “We can function without him still, even through a Solar. I can keep his logs going. Nobody will know.”

The “Nourish” man next to Parrish didn’t look very happy about their plan. “That’s against-”

The Coach scoffed. “Shut it, Harris.”

“I beg to-”

The Sheriff shut them both off with a wave of his hand. “Parrish, any info on the location?” The navigator just shook his head and continued his tapping. Derek already knew he was not going to find anything official about it.

Good, he needed to prove a point, after all, so why not just share what he already knew.
“It’s a research station,” he said. They all turned back to him with various stages of surprise and suspicion written all over their faces. Except Deaton, that was.

“How would you know that?” the Sheriff wondered aloud.

“I came across it in-”

Parrish sighed. “It’s not in the IA database, nor in any other official-”

“And you know itss?” Jackson hissed out of nowhere, emerging from behind his table. He was sitting there, ignoring them for the most part. “Now if that ain’t susssspiciousss.” The last word was barely understandable through all that hissing.

The Sheriff seemed to be ignoring the suspicion for then though. “What kind of a research station?”

“The illegal kind,” Derek said, trying to not dig his own grave with sharing too much. He only came across their products in his earlier days of space travel, never their homebase.

Yes, the coordinates were something the IA would and did kill for, but he wasn’t gonna bring the whole IA down on the station and risk Stiles… wait, back to the present, Jackson was asking something.

“I ssssaid where do you know ssssuch thingsss from?’”

Harris joined him in his suspicion. “I would be curious to know that as well.”

“Is this really the time?” Boyd asked, annoyance hearable in his tone. “I would say we got more import-

“Shhhht it, theiss Outsider-”

“Jackson-”

The Whittemorian hissed and started to advance on Derek. Not that that was gonna intimidate him, but he still watched his tail just in case.

“Enough!” the Sheriff yelled. Lydia grabbed Jackson and pulled him to the edge of their loose circle again.

“Now,” the Sheriff continued. “We can talk about all of this after we get Stiles back. If Derek is right, we don’t have any time to lose. A Nano at a research station-” He didn’t finish and he didn’t have to. They all understood the implication.

“Sheriff, if I might have a suggestion,” Deaton said, unfazed by the heavy silence. “My sister would be a perfect candidate for this mission. She was out of commission for way too long and you promised-”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” the Sheriff said, ballantly refusing whatever was about to be said. “You know the risks of her leaving this system...!”

Deaton showed no signs of understanding the refusal. “She needs an outlet every once in a while. One that would restart her System. When you took us in, you guaranteed our purpose will be regularly fulfilled to avoid malfunction.”

“Not like this…”
“Exactly like this,” Deaton said. “My sister had been dormant for way too long.”

Derek felt more of an outsider in this conversation than ever before. It was surprising enough that this old android version was even working on an IA ship, but one android calling the other out on family ties was something he had never heard of. Did those two live with humans so long, that they took it up on their own or was there some sort of a reprogramming involved? He wasn’t about to ask, but it was still a curious thing to witness first-hand.

“The risk is too big,” the Sheriff continued. “This far out of our system, this far from the Beacon. If she is noticed—”

Deaton nodded stiffly. “They will scrape her without a second thought, but without this mission, she will wither away. Her processes will loop and she won’t be functional anymore. It’s better for her to—”

“Deaton, we talked about this, I will find a mission for her as soon as—”

“This mission, John. This one.” The words came out almost as resolutely as when an engine explodes. There wasn’t really any room left for negotiation. Derek wasn’t sure if it was the usage of the Sheriff’s given name or anything else… but in the end, the Sheriff just nodded.

“Danny should go with them. They will need a reliable pilot,” the Coach added and with that their tiny extracting team was formed and hurled out into space on a potentially dangerous mission.

Well, it was always better for Derek to be moving away from the approaching Hunters than towards them, so he wasn’t exactly complaining. The fact that he was able to tie it together with rescuing Stiles was a nice bonus. And just a bonus it was, his mind supplied, nothing else.

~o~

“Morrell,” Danny said as he joined them in the back of the shuttle. It was right after the stabilisers kicked in and they were propelled in the direction out of the system - in a totally different direction the Beacon was heading out to.

“Marin Morrell,” Danny repeated a bit louder. Up until then her body was sitting on the bench, unmoving, deep in hibernation. Not anymore though. She moved stiffly. Opened her eyes. Derek could hear her wheels turning, but the movement seemed to freeze every once in a while for a brief heartbeat.

“Mission update,” she croaked, her voice more of a recording than a human imitation.

“We have left the Beacon, T plus twenty minutes. The plan is to meet with a buddy of mine near Mars within a circle.” He brought up his holo, showing them a travel map of the known space. “He will pin us through a few tunnels to all the way here.” He pointed to a blue dot on the map, which was coincidentally somewhere near the Whittemorian territories and also nowhere near the facility that bought Stiles. But that was alright. That was how space-travel worked after all. Sometimes going further out brought you closer to your destination than flying straight at it.

Danny pointed to the red dot few galaxies away. “Jackson will get us a pin from there to somewhere near the asteroid. There is no plan after that. It will be our job to figure it out while we fly.”
“Understood,” Morrell said. Derek was expecting at least a nod, but her body was as if carved into a stone. It conveyed nothing. She really had been out of commission for far too long, it seemed.

Danny stood up. “Alright so, who is up for the first solitary this circle?” he asked. “If you don’t mind I will gladly volunteer myself, since I haven’t had any time for myself ever since we left the Beacon for Earth.”

Derek nodded and moved to the front of the shuttle, sitting down at the pilot’s seat. A cursory look at the control panel told him that it was set on an autopilot. Good.

The chair next to him creaked. Morrell sat down into it staring ahead at the wall. Well, technically there was a holo screen, but it was dark at that moment so she might’ve as well been staring into a wall.

The connecting door shut close and a blue light flashed on the pad next to it. “Commencing a solitary,” the shuttle’s interface said automatically.

Derek thought he might as well get some rest while he could. Morrell didn’t seem like much of a talker anyways. And he still had to wait for his own solitary session to perform his needed rituals. At least his ribs didn’t ache anymore. Small victories. Bigger ones to come though, he hoped.

_We’re coming, Stiles._

~o~

“Eyyy, Danny boy,” came from the speakers when the pinner intercepted them near Mars. The holo at the front broadcasted a red planet and an approaching small spacecraft used for long-distance pins. There wasn’t really much to say about it. It looked freelance. Obviously. The IA wouldn’t condone this sort of operation, so freelancers were their only way.

“Rogh, hi,” Danny said, flipping a few switches. “Commencing pin-up.” The sensors beeped and the shuttle’s thrusters hissed on their sides.

The pilot on the other side laughed. “Is that all I’m gonna get?” The pinner started to slowly maneuver closer to them. “And I thought I gave you such a nice-”

“This is not a private line, if I might add.”

That information didn’t stop Rogh though. “Blowjob, I gave you such a nice, long blowjob the last time we saw each other.”

Derek kept his eyes glued to the holo, but he could feel Danny’s eyes on him, expecting some sort of a reaction. He wouldn’t get any from Derek though. He had other things on his mind.

“You dumbass,” Danny muttered into the microphone, as he grabbed the steering rod and corrected their trajectory. Rogh continued on with his own tirade despite of it all: “Well, it would have been long, but I was just too good for you to last, so… maybe next time?”

Danny glanced over at Derek one more time and this time Derek decided to return the look. Not because he was intrigued by the conversation, honestly it was nothing weird on freelance ships to get into some sort of an intimate talk even through general channels… the reason he looked over
was because he was worried Danny might be flustered enough to mess up their pin-up.

“Sorry about that,” Danny mouthed, his hand steady.

Derek just shrugged and turned back to the holo. The pinner just lined up with their shuttle and pinned them in. The side holo blinked green and a few more buttons followed in a slow progression.

“Pin-up successful,” Danny said, typing in a few settings for their impending flight.

“Feels great to have you back in my asshole again, Danny-o,” the pilot laughed. “Kick in some drugs and enjoy the ride. T minus two minutes.”

Danny sighed an turned to Derek again. “I am really sorry about… that.” He gestured at the speakers. “It’s not like we’re… uh, it was a long time ago in fact, so…”

There wasn’t really much for Derek to say to that. He was too busy making a show of pressing his finger against the slot in the middle of the control panel. He held his breath, forcing his middle finger to grow out a bit, making the new tip internally looped in on itself. Superficially you would only be able to notice it if you compared the lengths of his fingers.

He pressed the new finger pad against the slot and the needle sprung up automatically, inserting a drug into his system. But of course, the drug didn’t get far and remained contained in the organic space he had created.

It’s not like the drug would do anything bad to him. It would just do the same as to any normal human - numb him, send him off to a REM sleep for the length of the flight through the vortex. Not that that’s actually a bad thing. He just preferred to be alert even during the flight… just in case.

Danny followed right after him, scrunching his face as the needle made contact. He then leaned back in his seat and relaxed.

“See you on the other side,” he said.

“Don’t worry, I will get you through safely,” the pinner said. “This ain’t my first rodeo.”

Derek leaned back in his own seat and waited until Danny went slack next to him. He then shifted his insides just by a tiny fraction - he sucked out the endolymph his cupula was bathed in, so that his body wouldn’t detect any of his movement in space and cut down all sensory functions to a big enough level so that the vortex wouldn’t influence him anymore. If Shifters knew something well, then it was to adapt to any environment, even the vortex.

“T minus three seconds,” he heard from the speakers.

Derek was ready. He set on monitoring the control panel.

“Two, one….”

~o~

They didn’t exactly have a plan on how to infiltrate the so-called research facility, but some ideas
did come up after Rohg left them to their own devices.

“An infiltration plan is not in order before we collect all the needed data on the facility,” Morrell informed them. She seemed in a lot better state than before. Faster. Her systems were slowly rebooting her to her full performance capacity it would seem. Good, they would need all the help they could get.

Danny agreed. “We will not be able to land directly on the asteroid, I presume.”

“Indeed, not if this is an illegal location,” Morrell said. She brought up her wrist and a holo jumped out of it. “I propose we land on the main dock of this planet here, it’s the closest possible restock place for the facility. The probability of shuttles moving to and fro is very high.”

“I agree,” Derek said. He was letting her speak for now. For as long as she was making sense, it was better to let he be the creator of their plan - he didn’t want to stand out too much. His field experience wasn’t supposed to be that high.

“Upon landing, we shall move among the locals and survey the situation in pure anonymity,” she continued. “Once we get all the information needed, we will confer and decide on the next course of action.”

“I’ll see if I can hack something,” Danny added. “Won’t we be instantly suspicious though? Being humans and all?”

Derek shook his head. “Race is not really something Outsiders pay much attention to.” It would be different when it came to certain individuals, but he decided to not speak about that right then. It was too close to home.

“Yeah, but still. Wouldn’t wanna blow our cover before we can even-”

Derek wondered why he even bothered trying to explain the mentality of the rest of the universe to a human. It’s not like humans could understand it, not if what he saw on Beacon was worth generalizing. Instead of continuing on with the topic, he decided to switch to a more dire matter.

“What was the prognosis on Stiles’s pod?” he asked. “Wasn’t it supposed to be there by now? Is it really a good idea to wait it up for too long?”

Morrell’s eyes whirled in his direction. “Any reckless course of action due to the possible time pressure is unacceptable. If-”

“He’s just worried,” Danny cut in, dismissing her. “It is a valid question though, isn’t it?”

“There will be no approval of a possible strategy before we will collect the needed-

A beep from the front of the shuttle alerted them to the Whittemorian pinner nearing them and thus the rest of the conversation was postponed in favor of another vortex ride.

~o~

“I would take a Solitary before we land. And hour, you’ve said?”

Danny nodded. “Just about enough time for it, I’d reckon.”
Derek nodded back and waited for Morrell to vacate the back of the ship.

He was just about to close the door, when Danny turned in his seat. “Hey, if... you want anything fun just log into the shuttle. There’s a... uh a library with... basically anything.”

Derek squinted, staring back at him. “Thank you, but I won’t be needing any of that,” he decided to answer. Honesty worked fine with the crew till then.

Danny’s face reddened and he turned back to the holo hastily. “Sure, I was just...uh, ya know.”

Derek didn’t really know, but he didn’t bother wasting more of the time he had left and closed the door. It locked behind him, the solitary lock triggered automatically. It wouldn’t open unless the shuttle was under code red. Derek could perform his ritual in peace and without a worry that his team might walk in on him. Sometimes the IA rules actually did make sense.

~o~

“Remember not to engage directly. The objective of this airing is to collect as much information as we can to use for a bulletproof plan, understood?” Morrell said as they landed at the small planet the asteroid was the nearest to.

They both nodded to her words. Derek nodded despite not agreeing with her strategy wholeheartedly. It wasn’t like the strategy was faulty or something, he just wished there was a more direct route to Stiles. One that involved getting him out of the place right then and there.

Life wasn’t that kind though.

They exited the shuttle and split up. Danny stayed at the Docks - there was a great deal of information one could get from pilots that were just loitering around and waiting for their crew or passengers. Not to mention if he would be sneaky enough he could get into some dock panels and hack a little.

Morrell and Derek walked through the double-reinforced passage and headed for the trading center to look around for a bit - pretending to be shopping for a restock, but also secretly fishing for anything that could help them further.

This planet, it would seem, had no breathable air on its surface since all the facilities were locked down under heavy domes and tight corridors, which pretty much went for the majority of the settlements around the universe - breathable atmosphere was not easy to come by unless one had the right technology or right conditions. And those were rare and valuable.

The dome with the market was connected right to the docks, so they didn’t have to walk too far out. The sound of multi-language chattering enveloped them right when they stepped in through the passage.

“Split,” Morrell instructed and he nodded, going to the right. He weaved out of her sight quickly enough, disappearing behind a swarm of Ethers. Their gasses were thick and condensed - his sense of smell was overwhelmed by the anisole all around him, which wasn’t actually that bad - it would seem these Ethers were actually a very polite bunch. As opposed to being poisonous and flammable - not a very good combo when residing under a dome, he reckoned.

Derek followed their pattern for a bit, hidden in their fumes and listened in on the surrounding conversations, most of which were in SLA, the artificial standard for the whole IA. When it came to
native languages - with some he was able to distinguish the topics himself - thanks to Peter and his persistent teachings, but with others he needed to relay on his incognito holo feeding him translated bits and pieces. It worked well enough… expect the holo’s hearing sense did not reach as far as Derek’s.

Still. Better than nothing.

He got lost in the sea of sounds.

“I say we get the cheaper one-”

“…insult me again-”

“Do you have some-”

“…tools, tools, tools…”

“-iece of sssshi-”

“Let’s fuck after-”

“…hungry…”

“… how much?”

“…blood fieldssss…”

“My eggs-”

Nothing that stood up to him in a specific way. Mostly just the usual market banter.

Derek looked around, thinking. He caught a glimpse of Morrell who was already chatting up a guy with an opiate stall. She was kicking in a glass of liquid, laughing. One wouldn’t even think to compare her to the half-frozen android from a while ago. She blended in perfectly.

He tore his eyes away and scanned the rest of the stalls. They were full of flashy commercial items meant to please outside visitors. There wasn’t a single normal product in sight, even the cables had a fancy 5+1 packaging. Now why would the research station even use this way to restock every few-

Derek turned around and walked out of the market, down the connecting passageway and back to the docks. A customary glance through the docking ships didn’t reveal anything much either - there were no cargo shuttles, nor any short distance ones - just a mix of pinners, LD shuttles, fighters and… basically nothing that Derek would have used to restocking if he had an illegal research facility. But then again, if Derek had one, he wouldn’t want to dock in-

Wait.

He set on walking the perimeter of the docking dome, scanning the walls. Standard surface… standard… a maintenance door, simple, standard… standard… standard… he walked around a high wall of haphazardly stacked storage units… standard. Wait. He stopped, turning around to look at the storage units. They were empty.

He walked closer, pretending to be inspecting the storage units and noticed a door. Except, it was just another maintenance door. A maintenance door with triple seals and a Whittemorian scent mark all around the area.
Derek’s heart couldn’t help but beat faster.

This was it.
A/N: Supriiiise! I thought I would post a chapter ahead of my schedule just to thank you all for the support and wish you happy holidays and all that, so... here we are, hope you will enjoy it and hope you will have a lovely week! And of course, feel free to leave art suggestions down below, because this chapter has no art yet either :)
Cheerios~

EDIT: A huge thank you to @LivesUnderARock who brought up the visual f the 1-0-0 species. I just had to draw that for the chapter pic. Thanks for the inspiration!
Now, he could have left it at that and waited for his team to report in his findings, but he wanted to be sure it wasn’t a waste of their efforts.

A maintenance door with triple seals might have meant there was a small reactor behind it and the Whittemorian scent could also mean anything - he would be too racist to think a Whittemorian would never be found around any maintenance area - albeit it was… rather interesting.

And so he decided to investigate further, but not in his current form. That would have been a too big of a risk at this stage of their mission.

Instead, he lifted one of the empty storage units and took it back to their shuttle. It was the only place that that shielded from the Dock’s surveillance. He put it down next to the entrance and looked around for Danny. Just in case.

He could see him standing near a Vulgular shuttle far off, talking to their pilot with a smile plastered on his face. Ahh, showing his teeth wasn’t really a good idea with a Vulgular, with any species if truth was told, but whatever. The most Danny would get was a blaland refusal.

Derek didn’t have much time to lose.

He walked into the shuttle and closed the door. He had to hurry. Luckily, his recent ritual helped him to change shapes faster.

Sharp and solid talons sprouted from his fingers instead of his feeble nails, a tail grew from his backbone - it was all very familiar to him in shapes and sizes. All except for the coverage, because instead of his usual thick long fur, scales erupted from under his skin and covered him like a flexible armor.

He fell to all four, flexing to one side to keep stabilized and exhaled a few times. It was hard to breathe while he was leaning onto one side, because his lungs were constricted. He had expected as much, but that didn’t mean it didn’t scare him. How did the Whittemorians walk around with so much confidence when each tilt of their body pressed on either side of their lungs? No wonder they were irritated all the time.

Derek stood up, flickering his tongue around. He couldn’t sense much inside of the shuttle at that moment. Well, it was now or never.

He exited the shuttle quickly and took the empty storage unit. Now he just had to hope, that the surveillance wasn’t as heavily watched. Otherwise it might be a tad too confusing and somebody might decide to investigate the anomaly..

His body moved heavily and his tail swished around rather haphazardly as he walked through the shuttles... basically naked. It was his only luck that Whittemorians usually walked around with very little clothes.

The only downside of this shape was that each step he took made his breath stutter like that of a newborn babe, but he didn’t waste time to learn how to do it properly. The door-

“Hey, excuse me,” he heard from behind him, a hissing sound accompanying the SLA language. He twisted around to see Danny standing at a respectful distance with the interpreting function on his holo held up high in the air.

“Would you happen to have a sonic screwdriver I could borrow? I got a core to tweak before my
crew gets back with supplies.” Ah, that was rather smart of him, Derek noted. Except he wasn’t the right target to talk to.

The way Derek’s body was twisted didn’t allow for much air to flow into his lungs, so he turned around fully and regarded Danny with a look that was hopefully convincing enough.

“I didn’t mean to bother,” Danny added, smiling. Again with the teeth. Derek decided to respond in the same matter and opened his jaws to reveal rows of sharp teeth.

“No sssssonic,” Derek hissed in Whittemorian, listening in to the interpreter repeating the exact same thing the SLA.

Danny just nodded and waved his goodbye without a second gaze. He obviously understood that Derk wasn’t a good subject for fishing information out of. Obviously. Well, he did well trying anyways.

Derek walked back to the maintenance door and put the empty storage back on the pile. He then walked to the door, flickering his tongue around to get a better sense of the Whittemorian whose scent was all around the place. He wasn’t able to interpret it well enough. A male, wasn’t it?

Now for another test.

He slapped his hand against the pad next to the door. The door opened and Derek grinned widely. Not many life forms would know that all Whittemorians had the same body constellations with no deviations, not within adults anyways - it was pretty much the easiest race to copy for a Shifter.

Once the door opened, Derek could see that the corridor following was not that long at all. And also that at the end of it was the actual Whittemorian, turning around with a dangerous sort of hissing noise.

Derek held his breath and swished his tail. Its end nicked the back of his head before the situation could develop any more. It took only a heartbeat and the other Whittemorian was falling backwards, his limbs locked in paralysis. Derek grabbed him, covering his mouth and pulled him as close to the maintenance door as possible, so that they would be hidden by its darkness.

He grabbed the piece of garment he was wearing around his head and stuffed it into his mouth. Then unbuckled his belt with guns tinkering along and clasped it around his own hips. He walked out into the light without sparing his victim another glance.

It was just as he had thought - a private Dock with a cargo shuttle nestled in the middle. This was exactly what they were-

“Sisss-iss-iss!” A head poked from inside the shuttle and beckoned him to come closer. It was a Norgarian, a race very similar to humans in shape. Sort of anyways. Except there were more limbs involved. And a hive mind. Still. At least they were using the SLA, so he didn’t have to engage in their language… it was a bit mouthful and pretty much impossible to pull of with just one set of vocal cords.

“Sisss-iss-iss! Come on, we gotta go-o-o,” they said, the echo of their voices resonating within the small dome. “Xim is already waiting outside with his shuttle-le, he will squeeze the life of us if we don’t scram now-ow-w!”

Derek hesitated. He shouldn’t…

“Get the fuck on or I will report you-ou-u! I ain’t losing points for a fucking delay-lay-ay-y!” the
Norgarian screeched, closing the window with a heavy thud. The seals jumped into action, hissing as they welded the materials together.

Without much of a choice.

Derek sprinted to the shuttle and jumped in through the back, his tail barely avoiding the shutting door.

There was a whirl of movement in the corner of his eye that seemed foreign, but as he turned around, he saw nothing other than his tail. Wait, something scrambled behind a storage unit to his right. Something small - he flicked his tongue - it wasn’t organic.

“Buckle up Siss-iss-iss!” came a shout, an echo bouncing back to him from the wall reinforcing the order. “The fuck is wrong with you…ou…ou…”

Derek lumbered to the front and sat down at the co-pilot seat grumbling all the way. The seat didn’t take his tail into account. He hated it already.

The shuttle vibrated and jerked slightly into three different directions before it set off on its way outside. The Norgarian cursed and moved his multiple arms switching, pressing and coercing the shuttle to stabilize as well as possible, but it was still all over the place. One would have thought they could have afforded a set of nice stabilizers, but no.

Derek was not looking forward to the rest of the ride at all.

~o~

The Norgarian was talking to himself the whole flight. It didn’t take long to get there per se and with his constant stream of words it actually seemed a lot faster, but it still didn’t calm Derek down.

This was the opposite of a stealthy and careful mission. He was on enemy territory without a plan. He guessed he could just pop a ride back in the next circle, since there seemed to have been only two cargo shuttles pendelling to and fro, but still. He didn’t know how long the intervals were and it might be the Whittemoriand back in docks would either get discovered before he could return or the paralysis would fade out just as fast.

He was pretty much busy trying to stay calm for the whole length of the flight. Fun. Even more fun with lungs constricted by that fucking chair.

Once they docked down at the research facility, the Norgarian waved his multiple hands in the direction of storage units at the back and proclaimed they were all his. “I made sure to catch up to your delay by cutting through the asteroid belt-elt-elt, the unloading is on you Siss-iss-iss. Enjoy-oy-oy.”

And just like that, Derek was left all alone in the dock. The Norgarian disappeared through a passage at the front, that was obviously used as free-time quarters for the shuttle workers. There was only one other door there, a sheer double door leading into the rest of the facility on the opposite side.

Now, Derek could just unload the cargo and wait for them to go back down, but… Stiles was there
somewhere, right behind those doors.

Maybe he could at least… he grabbed the first storage unit and heaved it up on his shoulder. He didn’t even try to look for droids. Illegal places barely used any, since they were paranoid enough to think them hacked by the IA. Which they mostly were. Nobody else had the resources to build that many bots anyways.

He placed the storage unit near the double door. They slid open by an automatic command. There was a chamber dividing one door from the other. He went in, but the other doors remained closed.

“Commence equalization?” an artificial voice sounded throughout the chamber.

Derek stepped back out of the chamber. He didn’t know what atmosphere was hiding behind the second door. It might as well kill him in this shape if the chamber got flooded. It did look rather… like thick pinkish smoke.

He needed a bit more time to think and so he set on unloading the storage units from the shuttle. When he was walking back to the chamber with a fifth one, he caught a glimpse of it again - a weird movement just at the edge of his sight. He whipped his head around, flicked his tongue in the direction but couldn’t sense a life form of any kind.

Was something artificial sneaking in behind his back, watching him or was he just catching the movement of his tail? He wasn’t sure. He wasn’t used to having his tail completely on command and definitely forgot about it a lot. Still…

He finished the unloading with paranoia creeping his way into the back of his head. And for a good reason, because the facility must have been watching him, because once he was done with unloading, the first door closed and the chamber started to equalize. He watched it happen from the safety of the dock.

Once it was equalized, a life form he had never seen before appeared on the other side of the corridor. It was floating in the direction of the chamber, its hundreds upon hundreds tendrils extending to slide over every possible surface - the wall, the floor, the switches, the buttons.

If Derek were to be crude, he would have compared its shape to that of a translucent scarf flying away in a harsh wind. Sort of anyways.

He watched it float to the second door, its tendrils caressing the pad. The door slid open and the life form glid inside of the chamber, extending all its tendrils. They filled the space, touching each piece of surface, then most of them retracted and the remaining ones nudged the storage units, which rose with ease. The tendrils grabbed each storage unit and then started to pull them down the corridor. It wasn’t long before the life form disappeared behind the corner leaving Derek alone.

~o~

Derek couldn’t stop staring at the double door. By all means the clever and safe thing would be to wait it out and return back to the market, talk to his team first to figure it all out and actually make some sort of a plan. But he was so close. Stiles was within the grasp - at least figuratively, because Derek of course had no idea what the layout of the facility was. It could be a maze and Stiles could be all the way in the back, tortured, used as a lab rat, broken, hurt...
Just that thought made Derek stand up and pace around the shuttle. His tail was swishing around and he was struggling to keep his breathing calm. His lungs felt constricted. And not because of the Whittemorian anatomy. This was something else, something more.

He looked back at the door and then further into the facility. The atmosphere beyond the second door was no good for this body. A Whittemorian wouldn’t be able to survive long enough to reach anything important in such an environment. He was pretty sure about that. The thick smog didn’t look very welcoming.

He slid his fingers across the screen and brought up the anatomy of the 1-0-0. Apparently the life form he saw earlier had no given name in the native language. Mainly because there was no native language one could put into words. The only thing these life forms had was touch to work with.

Derek scanned the shapes one more time, looked at the chemical composition, related processes...anything he could find. It wasn’t much, but it was just about enough for him to...

He then glanced up at the double door. He hesitated. It would definitely be better to sit back and wait… it would definitely be safer. Not only for him, but also for the whole mission. *Don’t be foolish, don’t be reckless, don’t...*

Derek’s eyes jumped from the holo to the door a few times. It would definitely make more sense to not engage. He could mess up the whole extraction. He could blow his human cover. He could do so many things. But... *but*.

“Sssshit,” he hissed, slapping his hand against his bracelet to turn off the holo. He had come this far. One step further might not… he stopped in his tracks, watching the door again. The last time he hesitated this much… he lost his pack.

Derek hissed when he thought back to that time and just like that, he made a decision. He turned around and slapped his hand across the pad of the door in the back. The door to the pilot’s quarters sealed close. He took a gun from his belt and fired at the pad a few times to disable did. He did the same to the lock.

He then lumbered to the shuttle, kicking off the little wing protruding in the back. With the now detached part in his arms, he hurried to the double door. The first one opened with a hiss, no problems there. Derek wedged the wing into the small tracks in the floor and walked into the chamber.

The first door tried to close, but the wing wedged in it stopped it from moving any further. An error alert jumped up at the pad. Derek fired a few shots at the inner frames of the door. The receptors melted away and the error disappeared.

By now the 1-0-0 probably got some sort of an alert memo, but he wasn’t overly worried about it. They were essentially blind. Any sort of surveillance must have been working in a different way. Probably. A "probably" was good enough.

“Commence equalization?” an artificial voice sounded throughout the chamber.

“Yessss,” Derek hissed and tapped the pad next to the second door. The chamber started to balance out their atmosphere, filling it with thick smog. It began to billow out of the opened door into the docks as well.

Derek was glad for the added time though. He brought up his holo again and took one last look at the 1-0-0. He wasn’t really looking forward to this shape, but it was too late to turn back now.
The air around him was getting thick beyond a measure. It was getting too hard to breathe and were he to remain as a Whittemorian any longer, his lungs would suffer through too much damage. It was time for a new shift.

~o~

He was blind. He couldn’t see anything. Scratch that, he wasn’t even breathing! He was suffocating. The shift didn’t work out and he was trapped in the new atmosphere with Whittemorian lungs. He wanted to scream but he couldn’t. He wanted to do many things, but after the initial shock he knew there was only one thing he needed to do and do it fast - calm the fuck down.

He kicked out his leg. Except it didn’t feel like a leg at all… it felt as if he was stretching out a very thin and fragile tentacle. It connected with a surface and suddenly, Derek didn’t feel like he was floating in a pitch dark space with the most severe case of sensory deprivation squeezing the life out of him. There was a point in space that made total sense, a point he could imagine since he had seen it in his Whittemorian shift - the floor of the chamber.

His panic lessened almost automatically. He had lost enough time submerged in its sticky smog. It was now time to find Stiles.

Derek stretched out all of his tendrils until they reached a surface of sorts and then slid the nerves at the ends against it to get a better feel for his surroundings. Three of them were on the pad. He slid it over the pad and the second door opened. He knew it opened because the nerves at the back of his body transmitted a loss of the surface.

After he opened the door, he noticed a subtle vibration in the air. He could feel it all around him when the nerves weren’t touching anything else. He wondered what that could be at first, but then decided to ignore it and head out into the facility.

Setting up a mental counter was a given.

One.

He floated down the first corridor, trying to get used to the new movement and relaying on his touch. Once he turned the corner, the surface changed. It became bumpy at places - probably some sort of a printed language or… whatever the fuck, but he couldn’t make sense of it so he filed it under yet another thing that had to be ignored.

Funnily enough, there were no doors anywhere, just rooms upon rooms. Or something that seemed like rooms to Derek’s mind anyways. The silence was making each and every one of them scarier and scarier. But he had to work fast, this was no time for dwindling around.

Ten.

The first room was empty, the walls were soft and flexible like deflated balloons. Upon touch they started to seep into his nerves, making them feel tingly. He retracted all of his tendrils at once and continued on.

Twenty-two.
The next room was the same.

Twenty-nine.

In fact the next seven rooms were not different.

Hundred eleven.

Derek was starting to think he must have missed a corridor or something when something on his right moved. A single tendril touched his fragile body and he flinched out of the way, colliding to the opposite wall. More tendrils stretched out to meet his body, caressing him soothingly as the life form passed to float in the opposite direction.

He extended a few tendrils and caressed the other 1-0-0 in turn, hoping his flinch didn’t brew any sort of suspicion. Not that he would now even if it did.

Damn, How much was it now? Hundred twenty-one.

He needed to hurry. He kicked it up a notch and started to float deeper into the facility.

There was a cubicle of sorts on his left. He moved inside, extending his tendrils. Again the bumps on the wall. Or was it some sort of a screen? He wasn’t sure. The bumps moved, forming different constellations… he couldn’t decipher anything. It was rather frustrating.

But, wait… he could feel something similar to a pod in the middle of the cubicle. He floated around, feeling it up, but he only found another bumpy surface and then nothing else. Two of his tendrils slipped to the top of the pod. And there was something there!

He moved more tendrils up, circling the form. It was a statue of sorts. It’s head was moving from left to right, it’s hand outstretched to the front. Judging by the tail and the overall shape of it, Derek knew right away that it was a Whittemorian. He was pretty sure that it was some sort of a projection of what the pod contained.

Hundred forty-three.

He left this cubicle and searched for more. There was another right next to it. He didn’t waste any time and floated up to feel for the race inside the pod. Not Stiles.

Hundred forty-eight.

Another. Not him.

Hundred fifty-four.

Another. Not a human shape either.

Hundred sixty-one.

He wasn’t sure how many he went through. At some point, he found out that the tendrils on his sides could extent as far as he wanted them to and he resolved to just floating down the corridor and checking each cubicle on both of his sides with six of his tendrils each.

Hundred eighty-seven.

Hundred eighty-eight.
Hundred eighty-nine.

There were so many cubicles, so many pods, so many different lab rats. With some shapes he himself wasn’t even sure what kind of a life form it was.

Until he bumped his tendrils on a form of a human.

He stopped in his tracks and turned into the cubicle. It was indeed a human. One head, two arms, two legs. The proportions were right.

Derek tried to think back on Stiles’ proportions but he couldn’t be sure this was the right thing. It could be just any other human… he slid more tendrils around the statue and mapped it out. He wasn’t sure. Shit. If he took this one and it turned out it wasn’t Stiles…. he slid his tendril over the head, taking his time to feel it out. *Wait, this hair was probably too long for it to be Stiles*. Not him.

*Two hundred seven. Shit.*

Derek moved out of the cubicle and continued with his search, trying to get through each cubicle faster.

Another human on his left. But a woman this time. He didn’t waste much more time after he felt breasts under his tendril.

*Two hundred twenty-one.*

One more human on the left. A small child, not bigger than a newborn baby - moving on.

*Two hundred seventy-five.*

And again a human, but this was one way too fat to be Stiles.

*Two hundred seventy-eight.*

Derek was starting to think he won’t ever find him, but he couldn't just give up, not now, not after all he went through to get here, Not when he was this close.

Next batch of cubicles contained a few Norgarians. He was starting to sense a pattern, but then why wasn’t Stiles with the human group? *Except…*

*Three hundred seventeen.*

The next cubicle contained a full fledged Nano male. He could feel the long slender body, the bold scalp, the thin limbs… if he’s had a heart in this form he would have felt it beating like crazy. As it was he could only feel weird vibration curling the ends of his tendrils.

*Three hundred twenty-one .*

He extended his tendrils into the next cubicle, sliding them over the top of the pod. The statue was curled up on itself, swaying slightly, but he could still make up the shapes - thin human-like limbs, slender body, a bold head that upon closer inspection revealed a buzz-cut texture.

*Three hundred twenty-nine.*

It had to be Stiles.
Derek found Stiles’ pod. What next? How could he take the whole pod back to the docks? One would have said it was rather foolish to try and wedge the pod off just using his tendrils. Still. Worth a try. At this point anything was worth a try.

He winded his tendrils around the pod and pulled, hoping against all logic that they wouldn’t just simply snap off his fragile body. They didn’t. And the pod actually moved after the first pull. It actually... floated up. The dense atmosphere made it feel light.

Well… good.

After a bit of fussing and feeling up all around him, he was able to secure the pod under his waist. He used his front tendrils to map out the way ahead and retracted the ones on the tail to be able to move a lot quicker.
He set on his way with Stiles nestled safely under his body.

*Three hundred sixty-four.*

The vibrations all around got a lot stronger than before, which Derek concluded was not good for him, but he didn’t have time to stop and think about it. He just kept moving on.

Up until he reached the sticky rooms and something grabbed him from the side. The foreign tendrils wound themselves around the net he had created for the pod and pulled all his sails together, making Derek drop the pod altogether.

He would have growled in frustration, but couldn’t. The only thing he could do was turn to his right and extent all his tendrils to try and get a feel of the other 1-0-0.

His nerves hit the wall.

There was a slight movement in the atmosphere and he could feel something moving above him, but before he could react in any way, it wrapped its tendrils around him, squeezing the living hell out of his body.

The hold was firm and suffocating. Even if Derek didn’t have to breathe in this form, he could still feel his exoskeleton ready to burst out of his translucent case.

*Shit.*

He extended a few tendrils, trying to get a feel for where the pod was and thus find some sort of a stepping-stone. He found it way too far ahead and the weirdest thing was that just as he had grabbed it, it slipped out from under him.

He tried again, but the pod was tugged right under him again. *Shit,* why was he even thinking about the pod at a time like this anyways? First he needed to get free of this shackles.

The 1-0-0 started pulling him down the corridor, away from the dock and no matter what he did, he was not able to break free. It was maddening. He tried to trash his body here and there. Tried to pry the tendrils off him with his own ones. Tried to twist and shake… but he didn’t know how to fight in this shape. He wouldn’t have even thought there was a way to fight like this weren’t he currently subjected to it.

The squeeze was causing him to lose all the feeling in his tendrils. He could barely move them anymore. They started to go limp.

*Shit. Shit.*

Wait, he didn’t really have to fight in this shape now, did he?

His body moved on its own. One tendril shivered and grew fatter and fatter, its tip sharpening. The chemicals reacted within it until it formed into the shape of a Whittemorian tail. It burned to have it out in the open, in the embrace of the poisonous atmosphere, the new organic matter was slowly dissolving…

Derek didn’t wait for it to dissolve totally. He swished the tail around at the other 1-0-0 and punctured its body. He did it again and again, until the life from let go of him and pulled out of his personal space with a strong tremble in the atmosphere.

The tail was slowly dissipating and he let it fall off uselessly. There was no time to squirm around
in pain. He snapped his body and hurried back to the pod, extending his tendrils as far as he could in their semi-limp state.

The pod wasn’t where he’d left it. In fact it was nowhere in the corridor ahead. He kept feeling it up, confused out of his mind. Maybe he left it somewhere else? Maybe some other 1-0-0 took it while he was fighting its brethren? Maybe…

The only way to go was ahead though. They definitely wouldn’t be able to smuggle the pod back inside the facility. Derek kept racing ahead. He could feel the tremors just behind his body, more 1-0-0 slipping into the corridor to chase after him. He sped up.

He reached the end of the corridor and slipped through one door, through the chamber and he was almost in the dock, when they finally caught up with him. Tendrils grabbed him. They looped around a few of his own and started to pull him back into the chamber.

And as if that wasn’t enough, he could feel a gust of wind coming from the direction of the shuttle.

What the hell… who…? The atmosphere was still poisonous-

More tendrils grasped at him, the strength of the pull getting fiercer. It made him crash into the wedged door from the outside. He wrapped his remaining tendrils around it and tried to remain in the dock. If they pulled him into the chamber, he was sure he would never get out again.

It was a real struggle.

One of his tendrils snapped painfully off his body. He could feel some of his linguids bleeding out into the atmosphere - the wound was burning more than fire, the poisonous vapors were entering his body through the wound, dissolving the insides.

The shuttle ahead shuddered. The engines were being preheated. The tremble of the atmosphere could only mean one thing… oh no , the back door was being closed. Somebody was just fucking gonna fly away with his only way out!

It was obviously time for desperate measures.

He used his remaining tendrils to heave the wedged wing from the rail and the door snapped shut almost immediately. That also meant it cut off most of his tendrils, leaving them bleeding, opened and raw out in the atmosphere. The smog did not waste any time to start feasting on his flesh.

None of that mattered though. He snapped his body once, snapped in twice in a vicious crazy motion, hoping it was not too late, hoping he could still make it.

The back door of the shuttle was almost closed. The door of the equalization chamber was opening again, tendrils reaching out to grasp him.

A few frantic movements later, he was able to squeeze into the shuttle. He was almost in, when the tendrils grabbed the back of his body. It pulled him back a bit and the door snapped the end of his fragile body off, seals falling in place.

It hurt like a bitch. But it was fine. It was fine. He was in. Thank the living fuck!

The shuttle shuddered and rose from the platform.

Derek extended his front tendrils - the only ones remaining and they bumped into Stiles’ pod. It was right there, safely nestled in the back of the shuttle, still closed and undamaged
Before Derek could even start to wonder how, what and where, the filters in the roof of the shuttle
started to hiss and clear the poisonous dense atmosphere out of the shuttle. The fresh air was
starting to fill the area and Derek was starting to suffocate again.

How did the saying go again?

Right.

From smoke into smother - the story of his life.

~o~

Once the levels of normal breathable air reached over the half of the whole content, Derek’s body
fell down and slammed painfully on the floor right next to the pod. It was suddenly so heavy, he
was barely able to lift a tendril. His tendrils felt like dry wires and they were quickly becoming
ones too.

On top of that was the pain. Oh, the fucking pain that… Derek didn’t even want to describe it in
his head. In fact, he was trying to not think of it at all. But as it happened not thinking of the pain
only brought the thought more to the forefront.

It was time to shape out.

But into what?

He would have preferred his human shape, but there might be some major issues with that. Starting
with meeting whoever just pulled them out of the research facility. The one waiting behind the
connecting door to the pilot cabin.

He needed to stay undercover for a bit longer. Even if he wouldn’t have any more energy left to
return to his own shape.

And so Derek concentrated on the previous Whittemorian shift, starting with lungs. They bubbled
up inside of him, connecting to the already forming throat. The first breath was like a taste of…
well, like taking the first breath after being born, he supposed. No matter how crude that might
have sounded.

The poor remains of his tendrils merged into four growing limbs, his body grew firmer, knitting
together where it was torn and abused. It was hard to add more mass into his body when he was
this damaged, this tired and by all means it should have been impossible - what with his race being
all wiped out, the mass balance of the universe was stretched out thin with only two of them being
able to shapeshift. Still. He made due.

The only thing left was the tail, but he didn’t get as far, because the door slid open and the pilot
jumped at his neck before he could even breathe out the stars from his head.

Lovely, as if he didn’t have enough suffocating in one circle. The universe just wasn’t on his side
for some reason.

The pilot… the pilot was an android hand. Ah, so that was what he saw sneaking into the shuttle
before. And that was what pulled Stiles’ pod out of the facility while he was struggling to keep the
swarm of 1-0-0 at bay and that’s what piloted the shuttle out. Morrell could have said this was her plan all along.

But... it was not as if he could complain right there and then. He was still undercover.

“W-wait,” he cracked, his hands coming up to try and pry the hand off him. His pleading wasn’t doing anything though. Nor his own hand, it was still not formed fully, claws deformed or missing.

So he tried a different tactic. “Mor...ehl.”

The hold on him lessened and he was finally able to get the hand off him. It landed on the floor, crawling a bit away from him into a more defensive position.

“Ssson of a- I am on your ssside,” he added after a few deep inhales.

“State your business,” came out from the wrist of the hand. Some sort of automatic engage system. It would have been impossible for Morrell to be actually in touch with her hand right now. It must have been some sort of a bare copy of her.

“Jackssson contacted ussss for an undercover exxxxtration misssssion,” he hissed. “I took the job. Didn’t your crew inform you, you ssssadissstic bitch?” It wasn’t that he wanted to insult her. He just felt that he had to as a pure Whittemorian. They definitely wouldn’t tolerate this sort of behaviour.

He kept on. “Where iss the thankssss. I practically got him out for you.”

“Business valid. Permission to stay aboard granted,” the hand replied, crawling back to the front of the shuttle. It was starting to shudder way too much. The autopilot wasn’t doing a well enough job. Not with the ripped out stabilizer wing.

Derek sighed and looked down at the pod.

At least they got Stiles back. Or at least he really hoped it was him. It was time to find out.

~o~

The pod, as it turned out, was pretty much impregnable to your common Whittemorian. There were no obvious buttons to press, nor any other obvious mechanism of opening the fucking can.

Derek walked around it a few times - tapped it, tried to pry it open with his deformed claws - nothing worked. He even tried to kick it a few times for a good measure, but the result was the same - practically non-existent.

The fact that the material holo on top of it stopped working in their air was not helping it much either. Was Stiles alright?

He glanced over to the pilot seat. The hand was struggling to keep them upright and also watching him from where it was wedged on the control panel. Literally. There was a camera stuck to the end of its middle finger. It was rather ironic really.

“Any ideasss on how to open thissss can?” he asked.
“This unit does not contain a manual on opening pods,” came out from its spoke in the wrist.

Derek cursed under his breath. “Of course it doesn’t.”

He looked around the cargo area for something that might help. These sort of shuttles usually had a kit somewhere around… he walked to the small bench at the front and looked under it. Nothing. There weren’t even any hidden panels for tools in the walls. This cargo shuttle was really stripped bare. Well, it was for short distances after all.

The pod was sitting in the middle of it all, laughing at him. Metaphorically, anyways.

He wished he’d had time to finish building up his tail. Walking around without it really messed up his balance. It was not helping his mood much.

The shuttle shuddered again. His side collided with the wall.

It was just about time to stop playing around. They would need to land in the dock soon and transfer to their own shuttle. There was no way in hell they could carry this monstrosity over.

“How ideas yet?” he mocked the hand, but it just repeated the same old song to him: “This unit does not contain a manual on opening pods.”

Whatever. He’d watched Peter sabotage shit enough of times…

Derek walked to the top of the pod, where the stand for the material holo was and kicked into it. It cracked. He repeated the procedure over and over until the holo trickled on the floor. It did so rather reluctantly, but Derek wasn’t really up to his usual strength so he wasn’t really that offended.

He kicked off the piece of… well, he wasn’t sure what it was, it just looked like some sort of a hardened… black… goo?

The full cover came off after a few more kicks and revealed a mess of wires… wires? More like… it kinda looked like the tendrils the 1-0-0 had on their body.

Now, the question was - how resistant were Whittemorians to electroshocks? Well, he was about to find out.

~o~

Derek used some of his claws to strip the wires of the gel casing. He scraped it off from at least a whole dozen of them and then grabbed them all in his hand, pressing them into a tight knot. Nothing happened.

He was about to let it go when a spark send his arm away and something clicked inside of the pod. But it wasn’t the door. Derek didn’t exactly have a good feeling about the whole thing anymore - and he wasn’t thinking that because of the electric shock he received.

There was a faint thud from the inside of the pod they wouldn’t have been able to hear unless the top cover was off. It came again and again as if somebody was trying to get out.

Derek could feel cold crawling up his spine. What the fuck did that short circuit do? Was the poc malfunctioning?
He jumped on the pod and rammed his claws against its surface. Barely a scratch. He needed stronger claws.

The thumping inside got more insistent and so Derek kept going - he pushed what energy he had left into forming the hardest material he could over his fingers and started to ram them against the same part over and over. He could hear the bones crunching in his hand, he could feel Morrell’s hand watching him intensely, he could feel blood seeping down his claws, but he didn’t stop.

And when his right hand was fucked up beyond recognition and there was a deep crack in the pod, he used his other hand and slid of his talons inside, forcing the crack deeper and wider.

The crystal gave in.

Derek stumbled back, huffing from the extortion and watched as a naked human emerged from the inside like a Whittemorian being born from a small blue egg.

A leg kicked off a thin layer of crystal and then there was a hand prying it all off. Finally a head surfaced and a human pulled himself out of the slime inside of the pod. He doubled over and gripped the tubes connected to his mouth and nose. He yanked at them once and his lungs whistled in pain. He yanked at them again. They did move a bit but stayed firmly connected to his insides.

Derek watched him struggle for a few heartbeats and then moved closer, gripping the back of his neck. Using his claws, he quickly scraped off the slime holding the tubes glued to his face and then helped him pull them out.

The body beneath his fingers shuddered and heaved for a few times. Then the tubes came off and fell down on the floor together with acidic vomit. It wasn’t really a pleasant thing to be near of, but Derek didn’t move away.

The human sobbed, clenching the side of the pod, still sitting in the disgusting slime inside, but he could finally breathe properly.

That was when Derek saw blood dripping down into the vomit and for a second he got worried, but then he realized humans don’t possess green blood. It was his own hand still pressed against the back of the neck.

The human noticed it too. He looked up and...

It was him. It was…

“Stilesss,” Derek breathed in relief.

Stiles didn’t look as relieved though. He slapped his hand away with a distressed sort of sound and stumbled out of the pod faster than should have been possible. Or well… tried. The rest of the tubes connected to his other openings pulled him back and he crushed back into the slime with a yelp.

“Careffful,” Derek said, trying to keep the hissing at minimum. It was a rather impossible task.

“W-” Stiles gulped a few times. It was obviously hurting him more than he was willing to led on because he wasn’t even able to finish the whole word. “Wha-”

He closed his mouth and took a proper look at him. Derek could see him finally take everything around into account too. The primary panic subsided slightly.
“This is... same... carg-o,” he croaked warily.

“Yesss,” Derek nodded.

“But...yo-...you ai...n’t,” Stiles stated.

“No, I am notttt.”

Stiles nodded and turned to inspect the pilot section. His shoulders relaxed a lot more once he noticed Morrell’s hand on top of the control panel, dancing along different buttons and switches.

He turned back to Derek. “R-es...cue?” A hopeful little smile appeared on his lips. It was so small Derek couldn’t bare to look at it. He didn’t look away though.

_They found him. They got him. It’s alright now._

“Yeah,” he whispered totally out of it. “I couldn’t jussst-” he started saying, but cut himself off before he could say anything stupid. He wasn’t Derek right now. He needed to remain incognito still. What the hell was wrong with him?

Well, a lot of things, but for starters, as his adrenaline went down, he noticed all the pain his current body was gifting him with - his hands hurt, his nonexistent tail created a raw wound on his butt and he was fucking exhausted, but…

“Autopilot disabled,” said the shuttle’s interface out of nowhere. “Commence descending. Pilot required.”

Stiles glanced at his bleeding hands and inclined his head in the direction of the pilot’s seat. His hand wondered hurriedly back into the slime to pull at something. Presumably the catheter that was holding him glued to the pod still. “Shou…?”

Morrell’s hand scrambled to grab the steering rod before Derek could even open his mouth.

“Ah...guess no-t...need-ed,” Stiles said and then reached back to pull one more tube out off his body. He cringed as it left his entrails.

Derek busied himself with studying his hands, wondering how much more energy he had left… will it be enough for one more shift? He was rather sceptical about that.

In the meantime, Stiles managed to climb out of the pod, his hands shaking so much he almost slipped on the slime and rammed his head on the crystal protruding from the broken lid.

His skin was covered in slime and grime and all sorts of disgusting stuff. But other than that he looked unharmed… well superficially anyways if one didn’t count that weird red rash all over his skin.

Still. The fact that Derek couldn’t hear any sort of song coming from him was more troubling than an opened wound would have been. Maybe it was just this shift… maybe these ears weren’t able to pick it up?

Doubtful.

“So,” Stiles said between coughing and spitting. He gestured at his naked form. “Cloth-...?”

Derek just shook his head.
The shuttle shuddered a lot more than ever before.

Stiles just nodded, sliding down to the floor, exhausted, panting. His hands did not stop shaking ever since.

Derek wanted to get closer to help him somehow, but thought better of it. This form wasn’t exactly suitable for that sort of a thing. So instead, he sat down on the floor as well. He wasn’t sure his legs could hold him up anymore anyways. Not while the shuttle was subsided to landing tremors.

He ran his eyes over Stiles’ body making sure he was alright… for like the fifth time for some reason. He would have wanted to reach over and make sure it wasn’t just some sort of a holo, but refrained himself. It was Stiles. They really did get him back. *Stop it.*

Stiles gave him a weird look.

“So ugh… what’s the…? What’s next?” he asked.

“You will change shuttles,” Derek hissed, leaning his head back. “Your crew isss already waiting to essscort you back home.”

He nodded and then coughed softly. “What about… about you… are you?”

Derek still had a role to play. “I wwwwill collect my rewardssss.” He said forcing a grin to his lips. It came in easily. This was, after all, a very successful mission.

Stiles watched him for a bit and then nodded, sliding his fingers down his leg to get rid of some of the slime. He grimaced when it stuck to his palm. Derek watched it drop to the floor.

Morrell’s hand was performing the last landing maneuver. They were almost back to the market’s docks.

Stiles looked up at him. “Th-anks,” he said. “I never...ugh, thought…”

“A Whitttttemorian would sssave a lowlife like you?” Derek guessed. By the looks of it, he guessed it correctly enough. “Everytttthing hasss a priccce.”

Stiles frowned “Ho-...much did...? Bea-on is… bu-t we got no…”

He closed his mouth when Derek looked at him. He *did* want to continue his charade, he did want to say something about the Sheriff being in his debt or whatever, but he was tired and also he didn’t think stressing Stiles about debts or whatever was a good idea at that moment.

Luckily, he didn’t have to worry about an answer, because the shuttle landed.

So instead he just stood up, moving to stand at the door. It opened… right into the embrace of a very angry-looking Whittemorian, which is what he noticed right after the said life form stabbed him in the gut, burying its sharp and poisonous goad deep inside his already tired body.

The universe was obviously a cruel motherfucker.

Lovely.
Derek caught up quickly enough. Surprisingly. It might have been the exruciating pain or perhaps the fact that this toes were quickly losing the feel in them.

He blinked and grabbed the goad in his gut before it could leave his body. The Whittemorian in front of him tugged at it and Derek let it slide out to the point where his hid-claw hit edge of the goad.

He then jabbed his claw under the goad, forcing it to come off. The end of it dislodged and the Whittemorian stumbled back by the sheer power of velocity.

“Oh shit, dude!” he could hear behind him, but he paid it no attention. The poison just immobilized his legs. He pulled the goad out of his guts with a vicious hiss and threw it at the Whittemorian.

He ducked, but not well enough. It grazed his shoulder.

Derek sank down, his ass hitting the floor painfully. He was holding his wound, but knew he only
had a few heartbeats before he would lose the feeling in his hands too and wouldn’t be able to press against the wound anymore. It was a common Whittemorian strategy - hit the biggest artery and let them bleed out on their own.

Stiles was by him before he could even realize it. “Oh...fu-ck!” He tried to press his hands against the wound too, but Derek didn’t let him.

“Go... go,” he urged, shoving him out of his personal space. “Go beefffmore offff them come.” He couldn’t feel any pain anymore, his stomach was numb. He wasn’t sure if he should be happy about that or not.

“Ca-n’t... just...” Stiles argued, but Derek cut him off, turning his head to the hand that had just scrambled around them.


“No...yo-”

“Take him!” he hissed, feeling his hands grow numb bit by bit. “Get the ffffuck out offff here!” he yelled. Maybe he could attempt a shift to get rid of the poison, but he couldn’t possibly do it with an audience.

It was then that Morrell appeared in front them with Danny following close behind, thank fuck. She stretched out her stump and her hand quickly crawled to her, connecting by the wrist while Danny kicked the legs out of the barely standing Whittemorian. He clambered to the floor like a bag of stones.

“You! Human!” Derek barked. There wasn’t much time left. “Get him out offf here. In ffffact all of you, ssssscram!”

“Ju...st-”

There was movement somewhere in the back of the dock. And then there was shooting. Great. Just great.

Morrell nodded to Danny and bolted for the control room where the shooters were covering behind the panels. They landed a few hits on her as she ran, but she just kept going on. Those must have been some very lovely illegal upgrades of her outer layer. Derek was almost impressed. And surprised he actually has the brain capacity to even notice it.

“Come on, Stiles!” Danny urged, grabbing his biceps. “We gotta go, now!”

Stiles looked back at Derek. “Bu-t...”

They honestly didn’t have time for this bullshit. Derek’s body was immobilized, his wound leaking between his paralyzed fingers… the only good thing about the situation was that he actually couldn’t feel any pain anymore. But then again… he would rather feel himself dying that not know how close to it he was.

His head was starting to feel more and more dizzy though. That meant unconsciousness wasn’t far off. He needed them to fucking leave before it would be too late.

“You amussse me, boy,” he hissed, bringing up a sardonic smile to his lips. “You’d dare to disssshonor my misssion by getting caught? There isss no ressspect in humanss.”
Even that didn’t move with Stiles. He tore his biceps from Danny’s hold and grabbed the scarf the other Whittemorian had around his neck.

Derek tried again. “I won’t get my sssalary if you don’t return to your ssship,” he hissed petulantly.

“If yo...die,” Stiles retorted, moving his numb hand off his wound to press the scarf against it. “Noth-ing...”

Derek closed his eyes. He couldn’t keep them open anymore, the edges of his vision were starting to blur, but he couldn’t do anything about it if…

“Please, Ssstiles...,” he whispered weakly, “I can’t.”

The pressure against his wound weakened and then it suddenly disappeared altogether.

Derek opened one eye and saw Morrell. Her arm was ripped off her body and stuck between her teeth. She was pulling Stiles out of there with strength he couldn’t really fight against. The last thing he saw were Stiles’ eyes looking his way still and a confused look on his face. Probably because he never heard a Whittemorian beg.

Well… he had worse things to worry about than the integrity of his shape at that particular moment.

~o~

Derek tried to shift out of the Whittemorian, he really did, but he soon realized he was at his tether. He wasn’t as good as Cora, he never was. He couldn’t shift back at forth a dozen times. He couldn’t control it like his mom used to, he couldn’t shape in a perfect detail as his dad used to… he couldn’t. He couldn’t stop thinking of his family, his pack. They were so much better than him. They deserved to be well and alive...and he… he deserved this.

He couldn’t move, he couldn’t feel his body. Maybe he was already dead. His head felt light. He wanted to cry but… not even that was possible in this state, his glands weren’t able to respond to his receptors with the poison enveloping his body.

What would Peter think if he saw him like this? He could kick his body and order him to get the fuck out of his head. And so… as simple as that sounded, Derek did.

He forced his body to at least exchange the liquids, to change the poison-infused blood into the usual green concoction of the Whittemorian race. The paralysis slowly lifted from his body and he was able to bring his hand back against the bloodied scarf and stop the steady flow of blood.

But he couldn’t do anything more, he was out of energy. The previous shifts cost him too much, not to mention he also had to force in some serious organism repairs and change the volume of his shape. He had no more energy to actually create anything new and he needed that for his human shift.

He lifted his head weakly and looked out of the shuttle, trying to nurture a vague hope of finding sustenance in his direct vicinity. There was nothing organic around he could use. Nothing but the paralyzed Whittemorian.
Derek made a face. He threw the idea to the back of his brain and then brought it up again. It was not like he actually had a choice if he wanted to heal his wound and get the fuck off here in one piece.

Except, he looked back to the pod, to the slime sliding down its sides where Stiles climbed out of it. Maybe...

He pulled at his legs, planting his soles against the surface of the floor. He pushed and pushed - and so managed to slowly crawl to the pod.

The slime didn’t look any more appetizing than before and by all means he shouldn’t be risking it, but eating the other Whittemorian would have been even worse. And so he opened his mouth and let the disgusting mess of a whatever-the slime-was drizzle right inside.

It tasted… Derek didn’t want to think of the taste.

The churning in his stomach didn’t make it any better either. He hoped will be able to hold it down long enough for it to be usable to heal his wound and fuel his next shift.

~o~

Just as he had thought. The slime was actually some sort of a concoction that was supposed to supply the imprisoned individuals with all the needed sustenance.

The substance seemed to have been digested faster than he had anticipated and he was shifting before he was done slurping another load of it.

So the universe didn’t hate him after all.

Not entirely anyways.

He decided not to waste time with contemplating how sentient the vast universe could be and how much of a involvement it had in his life and diverted his energy into the next shift.

Once he was fully human, he raced out of the shuttle, ignoring the fallen Whittemorian and the eerie silence in the docks. It would seem all the attackers that were previously hiding in the control room were all dead. He didn’t really feel like checking in on them, but judging by the smell of burned substances, Morrell did a number on them with some sort of a laser weapon. He really didn’t want to know what and where she got it from.

And so he held his breath and ran across the dock to the fake maintenance door. It was askew, hanging from its frame haphazardly.

Derek ducked and squeezed through. The metal scratched his bare skin, but he didn’t bother to look for clothes. And maybe he should have, because as soon as he entered the official docking site, his hearing was assaulted with a mess of chaotic sounds.

He took a deep breath in and looked around to get a feel for the whole situation.

The dock was in mayhem.

There were life form scattering to and fro, shots fired to and fro, screams and yelling coming from
each side and above all a whole lot of smoke and gases everywhere. Derek couldn’t make out where the danger lurked. He actually didn’t even understand what the whole commotion was about.

And so he just ran for their shuttle hoping nothing too lethal would hit him. That was the most logical choice for him anyways.

Before he could reach it though, he stumbled over a body splayed on the floor. He hit the nearby shuttle. Good thing too because the path he was about to take was suddenly full of laser beams.

He took a better cover and looked down at the body. It was a female android sculpted into a human shape. Her head was busted open and… something grabbed his shin.

He looked over.

“Stiles…?!”

Stiles was crouching down next to what appeared to be the remains of Morrel’s shell. Derek lowered himself down too.

“You okay?” Derek asked, looking around for any sort of danger.

“Yea... bu-t,” he croaked. He put his hand on Morrel’s busted head and pursed his lips. He then proceeded to pick at the burned-off wires sticking out from her face.

The laser beams were getting closer and closer, their angle indicating the shooters were moving around to come to level with them. It wouldn’t take long and the lasers would have them surrounded. Derek didn’t see a way for them to reach the shuttle anymore.

“Danny?” he asked.

Stiles just shook his head.

“Dead?”

He shook his head again busy trying to connect something within Morrel’s face. His fingers were trembling.

The lasers were moving closer.

“We can’t possibly stay here, the shuttle won’t be able to cover us forever,” Derek said.

Stiles ignored him, fiddling with the wires. His fingers were shaking so hard the red wire actually slipped from them twice while Derek was watching. And he wasn’t watching long.

“Stiles,” Derek spoke urgently. “We gotta-”

There was a small explosion on their left. What the actual fuck was going on? This couldn’t be just because they extracted Stiles, could it?

“Stiles,” Derek said again, reaching out to shake his shoulder. “We gotta run.”

Stiles just shook his head, leaning over Morrel.

“No, leave her. We gotta-!”
Another explosion on their left. The lasers were closing in from the right. That left only one route to go.

He grabbed Stiles’ biceps and pulled at it.

“Let’s go!”

“No!” Stiles yelled pulling back. He wiggled his arm around too, but Derek’s hold was too strong to shake. “Ca-n’t lea… her! Fix-”

“No time for that, come on.”

“You-”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Ca-n’t…” He grabbed her remaining arm. Derek didn’t know where her other one went. “Take he-r…fix…”

“Stiles for fuck’s sake, she is too heavy. She will just slow us down.”

“T-ake…”

“No!” he grabbed both of his shoulders and shook him as much as he could, hoping it would bring some sense back to him. “Do you wanna die? Do you? Because you will if we don’t run now. Stop fucking around. You can’t die! Not before I get you back to the Beacon!”

That seemed to help a bit, but not too much. *Motherfucker*.

“You want your dad to bury another body? Suit yourself. I won’t-”

Derek didn’t even try to finish the sentence. He just got up and-

“Wai-t!”

Stiles got up too and kicked Morrel’s head in. He kicked a second time and the side casing flew off. He kicked a third time and something inside of it cracked.

Stiles bent over and extracted something from her insides.

“Let’s g-o,” he said then just when the lasers were upon them.

Derek grabbed his arm and bolted for the fake maintenance door, hoping the smoke from the explosions would cover them well enough.

~o~

The illegal dock was still rather silent.

Stiles made it in without getting hit or hurt. Derek made it in without getting hit or hurt as well. He was starting to appreciate the small things in this cycle. He really was. Still, he didn’t want to stand around waiting for somebody to reach them and “fix that”.


He pulled Stiles along to the cargo shuttle he had abandoned just a moment ago. Ignoring the Whittemorian just as he had before - he was still pretty much paralyzed and probably super confused as to what was happening - he climbed into the stupid shuttle. *Again. Yes.*

Stiles stopped next to the pod, looking around concerned, studying the green blood stains on the floor and Derek wished he could tell him to not worry, *he was fine.*

But that was when they (whoever that was) caught up with them and the dock was lit up by shooting lasers.

Derek jumped at the control panel at the front of the shuttle and hit the needed buttons to start the engines. They shuddered to preheat and the back door was slowly starting up again.

Stiles appeared next to him, grabbing his arm.

“Da-nny!” he said urgently, but Derek just shook his head.

“He will have to get out on his own.”

“The fu-ck...no!”

Derek looked at Stiles. Really looked at him. They were losing precious moments to have this fucking conversation but it needed to be done. Obviously. Stiles was still clinging to his hand with a bit too much force and for a brief heartbeat, Derek wished he was more like Peter.

Usually Derek was the one to insist on getting back to save whoever needed to be saved and Peter was the one pulling him selfishly away.

Playing the other was really hard, he realized. He didn’t know what to say.

“I need your help,” he admitted lamely in the end. There was so much more he could have said, but it just didn’t pass through his lips. He wished Peter was here. He always knew what to say and do in these kind of situations.

Stiles seemed to have gotten it anyways. He gave a short nod and sat down at the copilot’s seat, punching a few more buttons. A red signal flashed on the holo in front of them signaling the whole market was on the lockdown but their shuttle was listed as an exception to that rule. So the defences let them pass same as they’d let them pass when landing before.

Derek sat down too, grabbed the manual drive and guinded them out into the vast space.

~o~

It wasn’t much better out in space, albeit at least they got rid of the suffocating and limited environment presented by the market domes. Still, a cargo shuttle wouldn’t bring them far out and once the paralysed Whittemorian came back to his senses… well let’s just say Derek would have prefered to not be occupying an enemy cargo ship.

The shuttle shuddered for like the upteenth time and it wasn’t because they were leaving the atmosphere. At least the artificial gravity held.

The holo blinked and a sterall map appeared on it, alerting them of the chaotic traffic around them.
The computer automatically recounted the most comfortable way to the research facility. *No thanks*, Derek thought, leaning over to delete the preset destination with maybe a bit more force than was really necessary.

Anything that would help him stay calm at the sight of a dozen fighters waiting for them out in the open.

Another pop up appeared.

“Incoming hail,” the interface said.

“Shit,” Derek muttered.

“We go-tta–” Stiles started reaching over to cancel the call, but Derek slapped his hand away, reached for the headphone chip in the control panel and stuck it to his throat.

The stellar map confirmed there was a second cargo shuttle similar to their own approaching. The fighters were staying behind for now. *Good.*

Derek hit the hail button and started to tap the chip gently. He hoped the sound interference would help disguise the lack of proper vocal cords.

“Xiiiim, you bassstard!” he hissed, feeling his throat protest lightly. “Get the ffffuck offff my way.”

There was a crack in the transmission and the other Whittemorian hissed back at him. “Sissss, I tttththought-” They didn’t get to discover what the other pilot thought though, because there was a sudden beeping on their screen announcing a wave of shuttles departing from the market planet.

Oh, someone must have gotten the main dock to open and let them all out. *Nice timing.*

“Ssssssscan for a long dissssttance IA old-ssschoool trashhh!” he yelled into the chip. “Tttthree liffffefffforms and a fucker artificcccial!”

“Copy that,” came back at them from the Whittemorian.

Derek could feel Stiles’ eyes on him, but he ignored him for now. Instead he grabbed the manual and turned them in the direction of the fleeting wave.

The other cargo ship joined them not long after with the whole fighter fleet. They were hiding right under the candlestick, Peter would have been proud.

“Targettt locked,” came from the transmission. A dot on the map light up. Stiles reached over to tap at it and the cargo ship scanned it.

“Da-ny,” he mouthed.

Derek just nodded, pulling back from the crowd. The fighters flew ahead of them together with the other cargo shuttle.

It wasn’t like Xim the Whittemorian needed to join the fighters, his shuttle probably had no weapons on board, same as theirs, but a Whittemorian wouldn’t be able to help himself to at least witness the possible carnage.

Derek terminated their connection, pulling the chip off his throat and before he could maneuver the shuttle further away, Stiles grabbed his arm.
“W-ait… wha… Da-nny!”

“He’ll be fine,” Derek said, jerking his arm. Stiles was holding onto it too tightly though. This was happening a bit too much lately.

“Figh-ters...he won’t...stand a chan-ce!”

“He will if he plays it smart enough. There is a pin waiting not too far away,” Derek explained, prying the fingers off him. He reached to the holo tapping away at it. “Do you know how to screen us from them?”

Stiles just started at him in utter shock.

“Yo-”

“Stiles, we need that screen right now,” he said, pushing at an adjuncted holo. He moved it over to Stiles. “If we don’t disappear now, Danny’s struggle will be all for nothing. There must be something usable in the bios, but I know shit about those things.”

Stiles pursed his lips and glanced at the map on the main holo. “You-ll... let him d-ie… to sa-ve your-self?”

“He won’t die,” Derek said firmly. “He is way ahead of the shuttle wave, on the straight path to the pin. The crowd will cover for him if they choose to shoot and he knows that. See? He is keeping within blind spots. We would be stupid not to use it. Give him some credit, he is a good pilot.”

Stiles nodded, tearing his eyes from the main holo. “A sc-reen mig-h-t be impo-ss-” he started saying typing in stuff Derek didn’t really understand. It looked like he got in in record time though and was already browsing through the programming when Derek turned them around, away from the conflict.

~o~

Gravitational slingshot brought them further away than they could have hoped in such a short-distance shuttle, but it still wasn’t enough. They needed the screen.

“It’s-.ugh no-t a scr-een, bu-t...” Stiles struggled around his hurt throat, his nimble fingers tapping away at the holo. He was so deep in the system, Derek would never even attempt to open those sort of formulas.

“Will it stop them from finding us?” he asked. “Just while we get a hang of some pin to tow us away.”

Stiles hummed in affirmation. He glanced up at the main holo briefly without a pause in typing and then returned back to his coding.

Derek couldn’t help but checking on Danny as well. It would seem the fighters started to fire on the escaping shuttles, terminating them one by one. The illegal research facility obviously really didn’t want any sort of info about them getting out of the system.
It was too late for that though.

Danny was still a long way ahead of them. He passed right through an asteroid belt, which slowed the rest of them down and rendezvoused with their Whittemorian pinner. Only a few more moments and he would be out of the system.

“O-k...do-ne, I gue-ss,” Stiles said, sliding his forefinger over the screen.

The shuttle shuddered, the engines cutting off together with most of the main functions. The light inside dimmed.

“I won-t...no-t for long,” Stiles tried to explain, coughing a bit. “Bu-t I… issu-ed… exclu-sive pin con-tract. Somebo-dy will-”

Derek nodded. “So we wait now.”

Stiles nodded back and they both watched as Danny’s dot disappeared safely into the vortex.

And then the main holo went black too.
A/N: Still no art, but I am slowly getting better so hope to whip up my wacom soon again. In the meantime I am using the time to stock up on more chapters, so win-win :) I might post the next one sooner... let's see how it goes.

EDIT: Pic available now! :)

Derek was dozing off on the floor next to the pod when he heard a silent tap-tap sound. He opened
one eye to see Stiles walk into the back of the cargo ship and then closed it again. He was too tired, too fucking tired… but at the same time worried to fall asleep with a stranger this close to him. He wished to be back in his cabin already.

Stiles sighed and there was a gentle scratching noise.

“You okay?” Derek asked.

Stiles just hummed, not answering. Derek opened his eye again and looked to the left at the huddled form on the other side of the pod.

“You should eat some of that slime from the pod if your throat is still bothering you,” he said.

Stiles looked up from over the pod, his nose scrunched up in disgust. “W-wha..gh?”

Derek nodded, his eyes closed again. “It’s very nutritious, plus has some healing properties,” he explained. “I guess it could also help if you bathed in it again, but… that might take longer then.”

“You t-tellin me.... to eat… ugh d-dat?” came from behind the pod.

Instead of answering, Derek sat up leaned over to the pod and dipped his fingers into the concoction inside. Once they were fairly covered, he lifted them to him mouth and licked it off. “Yes.”

Stiles scrunched his nose even more. It looked rather ridiculous. “Ewh...dud.” He coughed.

“Come on,” Derek said, beckoning him closer. “Eat some. Trust me, it will help.” He was speaking from his own experience after all.

“Yo-u… realiz-.. mah,” he started to say, but was interrupted by a nasty cough again. So instead he just gestured to his naked body.

Derek just shrugged. “I’ve eaten worse, if truth be told.” Indeed he did. Even when in Whittemorian form, the slime seemed like a gift from the universe itself. Anything beats a living, but paralysed Whittemorian. “And this tuff is actually kinda good,” he added.

Stiles scoffed, but leaned a bit closer to sniff at it. It didn’t smell like anything. He looked up at Derek, unconvinced.

Derek just lifted his eyebrows knowing a look like that was enough.

“Al… righ-”

Stiles dipped his own fingers into the slime, made a face and then sucked the fingers into his mouth. He didn’t look all too happy about that, but it was apparently not as bad as he had imagined, because within a few heartbeats, he was scooping up more of it.

Derek laid back down with a small smile on his lips. “Told you.”

“How did yo-u know?” Stiles asked, sounding a bit surprised that the rasp in his voice was slowly disappearing.

“Saw something similar to this on Malori,” he lied promptly.

Stiles just hummed and for a while the space was filled only with his careful slurping. Derek almost fell asleep to it, but a spoken word dipped deep into his subconscious and pulled him back
up to the surface.

“What?” he asked, blinking unhappily.

“I said, dude, now that we have time to address the important issues, why are you even naked? Was that a part of the infiltration plan or something?”

Derek hoped the sudden silence would just make him look too sleepy to answer right away. In reality, he was trying to think up a reason for him to be in this state. Ah.

“They caught me, wanted to stuck me in a pod too,” he said in the end. It sounded rather plausible at this point, right? It wasn’t like Stiles knew exactly what happened.

“Oh,” he just said. That didn’t exactly convey what he thought of his lie, but Derek guessed he got a free pass for it.

Silence. And then he said. “Sorry about that.”

Derek sighed. “I’ve had worse. Was glad for the distraction Morrell caused though. Wouldn’t wanna end up in one of these fuckers.” Derek kicked the pod. It was a weak kick, but still.

“Myea, it’s…,” Stiles sighed and leaned back from the pod. Derek lost the sight of his face. Probably for the good though. It seemed too private to watch.

He closed his eyes again, fully intending to go back to his dozing, when Stiles spoke up again.

“So what happened... ? After?”

Derek looked up at the ceiling. He needed to sort out his thoughts, filter what really happened and what he told to the crew. The info needed to fit like a puzzle and cover the real truth.

“They couldn’t sell me,” he said, which was actually true. Now, to mix in a bit of lying. “Nobody wanted to buy a human.”

“Ah, good for you,” came in a reply.

“They just flew me back to Earth, all the way to the docks. I waited for the Cap- Sheriff, then explained… we made a rescue plan and here I am. I guess.”

Stiles snorted. “That was awfully detailed.”

“What more do you want to know?”

“How did you find me?”

Derek sighed. “No idea, Boyd got us the coordinates somehow.”

Stiles hummed under his breath and then he said: “I barely remember much after they sold me, you know. They… fucked me up and then stuck me into some sort of a pin pod.” Derek should be glad about that, shouldn’t he? He was worried, that Stiles might have-

“There was this life form…”

*Maybe he did...?* Derek remained silent, waiting for whatever memory Stiles was chasing to materialize.
“I don’t know,” he said at last, but it didn’t end there. “I was out of it in the pod, back on the Moon. I just… I wanted somebody to come… rip through the door and fucking… fuck up the pod and… I guess I somehow…”

Silence.

“Do you know what a werewolf is?” he asked.

“No.”

“It’s like this stories humans used to have, like make-believe, right? About humans being compelled by the Moon… like… humans during full moon… they were forced to change into a rabbit half-wolf, half-human sort of…” Derek could see his arms rising over the pod to gesture some sort of a shape, but he was too busy listening to register it fully.

“Wolf is like this… dog-like… well, no. Huge, furry, four-legged…”

“Did you see one there?” Derek asked, fishing for more information. He needed to make sure.

“This… werewolf? Are they real then? Are they?”

“Well, no, I don’t know,” Stiles said, lost in thought. “I don’t think it was a human. I think… or I guess it was just the drugs messing with my head. I mean, did you… see someone like that, after…?”

Derek shook his head. “I only saw humans.”

Stiles laughed. “Myea, I thought… eh I thought some sort of a supernatural creature had come to save me. When in the end it was a freaking Whittemorian, would you believe?”

“They ain’t so bad, you know.”

Stiles sighed. “No, I guess they aren’t.”

There was soft noise on the other side of the pod, Stiles was probably lying down too. The silence of the shuttle lulled Derek into a doze again. Except Stiles wasn’t done talking. That seemed to have been a reoccurring theme in their conversations. He should have been annoyed, but in a weird way, he was just about okay with it.

“Derek?”

“Yeah?”

A pause. And then: “Thanks. I-... I am glad you guys came to get me.”

Derek cracked his eye open and looked over at him. The pod was of course in the way so he didn’t see anything else than the crystal mirroring his own face at him, but still.

“Me too,” he admitted to himself.

Silence enveloped them again and it might be Derek fell into a very shallow sleep, because the next thing he knew Stiles was once again in the middle of a question.

Derek didn’t catch more than: “… ask?”

He rolled over to his side, sliding his arm under his head. “Ask what?”
“What they did to me…,” came a tentative reply.

Derek blinked the sleep off his eyes, listening in. Stiles was scratching some part of his skin. The rash must have been getting worse.

Derek pursed his lips. “You shouldn’t think of that now,” he said sternly. The words Peter used to repeat to him at least a hundred times before. “It’s over.”

“Still…”

Derek sighed, closing his eyes again. It would be better for Stiles to fall asleep as well. He was probably tired too.

“Get some rest, Stiles,” he muttered, letting the sleep carry him out of that conversation for good.

~o~

His skin tingled. Chilly fingertips were sliding slowly up his chest, but he didn’t feel their coldness, only a scorching warmth spreading all over his nerves, seeping into his insides, burning the last remains of his logic. They slid around his neck, pressing against the back. He couldn’t help but close his eyes as the wave of tingling swept through his body.

It was forbidden. It was new and exciting and he wanted to taste it all. But he wasn’t allowed to. Not yet. He didn’t know how to control this weirdly bold body. He didn’t know how to feel with these deprived nerves… it felt as if he wasn’t really there with her, but at the same time her touches were too good to be a simple dream.

He took a deep breath in, disappointed by the lack of smell he could perceive. He wanted to smell all of her, wanted to feel her, wanted to do the same to her, make her melt under his fingers and rise up into a blissful pleasure together.

She leaned in closer and pressed her lips against his, licking them almost immediately. Derek didn’t know what else to do, but to open them and taste her. She tasted like ashes. The heat around wasn’t really pleasant now that he thought about it, not at all, it was burning him, the smog was suffocating him, making his feeble human eyes unable to perceive, his brain unable to understand.

He stumbled up and looked around.

Fire. Fire everywhere.

Their den was burning. He needed to get out. No, wait. He looked deeper into the forest. Strained his weak human ears. He couldn’t hear anything else than the vicious cracking of the fire. Its heat was burning him, but something in the back of his head didn’t let it register.

He made a step deeper into the fire… he made another and another, forcing his legs to run, passing the burning trees, the wood crumbling in front of his eyes.

How long was he out of it?

How long was he…?

And more importantly… where? How? How did this even…? He didn’t want to let himself realize
The truth although he knew it from the moment he woke up in that clearing. He knew it. He knew who was responsible for this catastrophe. He knew... he knew...

“Mom?” he yelled, his voice not his own. She won’t know him like this. She won’t recognize him. He stopped and tried to shift to his own form, but he couldn’t.

“Mom!” he yelled. “Dad? Laura!! Laura!!?” He yelled but nobody answered. The forest remained quiet and yet... and yet it was so loud Derek could barely think.

“Corra!” he yelled, forcing his legs to move again. These legs, those fragile fucking human hairless spider-legs that wouldn’t give him enough speed. He pushed them, coerced his muscles... but it was hot, it was so hot and he couldn’t... he couldn’t.

And then his eyes caught them. Saw the burning mass in front of him and he couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe. Not because of the smog gagging him, not because the air was too hot, not because... 

“No...” he muttered in disbelief. He didn’t actually say it out loud, his mouth just shaped into the sound, but nothing came out.

“...no...”

He reached out, somehow hoping that they were just... joking around, trying out a new shape, a new... charred, horridly grotesque sort of life form... that looked like... looked like...

“Derek!” somebody yelled grabbing his shoulder.

“Peter...?”

It was him. Well and alive.

Peter would know what to do. His uncle always knew what to do. He always helped him to get out of the mess he’d made. Peter would definitely...

“Help them,” Derek croaked, his throat dry. He looked up at his uncle, his eyes hazy with tears. “Help them.”

Peter said something he didn’t quite catch and shook his shoulder, but he knew what his uncle said, he knew it even if he didn’t really hear it. “We have to go. We have to go, come on.”

He couldn’t though, could he?

How could he...?

He didn’t know this would happen.

He didn’t know.

“I didn’t know...” he wheezed out, looking at them again. He couldn’t stop looking at them. His eyes were glued to them.

“I didn’t know,” he repeated, but Peter wasn’t listening. He just kept pulling him away. And then they were running. And then they were huddling somewhere and Derek was crying and Peter was stroking his skin, hushing him, whispering soothing things.
He couldn't understand the words, but he let them carry him back into the depths of the sleep once again.

~0~

Derek woke up to a loud beep coming from the front of the shuttle. Considering their predicament, it couldn't have been a sign of anything other than trouble.

He bolted up, stumbling to the pilot’s seat. Stiles was sitting in his own, merrily typing away into the small adjuncted holo. His other hand was lazily scratching over the expanses of his reddened cheeks.

On the big holo in front of him, Derek could see a mass of ships dispersed around the solar system around them.

“Wha…?”

“Don’t worry, it’s a controlled ping,” Stiles explained, waving his hand. “Just checking in on the situation around us. I was paranoid.”

“But…”

Stiles slid his fingers over the holo, enlarging the dot that had to be the research facility. He then slid his fingers over the hollow of his arm, which looked really inflated already. “It’s fine, they couldn’t care less. After Danny and some other ships escaped, they started to mass-evacuate.”

Derek looked up at the scheme on the big screen. It wasn’t in real time. It was just the view of one ping. Still. He wanted to ask if they are in any way able to trace the ping back to them, but figured Stiles was bouncing it off to not give away much of anything, so he decided not to ask in the end.

So instead he sighed, leaning into the door frame. He felt like he didn’t sleep at all. Did he even?

“How long was I…?” He wondered aloud.

“Two cycles-ish… I mean this junk has no time,” Stiles said, tapping the holo in front of him. He then pointed at the main screen and showed him a planet with two small moons orbiting around it. “They went around twice, so two cycles, but guess that’s somewhere around a cycle back at the Beacon. Hard to say really.”

Derek nodded, even though Stiles could probably not see that reaction. Whatever. “And the pin auction?”

“Uhhh, no answers yet,” Stiles said, scratching his chest. “But… but there wouldn’t be any anyways, I didn’t open the channels ever since I sent the ouroboros message out. So we will either find out during the next ping or see them approach once they arrive. I will boost the systems then and you could pin us.”

Just by saying that, Derek could feel the pressure of his previous lies upon him. He had said to Danny he’d never piloted before and just a cycle ago, he was driving them out of the market dome like it was his second nature. Shit.
Derek glanced over at Stiles, but he sensed no suspicion from him. He seemed too busy with his holo.

Well...

If Derek had the strength to deal with it, he would have tried to figure out a new lie to cover up the previous uncovered one, but… honestly… now that he knew they were relatively safe, his brain opened up the memory of his nightmare again.

It felt like a punch in the throat.

It wasn’t a nightmare per se. The monsters in nightmares were not real, but this one… Kate. She was real.

Suddenly Derek didn’t feel just as comfortable in his skin as he did before. He felt all clammy and disgusting.

“I uh...” His breath got stuck in his throat. Stiles looked up at him, tapping his neck absentmindedly. He didn’t look any better either. His skin was burning red at some places, the rash was spreading...

Derek swallowed his anxiety. At least for the moment. It wouldn’t do any good to stress the situation any more than it was necessary. “I’d grab a solitary then.”

Stiles eyed him for a bit and then shrugged, returning back to his holo. “Sure.”

“Don’t-”

“Honestly, duuude, I’ve seen your dick already, so what possibly more could I spy on?” Stiles said, his voice a bit louder than before. He waved his hand not looking at him. “Enjoy your wanking session.”

Derek didn’t say anything to that, he just nodded again and walked into the back of the cargo. Before the door closed though, he caught a last shout from Stiles: “Do me a favor and use that slime, dude. I don’t wanna have to stare at an indian burn on your dick the whole way back!”

And with that, the door closed, leaving Derek alone.

~o~

Derek turned his back to the closed door and looked around the darkness. It was almost as dark as they used to have in their den. It felt familiar. It felt comfortable. It felt like home.

Except it wasn’t. Not really. And it never will be.

Derek knew that. Derek learned to accept that, but the hard reality of his nightmare wouldn’t let it slide just as easily as his trained mind would.

Was there ever gonna be a time where he could think back on that fateful night and not feel… all of this? He wished for it, but knew it couldn’t ever be like that. He deserved to live with it. He deserved to suffer the consequences of his stupid…


*Enough*, he told himself and sank into a crouch.

*Now, breathe.*

He took a deep breath in lifting his hand in a reaching motion. He willed the song of his pack fill his ears, their voices joining in an endless howl and felt his muscles shift with it, following it’s pattern, elongating, changing position… taking him back to his roots.

Once his arm reached the needed size, he leaned forward pressing it against the floor in a ritualistic motion. He moved his other arm, following a trained pattern, letting the muscles envelope the feeble human limb, giving the bones the freedom to snap back in their original position.

He leaned over into the arms then flexing his back up. It grew, the spine popping as new vertebrae sprouted within it.

His pelvis shifted lower, creating the space for new organs within his body. His small heart split in two and then in four, beating in an erratic yet calming rhythm.

This was the rhythm that filled all of him when he was roaming the forests of his home planet. This was the rhythm that he could feel from his pack when sleeping in their midsts. This was the rhythm of their joined voices. The rhythm of all things lost, of all things that couldn’t be forgotten.

His legs, strong and agile, were ready to leap just as the ritual demanded, but he forced them to hold back, he forced them to just stretch to their full lengths and then pressed himself against the floor.

He closed his eyes and let his face slide right off into the familiar shapes and forms.

And all the while he moved, the motions copying the ancient ritual of change, of the shift. A shift the first mother granted them. Of what every mother after her shared with her children. Mother after mother. Changing. Coercing. Molding them into what they were now.

Shifters. Able to survive through so much more than any other known life form in the known universe. Persistent and strong.

And even with all the mothers gone now. And even with his mother being the last one in the thousands of mothers born into this universe… even so, Derek could feel their presence within his ritual. He could feel their gift shaping him, giving him the fluidness he needed, filling the emptiness inside him, reminding him of who he was.

As fur covered his entire body, he reached the final stages of the ritual. He was once again back to himself, back to who he was when he was born. When his mother brought him into this universe.

Say… who was he to taint her gift of life? Who was he to let millions of voices die within him. Who was he to forget, to despise, to fear the mere thought of his pack? Who was he to let the Hunters change him like this?

The only gift of change he would and could ever accept was the one from the ancient Mother… carried through generation after generation. Nurtured… cherished… lived. Hunters couldn’t change him, couldn’t distort him. They Couldn’t even if he was the last one in the whole wide universe.

Because a one was never a one. Because there has never been such a number in their language. And albeit he really was just one right then, he was a million, he was whole and he would never ever be what they tried to force him to be.
“So, who’s Peter?”

Derek has just sat back down on the pilot’s seat, feeling fresh and all kinds of reborn after his ritual, but Stiles’ question made him pause before his butt could even come in contact with the seat. He mentally shook it off and forced himself to sit down properly.

The silence grew.

Stiles turned around in his seat, his nails ranking over the reddened skin on his neck. He didn’t seem to be aware of the damage his nails were doing.

“You shouldn’t scratch that,” he said, gesturing to his neck.

Stiles pursed his lips and tore his hand off his neck. Only to put in on his knee and continue with the same treatment.

Derek lifted his eyebrows.

“Don’t change the topic,” Stiles exclaimed, but took his hand off the rash. He folded his arms over his chest.

Derek refused to give him and answer.

“I didn’t see a Peter in your file.” Stiles continued.

“You went through my file?” he countered.

Stiles just snorted and leaned back into his seat “Are you telling me you didn’t? I bet you had us sort-of memorized by the time you started working at Root.”

He wasn’t wrong per se. Still.

Stiles wasn’t happy with his silence. “Oh, so it’s okay to want to know about my shit, but when it comes to your highness, no no, we mustn’t ask. How dare we inquire, how dare we-”

“My uncle,” Derek said before he could realize what he was doing. And once he’d shared the information, it was too late to take it back. It shouldn’t have been that easy to get the information out of him. It should have been guarded and triple locked… and yet, the simple act of asking made Derek comply. Being around Stiles was dangerous. He didn’t know when to shut up and somehow, the same behavior got imprinted onto Derek as well.

Stop talking.

“Oh,” Stiles said. “I didn’t know you had an uncle. What happened to him?”

A lot.

“Nothing,” Derek simplified.

“He wasn’t in your file though.”
“It’s complicated,” he supplied curtly.

Stiles nodded, though why was a mystery. Maybe he understood at some level that it was hard for Derek to share more of his life.

“You two are close though.”

“Yeah,” Derek said. That much he could say.

Stiles grinned up at him. “See, was that so hard?”

Derek sighed. “Stiles.”

Of course it was hard. It would have been much easier to just say everything, but he couldn’t do that. It was dangerous, too dangerous. Especially after what happened to his pack. This kind of knowledge was too dangerous to share.

They looked at each other for a bit, as if the eye-contact would make the one talk and the other to stop asking things that weren’t supposed to be asked.

“Well, I was just wondering how much more intimate it can get. More than two naked dudes in an enclosed space, I mean,” Stiles said, grinning.

Derek sighed again and looked away. “It was just a stupid dream. There is nothing to share about it.” He thought about it for a bit and then added. “Or about my life.”

Stiles hummed, his fingers scratching the insides of his elbows again. Derek leaned over and grabbed his wrist to pry it off his skin.

“Just a stupid dream wouldn’t do so much damage,” Stiles muttered, letting him pull at his wrist. Derek stopped in his tracks, leaned over Stiles, holding his wrist.

“What…?”

Stiles shook him off quickly, laughing nervously. “I said… if you wanted to cuddle you could have just said so… not pretended to have a horrible nightmare, yanno.”

Derek still didn’t move, he was trying to think back to the time he had the nightmare. Now that it’s been mentioned, he could vaguely remember a gentle reassuring touch...

“I am quite the cuddler,” Stiles said, winking at him.

Derek pulled away, leaning back into his seat. “That… wasn’t really necessary. I was fine.”

Stiles snorted. “Well… it seemed to help so…” He shrugged.

Derek looked away taking a deep breath in. He wasn’t really embarrassed… he wasn’t. It was just slightly weird. But still. Stiles did do him a service in a state of discomfort so… and he didn’t really have to do that, so…

So...

“Alright, thanks,” he said curtly.

“You’re welcome,” Stiles said. “I reckon that makes us even. You did save me back at the docks. This was kinda the same.”
Derek frowned. “Yeah, no.”

“Awh, come on. I only did it to get even! You’re telling me all that effort was useless? Seriously?”

“Stiles.”

His hand shot up. “Wait, hold that thought. It’s time for the third ping.”

He reached over to his holo and brought up the bios. Tapping a few things, the main holo in front of them lit up into a...

“Oh shit,” Stiles breathed.

Oh shit indeed. The holo was a battlefield. Ships in a very neat formation on one side were approaching the illegal asteroid. And the enemy’s forces were scattered all around them, not giving up that easily, they must have called back the fighter fleet and now... shit was going down.

“Boot us back up!” Derek insisted, grabbing the steering rod. “We are right in the middle of it.” It was a miracle that they haven’t been hit yet, drifting right at the front line like that.

“On it!” Stiles started to tap away and within a few moments, the ship was back online - the control panel powered up, the engines preheating very quickly and the holo in front of them supplied a real-time footage of what was happening all around them.

Ships were approaching from each side, firing at each other, but the ones in front of them, the ones coming out of the vortex still... were something Derek had never seen before. They were... they looked like small portable galaxies, with stars flying all around them in varied shapes, sliding through the vessel itself even.

Derek felt overwhelmed. He pulled at the steering rod to flee away, but Stiles stopped him. “Wait!” He banged the control panel to get his attention. “Wait, that’s my people. The ouroboros must have led them here.”

“Humans?” Derek frowned. “But how-”

Stiles looked at him funnily. “You do realize the word “people” doesn’t just go for humans, right?” He brought up the hailing sequence, typing in something Derek didn’t understand. It looked like... some sort of knitting pattern for scarves.

“It has all kinds of connotations... like, well, in this case it would be our Nano friends.”

One of the ships at the back of the formation split away and boosted up it’s engines to get ahead of the Nano fleet. There was fire all around, but this one’s shield were boosted strong. It headed right for them.

But other things were heading their way too. Mainly a lot of fucking beams of condensed heat. The fighters were targeting them.

“Incoming!” Derek yelled, turning around to hit the door switch. It shut close just as the beam hit them. The explosion at the back of their ship rocked the shuttle like a giant quake. The door held though. Except... if Derek guessed right, their whole cargo space was just ripped out of shuttle.

All the power went out in an instant..

“Shit,” they both said, their curse getting lost in the darkness.
Derek looked at Stiles.

“I’m-” he started to say, but he didn’t get to say anything more, because another beam reached the wreck of a shuttle they were both huddled in. And there was nowhere to hide. Nowhere to run.
A/N: Slowly catching up with the title pics again, chapter 12 done, yay! I mean, my eczema still sucks, but yeah... I gotta try not to dwell on that too much. (Let's ignore the fact that it's actually in the fic lol.) More importantly, thank you all for the wonderful support, I still can't believe people would take the time to comment and it amazes me each and every time. It's such an honor. It means a lot and I can't thank you enough! Anyhow, enjoy <3
They both braced for more explosions and possibly for a very quick death, but that didn’t happen. A streams of light rushed through the edges of their shuttle, flickering through the walls as if they weren’t even there and the whole pilot cabin was filled with a chorus of a never-ending song.

Derek recognized it… but not really. He recognized the instruments, but not any of the songs. It was very similar to what he heard around Stiles before. Sort of anyways. But not really.

The chorus grew stronger and the shuttle shuddered a bit, creaking. It held though. The fatal beams didn’t reach them. The light surging all around them must have been a part of the Nano’s shields. It enveloped them in a gentle safe embrace.

They both seemed to relax at the same time.

“Well, fuck,” Stiles whispered, sitting back in the seat. Somehow they both ended up standing right next to each other during the last few moments.

“I’m assuming that shielded ship got to us in time,” he half-asked and half-said while collapsing into his own seat.

“Yeah, that’s them,” Stiles confirmed, closing his eyes. He seemed to be listening in. “It’s them.” He smiled.

“Your people,” Derek said.

“Our people,” Stiles corrected. “The least you can do is include them in your circle too. They did save your life yanno.”

“Is that how it works?” he wondered.

Stiles just shrugged, his hand wondering about his thigh. He was idly scratching the rash there and Derek had no energy to stop him.

The pilot cabin gave a weak lurch and then seemed to be pulled towards something. A speckle of light phased through the front wall, its pattern different from the streams of light dipping in and out of the walls. It swirled lazily around the main holo. It looked like Stiles’ Nanobot, except it had a different color - if that could be called a color really. The light was so small and so pure it was hard to say exactly.

Stiles leaned over and reached out a finger. The light swirled around it and then bumped into his hand. Stiles’ skin somehow repelled it, propelling it to the other side of the cabin. Stiles’ lips did a funny thing… but he otherwise gave no other reaction.

The light swirled around and headed towards Derek, who leaned away cautiously.

“Don’t worry,” Stiles said, following the light with his eyes. There was something in them, that Derek couldn’t read. “They’re just checking up on us...”

“Oh.” Derek huffed, nodding. He offered his own hand. The light circled around it a few times and then flew right through his palm.

In some sort of a delayed reaction, Derek pulled his hand back, but it was too late, the light was already swirling up and about the cabin as if checking for the general state of things around them.
Within a few moments, it disappeared back into the wall, leaving them alone. Derek looked over at Stiles with his eyebrows lifted up high, hoping he wouldn’t have to utter the question that was hanging on the tip of his tongue. But Stiles wasn’t paying him any attention anymore. He was looking at the spot on the wall where the light had disappeared, his hands shaky as he pushed his thumb against his palm.

Derek swallowed his question back down and remained respectfully silent.

~o~

The lights streaming at the edges of their walls slowly whirled into full view, flooding the whole space. The cabin gave one last lurch and then stopped moving. They were inside of the mother ship, judging by the slight change of gravity Derek could perceive - he suddenly felt a lot heavier than before. His shoulders slumped by reflex.

There was a blinding flash behind them from a tool thawing through the locked pad next to the door. After a moment, the door slid open.

“I’ve got this,” Stiles said as he got up to greet their saviors. Derek followed suit, albeit a bit more cautiously. He knew nothing about the people waiting for them on the other side, so caution was only natural.

The light coming through the opened door was almost blinding. There were so many Nanos swirling through the space, Derek almost didn’t even notice the actual life form standing in front of them…the long limbs and the obvious lack of a mouth were a given, but Derek was slightly confused by the four legs. Interesting...

It didn’t move, but there was a mass of purple-colored Nanos around it. The other colors joined and parted with them in a massive wave of light.

Stiles lifted his hands and moved his fingers around in some sort of a pattern, but compared to the life form in front of them it looked rather clumsy, heavy.

And all the while, the stray Nanos kept streaming around, passing through Derek’s body. He didn’t like it and kept twitching uncomfortably, even though he couldn’t feel a thing with them flying through his matter. He considered to move behind Stiles, but didn’t want to offend the life form.

Then again, Stiles had it worse. Nanos were bumping into his skin, trying to resume their course and failing rather phenomenally - it was a mess of a dance.

The life form opposite of them noticed the same. Or maybe it just understood whatever Stiles was trying to bring across with the weird and erratic finger-wiggling.

It extended its three-fingered hand and in its palm, Derek saw two white thin bracelets..

Stiles waved his hand in a weird gesture and reached out for both.

“Here, put this on you somewhere,” he instructed, giving him one. “They will just flow around then. Give the needed privacy. Jack apologizes for the rudeness, under any normal occasion xe would have given us these before we could be assaulted by the stream, but yanno… this was far
“Right,” Derek said and slung the bracelet around his wrist. The Nanos around started to part, moving around him as if he was a rock protruding from a vast river.

Derek jerked his head in the life form’s direction. “Jack?”

“Well, names are really hard to translate from Nano, yanno.” He lifted his hand and showed some sort of a wavy motion. The Nano in front of them jerked its head to Derek in a very human manner. It apparently understood Stiles was introducing it.

“Let’s just call xyr Jack,” Stiles added, turning to Jack. “This is Derek,” he said, swirling his fingers around like… well, it looked rather crazy, Derek was pretty impressed. Such motion shouldn’t be manageable for human fingers. But then again, Stiles was lucky enough to have such long nimble fingers, they were perfect for the language.

Jack turned around without a word and started to walk away from them. The Nanos never stopped dancing through it in an unending stream.

“Xe’s gonna lead us to the Med,” Stiles explained as he started to follow. Derek matched his pace. “Apparently one of xyr pinners intercepted my ouroboros. I put a hidden Nano stream inside just in case. Guess we were lucky for once.”

He curled his fingers, waving his pinky. Jack didn’t even watch him and yet they seemed to be still communicating. Was all of it done via the Nano stream? Derek understood a sad equivalent of nothing.

“Ah, so we are on our way back to ehm… one of the home planets. I can’t remember the IA name right now. But anyways… the fleet apparently got rid of the fighters guarding the facility. They are gonna send more rescue troops down there to check it up.”

“Good. There were more of the pods in there,” Derek said. “I think. They deserve to be saved too. If yes.”

Stiles shuddered. “Yeah.” He scratched his stomach, the movement attracting Derek’s eyes. The rash was getting worse way too fast. The fact that Stiles kept scratching it didn’t really help it much either.

He opened his mouth to stop him, but then closed it again. It wasn’t his business… but, wasn’t it a bit too late to try and force himself to think that? After all he risked to rescue him?

They walked through a few corridors enveloped in streams of light. They passed other Nanos that were not paying much attention to them. Some had the picture-perfect shapes Derek saw in the holo while researching the Nano race, but the rest had… some additions to them - an eye more, a leg more, an actual mouth.

“They got different shapes,” Derek said, curiosity winning over.

“Yes,” Stiles nodded, swiping his fingers over his arm. “Surprised? It’s just… an accessory thing.”

Derek frowned. “Extra limbs?”

“Well, yes, for Nanos anyways. They aren’t reproductive in a human sense… or yanno, in a general sense anyways. They got no gender, they got no sex - in all sense and meaning. They literally just build their offspring, using a Nano as a seed. And once you grow a Nano stream inside from normal.”
of the body, they spark the individual. The design it up to your parent then, right. I guess you could make all kinds of shapes with it but also you want them all to have a pretty efficient design. More legs take up more motoric skill and it’s just bloody awful to coordinate, so not many Nanos usually go for that. Same with basically all the entrails… it’s just a mess, digestion takes up too much energy. And anyways the Nano stream supplies enough of that, so…”

He was just babbling at that point, Derek realized. It was a nervous sort of talking, accompanied by compulsive scratching. Stiles’ skin on his arms was looking raw, it was leaking and he barely paid any attention to it.

Did it hurt? It must have been hurting.

Derek reached over and grabbed his biceps to pull his nails off his skin.

“Stiles,” he said not sure how to continue, instead he just gestured on the raw skin on his arm.

Stiles made a cross face, his eyes stubbornly glued to his face. *What the fuck was going on? Was Derek imagining the damage on his skin or something?*

“I bet you are wondering how I was made then, dontcha?” Stiles teased, shaking off his hand to hurry after Jack. “Well, the same…-ish. Except it was super hard to combine a human content with that of a Nano. Nobody ever tried it before and well… my mom succeeded, but it killed her so, I don’t think anybody is like super motivated to try it again. Anyhow, the answer is yes, I was made in a test tube. Basically…”

Stiles kept on going, his topic straying from the Nano race to explain different intricate things about human anatomy. And Derek? Well, he remained thoughtfully quiet for the rest of their track to the Medical, watching uneasily as Stiles nails ranked over his skin.

~o~

Once Stiles was whisked away into the urgent care and Derek politely and then *very insistently* declined any sort of medical care and universe forbid a routine scan, Derek was ushered into a spare cabin and left to his own devices.

Luckily, it was slightly shielded away from the Nano stream, because Derek wasn’t sure if he would be able to sleep with all the light around. Especially when it was looking like a burning fire when he closed his eyes. Still, it wasn’t perfectly sealed away. Derek could see tiny flickers in and out of the wall...

Tearing his eyes away from the Nanos, he glanced at the bed. There was a standart IA package on top of it with nourishment and clothes that were universally acceptable.

Derek wolfed down the food, recognizing the flavours of Whittemorian home worlds and drank as much of the fruity fluid he could fit into his tiny human stomach.

He then took a very quick and unpleasant dry shower… needless to say, he wasn’t used to anything better, so it was fine. And since he grew tired of running around naked, he rummaged around he standart IA package for a bit, until it supplied him with some comfy greyish pants in Vulgular fashion. Those literally fit the overwhelming majority of the universe since they were loose enough to cover any bits of pieces that could protrude from the general and ordinary race-shape.
Derek sat down on the floor and stared at the wall. By all means he should be figuring out how to contact the Beacon and let them know he managed to get Stiles out of the marketplace. But somehow, he couldn’t muster enough strength to even lift his arm anymore.

It’s been a hard few cycles. Harder than he would have thought it to be. He had been too close to death one too many times. And for what? His pride, his sense of righteousness? Or perhaps for Stiles? No, he frowned, no… he would have done the same for any other crew member, because it was the right thing to do. Wasn’t it? Of course, it was.

Instead of thinking deeper into it, Derek decided to get a hang of the Beacon after all. It was better than dwelling on things he wasn’t comfortable diving into yet. If ever.

Tapping his holo, he opened the communication channel and was surprised that the Nanos instantly re-routed him right into interstellar waters, boosting the signal to reach whatever part of space Beacon was currently occupying. Stiles must have told them something or maybe they were expecting him to contact his Captain once he settled down regardless… be it as it may, Derek’s holo suddenly blinked and the Sheriff came into view.

He was standing on the Bridge, looking rather surprised.

“Son, I… did not expect to hear from you again.” His eyes skimmed the signal feed. “And from a Nano ship nonetheless. From what Danny reported-”

“Sir, I apologize for not contacting you earlier,” Derek started, nodding in a silent salute. “The situation was rather…”

“Stiles?” Sheriff breathed.

“Here on the ship with me,” Derek said, watching a tremendous wave of relief pass over his face. “I’m not sure what the status on his health is at the moment though. The pod he was trapped in… did something to him.”

Sheriff nodded. “But lucid.”

“Up until admitted to the Medical,” Derek confirmed. “I don’t exactly know the present status.”

Sheriff nodded again and then exhaled deeply.

“Why don’t we start from the beginning so that I am up to date on all fronts. Danny told me his side when he arrived a few hour ago… up to losing Stiles within the Docks when Morrell got hit. There was apparently a riot of sorts because of a forced lock-down?”

“Yes,” Derek said, finally understanding what all the commotion back at the marketplace was about. “I stumbled upon Stiles when running from the shots myself. We managed to hijack a shuttle that belonged to the research facility, so the passage out was open to us… I think, it was a rather fortunate turn of events.”

“I see.”

“Stiles shielded us from the ruckus around and send out an ouroboros message, which was received by the Nano fleet. They… hurried to our rescue with the whole fleet…”

“Yeah… that doesn’t surprise me.” Sheriff smiled. “If there is one thing the Nanos do is taking care of their own. Rather excessively at times, but I guess it played out well for you.”
“Yes.”

Sheriff leaned out of the view for a second and there was a murmur of unrecognizable voices - the connection was jumbling them too much. He then appeared back, saying: “What is your position? Might be we could rendezvous with-”

“I am unsure, sir,” he admitted. “My apologies, I did not get to speak to the Captain yet. Nor to any of the crew for that matter.”

“Ah, no problem.” He lifted his hand and drew a complicated pattern with it. It would seem he also knew some bits and pieces of the Nano language. “They will re-root me to the Bridge now. Take care, son.”

“Yes, sir.”

And just like that the connection went blank.

Derek had to briefly wonder if he said all that needed to be said, but… it wasn’t like he had much to relay anyways. Stiles was fine. For now. Probably… except, was he though? It was a while since he had seen him… and his state was rapidly deteriorating ever since he got out of the pod. Or maybe even before, Derek wouldn’t know.

He glanced back his holo. Pursed his lips.

Lifting his finger, he tapped the holo, scrolling through the options. He wondered if the Nanos had some sort of a written language and how it looked like. His holo was in a default SLA setting, so it wasn’t exactly clear what the Nano used in a normal setting…

A within the ship chat option came to view. Derek’s finger hovered over it.

Stiles would know what kind of a language the Nanos spoke. Assuming he was on the list anyways.

Derek tapped it and scrolled through the list. And to his surprise there actually was a user named Stiles. All the rest were confusing sequences of dancing dots that Derek couldn’t read - that was probably the Nano language he had been wondering about. Well, so much for that.

Derek tapped his own user name, which was a dance of dots on itself. He wasn’t sure what it meant, but he could guess it was just some default whatever. Stiles must have changed his…

Derek tapped his name. It opened a chat window.

After starting at it for a while, he decided there wasn’t really much he needed to share with Stiles. Sheriff would probably already be in contact with him… Derek probably shouldn’t disturb.

He let the arm with the holo fall down and lied down. It didn’t take long for him to fall asleep.

~o~

He could see light blinking behind his eyelids. That was probably what woke him up… or was it something else? He wasn’t sure. But since it wasn’t a horrid nightmare, Derek wasn’t gonna complain.
Surprisingly enough, the light didn’t originate in a part of a Nano stream, it was his holo alerting him of an arrived message.

He squinted at it as he read the words.

STILES: can c yu typin yanno

Derek frowned and turned over to his back, staring up at the words. He should probably type something back.

.: I wasn’t really though. I just left the window opened and then fell asleep.

The reply came almost immediately:

STILES: same same but diffnt

STILES: anyways smth u wanted?

.: I contacted the Beacon to update them on our situation. Sheriff said he will talk to the Nano Captain.

STILES: yea we talked

.: Did he say what the plan is now? Will they come pick us up? Do we have to catch some pin back to them?

STILES: dunno bout u but i am stayin with nanos for a bit

STILES: suppose dat means u r stayin until we reach home planet at least

STILES: no idea tbh
I see. I suppose I will contact the Beacon for orders then.

STILES: u do dat

Derek pursed his lips, staring at the screen. His fingers hovered over the letters. He wasn’t sure if he should type the question that came to his mind.

STILES: dud i can feel u burnin holes in screen

STILES: spill it

. • • • • o ° °: How are you doing?

STILES: ok

. • • • • o ° °: Does that mean the Nanos can heal whatever is blocking your bots?

STILES: yep

STILES: no thats a lie they dunno wat to do with it tbh but i knew dat already

. • • • • o ° °: Wait. But you just said they know how to heal you.

STILES: its fine

STILES: i lied

. • • • • o ° °: Why?
STILES: look

STILES: i feel like shit can we just talk bout smth else?

. • • • ◦ ○ °*: You should rest instead then.

STILES: i am resting

STILES: but cant sleep and am bored

STILES: entertain me

STILES: its not like u got other stuff to do

. • • • ◦ ○ °*: Stiles.

STILES: derek

. • • • ◦ ○ °*: I don’t really have anything else to talk about. You really should get some rest if you feel unwell.

STILES: derek

STILES: DEREK

STILES: deeeerrrrreeeeeek

STILES: i am boooooored
• • • °*: Stiles, seriously?

STILES: yep

STILES: i can feel yor eyebrows judgin me from all the way here dud, stop it

• • • °*: You are just gonna keep spaming me, aren’t you?

STILES: yp u might as well give up now

STILES: spare yorself embarrassmnt cos yu aint gonna last long

STILES: im gonna tire yu out eventually

• • • °*: Is that a challenge?

STILES: nop its reality

• • • °*: What do you want to talk about then?

STILES: yaaaaaay

STILES: — — —([-] — [ — ]— — —)

• • • °*: What is that?

STILES: mah face rn

• • • °*: I sure hope not. Seeing as it’s rather two-dimensional.
STILES: duuud a joke?

: Yes.

STILES: from you?

STILES: mr grumpy mcgrump?

: Yes.

STILES: unexpected

: And don’t call me that.

STILES: pardon my language guest 02

: Is that what the dots say?

STILES: yep

STILES: so...

STILES: i realized i know nothin bout yu and yu like saved my life n all that shit

: And you saved mine and I am thankful for that, but that doesn’t mean I will share all my childhood dreams with you.

STILES: i would share mine with yu if yu wanted
STILES: no biggie

● ○°¨: Don’t.

STILES: open up Derek

STILES: it might do yu good

● ○°¨: I am good, thanks.

STILES: are yu though?

STILES: cos dat was a really fuckedup nightmare yanno

● ○°¨: We are not going to talk about that. Forget it ever happened.

STILES: i used to have nightmares like dat n it helped to talk bout dem yanno

● ○°¨: Tell me what’s wrong with you then. Tell me what the medics said. What is the diagnosis? Tell me. Go on.

STILES: wow low blow dude

● ○°¨: Thought you would like to have a piece of your own medicine.

STILES: my nanos are dying and dey cant reverse it- dey never saw dem regress like this- beyond repair dey said- its not what snatchers back at earth did- dat was just a cheap blocker- simple to get rid of once yu got needed tech- but wat dey did in that pod- i dunno… it felt different n it felt wrong n now dey are all dying- one by one n its fucking me up- yu saw what it did to my skin- thats how it starts- i should know dat coz its what happened to my mom too- so dont tell me it will be ok cos im not stupid- i knew it since i saw my skin when i first got off fucking pod
STILES: now

STILES: your turn

● ● ○ ° °: I didn’t really mean to pry. I was just trying to keep up with the conversation.

STILES: YOR FUCKIN TURN DEREK

STILES: or i swear i will fuckin crawl out of dis antiseptic aspic n come punch yor stupi face

● ● ○ ° °: There isn’t really anything to tell if truth be told.

STILES: ...

STILES: right well

STILES: i call lies

● ● ○ ° °: Stiles.

● ● ○ ° °: Leave it.

STILES: leave wat? dat yu arent human somehow? dat yor file is obviously a big fat lie cos yu sure as hell aint a root trainee with no other experiences? wat happened to your family dat got yu such nightmares? im sure it wasnt a IA military life- and who is peter? n how did you get the coordinances of research facility cos i know for a fact dat vernon has no fuckin life n thus no friends to ask such favors of

STILES: im not stupid yanno
STILES: but of course dats none of my business

STILES: goodnight derek

... ● ○ ° " : Wait.

STILES: if dats even yoor real name

... ● ○ ° " : Stiles, wait.

STILES: wat?

... ● ○ ° " : Are you gonna tell them?

STILES: tell who? my dad? IA?

STILES: why would i? are yu some sort of a dangerous terrorist out to get us all?

STILES: no i am not gonna tell dem

... ● ○ ° " : I am not a danger to the Beacon. Nor the IA.

STILES: i didnt think yu were

... ● ○ ° " : Thanks.

STILES: look its not like i wanted to...

STILES: i mean yu just know so much bout me and my shit so i...
STILES: it just felt unfair

STILES: keep yor secrets if yu need to keep them wtv

STILES: derek?

STILES: hello?

・・●・○゜ﾟ・：My family was murdered and they almost got me too, but I ran away with Peter and we have been on the run ever since. I just… I couldn’t do it anymore. I wanted to… I don’t know what I wanted, but I was just in the way and an IA flagship seemed like a good place to hide out and be safe for once.

STILES: holy shit

・・●・○゜ﾟ・：What?

STILES: i didnt see dat comin

・・●・○゜ﾟ・：What did you think it was?

STILES: idk like some illegal shit yu are embarrased to share or somthg mellow yanno

STILES: like dat yu are some reinstalled hybrid or a secret agent or some shit

STILES: not like

STILES: dis
STILES: dats gotta be tough

● ● ○°℃ My file is a lie, you were right.

● ● ○°℃ Is it that obvious?

STILES: nah

STILES: no

STILES: i am just very persistent when i set my mind on somthing

STILES: also you are really shitty in keepin it up around me

● ● ○°℃ Yes. I noticed that myself.

STILES: i shall be flattered mylord

● ● ○°℃?

STILES: come on no need to be embarrassed

STILES: i am the king of chill atmosphere

STILES: one feels instantly at home round me- its so mellow- makes yu wanna share all yor secrets

● ● ○°℃ That’s not really how your presence works, but okay.

STILES: you wound me sire
STILES: i shall request a duel to protect my honor

● ● ○ ★: You would lose.

STILES: ts ts ts

STILES: dont think so

● ● ○ ★: Stiles, I am not human, how can you win against me?

STILES: oh now he confesses!?

STILES: when its about proving a point?

STILES: i should have mocked yor strength sooner

● ● ○ ★: I doubt that would have worked before.

STILES: so how does it work anyways?

● ● ○ ★: What?

STILES: yor secret alien side

STILES: yu look human...

● ● ○ ★: Holo suit.
STILES: n yu want me to believe dey didnt want to sell dat back at earth?

STILES: or dat nobody noticed yet?

... ● ○° ¯: Yes.

STILES: level 0 tech?

... ● ○° ¯: Yes.

STILES: i gotta admit i am impressed

STILES: and weirdly aroused

STILES: can i see?

... ● ○° ¯: Stiles.

STILES: level 0 tech- come on

STILES: thats like holy grail of tech

STILES: how did you even get yor hands on somtng like dat?

... ● ○° ¯: Peter is good at that sort of thing.

STILES: yor uncle

... ● ○° ¯: Yes.
STILES: ok scratch dat

STILES: i wanna meet him instead

● ● ○*: No.

STILES: well one can always dream

STILES: dud

STILES: now i cant stp imaginin yu like a blob of slime hiding away in badass holosuit

● ● ○*: If that makes you happy.

STILES: not gonna get any more info out of yu am i?

● ● ● ● ○*: One would have thought you already got enough for one cycle.

STILES: true but also not true yanno

STILES: jk im fine with anythng yu wanna share

STILES: was hopin for dose childhood dreams

● ● ● ● ○*: I don’t think I’ve had any.

STILES: sad
Except maybe going out there, you know? We were sort of excluding ourselves from the universe. There were all these huge civilisations all around and we didn’t even go out to space. It wasn’t a thing in our culture albeit we had the technology.

Ironically, that’s exactly what I’ve gotten in the end. Now I can go anywhere except home.

STILES: can always make new home

STILES: but yea i get it

STILES: i always thought my home was gonna last forever n now it ain’t nowhere

STILES: nanos would take me but i dont feel like one

STILES: humans are weird around me

STILES: dad is too

STILES: it wasnt like dat before my mom died

STILES: sometimes i feel like shit cos shed be still alive if she havent decided to build a fuckin hybrid like me

I would say it wasn’t your fault, but I hate to hear that myself, so I won’t go there. Can’t exactly erase that guilt with any words now, can we?

STILES: what did yu do?

I trusted the wrong person.
STILES: yu said yu were keepin away from universe...

● ● ○ ＿: We were. It was dangerous for us to be a part of the universe. I know that now. I didn’t know that then. Naive as I was I should have... well I should have done a lot of things I didn’t.

STILES: a blob of slime would have it hard

STILES: splattering round

STILES: i cant get it off my head

STILES: its cute yet yucky at th same time

● ● ○ ＿: I rolled my eyes so hard they should have fallen out of my skull. I am honestly surprised they are still intact.

STILES: har har

STILES: just thought dere was enough heavy stuff

STILES: ah fuckk

● ● ○ ＿: Can’t disagree with that.

● ● ○ ＿: What?

STILES: gotta go now

STILES: but talk later?
Derek leaned back, his eyes rising up to the ceiling. A flicker of Nanobots created dancing reflections all over its surface, but he paid it no attention. His heart was beating heavily in his chest. So heavily he could feel the perpetual drumming right inside his ears.

He told him. He actually told Stiles. Told him what he wasn’t supposed to tell anybody.

He told him.

He did it.

Well, shit.
• • • ○ ‹": Stiles?

• • • ○ ‹: The med is under quarantine and I understand very little of the Nano language even with the translator on. It’s not picking up on the patterns well, they are too scattered… are you okay?

• • • ○ ‹: Should I contact the Sheriff?
Just let me know once you’ve read this.

Hope you’re okay.

STILES: hi

STILES: im fine no worries

Then what is the quarantine about?

Hello.

STILES: uhhh, how much of a lie do yu wanna hear?

Zero percent.

STILES: figures

STILES: im not doin so well dey say

What does that mean?

STILES: uhh it might include some really nasty blisters all over my skin, dryin off and comin off with my skin within an hour or so?

STILES: on another hand i look quite badass like this

What the hell. Stiles.
STILES: iiii guess thats normal though no worries

*********: How is that normal?

STILES: well it happens, just not this fast

STILES: i would really wanna know what the bastards pumped into me

STILES: n so would the captain

STILES: said its a possible biohazard so dey quarantined me in case it was contagious to other nanos

STILES: though i guess its not, yu saw how dey bounced off me

*********: They wouldn’t even let me in through. And I shouldn’t be in danger, right? What are you not telling me?

STILES: ah i guess dey were scared my open wounds would catch infection, its not safe or somthng hah

*********: I don’t find that very funny. What are they doing to help you?

STILES: everthng dey can

*********: And what can they do?

STILES: not much i admit
STILES: though i get to float in aspic for most of my time... thus lack of responses- sorry

***: What is that aspic for?

STILES: its cooling n antiseptic n such

***: But that doesn’t heal anything then? Just makes it bearable?

STILES: pretty much yea

STILES: anyhow howve yu been?

***: Stiles.

STILES: look yu seem worried but can yu not?

STILES: its fine

STILES: pls

***: But it’s not fine. There must be something that can be done.

STILES: dey cant do anything here, but we will be on home planet within a few cycles so- sadly we can’t use a pin with me like this- dey are worried it will trigger somethg

***: Will they be able to help there?

STILES: no but hey its FINE
STILES: can we talk bout somethg else?

● ● ○ * " : No.

● ● ● ○ * " : We need to figure out what to do to help you. If the Nanos can’t help you then we will go and search elsewhere.

STILES: awww yu do care

STILES: but seriously

STILES: i dont think i can leave in dis state anymore hah

STILES: i just... i wanna talk bout somethg else for now?

STILES: i will let yu talk bout this shit later if ya want

● ● ● ○ * " : Does the Sheriff know?

STILES: yea

● ● ● ○ * " : So what is the plan then? I doubt he would just let you stay like this.

STILES: he cant do anything

STILES: ok look

STILES: i dont wanna talkbout it now please? thanks for worrying but just...the medics are already full of it and i need a break give me a break derek.
But.

Alright.

What do you want to talk about?

STILES: anything everthing idk

STILES: hows the nano ship life for ya?

Better than for you.

STILES: yu’re no fun dud

I am not trying to be, maybe that’s the problem.

STILES: then try to be

STILES: dyings dud last wish

Sweet universe, Stiles. You are not dying.

STILES: on the contrary

STILES: yes i am

STILES: now get t fuck over it n lets have some fun

Stiles.
STILES: derek

STILES: lets play truth or dare

• • • ◆ ○ ◆: Not sure I like this useless plan of trying to force to reveal all my secrets.

STILES: just go with a dare den

STILES: first!

STILES: truth or dare

• • • ◆ ○ ◆: Doesn’t a dare defeat the purpose? It’s not like you can see me doing whatever nefarious thing you have in mind.

STILES: so dare?

• • • ◆ ○ ◆: Yes.

• • • ◆ ○ ◆: Now what?

STILES: im thinking

• • • ◆ ○ ◆: See.

STILES: shush

STILES: take a selfie actually smiling n send it to me
Like a picture? What? Why?

STILES: cos i say so

STILES: wat did yu have yor smile muscles removed or wat?

STILES: woulndnt surprise me

That's not really a dare.

STILES: so where is my pic dud?

STILES: hmmm?

STILES: hmmmnnnn?

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There. Truth or dare?

STILES: oooo, yu actually can smile

STILES: color me surprised

Truth or dare, Stiles?

STILES: awww yu shy bby
STILES: hmmm truth

Tell me what the medics said about what is affecting your Nanos. What did the tests say?

STILES: dud is dis it?

STILES: choose something more fun

STILES: yu can ask basically anything

I am asking this.

STILES: alright

its some sort of interactive blocker- it was probably infused in water molecules n somehow activated to get into each cell- its blocking off any nanos from entering and it actively searches out nanos inside of me coating dem and dissolving- that creates waste materials dat are poisoning me from inside- dats why the crazy skin reaction- body is trying to get rid of it through skin but its not helping- once all my nanos die i am a goner too n dey cant feed me any of theirs to support my system due to obvious reasons

STILES: t or d?

Dare.

STILES: ur such a shitface

Dare anyways.
STILES: hmmm

STILES: i dare you to tell me something super personal

: That’s not technically a dare.

STILES: well it’s not like you’re playin fair with all your stupid truths so

: Point taken.

: What counts as personal?

STILES: hmm, idk like first kiss or something for example

: Or something like what?

STILES: wait wait wait

STILES: just go for first kiss story

: No.

STILES: i dare you

: My mom.

STILES: on lips?

: Well, no.
STILES: doesn't count then needs to be like some serious tongue action

STILES: or like slime action or wtv yu use in yor real form

• • • ○ •*: I was in a human form for that.

STILES: oooo and?

• • • ○ •*: I don’t like to talk about it.

STILES: that bad?

• • • ○ •*: Yes.

STILES: why? horrible kisser?

• • • ○ •*: Not really.

STILES: so?

• • • ○ •*: That’s it.

• • • ○ •*: My turn.

STILES: duuud dat was like no story at all

STILES: come on
It was a female human. She kissed me. I liked it. She just did it to gain my trust. And then she fucked me over. It’s not something I enjoy remembering.

STILES: ah ok sorry

Truth or dare?

STILES: truth

What is he running theory on curing you? There must be something? Anything?

STILES: i thought yu would ask bout my first kiss

No. Now tell me what I want to know.

STILES: uhh well dis is a hard one though but ok

if dey could flush their nanos through me, so many of dem dat it would overwhelm the virus, dey could win over maybe and flush the virus out, but i am full with it n my nanos are obviously losing n blocker wont let dem in

Can’t they implant them surgically somehow?

ho hoo, my turn though

Dare.

STILES: ugggh

STILES: ok
STILES: run to the med and bang at door five times

・・・・・〇°°・: Seriously?

STILES: yes run, you need to do it under min

STILES: hurry hurry

STILES: derek?

STILES: are we playin or what?

STILES: ahhh i heard dat omg haha

STILES: medics r coming ruuuun

STILES: omg you really did it haha

STILES: i can’t even lol

STILES: (︶▽︶)

・・・・・〇°°・: Your turn. Can’t they implant them surgically somehow?

STILES: well technically via a blood transfusion maybe, but you see no nano or human has a blood like mine, so… and their nanos wouldn’t be potent enough to overwhelm my system even if dere was blood like dat available n dey would have to run loads of it through me… like a whole circulation system, dat a lot
STILES: lololol did i scare yu with t last one?

They knew it was me, Stiles, who else would it be. I doubt other Nanos go around banging on doors like maniacs.

I don’t want to cause trouble by having to do this kind of shit again, so truth.

STILES: hm hm hmmm

STILES: how old r u really?

53 quantons.

STILES: ummm

STILES: dats like wat 64 human years?

I am unsure. I guess?

STILES: rad

STILES: im younger by a bit

STILES: dontcha wanna know how old i am?
No. Now which do you choose?

STILES: dare

Make a picture for me. Of yourself.

STILES: eww no

STILES: also yu cant just do the same as me

STILES: cant do the same twice thats rules

Alright, hack your medical files and send them to me.

STILES: i am making a very unimpressed face rn

So am I, since I see no files being uploaded.

STILES: like what do you think.... ok nvm

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dere

STILES: truth or dare?

Truth.

STILES: wat do yu think yu can achieve with this whole medical interrogation?
I want to see for myself if there really is nothing to be done.

STILES: suit yorsel

STILES: yu will be proved wrong yanno but ok

STILES: anyhow dat wasn’t my question actually

STILES: let me think a bit

By all means it should have counted as one.

STILES: yea, but yu like me so yull let it slide rite?

I wouldn’t formulate it exactly like that but ok.

STILES: awww yu big softie

STILES: umm actually

STILES: need a break

STILES: talk later?

Yes, talk to you later, Stiles.

STILES: [⊙‿⊙]*
“Boyd.” Derek nodded in a silent salute. “May he stars never lead you astray.”

“Same,” Boyd said, staring at him from the holo. Erica was leaning into the view as well, waving her hand around so fast, it was practically smearing on the screen.

“How are you?” Boyd cut in.

Derek shrugged. “Tired, but alright.”

“Stiles?” Erica asked almost immediately and Derek almost felt bad bursting the hopeful bubble he could hear in her voice.

And so he decided for a more neutral answer. “I am not exactly sure.”

“So I guess the transcripts were right,” she said, her sad face coming into view for a bit before it disappeared behind the visor flare. “They poisoned him?”

“That is my understanding of it, yes,” he confirmed.

“But what-”

“Erica,” Boyd interrupted, gesturing to his right. Probably at the station number two. “Could you get that while I go through the next steps with Derek?”

She nodded and disappeared from the view.

“So, the Sheriff will be taking a leave and reconnect with you both at the Nano homestead in a few cycles,” Boyd said. “The pin transporter will be prepaid to take you back to us. We shall have you back in no time.”

“What about Stiles?” Derek asked somehow stupidly.

“You know what the situation is with him, don’t you?” Boyd asked seriously. “He will remain in a med center with the Sheriff until... “ He didn’t finish the sentence but Derek understood it well enough.

He had a plan though.

A running theory.

A foolish hope perhaps.

He just needed to get a hang of one more thing.
“I need Stiles’ private file,” he said.

Erica’s head popped up at the side of the holo screen, staring at him weirdly.

“What for?” Boyd asked. He leaned in a bit closer to the holo as if worried somebody might hear their conversation. Or maybe it was just the curiosity.

“Do you have some sort of a med friend that could help him?” Erica piped up. “Like with the coordinates?”

He didn’t answer.

“Derek, I can’t give you that,” Boyd said. “Only the Sheriff has access to those. Not only because he is the contracted Captain, but because of being the last surviving relative.”

“I need it, Boyd,” he said hoping that against all odds it will be enough to persuade his Root Boss to take the risk. It of course wasn’t.

“It’s not about wanting or not wanting to do it,” Boyd argues. “I literally have no access to that part of the Code.”

Derek pursed his lips. “Maybe a ha-”

“Don’t even say that,” Boyd jumped in. “This is an official line. Your request has been denied. Get ready to board the pin transport once you reach the Nano planet.”

“Understood,” he said.

The line went blank, leaving Derek alone with the small flickers coming in through the wall of his cabin. He thought it was rather fitting - his hope was flickering the same.

~o~

STILES: so i know what i wanna ask now

STILES: derek?

STILES: dud?

・・○゜・” I’m here.

STILES: oh hey

STILES: hi
"Hello, Stiles. How are you doing?"

STILES: ok

STILES: yu?

STILES: dat is NOT my actual question

"What is your question then?"

STILES: been thinking bout my mom a lot lately

STILES: wat was yors like?

STILES: i mean any equivalent of a mom in yor species

STILES: my mom wasn't exactly female by human standarts, nanos have no gender like dat

STILES: its jut wat dey decided with my dad since dis n dat but anyhow...yor mom? go

"Do I have a choice?"

STILES: nop go

"I always thought I was her least favorite child if truth be told, but now that I think about it I realize that probably wasn't the case. She was just really strict, but that didn't mean... I thought it was more with me at that time, but she was the leader. She just wanted to protect us all and I was the most rebellious."
STILES: lol yu dont seem like it now

• • ● ○°̅°°: I would love to say I've learned my lesson, but I think I am just pretending I did. If it comes down to it, I usually choose the more foolish path.

STILES: dat aint a bad thing tho

• • ● ○°̅°°: It is if it brings me and the life forms around me at risk

STILES: yu saved me tho

• • ● ○°̅°°: I didn’t really, but thank you.

STILES: yor mom sounds cool

• • ● ○°̅°°: She was far from cold. I was just blind to it and chose to see only the restrictions she placed upon me.

STILES: dud

STILES: stop bringin yorsel down n focus on the nice stuff

STILES: just saying

• • ● ○°̅°°: Truth or dare?

STILES: wat?

STILES: but yu didnt...
STILES: ok guess yu did but still

STILES: alrite

STILES: truth

・・・○°*: How was your mother like?

STILES: awwh dud

STILES: best

STILES: she was THE BEST

STILES: i was lucky she didnt die right after i was made

STILES: i had a few years with her befor it came to it

STILES: few glorious years

STILES: she hid it from us yanno

STILES: wat making me did to her

STILES: she was hiding it for years can yu imagine?

STILES: her nanos were dying

STILES: but in the end she couldnt hide it anymore
STILES: she got sick not just her body but her mind too

STILES: she

STILES: it was hard

STILES: she thought

STILES: i mean she was right in thinkin it but

● ● ○ *

:. Stiles.

STILES: she had these episodes where she thought i want to kill her

STILES: she would yell all these things at me

STILES: she was right tho

STILES: my nanos were feeding off hers for years

STILES: we just didnt know till it was too late

● ● ● ○ *

:. Stiles.

STILES: derek i think i deserve this

STILES: it should have been me
But it wasn’t you. What point does it make to look back now? What point is there to live to die? We need to live to live. Death will come to us all at some point. The time you have left shouldn’t be a curse, but a blessing. You are honoring your ancestors with living on. Don’t disgrace your mother, honor her sacrifice.

STILES: is dat wat yu do?

It’s what I am trying to do. It’s why I decided to board the Beacon. Yes.

And it’s why you must fight for your life for as long as you can. Giving up is not an option, understand?

STILES: sounds easy when yu say it like dat

No, it’s not easy. Dying is easy. This is hard. But I know you can do it.

STILES: its not up to me derek

STILES: i cant get rid of the poison with positive attitude hah

I know, but...

STILES: truth or date?

STILES: *DARE

Do I get three options now? Is this like a bonus round?

STILES: dat was obviously a typo stop it

STILES: t and r are too close togther n yu know it
STILES: yu aint even gay

・・●・○°゛: I wonder how you would know what I am and ain’t in terms of sexual orientation, if you don’t even know what kind of a life form I am.

STILES: whoa

STILES: did yu jus get offended becoz i said yu aint gay?

STILES: unexpected development

・・●・○°゛: Stiles.

STILES: ok sorry

STILES: is just humans react to dese things different

・・●・○°゛: Sucks for them.

STILES: yea i guess so

STILES: so which do yu choose?

・・●・○°゛: Truth.

STILES: so wat is yor sexual orientation?

・・●・○°゛: I just knew you’re going to ask that.
STILES: haha

STILES: so?

● ● ○°": I stopped seeing the point of these things after my last encounter.

STILES: dats cool

STILES: a shame but cool

STILES: well yu never know

STILES: yu might meet somebody who makes yu wanna get back into it

● ● ○°": Even so. I don’t think I would want that.

STILES: fair enough

STILES: sooo truth

STILES: wanna ask me bout my sexual orientation?

STILES: before yu say no and ask some stupid question bout my sickness i gotta warn yu dat id rather go back to puking than answer more of those questions

● ● ○°": Well then what is your sexual orientation, Stiles?

STILES: anyone and everyone!
STILES: duh

• • ● ○ "*: I expected as much.

STILES: but like yanno i might pull a line at some point, universe has much to offer and dere r only so many life forms compatible with humans

STILES: like any of dose 2d races i cant imagine

STILES: its a whole different level of being yanno

STILES: hard to wrap my 3d head round it

STILES: but i mean if it would come to it i might try if dey catch my attention or somethng i wouldnt just say no yanno

STILES: i seem a bit desperate i know

• • ● ○ "*: It’s not good to be alone. I know that much.

STILES: and yet here we r

• • ● ○ "*: Rather ironic, true.

STILES: u got me for now though

STILES: and soon yu will have beacon back

STILES: so all good
What about you, Stiles?

STILES: well my dad will come

STILES: n i got all the nanos round

STILES: now granted we cant exchange nanos like dis but dey r doin their best to accomodate me

What does that mean “exchange Nanos”? You guys can do that? I assumed its like within the mother-child relationship?

STILES: well yes

STILES: but no?

STILES: ok let me explain

so the first nano never originates from you, the nanos lost it ability to actually create a nanobot from nothing dey say but some say its impossible and was never done, first nano is a myth dey say or perhaps a genetic mistake OR some sort of a miracle or so

but anyhow so you receive your first nano from your mother, xe builds your body n puts one of xyr nano into you where it starts up n takes care of the needed processes.

sometimes one needs more nanos to start working, it depends on the design but if you go with the usual materials, shapes n processes you are able to give life offering one only

once the body is all started up, nanobot has time to multiply to some extent depending on how much energy body creates

now with time you can learn to control them, you can let them go out of your body to join the
nano stream and rejoin with you again when the waves come back around

STILES: but you can never be without any nanos for a long time - the one from your mother at least needs to remain within you

STILES: nano queen we call it

STILES: but with that one within you, you live but you are no more than a vegetable you know

STILES: it's like taking the chain off the bicycle without nanos for us, you might be able to go downhill for a while but once you hit the plain or need to go uphill you can't

*: I don't think I know what a bicycle is, but I sort of get the metaphor.

STILES: right well

STILES: now you can send a portion of nanos out for some time and since they can get through matter they go about coursing through everything round but mostly other nano beings too and they are able to share info n stuff with other nanos, they can interact with them

*: Your father said the nanos wouldn't survive within a different organic matter, not for long anyways.

STILES: yes I mean it's different with other races

STILES: if I sent them to reside within you, not the holo suit, but real you then they would die off after a while true

STILES: they need our bodies to get energy from and we need them to keep these bodies functioning well it's a win-win for both sides

*: But can't your Nanobots not get the energy from some other Nano they are going through as a part of the stream then?
STILES: well no dey are my nanos after all dey work with me

STILES: its special for me since my nanos are a part of a very unique biosystem

STILES: a pattern like mine isnt exactly a default nano composition yanno so dey had to adapt to dat n a lot of dem died adapting and trying to get it to work out somehow

STILES: at this point dey r too different from other nanos

● ● ○ ● ●: But it works between Nanos of the same pattern, composition etc?

STILES: ehmm well i guess if yu had two exactly same nanos in every way possible den yes

STILES: but i never heard of a mother constructing such two individuals, its not easy to do dat, i guess whittemorians would disagree but wat dey do is more science dan nanos do with deir offspring, dey clone their genes and we just mash stuff together and hope nanos can get it to work? Its hard to explain but its totally different

● ● ○ ● ●: I see.

STILES: but i can still be a part of nano stream

STILES: if i was healthy dat is

STILES: i can send dem out to share deir own info n dey would get a lot of info back n once dey would rejoin with me i would know so much more

● ● ○ ● ●: Know as in knowledge?

STILES: wel depends wat nanos yu send n where dey get through the stream but basically yes yu might get flashes of individual feelings or actual info too if dey r in stream long enough
That’s quite like a hive mind then, no?

STILES: to some extent yes but we still retain our own independence since we don’t all think the same but true it does help get a lot of the negative stuff around independent thinking out of the way.

STILES: it’s a perfect democracy, they say because we understand each other and nano sharing inclines us to look in the same direction which is to say it goes above needs of one person.

STILES: idk much about it first hand, tbh just theory.

STILES: been always either just me and mom or just me.

STILES: the times when I was part of the stream were rather overwhelming to say the least.

STILES: so many ghost things.

I guess it’s good you never gotten used to it since then it would be harder for you to function on the Beacon. With any Nano stream around...

STILES: i guess?

STILES: never thought of dat like dat tbh.

STILES: look at you all positive.

Someone ought to be.

STILES: r we still playin?
STILES: your turn?

STILES: ah no mine

・・ ● ○° ゜・: Mine.

STILES: so truth or dare?

・・ ● ○° ゜・: Truth I guess. I don’t feel like getting into trouble on this ship.

STILES: wise

STILES: yet foolish muhaha

・・ ● ○° ゜・: So what do you want to know?

STILES: hm hm hmmm

STILES: oooh

・・ ● ○° ゜・: I don’t like the sound of that.

STILES: so out of the whole beacon crew, who is the most attractive? go

・・ ● ○° ゜・: I don’t really know.

STILES: or the most comfy to be around or so then

・・ ● ○° ゜・: I suppose Boyd then.
STILES: who

STILES: not me?

STILES: duuuud

- - - - ○ " ": Or I didn’t realize we were playing the lie or dare game. Well, let me amend that. You, Stiles, of course you, it’s always been you.

STILES: way to rub it in

STILES: i am sick i deserve some love and appreciation

- - - - ○ " ": Stop playing the sick card. It won’t get you anywhere.

STILES: wont it tho?

STILES: shame shame

- - - - ○ " ": Not with me anyways.

STILES: and here i was tryin to win yor heart over

STILES: triple shame

- - - - ○ " ": Stiles, truth or dare?

STILES: truth i guess
STILES: wat no

STILES: we already agreed it makes little to no sense

STILES: besides i cant really do much like dis

STILES: ugh

STILES: fine

STILES: dare den

STILES: Force the quarantine open for me. I need to get in.

STILES: Right now.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

A/N: Surprise! I was so motivated by all the kind words, I just went on and finished the next chapter earlier! Happy Easter~

Derek actually thought the door wasn’t even gonna open at first. It looked like a rather ridiculous request even under the pretense of a game. Especially as a game. And yet he waited. Hoping.
He watched as it slid open within a few moments, revealing Stiles - his eyes were wide, his body was naked and oh, his body… Derek forced himself to look at it properly even if his first reflex was to avert his eyes and not acknowledge it at all. But he needed to. He needed the sight to fuel his resolve.

Stiles’ skin looked nothing like before. If it had looked awful to Derek before, now it was… either full of swollen blisters or so raw and opened it couldn’t exact be considered skin anymore. He looked almost like a… corpse. But he wasn’t one. He was still alive, his lungs were still bring in the needed oxygen, his heart was still pumping blood - he could hear all of that. He could see it in the spark of Stiles’ eyes. Life. Derek needed to protect that life. He had to.

“Derek, what?” Stiles asked breathlessly. Before any of them could say anything more, two Nanos rushed into the view, moving around frantically, watching Stiles, running at the door.

“Wait, no, wait!” Derek begged. “I need to get in. Tell them to let me in. Tell them I can help.”

Stiles smiled sadly as one of the medics put his hand at the pad next to the door. “You can’t.”

Derek stepped into the door frame to block the automatic closing sequence. “Try me.”

But Stiles remained silent. That sadness of his smile spread over his whole face. He took a step back, waving at the medics. One of them advanced on Derek to get rid of him.

Derek lifted his holo, trying to open a very bad nano translator he had found in the system. “Shit, this thing is not… I can help him. I can help you, Stiles, but you have to let me.”

Stiles turned away, his shoulders sagging. The medic with four strong arms pushed Derek out of the door… or tried to, but Derek didn’t let him. He pointed at Stiles, glared, huffed… trying to convey his intentions but the Nanos were adamant about getting him out and reinstall their perfectly guarded quarantine.

“I dare you, Stiles! I dare you.”

He could barely hear the whispered answer: “It’s not your turn, Derek…”

Derek grabbed the door frame to get a better leverage against the Nano medic. He was turning out to be stronger than expected.

“Stiles” he said desperately. “Please.”

That did it. Stiles whirled his fingers around, and the Nano medic stepped away from Derek. Not happily, but still.

Derek followed Stiles deeper into the station, watched as his skin stretched out as he moved, watched it crack open over his joints, felt the heat radiating from the inflation. Stiles tried to play it cool, but it was clear each movement hurt him enough to make him hold his breath.

He walked to a pod-sized block of gelatin-like substance and sat down into it. It enveloped his body, soothing his skin, cooling it down and Stiles closed his eyes for a second to enjoy the effects, before he turned them up at Derek.

The Nanos were watching him impatiently too, but he paid them no attention. This was it.

“Well? Go ahead.” Stiles gestured, lifting his arms out of the gelatin. “I can interpret for you.”
“It will be faster if I show them,” Derek said. “Show you.”

He watched Stiles twirl his fingers and then put them hurriedly back into the gelatin. He looked so fucking tired, so defeated, even if he tried not to…the fact that Derek could actually see it on his face meant it was visible enough to the ignorant ones as well. Derek hated to see him like this. He deserved so much better…

And he shall get i t, Derek thought as he closed his eyes and ordered his body to shift. It was an easy shift when it came to the shape since it was similar to his own human one, but it was what was on the inside that took him the longest. He was still in progress of refining it when he opened his eyes again.

Stiles’ mouth was agape. “Holy…” He didn’t get further, clearly in loss for words. His eyes flickered briefly to the Nanos standing not so far away and then back to Derek.

“How?” Stiles asked.

“Holy shit,” he repeated. “You’re a Shifter?”

“Yes,” Derek answered, the voice an echo of Stiles’ own. He glanced down at himself. At the long limbs, the pale skin.

“How?” Stiles asked.

Derek frowned. “I was born that way?”

“No, how?” Stiles lifted his hand again and gestured at his new shape. “You’ve just turned into a perfect copy of me as far as I can tell. Like… how did you do that?”

“Boyd send me your personal files. Secretly. Including all the scans they did of you back at IA,” Derek said, shrugging. “Once I know the logistics down to a cellular level, it’s rather easy.”

Stiles watched him, his eyes huge. Was it hope Derek could see in them? He couldn’t tell.

“They say Shifters can replicate anybody in such a detail, that you wouldn’t know a difference. Anatomically anyways…”

Derek nodded. “Yes, we can.”

“Which means…” Stiles closed his mouth before he could continue. It seemed he was afraid to voice what he already knew. Scared to give himself hope.

That was okay though. Derek wasn’t afraid of any of that. “It means I can create exact replicas of your Nanos inside of this body. More than that, I can create an endless supply of them provided I get the nourishment needed for it. We can flood you with them and get rid of the poison.”

Stiles just stared.

“Is this real,” he finally decided to say.

“Yes.”

“Well, shit.”

Derek grinned.
His plan had some holes - it was a very primitive-level plan, since Derek barely knew anything about medicine but what he did know, was building and rebuilding cells. That, he was good at. So he watched silently as the Nano medics conducted a very complicated debate with Stiles.

And then it finally came down to the practice. They hooked him up to some sort of improvised nourishment mixture and sat him down right next to the gelatin pod.

“So, ready?” Stiles said, leaning over from where he was macerating.

“I was ready for a while,” Derek answered back, unimpressed.

Stiles just shrugged. “Yea, well… I was eager to start too, but not before making sure I won’t suck you dry. That’s not how I do my business.”

Derek didn’t answer mostly because he didn’t understand Stiles was on about.

“Alright, let’s do this,” he reached over and grabbed his hand. His fingers felt fragile under Derek’s, but he squeezed right back anyways.

“So… we figured the poison holding Nanos within me won’t know the difference between my and your body. It will just continue to spread and envelope your skin too…thus allowing the Nanos to flow through if we touch like this? It will think of you as some sort of an extension of my body it previously missed.”

Derek nodded. He already knew all that, but it seemed the narrating was keeping Stiles calm so he didn’t try to interrupt him.

“The Nanos you create should recognize my body in the same way. They should hurry to repair the damage without much prompting so… you shouldn’t have to do anything special,” Stiles kept going.

Derek watched their joined hands for a while, but he couldn’t see any light… or any sort of transfer happening.

“How do we know it’s working?” he asked.

“We won’t for a while, I guess,” Stiles admitted lifting his eyes from their tangle fingers. He looked over at the Nanos and interpreted: “They do have a Nano scanner here, but… they don’t wanna risk hitting me with the rays right now, so we’ll just have to wait it out and see.”

Derek shrugged to show he didn’t mind and leaned back in his chair, his hand still nestled firmly in Stiles’. 

“I don’t feel a decrease of Nanos yet,” he said after a few heartbeats. “I will keep producing them though, just so I am ready once the process begins.”

Stiles was watching him curiously. Derek looked back. “What?”

“You said it was a holo suit,” Stiles said, a slightly accusatory tone creeping into his voice.

“I lied,” Derek admitted.
“And the rest of it?” Stiles asked, shaking his free hand to bring up his holo. He moved his finger
and the feed scrolled through the chat. “The rest was a lie too? It didn’t feel like it…”

Derek sighed. “That’s because it wasn’t a lie.”

“Oh, okay…”

Derek squeezed his hand a tad more tightly. “Now you know the truth, so…”

“Myea…”

The silence that enveloped them was awkward at first, but then Stiles somehow started to talk
again, because… how could he not talk? Derek never experienced him silent for too long.

“So how many life forms can you change into?” he asked curiously.

“How many life forms are there in the universe?” Derek mused idly. “I guess that many.”

Stiles whistled, nestling himself deeper into the gelatin. That left only his head and his hand
peeking out. “That’s a pretty bad-ass superpower, man.”

Derek just shrugged, looking up at the ceiling. “I thought the same about yours, you know.”

“Oh, shut up,” Stiles said, snorting.

“It’s true.”

“You can change into any fucking thing. How is that better than having Nanos?” Stiles questioned.

“Everything has its limits and disadvantages,” Derek said.

They were silent for a while, until Stiles’ eye flew open and looked at Derek as if he actually saw
him for the very first time. Which… couldn’t really be true because Derek looked exactly like
Stiles at that moment.

“What is the natural form for a Shifter?” Stiles asked. “Nobody really knows that, do they?”

Derek squirmed in his seat. “Stiles, I really need to focus on the Nano production. You asking
questions is not helpful…”

“Derek,” Stiles insisted, shaking his hand. “Similar to a werewolf, isn’t it?”

The fact that Derek chose not to answer only confirmed his theory.

“Oh my... Stars!” Stiles exclaimed, slapping his gelatin-covered hand across his face. “It was you!”
he pointed at Derek. “Back on Moon. That thing that tore through the pod area. It was you!”

Derek pursed his lips and remained stubbornly quiet.

“You tried to get me back, dude,” Stiles said in awe. “Dude… you like… fucking… it was you,
wasn’t it? Wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” he admitted reluctantly. “But I failed. So I don’t really see the point of discussing it any
further.”

Stiles was looking at him in wonder and Derek could see the wheels inside his head turning by the
speed of light and he didn’t like it. The scrutiny of it. The closeness. The intimacy. But there was nowhere to hide. Nowhere to run. He needed to remain there and hold his hand.

“Can you turn into a Whittemorian too?” Stiles asked and Derek gave out such a deep sign he was surprised he didn’t choke.

“Shit,” Stiles muttered, sinking back into his gelatin. “Shhhhhh,” came out through. He pushed himself up a bit to reveal his mouth again and gaped.

“You went into the facility to get me?” he asked.
Derek looked away.

Stiles shook his hand to get his attention. “Did you?”

“For the love of… yes, I did,” Derek admitted angrily. “Now can you shut up so I can concentrate on my cells for once?”

Stiles closed his mouth and nodded, sinking back. Still, Derek could feel him glancing his way every-so-often, study his own features as if he was trying to understand some deeper truth.

Derek almost wished there was a change in his condition already to take the attention off him.

“You need to stop trying to save me, dude,” Stiles whispered. “It’s fucking lame.”

“Stop getting into trouble then,” Derek countered. “That’s fucking lamer.”

Stiles snickered and Derek couldn’t help the corner of his mouth going up as well.

A Nano medic came over to check on his nourishment mixture and Derek leaned back and closed his eyes. The light of the stream was a bit too much for him. Even with Stiles’ eyes that seemed to filter the intensity a bit more than human eyes would. It didn’t seem as harsh through his eyelids. It didn’t feel like scorching fire… more like a gentle warm candle flickering in the middle of the night. It was rather soothing.

He turned his senses inside out and concentrated on the Nanos inside of him. He had no idea how to actually control them, how to make them do stuff, but their presence inside of him made him feel a bit less empty. It felt like his body could go on forever like this… regenerating, healing, functioning oh so well for him. It was similar to his Shifter feeling at some many levels and yet so different...

One was clear though, just imagining the Nanos wouldn’t be there in this shift made him sick… just as imagining himself without the Shifter abilities. It was more than sickening. Derek gulped at the thought and forced his eyes open again to distract himself.

Luckily, Stiles seemed to catch up fast enough.

“Any change?” he asked.

Derek shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I-”

“It’s fine, come on.” Stiles smiled, squeezing his fingers. “It will work, just give it time.”

Derek’s eyebrow rose up. “How are you the hopeful one suddenly?”

Stiles smiled and shrugged sheepishly. “Dude, you’re like… hard not to trust after all this, yanno.

"..."
You honestly should stop before I fall in love with you.”

Derek snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

At that Stiles just smiled and looked away silently and Derek felt a weird pang inside of him, but he pushed it back down. It was all jokes and fun. It was all just gratefulness and such - it wasn’t like Stiles or anybody for that matter would ever… It wasn’t. Of course, it wasn’t. Derek wasn’t ever gonna feel loved again and that was fine. He didn’t want it anyways. He didn’t need it. He wouldn’t know how to deal with it. Right. Yes.

He nodded to himself and looked over at their tangled fingers. It was a nice notion… a nice thought. He slid his thumb over the back of Stiles’ hand and sighed. But it was just that.

“T’m not... you know,” Derk confessed. “I think I won’t ever be. I think everybody is better off without such things.”

“Myea, I guess,” Stiles said, his gaze fixed somewhere into the distance. He was tracing the Nano dance around them. Derek did the same. He let the patterns soothe him into a relaxed state. Let them carry his mind somewhere else. Somewhere far away. To a place long lost. To a place where love was a natural emotion. Where it was a part of him. And where he didn’t feel bitter and lost every time somebody mentioned it.

~o~

He must have dozed off for a bit because the next thing he knew, his skin was burning. He jolted awake, his mind full of fire and smoke and charred bodies… he wanted to run away, but something was holding him down. He couldn’t move away from the fire.

No.

“Dude, calm down,” came in Stiles’ voice. Derek finally regained his bearings. He was standing a few feet away from the pod, his arm extended all the way over to Stiles who was propped up against the gelatin, halfway out of it, breathing heavily.

“Can you… just…,” he gestured at the chair and Derek nodded, walking quickly back to it.

“Thanks,” Stiles muttered, sinking back. He looked like he was in a lot of pain, His fingers were bleeding over Derek’s.

“I’m…,” Derek starting to say, ready to extricate his hand off Stiles’, but Stiles kept on holding his hand stubbornly.

“You can’t let go now,” he said sternly. “The poison is in you, once you let go it will close up all around and no matter how we connect it will be impossible to transfer anything anymore.”

Derek pursed his lips, squeezing Stiles’ hand guiltily.

“I should be the one saying sorry,” he said, gesturing at Derek’s skin. “It’s gonna be hell for you now…”

Derek looked down at his arm and it was… covered in a red rash. It was burning and itching and
Derek wasn’t sure which one of those two he preferred. Both were pretty dreadful. Blisters were rising up on it. Same ones Stiles had all over his skin.

He couldn’t help but reach over and scratch the less red skin. It felt wonderful and then… it felt like a million times worse than before. Derek scrunched his face in distaste.

“This is pretty fucked up,” he confessed.

Stiles snorted. “Welcome to my world.”

“Alright, let’s see what I can do about that.”

Derek closed his eyes and took a deep breath in, he forced a partial shift, doubling the amount of his own Nanos in the term of an exhale. He looked down at his arm again. The rash was still there, but it had stopped spreading. He could even see some some normal patches between the scorching redness.

“More,” he realized. “We need so much more of them.”

“How much did you create?” Stiles asked.

“Doubled them,” Derek said. “It’s nowhere near enough.”

Stiles signed something to the Nano medics. “How many more can you create?”

“I am not sure,” Derek admitted. “As many as I have to, I guess.”

Stiles didn’t say anything to that and he didn’t even have to. Derek was done listening anyways. He was too busy concentrating, forcing his cells to multiply faster, building up dozens after dozens of Nanos to flood his system and thus in turn Stiles’ own.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat like that, his eyes closed, his back rounded as he leaned against his knees. His hand was firmly placed within Stiles’, keeping their connection alive.

It wasn’t long until he got too tired to continue, but still he pushed. He pushed even after his body wanted to give up. He wouldn’t stop until the poison was out of them both.

“Derek,” Stiles shook his hand. “Derek, you need to take a break.”

“I’m fine,” he muttered, lost in his trance.

“No, I’m serious, stop it,” Stiles insisted. Which in turn made Derek open his eyes and glance up at him. He didn’t look much better. The hand connected to Derek’s looked a bit less inflated but other than that… nothing much seemed to have changed, even after Derek poured hundreds of Nanos through him.

“But-” He didn’t know what to say.

“The nourishment mixture was gone long ago,” Stiles told him. “They are mixing up a new one for you, but...I think for now you should rest.”

“Are you feeling any better?” Derek asked, shocked by how little change he could see on the outside.

“That’s not really important right no-”
“Do you?” Derek demanded.

Stiles looked away and Derek… was weirdly glad he didn’t think of lying to him this time.

“This can’t be,” Derek muttered, looking down at their tangled fingers. “I have to-”

“You have to rest,” Stiles said. “You have to rest.”

Except his words were not registering with him properly.

“I can do better,” he said, nodding to himself.

“Yes, you can try again after you-”

“I don’t need-”

“Yes, you do,” Stiles insisted.

“No, I-”

Stiles relaxed his hand and weren’t it for Derek’s tight hold, his hand would have been free, his only chance of being healed lost forever.

“What the fuck, Stiles?” Derek hissed, using both of his hands to keep their bond secure. “You almost-”

“You will rest now, Derek,” Stiles demanded, looking straight up at him. “You will fucking rest or I will stop this experiment right now.”

“Stiles…”

“No, I fucking mean it,” he cut off. “I fucking mean it. You are not to kill yourself for me, you understand? Not again. Not again, Derek.”

“But I can survive a lot. I won’t- I am not as weak as you might think I am,” Derek argued.

Stiles sighed and patted their joined hands. “I know that. I know. I saw it with my own eyes, yanno. I saw what the snatchers did, I saw what the Whittemorian did… and yet here you are. I know you are strong, but I- I don’t want to do it like this. We have time.”

“We don’t,” Derek said, his eyes skimming over the gelatin pod that concealed Stiles’ still damaged body. “We don’t…”

“We do,” Stiles insisted. “I am not as weak as you might think I am.”

Derek hesitated for a brief moment and then snorted silently. He looked down on the floor.

“Alright... alright.”

“Besides, if this doesn’t work, my dad is coming back with some of my clean Nanos. I always leave some with him. He doesn’t want me to do that, but yanno, just in case,” Stiles shrugged. “They could help with a heart attack or so, if he ever....”

“I thought your Nanos can’t survive in organic matter for too long,” Derek wondered.

“Mom gave him an implant,” Stiles explained. “They are fine as long as they are mostly docked there.”
“I see.”

He didn’t exactly feel reassured by any of that.

~0~

Who would have thought the chair was very easily convertible into a bed. Well, not Derek. Not that it was any kind of helpful to him, he couldn’t sleep on that softness anyways.

And so he settled on the floor next to the gelatin pod, his arm pressed up against its side.

“Don’t worry,” Stiles said leaning over from above. “I won’t let go. You can rest easily.”

Derek blinked up at him as they hooked him up to a second nourishment mixture so that he could regenerate while he takes a brief nap.

“Sure you don’t want the bed?” Stiles asked.

Derek rolled over to his side and pulled his limbs closer to his chest to get more comfortable. “Sure.”

“Or a gelatin pod?” Stiles continued to ask.

Derek looked at his arm. The rash was spreading over it again, burning. He was slowly getting use to it - no, scratch that, this was not something one could actually get used to.

“I’m fine, Stiles,” he said. “I always sleep like this.”

“Even back at the Beacon?” came a frowny question.

“Even back at the Beacon.”

Stiles shifted, pulling his hand into the gelatin to grip it more tightly. “Even back at home?”

Derek stopped in his tracks, opening his eyes again to stare up over the edge of the gelatin. He couldn’t see Stiles like this, but he still watched the edge, wondering.

“Is this what you want to know? As the part of the truth or dare answers I owe you?” he asked at last.

Stiles thought for a bit, humming under his breath. “No, not really.”

And so Derek left the question unanswered. He leaned his head back, putting it on his free hand and then sighed, trying to slip into a sort of a nap that could replenish his energy.

The medics left them to their own devices, shielding their side of the Med from the streams of light, so it was nicely dim there - perfect for sleeping.

“I do have a question though. Tied to our game,” Stiles said after a while.

Derek just hummed under his breath, listening only with half an ear.

“These people that hurt your family,” he started, his voice barely hearable to normal human ears.
“Did they get punished for what they’ve done?”

Derek pursed his lips and opened his eyes again. He really didn’t want to talk about this anymore.

“I thought people are only life forms within your circle,” he said, avoiding the topic. Rather clumsily, true, but who could blame him.

“Usually it’s just meant as a group of any life forms. People, yanno,” Stiles shrugged. Derek knew he did because he could feel the pull of it through their linked hands. “So, did they?”

“No.”

Stiles was silent.

“What’s the second thing?” Derek asked, hoping he could get it over with in one swing. Erase the debt. Having it hang in the air for Stiles to demand truth or action any time he felt like it was rather dreadful now that he’d thought about it.

Instead of answering, Stiles squeezed his hand.

Derek frowned. “Stiles.”

Another squeeze. His hand sank lower together with the whole body and Derek bolted upright, seeing Stiles submerged in the gelatin.

“Don’t be an ass,” he said, pulling at the hand. Except, the hand was limb now. And when he looked more closely, the whole body seemed rather limb. Until it started to shake a moment later.

Derek did not hesitate, he jumped closer, grabbed Stiles and pulled him out of the gelatin pod, careful not to let go of his hand. He was unconscious and his body was shaking with some sort of a shock.

There was no time to lose, he turned around and yelled for the medics, who pooled right on tops of Stiles before Derek could even register what was going on.

Derek couldn’t understand a thing. He didn’t know what they were doing, nor what the whole thing was about. But he knew one thing for sure - they were running out of time. He needed to heal Stiles as soon as possible, otherwise…
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

A/N: Once again, thank you all for reading. The picture will follow soon, I already have it sketched out, but it's a scenery pic and I am not so good at those so I wanna take my time and not stress about finishing it today. Hope you will enjoy the chapter anyways! It's quite a special one to me~

EDIT: Pic online now and yes, I chickened out on the actual Shifter design and went with a normal wolf. I have no other excuse than being lazy :D

__________

The light in the Med was dim, almost non-existent. The medics decided to withdraw the most of the stream from the cabin.

Stiles was… not good. His body was burning high. So high it must have disturbed the chemical composition of his gelatin pod. With the concoction no longer able to support his weight, Stiles sank and almost drowned in it.

At least that’s what Derek assumed. He couldn’t really communicate with the Nano medics. He didn’t even try. He didn’t want to know… he didn’t want to know how much time Stiles had left, how much until the poison would win over. He could feel it himself… the poison was spreading up his arm again and it was burning worse than before…

Derek sat there, unable to sleep, but immensely tired, holding Stiles’ hand between both of his
own, staring. He couldn’t sleep even if the Nanos gestured to him he should. Was that what they meant? He assumed so.

He pretended not to understand them. Pretended not to understand what they meant by pointing at their joined hands. Pretended not to see them pulling their own hands apart urgently.

He just shook his head and stared at Stiles. He couldn’t let go. Not now. Not yet. If ever. How far would he go to save him? Would he keep holding Stiles’ hand until the poison consumed him as well? He was pretty sure he could force the poison out of his own body. So why wasn’t it as easy to push it off Stiles’ own withering one?

It was hard to create Nanos for both of them. It was even harder to flood Stiles’ body with an army of Nanos. He was weak. He wasn’t as strong. He was… a fool. He couldn’t save Stiles. He couldn’t save his own pack for fucks sake, why did he think he could save Stiles? Stiles wasn’t pack, he wasn’t… oh stars, he wished his mom were here. He wished...

If his dad were here, if Peter were, if maybe Laura or the Cora or… Derek looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. Oh stars… oh stars … why? It’s him isn’t it? It’s him causing all of this. People … people around him end up dead sooner or later. He is cursed. No. He’s poison. He is the poison.

Maybe he should just give it up. Maybe he should just let go… He looked down at Stiles, his face feeling tight.

“I can’t save you,” he whispered, squeezing Stiles’ hand. “I can’t do this.”

Stiles didn’t answer. He was still unconscious. Derek hoped he would answer. Derek hoped for some kind of resolution, forgiveness even, but of course he didn’t really deserve any of that so… why should he get one?

The universe was cruel. It was cruel and unfair and Derek was sick of it, he was so sick. He wanted… he used to want so many things when he was a child and the universe stripped him off everything. No. He stripped himself. He trusted Kate, showed her a way into their world and so caused the ultimate demise of their species.

Similarly, he let Stiles be captured, he didn’t get to him in time, he didn’t save him from the pod, didn’t find him in time, didn’t… didn’t do so many things he should have done for him.

Wait… wait, no wait, Derek thought, frowning down at the unmoving body. No, wait. Wait… He swallowed the tightness built in his throat and took a deep breath in. Calm down. What the hell? What the hell was going on? He shouldn’t be this emotional over a stranger, should he? And Stiles was a stranger, nothing else. Maybe a coworker of sorts at most? Maybe… in a weird sense… maybe a friend? But they didn’t know each other that long. He wasn’t…

Oh shit. Oh... shit. Shit. He kept staring at Stiles, shocked, internal panic seizing his heart. As if staring at Stiles would give him the answer he already somehow… he had known it for a while though, hadn’t he? The reason why he kept running after Stiles. The reason he… the reason why he somehow lingered around him. How he was receptive to the sound of his voice even from afar, his shadow, his… oh. Oh.

He couldn’t let go. There was no way he could let go. He needed to save him.

Derek laughed. He felt panicky. He laughed and then sighed.

He needed to save Stiles.
And then he needed to get the fuck away.

As far as he could.

As soon as he could.

Never see him again.

Ever.

And with that he closed his eyes and immersed himself in the ancient rituals of his pack - even if only in his mind - he focused on his ancestors, on his pack, his siblings, his parents, his family and drew power from them. The world around him faded and it was just him and his memories. His memories that fueled his shift, that fueled the Nano-creation, that fueled his resolve.

~o~

“Derr, mom said you have to play with me!” Cora shouted, running after him. Well, she was more like following his around really, the big baby.

Derek was annoyed. Obviously. He wanted to do his own thing. Not babysit his little sister. Why wouldn’t they just let him do his own thing?

“Derrr,” she wailed, snapping at his tail. He growled at her and sped up up the forest hill.

“Derr, mom said so,” she continued.

“I don’t wanna play with you,” he snapped. “Go play with Laura.”

“Nooo,” she cried. “Laura doesn’t want me around, she has her mate now.” She pretended to retch and then sped up after him. “They’re all gooey-eyed and gross, Derr. You play with me!”

“Leave me alooone,” he growled in annoyance. “I have stuff to do.”

“What stuff?” She was running alongside him, looking around as if the passing trees would reveal his big plans.

“Nothing. Go away,” he said.

“Deeeerrrr,” she wailed again, bumping into him.

He stopped and snapped at her again. He didn’t to it fiercely enough to really hurt her, but he needed her to understand that the games were over. She whimpered, but didn’t run away.

“Cora, I am serious, go away,” he growled, head-butting her gently. “Go away.”

She just growled back, nipping at his ear. “I promise I won’t annoy you, pleaaaase.”

“No,” he said, pushing her away with his head. “Go back.”

“No,” she argued, pushing at him. She wasn’t as strong as he was, but then again, he wasn’t really using anywhere near his full strength around her.
“Please, Derek, pleaaase,” she yowled, cuddling into his neck. “Please, I won’t be annoying, please. I wanna play with you.”

He stepped away to look at her. “You promise?”

“I promise. I’ll be all good,” she answered, letting her head sink down to feign innocence. Derek knew she didn’t have a pinch of innocence in her, so he wasn’t really fooled that easily, but still… he had a soft spot for his younger siblings. Even if they were annoying the shit out of him sometimes.

“Okay,” he said finally, watching Cora squeal in happiness. “You can come with me, but you can’t tell anybody what we’re doing, okay?”

“Yes,” she smiled.

“It’s a secret, okay?” he insisted.

“Yes!”

“Promise you won’t tell anybody I took you there, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Not even mom.”

“Not even mom.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

He led them up the hill, along the top of the hillside and through the tightening lines of trees up until the trees thinned out and the ground slowly changed from dirt and leaves into stones. They could hear the sound of water from all the way before already, but now it got so much more vibrant. It resonated around the rocky area, mixing into a harsh melody. Derek loved it. He really did, but they weren’t allowed to go there, because it was apparently too dangerous for them to be climbing over the wet rocks. Cora knew that too. The mischievous twinkle in her eye told him she was just as excited as him.

He stopped at the edge of the rocky slope. “Alright, so, I found this secret path that leads under the waterfall, okay? And I am building a cave there.”

“Oh, I wanna see!” Cora squeaked.

“No, you will wait here,” he said. “It’s too dangerous.

“Aww, no, Derek, I wanna see. I will be careful. I wanna see. Please.” She nudged his shoulder, her tail wiggling around in excitement. “Pleaaase.”

He signed. “Okay, but you will be careful, yeah?”

“Yeaah!” she squealed.

They descended down the steep slope, water drops flying all around them. Halfway through Derek led them onto a small path that he had found before. It was a pretty safe path, so he didn’t even watch Cora anymore, too excited to see if his cave changed anyhow… not that it would have, but still.
They reached the end of the path. It ended rather abruptly a few tails away from the actual waterfall. Their fur was utterly drenched. But that was fine. They would dry out before heading back home. If not they would lie and say they had been swimming in the pond. It was fine. It was all fine.

Until it wasn’t fine. There was a yelp, a slide of stones and Cora was gone. He didn’t see her fall. Didn’t see her fly through the air. Didn’t see anything because he still couldn’t comprehend why she wasn’t right behind him. He only heard the crunch of bones and then saw her lying askew below.

She was whimpering in pain and… Derek just stared. He somehow expected her to shift right away and be fine, but she only twitched and sobbed. As if it was impossible for her to move. As if she couldn’t shift.

“Shift, you moron!” he yelled, panicked.

“It hurts,” she sobbed, curling into herself. He breath was ragged and there was blood and… Derek ignored the bones sticking out of her body and... all the other stuff.

“Just shift!” he yelled again.


Derek didn’t know what to do. He was caught between being scared to call their pack and panicked his sister would die. Why wasn’t she shifting? Why wasn’t she fucking shifting?

“Cora! Cora, shift!”

“Mommy,” she cried.

“No, shift, shift! You will be fine, you just have to shift”’’

“Mommyyyyy,” she cried, but her voice was growing weak.

“Cora? Cora!”

His panic won over and he drew out a long and anguished howl. His pack would be there soon. They will help him. They will help Cora.

~o~

*Burning.*

*If you were given one more chance, how far would you go to save them?*

*Further than this.*

~o~
“So, you look so much happier lately, could that be cause of Paige, hmmm?” Laura pried as they lay basking in the evening sun.

“Paige what?” He wasn’t really listening, lost in his own thoughts.

She nudged him with her leg. “Oh come on. Just look at you, smiling all dopely, it’s a surprise mom didn’t caught up to it yet.”

Derek looked up at his older sister. “Is it that obvious?”

“Hell yeah,” she snorted out.

Derek pursed lips and looked away guiltily. He was trying really hard not to let anyone notice how happy he was lately, but it would seem he wasn’t good enough in hiding his emotions. Not yet anyways.

“Ah come on, it’s just me,” she said, kicking his leg again. He rolled away so she couldn’t reach him anymore. “Mom doesn’t suspect a thing.”

He sighed. Good.

There was silence again for a while and Derek hoped Laura would just drop it, but why would he think that was even a realistic hope was beyond him. Of course she wouldn’t drop it.

“I won’t tell on you if you tell me about it,” she said, grinning at him.

He frowned grumpily. “No.”

“Aww, come on, Derek. I am all in for young love,” she said smiling.

“No, you’re just nosy,” he argued.

Laura shrugged. “Well maybe, but you want to keep it a secret and my silence does come with a price.”

Derek groaned, hiding his head under his paws. He really didn't want to talk about it. Not because he was embarrassed, but because he was scared… scared somebody would find out the truth and forbid him to meet her ever again.

He could hear Laura shuffling closed, until she was lying on top of him pushing him down with her freakishly heavy body.

“Come on, lil’ bro,” she said, rolling over on top of him. “Tell your older sister. She can give you some nice pointers on sex and all that.”

“Eww no,” he said, trying to squirm away from her.

“Don’t ewww me,” she barked, nipping playfully at his paw. “Come on, spill it or I’ll tell mom you’ve been sneaking away.”

He stopped struggling and looked at her unhappily. “You wouldn’t, would you?”

She rolled off him, sensing the atmosphere shift into more serious waters. She sniffed the air, looking up at the skies of their home world. “Well, no, I wouldn’t, I guess. But still.”

Silence fell over the somber mood and for a bit there were just the sounds of a far-away waterfall.
“It’s not Paige,” Derek confessed in the end. “It’s… someone else.”

Laura looked over at him, obviously trying to stifle her curiosity. “Who?”

“I can’t tell,” he said, looking away.

Laura rolled her eyes, putting her head on her paws. “You’re no fun, Der. Yanno you can just tell me, right? It’s not like I would tell or yanno… disapprove.”

Derek sighed, nudging a leaf with his nose. He didn’t feel as happy anymore. He never was when he realized how much he had to hide from his pack. It was a big secret. A bad one. Correction - it would be a bad secret for mom because she would definitely disapprove and force him to break it up, but Laura… maybe she would understand?

He opened his mouth to say something more, but the words didn’t come out. He closed it again, frustrated.

Laura looked at him, sensing his indecision. “Okay, I will give you a discount, since you seem genuinely happy. You have to tell me one thing. And not like some random shit, I want something spicy, ok? Go.”

Derek hummed, thinking.

“She is older than me,” he said.

Laura squinted at him. “How much older?”

“Older than you.”

“Older than mom?”

Derek scrunched his face. “I don’t think so?” It wasn’t like he knew how to recount human years into those of a Shifter. He was going utterly by a feeling here.

“I see,” she said, her mouth doing that weird movement it always did when she was thinking. She was obviously trying to figure out who he was talking about. Luckily, there was no way she could have guessed it.

“Derek,” she said seriously then. “If she is older then you definitely need some pointers on sex. Can’t disapp-”

He jumped up to his feet, trotting away. “Not listening!”

“Derek!”

“Not listening, BYE LAURA!”

~o~

_Burning._
If you were given one more chance, how far would you go to save them?

Further than this.

~o~

“You missed one. Or more ones for that matter,” his dad said, flicking his ear. It was still pointy. Derek groaned and covered it with his human hand.

“It’s not like anybody would notice such small things,” he complained.

“Yes, they will,” his dad said. “You would notice if a Shifter had some odd body part no matter how small of an attribute that would be. It’s how brains work. They generalize and compare everything to that general idea. Now granted each brain generalizes from a different sample, but anything that sticks out is analyzed. If you want to blend it better, you have to notice all the details and replicate them without a second thought.”

Derek sighed sitting down clumsily. This human form was a rather unstable one. How did they walk on such weak twigs, Derek just didn’t understand.

“What’s the point,” he moaned. “It’s not like we will ever go out there. I don’t need to know how to blend in.”

His dad hummed under his breath and sat down. His human shift was prefect down to a mole of course. Derek looked at him grumpily. *Stupid dad and his stupidly perfect shifting.*

“Well, you never know,” his dad started, but Derek interrupted him right away: “I know, you know, we all know. Mom wouldn’t allow it anyways, so… so what’s the point?

His hand shifted back to its original form and Derek groaned shaking them around as if that would force them to regain that fickle human form again. It didn’t.

“Well, I can’t talk for what your mother will decide for the pack or what the mothers will decide for all the packs for that matter, but…”

“We will never be allowed to go out there, won’t we?” Derek signed, looking up at the vast skies above them. “Why? Like, I get it’s dangerous, but…”

“You know why, Derek,” his dad said. “Shifting is a too good of an ability to-”

“Okay, I get that, but…” Derek signed. “It’s not like they would know it’s us, right? We can shift? Hide? We can-”

His dad snorted, poking his ear. “Not with these weak skills, you won’t. And it’s not just about the shape, it’s also about all the other things - behavior, speech, added abilities. How would you blend in with humans when you can barely stand on their two legs?”

“Well, I would learn that more properly before going out there,” Derek said, covering his faulty ear with his faulty hand. “Still.”

His dad nodded, looking up at the sky himself. “I get it.”
“You don’t.”

“Oh please, of course I do,” he snorted. “I would love to go out there myself. See all the shapes. Try them all out…” he gestured at the holo on his wrist and scrolled through the pictures of humans. “There are so many variables of each race, so many combinations.” He signed wistfully. “It’s not something they categorize in these. Being able to see it in flesh would make it so much better. Alas-”

Derek pursed his lips.

“Look,” his dad said, putting his hand on his shoulder. Derek shook it off. He stood up and shook his head. “Can I leave now?”

His dad smirked and gestured to his wobbly legs. “If you think you can.”

Derek growled flopping down on the leaves. “This is so unfair! Why can’t we just go wherever we please?”

“You know why,” his dad said patiently.

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. You know the stories.”

“They’re just stories,” he grumbled.

His dad leaned in closer and looked at him. His eyes were so different from what he was used to. They were green as the leaves around them and… it was rather weird seeing the same color in eyes.

“You know they’re not just stories,” he said seriously. “It’s reality. It’s happening now all over the universe. Just because it’s not happening to our pack, to our planet, it doesn’t mean it’s not happening. It might not seem so, but it is. There are races who would love to explore our abilities. Who would love to take our children and use them for-”

“I would be careful, dad,” he whined rather than said. “I would be. I wouldn’t bring in any danger. They wouldn’t know.”

“Derek…”

“It’s so unfair!”

“Derek…”

“It is!”

“Okay,” his dad said, standing up. “Let’s make a deal.”

Derek waited for him to continue, his frustration slowly seeping away from his body. One could never really be frustrated around his dad, he was too mellow of a Shifter.

“If you learn to shift at least twenty shapes, including ten individual combinations for each… if you will be able to do that up to my satisfaction, my satisfaction, Derek, okay? Then I will recommend you for the external.”

Derek’s heard quickened. “But… that’s way above…”
“Twenty plus ten combinations, Derek. In perfect detail. Master that and you can have a chance of becoming one of them.”

Derek couldn’t believe something like that was possible. “But mom said she will never-”

“Oh, did you think that’s all?” his dad laughed, folding his hands over his chest. “Oh no, buddy, External training is really tough, only a half a dozen Shifters in a motherreign get to join the universe out there. Your uncle Peter had to go through a few rounds to even be eligible enough.”

Derek’s face fell. “So, it’s-”

“Possible. It’s possible.” His dad smiled. “If you work hard enough, anything’s possible.”

“But mom-”

“Leave your mother to me,” his dad said, reaching out a hand to him. “Now, come on, let’s see if we can make this human shift work.”

~o~

_Burning._

_If you were given one more chance, how far would you go to save them?_  
_Further than this._

~o~

“What do I do?” Alex asked rather desperately. He was holding up Oliver, trying to soothe him. The other twin was standing next to them, bawling his lungs out as well. “Derek, help?”

Derek looked up from his holo and sighed. “Just wait for them to calm down.”

“Mate, come on,” he begged, gesturing at Josh, who was by then rolling on the ground, howling. Oliver would have followed him down too, weren’t it for the fact that Alex was holding him tightly in his arms.

Derek closed the chat window and got up to join the chaos.

“What do I do?” Alex asked. He knelt down and let Oliver tear himself from his hold and join his twin on the ground. Derek was surprised their combined temper-tantrum didn’t cause a massive earthquake.

“Just let them be,” Derek advised.

“Seriously? Your mom will kill me if she comes back to this ,” he said gesturing at the ground. “I failed her test!”
Derek snorted, walking to them. “It’s no test.”

“Yeah, that’s what you are supposed to say.”

“No, really,” Derek said, shaking his head. “There was just nobody else to babysit.”

Alex looked pointedly at him.

“I am busy,” he said, shrugging.

“Oh come on, you’re here to make sure I won’t fuck up by letting them eat dirt or something,” he said, unconvincing. “Now, this is one of those situations where you jump in and save my ass and I will owe you some really bizarre favor for not telling on me.”

Oliver chose that moment to pick up a rock and throw it at his brother, who was slowly calming down again. Alex cursed and kicked out his leg to bring the rock off its trajectory. It hit the nearby wall, bounced off it and broke a jar in the corner.

“Well, great,” he sighed just as Josh started to bawl in full volume again, yelling at his brother.

Alex looked at Derek. “By this point you could get literally anything for helping me.”

Derek perked up. “Anything?”

“Anything, dude, come on,” he said, bending down to grab Josh’ hand before he could hit his twin in the face.

Derek nodded, turned around and grabbed Oliver by the nape of his neck. He pulled him to the other side of the room and sat him down.

“Stay.”

“NO!” Oliver shrieked, kicking him. “Joshie stole my toy! I want mah tooooy!”

“What toy?” Derek asked, staying in a safe distance.

“Mah toooooy,” Oliver wailed, throwing himself on the ground again, his little legs flailing. “Mah toooooy!”

Derek looked over at Alex, who had Josh cornered on the other side of the room. Otherwise he would probably run over and try to hit his brother again.

“Any idea?”

“None. They weren’t playing with any toys,” Alex said, looking around. Josh tried to slide in between him and the nest, but Alex was quick enough to bar his way.

“What toy did you take from your brother?” Alex asked him.

“It’s mah toy, Oli is lying!” Josh yelled.

“No, it’s mah toy!” Olived yelled back.

“MAH!”

“MAH TOY!”
“YOU STINKY LIAR!”

“YOU STINK!”

“NO, YOU STINK!”

“NO, YOU!”

“ENOUGH!” Derek barked, baring his teeth. He let his eyes flash to shut them up. And it worked, for like a tiny brief moment both of them were quiet, shocked and then they started to bawl again.

“DERRIE, YOU BIG MEANIE!”

“DERRIE, YOU STINK!”

“You STINK!”

“MAH TOY!”

“MAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Derek sighed and got up. He walked back onto the nest. Alex’ eyes were following him questioningly.

Derek beckoned him to come too.

“Alright, well, we are bored with you, so you can continue whatever you are doing and me and Alex are gonna watch some stuff on my holo.”

Derek sprawled on top of the nest and patted the place right next to him for Alex to lie down too. He did so rather hesitantly, looking back and forth between the twins. They were still bawling on the ground and Josh was crawling to his brother to presumably hit him again.

Alex pursed his lips. “You sure about this?”

“Yeah,” Derek said, scrolling through his feed. He put on their favorite show and waited. Just as the intro song started, the bawling stopped and Josh’ head turned around. He zeroed in on the holo and then sniffled.

Oliver’s head popped up from behind the pillows he had been destroying just a moment ago.

“What’cha watchin?” he called from over the other side of the room.

Josh took a few steps closer to them.

“Just some stuff,” Derek said. “You can come watch too if ya want.”

Oliver looked over at his brother as if he was wondering if they should resume their shouting match or not, but Josh was already sitting at the edge of their nest stretching his neck to get a better view of the alien animals on the screen.

Oliver sniffled and walked over, making sure to walk all around the room to sit down at the other side of the nest. He slowly moved in closer to Derek, his face covered in snot just as his twin’s.

They were both watching the holo now, the fight forgotten.
Alex sighed. “Thanks.”

“Don’t forget you owe me.”

“Feel free to demand the favor from Laura anytime. She pays our debts on her side and I do at mine.”

Derek chuckled, nudging his shoulder playfully. “You better-”

“Shhhhh,” Josh hissed, cuddling to Derek’s side, his eyes glued to the holo. Oliver was on the other side cuddling to Alex’s side.

They seemed to have calmed down and Derek turned his eyes to the holo as well, watching the numbers on his chat icon in the corner add up slowly and angrily. He dreaded the consequences of not responding right away.

~o~

_Burning._

*If you were given one more chance, how far would you go to save them?*

*Further than this.*

~o~

He was running through a dark forest, his lungs were burning and his muscles aching, but he’d never felt better.

The three moons shone bright above them, slowly advancing on their alignment, steadily approaching the total triple eclipse. It was a holy night, a special one. One that only occurs every hundred motherreigns and all of the packs were out in the forests, running as one.

A howl came from afar and Derek joined before any of his kin could. It was an endless drawl, the echoes carrying their cry into the distance - a song that enveloped their whole planet for just this night, seeping into the flora all around them, into their flesh and bones, into their souls.

Derek cut through a clearing, slowing down. He couldn’t sense any of his pack in a direct vicinity, but that was okay. He wanted to be alone… even though he couldn’t exactly be alone. The echoes of the distant howl rejoined with him again and he lifted his head to help them carry on.

And as he opened his eyes and looked up at the dark skies full of stars, full of foreign life… the three moons aligned, seemingly merging into one huge ball of yellow light. Derek’s eyes responded in turn, flashing the color back at the moon. It was beautiful. It was mesmerizing. It was…

“That’s rather something, isn’t it?” Talia said from behind him.
Her approach didn’t startle him, he heard her getting nearer and nearer with each calm breath he took. She sat down next to him, watching the moon wane.

“Oh stars,” she whispered as the moon started to slowly turn red.

Derek watched it, but it was happening so slow, that his eyes got distracted by the small twinkling lights all over the sky. The stars… and he wondered.

“It’s a shame nobody else can see this,” he said after a while.

“Nobody else would be worthy,” his mother answered. “Only a Shifter could appreciate this moment in its full glory - only we can hear the echoes of our ancestors within the long howl. Only we can feel the pull of this sacred eclipse. To Outsiders, it would be merely nature playing around.”

She didn’t sound bitter telling him any of that. She said it as if she was only stating a well-known fact. And Derek hated it. He hated how dismissive she was toward the Outside.

“You don’t know that,” he said defensively.

She didn’t answer and that made him even more annoyed. He wanted her to answer. He wanted her to argue and he wanted to have an open discussion about it all, but she never saw a point in talking about the Outside. Her mind was made up and he couldn’t bear that.

He could hear Kate laughing at his mom in the back of his head. They are all retarded for ignoring the rest of the universe, she had giggled, not you, you are smart, aren’t you? You know what is important. Not like that mother of yours.

“Mom I… I want to go out there,” he said, his voice hushed. She looked over at him, the red moon shining in her fur, gleaming in her eyes.

“Derek, not now.”

“But when, mom?” he asked, pushing the question out between his teeth. “It’s always not now. And I-

“Not now, not ever,” she said, redness creeping into her eyes as the moon reddened further.

“But-”

“No, Derek, it’s dangerous. I won’t let you-”

“It’s not dangerous, mom,” he argued, no longer watching the moon. He stood up and started to pace around the clearing. “It’s not.”

“Yes, it is, Derek,” she said, her glowing eyes following him patiently. “You will understand once you grow up, that-”

“I understand it now already! I understand that you have it all wrong! They aren’t all out there to get us! They really aren’t…”

There was pity in her eyes. Kate would have called her… things he didn’t really want to think about.

“Mom, this can’t be all there is,” he said. “There is so much more out there. How can we just-”
“Derek, maybe-” she didn’t continue. She just sighed and looked up at the moon again. It was approaching the total eclipse. “Maybe we could talk later? This really isn’t-”

“And when will it be? When-” Persuade her, Kate had said. If you want to be with me, if you love me, then you will.

“Derrie,” she whispered, he eyes glowing full. “Look.”

He didn’t want to look.

“Look,” she repeated, her voice strong. Too strong for him to refuse an order.

He looked up.

The moon seemed huge. It seemed so close that if he would have reached over he could have touched it. The magical apparition filled his mind, pushing the thought of Kate and her words away. There was no Kate in this world, not at that moment. It was just him, his pack… all the packs, raising their heads in one long howl. The song of their race reverberated through their throats and he let it carry him into peace.

His mom was sitting next to him. Her warmth seeped into his body, calming him down even further.

It was a moment.

An eternity.

And then he opened his eyes again. As he watched the moons split apart tail by tail, he realized, that he couldn’t really imagine leaving them… he didn’t really want to leave. Not yet.

Derek sighed, tearing his eyes away from the moon. He pushed his head into his mother’s fur and breathed in the fresh forest air. It wasn’t long before the rest of the pack joined them, piling up around them, exhausted, but calm.

And as he lay there, the moon letting go off him, Kate grew stronger at the back of his mind again, but this time… perhaps the first time in a very long while, he didn't listen to her. Instead, he listened to the gentle breathing around him, the steady thumping of all of their hearts…and he got more sure.

He was sure that this was something he couldn’t leave behind. Something he didn’t want to leave behind. Not even for the whole universe.

His mom shifted, cuddling closer. “Hey pup,” she whispered only for him to hear. “If it’s something you really want, then-... I know I can come on a little too strong when it comes to the Outside, but… you should know that I only want to keep you s-”

“I know, mom,” he sighed. “I know.”

“If it really means so much to you, then-”

He pushed his head under hers, relishing in the weight. It made him feel safe. It made him feel grounded. It made his head cleared. “I don’t want to go anywhere yet, but… maybe someday. Maybe someday we can talk about it? Like actually talk?”

“Yea,” she sighed. “Yea, of course.”
If you were given one more chance, how far would you go to save them?

Further than this.

“Did you hear? Peter Hale’s mate, the faulty Shifter, apparently she is with a child.”

“What? And she’s keeping it?”

“I heard so.”

“What? Is she crazy? Having a child without being able to shift is not really…”

“Yeah, I know, it’s crazy…”

“Totally.”

Derek glared at the pair of women chatting right next to him. They didn’t notice him at all. And even if they did, they probably wouldn’t have known who he was. And even if they did know… he doubted they would have stopped.

He took the bag of traded fruit from the stand owner and walked away. A glare was fixed on his face as he walked through the sea of Shifters - the trading station was always full of them.

He found Olivia at a stand filled with small trinkets - beads, charms and all kinds of things Derek wasn’t really interested in. She was holding a small opal bead and as she rolled it in her fingers, the sun reflected from it to a multicolor of reflections.

She noticed him approaching. “Derek, all done?”

Her smile was kind and gentle. Derek felt even more angry about the gossip he overheard at the fruit stand. He wished it had ended there. But it followed Olivia wherever she went.

“Oh, that’s her, isn’t it?” Derek could hear from a nearby metallurgy stand. And so did Olivia because her fingers stopped twirling the bead. She was listening in as well now.

“Think she will survive it?”

“I doubt it,” came the hushed answer.

“Such a foolish girl.”

“Well, she is faulty, what did you expect?”
Olivia pursed her lips at that and put the bead back into the bowl in front of her. She smoothed the fur over her belly almost protectively. “Let’s head back then?”

“Yeah, just.” He walked over to the stand and reached over to grab the bead from the bowl. “Didn’t you want this?”

She looked over. “Oh, I don’t think…”

“Maybe we can trade three of them,” Derek kept on, rummaging through the bowl. “For all of you.”

“Oh, I’m not sure-”

He picked up three that seemed the most pretty and most similar to each other and showed them to her. “One for you, one for Peter and one for the tiny one? You can all wear them once the baby is born.”

The smile on her face was almost a grimace, her eyes clouded with unshed tears. “Alright,” she nodded weakly.

Derek turned over to trade the beads and then followed after her.

“Here,” he said, pushing the tiny pouch into her hand. “And don’t listen to those old hags. They don’t know shit.”

She snorted, looking down at the pouch. She stroked it with her fingers for a while and then smiled. “You sure are a sweetheart, Derek.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” he scoffed. “You’ll ruin my reputation.”

“Don’t tell what?” she said, winking over at him. He smiled back at her.

~o~

_Burning._

_If you were given one more chance, how far would you go to save them?_  
_Further than this._

~o~

The moons shone bright, bathing the waterfall and its surroundings in a gentle silver sheen. The leaves drank in the light and so turned the forest into a sea of small light sources, enlightening the clearing around the waterfall.

It was a perfect night for a mating ceremony, they said - the nature calm, the guests relaxed, the atmosphere serene and magical.
Peter was standing at the edge of the lake, his feet in the water, his hands outstretched in a ritual gesture. Olivia was standing right next to him, mirroring him. They were thanking the moon for bringing them together. The moonlight filtered between their fingers, gently kissed their foreheads and then allowed them to bring their foreheads together in a silent oath.

It was a short ceremony, blessed by the mothers, blessed by the moons, blessed by the packs and Derek found himself in awe as Peter and Olivia stepped out of the lake hand in hand. Their bond grew stronger under the moonlight and became... eternal.

“For as long as the moon shines upon our souls,” his mom chanted, rising her fingers to the dark skies. “For as long as the mothers reign over our flesh.”

“For as long as you are willing to have me,” Peter joined in with his own oath. His words were barely understandable within his throaty howl.

“For as long as I am enough,” Olivia said in return.

The rest of the packs present began to add their own chants - some of them plain, some of them bizarre, until the clearing was full of overlapping voices, chanting the same, but yet different things.

“For as long as the sun shines,” her said.

Cora snorted next to him. “You are supposed to come up with something cool and original, you know,” she whispered.

“What’s yours then?” he asked grumpily.

“For as long as the water flows,” she said proudly.

Derek scoffed. “Pretty much the same as I said.”

“No, it’s totally more original than yours.”

“Yeah, no.”

“Hush, you two,” Laura said from behind them.

Cora turned around. “What did you say?”

“For as long as we live and beyond that,” she answered silently.

“Oh, that’s good,” Cora said. “That’s good, ain’t it, Derr?”

Derek chose not to answer. Instead he listened in to the echoes of their joined howling slowly dying out in the distance.

“Alex, what did you say?” Cora demanded next.

Laura’s mate shuffled in closer. “For as long as there is breath within us.”

“Oh, that one’s good,” she said, then made a sad face. “Wish I had come up with that.”

Alex just shrugged. “I heard it at a different mating ceremony.”

“See? You should have listened not talked over everybody,” Laura teased. “Then you could have...
had some cool chants for next time.”

Cora looked even more sad for a second, but then her face brightened. “I will just go and ask everybody.” And with that she left them, weaving her way deeper into the crowd.

“We were gonna grab something to eat, wanna come?” Laura asked, but Derek didn't feel particularly hungry, so he just let them go without him. He didn’t feel very sociable that night - he barely ever did if truth be told, but somehow, it got to him more with all the Shifters around.

That’s why just a few moments later, Peter found him far behind the edge of the clearing, watching the gathering from between the trees.

“I would say I am surprised to find you here, dear nephew, but I really am not,” he said instead of a greeting.

“I could say the same, you know,” Derek answered grumpily. “Why else would you be here.”

“Why to bring you back to join us all, of course,” Peter grinned wickedly.

Derek snorted. “Right.”

“That and also keeping an eye on the Rubbard pack,” Peter said, his eyes turning to look at a group of Shifters laughing silently at the edge of the clearing. They probably would have noticed them right away weren’t it for the ruckuss of the packs around.

Derek followed his line of sight silently.

“Oliva really wanted them around,” Peter muttered with hate seeping into his voice. “But I find their stay has been extended for long enough.”

Derek didn’t ask why. He knew well enough why. They were silent for a bit, listening in to what the two Shifters were talking about and well… a lot of it was something Derek didn’t really want to listen in.

It didn’t take long for Peter’s eyes to gain that dangerous glint they always got when he was about to do something… Olivia would have not liked. She was way too gentle for the likes of Peter. Sometimes Derek wondered why the moon brought them together, but… maybe that’s just what they needed - Olivia to gain a bit more confidence and Peter to calm down a bit.

Peter’s head inclined at a particularly nasty insult that spilled from between their teeth. Derek didn’t try to stop him when he started to sneak towards the two. He actually followed along.

“Gentlemen,” Peter raised his voice to a more hearable level.

The two Shifters turned around, unfazed. First mistake. Or maybe the second one, since the first would be calling Olivia all those unkind names before.

Before any of them could do anything, Peter grabbed the one of the left by his neck and pulled him into the darkness between the trees.

His brother looked at Derek, confusion and shock written all over his face. “You insulted Olivia,” Derek said shrugging. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Wha…?”

“You better go before Peter comes back for you,” he said.
The Shifter glanced into the darkness again. Even when they could see through it well enough, the dense layout of trees didn’t allow them to see much. And the fact that they couldn’t hear anything, not even a breath being let out was… well, it must have been very… uncomfortable for the other Shifter.

He turned around and fled the scene without saying a word.

A few moments later, there was a rustle of leaves and Peter was standing next to him again.

“Well, I suppose I ought to join my mate now that that’s taken care of.”

Derek nodded silently.

“Speaking of which, Olivia was wondering where you went,” Peter said out of nowhere.

“Oh, good alibi,” Derek smiled and joined Peter on his way into the crowd.

~o~

_Burning._

_If you were given one more chance, how far would you go to save them?_  
_Further than this._

~o~

_Further than this._

~o~

_Further than this._

~o~

“Derek!”

A hand shook his shoulder and he snapped out of his trance. A stream of light assaulted his eyes… wait, no, his eyes were were light. That was fine though; he knew that feeling albeit it wasn’t _his_ kind of light or _his_ actual eyes, he knew how to calm them down.
After a few restless heartbeats, the Sheriff came into view, standing above him, clenching his
shoulder.

“That’s enough, son,” he said sternly. Calmly. Derek wasn’t sure. Everything was so confusing.
Wait. No. It wasn’t. He was here to…

Derek whipped his head around to look at Stiles and he was confronted with amber-colored eyes
full of life. And sadness. Eyes coated in tears and Derek was even more confused than before - did
he do something wrong? Did he cause Stiles pain? He looked down at his body - his skin looked
soft and tender, but the blisters were gone and the weeping mess of a raw cracked skin was gone.

So then…

“Derek,” Stiles whispered.

He looked back up at the eyes full of… oh no. Oh no. He knew. We saw.

He didn’t even notice that the Sheriff let go of him and went around the pod to crouch next to
Stiles. Their eye contact was broken when the Sheriff started to talk to his son and Derek… oh
stars, he needed to leave. He needed to go. Stiles saw it. The Nanos must have... Stiles saw. He
knew.

“I have to…,” he croaked uncertain. He looked down at their connected hands and hesitated.

“I have to,” he started again, looking around frantically. Where did the medics go?

He shook their joined hands, his breath ragged. “Can I? I-”

Somewhere in the back of his brain, he knew it was unnecessary to panic like this. But he couldn’t
calm down and the cabin felt a lot smaller than it did before… constricting and he needed to run,
run as far away as these spasming fickle legs would carry him.

“You can let go, son,” is all he registered and just like that, he snatched his hand away, stood up
and… before he could even take a step, his legs gave in and he fell into total darkness.
Derek felt like shit. Like absolute shit. And that wasn’t even an overstatement. He wished it was. But no. It wasn’t.

He was lying on a flat surface, his head throbbing, feeling like… well, like shit. Like he overdid it with shifting. Duh. Of course he did. He should have known. And if he hadn’t been panicking like a fucking moron he would have noticed it too, but alas. Well… good Peter wasn't around for that debacle. He would have had a solid laugh over it.

He opened his eyes and was assaulted by huge waves of light rolling all around him. It wasn’t really as unpleasant to his eyes as he would have thought, so that meant he was still in Stiles’ shape.

Yep. One customary glance down at his body confirmed that assumption. And a second customary glance around confirmed that he was not alone.

“You’re awake,” Stiles said, smiling over at him. He looked… good, normal, healthy. The Nanos
were flying all around him, avoiding him because of the bracelet, but not being rejected - at least he hoped. Derek sighed in relief, a tired smile pulling at his lips.

“How are y-

“Now would not be the time for questions, son,” the Sheriff said from right next to him. Derek almost thought he was gonna get a heart attack. Stars, were these ears weak.

“I would very much like a few answers first,” the Sheriff continued. “Preferably truthful ones.”

Derek pursed his lips, nodding over in his direction. He would have preferred to do this all a bit later, but it wasn’t like he could do anything about it. Now, let’s see what his little stunt brought him into.

“How about you change back to your own form,” the Sheriff suggested, folding his arms over his chest. “So that we can have an actual conversation.”

Okay. That didn’t tell him much. Derek glanced over at Stiles. How much did he tell his father? Which emergency protocol should he follow when dealing with this? It was hard to choose without the right information.

“Now, son,” the Sheriff said sternly. He got up from his chair to tower over Derek. 

Alright, a shift it is.

It was a bit awkward to force it in front of his audience. Under such scrutiny. After all the strain from healing Stiles. But he did it anyways. He changed into his usual human shape and sat up to level it up a bit.

Stiles’ song reached his ears almost immediately. Derek would have smiled, but the situation didn’t call for it.

The Sheriff looked unimpressed. “Is this your real form?”

Derek’s jaw tightened.

“Dad-” Stiles started, but was quickly interrupted: “Stiles, you agreed to be silent if I’ll let you stay, so be quiet, please.”

Scenario 15 it is , Derek decided, with a small variable. He hoped he chose the right one, because this one… it could only work if the Sheriff didn’t know everything. It was a risk. Stiles might have told him. He should have. And yet, Derek chose to risk it. It was pretty reckless, but his guts were telling him to trust Stiles. Peter would have kicked him in the shin if he knew what kind of a risk he was taking on. And yet.

“It is,” Derek said. “My real form, that is.”

The Sheriff frowned, confused. “How is that possible? Aren’t you of alien origin?”

“I designed this form myself. It bares no resemblance with any other human form I’ve ever seen,” Derek explained. “And thus it is my original form. Any resemblance to any being - living or dead - is purely coincidental. ”

“I am not here to argue technicalities,” the Sheriff said dismissively. “I am here to address the blaland deception that you dared to play upon the Beacon and in such - the IA. Do you know what
the penalty for such an act is, mister Kasai? If that’s even your actual name.”

“We could argue technicalities over actual names too,” Derer said, looking back at the Sheriff. “This is how my actual name was translated into the IA Standard. You can find the actual pronunciation in my IA file.”

“That’s not the point.”

“I suppose it isn’t,” he agreed.

Sheriff huffed impatiently and then started with his actual interrogation. It was fine though. He was ready for this. Peter made sure of that. He was ready for worse that this.

“You impersonated an IA officer and snuck onto my ship… to do what?”

“I am an IA officer,” Derek argued. “I did not sneak into your ship, I was chosen by the IA committee to join your crew, as it is stated in my file.”

The Sheriff brought up his file and frowned scrolling through it. “You want me to believe any of this is true? If it were, it would mention you not being human.”

“My origin was filed under confidential information.”

“Now why would that be?” the Sheriff asked.

“Because I am one of the last Shifters in the known universe that retains the ability to shift,” Derek explained. “It’s highly dangerous to leave such an information in the open. The IA-.”

“Your family-”

Derek did his best not to glance over at Stiles as he interrupted the Sheriff before he could finish his question. “My parents share very little with their distant Shifter ancestors, they are Hybrids or at this point one would consider them purely human, I guess. I was lucky… or rather unlucky enough to somehow get the correct mixture of genes.”

It was a lie of course. He was testing the Sheriff as well as Stiles. Derek needed to know how much Stiles shared with his father. Or how much he would share right there and then.

He could see Stiles twitch from the corner of his eye, but other than that, he remained silent.

*He didn’t tell him*, Derek realized. Maybe he could still keep his cover if he played out his scenario well enough. What for, he wasn’t sure, but he somehow couldn’t help it.

“What was the objective of your mission? Why did the IA send you to my ship? They must have known you have these abilities... there must have been a reason behind it.”

“There was none,” Derek said. “I was assigned at random. As far as I know anyways.”

“You want me to believe that your abilities had nothing to do with your assignment...?”

Derek pursed his lips, not answering. What was the point? He would just end up repeating his previous statements.

“I warn you, if--”

“I am a Shifter, sir,” Derek said, feigning annoyance. “Not a spy.”
“As far as I see it, Shifters are the best sort of spies,” the Sheriff argued. “Able to blend into any environment, able to impersonate anybody, able to access all kinds of powers, traces, skills,...”

“Dad, I told you-”

“Stay out of this Stiles or you are going out.” The Sheriff braced his arms on his hips. “I gave you access to my Root, I trusted you to-”

“And I did exactly what-”

The Sheriff huffed in exasperation. “Don’t interrupt me, son. I should have known right from the start. I should have acted right when Vernon came to me about your excessive knowledge of illegal paths. Now, he put it as something positive, but I had this feeling… and then all these scuffles with my crew. Were you trying to rile them up? To see how far we’d bend? To find something to report back to the IA? Did you perhaps impersonate any of them to cause the ruckus? Make it look like it was them causing all of this?”

Derek remained silent, observant. That seemed to not sit right with the Sheriff because he picked up his tirade again.

“Could it be you even orchestrated all of this?” He threw his hands in the air gesturing around them. “The IA was against Beacon being all human, against me doing things my own way, against having Stiles as a head of the Technical for basically forever. Is this what they wanted? To get rid of him? But it didn’t work out as it should have, did it? You probably thought Earth would be an opportunity for that, didn’t you? To show humans were not equipped to occupy such high positions? But it didn’t work out now, did it? Maybe you were even in with the snatchers? You knew exactly where they’d send him and fed the information to Vernon. Trying to play the good guy, trying to win my trust? Is that what this whole charade was about?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Derek said. He looked over at Stiles. “It wasn’t.”

“It wasn’t, dad,” Stiles confirmed. Not that his words confirmed anything for the Sheriff, he only got louder after hearing them. “And how would you know, Stiles? He could be-”

“He saved me, dad, multiple times,” Stiles argued.

“Well, that’s exactly the kind of-”

“Dad…”

“Don’t dad me, Stiles.”

While Derek was glad for having the Sheriff’s attention on somebody else for a while, he couldn’t let the squabble go on. It wasn’t doing his strategy any favours. He was an IA official. He needed to secure his position as such. Even if… he wasn’t really sure if he’d be returning to Beacon. So why… well, it was still important for his actual cover to not be blown into pieces. Especially if the Hunters would be sniffing around the Beacon. Right? Right.

“Sir, I don’t mean to be rude, but is there any sort of evidence to support these accusations at all?” Derek asked, getting up from the bed.

The Sheriff frowned in his direction. “Well, obviously-”

“With all due respect, but the fact that my race is confidential to the Captain rank… I don’t think that has anything to do with this situation,” Derek said. “It was approved by the board and there are
restriction placed on my shifting ability, that… true, I broke them to help out Stiles, but I couldn’t just-”

“You should have told me-”

“I decided it was safer not to disclose anything,” he said. “I wasn’t comfortable nor did I agree with the procedures concerning such delicate information on the Beacon. Not after I saw how Stiles’ personal details are treated. Now, that doesn’t mean I disregard your judgement, but of course-

“Why wouldn’t you be comfortable sharing this?” the Sheriff wondered. “My crew is built on trust and-

“That’s a sentiment I couldn’t afford,” Derek said. “Maybe with time I would have. Nonetheless-”

The Sheriff snorted and started to pace around. “You see, I find it very strange, that the snatchers didn’t sell you. That they would have just let such a precious-”

“They almost did.” Now, it was time to mi in some truth into his scenario. That was what made most lies believable. “The Earth’s AI stopped them before they could though. Said I was too rare to be sold… endangered species, she said.”

“I find that very hard to believe.”

Derek lifted his eyebrows, unimpressed. “Believable or not, it’s the truth. You could probably ask the AI for the evidence. She must have a log available…”

The Sheriff stopped in his tracks and regarded him through squinted eyes. Good.

“But still,” he said dismissively. Or maybe not so good. “All the conflicts back at the Beacon, it doesn’t look good for you, son.”

Derk restrained himself from groaning in frustration and took a moment to think about this next steps. Maybe he could-

“What conflicts?” Stiles piped up.

“Stiles-”

“What conflicts, dad?” he insisted from his seat. “Possibly with one annoying Whittemorian? Possibly because that said pilot would do anything to make it look like I messed up?”

“Stiles-”

“Check the logs.”

“Stiles…”

“Check the logs, dad,” Stiles demanded, standing up. “Check the fucking logs.”

The Sheriff folded his arms over his chest, looking livid. Now, Derek could just interrupt them again and force his own scenario to unfold again, but… Stiles gave him a look and even if he didn’t really understand what that look meant, he somehow… shit. He was doing it again, wasn’t he? Where did this blind trust come from?

Stiles stepped forward, facing his father.
“This interrogation ends here, dad,” he said.

“You don’t get to decide that.”

Stiles snorted. “Oh, yes, I do. You are not here as an IA Captain, remember? You are here as my dad. And I almost died, that certainly should bring things into perspective for you. Now, I tried to cut you some slack for ages. I tried to give you time to recover after mom died, but you never did - not as my dad. You only kept sinking deeper into the Captain position. Now, for a bit I thought that’s fine. I got it, yanno. It was a good coping mechanism. But we are done with that. I need my dad now. At least for now.”

The Sheriff just kept staring at his son in shock. Or maybe it was disbelief. Or hurt. Or… Derek wasn’t really sure what it was, but it certainly was something he had never seen on his face.

“Good,” Stiles nodded, taking his silence as agreement. “Now, why don’t you stop towering over your son and the guy that saved his life at least ten times in the last few circles and sit down. We have a couple of things to talk about.”

~o~

“Well, that was… interesting,” Stiles stated as they were exiting the Med Station.

The Sheriff has left them a few moments earlier to discuss their return to the Beacon and since there was no further reason for any of them to remain in the Med, they decided to head back to their designated cabins. The Nano homestead was close, but not close enough for them to wait around in the hallway. And Derek really wanted to take a nap. Or two.

“But at least it was all resolved in the end, right?” Stiles asked. Derek decided to remain silent. He guessed Stiles didn’t exactly want any answer from him, he was just trying to process the previous discussion with his father.

“A quite unexpected development, huh?” Stiles continued in amazement. “Who would have thought my dad would actually listen? Would you have?”

“I don’t know him that well,” Derek said.

“Yea, but I mean… he actually listened! And he actually talked to me about the whole… shebang and there was a hug included. Did you see the hug?”

When Derek didn’t answer, Stiles bumped his shoulder and smiled over at him. “Did you?”

“Yes, Stiles, I saw the hug,” he sighed.

“And he apologised to you and like… thanked you, yanno? That was pretty cool, wasn’t it?” Stiles continued, waving his hands around, beaming over at Derek.

Derek in turn thought he was gonna be sick just from watching him. His stomach wasn’t really having it. It must have been the shift exhaustion. Except it never felt this weird before. What the hell.

Stiles kept on talking, but Derek stopped listening after he started to retell the whole conversation
with his father. Derek was there, he didn’t exactly need to go through it again. Now granted it was nice that the Stilinskis made up and it looked like a huge step forward for Stiles and Derek was somewhat glad for it, but he _wanted to_ not care. And so he didn’t.

He just walked through the hallways with Stiles chattering around, squinting in the light and once he reached his cabin, he just went in without a word. He sat down on his bed, thinking he was finally all alone. Except Stiles was standing in his doorway. Hesitant.

Derek looked up at him. “What?”

“It just occurred to me I didn’t actually thank you for saving my life. Again. This seems to be a reoccurring theme between us.” He took a step into his cabin, looking around curiously. It wasn’t like he could see anything personal so Derek left him to it.

He sighed tiredly, leaning against his knees. “I sure hope that was the last time.”

“Whoa, rude!” Stiles spluttered.

Derek just shrugged.


Silence fell over them. A silence that Stiles wasn’t able to handle for too long. He picked up the conversation again: “Dude, what’s wrong? Now I get my dad really overdid it before, but I set it all right. And I… well I think it will be better from now on, so-”

Derek didn’t feel like listening to him anymore. He just wanted to be alone. Him being there, this close, it just didn’t sit right with him. He needed his space. He _wanted_ his space. It was just too much at once lately.

“Stiles, just get to the point,” he said.

“Right.” Stiles nodded, sitting down next to him. Uninvited. “Thanks for saving me, Derek.” He was looking down at his hands, his finger pushing into his palm. “Again.”

“No problem,” Derek answered curtly, looking away. He was glad Stiles couldn't hear as well as he could, because his heartbeat was embarrassingly loud. Fuck, he was tired, even his heart was protesting.

Stiles was silent a while and Derek hoped he would just leave and let him to enjoy a few moment in a blissful solitude, but alas… he seemed to be not getting the things he wanted, because Stiles was still there when he looked over. He rubbed his forehead in annoyance.

“Is this about the memories?” Stiles asked out of nowhere.

“What?” _No, no, we are not having this discussion now, if ever!_

“I am asking if you are acting this distant because I got to see all those memories while you were healing me,” Stiles specified. Derek didn’t need any specification. “It wasn’t like I wanted to see any of it, your Nanos-”

“I know.” Derek bit out, pushing his forehead against his knuckles.

“So ya know it wasn’t really anybody’s fault, especially not mine,” Stiles kept on. Derek wished he didn’t choose that particular topic to talk about. Derek wished he didn't talk at all. Why was he just
always fucking talking? He had enough.

“Well, unless it was your fault the snatchers got you,” he noted with annoyance.

Stiles snorted. “We’re not gonna go that far, are we?” The silence was an answer enough. “Right. Well… well, I suppose if you put it like that, then you could technically say it was my fault. I didn’t really turn off my Nanos and that might have kept us hidden from the snatchers. Emphasis on the *might have*, though, so… it’s possible they would have snatched me up anyways.”

Derek sighed.

“What is *fault* anyways.” Stiles laughed, leaning forward onto his own knees to be at an eye level with Derek.

Derek looked over at him, eyebrows rising. He wasn’t really amused. “Responsibility for an-”

“Har-har!” Stiles interrupted, watching him. “If it came down to it, it was your fault for imprinting the Nanos with those memories.”

Derek glared at him, making Stiles smile back. What kind of a fucking reaction was that? Derek wanted to punch him.

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” Stiles said slyly.

Derek didn’t really understand why this conversation kept going on. Was there a point to it? “I have nothing to tell.”

“True, but still.” Stiles just shrugged smiling at him. Derek couldn’t keep looking at his face so he turned his face back into his hands, closing his eyes.

He could feel Stiles’ eyes on him and it unnerved him. His heartbeat was getting critical and his palms felt sweaty… and it was all because he was tired and Stiles kept bothering him and why the fuck didn’t he just… Right. He was probably waiting for a thank you himself or something.

He looked over at Stiles again, meeting his eyes.

“You didn’t tell him.”

Stiles frowned as if he didn’t catch the whole sentence. “What?”

“Your father.” Derek muttered. “You didn’t…”

Stiles’ smile faltered, being replaced by a somber expression. “I didn’t… and I won’t,” he whispered honestly.

“Why?”

“Because I said I won’t,” Stiles smiled, looking away from him. Derek spent enough time around Peter to know that the way he looked away was a sign of a lie, but he didn’t feel like pushing it. Maybe Stiles had a reason he didn’t want to talk about. Maybe… Derek decided he didn’t want to know.

“So, why don’t we-”

“So, how are-”
They both stopped mid-question, looking at each other in confusion.

Stiles was the one to snap out of it first. “Uh… go ahead.” He gestured with his hand.

“How… how are you doing?” Derek stuttered out, somehow disheveled. It was just a question. It was only natural for him to wonder about Stiles’ well-being. He invested a lot into it in the last few circles.

“Oh, yeah…back to the same old, I guess,” Stiles smiled, stroking the back of his neck. Derek watched the motion idly.

“Your Nanos…” he started, watching Stiles nod along.

“All fine, all fine,” he stated, sitting up. He put his hand on his chest and took a deep breath in. “I didn’t get them out for a spin yet, but I guess-”

“You can do that now,” Derek blurted out before he could stop himself.

Stiles just stared at him.

“Just to be sure all is right... that it’s alright.” Derek said, trying to make it sound somewhat logical. “I want to be sure you won’t need me to charge you again or something.” Yes, that was a rather logical reason, wasn’t it? He needed to know if it was safe to leave. If it was safe to distance himself from Stiles. If he was safe now.

“Right,” Stiles said. He got up, pushing himself off Derek’s bed in one fluid motion. “Can’t do it here,” he explained, stretching his arms over his head. “This cabin is shielded from the stream.”

“Oh, right,” Derek answered dumbly.

Stiles pursed his lips. “I guess uhh… I could unshield your cabin and try it here though,” he suggested slowly. “But it would be quite the assault for you, so maybe…”

“Sure,” Derek said a bit to eagerly. He cleared his throat awkwardly and nodded.

Stiles squinted down at him, “Alrightiiies.” He walked to his door and tapped the pad next to it. Derek almost got up to stand behind him to watch but in the end he didn’t.

Two taps later the cabin was flooded with a wave of light. Derek jerked out of the way as the onslaught of Nanos rushed towards him. The light weaved around him, not touching him and he exhaled, rolling his eyes. Right, the bracelet shielded him.

Stiles sniggering from the pod didn’t help his mood either. He walked back to Derek and sat on the floor in front of him. Derek shuffled his feet out of the way awkwardly even if Stiles was far enough to not be in his way.

“Alright, so I will turn off my bracelet too,” he said, scrolling through his holo. “Now, don’t freak out if I’ll be silent for a bit. I haven’t joined the stream for years and the last time I started crying in the middle of it because… uhh anyways, just… don’t try to shake me out of it. Or better yet, don’t touch me at all. I won’t-”

“No problem,” Derek said.

Stiles looked up at him, his lips in a weird shape. “Of course.” He gave him a weird look and returned back to his holo.
“Right. Ready?” he asked before Derek could dwell in his expression for way too long.

A nod later, Stiles had tapped on the holo and the Nano stream enveloped him like a tsunami swallowing the shore, hurtling through mercilessly.

Stiles became rigid. His eyes went wide and started to glow golden. His own Nanos emerged from his body as if the stream tore them out of it, carrying them in a rushing current around Derek and out of the room.

He was quiet, his breathing erratic. Derek unconsciously mirrored Stiles’ breathing, his heart hammering at the rush of oxygen. He wanted to curse, but didn’t dare to say a word, the cabin full of a melodic orchestra of songs.

He listened in, closing his eyes. Maybe he could catch a snippet of Stiles’ own song in-between the assembly of different notes, but the final song was just too saturated for his brain, he wasn’t able to catch anything. It kept changing, carrying up into the high and then sinking down, notes smashing against each other and flowing all possible directions. It was slightly overwhelming to listen to. But there was something tempting in it. Something that made him want to turn off his own bracelet and join in.

Derek almost jumped from the bed when something grabbed his knee. He looked down, with mouth agape and eyes similarly big.

It was Stiles, his eyes were glowing bright and his mouth was moving as if he was trying to say something. No words came out though. His fingers were gripping Derek’s knee strongly and yet his hand shook. He looked distressed.

The Nanos kept rushing through him as if nothing was astray. But Derek didn’t believe that. Something seemed wrong. Stiles’ grip was so strong, his nail were white, the tendons on his arm protruding. Something must have been wrong.

Derek almost reached over to shake him out of it, but stopped himself before he could.

“Stiles,” he said slowly.

No change.

“Stiles,” he repeated after a moment. Louder, shaking his knee a bit in a vane hope the movement would help somehow.

No change.

“Stiles?” he said, raising his voice even more.

No change, except for that fact that Stiles face contorted in discomfort… or even pain, Derek wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure about much at that moment if truth be told. Should he shake him awake? He-

Wait.

He jerked his knee away from the hold and ran to the pad next to the door. He stared at the dancing dots on it. The light kept streaming through his cabin and the stupid dots on the pad kept moving in a mocking motion that didn’t tell him much.

He pursed his lips.
He didn’t want to scroll through, since he wasn’t sure what he was gonna land on.

He looked back and saw Stiles lie on the floor in a fetus position, his hands over his head. His own Nanos were flying erratically all around him, deforming the stream…as if they were trying to block it from reaching him and... well, it didn’t look good.

“Shit,” he breathed, turning back to the pad. He was just gonna have to risk it, wasn’t he?

He tapped the pad twice and with that the flow of the Nanos was cut off altogether. The orchestra assaulting his sensitive ears stopped. The cabin went dim again.

Derek exhaled slowly and turned back to look at Stiles, who was still on the floor, his hands over his head. There was no sound from him except for his breathing.

Derek approached him cautiously. “Stiles?” he asked. He knelt down on the floor next to Stiles, watching him closely.

“I’m fine,” Stiles muttered suddenly. He rolled onto his back with a silent groan and then snorted. “Well, that was worse than I remembered.” He pushed his palms against his face.

“What happened?”

“An overload. duh.” Stiles shrugged sheepishly. “Was just too much at once. I am not used to it.”

“So you’ve said,” Derek noted. “And yet-”

“And yet I was stupid enough to go ahead and try.”

“Yeah, well, nothing new there.” Derek snorted.

Stiles lifted his palms and glanced up at him. “You better not be insinuating what I think you are, mister.”

Derek raised his eyebrows and considered that being an answer enough.

“Okay, well, it might have been a teeny tiny bit foolish of me,” Stiles admitted.

“You think?”

Stiles rolled his eyes and sat up. “Stop making fun of me or I won’t tell you what I’ve found out.”

“I don’t really ca-”

“Before you tell me you don’t give a fuck, let me just remind you that the Nano stream is the most unfiltered group consciousness in the whole known universe,” Stiles said, pulling his knee up to lean over it. “There are no secrets. I was just fed a whole bunch of updates on everything that has happened in the last few circles…”

Derek pursed his lips. “Something about me?”


“What is it?”

“So, they rescued a bunch of people from the research facility, right. One of them seems to be a Shifter.” Stiles obviously wasn’t one to beat around the bush, which was good, but Derek… felt
like he needed to be broken into it a bit slower. He froze.

“You said there are only you and your uncle left,” Stiles said.

“It is just us,” Derek said, his frown deep. “Just us,” he repeated for no reason.

“So then…?”

“I don’t understand,” Derek muttered. “Are you sure it’s a Shifter they found?”

Stiles nodded. “Yes, I saw them talk about it, I saw the visual they’ve shared…”

Derek reached over and grabbed Stiles’ shoulder. “You saw the Shifter?”

Stiles’ nod confirmed it. Derek zoned out for a bit, his brain too occupied with him thinking back to that fateful day. Could it be somebody from his pack survived? It’s not like he could be sure he saw all of their bodies… or… it could be anybody. Anybody, but a Shifter nonetheless. He needed to-

“Derek?” Stiles squeezed his arm.

“I need to see the Shifter,” Derek breathed. “I need to see what you saw.”

Stiles pursed his lips. “Yeah, that’s… I mean, sure. I just ain’t so good at sharing these… I didn’t-”

“Stiles,” Derek said urgently, squeezing his shoulder. “I need to see it.”

“Right. Okay. Alright. I’ll show you.”
“So, how do we...”

Derek was standing in the middle of his temporary cabin, watching as Stiles paced around. He wished they would just get on with it, but alas not many things usually went as he wished.

Stiles took a deep breath in. “Well, like I said, I’ve never really done this with somebody other than my mom, so I only really know this one way of doing it.” He shuffled his feet awkwardly, his hands resting on his hips.

Derek got a bit worried. “I don’t care how we do it, just-”

Stiles looked over at him in exasperation. “Alright,” he said, moving to stand right in front of him. He seemed expectant. Not like Derek knew what he was supposed to do just from seeing that
expression though. “What should I-”

“A hug, dude, a hug, okay? Or well kinda. Ish? I just need you really close, okay? Not really a hug, not much chest contact needed, just, come here,” Stiles babbled, annoyance seeping into his voice. “Ain’t it obvious?”

Derek frowned. “Is that it? That’s not so-”

“Right, well, chop-chop then,” Stiles said, beckoning him with his fingers. “Or actually.” He stopped, looking back. “Maybe we should use the bed…”

Derek stared. “The bed.”

Stiles kept looking at the said bed, his face averted away from him, so Derek couldn’t read him even if he knew how to read him properly.

“Well, I mean, sure. Any flat surface would do I guess, but-” He coughed awkwardly. “I mean, look at you.” He gestured in his direction and Derek actually did look down at his human body, wondering if he did something wrong when designing these shapes.

“I mean, you probably weight like a ton,” Stiles clarified quickly. “If you won’t be able to handle it and decide to clatter to the floor, I won’t be able to catch you and then you end up with a concussion or something…” He waved his arms around. It looked rather silly. “Look at these noodles. Look at them. Overcooked noodles are stronger than this!”

Derek squinted. “Stiles, I for a fact know that that’s not true. I shifted you, remember?”

“Then you didn’t do a very good job, now, did you?” Stiles muttered.

Derek felt his eyebrows pulling closer together. “Excuse me?”

“Noodles, Derek, over-”

“Oh I heard you,” he said. “I also heard you insulting my shift and I will have you know I might not be as good as my dad was, but I can shift well enough and you do have muscles. Strong muscles in fact. They might not be something to parade around, but anybody who ever trained will tell you that muscles that are just for show mean shit if you can’t actually use them.”

Stiles turned to look at him amusement on his face. “So you say and yet.” He gestured over at him.

Derek folded his arms over his chest. “I built this shape to mimic my original weight distribution. It would be just another thing to learn. I got lazy.”

“You got lazy…”

“Yes,” Derek answered.

“That’s the reason behind all those… those muscles.”

“I would hardly call this-”

“Awh, come on!” Stiles moved closer to him and reached over to pat his biceps. “Look at this. This is quality content, man! You can’t tell me you went for this just because you were lazy. Nobody is that humble.”

Derek lifted his left eyebrow, unconvinced. “Stiles, you saw my real form. This is nothing
compared to my actual muscular system.”

“Ah, I take that back, you are actually filthy vain!” Stiles exclaimed, retracting his hand as if he was burned. “Shame on you!”

Derek sighed. “Is there an end to this conversation? Can we actually get to the-”

“So no bed,” Stiles went on to clarify. Rather needlessly

“No.”

“No floor.”

“No.”

“No flat surface.”

“No.”

“Not even a-”

Derek couldn’t help but groan. “I think we established that I won’t fall over, so no need for any of that.”

Stiles tsked, folding his arms over his chest. “Well, if your face does decide to greet the floor-”

“It won’t,” he said quickly.

“Well, if it should,” Stiles emphasized, “then leave me out of it.”

“Fine.” He shrugged. “It won’t happen though.”

“Overconfident and vain,” Stiles muttered “Stop it, my pants will come off by themselves.”

“Stiles.”

“Alright, alright,” he exclaimed, rolling his shoulders as if he was getting ready for a mockup exercise routine, not for a simple hug. Ish. Closeness. Or whatever. “Let’s do this then.” He shook his hands out and looked over at him expectantly. “Well?”

Derek made a sour expression.

“Wow, aren’t you excited,” Stiles snorted, rolling his eyes. “Why don’t you just-”

“Stiles,” Derek said. “It could be someone from my pack.” He wasn’t really sure why he said that. Okay well, he knew why. He wanted Stiles to be more seriou about the matter, but… it couldn’t possibly have been anybody from his pack, could it? He saw them… all of them. He definitely saw all of their bodies. Still, he couldn’t help but feeling hopeful. Foolishly hopeful but hopeful nonetheless.

Stiles pursed his lips. “Right.” He nodded and reached out for him.

Derek steeled himself for the touch. He usually tended to flinch away from the unfamiliar kind of a touch, but this turned out okay. More or less anyways. Stiles hands came up slowly, stopping at either side of his jaw to hold his head in place. He closed his eyes and moved in closer, his forehead touching Derek’s, their skin barely brushing.
The eyes behind his eyelids flared up into a soft glow and as Derek watched him, he could see light erupting from around his heart, travelling up his veins, up and up, through the veins of his shoulders and arms, presumably pushing further beyond his fingertips, right into Derek’s brain.

He held his breath and waited, watching Stiles’ fluttering eyelashes. He waited, but nothing happened.

“Oh, wait,” Stiles whispered, letting go of him quickly. He turned, grabbing Derek’s hand. His eyes were ablaze, his veins glowing faintly under his skin.

“The bracelet,” he explained, tapping the holo that sprung up from it. “It’s blocking you off.”

He looked up at Derek as if waiting for him to confirm something, but Derek just looked away, his eyes assaulted by the light. His eyes caught some of it though and it burned itself into the back of his retinas. Now everywhere he looked the two black imprinted spots were following him. It wasn’t really a comfortable thing.

“Alright, one more time,” Stiles said, reaching back up again. He pressed his fingertips against the side of his face and Derek moved his head automatically into the previous position. His forehead pressed against Stiles’. And this time, he decided to close his eyes too.

The fingers felt cold against his skin - they chilled the expanse of his cheekbones, down to his jaw, up to his temples. Only for a moment though.

Before he could take in another breath, warmth spilled down from them, seeping into his skin, deeper, deeper… all the way in.

A sudden flash almost blinded him.

He opened his eyes and saw the Sheriff standing right in front of him, his fingers waving around in complicated patterns, there was light all around them, circling, dancing…

A flash.

Green foliage was all around him. He looked up and the twin suns on the sky above him… no, they didn’t sting his eyes as they normally would. His eyes were much more used to harsh lights. They were all around him still, the waves of light, their patterns different than before and yet so similar.

A flash.

Pods collected in a huge hangar. Some of them burned on the surface, some destroyed and yanked open, all of them gleaming in the circling light.

A flash.

Gas all around, his lights couldn’t perpetuate it, they popped and imploded in on themselves as soon as they touched it. The atmosphere inside of the facility was too harsh for them. He pulled back and so did his lights.

A flash.

His hands reached over and put the two pieces together. He felt a happy feeling bubbling inside of him. Just a bit more…

A flash.
The navigation panel was gleaming right in front of him, its light dim compared to the waves of light all around him. The flagship was heading into the vortex, the Nanos leading it into a pin.

A flash.

A pod. The pod was suddenly right in front of him. It looked just the same as all the other pods, but he knew it was different. The projection on top of it kept changing in a flurry of movement. Changing shapes. Shifting.

A flash.

He looked over at the Nano lying motionlessly in front of him. The lights all around dimmed and died out and he realized he was crying. He was all alone.

A flash.

He was walking through a maze full pods, the walls sticky with a weird substance. He didn’t want to touch it. The floor was littered with the same substance. They were weaving their way through translucent dead bodies, the tendrils tearing apart as they tangled into their suits.

A flash.

A hangar full of pods. He was in the middle of opening another one of them. His tool made a small crack in the lid. And then the crack widened on its own. He looked up at the projection all puzzled. It changed shape.

A flash.

He turned around, a pod at the other side of the hangar exploded and a shape emerged from it. It was big, way too big and then it was small and spiky and then tentacles emerged and then…

A flash.

He was standing right behind the wreck of a pod. The creature that emerged from it turned around and jumped right at him.

Derek jerked away so violently that he ended up losing his footing. Before he knew it, his ass connected with the floor and his head snapped back connecting with the wall behind him. Quite painfully too.

He rolled to the side and clutched the back of his head.

“Fuuuck,” he swore, trying to blink away the pain. He realized very quickly that wasn’t gonna happen and so he forced a partial shift and coaxed the damage away.

A sigh reached his ears.

Stiles was standing over him, his arms folded over his chest. His eyes were back to normal, his skin as well.

“Well-”

“Don’t say it,” Derek growled, sitting up.

“Why so annoyed, I said I won’t be catching you if you fall over. It’s not like-”
Derek scoffed over at him. “You could have tried.”

“Right. You would have pulled me down with you and it’s not like I can just grow a bone or two.”

When Derek didn’t answer, too busy recalling what he saw, Stiles crouched down and asked. “So? Anybody you know?”

“I couldn’t tell,” Derek said shaking his head. “It was too frantic. There were other flashes too.”

Stiles sighed and rocked on his heels. “Yeah, sorry about that. I am not really good at this.”

“Wasn’t there more?”

“I didn’t catch the whole feed,” Stiles said. “Maybe. Possibly. I could connect to the stream again, but I don’t wanna risk it.”

“’s fine,” Derek said. He pushed up to his feet and sighed. He… wait. He looked down at Stiles, something similar to dread clouding his mind. “How much did you share with the stream when you connected to it before?”

Stiles stiffened. “Not much.”

“You said you can’t control it…”

“Well, there isn’t much to control if truth be told,” Stiles muttered, shuffling up to his feet. He kept his glance averted. Not a good sign. “Other than your own reaction, yanno. You can control that. But not really-”

Stiles.” Derek felt goosebumps creeping up his spine. It couldn’t be, could it?

“Well, it’s not like the Nanos go out to talk about-”

“Stiles,” he bit out. “How much?”

“Well-”

“Stiles, how fucking much?”

There was a tense moment of silence and Derek watched Stiles look up at him with guilt written all over his face. He didn’t have to answer for him to know.

“You spilled all of it out to a whole race,” Derek whispered in disbelief. “You leaked everything into the stream, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t mean to-”

“But you did it, didn’t you?” Derek couldn’t keep standing on his spot. His mind whirling into a dozen different directions and his body had to follow. “Are you fucking kidding me?

“ You wanted me to connect to the stream,” Stiles said, defensiveness creeping into his voice. He stepped away from him, clearing the path for his frantic pacing. “You wanted me to-”

“Not like this ,” he barked, panic creeping up his throat. “This is not what I wanted. You…” he gestured to the bed, “we were sitting right there. You said you would never-... you said-”

“And I meant it but I can’t control what my Nanos share now can I?” Stiles argued.
Derek couldn’t keep the panic under the lid any longer. “Then you shouldn’t have connected to the fucking stream!”

“I didn’t… think! It’s hard for me to think arou-”

“Do you ever think before you act?”

“Well-

Derek stopped in his tracks, looking over at Stiles. “I shouldn’t have told you anything.”

“Derek,” came a pained answer.

“I can’t believe I was this stupid to trust you,” Derek laughed, feeling foolish. He should have known. He should have known. They are all the same. And now… the Hunters - they will have his identity within a few circles. That much he was sure of.

“It’s just the Nanos, they won’t-”

“Just the Nanos?” He wasn’t gonna believe it. He wasn’t gonna trust a whole bunch of strangers to keep his secret. Not again. Not ever. “Just a whole fucking race, you mean? How long until somebody slips? How long until the rest of the universe knows that Derek Kasai, the fucking Rooter on the IA Beacon, is a Shifter?”

“They won’t. They wouldn’t-”

Enough. He walked up to Stiles, pointing right into his face. “Were you even gonna tell me?”

Stiles pursed his lips. “Of course-”

Oh, please. “When? Were you gonna keep it a secret until the fucking Hunters came up and slit my fucking throat? Would you let me believe I was safe? Let me return to the Beacon? I risked my everything to get you back, I risked my fucking cover, I only so-so managed to keep it intact and you go ahead and-”

Stiles stepped back a bit. “Well no, I just…,” he frowned, straightening. “I was gonna tell you!”

“When, Stiles?”

“Soon.”

“Lies.”

“No, I was.”

“All lies.”

Stiles scoffed. “Calm the fuck down. If I didn’t connect to the fucking stream you wouldn’t even know about the Shifter.”

“So I should be thankful?” Derek laughed again.

“Well, sort of?”

He turned around. He couldn’t keep looking at Stiles. “I should be thankful, that you led them straight to me?” he wondered aloud.
“Well, I didn’t lead anybody to you. Do you see any hunters around?”

It didn’t matter.

“It will get to them eventually,” he signed. There were so many reasons for him not to go back to the Beacon now, that Peter would have pulled him out of the ship mid-vortexing if he even thought of considering it. So why was he still having this conversation? It was…redundant. He had decided a while ago, didn’t he? It was already all settled. It was.

“Derek, come on-” He could feel a hesitant touch on his shoulder.

“Don’t-” He shook it off. “I might as well resign now, while I can still disappear without a trace.”

_There. Do it._

“What-...no. Derek.”

He turned around to look at Stiles for one last time. He shouldn’t have, but he couldn’t help himself. “I didn’t plan to return to the Beacon anyways,” he confessed. It was true. _It was._

“So why did you fight so hard to keep up the pretense with my dad then?” Stiles asked. On point as always.

“I don’t know,” Derek admitted. “It’s not like I have to defend my choices to you though, is it?”

Stiles pursed his lips. He hesitated for a bit.

There was a tense moment.

It seemed to drag on forever.

But it was over before Derek could say anything.

Stiles blinked.

He nodded. “Right, I-... sorry…” He sighed. “..if you think it’s a bad idea to return then... don’t. Of course. It would be foolish of me to want that.” He shrugged and nodded, bringing up his holo.

“The ship should be docking at the orbit within a few minutes. We jumped when you were out of it, so… I will grab a place at the first shuttle down to the central for you. And after it’s all up to you.”

“Thanks,” Derek said. “For… everything.” He watched the glint of the holo in his eyes, his mind suddenly blank. He felt like there was something more to be said, but nothing was willing to come to his tongue… nothing but some sort of a bitter taste.

Stiles looked back up at him, his hand reaching over to rest at the side of his neck. It was warm. Gentle.

It seemed like he wanted to say something, but after a moment, his hand slid back off and he looked away awkwardly.

“Take care, Derek,” were the last words said before he left the cabin.

“Take care,” he parroted to the closed door.
Derek didn’t stick around for long enough to talk to the Sheriff. He just boarded the shuttle down to the planet and went ahead to activate one of his dormant human identities - one where he didn’t have to shift his appearance.

Contrary to popular belief, a visual wasn’t the first thing that got somebody caught - the universe was too big, too diverse and unless you were very acquainted with humans you would barely be able to tell them apart. He was safe like this - for now anyways.

And so, with his bracelet reseted, his mood worse than before and his motions automatic, he rented a small pin ship and left the Nano worlds.

He was glad for it too, the Nano stream all around him made him paranoid. It made him feel like they were all watching him, like they knew, like there were Hunters already hiding among them, stalking him until he would be all alone and then… not to mention the dazzling light all around wasn’t doing any good to his human eyes.

After disabling the tracker the IA renting company had on all of its ships, he went through seemingly random pins to lose any possible lurkers and docked out in an orbit of an unknown unpopulated moon.

It was time for him to call his uncle.

The ouroboros line clicked into place just as he was beginning to think nobody would answer. In all the stress around Stiles he actually even forgot that his uncle was heading towards the Hunters. And while Peter was a rather resourceful fella, one should never underestimate their enemy. Especially not this enemy.

“Fifty-seven, twenty-one, twenty-nine,” he said as soon as the audio patched through.

The visual came through and Peter’s head came into view. He was cramped in a similar pin ship. “Eighteen, one, seven. It would seem we found ourselves in the same predicament, dear nephew.”

“Our ship?” Derek asked.

Peter shrugged, nudging a few switches above him. He was flying an old-schooler. “Hidden away safely. Your cover?”

He pursed his lips. “Busted,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Bound to happen at some point,” Peter said, squinting over at him. Derek knew he was watching his reactions for any sign of weakness. He wasn’t supposed to get tied down to Beacon. It wasn’t a long-term solution to his struggles. And yet.

He just nodded wordlessly.

“Did you clean up properly?”

“Yeah,” he said, glancing over at the ping view as he kept talking. It was a safety measure. He was not avoiding Peter’s searching look. “The hidden vault in the Root system of the Beacon should be activated soon enough if not already. I’ve sent over an anonymous inquiry that will trigger it.”
Peter took a moment to mule through that and then asked: “But?”

Of course he would ask that.

“The Nanos all know, it’s in their stream,” Derek admitted at last.

Peter snorted. “Oh boy, that Nano hybrid of yours?” He warned him something like that would happen again. Many times. He was too trusting. Too naive. And yet Derek let himself get close. Too close. Again. So stupid...

Derek nodded.

“How much?” he asked, probably knowing the answer already.

“Too much” He hesitated, not wanting to spill it all, too embarrassed in front of his uncle, but he had to. It’s how they survived - total trust was a must. “He saw me shift, he saw some of my memories even. He knew a lot and... he shared a lot with the stream - all of it possibly. All my private-...” he stopped and frowned at the screen. “You’re calm.”

Peter rolled his eyes and looked over at his own ping view for a second before returning back to the conversation. “Everybody knows Nanos upload everything into their stream. It was just a matter of time really. Though the memories surprised me a tad. I will be curious to hear more about that some cycle.”

“He wasn’t a part of that community.” Derek felt like he needed to defend his choices. He always did with Peter, but this time… he didn’t have a good enough reasoning behind his actions and he knew it.

“One day you will learn not to hope for the impossible, dear nephew,” was all Peter said. “So, back to join me?”

“No, I,” Derek took a moment to collect himself. “The medical facility you found for me. It turned out they were doing experiments on many life forms.”

Peter hummed under his breath. “Get to the point, Derek.”

“There was a Shifter in one of the pods. The Nanos got the pod to the Med Central… at least I think they did. I saw the coordinances in the stream memories. We must go there and-”

“No.”

Derek frowned. “Peter.”

“No, Derek,” he repeated. “We won’t be going to the Med Central. And that’s the end of it.”

“But Peter-”

“No.”

“We got an obligation-”

Peter hit the screen. It was shaking hard as he got in so close Derek could only see his eyes. They were glowing red, causing the screen to erupt with a dozen dancing lens flares. “It is our obligation to avenge our pack, Derek. The fact that you selfishly gave up on that obligation… well, that was your own choice, but do not tell me what to do. Not unless you are ready to challenge my claim.”
Derek looked away, shame washing over him. “I didn’t mean to…”

“Oh, I know you didn’t, dear nephew,” Peter purred, reaching over to stabilize the screen. “Alas, this is not a negotiation. I am so close... I am this close,” his fingers appeared on the screen, pushed closely against each other. “This close. You are welcome to join me in hunting down little Katey or you get the fuck out of my way.”

“The Med Central-”

“They’re dead, Derek,” Peter bit out, returning back into his seat. He grabbed the steering rod in front of him and corrected his course. “All of them.”

Derek could feel his throat getting tighter at that, too tight to breathe, but he managed to swallow it down pretty quickly. “How… are you sure?”

“Yes, all of them are dead. And she killed them,” Peter said harshly. “And I will take a great pleasure in returning the favor quite soon.”

“And the Shifter?” Derek whispered slowly. “Even if it is somebody from a different pack… it could be a former External. Your colleague. We… somebody ought to help them. They were… in a pretty bad shape. Shift craze, I think. I don’t know how-”

Peter growled, yanking the steering rod. He glanced over at his ping view and cursed. “Derek, now I would be delighted to keep conversing about how you use your saviour complex to get rid of your guilt, but I’m afraid now is not exactly the best of times.”

He hit a few switches above him and leaned back to rummage at the back of the ship for something. The screens in front of him flashed a few times trying to alert him to something urgent.

“What’s going on?” Derek asked.

Peter returned into view with a second steering rod and jammed it into place. Apparently he needed to engage very advanced maneuvering. It suddenly made sense that he opted for an old-schooler. Newer ships didn’t have an insert option for a secondary steering rod.

“I assume you will be heading for the Med Central?” Peter asked, yanking both of the rods. He pulled some lever under the screen and a 360-degree view clicked into place. Derek could see a lot of stray asteroids and beams trying to find their way into the ship’s entrails.

“Yes,” he said tensely.

Peter nodded, his focus on the circle-view. “I’ll talk to you later then.”

The screen went back, the ouroboros folding in on itself and Derek was left all alone, drifting on an orbit of an unknown moon. It reflected his present feelings well enough.

~0~

It would be useless to try and contact Peter again. And it would be a waste of time to worry about his well-being. Peter… was a unique sort of Shifter. He had an External training and he was very driven to stay alive for as long as he could. He definitely wouldn’t end up splattered at the surface
of some asteroid floating around space. Nor would he let a squadron of ships eradicate him at
sight.

Still, it actually took Derek awhile to enter his new coordinances and abandon the orbit. For
multiple reasons. Firstly, he didn’t want to continue with his journey tired. Mostly because he
needed to be able to shift a few times once he’d reach the Mec Central. So he took a short nap.
Which turned into a longer nap. Well, a full-on sleep session.

Now, the seat wasn’t the most comfortable thing there was, but for him it was better than an actual
bed. It was where he slept for a second half of his life. It was… comforting.

Next, he loaded up the maps and all the possible info on the Med Central. It wouldn’t hurt to go
prepared in case they wouldn’t let him visit the Shifter via official routes.

After that, he ate a bit and drank a whole lot of expanding liquids and well… he was pretty much
ready to head out. Except he didn’t. Head out, that was. The switches and buttons were right there
in front of him, but he couldn’t make himself reach over and input his new course.

He kept thinking back to the last time he saw Stiles. It seemed like an eternity ago. Maybe he
should have… no. Derek pushed the thoughts out of his head, entered the coordinates and guided
his ship into the vortex.

~o~

The Med Central was huge. It was the biggest organically inhabited space station. And it was
orbiting a pulsar. Now normally, everybody would just keep as far from the pulsar as possible,
because of the gamma rays, but the Med Central was, and for a while probably also will be, the
most advanced place in the whole universe. They said life was more important to invest into than
anything, but that thought made Derek’s inside twist painfully. Instead of thinking about it, he
turned on his holo and sent out a message to the dispatcher.

There were a few shielded paths in and out of the station and Derek was quickly assigned the one
nearest to him. The beacons created a tunnel for his pin ship to glide through the decaying matter
all around.

The Central’s main protection was collapsing the paths and leaving the attacker out for the gamma
rays to eat through their shields. Quick and deadly. It wasn’t something Derek would have liked. It
wasn’t something anybody would like for that matter. That’s why only fools came over to attack
this place. Or sneak into this place. Or overall plan any nefarious things at this place.

Derek, for that matter, well, he wasn’t really planning anything nefarious, now, was he? At least not
yet. He was gonna look around first, then try and get access to where they were keeping the Shifter
and then… well, if any of the usual paths should fail, he will sit down and think of another one.

So really, it wasn’t like the bridge would have a reason to be terminated, now, would it? It made
him nervous just to think of it anyways. Not even his shifting ability would save him out in the
gamma rays.

He docked at the assigned spot, which locked his ship into place. He knew that would happen and
it still made him anxious to see his only way out locked away from him.
“Please, vacate your vehicle and get ready for a chip insertion,” came an artificial voice in IAS. Derek pulled the lever open and climbed out. He was in a small secured cube他的 own docking garage.

A light path blinked to life heading from his ship to a closed door.

“Please, follow the light to the door,” said the voice.

He did as he was told. A mechanical arm sprung from a panel beside the door. The panel slid down creating a small rest.

“Please, place a selected body part onto the rest in front of you,” came the instructions. “Please make sure to cover the highlighted dot.”

Derek lifted his arm and put his hand onto the rest with his palm facing up. The arm came down hard, a needle springing out of its end to insert the chip.

“The chip has been inserted. Please mind, that any violation of the chip will be considered a serious transgression and punished as such. Your chip will dissolve after twenty-one cycles as was the requested length of stay. For an extended stay, please refer to the information area one cycles before dissolve. Have yourself a lovely cycle and may the stars never lead you astray.”

The door in front of him slid open and Derek entered the bright intestines of the Med Central.

He found himself in a huge cavern busting with movement. There were dozens upon dozens of entrances from similar docking cubes as his own that were opening and closing, pouring visitors in and out of the Central.

He walked through the hurrying entities of various races and stepped in to the railing so he could take in the whole station.

A monumental cylinder of a building was sprawling right in the middle of the whole cavern. It was encircled by numerous levels, similar to the one he was standing on, that were connected with the main building by bridges. Some bridges were sliding into place as he was watching, some had groups hurrying through them as if they were worried they might collapse at them.

The levels were spiraling higher and higher, right up to the ceiling above that was glowing with a gentle warmth of a sun, Derek blinked into it and then averted his eyes to look down. A few levels lower, he could see a lush deciduous flora covering the whole bottom of the station. The red leaves of Oxygen trees were rustling in a gentle breeze.

It was a rather peculiar sight for a space station. A remarkable one at that.

There was a movement on his right. A movement that was a bit too close for his liking. Derek stiffened.

“Took you long enough,” came a familiar voice.

He looked over and then averted his eyes back to the trees before the seen information could be processed by his brain. Wait, what? He did a quick double take.

It was Stiles.

Stiles was standing right next to him.
“You know,” he said, leaning over the railing to look down. “I figured, after having that nearly death experience… it was probably time for me to finally use up some of my vacation. And who better to visit than my bestie training at Med Central.”
A/N: I think you will see pretty clearly that I had a very shitty week at work when I was writing this - especially towards the end and then the beginning of the next chapter too. But worry not, my dears! It will all turn out well in the end :) 

Pic will be available later. I was on a festival for the last 4 days so didn't get to it yet! Cheers~
Stiles was still talking.

“....came to see my best buddy, my bro, my pal, mah man - Scotty,” he said, bracing his hands on his hips. His clothes were different from when Derek saw him the last time. Derek’s were as well. Not that any of that was relevant to the situation.

He couldn’t help but stare silently, trying to process what he was seeing. It wasn’t so unbelievable though, was it? Stiles knew where they took the Shifter, so really... he should have expected this to happen.

Still, it did leave him a bit speechless. He had foolishly thought he had cut off this part of his life for good. He was a naive fool for believing it to be that easy, wasn’t he?

“My best boy Scott?” Stiles continued, taking his silence for what it was. A confusion. “Come on, I must have mentioned him at least a dozen times since we met.”

“Stiles-”

“My best... oh, for the star’s sake!” he exclaimed in exasperation. He turned to scan the crowd around them and then beckoned to a human standing not too far away from them with two baggies of something akin to food in his hands. He was indeed in a med trainee uniform. Okay.

“This is Scott,” Stiles said, putting his arm around the human’s shoulders.

“Hi,” the human, Scott apparently, greeted smiling over at him. Derek wanted to bare his teeth in an answer too. He was far too strung up. Annoyed with himself. Annoyed with Stiles for following him like a fucking-

“So yeah, now that you are all introduced and shit, I’ll be off. I got stuff to do. Vacation and all,” Stiles said, grabbing one of the baggies from Scott’s hand. “See ya later, my man?”

“Gotcha,” Scott answered, nodding. He reached over to bump Stiles’ fist gently.

“Take care of this idiot here,” Stiles said. “Cheers.” And after that he just melted into the crowd around them and disappeared.

He disappeared. Just like that. Without a glance back, without any sort of look directed at Derek, without a care, without an actual explanation. Derek’s annoyance levels went automatically up a couple of levels. It’s not like he cared though.

“Come on, then,” Scott beckoned when Derek didn’t make a move to follow him. And Derek didn’t anyways, he was staring at the spot where Stiles disappeared into the crowd like some kind of a mirage. Was he even there to start with? Or was Derek-

“I have a-” he started to say.

“Yes, Stiles said you need to get to the Shifter we are treating,” Scott nodded, opening his baggie and peaking in. “I can get you in, no problem.”

Derek finally managed to refocus his attention.

“Just like that?” he asked, paranoid. It couldn’t be that easy, now, could it?

“Yep,” Scott answered.
“I don’t have any clearance,” he said slowly.

“I know,” Scott said incredulously. He jerked his head, his eyebrows high anyways.

Derek decided that beggars can’t exactly be choosers and nodded. “Well, lead the way then.”

“Cool.”

~o~

“So, you and Stiles are working together on the Beacon, he said?” Scott asked, opening his baggie to glance inside. They were walking up the spiraling levels. Side by side. It was so crowded that his body was coming into contact with way too many strangers for his comfort. He was getting more and more annoyed by each moment, which was why he decided not to answer Scott’s prying questions. It might come out as too offensive if he would let go of his moon and Scott was his best chance of getting in apparently.

“He said he owes you big times for saving him at that freaking place after they sold him to?” Scott continued, shaking his head in clear disbelief. “Was quite the story, dude. You’re pretty badass going in like that for my buddy. Being human and all.” He looked over at him. “You are human, aren’t you? Stiles didn’t exactly specify.”

Derek decided to ignore his words.

“No offence, of course,” Scott added quickly. “It'd be just more impressive, yanno. Give us simple humans some hope on being badass in this sea of X-men. But yeah. One can’t be sure anymore with all that mixing going on, looks can be deceiving, yanno.”

“I guess,” Derek muttered, the conversation going a bit over his head. He was putting most of his attention in avoiding collisions with random individuals. Which was to say, why the hell didn’t people just look where they were going?

“Not like I care if you are human or not,” Scott amended quickly. “I mean, not that I… I am not really… well you know, it’s all cool. All cool.”

Derek didn’t answer.

“Dude, you are totally pissed off because of what I said,” Scott exclaimed, not letting any kind of silence set between them. “I’m sorry. Here.” He stopped, offering his baggie to him. “I didn’t mean to offend. They always tell us to talk very politely, but I… well, you are Stiles’ friend so I assumed all is fine, but guess I took it too far.”

Derek shook his head, beckoning Scott to continue walking on, but he didn’t budge.

“I don’t really care,” Derek said when he didn’t move. They were causing a small traffic jam and Derek was really not enjoying the nasty looks. Or gurgling for that matter.

Scott squinted over at him. “You are totally pissed, dude, come on.”

“I really don’t care what you-”

“Peace?” Scott said, pushing the baggie onto him. Derek pushed it away automatically.
“Peace?” Scott insisted with that hopeful look on his face. Derek didn’t really have a choice if he wanted to start moving out of the place in his lifetime.

“Peace, but keep the… whatever that is.”

Scott beamed. “Roasted dumplings, only the best food ever. You gotta try one, come on.”

Derek’s patience was wearing thin. Perhaps it would be easier to leave Scott there and try to reach the Shifter by himself? It probably wouldn’t. But maybe worth risking either way? No. And so he took one dumpling and gulped it down without chewing.

Scott was still waiting.

“Not bad,” Derek forced out, hoping it would suffice.

It did.

Scott smiled and started to walk up the spiraling levels again, munching on the rest of the dumplings. He navigated the crowds like it was a second nature to him. Derek for that matter didn’t.

“Not much of a talker, are you?” Scott said as he scrunched the now empty baggie and threw it down into a suction hole that processed it immediately. Everything got repurposed here.

“Not much, no,” Derek agreed.

Scott snorted. “Must be a nightmare around Stiles then.”

Derek opted for a neutral “I guess” and left it at that. It obviously wasn’t a good enough answer though, because Scott just kept on stretching the topic: “I mean, he talks a lot and by a lot I mean really a lot. Doesn't shut up the dude, does he?”

“You don’t say,” Derek answered, hoping the sarcasm wasn’t too obvious. If it was, Scott didn’t seem to react to it, continuing on his merry ride: “Yeah, I mean just yesterday, well, okay, he did have this awesome kidnapping adventure to tell me, so the whole can’t-stop-won’t-stop attitude was understandable, but it’s not like-”

Ah, now I get it.

“He told you, didn’t he?”

Scott tripped over a bit, but righted himself before he could fall head-on into a swarm of Ethers. “Told me what?”

“Told you what happened. And he asked you to explain instead of him because he knew I was done listening to his excus-”

Scott stopped dead in his tracks, causing a Whittemorian bump into him a bit too viciously. He didn’t even wince though. Instead he glared at Derek. “He didn’t.”

Derek gave him an unimpressed look.

“No, seriously, dude,” he said.

“Don’t call me dude,” Derek said, but his words seemed to have been ignored. Scott was still rolling out his answer: “He did mention you guys had some sort of a fallout, I won’t deny that. But
he said nothing more. He only mentioned it because I asked. He always used to talk about you and now he was being evasive so I was curious. He talks about everybody by the way, I didn’t mean anything by it, “he added quickly. “Anyways, so he said he fucked up big times and maybe I could help him set things straight—”

“Ah, there we go,” Derek interrupted, the corners of his mouth lifting up in a sardonic smile. He wasn’t even surprised by then that Stiles would—

“Not like that. He asked me to get you to the Shifter. Only that.”

Derek shrugged.

Scott’s frown deepened at that and he took a step closer to him, poking his chest. Derek almost swatted his hand away, but he was too busy processing his words to react.

“No, you don’t get it. He freaking called in a massive favor. I refused at first, you see. I can’t just lead people into the cylinder without any sort of clearance. It would be too much of a risk without proper screening. I mean, no offense dude, but I don’t know you.”

*I don’t really want you to know me*, Derek thought, but he decided to go for a more polite answer. “I see.”

“I don’t think you do, dude,” Scott hissed, poking his chest. It was getting annoying. Both the childish poking and the dude-calling. “This is it. This is huge. This is the favor of all favors and if something goes wrong, I will be thrown out of this place. Actually, I will call myself lucky if they won’t deposit me right into the pulsar. Stiles got us this place, so he gets to demand such shit, but even he knows he is being a fucking selfish asshole doing so. For you, I might add. So you better appreciate it. This is huge, alright? He is doing you a huge favor. And so am I.”

“Can’t be that huge, if he’s risking his best buddy,” Derek snorted, swatting Scott’s hand away. He’s had enough of this childish conversation. None of it mattered to him. Neither Scott’, nor Stiles’ involvement. He didn’t need any of it. If it came down to it, he would have gotten to the Shifter all by himself. In one way or another anyways.

Scott sighed, shaking his head. “What he sees in you I have no idea, you are quite an asshole.”

“And you are a child,” Derek retorted. “Now, if we are done insulting each other, maybe we can move on. Or you know, you can just leave right now. It’s not like I asked for it.”

“No, but Stiles owes you,” Scott scoffs. “And we might not be technically brothers, but we might as well be considering how close we got growing up together. While the Sheriff was still tied to a planet yanno. He owes you his life. And so by an extend I owe you his life.” He stepped away from Derek and folded his hands over his chest. By which he almost collided with supply droid. “I will take you to the Shifter because I promised Stiles. I will, even if it’s a crazy demand, but you will not insult Stiles of whatever-the-fuck you want to insult him of in front of me, dude. He is a good guy. The best, alright?”

Derek shook his head, hoping to chase away the impending headache. *Humans were so stupid.*

“Stiles puts you in harm’s way for some stranger and you just jump eagerly the way he whistles? And you tell me he’s a good guy?”

Scott sniffed, his head held high. “That’s what you do for family.”

“You aren’t family though, are you?” Derek pointed out sadistically, flashing his teeth at Scott. His stance was too aggressive, too much of a challenge. He couldn’t help but react to it in some way.
“We are more than that,” Scott said, the tone in his voice annoying. “There are things that reach beyond a blood bond, you know, like a… well like a…”

Derek stared at him in distaste, headache thumping in his head. Scott was struggling with a word, that much was obvious and he wasn’t feeling very forth-giving nor understanding. *Just leave me alone, I don’t understand your stupid human shit.*

“…like that thing, you know,” he said, his mouth upturned in frustration.


Scott looked over at him funnily. “I guess,” he started slowly. “If that’s what you wanna call it. The baseline of this conversation is that I will do whatever needed to help Stiles and he obviously wants to help you, so… but, no, he didn’t tell me to sweeten you up. He just asked me to get you to the Shifter. I think,” he hesitated, “I think he kinda thinks he fucked up things with you for good. That’s bullshit though, isn’t it?”

Derek pursed his lips, refusing to comment on that. He wasn’t so sure himself. Just thinking of it made him nervous. He surely didn’t want to dwell on any of it anyways. He didn’t have the time.

“Did he?” Scott wondered studying him.

Derek sighed. “Are you going to bring me to the Shifter or not?” he asked hoping to distract Scott from the unpleasant topic.

Scott squinted his eyes. It made him look utterly idiotic. Except the words following were beyond smart. “He shared something with the stream, didn’t he? I can’t imagine anything else that he could fuck up that badly.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Not really, no.”

“Really,” Derek snorted, unbelieving.

“I couldn’t believe it myself either,” Scott admitted, shaking his head. “But he refused. And we tell each other like everything!”

“How about we go to the Shifter instead of yapping around?” Derek tried again.

“What did he share?”

“The Shifter, Scott.”

“And then you’ll tell me?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It’s personal.”

“No shit it is, what else would piss a person off, imma right?”

“Perhaps we could stop wasting time and get on with the-”
Scott stepped in closer and patted his shoulder. “I totally get you, man.”

Which, Derek would have expected a punch instead of a sympathetic pat. Especially judging by the way they were at each-other’s throats just a couple or moments ago. But somehow…

“I mean,” Scott continued, rolling his eyes over at him. His hand was still patting him gently. “The last time he joined the stream - the one I can remember anyways - a lot of my own shit leaked through too. Most of it in fact. It was some real personal stuff about my… well, my dad and… well stuff, you know. I didn’t speak to him for cycles after that. It triggered some really nasty stuff and I wasn’t able to cope. But I was a child then.” He shrugged dropping the hand off Derek’s shoulder. “I didn’t get it at that time. I know better now. I couldn’t really-”

“So, he leaked things into the stream and the Nanos couldn’t keep it to themselves,” Derek summarized, annoyance rising within his chest. “Basically.”

Scott stopped in his tracks. “Well, they,” he frowned. “Well, I guess you could say that.”

Derek’s previous anger was back in an instant. It must have shown on his face because Scott’s frown deepened in reaction to it. “What?”

“Stiles said the Nanos would never spread anything to the outside,” he scoffed. “So he was lying. Obviously.”

Scott’s mouth pulled into a tight line. “My dad was hurting me and my mom. All the time. I wanted the help even if I wouldn’t have admitted it then. I was glad for it.”

Silence enveloped them. Derek didn’t know what to say to that and Scott didn’t seem any keen on getting on with the conversation after such a statement.

He just jerked his head and started to walk up the spiraling levels again. “Let’s just get you to the Shifter. We wasted enough time already.”

Derek followed without a word.

~o~

It didn’t take them long to reach the bridge they needed to walk over, but personally it seemed much longer for Derek because of the amount of population they had to weave through. Derek was starting to feel less and less enthusiastic about this place. Especially when they were heading to a shift-crazed Shifter that he had only a vague idea on how to heal. If it was possible at all.

His legs felt weaker and weaker with each step along the bridge. And it wasn’t the height.

Scott stopped him right before the closed doorway, which of course blocked out the way for others as well. A Whittemorian hissed as he approached from behind them, but Scott seemed set on talking to Derek before they entered regardless.

“Now, you have to do exactly what I tell you otherwise-”

“Otherwise you are screwed,” Derek finished.

“Oh, we both are, buddy,” he said, slapping his chest. Derek wanted to screw his fucking head off right there and then. Fucked-up dad or not. Scott seemed oblivious to his thoughts though. “If they
catch us because you are being a fucktard, I will throw you under the bus faster than you’d fall off
this bridge. I will tell them I was forced or some shit, so you better not try anything funny.”

“What if they catch us because of you being a fucktard?” Derek wondered, the Whittemorian’s
hissing making his skin crawl. He just wanted to keep moving on.

“Then you are off the hook of course,” Scott said.

“Deal.”

Scott grabbed his biceps, reaching out to touch the glassy reflective door in front of him. Except, as
he touched it it wasn’t a solid glass-like material anymore, it turned into a liquid-like surface that
he passed right through, together with Derek right behind him.

“It reacts to my chip,” Scott explained once they were through. “And when I hold you, it lets you
through too.”

“I see.”

It was then, that Derek finally took in his surroundings - the whole place was basically like a giant
hive with hexagonal prisms upon see-through prisms stacked chaotically next to each other, on
each other, everywhere and nowhere. It was chaotic. Each of them represented a place for a patient
to reside while being treated.

They walked between them, the hallways creating a weird maze - one that he could see through to
other hallways, other prisms, other levels. One that he could see his own reflection in, one that was
confusing the hell out of your eyes. It was a madness constructed as a building.

A medic hurried past him, passing through the nearest prism wall as if it was liquid. Derek reached
over to touch it, but to his fingertips it felt solid. Upon the contact, the wall turned into a mirror-
like surface, shielding the patient and the medic from his prying eyes.

He looked up as a gust of air rustled his hair. A swarm of droids dropped down from a shaft above
them, dispersing over the level and sinking through the liquid walls of the assigned prisms. Derek
focused on one of them, watching him tend to a patient.

“Come on,” Scott said nervously and Derek followed.

With all the bustling around them and with how crowded the hallways were, not to mention the
chaotic layout of the prisms and hallways/shafts/bridges, Derek was about to lose overview of the
path they had already traced within the first few turns. Luckily Scott seemed confident enough, so
he felt at ease. (As much as he could at that moment anyways.)

But still, the place was nothing like he’d imagined. He imagined a very clean and organised and
calming place and this… while is seemed clean, all the reflective surfaces without so much as a
smudge, the constant moving reflections made it all very chaotic.

Prisms were going from see-through to highly reflective on demand, walls were switching between
a passable liquid and a solid heavy armor, everybody was hurrying to and fro… it was a tripping
version of a giant kaleidoscope.

It was no wonder a lot of the visitors rather took a roundabout on the spiraling levels outside and
then just slipped into the needed section via the slim bridges. It was much more easier that way
when one didn’t have a guide.
And so, to keep his paranoia and claustrophobic feelings at bay, Derek did the most sensible thing and turned to focus on Scott’s back and on the path his body took, counting the steps, remembering the turns and climbs as carefully as he could.

They walked for a while, a very long while it would seem, Scott grabbing him a couple more times to grant him a passage through various layers of the building. And after what seemed like an eternity, they’ve reached the center of the building and in its core was the biggest of all the prisms - and he guessed - the holding cell of the Shifter.

It was all mirror-like to Derek couldn’t see more than his and Scott’s reflection together with their entire surroundings crammed onto the huge surface.

Scott reached out to him again. “This one is locked to not become see-through,” he explained. “It’s just so other patients don’t get freaked out.”

Derek was scared to ask why, his heart in his throat all of a sudden.

“Come on,” Scott waved his hand.

He grabbed his arm and walked through the mirror.

~o~

They walked through, the light on the other side dim, almost non-existent. It was coming from a small round droid hovering in the air far to the right. Derek barely noticed it. His eyes were fixed at a shape trapped in the see-through prism in front of them.

He couldn’t tell what it was, what shape it was currently in, what race, what species… he couldn’t tell anything. Not even if it was sentient or not. It was nondescript and ever-changing.

The dark tar-like mass moved sluggishly, kneading like dough, overrunning and disappearing into itself.

Derek gulped. This wasn’t shift-craze anymore. This was something worse. Something much more unstable. He wasn’t sure what. He’d never heard of anything like this.

“Are you sure this is the Shifter?” he asked in disbelief. His voice sounded hoarse to his ears.

He could see Scott nod silently from the corner of his eye.

“Is this see-through?”

“No. Of course not. Xe was going all kinds of crazy when it was all see-through. It was,” Scott hesitated, “all kinds of messed-up. Xe was attacking the walls, getting hurt. Changing repeatedly. They figured it’s better to reduce the stimuli to keep it dormant. And xe somehow calmed down into this state after a while.”

*Xe didn’t calm down*, Derek wanted to say, *xyr state deteriorated.*

He stepped in closer, pressing his hands against the glassy surface. It was solid. “I need to get in,” he whispered, his voice trembling. *Oh stars.*
Scott snorted. Derek looked over and repeated his request. A bit more sternly this time.

“What, really?” Scott asked like he didn’t believe his own ears. “I can’t let you in.”

“You can.”

“Well, yes I can, but I shouldn’t. You don’t know what xe will do.”

“I don’t, true, but I have to go in.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No freaking way.”

“Yes.”

Scott shook his head, backing up to the shadowed wall. “That’s it, we’re done here. I brought you here as promised, so now-”

Derek didn’t wait for him to finish his speech, he was already reaching for the zipper on his overalls, pulling it down in one swift movement.

“What the… dude, what?” Scott spluttered, confused. Derek slid his overalls from his body and started to shift into his original shape. It was easy to slip into it, it made him a bit more calm and reassured that what he was planning was the right thing. At least he hoped so.

“Oh my- , oh my- you are a werewolf!” Scott exclaimed when he was finally done shifting. He was standing a lot further away than before.

Derek sighed. “No, I am a Shifter,” he corrected, his throat growling out the language it wasn’t used to.

“You look like a werewolf,” Scott said squinting up at him.

Derek looked down at himself to make sure that nothing was amiss, but since everything seemed normal. “Yes, this is what Shifters look like.”

Scott opened his mouth and then closed it again, then obviously had to process it for a while. Until he could finally talk again. “I am gonna kill Stiles!” he whined. “What in the name of-”

“Yes, well, you can rage later. I need to get to the Shifter now,” Derek said pointing at the prism. His long claws made Scott obviously nervous, so he put his hand back down.

He frowned. “Does Stiles even know? He must know, right? I mean-”

“Scott, the wall?” Derek interrupted.

Scott shifted, biting his lower lip. “What are you gonna do?” he asked, glancing toward the prism. “Not bite xe, I hope?”

Derek rolled his eyes. “No, I need to see if I can reverse this somehow.”
“You think ze seeing you... might help to stabilize xyr state?” Scott asked.

Derek nodded. “I hope.”

“Alright, alright,” Scott said collecting himself. “Right, but one wrong move from any of you and I will pull you right back out.”

“Deal.”

~o~

The point of entry they chose, was the one putting Derek in the best strategic advantage - as much as it could in such a tight space anyways. The Shifter’s mass was rolling at the not-so-far end of the inside, non-repulsed by his entry. Good. Or perhaps not good?

Derek held his breath, watching for any changes in movement or shape, but none came. He exhaled slowly and then crouched down to all four. He was now all alone with the Shifter, Scott having retreated back out just a few moments ago.

“Hello,” he decided to go with, his native language rolling off his tongue with a wooden difficulty.

At the sound, the mass shifted, rolling to the side a bit. Derek mirrored the movement, keeping his distance.

“My name’s De-”

A Whittemorian goad formed from the mass on the right side, so quick Derek didn’t even notice it. Not before it struck him in the head. Or tried to, for that matter, Derek’s reaction time was luckily really good so he managed to stumble back. The goad hit the prism, the sound of it reverberating all around.

“Wai-,” Derek tried, but his side was pierced with multiple spikes before he could even finish the word. He made the mistake of glancing down to asses his injuries when a massive hand grabbed his head and pushed it against the wall behind him.

He heard a very loud crack - presumably his skull and whined. The mass moved closer in a blink of his eye. So close he could smell the rotting stick of it.

A huge mouth formed right above him, sharp long teeth, dripping saliva and tongue of a monstrous creature he’s never seen before.

“Yo…r….” xe said in a voice that was too rattly to be recognizable. Derek felt a chill climbing down his spine… he couldn’t think straight. Was the Shifter really talking or was it just his consciousness laughing at him from behind his drooping eyelids..?

“Yoo-r… fu… lt, Derrr-eck,” was the last thing his brain registered before hands grabbed him around the waist and pulled him through the wall.

~o~
Scott softened their fall with his own body and rolled Derek off onto his side with as little jostling as possible. Derek was thankful because he couldn’t even coordinate his own limbs properly anymore. *The cracked skull*, he thought belatedly.

“I’m fine,” he tried to say, but instead he vomited his last meal and judging by the bitter taste on his tongue, probably even all of his stomach fluids. *Great*. It was only thanks to Scott’s quick reaction that he didn’t manage to choke on his own bile.

Derek closed his eyes and focused on shifting his skull to the original state. He finished it just in time to see Scott stand up and head for the shadowed wall that was keeping them safely hidden away from the rest of the population in the building.

“Wait,” Derek managed to say, grabbing Scott’s ankle before he could disappear through the wall. “Wait.”

Scott jumped back in. “Dude I have to call a medic, your head is,” he frowned. “The wound is gone.”

“Yes,” Derek confirmed, getting up on his elbows to have a look at the spikes still nestled between his internal organs. “I don’t need a medic. I can shift back to how I was before. Just need help pulling these out.”

Scott nodded, running to squat down at his side. He grabbed the spike in Derek’s hip and glanced over at him.

“Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, I gue-” Derek didn’t even get to finish that sentence, before Scott pulled the spike out in one go. The boy had sme skills, Derek could give him that at least. He was fast and swift and before Derek could even say anything, all of the seven spikes were out of his body and he was already halfway fixing the damage.

“That’s pretty neat,” Scott commented, watching the wounds close in on themselves.

“Can’t complain,” Derek wheezed.

“I finally get why Stiles said you’re like the Wolverine,” Scott nodded. “I thought it’s the body or the attitude but… it all gives sense now.”

It didn’t really. Give sense to Derek. But he wasn’t really listening anyways. He was looking through the prism, watching the Shifter and shaking. Not because he was in pain, not because there were more wounds to be healed, but because… *oh stars, oh fucking stars*. *It was someone that knew him. Someone… someone he knew.*

“I need to get out of here,” he said, breathlessly.

“Sure, just-”

“Now!” Derek barked, getting up even if his wounds were not fully healed yet. “Right the fuck now.”

Scott just pursed his lips, sending one last look in the direction of the Shifter and then grabbed his forearm to lead his panicked body out of the building as quick as possible.
Derek knew he should have stayed by the Shifter. He should have stayed and helped xe, but he couldn't. He couldn't. Just the thought of it made his surroundings spin around in an uncontrollable speed. It made his breath stuck somewhere in the back of his throat, building up and up until he would throw up all his organs. He couldn’t. He needed to get away. As far away from his guilt as he could.

It was someone he knew. He couldn’t shake off that thought even after they exited the central building. He walked over the bridge, his knees weak and didn’t stop until he was all the way on the other side.

He didn’t care that he left Scott behind. Scott, who seemed worried, but not in that much mood to follow him around.

The worst thing was, that no matter how much he walked, he was just walking around the same building in circles. He couldn’t get it out of his sight. It was right there, too close, mocking him, torturing him.

It was dark outside, the Med Central going into the night cycle and the spiraling path was just a slightly bit less busy. There were still people about - medics, night cyclers - but Derek paid them no attention. He just kept staring at the ground, walking and walking, his mind reeling.

He didn’t even notice when the path came to an end at the very bottom. Only when the gentle rustling of leaves around him reached his ears did he realize that he’d reached the Oxygen forest. And there, he was finally somewhat alone.

The high concentration levels of oxygen produced by the trees were not tolerated by many species even at night when the trees produced a lot less and thus weren’t that dangerous. Derek was one of the lucky ones that could walk through the forest even by daylight. But he wasn’t really happy about it. It reminded him of his home a tad too much. What with the Shifter circling his mind, he couldn’t bare to enter.

He was about to turn around and walk up the spiraling path, when his ears caught something. Something behind the rustling, behind his own rattled breathing - a familiar song. And he knew there was no turning back.

Dark red leaves glazes his skin, gentle as butterfly wings and just as beautiful. Derek had the honor of seeing pictures of butterflies once and it left him wishing there still were some to be glanced upon in the human worlds. Alas… not even the thought of butterflies could redirect his turbulent thoughts. Not even this beautiful forest. Not even the tantalizing song pulling him deeper.

*Your fault, Derek.*

*My fault. My fault indeed.*

A flicker of light caught his eye and he turned to watch a tiny speckle of light dive through the leaves on his right. More and more of them emerged as he walked, flying through the leaves, illuminating their shapes into those of a sunset. It was mesmerising.

The song got louder with each step he took, but it just wasn’t enough. It was too gentle and calming.
and he wished it was loud. So loud and overpowering it would render his mind silent, so he wouldn’t hear it anymore - the echoes of the Shifter’s damned words.

*It’s your fault, Derek. All of this.*

*Indeed it is.*

The clearing he entered just a few moments later was full of the glowing Nanos. They danced around in seemingly random patterns, pulling Derek into the center where Stiles was sitting. He looked over at him, his eyes alight with the essence of thousand stars and Derek felt a sort-of a relief just by seeing him.

“Derek,” Stiles said instead of a greeting. He was… he just was. Someone Derek didn’t screw up. Not yet anyways. He should leave before he could. He should. Yet, his feet were rooted to the spot.

*Your fault.*

“Sorry, I’ll-” Derek started, making an aborted movement back.

“It’s fine, I was just done,” Stiles answered, the melody of his song so loud his words were barely hearable. He reached up with both of his hands, his palms up and the Nanos circles through the clearing and down into his hands. It was as if liquid gold was poured down his veins, melting into the skin and encasing his heart. It was a weirdly accurate metaphor, Derek realized.

“It’s fine,” he echoed. “I didn’t meant to-”

“Ah,” Stiles smiled, shrugging. He put it hands down. “Right, well, still… they’re gone now, so no worries.”

“I wasn’t…”

Stiles shrugged again, getting up to his feet. “Well, still.”

“Right,” Derek said, looking down at his feel awkwardly. He wasn’t sure what he came here for and on a very logical level, he was starting to regret it. There was nothing really logical about this cycle though.

“Got to the Shifter alright?” Stiles asked rubbing his pants to get some of the leaves off.

Derek gulped, nodding silently “I guess… and uh, I owe you a thanks,” he said automatically, surprised that his voice even came out.

“Ah nah,” Stiles answered and his voice sounded closer than before. He must have started to walk to him, but Derek… he refused to look up. He didn’t want to.

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Well, still,” Derek muttered.

The silence dragged on and Derek would have thought Stiles had already went away weren’t it for the ever-present song.

“Right, well, I gotta go now,” Stiles said suddenly, shifting to walk around him. “You can have the place for… well, whatever you came here to do.”
I came here following your song - was something Derek wasn’t gonna say. Instead he just nodded his head and said. “Right.”

“Bye, Derek,” Stiles said, heading for the trees.

“Goodbye,” Derek answered not even looking around.

He was left alone in the now dark clearing with just the rustling leaves and his own thoughts. And it was the most lonely and terrifying feeling ever.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

A/N: This one was a struggle till the very end. I just kept tweaking it over and over and over and nothing seemed to fit the fic anymore... I feel like my job is really doing a number on me lately, so that might be a reason why. But enough of that now! Enjoy the chapter, cheerios!

__________
Derek didn’t sleep that night. His head was spinning too much to keep his eyes closed for longer than a quick blink.

Even in the darkness, his eyes were plagued by flashes of light, that weren’t really there. They were stuck in the crevices of his brain, slowly eating them up, rotting him from the inside. He knew it was bad for him to be like this. He knew he should stop thinking back to that time, especially to the fire, but the temptation remained. It was irresistible no matter how painful and scarring the process was.

*Your fault, Derek*, xe had said.

Somebody that knew him. Somebody he knew.

He was drenched in cold sweat just thinking of the fire. He should stop. But he couldn’t stop. He had been so sure he had seen them all on that pile of burned carcases. He had been sure Kate had… Kate had killed them all after he’d let her in.

Could it be that…

He leaned over staring at the ceiling of his little rented cabin, his breath coming out in frantic pants.

He remembered running through the woods of their home planet, he remembered the scalding fire all around, the stench of-

He gulped, too scared to go any further, but he had to.

*Come on, you fucking coward. Come on. Who was it?*

He was running through the forest, fire all around… all around…

Derek wheezed, bringing a balled fist to his clenched eye. He pushed against his eyelid until he could see white.

*Come on.*

The room was spinning and he was so lost, so fucking lost. There wasn’t enough air around him, it was all smoke, clogging his lungs, making it unable for him to breathe. The hand hand pushed his face was shaking.

*You fucker. You fucking.. again!*

He was running through the forest, fire all around him. He could feel his skin prickling at the contact, blisters jumping out and burning off into black scorch marks and yet he kept running. He kept calling for them.

His heart was hammering inside of his chest, trying to break the rib cage apart. He retched, his stomach too empty to even force out acids.

He was running until he wasn’t anymore.

*Your fault*, came from a pile of scorched bodies. *Your fault*, came an endless echo. He should have stayed behind to check, but he was a coward then and he was still a coward now. He ran away then and he ran away now.

And whoever - oh stars, what if it’s one of the twins? Did he really see two little bodies on that
pile? He wasn’t sure.

*Your fault, Derek.*

What if it was his baby sister Cora?

*Your fault, Derek.*

Or Laura?

*Your fault, Derek.*

What if it was her mate Alex?

*Your fault, Derek.*

Oh stars, not Olivia? What is it was her?

*Your fault, Derek.*

Or his dad?

*Your fault, Derek.*

Mom?

*Your fucking fault, Derek.*

Anybody else from the thousands of shifters he helped finish off?

Derek broke down crying. Funnily enough, somewhere on top of all the desperate feelings, far up on some very thin logical layer, he was laughing - laughing at how weak he was, how fucking self-centered, how he couldn’t even set aside his own guilt to help the Shifter trapped in that horrible state, trapped in that prism.

He laughed and laughed. Until he couldn’t cry anymore.

~o~

“No,” Scott said when he saw him waiting at the base of the bridge. “No fucking way.”

Derek stepped in his path, blocking it off for him and for a murder of Vulgulars, who didn’t look happy about it at all. (And before you begin to wonder, yes, he had spent a very long time waiting there in hopes to intercept Scott. His head wasn’t in the right space to infiltrate the prisms, so Scott was his only choice.)

“I said *no* ,” Scott hissed, grabbing his biceps to pull him aside. “Do you even remember what happened yesterday? Xe freaking impaled you, multiple times I might add and then you ran away in panic.”

“I didn’t run away,” Derek argued even if he knew it was true. “And I am *fine* .”

“Yes, well, that’s all swell, now, isn’t it?” Scott retorted, trying to keep his voice down despite the
agitation. “But it doesn’t change a freaking thing. You caused a major setback in the healing process of-”

“I didn’t cause anything,” Derek argued, almost choking on the word. “Xe’s deteriorating. I have to help-”

“How?”

Derek blinked. “What?”

“How do you plan on helping?” Scott repeated, looking around suspiciously.

Derek followed the line of his sight. Looking up the spiraling path and then down, surveying the masses of races occupying it in various stages of hurry. He didn’t really care about them. He just was collecting his thoughts for his answer.

“No, really,” Scott continued, filling in the silence. “Tell me your big plan and then I might lead you back in. There is a chance you might know something only a Shifter would know. If that’s so, then go ahead and reveal your great plan right now. Otherwise I won’t sneak you in at all.”

Derek frowned. “I just want to try-”

“No, dude,” Scott said poking his chest. “It needs to be solid. This is not some research facility where we test our vague theories on our patients. This is serious business. I swore an oath.”

“Who better than me?” Derek growled.

“Anybody medically qualified,’ Scott said, poking his chest again, which earned him a quick swat away. It wasn’t the first time Scott touched him in such a degrading way. He was starting to lose his patience. If he ever had any to begin with.

“They wouldn’t know about Shifters as much as I do,” Derek argued.

Scott didn’t back down. “Yes? And how much is that?”

Derek’s frown deepened.

“No really, how much?” Scott went on. “Are you secretly a Shifter medic? Or a nurse? Or any other… do you even have like… any sort of experience with healing?”

Derek should have lied just there and then or just explained how their healing really worked, but somehow he couldn’t get it out of his mouth. He thought back to the day Cora fell from the cliff. Thought back...and remained silent.

“That’s what I thought,” Scott nodded in triumph. Stupid child. Stupid fuck-.

Derek shrugged, turned his back to him and walked away. He was angry. At himself. At Scott. And somehow… secretly relieved, but he wouldn’t have admitted it for the world.

~o~

Derek found himself back at the Oxygen forest. Hungry and thirsty but unable to consume anything, he kept wandering through the vast expanses of trees, breathing in the saturated oxygen of the day, feeling lightheaded. It was better than feeling heavy with guilt. It was better to roam
mindlessly than to be haunted by the same images, the same thoughts.

He walked on, the artificial sunlight painting his path with small specs of vibrant light. He watched it dance sluggishly through the leaves. It was nothing like Stiles’ Nanos. Nothing like it at all.

He walked on even as the sunlight grew dimmer with each step, painting the leaves dark purple. They seemed almost black, that was how deep in the forest he was. The rustling gradually calmed down, silently hushing in the background.

And he walked on and on.

And on and on.

Until his feet lead him back to the clearing from the previous night. (Or maybe it was the light coming off through the glowing holo screen.) And there he was again, sitting in the same exact spot - Stiles, enveloped by his endless song.

He looked up when he heard the rustle of leaves.

“Oh hey,” he said, putting down his holo. He frowned. “Is this like your spot or something? I can just-”

Derek shook his head, stopping at the edge of the clearing. “I’m just… walking by,” he forced out, his voice funny.

Stiles squinted his eyes over at him through the growing darkness, illuminated only by his holo. “I see,” he said.

Derek lowered his eyes to study the ground. It was covered with a reddish moss, soft and spongy. Not that he cared really.

He felt Stiles study him in silence and Derek realized, that if he won’t say anything, Stiles will leave just as he did the night before.

“Uh,” he started, forcing himself to look up. “How’s eh… your vacation?”

“Pretty chill. Fun even,” Stiles smiled, looking down at the moving feed on his holo. It looked like he was talking to somebody through the chat.

Derek took a step closer.

“Can’t… uh imagine a med station being fun,” he said, not wanting to let the conversation die out.

Stiles scrolled through his feed, typing in something and sending it off. He barely looked up at him as he answered: “Oh, there it a plenty of fun around, if you just know where to go.”

“For example?” Derek asked, walking in closer.

Stiles looked up at him with a squinty sort-of face. He studied him for a bit and then shrugged. “Well, for example, we went out with Scott yesterday and I got into a convo with this android and it was the most bizzare thing ever. I think I’ve never had my brains blown like that before.”

“How so?” Derek asked, hovering over Stiles by then. It was just that he was feeling chilly in the draft created by the trees. The middle of the clearing seemed like a much better, warmer place.

Stiles pursed his lips and then sighed. “Well, you might wanna sit down for this one,” he
suggested, gesturing at the ground in front of him. “Since this might lift you off your feet.”

Derek sat down just a few feet away and waited for Stiles to continue. He seemed to be taking his time - he probably just needed to collect his thoughts to explain what the android had on his mind. Androids never had anything simple on their minds after all.

“Get this,” Stiles leaned in. “Xe was trying to convince me the whole universe is actually 2D and we only think it’s 3D.”

Derek inclined his head. “Sounds... ridiculous.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Stiles exclaimed, throwing his arms in the air. It made the light from his holo jump around wildly. “But he said it’s like… we’re all just information, just zeros and ones yanno, like a software that renders the picture into 3D in your head, but the input was 2D all along.”

“But, the hardware is still 3D,” Derek said.

“Oooh.” Stiles leaned in closer again. “But this is where it gets wild. There is apparently no hardware. Just information. It’s like the whole chicken-egg problem all over again, except this time they are trying-”

“Chicken?”

“It’s an earthian animal that lays eggs,” Stiles explained dismissively. “The point is, he was pretty solid that all of this,” he waved his hand around, “and even this,” he said grabbing his own biceps, “that all of it is actually just what our brain makes us think, there is no 3D world at all, the brain just makes us perceive it as such.”

Derek thought about it, sliding his hand over his folded leg. “I guess… I guess I understand why an android might think that.”

“Well, yeah,” Stiles admitted, leaning back. “If you are willing to stretch it that far, then androids do process everything through ones and zeros and then the driver renders the picture. But that’s stretching it, because the input is still 3D, right?”

“Could be a system error in xyr screening process,” Derek said offhandedly.

Stiles stared at him, his lips twitching up into a smile. “Or, yanno, xe has it all figured out and we’re the fools here.”

Derek was almost tempted to smile back at him.

“May be,” he said, looking down at the moss around them. He reached down and poked at it. It was slightly damp, but mostly just very very soft and squishy.

“May be,” Stiles repeated with a hearable smile.

“May be,” Derek picked up again. “That he just defines information differently than we do. All matter could be perceived as information maybe?”

He looked up at Stiles, who was grinning over at him. “Hey, don’t look at me,” he said laughing. “I didn’t really get it either. One night isn’t really enough for such groundbreaking discoveries.”

Derek couldn’t help but smile at that. Even if only a little. “I bet,” he muttered, his fingers playing idly with the moss in front of him.
“Myeah,” Stiles said smiling back. He then pursed his lips and took a deep breath in, glancing back at his holo. There were messages popping up on it, blinking urgently for Stiles to acknowledge them. Derek wondered if it was the android. Or even Scott perhaps?

“Scott, he,” Derek heard himself say. Stiles looked up at him.

“He,” Derek fumbled for words. Why did he even start with this topic? Since when did he hate silence that much?

“He seems like a fine human,” he finished lamely.

Stiles squinted his eyes over at him again. Maybe it was hard to see him in the surrounding shadows? Or was it because he’d been sprouting nonsense ever since he joined him here?

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “He’s the best.”

Derek lowered his eyes back to the moss he was playing with, nodding his head a bit.

Silence fell over them, like a heavy blanket, pushing them down to the ground, making it hard for Derek to breathe. He knew the question was coming, but he wasn’t sure what to do about it.

“So, the Shifter…,” Stiles started uncertainty and it was enough. Derek knew where those words were heading. He lowered his head even more, avoiding Stiles’ eyes.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” Stiles said, the light of his holo moving up again slowly. The movement prompted Derek’s tongue to start twisting, his throat to push out the words. “I am unsure.”

The light wandered slowly down again. “Unsure about what?” Stiles whispered.

“The Shifter,” Derek muttered, pushing his fingers through the moss just to feel something. “I am unsure. Not sure what to do with… I seem to be making it worse.”

_Your fault, Derek._

The memory made his throat clog up. He couldn’t really admit it all to Stiles. He couldn’t, not like this, not face to face, not under such a direct scrutiny. Not… just not.

“Maybe… we can brainstorm together,” Stiles proposed slowly.

Derek watched his fingers pull at the moss, breaking it apart into these long strings of red tissue. His mind was so full of nothing, he wasn’t sure what to answer.

“Or not, you know,” Stiles said. The light of the holo moving around as if he was settling back to read through it. “I’m sure you will-”

“I don’t think I can,” Derek blurted out, lifting his head. Stiles stared at him in surprise, his finger hovering over the holo.

“I don’t think I can,” Derek repeated. “Do anything. It… it’s,” he shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Stiles frowned, putting his holo back down. “Like what?”

“I thought,” Dere sighed, pushing the words out of his mouth by force. “I thought it’s the shift-craze. I’ve never seen it before, but I heard of it. It happened to some Externals or some really hurt
Shifters, but… this is not it. Not anymore. It’s worse. I’ve never…” He was in loss for words.

“I’m sure-”

“And it’s somebody I know, Stiles,” Derek breathed, his heart hammering so hard he felt like he was gonna faint of all the rappid blood distribution. “Somebody who knows me.”

“What makes you think that?” Stiles wondered.

Derek couldn’t breathe properly. The mere memory of what happened the cycle before made him distraught. “…spoke,” he wheezed.

Stiles was silent for a heartbeat and then he moved, the movement making Derek refocus back at him.

“I think we need to back up here a bit,” he said, standing up. “I can’t think on an empty stomach and I’ve avoided food ever since this morning cause… I actually came here to chill out a bit, but then Erica started to bitch at me and… anyhow, wanna go grab a bite?”

~o~

“So,” Stiles started setting the last few baggies on the table between them. Derek watched the amounts of food in front of him with a rather incredulous feeling. Stiles ended up leading him to what seemed to be the main level for nourishment. It was a whole level, ring-like narrow room running all around the spiraling path, connected via alcoves on one side and rimmed by food dispensers on the other. And right in the middle a row after a row of tables of various sizes and heights.

Stiles opted for a high small round table that they could lean onto and proceeded to walk swiftly from one dispenser to another, collecting baggies as if he had not eaten in a thousand cycles. Derek was left behind to guard the table - whatever that meant, nobody actually tried to take it from him.

“So,” Stiles said again, his fingers jumping from baggie to baggie opening them. “It’s basically a very shitty situation.”

Derek shrugged. He managed to calm down enough as they were walking up the crowdy spirals and ended up telling Stiles all the details..

“And you don’t know how to proceed,” Stiles summarized. He nudged a steaming baggie his way, grabbing some small rolls from another one. “Want some?”

“No,” Derek said. “And yes, I have no idea how to-”

“No need to be shy, take some,” Stiles said, pushing a few more baggies his way.

Derek just scowled their way. “I’m fine,” he muttered. “I don’t-”

“I could hear your stomach growling from like miles away, dude come on,” Stiles said, smiling at him through the noodle-like green glowing… whatever-that-was. “Why do you think nobody tried to get this table.”

“I’m not-”
“Suit yourself,” Stiles said, pulling one of the baggies closer. “This is stuff is so good though.” He stuffed his mouth full with some black beans from a different baggie and proceeded to chew his teeth off.

Derek couldn’t help but scrounge his face in distaste. No matter how distasteful Stiles’ eating habits though, he could feel his saliva collect at the bottom of his mouth. He wasn’t really hungry. But it all smelled so delicious. Or correction, he was hungry, but he didn’t want to eat, he didn’t really… he glanced down at all the food and pressed his lips tight.

Stiles grabbed a handful of the green noodles and slurped them messily into his mouth. He then wordlessly pushed the baggie his way and turned his attention to the rest of the food.

“So if you have no idea,” he said. “Maybe your uncle would know? Uncle Peter?”

Derek shook his head. “Peter is busy.” He leaned his forearm on the table. His fingers brushed the baggie with the green noodles and he looked over at Stiles, spooked for no reason. But Stiles was too busy lapping at some small see-through eggs to notice.

“Busy doing what?” he asked with a full mouth.

Derek remained quiet. Quiet for long enough for Stiles to realize is on his own. “Oh,” he said. “The revenge thing?”

Derek nodded, his fingers poing the baggie in front of him idly.

“Well, that’s,” Stiles hesitated and then dusted off his hands. The small eggs that were sticking to them fell off. For the most part anyways. “That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Derek agreed, only to disagree in the next moment. “No. I don’t know.”

“Well, it sucks for us, because he might have known how to… can’t we contact him somehow?” He asked, picking at the eggs glued to his skin.

“I don’t think he would pick up,” Derek admitted, thinking back to when the ouroboros line disconnected. Connection silence was the best thing for a few cycles.

Stiles just nodded, bringing his hand up to his mouth to dispose of the last few eggs.

“Well then,” he started after his hand was clean. “We need a medic’s view on the whole thing.”

Derek gave him a sour face.

“Now now,” Stiles warned, grabbing a few sticks from a baggie on his right. “I get that you as a regenerating superhero wouldn’t hold much of a regard for medics, but I really think-”

“No,” Derek interrupted. “Nobody would know-”

“All I’m saying is,” Stiles bit into the stick, breaking it off with a snap. “That it can’t hurt.”

“I don’t trust anybody,” Derek argued. “Nobody can possibly know-”

“Well, unless you plan kidnap xe, which I would not recommend by the way, it’s already too late to pull out that whole trust card,” Stiles argued, snapping a piece from another stick. “They are treating xyr already. Besides, this is like the best place to treat people, so…”

While that was true, Derek still didn’t feel comfortable with the whole Shifter business. He was
starting to wonder if he was arguing just for the sake of arguing. His stomach growled back at him in affirmation. And yet he didn’t touch the food in front of him.

“There is a huge group of people saved from the pods that they are treating. That’s a lot of data. They might have all been pumped with similar shit. I am sure—”

“Stiles,” he grunted, not sure what his objection was.

Stiles looked over at him, studying him for a bit, the noise of conversation around them protecting them from the impending awkwardness.

“There is nothing you can do to help xyr,” Stiles decided to say.

Derek’s chest almost collapsed on itself once he heard it, anger flushing through him like a ravenous stream. “How d—”

“And that’s okay,” Stiles said, silencing him. “It’s okay not to have a solution for this, it’s okay not being able to help, it’s okay to need help with stuff - you know that, don’t you? I get you feel responsible—”

Derek growled, stepping away from the table. He didn’t want to hear it.

Stiles opened his mouth to continue but whatever treacherous words were about to leave his lips were stopped by a ping of his holo.

“Speak of the timing,” he muttered, tapping at it and scrolling through the feed. Derek watched him carefully, his anger abating a bit. He stepped in closer to the table again.

“Look—” Stiles tried again.

“Stiles,” Derek interrupted him warningly.

“Derek,” he mocked. “The reason why I even brought up the medics is that I was in line for the access to their feed,” he said, shaking his holo at him. “Each prism has a feed where the data is collected, where the team discusses stuff, shares info and… well it’s an open line, but you need to be invited by a member, so it’s not as easy as it might seem.” He walked around the table. “Luckily, Scott’s mom, Mellisa is on the team, so I was able to get there. And now I can invite you too.”

He was standing in front of Derek now, his hand outstretched, offering the wrist. He shook it when Derek didn’t react. “Well? You don’t have to tell them anything, but this way, you can at least observe what’s going on without threatening my buddy.”

Derek felt a pang of guilt, but he didn’t let it overwhelm him. Instead he just nodded and reached over with his own bracelet. Stiles touched them together and tapped a few buttons that jumped out on his holo.

Once the deed was done, he nodded over at Derek and said. “Right, well, I got places to be, so,” he turned to grab a few of the opened baggies and stuffed them under his arm. “Stay safe, Derek.”

And with that he was gone, swept away by the ever-changing crowd and Derek was left along with a table half-littered with baggies full of food. He didn’t have the heart to throw them out and so he closed each and took them back to his cabin.
The feed turned out awfully useful. So helpful that Derek actually managed to eat most of the leftover food while skimming through and get a solid shut-eye.

It calmed him down to see that the feed was constantly moving. It was reassuring to know there was someone out there who cared. Who was trying to heal the Shifted. It brought down some of the pressure.

He didn’t join the feed himself though. Because of various reasons - from which the most pronounced was his fear of being discovered. There were too many people that knew about him already. Too many loose ends. The Sheriff, Stiles, Scott… adding up more individuals to it would be dangerous. Peter would not approve.

So he lied there, scrolling all the way to the top of the feed and read about how the Shifter was trapped and escorted from the Nano ship to the Med Central. He barely got to the rules of the containment and the gradual deterioration when his eyes shut down and he fell asleep.

He woke up a cycle and half later, rested enough and in no mood to read on. Instead he left his temporary cabin and walked back down to the Oxygen forest. It was dark there, the start of the night cycle causing the trees to produce less air. There was only a slight breeze around, the temperature nicely warm.

His feet led him automatically to the clearing where he’d met Stiles before.

It was empty this time, but it didn’t matter. He stopped in the middle of the clearing and then closed his eyes. It’s been a long long time since he had last performed his ritual. He wasn’t really certain if he even could do it in his present state of mind. But it’s been cycles upon cycles. When was the last time? Back at the stolen shuttle? No, also on the Nano ship. Still. It seemed like a lifetime ago… no wonder he felt like shit, no wonder he couldn’t sleep, no wonder his body felt like it had just been pulled out of trash (and then thrown back in).

Now that his mind was a bit more calm, with his conscience a bit clearer thanks to the feed and his hunger and tiredness satisfied and with this place - a safe haven of his... Now it was time to get back into the needed routine.

Derek took a deep breath in and let his ancestors guide him through the shifting medley of the ancient ritual.

There was a song guiding him through the last few steps of his ritual and the song… it was so… Derek would have no proper words to describe it even if he did want to do it. It wasn’t anything he had ever heard during this ritual before. It was so different from the song of his ancestors. So different and yet so similar. In its own way it was a familiar song. Yet it was so alien to him at that moment, so new, so intriguing, so… he stopped, turning around the stare into a gap between two trees.

“Stiles,” he breathed, the letters coming out jumbled.
Stiles came out from where he was leaning against a tree and walked into the clearing. Derek could see him as clearly as a day in his Shifter form.

“Is this like,” he said gesturing vaguely his way. Derek closed his gaping jaws to hide the vast rows of his fangs and took a conscious effort not to move his tail too much.

“Is this like,” Stiles started again, stepping in closer. He frowned. “Like your spot or something? We keep bumping into each other here a lot.”

Derek remained silent, squaring his shoulders. He was towering over Stiles and it made him utterly uncomfortable to stand there in his shape. Was this the first time Stiles actually got to see his true form properly?

“I can just, yanno,” Stiles muttered, jerking his head in some random direction. He must have felt Derek’s discomfort. “Keep away,” he continued. “I can keep away. Make a wide breadth around this area if that should be a problem.”

“It’s not,” Derek growled before he could stop himself. It came out even more distorted than before. The SLA was not suitable for this kind of anatomy.


Derek tried to clear his throat, but it just sounded like he was gurgling at Stiles, so he stopped. “How long?” he asked making sure to speak clearly and slowly. He gestured at the gap between the trees where he saw Stiles lurking before.

“For the last bit only,” Stiles admitted. “Sorry about that, I didn’t know you were… busy.”

“It was just a ritual I do sometimes,” Derek explained, shrugging self-consciously. His speech was agonizingly slow. “It’s… a thing Shifters do.”

“Like training?” Stiles asked. “It looked like training. Training the… shifting.” He frowned, pursed his lips and sighed. “Or something. What in the living… I am really bad at words right now.”

Derek almost laughed at the irony of that statement, but he reigned himself well enough to just let a silent hiss escape through his teeth.

“I’ll,” he started to avoid the impending silence, “I’ll just go change.” He bent down to grab his overalls that he disposed of before the ritual and wanted to turn around, but Stiles spoke up again, making him stop: “You can stay like this too. If you want. Or so.”

Derek wasn’t sure he understood correctly. “What?”

“Well,” Stiles blinked. “Isn’t it more comfy in your own skin?”

Derek blinked back at him, silent.

“Sorry, was that… like a stupid thing to say? I can’t tell at this point anymore… what is stupid and what not, yanno,” Stiles said, shifting on the place.

“It’s not,” Derek said, but he remained uncertain. He barely ever did remain in his original form anymore. Not unless he was out of control or needed a sudden strength or speed boost. “I just, didn’t want to disturb…” whatever you came to do, he didn’t finish.

“Just wanted to flop down and watch some stuff,” Stiles said. “Perhaps let the Nanos lose a bit. It’s
not allowed anywhere else, yanno. Unless you’d mind… my Nanos around that is.”

Derek shook his head. “Not really.”

“Oh I thought…” He didn’t finish the sentence, forcing Derek to ask: “Thought what?”

Stiles lower lip came out a bit. He shrugged, shuffling his feet. “Thought you ain’t a huge fan of them.” He shrugged again. “Judging by all the stuff they fucked up for you.”

“Oh.” Derek wasn’t sure what to say to that. He looked down at the overalls in his hand, sliding his thumb over the rough fabric..

“Yeah, oh.”

“It’s fine,” he said quickly. It was too quick though, he realized, because the words were barely distinguishable. He bared his teeth in annoyance.

“It’s fine,” Stiles repeated in a tone Derek didn’t quite understand. Was he just trying to figure out what Derek barked out? Probably. It sounded slightly bitter or… he wasn’t sure, but he didn’t like it.

“It’s,” came out of him slowly. “You made it up to me with the… access to the Shifter and the… feed access and such.”

“I hardly did but it’s nice of you to say so,” Stiles said curtly, sliding his hands into the pockets on his pants. He looked away.

“It’s…” Derek wanted to say it was fine for some reason. Even though it wasn’t. Of course it wasn’t. Stiles shared everything about him, even things that weren’t his to share, the things he saw when Derek was healing him and that, that was definitely not fine. So instead Derek just said: “Uh sure.” Perfectly eloquent as always.

The silence grew, making Stiles sniff and pull his hands out of his pockets. He opened his holo and glanced through some sort of feed.

“I’ll just,” he said, gesturing to the ground a few feet away from them. And since Derek didn’t reply, he walked over and flopped down, his eyes fixed to the screen.

Derek felt a bit off standing in the middle of the clearing like he was, his huge form towering over Stiles. He wasn’t looking at him anymore, true, but somehow… it made him nervous, made him feel more naked than when he actually was naked in front of him so many times before.

And so he took a deep breath in and began to change back in a quick fluid movement. It was done before he exhaled again, the fur shrinking back, the tail disappearing, the shape shifting ever so slightly.

He glanced over at Stiles, catching his eyes for no more than a moment. Before he could understand the expression, Stiles’ eyes were back to the screen, scrolling through some sort of feed.

“I’ll just,” he said, gesturing to the ground a few feet away from them. And since Derek didn’t reply, he walked over and flopped down, his eyes fixed to the screen.

Derek felt a bit off standing in the middle of the clearing like he was, his huge form towering over Stiles. He wasn’t looking at him anymore, true, but somehow… it made him nervous, made him feel more naked than when he actually was naked in front of him so many times before.

And so he took a deep breath in and began to change back in a quick fluid movement. It was done before he exhaled again, the fur shrinking back, the tail disappearing, the shape shifting ever so slightly.

He glanced over at Stiles, catching his eyes for no more than a moment. Before he could understand the expression, Stiles’ eyes were back to the screen, scrolling through some boxes.

Derek turned sideways and put on his overalls as quickly and possible. It was…

A tune coming from Stiles’s holo caught his attention. His hand stopped pulling the zipper halfway up the overalls. He listened in for a beat or two and then turned to ask: “Is that…?”

Stiles lowered the holo, looking over at him. “Don’t you dare make fun of me, okay? I’ll have you
know, that it’s a great show and any complains will be-"

“No, I…” Derek finished zipping up his overalls. He straightened up. “It’s a good one.”

Stiles squinted over at him. “You shitting me, aren’t you?”

“No,” he answered honestly. It as true he didn’t watch it much as of lately, but back at the ship with Peter… well there wasn't really much to do while they were in hiding.

His answer didn’t seem to make Stiles any less suspicious. “Right. So you must have favorite episode then.”

He was testing him.

“Twenty-seven,” Derek said easily. “Twenty-seven alternative L.”

Stiles’ eyebrows went up at that and he blinked a few times, the disbelief on his face melting into a soft smile. “That’s uh… that’s a good one, true. One of the best.”

“Yours?” Derek asked curiously.

“Forty-two alternative Q.”

Derek nodded. “That would be the second best, true.”

There was a gasp. “Second best!?” Stiles wailed, flailing. “Your words wound me deeply, sir!” He leaned over the holo, pointing at him. “I musn’t let you leave this place before we settle things fair and square.” He shook the holo at him. “I challenge you to an episode duel! What say you, sir?”

Derek couldn’t help but snort. And let himself be carried away just a tad too much. He folded his arms over his chest and started saying: “Peasants have no right to-.”

Stiles didn’t let him finish.

“Oh, it’s on, buddy!”
Chapter 23

PULSAR CENTRAL

LEVEL O 2

SOUND ENTRY -----__-----____

“Motherf**ker, why isn’t it working?”

[...well, it’s no-...]

“What a piece of crap.”

“Are they shitting me? I got a new one when I left the Nano worlds. Now, look, when I pull it off it should keep the holo going on, not freaking close it.”

“Why is it closing down? Must be a malfunction. I could tingle around the hardware, but I guess this will be a software thing.”

“Probably.”

“So, what now? I mean I guess we can just watch it some other time or use your holo maybe?”

“I can just sit closer.”

“Ah...”

“It’s no problem.”

“I mean yeah, you can... we can do that too. That’s... that’s a solution too. You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, well then scooch over.”

“Can you see it well enough like this?”

“Sure.”

“Are you sure? Like this is important, you need to see every detail to really appreciate it.”
“I can see fine, Stiles.”

“Right. Right-io. Let’s just…”

[...we’re in this together… for better or for worse… so let’s fucking go...]

~o~

PULSAR CENTRAL

LEVEL O 2

SOUND ENTRY ------_------_----

[...never really realized how vast the space...]

“Dude is there something on my face?”

[...imagine you’d never know anything like this existed...]

“No, just…”

“Just what?”

[...a lie and nothing else...]

“So, you’ve been talking to Erica?”

“What?”

“Erica… you’ve been…?”

“Ah, yeah, why?”

[...because the space is nothing more than a giant black hole...]

“Is she okay?”
“Yeah, I should hope so. If not I’d have to kick Boyd’s ass.”

“What?”

[...trapped in singularity....]

“Ah right, you dunno. They finally hooked up! They’d been a pain to be around for the last couple of cycles. Just so much pining! Like I swear, if they wouldn’t have gotten together on their own soon, I would have locked them in the Root together until they did. Like I swear, so pathetic.”

“Oh.”

[...spinning....]

“Is that all you’re gonna say to that?”

[at the edge of time....]

“It’s not like I really pay attention to things like that.”

“It’s worse than that. You, sir, are a blind man. A blind man with a blindfold on. A blind man with a blindfold on, that-”

“I’m not.”

“Yea, right.”

“I’m not. I knew they cared about each other, just…”

“Well, I wouldn’t say you’re very observant when it comes to tender feelings.”

“I gue-”

“You wouldn’t notice even if it was staring right at you.”

[ ..hold on...]

“Would it really matter? It’s not like I care for other people. ”
“Must be nice to live in such ignorance.”
“I don’t-”
“That’s just sad, man. And there I thought you and Erica are friends!”
“We were colleagues.”
“Oh, savage.”
“What? We were.”
“That’s not how she’d call it. Man, so insensitive, aren’t you even happy for her?”
“Stiles, seriously.”
“Dead serious. She put her heart on the platter right in front of you… and you wrenched it out of her feeble hands and-”
“Stiles.”
“Yes, Derek?”
“We were colleagues. If being with Vernon makes her happy then good for her. The fact that intimate relationships at the work space don’t thrill the hell out of me has nothing to do with it.”

[. ..I will if I have to...]

“Oh, so you’re that kind of a guy.”
“What kind of a-”
“All business and no pleasure.”
“I just don’t see the point in complicating things.”
“Right. Well, it’s not like tender feelings complicate things per se.”
“It’s just not worth it.”

[. ..max up the engines...]
“Ah… right.”

[...go, go now...]

“You know, my parents worked together too. Mom was Beacon’s Tech and dad was, well still is, the Captain. And it… it worked fine, I think. That is, until my mom died anyways.”

[...i told you to go...]

“I didn’t mean to-”

“It’s fine. Just thought I’d point it out.”

[...you’re too close, the explosion will...]

“This is different.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It is.”

“Because of that woman?”

“Kate. Her name was Kate.”

“She did some horrible things, I’ll give you that. But… not everybody is like that, yanno.”

“It’s safer to expect they are.”

“It’s safer to hide out on some unpopulated distant moon and live out the rest of your life as a hermit. And yet, here you are. If one doesn’t take risks…”

“I’ve had just about enough of those lately.”

[...i won’t let them...]

“Right… dude, look, I’m sorry you had to go through all that shit to save me, but-”
“I’m not. I would do it again.”

“I sure hope you won’t have to.”

“I sure hope so too.”

“Wha…? You just said you’d do it again, no problem!”

“I lied.”

“Duude, shame! Shame!”

“Shame on you for not being able to keep a low fucking profile anywhere you go.”

“Says you.”

“Stiles, I am literally the best undercover spy there is. Biologically at least.”

“Might be, but you are anything but subtle. It’s all brute force with you, buddy, isn’t it?”

“Well, sometimes you need brute force to-”

“Sure, sure… like fucking… ramming through metal doors to find me-”

“Seriously? What would you have done?”

“I would have turned into something small, slip away and actually achieve something.”

“I’m not so good at mass regulation, so…”

“Ah a constant mass problem-”

“Yes, but all the shifts I can do have just a very small difference in their overall mass, so I can regulate it with weight or energy or similar things. It’s the extremes that are harder.”

“The 1-0-1?”

“They make up for it with the horrendous weight of their bodies. The special atmosphere through the facility was by design. They needed something really dense, otherwise they wouldn’t be able to even lift a tendril. So…”

“Alright. You shifted me though.”

“It’s not such a differ- stop it, it’s not.”

[...i can’t fucking believe he would...]
“Well, can Peter do it? Mass shifts?”

“Yes, but I would’’t call it mass shifts, it’’s more complicated than that. But yes. He’’s… he was an External. They are trained to do it.”

“Ah yeah, your dad mentioned that.”

[...that fucking traitor...]

“In that memory. He mentioned that in the memory.”

“He did.”

[...I didn’’t know he still had...]

“Must be pretty cool to be able to shift like that.”

[...they are clinging to the...]

“Must be pretty cool to have your own private army of fixer-uppers.”

[...useless fucking ship...]

“It’s alright… not so easy to control though.”

“Neither is shifting.”

[...keep it up, I will see if I can fix the...]

“Look, I’’m sorry I made you leave the Beacon. I didn’’t meant to.”

“It’’s fine, really. I would have left eventually anyways.”

“Why?”
“It wouldn’t be safe to remain at one place for too long.”

“Where are you gonna go? After this, I mean.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, maybe…”

“…maybe we could stay in touch anyways. You can just write me if you get bored out there or so.”

“I promise I won’t rat you out to anybody else anymore… that is unless they won’t offer me like, I don’t know, a time machine. Because seriously, who would say no to that.”

“Understandable. I would sell you out for less.”

“Rude.”

~o~

PULSAR CENTRAL

LEVEL O 2

SOUND ENTRY ----_---_-----_----

“So, what’s the verdict? This was the best one, isn’t it?”

“Hard to say.”
“Hard to say? Hard to say?”

[...hesitate no more...]

“I think I would need to see the other one to know for sure.

“Oh well… yeah, I mean, unless you got other places to be.”

“Well… I don’t. Do you?”

“No, I’m good. I can definitely watch one more…”

[...protected by our high-tech shields, guarded by our seasoned outers, the flashes of our pulsar within reach ...]

“...no wait, wait, okay, wait. I think I gotta say something before it’s too late. I mean, just to avoid the usual meltdown at the end of our meet-ups. Why don’t we just move it forward, cos… man, you’re way too chill and I am getting pretty convinced that you don’t know about it, even though I did give you the access to the feed, so-”

“Stiles, what is it?”

“You do know, you’ve been spotted when you went into the prism, right?”

“What?”

“You went in in your Shifter mode.”

[...enjoy the pulsar face-to-face...]

“Who knows about it?”

“The meds. I mean, you didn’t think the prism would be unsurveilled right?”

“I…”

“I thought you saw the feed!”

“I did, but I didn’t get that far.”

“Oh.”

“Oh indeed.”

“But it’s fine.”
“It’s not fine, Stiles.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Scott explained and Mellisa - that’s his mom - she’s on the feed too and she helped. Like a lot. You owe her big times. Anyways, I think you’re off the hook. Ish. They would wanna talk to you though.”

“No.”

“Wait, no… don’t go.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? You just sat here-”

“This again? Seriously, since when am I your personal secretary? Also, it was your choice to go into that freaking prism, like… why would you do that is beyond me. Not to mention this has totally nothing to do with me, I am not here to-”

[ ...order an outing now and you get a second one for free...]

“Alright, how much?”

“What?”

“How much do I have to pay you to be my... secretary or however you want to call it.”

“What?”

“Well, you seem to be better at this whole stuff, so…”

“Are you mocking me?”

“No.”

“No…?”

“I’m not.”

[ ...hesitate no more...]

“Well uhh… yeah, well we are a good team, that’s for sure - brain and muscles. Guess which one are you.”

“Fuck you.”

“Right back at ya. But also come on, I am just kidding… being a Rooter is work for smart people, so in reality you got it both.”

“...right.”

“What I’m trying to say is that you don’t exactly need a partner in crime.”
“Wouldn’t hurt.”

“As long as you choose the right one anyways.”

“You are… for this. To help… with… stars, I really need to finish reading through that feed, don’t I?”

“You should… but I mean, we still got that other episode to watch and well, there is time, so…”

[ ...login to our feed to enjoy the pulsar central in full gulps...

“Still…”

“I will give you a quick summary of the feed after we finish watching this, alright?”

[ ...pulsar central...

“Alright.”

[ ...healing beyond simple health...

“Cools.”

~o~

PULSAR CENTRAL

LEVEL O 2

SOUND ENTRY ---_----_-----_----

[ ...pulsar central would like to remind all visitors...

“Okay, now I’m undecided. Like I wanna argue my case, but this one really aged well since I last saw it.”

“It’s a good one.”

“But better that the one before? That’s the question.”
“I’m not sure I care at this point.”

“Alright. Remains undecided then. Let’s get back to business. Sooo… they contained the Shifter at the pod bay. You saw it burst through the pod back in my... flashback, right? After they disabled it?”

“Yes.”

“Xe was safely transferred into the prism.”

“Somebody got hurt.”

“Back at the bay, yes. But there are no details here. The meds just labeled the patient life-threatening and left it at that.”

“Understatement.”

“Perhaps. But also better for the Shifter. Better than being thrown into the pulsar at least.”

“True.”

“First thing they did was extract the essence to see how it was altered by whatever tests they were running at that facility. But it didn’t fare well. The cells kept rapidly changing. There was no sustainable result from any of it.”

“Right.”

“So they checked the overlapping substances in all the other patients that came from the facility. Nothing stood out though. They think each species was tested on their own specific shit - Nanos on Nano poison, stuff like that.

“And there was no other Shifter in the batch, so who knows what-?”

“Exactly. Zero chance to check what the triggers were there. Or on how to extract them.”

“The rapid shifting... it’s a sign xe was trying to find a shift that could get rid of the shit doing it. Usually a new shift would get rid of anything that infected the system before.”

“Except it didn’t work. Why wouldn’t it work then?”

“I don’t know. I never heard of it not working.”

“...will be treated as hostile and will be punished by...”
“Right, well—”

“The trigger must be still inside of xyr, it keeps mutating the cells. Xe can’t keep shifting without the ritual to reset and without sustenance…”

“They feed xyr regularly or try to anyways…”

“So what’s the prognosis?”

“With this speed of decay - a total cellular breakdown within a few cycles. The black good is probably the last stage of the decay. With time the matter will lose all continuity…”

“Right…”

“The thing is though and that’s what got all the meds so freaking excited was the reaction when you entered the prism.”

“Because xe reacted?”

“Because of the shifting. Now I’ll give you that it looked all kinds of patchy, the shift I mean, but still.”

“You saw?”

“There’s a video.”

“Perfect. Still. It could have been a fluke only.”

“Could. But wasn’t. Or it won’t be if it will react to you like that again. That’s why they wanted you back.”

“Not entirely though, is it? They want tissue samples to compare the decayed cells with mine.”

[ ...would also like to remind all dwellers, that in case of a lock-down...]

“... yes.”

“I can’t give them that.”

“But—”

“Stiles, that’s not up to negotiation. I can’t. It’s against the rules. Not even Externals can—”

“Rules schmules.”

“Stiles.”

“Derek, look, not to sound insensitive, but—”

“Even if I could. I’m not sure, I can... help. I don’t…”
“Why? Because it’s somebody you know?”

“I did this Stiles. I did this to whoever that is and…”

“So?”

“What?”

“Alright, look. Firstly you didn’t cause any of this, the shits back at the facility did, alright? Secondly, so what? You are like a freaking guilt bag, just fuck it! Fuck guilt. Only nice people with good hearts feel guilt. If you really wanted to be exact here, it was all that fucking psychopath woman.”

“That’s not entirely correct.”

“It is though.”

“I don’t-”

“Alright, well, was I guilty because the snatchers got us?”

“In a way?”

“Rude. But also maybe not the best example, I’ll admit that. But if I had turned off my Nanos and they would have snatched us anyways. Would it-”

“That’s besides the point.”

“Oh, for star’s sake. Look. The baseline is: The fault is never with the victims, okay? It’s not your fault for being kind or naive or in love or anything. It’s those who exploit it who are at fault.”

“I know, but-”

“Well, you better keep repeating it to yourself every cycle so it sticks. Otherwise you will logically know, but never really feel it. Believe me I know what I am talking about. Getting over my mom took… well, long. Still working on that, in fact.”

“Stiles.”

“I know, but-”

“Well, you better keep repeating it to yourself every cycle so it sticks. Otherwise you will logically know, but never really feel it. Believe me I know what I am talking about. Getting over my mom took… well, long. Still working on that, in fact.”

“Stiles.”

“We should stop by the Old Ganymede. It’s not exactly the newest tech, but it’s still functional and it’s what we have.”

“Alright, then. I’ll see you there.”

“Alright, then.”
“I’ll come with you, if you want. If that helps. I mean… I am your secretary or whatever you wanna call it, so… I am not cheap by the way. You’re gonna have to-”

“I’ll take it.”

[...pulsar central… ]

“Good.”

[...healing beyond simple health...]
A/N: If you are into listening to soundtracks while reading I offer you three tracks to the three parts of this chapter:

1 - Lily's Theme by Alexandre Desplat (Harry Potter OST)
2 - Statues by Alexandre Despat (Harry Potter OST)
3 - Spacewalk by Thomas Newman (Passengers OST)

A thanks to @mameeta for inspiring me to add my music selection for the chapter <3
“Ready?” Stiles asked.

They were standing at the base of the bridge he had walked over before. A bit to the side to not block the pathway, but close enough that Derek was confronted with the gravity of the situation.

“No,” he admitted haltingly. It was the truth after all. The talk with Stiles helped to get him here, helped him to overcome the initial worries but now, standing here again, he wasn’t so sure. Logically he knew what he needed to do, but… but.

“No one is ever really ready for anything,” Stiles said.

Derek just pursed his lips, looking over at the huge cylinder. He could see his own reflections. It was a haunting sight.

Stiles’ reflection moved in closed to him.

“Look,” he said. “Melissa should be here any minute now, so if you don’t want to-”

“I do,” he argued. “I do. I have to.”

“You don’t have to, that’s not what I meant with-”

“I want to,” he corrected.

Stiles watched him for a while, studying who knew what on his face. Derek didn’t want to know what he saw in his profile. He was too ashamed to know.

Relief filled him when Stiles finally nodded as if he got his answer and said: “You got this.”

“What exactly do I have?” he wondered just for the sake of filling the silence. A bubble of silence in this noisy, bustling place.

Stiles shrugged. “Good looks?”

An eye roll later: “And that’s helpful how?”

“Sad that you would ask that,” Stiles sighed, looking around the crowd.

“Stiles,” Derek said just out of habit. He was aware that it was a habit of his by then and somehow he didn’t care at that point anymore. It was a habit and habits were comforting. And he needed comfort.

“Just distracting you.” Stiles smiled over at him with a lazy shrug. “Is it working?”

“A bit,” Derek admitted, although he wasn’t sure about it. His eyes were unfocused. He stopped focusing on his own reflection a while ago, just staring ahead mindlessly. Or trying to anyways.

“Well, the-”

“Stiles!” came from their right from a woman hurrying down the spiralling path. She was coming from the homing level no doubt, her curly hair slightly disheveled, but her eyes sharp and keen.
Stiles turned over to greet her and shielded Derek from the view. He didn’t bother moving from behind him.

“Stiles,” she greeted and turned to face him. “And Derek, glad to see you in person.”

Stiles moved out of the way to give them more space. Derek expected her to reach over to shake his hand as it was a human custom, but she didn’t. She just moved her head in an international greeting.

He did the same.

“So, I trust Stiles brought you up to speed?” she asked, beckoning him to follow after her. She didn’t seem to be one to lose time with pleasantries. Derek could appreciate that, but also… he wouldn’t have minded to stand out there for a while longer.

Stiles walked right behind them.

“All the newest info is in the feed anyways,” Melissa continued.

“Yes, I’m updated,” he answered.

She nodded. “Right, so.” She stopped in front of the wall, making the wave of visitors all squeak and growl and huff. Her hands rested on her hips. “First of all, you bring my son into you illegal shit again and I am gonna throw you out into the pulsar with my own bare hands the sooner you can-”

“Melissa…” Stiles started, but Derek just waved his hand to stop him.

“It won’t happen again,” he promised.

She smiled. “Perfect.” And reached her hand over to Derek. He hesitated. Before he could force himself to grab it, Stiles squeezed in between them, grabbed Melissa’s hand and Derek’s forearm and the wall turned into liquid as they passed through.

“I’m starting to regret I chose humans as my main shift,” Derek mumbled, not able to help himself.

“Because we are hella feisty?” Stiles asked, letting go of him.

“Yes.”

Stiles just grinned over at him.”If you didn’t, we might have never met though.”

“True,” Derek said, his breath getting slightly ragged. They were hurrying after Melissa who didn’t bother waiting for them. Now, it wasn’t that Derek was that tired or out of shape so… why the hell was his breathing getting so shallow?

He knew why, but it was better to pretend he didn’t.

He looked around, getting caught in the thousands upon thousands of moving reflections. All of them were staring back at him. Scared.

Your fault, Derek.

Your fault.

Derek.
“Derek,” Stiles said. “It’s that way.” He was pointing up a hallway Melissa was walking up just a few moments ago. She was nowhere to be seen.

“Ah, right, I just-”

“Follow me,” Stiles said, walking ahead. “My spatial orientation is superb. Being in Tech, you get to crawl through all kinds of mazes, so…”

Derek made sure to glue his eyes to the back of Stiles head.

Ir didn’t help his breathing much. The closer they got the more ragged it felt, his heart was doing weird shit and… he was probably still tired, right? He knew he was just lying to himself. Over and over. But what else could he do?

Melissa was waiting for them in front of a next layer to pull them through. This time she stuck with them, opening a conversation with Derek.

“So, Stiles is telling me you are against donating any sort of tissue to help us figure this whole mess out?” she asked. Oh, she was a direct one.

“Yes,” he answered.

“I am obligated to inform you that a donation would increase our chances of finding the pathogen causing this. If it’s a pathogen at all,” she said and Derek’s head was already spinning. Why the hell did Stiles slow down and decide to walk behind them after they passed the last layer? Derek lost his anchor. The reflections were everywhere again.

“I know,” he just said, fixing his eyes on her shoulder. “But, I can’t.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

Derek just nodded.

“Alright,” she answered and Derek tensed. Was she gonna demand that he do it anyways? His mom warned him about this sort of behaviour. She kept saying that Stable ones would seek to exploit their gifts. Maybe it was a bad idea to-

“Recorded,” Melissa said, interrupting his thoughts. “I had to ask before we got to this layer.” She gestured to the wall in front of them. “Labs are the other way around, you know.”

“Ah, I see,” he said awkwardly.

Stiles pushed himself between them again, a small smile on his lips. He took Melissa’s hand and reached his other hand to him. Derek took it after a short hesitation and passed through the last layer dividing him from the sick Shifter.

~0~

His body tingled from the layer of liquid letting him through. He could feel it slide over his hand, the substance barely touching him but feeling rough to his senses. It travelled up his outstretched
arm as he stepped forward. It enveloped him and then disappeared, leaving him out in the open.

Derek blinked a few times and then lifted his eyes… and there xe was. If it was possible to even call xyr as such. It was just a rippling mass of black goo. Reminiscent to a bubbling swamp. It was nothing that could be assigned a shape. A life. And yet. He knew. They all knew.

Derek took a shallow breath in, watching a bubble burst on the surface of the goo, of the shapeless puddle… of his kin.

His fingers tingled. His whole body did.

His chest felt heavy on the right side. So heavy it was causing his whole body to tilt. It was almost overpowering. No, wait. He wasn’t moving. It was the surroundings. They were tilting. So heavy. His body was so heavy. He was gonna-

“Derek, if you wouldn’t mind,” came from his far right. Derek gulped.

“If you wouldn’t mind joining us,” Melissa repeated a bit louder.

Derek tore his eyes from the Shifter lying helplessly on the floor and looked over. Melissa was standing not too far away, a part of a circle of other meds.

She beckoned him closer and when he didn’t move, she simply walked over, the meds following her. Before he could say anything, she took the lead, introducing each of them to him. Needless to say, he didn’t remember any of their names even after she did that..

“So,” she started. “The reason why we wanted you to join us for this session is, well, as you know by now, the integrity of the patient’s cells kept degrading pretty steadily. That was until you came in. We recorded a significant slow down.”

“Not only that,” a med on the right joined in. “We discovered some active cells upon your arrival.”

“We were hoping to replicate that,” another said. “See if we can get a few more readings.”

“Yeah, no,” Stiles joined in from next to him. “Derek ain’t gonna go inside again.”

“That’ssss not what we want,” the Whittemorian med said.

“Just thought I’ll point that out, is all,” Stiles smiled.

Derek looked over the the glob of mass that was the Shifter. He didn’t see much of a difference from the previous state. If anything, it looked even worse than when he first saw it. Saw xyr.

Melissa must have caught up to his thoughts, because the next thing she said was: “Yes, superficially we can barely see any improvement, but the cellular scan shows what we are talking about here.”

She brought up her holo and tapped a few things before the needed readings came on. A 3D model of the glob that was the Shifter jumped out of it. It looked sort of like a thermal scan.

“This is from before,” she said, sliding her finger to some other model. It was all blue, the individual cells glowing angrily. “These are the infected cells. Now, we couldn’t scan through them deep enough, but with how deep we could, we assumed all of the cells have been already infected.” She zoomed in, poking the model. It squeezed in through the outer cell wall and deeper and deeper, revealing layers upon layers of blue cells.
“That changed when you entered the prism,” she explained, sliding back to another model. This one had some shapes to it. The shapes that attacked Derek previously. He pursed his lips, watching the yellow cells emerge from the inside of the blue sea. Melissa once again tapped the cellular wall - this time made out of yellow cells and the scan went in deeper, revealing more yellow.

“The pathogen, if that’s what it is anyways, is moving in on the rest of the healthy cells, there is sadly no doubt about that,” she said. Showing how the blue progressed, slowly devouring the newly emerged yellow. “But at least now we know there are still some healthy cells left. And thus the hope of fixing this whole mess remains.”

“Sssadly, we aren’t able to remove any off the heathly cellsss to compare and maybe extract the patttthogen,” the Whittemorian said with a slight resentment painting his features. “Ifff thisss had been a controlled exxxperiment we might have had the time to do sssso, but-”

“We’ve been through that,” a different med said. “No need to cry over the cracked egg. Important is what we are going to do now.”

“I agree,” another said. “The cells are still disintegrating. Granted much slower now, but that might be just our own subjective feeling since we can not see inside properly.”

“We tried to extract the pathogen from the sick cells,” the first med said, turning to him. “But even after many tests it remained unclear which components are part of the Shifter cell and which are the pathogen. It was so deeply fused-”

“Comparing with healthy cells would help us-”

“Probably,” Melissa said. “It would probably help us. It might not actually help us figure out how to separate the pathogen from the healthy cells. From what we saw, the pathogen actually gets inside the core. Besides,” she said tapping her holo to upload a file into the feed. “Derek refused to donate.”

The Whittemorian hissed.

“Well, it’s nothing unusual,” one med said, silencing the Whittemorian with a wave of his hand. “Ignore my colleague please, Whittemorians have a very particular view on these things as you probably know..”

“A very correct one, you mean,” the Whittemorian hissed. “But of coursse I reesspect the wissssshes of my patttiensss.”

“So,” Stiles jumped in. “So extracting anything with the help of Derek’s healthy cells is a no-go. And as you said you were unable to differentiate the pathogen from the actual cell parts, so-”

“Indeed,” Melissa said, nodding.

“Now, I wonder,” Stiles continued. “I wonder… according to what Derek said, shifting helps renewing the cells.”

“Does it now?” Melissa asked. She turned over to Derek. “You can shift out of pathogens?”

“Uhh, well I can,” he said slowly. “Unless I’d want to shift keeping the… uuh pathogen. But basically resetting is no problem if the conditions are right.”

“Any pattthogen?” The Whittemorian asked.
“I can’t be sure,” Derek admitted.

“How does that work anyways?” some other med asked.

Derek shrugged. “I just... force my cells to change.”

“Yes, but what’s the action behind that?” he continued on. “How does it work on a biological
level? Can we trigger it somehow artificially?”

Derek pursed his lips. “I’m not really sure. I just.” He shrugged again. “Make it happen.”

“And I sssuposse that’sss alssso out of limitsss to experiment with?” the Whittemorian asked,
revealing his teeth. “It would be helpffful to-”

“Yes,” Derek answered. “I can’t give up any of the Shifter secrets… by all means I shouldn’t be
even talking to you. I wasn’t… I probably shouldn't even be here. I wouldn’t be if-” He glanced
over at Stiles.

“Right,” Melissa said, lifting her hands in a placating gesture. “Right, I think we need to step back
a bit.” She turned to the Whittemorian. “Xassiss, please reign your personal opinions on genetic
research, alright?” She then looked back at Derek. “So, the Shifter can potentially shift out of the
unhealthy cells.”

“Yes.”

“Obviously couldn’t,” some med said. “Xe gave up on switching a while ago. Obviously the
pathogen is too strong to shift out of.”

Was it though? Derek never heard of something a Shifter couldn’t shift out of.

He looked over at the blob of black mass.

*Why aren’t you shifting?*

He thought back to the flashbacks Stiles showed him. Thought back to the imprecise, chaotic
shifting. To the weird mash-up shifts.

“Ifff we knew howw-”

“I think,” Derek said, wanting to interrupt the Whittemorian. “I think...”

Melissa looked over at him expectantly. Derek didn’t want to say it.

He didn’t want to admit it.

Neither to himself, nor to his audience.

He couldn’t.

He needed to though.

“It could be xe sustained enough trauma to not be able to shift out,” he admitted slowly. “Or it
could be someone who doesn’t know how to break through. Or somebody not experienced
enough..”

“We assumed the shifting stopped because the cells were far too gone,” Melissa noted, nodding to
herself. “Because the deterioration was too severe.”

“Xe shifted though when given a trigger,” another med added.

“Indeed,” Melissa slid her finger back and forth on, repeatedly changing the model. “We were wrong all along. It wasn’t that the trigger revealed a bunch of healthy cells that were hiding inside. The sick cells… the Shifter was able to shift the sick cells into healthy ones. Some of them anyways.”

“Yes, that would explain why we didn’t find any healthy cells before,” a med said, reaching over to slide the model back to the one with yellow cells. “And why we can’t see them anymore. And why it seemed like the progression slowed down.”

“Yes,” another joined in. “The trigger created a bunch of healthy cells and the pathogen had to first swallow those and then it could progress on dissolving the cells again.”

“Yes,” another added in. “The pathogen could potentially be eliminated if the Shifter fully shifts, couldn’t it? If we go with this theory anyways. And if we manage to trigger it before the pathogen dissolves all of them.”

They all looked over at Derek. He could feel their eyes on him, but his own eyes were busy swallowing the Shifter mass behind the prism walls. A glob of the whole mass fell off, splattering on the floor where it dissolved like a puddle of water on a hot day.

“I don’t know how to make xe shift all the way,” he admitted, whispering the words. “I’ve never-”

He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to do this. His dad was the teacher, not him. How do you teach shifting? To a shapeless mass on top of all of the pathogen standing in the way? Everybody does it slightly different, you have to feel it inside, you have to train and train and train until you know it down to a single cell… you must be able to-

“Ssso we have to come up with a way to trigger sssshifting in the patttient,” the Whittemorian summarized. “Soomething we are not allowed to tessst the only other Sssshifter we have available for.”

Derek pursed his lips.

“Xassiss,” Melissa said warningly.

“The only trigger we now is Derek here going inside-”

“No,” Stiles said, shaking his head. “We are not doing this, it’s highly unmedical anyways, isn’t it?”

Melissa nodded. Before she could confirm it verbally too, one of the meds stepped forward though. “It definitely is, but this is a very special case.”

“We are not sending Derek in again, just so you can test the theory,” Stiles argued. “He got hurt last time.”

“And yet here he ssstandsss all fffine,” the Whittemorian hissed.

“So?” Stiles argued. “I don’t walk around lobbying for you to cut of your tail fr science. I mean, it will just grow back again, won’t it, so-”
“Our geneticsss isss widely accessssible—”

“Okay, enough,” Melissa ordered, putting her hands on her hips. “Of course we won’t be sending Derek in again if there is a potential danger to his health.”

“There isn’t though,” Derek objected.

A medic on Stiles’ right threw his two left arms up in a universal gesture for disagreement. “We aren’t talking about your physical health here, young one.”

“I can take it,” Derek said stubbornly. “Not that young either.”

Before he could insist with a bit more urgency, a different medic spoke up. “Why don’t we try a solid hologram? Now, I know that’s a very old-school technology, but it might serve the purpose.”

Melissa turned to Derek. “Does a hologram go against your beliefs?”

Derek pursed his lips. “It would, but I guess I already broke that back at the Moon so…”

“What moon?” a medic asked.

“Earth, they snatched us up to sell us,” Stiles explained. “Had a huge-ass scanner. Sold me to a research facility. The illegal kind I might add.”

All of the medics scoffed in their own way.

“Right, all in for the hologram?” Melissa asked and got an all-round agreement. She turned back to them. “I will ask our Nano team to whip up something, but it might take a while. Why don’t you go relax a bit and I will ring you up once the rig is ready?”

~o~

“I’m not really sure I can put any of it into words,” Stiles said after Melissa walked them out of the cylinder.

“Then don’t,” Derek retorted, not in the mood for more words.

“Right, well,” Stiles started, probably gearing up to say something deep and meaningful that should make Derek feel better, but if truth be told, he didn’t really want to hear it. Really not. Really. Just.

And it would seem the universe was on his side this time (surprisingly), because Stiles got interrupted by an insisted beep of his bracelet. “Ah.”

Derek looked over. “What’s that?”

“Eh, I was gonna go for the pulsar outing,” Stiles explained, pushing his finger against the bracelet to snooze the beeping. “With Scott. They kept running the ad on loop ever since I got here and well, this was supposed to be my vacation, so I figured…”

Derek remembered it coming on a few times while they were watching their show back at the Oxygen forest. “Ah, right,” he said, rather lamely. “Well, have fun.”
“Scott’s grounded.”

“What?” Derek asked, confused.

“Scott’s grounded” Stiles repeated. Lowering his hands. He looked back at Derek as he continued the explanation: “Confined to his living quarters. Melissa grounded him for the… favor I asked, so... he can’t go.”

“Ah,” Derek managed. Very eloquent.

Stiles bounced on the soles of his feet, watching him for a while and then said: “I guess I’ll just go by myself.”

Derek just shrugged, unsure what to do with that information.

Stiles kept looking at him as if he was waiting for something.

“Yeah, I mean,” he said. “They’re booked out for the next few cycles so if I won’t go now, I might never get there and it’s… quite the sight I hear.”

“Then you should go,” Derek agreed.

Stiles bounced again, looking down at his feet. “You know, it…” And then stopped, his eyes coming up to scan the crowds around them.

Derek frowned, looking around too. “What?” he asked when he didn’t find anything special.

“Ah, nevermind,” Stiles said, shrugging. He turned away from Derek. Still lingering. “Well… I really should go now.”

“Yes, you should,” Derek agreed again.

“So, I’ll be going then,”

“Alright.”

“Right.”

Yet there he was still, rooted at the spot. “Stiles, you’re not going,” Derek noted. Ridiculously enough, he hadn’t moved away himself. By all means, he should have left Stiles to his own devices right away. He should have. And yet.

*Ah, it’s that thing again, isn’t it?*

*The thing I keep evading.*

He should probably just go away. But instead he heard himself saying: “You really don’t have anybody to go with.”

Stiles shrugged. “That’s fine.” He shrugged again “I can go by myself. It’s fine, the slot can just -”

“Yes, but… you already paid for it,” Derek said, wondering where he was going with this.

“Oh, I didn’t,” Stiles answered, bringing up his holo to show him the outing feed. He moved in closer so Derek could look at it too. “It’s not a paid thing, see? Anybody can… in fact, maybe if I let them know now and they will find some random-” He tapped at the chat window and started to
“Or...” Derek started. And then stopped again.

“Huh?” Stiles asked, busy typing.

“I... I mean, it looks interesting,” he stumbled out. Oh stars.

“It definitely will be,” Stiles agreed.

He should just drop this altogether, he knew. This was not something he’d ever wanted. Not something he was willing to go into. Not something he wanted to encourage himself to do. He was here to just heal the Shifter and then...

And then...

And then...

“I could go,” he said, his words so contradictory to his rational mind it was getting silly.

Stiles’ finger hovered over the chat window. He deleted the message he was about to send of and then put his hands down. “Sure,” he answered. “If you want.” He shrugged. “Sure.”

“Sure... sure, why not,” Derek’s mouth said, imitating Stiles’ nonchalant tone, but he was everything but nonchalant at that moment.

“Alright well, okay, cool, let’s go then,” Stiles said beckoning him to follow.

And he did.

Just this once.

This once only.

He just needed a breather and this seemed like the perfect opportunity.

~o~

“Oh boy,” Stiles wheezed as they were gently pushed out of the bridge leading out into the space. They were still tethered to it by a rope so they wouldn’t be drifting out behind the shielded area, but it was still slightly unnerving. For Stiles apparently.

“Oh fuck,” he said, his eyes closed tightly.

Derek turned away from the bright pulsating energy before he could even enjoy any of it through the reinforced visor. It really was a sight to be behold... if Stiles hadn’t been groaning like a dying man right behind him.

“Oh stars,” there he went again. “I think, I’m gonna be sick,”

“What, why? What?”
Stiles bent over in his spacesuit, the motion sending him on a slow spiralling path. The rope was clench tightly between his fingers. He seemed to scared to let go of it entirely, although the rope was tested right in front of their eyes just a few moment ago. There was no way it would-

“Now is probably too late to say I am not very good with weightlessness?” he muttered.

Derek threw his arms out in the open. “Stiles, you live in space,” he noted incredulously. “How can you even-?”

“Yes and I also know how to install artificial gravity to any vessel,” Stiles said, retching into their com link.

Derek scowled his face in disgust. “Should we go back?”

“No no,” Stiles objected without looking up. “I can do this.”

“Can you not throw up into your spacesuit?” Derek asked, his voice laced with disbelief. He grabbed his reel and moved a bit closer to Stiles. He pulled at his rope and brought him back to his eyes level.

“It’s fine,” Stiles choked out, blinking over at him through the reinforced visor.

He could see his face a bit more clearly at this distance. “You are pretty much green. I think-”

“You know what would help?” Stiles said suddenly.

“What?” Derek asked.

“Evening the odds a bit,” he said, his voice hoarse. “It seems unfair you are doing this well in outer space.”

Derek shrugged. Though it was a bit of a mundane gesture given the spacesuit didn’t broadcast such small gestures well enough. Being all sturdy and what not. “I can just shift out of the organs causing dizziness.”

Stiles’ eyes flicked back to him. “What?”

“Yes, it’s what I do when going through the vortex,” Derek admitted.

“You kidding me?”

“No, I just shift out and I can stay awake when-”

“What.”

“Yes, I-”

“You stay awake in the vortex?”

“Yes, I mean… it’s not like I trust-”

“Alright, alright,” Stiles waved his hand to stop him from talking and then slapped it over his visor. “I am bookmarking this conversation for now and will ask you like a million questions later when I don’t feel like projectileing.”

“Right.”
“Ugh,” was the only answer he got.

“I also don’t really need a spacesuit,” he said, figuring the distraction of talking helped Stiles. A bit anyways. He wasn’t retching into his com anymore, so-

“Are you kidding me?” Stiled asked, his hand sliding down his visor so he could glare at him from between his fingers.

Derek nodded. “I got a shift for a race that can surviv-”

“Okay enough, jeez,” Stiles scoffed, rolling his eyes. “This is so unfair.”

“Maybe you just need an anchor,” Derek tried.

“No,” Stiles said, pointing over at him. “What I need is for you to feel just as bad, so you need to do something that makes you super uncomfortable too.”

“I don’t think that’s-”

“Oh yes, that’s how it works,” Stiles argued. “We either suffer together or we don’t suffer at all. Those are the rules of space equality.”

Derek sighed and concluded you win some and you lose some and this was a discussion he was willing to lose. Or at least pretend to lose for the sake of making Stiles feel better. “Okay, what is it?”

Stiles grinned, a tad of color returning back to his face. “Well-”

“I already don’t like the sound of that.”

“Well,” Stiles spoke up louder, the com crackling. “You could hold my hand.”

Derek stared.

And then he stared a bit more. The only sound coming to him was the gentle clicketting of the spacesuit’s life support for a long moment and then Stiles’ voice interrupted it again: “Since I mean, you are so uncomfortable with touches and I am uncomfortable with weightlessness. We will be in the same state on uncomfortability or whatever.”

“That’s not really…” he started to say, but stopped himself before he could admit anything aloud.

Stiles blinked over at him a few times and then his lips pulled out into a flat sort-of smile. He laughed - a weird sort of sound. “Just kidd-“

Just this once.

Derek pulled him closer by the rope and grabbed his hand. He held it tightly as he turned around and led them further out into space. Closer towards the pulsar.

The reel clicked into a lockdown to stabilize them automatically once they were far enough.

Derek fixed his eyes on the spinning pulsating star in front of them, watching the waves of light rush towards them at horrendous speed.

Stiles came to an almost stop next to him. Derek could feel his eyes on him, but he just kept staring into the depths of the pulsar. And holding his hand. Holding it in his own.
The pulsar… it seemed to be spinning faster. Each of the flashes making Derek’s heart louder and louder as if it was responding to its call. Its warmth seemed to envelop him despite of the shield preventing any of that. And the clackety of the life support filled his head with its own echoes. He was feeling weightless… as one did in space. But this time, there was something slightly different about it. Something he was sure he couldn’t get rid via shifting.

Stiles squeezed his hand, the motion barely noticeable through the spacesuit.

And yet so…

“This is neat,” his voice cracked through the com.

“Yeah,” Derek agreed.

It really was.

Just this once he let it be.

Just this once.
A/N:
A huge TRIGGER WARNING on this one. We will be dealing with the aftermath of Kate in a very raw and direct way. That and much more! So please proceed with caution. If there is anything specific you wanna know before reading the chapter, chat me up down below.

No picture yet. I've made a few sketches, but nothing seemed appropriate... any ideas?
EDIT: Done :)

__________
“That was awesome!” Stiles whooped as they walked down the spiraling path.

Derek kept his eyes on passerby. Why were there so many of them even with the night cycle fairly in progress? It irritated him. The masses of people around. He wished for the solitude of his cabin.

“It was awesome, wasn’t it?” Stiles asked, grinning over at him as he bounced within each step he took.

“You would have actually enjoyed it more if you didn’t have your eyes closed for the most of it,” he fired back.

Stiles shrugged. “We can’t all be perfectly suited for each and every environment now, can we?”

Derek just shook his head, watching the horde of Vulgulars pass a bit too close for comfort. “Still can’t believe you are so bad with weightlessness. What kind of a—”

“Ugh, savage!” Stiles complained. “Maybe I was just pretending. To… I dunno, hold you hand? It was my evil plan all along. You don’t know!”

Derek kept his eyes pasted on the path enfolding in front of them. Very resolutely. “Yes, funny,” he said after the silence stretched out for long enough.

Stiles kept his mouth shut and Derek sneaked a glance at him, nervousness overpowering his irritation. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments before Derek tore his away and returned to watching everything and anything else.

“I’ve held your hand before,” he said somewhat defensively. It wasn’t as if he knew what he was defending himself against though. Just a reflex maybe?

“For medical purposes,” he heard Stiles say.

“Yes, well.” He gulped. “It was necessary.”

“Yeah,” Stiles sighed. He stopped on the spot and slid his hands into the pockets on his joggers.

Derek’s own step faltered a bit later down the path. He looked over. More nervous than before.

His eyes must have spoken on their own because Stiles just nodded as if he got something Derek didn’t even know he was broadcasting. “I should probably go,” Stiles said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Catch some sleep and such.”

“Right,” Derek breathed. Maybe in relief even.

“You might as well do the same,” Stiles said, his pocket releasing one of his hands for gesturing. “They will beep us when the time comes.”

He knew as much. “Yes.”

Stiles took a step back and then somehow naturally gravitated right back to his previous place. “You won’t really be sleeping tonight, will you?”

“No, probably not,” Derek admitted. “But you should.”

Stiles snorted, shaking his head. “I’m staying with Scott,” he shared. “He can’t sleep without his nature sounds. It weirdly just keeps me up most of the time.”
“Ah.”


“I see.” Lovely, another one of his eloquent answers. “The forest was nice,” he added for the lack of anything better to say. Which… unrelated much?

Stars … why was he even trying to keep this conversation going? He was just growing more and more annoyed with the surrounding masses. Especially standing on one spot like this… it made him feel open, somehow vulnerable. The crowds had nothing to do with it really, did they?

“Well, it was nice, up until you started spouting nonsense, which-”

Derek scoffed. “Well, I couldn’t have possibly yelled _look out snatchers_ , now could I? I wanted us to be actually conscious for as long as possible.”

Stiles rolled his eyes and started to walk down the path again. “It’s awkward to stand here, I’ll walk you to your place.”

Derek’s legs moved to stay in step with him before he could stop them.

“Back to the point though,” Stiles continued. “I think we totally need like a safeword for these kind of situations.”

“I don’t think we will ever-”

“We definitely need one, Derek,” Stiles pushed.

He sighed. “Like what?”

Stiles pressed his fingers against his lips, lost in thought. Derek’s eyes lingered until he said: “Jellybean.” Then they simply attempted to roll out of his skull.

“Jelly- Stiles, are you just making up words to mess with me?” Derek wondered, shaking his head in disbelief.

“What? No!” Stiles laughed. “Jellybean is like a legit word, yanno.”

Derek folded his arms over his chest and glared over at him. (Now, he wasn’t really glaring, mind you, but it might have looked like glaring to an untrained eye.) “I will not be yelling jellybean when there’s danger.”

“Why not?” Stiles teased, smiling over at him.

“Because it’s a ridiculous word.”

“It’s not.”

“It is.”

“No way.”

“Jellybean, Stiles, _jellybean_ .”

“What about it?”
“Seriously?”
“Yes, it’s a perfectly-”
“Why are we even-”
Alright, alright,” he placated. “What do you propose then?”
Derek shrugged. “Something more sensible. Like,” he thought back to whatever codes he and Peter were using over the long cycles on the run, but dismissed them before they could come out of his mouth. Instead he chose to say: “Like code red or-”
“Code red?” Stiles deadpanned, lifting his eyebrows in Derek’s general direction.
“I guess?” Derek… guessed, which made Stiles throw his hands in the air in mock frustration. “Could you be any more obvious? Code red, for the love of-... why don’t you just run around yelling danger! Danger!”
“I could.”
Stiles just stared at him unimpressed. It was an answer enough.
“In the Shifter lingo,” he explained. “It’s not like anybody would understand that. Except for other Shifters, I guess.” Derek shrugged. “So-”
“Well, how do you say danger in your lingo then?” Stiles asked.
Derek suddenly realized that the conversation swerved dangerously close to home. And that… wasn’t something he would seek out on a regular basis.
“Couldn’t be possibly better than jellybean,” Stiles muttered, unaware.
Derek pursed his lips. “Doesn’t matter,” he said, trying to evade the topic. Albeit a tad too late. An excuse. “Humans don’t have vocal cords for that.” Right.
“Can’t hurt to try,” Stiles said, shrugging. “Unless it would?”
“Not really,” Derek admitted and left it at that. Hoping for the conversation to smother down by itself.
Stiles didn’t get the clue though. “Well?”
Derek looked away.
“You’re just making me more curious now,” Stiles said, poking him in the biceps. Derek swatter at his hand, flashing his teeth.
“Well?” Stiles asked.
Derek sighed, watched a few medics pass them on the way to the cylinder and then opened his mouth to rush out a word never used by it before. “Wah’hool.”
Stiles was quiet.
“Wah’h-...wah’ hool,” Derek repeated, the word sounding strange to his human throat. “It sounds weird like this.” He looked over at Stiles, his cheeks prickling uncomfortably. “Sounds weird with
these vocal cords, ours are slightly different. Quite different.”

Their eyes met. Derek felt his lips purse apologetically. Which was a bit ridiculous, but well… he couldn’t have helped it even if he tried.

Stiles gave him the tiniest of smiles. “It sounded pretty cool, actually… waahool?”

“Wah’ hool ,” Derek repeated, the word coming out a bit more swiftly this time. “You have to press on the last part.”


Derek’s lips twitched slightly. He had to look away before he could crack a smile.

“Any other useful phrases I should know about?” Stiles asked.

“Forget it,” Derek said. “You just want to make fun of me.”

“I wish,” Stiles said. “Still owe you for that weightlessness rant earlier. It sadly sounded way too cool to make fun of. Well maybe next time.”

Derek looked down on the floor, carefully avoiding a tiny droid boosting up between his feet. “It’s nothing special really… in the vast sea of languages. It’s rather a simple one.”

Stiles hummed under his breath, nodding along a few times. “Which one sounds the best to you?”

Ah , a stray thought emerged at the back of his mind, your song . “I have no preference, ” he said aloud. His eyes slid back to Stiles, up his body, up the instrument composing the ever-present song. It was humming to him now too, making him slightly less anxious about the whole hassle around them. Literally and metaphorically.

Stiles grinned. “People say hearing a Sonriar talk is the most orgasmic experience when it comes to lingos.”

Derek almost rolled his eyes, but managed to just shrug. “Never heard it really. Nor got to learn it for that matter. You’d need four split tongues to even st-”

“Maybe that’s why it’s so orgasmic.”

“Stiles.”

“Just saying,” he sing-songed, the melody resonating with his internal song. “Anyhow, speaking of simple lingos, how about Nano? One doesn’t even need vocal cords. Or tongues for that matter, which is rather a shame if you ask me.”

Derek chose to ignore the lewd comment this time and let his linguistic fascinations take over the reigns. “How does it work then?” he asked, waving his fingers around. “The patterns.”

Stiles watched his fingers wiggle around, scrunching his face in distaste. “You just insulted my mother, you jerk.”

“What?” Derek yelped, balling his fingers into a fist. “I didn’t.”

“Ha, just messing with ya!” That got him a scowl. And actual one this time. Which didn’t seem to bother Stiles at all. He just shot him a cheeky grin and then went ahead explaining: “The patterns, that’s just one layer out of three. We got the patterns.” He wiggled his fingers Derek’s way. “The
“sharing.” He touched his temple. “And the resonance.”

“Resonance?”

Stiles nodded. “You heard it when we first met, remember? The humming?”

“Your song, yes.”

“Yes.” There was a pause as he thought about it. “Well no. Not a song per se. That’s being rather romantic about it, I guess. Which uh… thank you? But it’s just communication.” He lifted his forefingers bringing them together. “Nanos relaying stuff to each other? Cells communicate via chemicals, Nanos via resonance. Well, I call it resonance. There’s probably an actual SLA term for it which I don’t really know.”

Derek just shrugged at that. He might look it up once he comes back to his cabin. If he’ll remember that was. Which, he probably will because the door of his cabin was just within his reach now.

He stopped and looked over at Stiles.

“Ah, your place?” he asked, studying his door. Derek just nodded, leaning against it.

Stiles slid his hands back in his pockets and smiled. “Well, thanks for coming with me to that outing thing. It was-”

“Awesome, yea,” Derek finished, thinking back at the throbbing pulsar resonating within him. The echo of the feeling returned as he watched Stiles linger. Again. It would seem all they did lately was linger awkwardly.

“Thanks for taking me,” Derek said to break the awkwardness up a bit.

Stiles nodded, his smile widening. “Sure, anytime.”

Without nothing else to say, the silence tiptoed around them, walking faster and faster, until it created a sort of tornado around them, swallowing the sounds of tittering masses, changing the pressure in the air. It was a weird metaphor, possibly, but Derek could feel the pressure against his ribcage quite explicitly.

It only increased when Stiles moved in a bit closer. Probably just to avoid a Whittemorian walking by way too closely. But still.

Derek watched its tail by the force of habit and when his eyes returned to Stiles, he was much closer than before.

“So I guess…,” Stiles muttered, jerking his head in the direction of the upper levels of the station. “I’ll…”

He didn't finish though. Instead he gave Derek a sheepish smile and slowly lifted his hand up to slide his fingers over his shoulder and rest them gently at the base of his neck.

Derek was suddenly very fascinated by Stiles’ elbow. So much that he was unable to tear his eyes away. To lift them up to see what Stiles’ face was doing.

He swallowed and the fingers twitched against his skin, pressing into it. And as if that was some sort of a hidden override button, his heart initiated an unusual sequence. A sequence he hasn’t experienced in a very long time. It beat much stronger, much louder, filling him up with heat and...
Ah, since Kate...

The first time she touched him intimately, it was somehow similar to this, wasn’t it?

Now you stay right there, she had whispered, her fingers sliding down his neck, much rougher than these, all nails, but the motion was oh-so-similar. You stay right there and show me how much you love me. Show me. And make it a good one.

The warmth that had pooled all the way down at that time was so fundamentally different from what he was feeling now. A mixture of eagerness to please her and the utter arousal as she revealed more and more of her bare skin to his eyes… it flooded his mind… and his...

Look at you. Like a bitch on heat, she had teased.

Derek jerked back from under Stiles’ touch, his chest frozen cold within a heartbeat.

“Ah,” he said, his mind such a mess he wasn’t able to bring out anything more than that.

Stiles blinked.

And then let his hand fall down to his side.

Derek watched his lips stretch out in a smile. “You just had a…” he said hesitantly, gesturing at his own neck. “…stuck from the…” He shrugged.

Derek lifted his hand to pry at the skin. The ghost of her touch still there.

“It’s fine now,” Stiles said awkwardly and flashed another one of those smiles. “Totally saved your life again. It might have grown into a fungus or something.”

Derek just nodded wordlessly. He wasn’t sure what to say. He didn’t even manage to open his mouth to try and maybe explain… he had never really talked about Kate in any sort of detail with anybody. He rarely ever let himself think about it, let alone push it further than that. Peter wasn’t an exception.

And… he was pretty much freaking out at that point. And so trying to conceal as much of it as possible, he just stood there, silently.

“I’d better get going,” Stiles announced. And with that he turned away and walked up the spiraling path. He didn’t look back at all. Derek would know. He watched his bent back for a long time through the gaps in the crowd. Up until he disappeared at the far end of the spiral.

Just this once, he had said.

Just this one was enough to burn you to ashes before, remember?

~o~

The door slid closed behind him, cutting off all the sounds with a solid and resolute thud. It was just him and his thoughts now. All alone in the small cabin. Except, Kate was there with him, she always was in a way, lurking at the back of his mind and sometimes, when the right trigger came his way, she moved up closer.
He tried to push her back into his pool of ignorance by focusing on something else. He took a deep breath in, smelling the sterility of the room, his own sweat and for the most part… a huge chunk of panic. He stood there in the middle of the cabin soaking in it. The breathing wasn’t really helping. It was just reminding him of how much he was freaking out.

He pressed his fingers against the side of his neck, still feeling the touch.

_Fuck off,_ he thought rather desperately.

It’s been a while since he had encountered such a strong trigger and he really wanted to avoid it growing into an massive and ugly flashback.

_Fuck off,_ he repeated, feeling the ghost of her touch. But her hands were on him, caressing his neck with her long pointy fingers. He could feel her press against him, could feel her whole body press up against his, teasing him.

_Enough,_ he ordered.

He looked around the room. Concentrating on something else sometimes helped. His eyes registered the bed he never slept in, the dry shower he had yet to use, the baggies of food Stiles left behind for him...

Her fingers lingered still, squeezing his neck in warning.

He sank down to the floor, leaning against the bed. His breathing was getting more and more shallow. He couldn’t stop this. He never could before. _No. Not now. Not again._

“And when the stars explode,” he rasped, trying to ground himself, “and fill the skies with the light of a thousand fires.”

_I’m here. Here. Not there. Stay here._ It wasn’t just the sensations anymore, he could actually smell her around him.

“It shall not blind us,” he bit out, grabbing one of the baggies on the floor. He stuffed his nose inside of it breathing in. He couldn’t smell any of it, her stench around him was too overpowering. _Oh stars_ … he threw the baggie away, choking.

“For we will see it for what it really is,” he pushed out, trying to ignore her whispering voice. It was spinning a very tight net of shame, disgust and arousal all around him, pulling him back into the past. It _was_ the past. It wasn’t _now_. _This wasn’t happening now._

“We will see the darkness behind it and our mind will be-”

_What a good puppy,_ she laughed, _show me._

“My mind will-”

_Show me._

“She’s-”

_Come on, don’t be so shy._

Derek choked out a pained exhale, pressing his hand against his growing erection. _No_. He no longer saw the ceiling of his cabin, he was back there, staring right into her cold eyes and her ripe naked breasts filled him with immense need.
No touching, she ordered. You may only touch yourself. Show me how you do it. Show me.

He was so close to being lost.

That’s right.

Lost in his younger self.

Lost in his mistakes.

In his remorse.

As so many times before.

He didn’t want to.

He didn’t want this anymore.

He hated this.

He hated this so much.

He wanted to be elsewhere.

He wanted to live.

He wanted to...

You can only love me, puppy.

No.

No.

Derek clenched his teeth. “I’ll show you a fucking dog!” he barked out, reaching out into the depths of his mind and yanking it all out - all the fur, the fangs, all of it. Now, it was never a good idea to shift with a messy mind and it never ever worked for him before. He usually just couldn’t push through strongly enough.

But this time he could.

And it hurt like a mother-fucker.

His bones were the first ones to change, elongating over the limits of his human body. They tore out through his muscles and his flesh like a set of blazing rods. And yet he rejoiced because the sprays of blood didn’t hit the forest moss, but the floor of his cabin.

His jaw dislocated in a weird angle and then reset back with a loud snap and so did most of his joints, hinging and unhinging like the valves of an engine. And still he smiled his shapeless smile, because her voice quieted.

His body flopped down on the floor and the mass of muscles grew all into a heavy load on his back and he could barely breathe as his lungs imploded. And yet he heaved in laughter because her hands retracted.

She hated his Shifter form and he was never ever allowed to show it to her. He was only allowed to
retain the illusion of a pristine human boy.

“Fuck you,” he howled, lying on the floor fully shifted and fully exhausted. He was fucking laughing. Laughing but actually crying.

As a matter of fact, he was probably just crying...

~o~

Derek was still lying there when his bracelet started beeping. He lifted his wrist, staring at the light peeking through his fur with a weird sort of detachment.

Without giving it too much thought, he pushed himself up to his feet and shifted back to a human. His overalls slid down over his knees and pooled down around his feet. Well, what was left of them anyways. He’d destroyed them when he shifted before.

Sighing, he pulled up the small holo next to the door and requested a clean up droid. Then jumped into the dry shower and used the instant mode to scourge all the dried blood off his skin within a few blasts. His skin prickled uncomfortably, but this was probably the first time he barely cared..

After pulling on some spare clothes he had lying around, he exited the cabin and headed for the right part of the cylinder. The bustling crowds all around him didn’t even make him blink. Hesitation broke through his lethargy only when he saw Stiles leaning against the railing, his head buried in his folded arms.

Derek pursed his lips and moved closer through the waves of people. And then… he just stood right next to Stiles’ unmoving form for a few long heartbeats. He wasn’t sure how to announce his arrival. Not after what had happened last time.

“Ah, dude,” Stiles breathed as he finally noticed him. He rubbed at his left eye and then yawned. “So much for sleeping, eh?”

“I wouldn’t have slept anyways,” Derek said, glad for the conversation starter.

Stiles was still looking around sleepily. Clarity returned to his eyes only once he got to take a better look at Derek. He seemed to hesitate for a bit, but then pushed through with a question. “You okay?”

Derek just sighed. At this point he didn’t even know what being okay meant.

“I’m pretty much a mess most of the time,” he admitted sourly. “If you haven’t noticed yet.”

Stiles lips twitched. “Well, good to not be alone in that.”

Derek wasn’t well enough to actually smile, but he could feel his face relax a tad. It felt good to lose the frown on his face for a bit.

A flash of light coming from the cylinder pulled on his attention and he moved his head to watch a small droid. It approached them on a steady trajectory, it’s belly flashing a bright yellow.

“Ah, Melissa’s sent a droid,” Stiles exhaled. He reached over his hand to the flashing belly and the droid moved even closer, swallowing it whole up to his wrist. When he pulled it back out, the belly
stretched out into sort of glove-like layer of yellow material, that stuck to Stiles’ hand.

“Let’s go then,” he beckoned him.

The droid flew back inside as Derek followed Stiles through the narrow bridge.

At the end of it, right in front of the reflective wall, Stiles hesitated.

Derek looked over at his reflection and saw him pull at his lip, his gloved fingers already dipping into the wall. He didn’t give him the time to question anything. Just reached out and grabbed Stiles’ shoulder.

The nod he got in return was small and barely noticeable, but the doubt in Stiles’ face was gone, so he considered it a win.

They passed through without a problem, the glove serving as some sort of a key. Or a temporary permission to get to their designated prism, Derek guessed.

“This way,” Stiles said guiding him through the maze composed of stacked and rowed prisms with such ease Derek felt awed.

“How do you know?” he asked.

Stiles snorted. “We’ve been here before?”

“Yes, but,” Derek didn’t dare to pull his eyes away from him. He was afraid to get lost in all of the reflections again.

Stiles just shrugged like it was no big deal and led him all the way without as much as a hesitation in his quick steps.

~o~

Melissa ushered Derek to the Nano medic, who was standing at the far end on the chamber surrounding the prism. If it could be called an end with is being a circular anyways. Derek wasn’t really in the right mind to argue semantics.

The Shifter was nothing else than a mere unmoving puddle of goo and he couldn’t help feeling like all this effort might be for nought. And even so he let the Nano connect him to the projector so that they could start the treatment. If he could do anything to help… to help even just a little...

The helmet around the Nano’s head glowed with a whirl of Nanos and the reproductor at the front crackled. “No worry, no pain,” said the generated voice.

“Xe actually said, there is no need to worry because the projector does not transfer any sensations, but it might feel slightly uncomfortable due to the outdated connectors,” Stiles said from next to him as he watched the Nanos move under the see-through helmet. “Xe also asked if we are for the full connection or just partial. Fuck these translators seriously.”

He moved his fingers in answer and then turned over to Melissa. “I think the full is a bad idea.”

She ignored Stiles and turned to him instead. “Do you want to be fully connected?”
“I can,” he said as the Nano took off a bracelet and threw it up in the air. It floated up above him, grew into a big loop and then divided into a dozen of thin ones, each as wide as far he could reach.

“It will feel as if you are really there,” Melissa warned, her eyes squinted as she watched his face. “Do you think you can handle it?”

“Yes,” he said just as Stiles spoke up as well: “Is it really necessary? My friend here says the projection will be instantaneous and alright, it might be a bit awkward to control from here since Derek will be pretty much staring at his own back, but that’s all we need right? We don’t need him to actually feel like being inside. This isn’t about user’s experience.” He waved his fingers at the Nano and then said. “No offense to my friend here of course. Nanos have a weird knack for making everything as good as possible, I respect that, just-”

“Well, it’s up to Derek,” Melissa interrupted. “Whatever makes him comfortable.”

Derek just shrugged. “I’m fine with it.”

“Well, you’re clearly a masochist, so I wouldn’t really-”

“I’ll be fine, Stiles,” Derek said tiredly. He actually did think he’ll be fine this time. After the episode with Kate, he really doubted he had any more capacity in his mind to freak out again.

“But-”

The reproductor on the Nano helmet crackled again and the voice said: “Safe.”

“I know it’s safe, I am not doubting your skills,” Stiles said, twirling his fingers around in an instant translation. “I just think it’s unnecessarily-”

“Stiles, if you want to stay, please let us do what we came here to do,” Melissa said over the loud hissing that came out from the Whittmorian med. “I promise Derek is safe and more than welcome to apply for therapy if this leaves any long-term marks on his soul, but for now, he is willing to participate and we can’t…”

Derek chose to ignore her reassurings together with Stiles’ objections. He was gonna be fine. He was. And he was gonna heal the Shifter, or help doing it and maybe...maybe he was gonna…

“Ready?” Melissa asked from beside him, tearing him out of his lucid dreaming.

He decided to simply nod.

“We will be right here,” she said. “You will still be able to talk to us and hear us, so if anything should bother you just say a word and we will help or in worst case just pull you out, alright?”

He nodded again, pointedly ignoring Stiles’ rolling eyes.

The Nano waved his hand in front of him, the rings on his fingers glittering in the dim light. The loops above him came down all around him, slowly speeding up, until they were oscillating up and down in such a speed his surroundings blurred around him.

They changed slowly. The inside of the prism leaked through until he was standing right there in front of the sick Shifter again.

He glanced down at his hands. They were no longer human. He ran his fingers up his furry forearm, but could still feel his soft human flesh. The projector emulated his actual shape without
him having to do anything.

“Can you hear us?” he heard faintly from behind him.

“Yes,” he answered, looking behind. He expected to see the medics and his own body perhaps, but he just saw himself, his Shifter form, in the mirrored walls of the inside of the prism.

“Now, go on and talk to xyr,” Melissa instructed. “Aim for a soothing, calm tone. Make sure to mention where we are, that it’s safe here. Repeat it a few times even if it should feel silly.”

Derek nodded. He let himself take a few steadying breaths and then opened his mouth. “I came back,” he said in the Shifter lingo, watching the goo for any changes. “I came back to help you,” he whispered. “Or try to anyways.”

The surface of the goo trembled and Derek held his breath.

“Keep talking to xyr,” came from behind him. “Xe wasn’t responding to your presence, but there was a reaction when you started talking. So keep it up.”

He nodded.

“This is the Med Station. It’s a healing place,” he said. “They brought you here from an illegal research facility. But you are safe now. This is a safe place.”

A tentacle whipped from the goo, grabbing his left ankle. He barely felt anything, but he saw his skin break under the spikes and bleed down at the floor. It was weirdly fascinating how the projection emulated even such small details.

“You are safe now, there is no need to-” he stated to say just as another spiky tentacle surged forward grabbing his other ankle. The goo started to pull itself closer to him.

“Remain calm,” Melissa instructed.

He complied.

“The medics send me here to help you trigger your shift,” he said. “We think you might be just unable to shift out of the poison. And... I might be able to help with that. It’s not too late. If we can get you to shift, you can still.”

The goo sizzled, interrupting him. A huge gaping hole appeared right in the middle of it.

“Keep it up,” said Melissa’s voice. “We are detecting an increase of healthy cells.”

Derek swallowed.

“I can-” he started to say, but the words got stuck in his throat as a shape emerged from the middle of the hole. It looked like a very long Whittemorian tongue.

It flopped around for a bit and then settled against the side of the hole.

“Fffff” came from the Shifter, the tongue trembling.

He waited.

“Fff...ult,” the gaping mouth hissed, flopping it’s tongue around. The tentacles strung up tight as the goo pulled itself slowly closer and closer. Were he really there, he would have probably
panicked at this point, but the projection was a good wall between him and the actual happening.

He pursed his lips.

“*Yes, my fault,*” he said, hoping the bitterness in his voice won’t be too disconcerning to the Shifter. “*My fault. But I am here to set it right. I am here to help you.*”

“*Ugh...hugh ,*” gurgled the gaping mouth.

Derek crouched down, leaning over on his hands. “*Can you still remember? The song of our ancestors. All you have to do is remember and it shall guide you back to us.*”

The hole contracted, widening and then slowly, very slowly growing smaller and smaller, until it wasn’t wider than his own mouth. He caught a glimpse of a structure very similar to their vocal cords, but it was incomplete still.

“*Ughhh...haaa,*” came out of it.

Melissa’s voice came up to him and he realized he almost forgot she was standing that near. “What is xe saying?”

He moved his head to the side. “Nothing yet, nothing I can understand,” he answered. “It’s just… gibberish.”

“Keep trying,” she said. “Repeat it over and over.”

He nodded.

“*It’s alright, you are safe,*” he said to the Shifter, trying to sound reassuring. “*This is a healing place. You are safe to shift back. You are safe to listen in to the song. Listen to it.*”

The vocal cords trembled, growing more solid. The hole sucked in air and Derek held his breath, trying to be as silent as possible. He was glad the medics didn’t dare to interrupt either.

“*Derrrrr... ,*” the mouth exhaled, the tongue vibrating at the far end of the hole.

“*It’s me,*” he said. “*It’s me. I came to help you. You can do this. You can. All you have to to is shift.*”

“*Derrrrr...eck,*” the Shifter howled, the tentacles around his ankles twisting up his leg. He didn’t feel it, but the projection was showing some serious damage to his skin.

“*It’s okay,*” he said in a soothing voice. “*It’s okay now. You are safe. We are safe. You can shift now. You can-*”

The goo pulled in together, rising up into a small pile with a gaping hole on top of it. It erupted like a small volcano, teeth flying out of it, their incomplete pieces raining down all over him.

“*Shift,*” he breathed, slightly rattled by the sight of it. “*Shift. Just listen in and let the ance-*”

“*Nooooo,*” the Shifter howled, the voice coming in distorted, but the word clear for the first time.

“*It’s okay, it’s okay,*” Derek said, unable to do anything but stare. The goo writhed and deformed, randomly underdeveloped parts emerging from it, only to be swallowed back up.

“*Take your time,*” Derek said automatically. The shape drew itself up above him. He stared up.
“All will be fine. You just have to shift out of it wholly and-”

“No,” came out of the hole. Nothing more than a silent sigh. The shapes disappeared, the pile started to sink back down.

He didn’t give up though, the mouth was still there. The Shifter was still there, still listening.

“Yes, yes… you just have to shift-”

“Mo-”

Derek fell silent, dread filling him up.

“Mo-”

He felt is if his heart made a freaking back flip inside his chest and it kicked his stomach while doing so, because he thought he was gonna throw up right there and then. He knew what was coming and yet he didn’t believe it up to the very last moment.

“Mommy,” the Shifter exhaled, the tentacles around Derek’s ankles letting to as they retracted back into the goo. “Mo...om...y.”

Derek couldn’t do more than just stare in horror.

“I wa...t...mo...,” the Shifter gurgled when the goo started to pour into the mouth, covering it back up. It sank back down. Lower and lower, back to how it was before.

“Shift...” Derek whispered rather helplessly.

“Mo...”

The next words came out almost automatically. “You will be fine, you just have to shift...”

But the Shifter wasn’t listening. Was she even able to hear him? Was she listening or was she just lost in her thoughts? Her memories, unable to shift as the poison ate her all up cell by cell?

Was she even still alive? Or did she die a long time ago?

“Mo...oo...o-” she repeated, caught in a loop.

“Oh stars...” Derek breathed, crawling closer. “Cora! Cora, I'm... Cora...I'm-”

“Pull him the fuck out!”

“I'm sorry,” he wheezed, but it was too late. The projection was shut off and he was back in the dim chamber, watching as the last traces of the gaping mouth disappeared back into the goo.

Goo that looked nothing like his baby sister.
The loops around him stopped oscillating. He was only barely aware as they, one by one, floated up above him. He didn’t know what happened to them after that. Stuff around him got a tad
unsharp, hazy.

Derek got up, scrambling up to his feet. He ran a hand over his face. Left it there, pressed against him mouth, smushing his nose and... stared. He literally just stared somewhere off space, his head emptier than the outside of the universe.

He wasn’t even sure he was breathing anymore.

“Derek?” Stiles asked tentatively. The sound reached him muted, almost as if he was under water.

He blinked, dropping his hand. He blinked again and then turned to his right to find him.

“It’s Cora,” he said. His eyes felt way too wide for his skull, so he blinked again, illogically hoping to push them back inside. Stiles seemed like a million light years away.

He looked over at the black goo. “It’s Cora,” he repeated, not registering the collocation. The memory of his sister didn’t match to what he was seeing even though he knew. He did. He might have known for a while now.

He breathed.

And then again.

His mind was empty.

So empty...

“Ah, shit,” Stiles whispered. Derek just nodded dumbly. His eyes tracing the shapes of the goo, mind unyieldingly stubborn. It wanted to keep the two things separated even if he knew now. He knew for sure.

“Someone he knows?” he heard Melissa ask somewhere on the other side of the layers upon layers of thick air.

“His younger sister,” Stiles muttered.

“Ah.”

Derek was glad she didn’t ask for details. He was glad the rest of the medics were quiet too. Or were they? He could hear some talk when he really focused on it, but it seemed secondary to his ears. There was a weird monotone hum instead. It was drowning out all the rest.

“I thought,” he muttered, frowning. “I thought...”

He blinked. His eyes felt too dry. No, too wet. No, too big for his skull. Enormous.

“If I’d know, I…” He wasn’t sure how to continue.

“Derek…” Melissa started, but Derek was elsewhere, deep in his mind, searching for the right thought. The right idea. It came to him quite quickly.

“I have to go,” he said, turning away from her.

“No, wait,” Melissa called, her voice suddenly way too loud. He twitched away from it. “I can’t just let you leave now. You are obviously in shock.”
“I have to go,” he repeated, not hearing any of it. He pushed against the wall. It didn’t budge. Surprisingly. His hands left a sweaty smudge on the glass.

Glass that wasn’t really glass.

Goo that wasn’t really Cora.

Except it was.

“Derek, please…”

“I have to,” he replied, distracted. “I’ll be back. I’ll try again. I’ll try as many times as needed, but… I have to go now.”

“Derek, just-”

He ignored her.

“I really don’t think-” Melissa tried again.

Suddenly there was Stiles, standing right between them. The chaotic hum in his head got overwhelmed by a gentle, kind song and Derek could breathe a little bit easier.

“I will keep an eye on him,” he said, reaching over to squeeze Melissa’s shoulder. Derek watched.

“Stiles, if anything he should stay in a prism for-”

“I’ll take care of him,” Stiles interrupted. “We have to go now.”

She bit her lip, obviously unhappy with the development, but then just gave up. “Alright.” She looked over at Derek. “Take as much time a you need, we will keep watching her and if there would be anything urgent we will definitely contact you so don’t go off the grid, okay? Watch the feed.” She jiggled her bracelet in front of them. “She should be fine for two or three cycles though, the experiment helped.”

Derek nodded, distracted.

Melissa stepped forward, pushing Stiles out of the way gently. “Hey,” she said, forcing him to look at her. “It helped. You helped. She is better. It doesn’t look like it but she is.”

He just nodded so she would let him go and then looked back at Stiles, hoping his glance was a plead enough.

Stiles didn’t wait for Melissa to say anything else. He grabbed his forearm and used his temporary glove to lead them through the numerous walls all the way out of the cylinder.

~o~

“So, what’s the plan now?” Stiles asked, as he pulled him along between the prisms.

“I have to contact Peter,” Derek muttered, distracted. He barely registered any of the reflections assaulting his vision, his eyes felt glued to the memory of Cora.
“How?” Stiles asked, reaching out to lead them through another wall. His hand never left Derek’s forearm. And he was weirdly glad for it.

“Fly out,” Derek said once they passed through. “I can’t go for an ouroboros here.”

Stiles nodded, pulling him up a ramp Derek didn’t remember seeing before.

“Will he help?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But he needs to know.” It was his first instinct to call for his Alpha, even if his brain had been a little slow on the uptake. And with that it became his mission, his duty… and having that to concentrate on made him a lot calmer. Peter would know what to do. Peter always knew what to do. As soon as he would contact Peter...

“What if you won’t reach him?” Stiles asked, the question like a hot rod in Derek’s stomach.

“I will keep trying,” he said stubbornly. “Or leave an egg.”

Stiles stopped in front of the next wall, letting go of his forearm. Derek frowned. “Let’s-”

“Maybe we should chill for a sec first,” Stiles said, his expression worried.

Derek frowned, pushing at the wall. “What?”

“I mean-”

“No,” he interrupted. He needed to go. He needed to go find Peter right now. Didn’t Stiles get it?

“Maybe drink some or…”

“Stiles, I’m fine,” Derek argued. He pressed his fingers against the wall with a bit more force. As if that would help to get him through. “Shifters don’t really need much to-”

“Are you?” Stiles questioned. “Are you really fine?”

“Yes,” he lied, eying the glove. Maybe he could just-

Stiles jerked his hand away. “Are you really?”

“...yes.”

“Derek.”

“Stiles.”

“You should-.”

“I should contact Peter and…”

“But!”

Derek couldn’t just keep standing there arguing. He had shit to do and Stiles needed to freaking hurry up and-

“It’s a one-seat blaster, Stiles.” Wait, what?

“What…?”
“I-” Derek blinked. “It’s a one seat blaster,” he repeated slowly, unable to voice it in any other way.

Stiles blinked back at him, his eyes searching. He frowned. “With enough place for an additional person to curl up behind the seat,” he said. It sounded like more like a question than a statement.

“It would in no way be comfortable,” Derek said, staring at him.

Stiles snorted. “Says the person who sleeps on the floor to a person that has spent a lot of cycles trapped in a fucking pod.”

“Stiles.”

“I promised Melissa I’d keep an eye on you,” he said and Derek felt his mind backing up a bit at that.

“I will tell her you did if that’s what’s bothering you,” he said, frowning.

Stiles pursed his lips. His jaw worked around a few possible answers and then let out: “That’s not what’s bothering me.”

Derek nodded. Albeit slightly in shock for a whole different reason this time. He couldn’t really believe he was doing this. Couldn’t believe he was saying this: “There’s… there should be enough space behind the seat, if I gut out some junk.”

Stiles smiled.

“Let’s go then.”

~o~

“We look forward to have you visiting us again. Pulsar Central - healing beyond simple health,” said the artificial voice through his com right before they left the tunnel.

“We’re out,” Derek said, knowing full well it was obvious enough even if Stiles couldn’t see the screens of the pinner properly from behind his seat. “I’ll drift us to the closest planet. We can dock at the orbit and… you still alive back there?”

There was a soft scuffling noise from behind him, his seat shifted slightly as Stiles’ body pushed away from it. A voice came from above him.

“Yea,” Stiles said, his breath caressing the top of Derek head. “Superior passenger care alright.”

“I warned you,” Derek said defensively, reaching over to click out a few functions and then firing the engines to lead them down a designated approach path.

“Not well enough,” Stiles joked, sliding back down on the floor. “Nah, I’ve had worse.”

Derek could hear water slosh in the drink Stiles got for the both of them before they boarded. He downed his right away, but Sties was savouring it, slurping it very loudly at the back of the pinner. He probably thought he was gonna annoy Derek, but he had other things on mind. Besides, the
sound was a welcome distraction from the silence of the universe. A distraction telling him he wasn’t all alone.

“I can actually stretch my legs in here,” he said after a while.

“I doubt that,” Derek snorted.

There was a shuffle and a thud. “Well, I can.”

“Liar.” Derek rolled his eyes, tapping a few commands into the console to run a diagnostic in the background just in case the pulsar managed to damage something while they were in the tunnel. Improbable, but still.

“So glad we didn’t play the truth or dare face to face,” Stiles said, slurping his drink.

“I could tell you were lying through the chat too,” Derek said, checking the stats as they approached the orbit. All seemed fine.

“Well, that’s because I wasn’t trying to lie,” Stiles answered. Derek didn’t add to that, so he continued after while on his own: “I am more of a ignore-until-the-problem-disappears sort of person. Not to say anything until-”

“Some things can’t really be ignored,” Derek muttered, focusing on the readings in front of him.

Stiles shrugged, nudging his seat a little. “True, but also not really. Some people can ignore anything.”

“I don’t want to ignore stuff anymore,” Derek admitted.

Stiles hummed, slurping his drink. From the sound of it he was reaching the bottom. “Can’t be the one to always engage in everything, though. Sometimes you have to let go too,” he said, his voice suddenly dejected. “That’s just the case with certain things, I guess.”

It was weird how Derek could distinguish Stiles’ mood just by the tone of his voice. When did that happen? He tried to think back to their past conversations, but there had been so many, he couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment.

“Guess some things just aren’t worth it,” Stiles continued. For the most part it just sounded as if he was talking to himself. “That’s fine too, yanno.” He was running his nail over the cup over and over. A rhythm that didn’t fit his song at all.

“Then it’s best to ignore it all from the start,” Derek said, trying to participate in the conversation a bit more. Maybe that would cheer Stiles back up? “Or stop engaging as soon as you realize it isn’t worth it. Before you get too far in.”

“Ahh,” Stiles said, putting the empty cup in a container in the back. “Well, you see, sometimes it’s worth even if it isn’t.”

“You can’t know that,” Derek said, wondering if they were both thinking the same thing.

“Neither can you,” Stiles sighed.

A beep from the console interrupted their conversation.

“We’ve docked,” Derek supplied.
He leaned over to pull up his main holo. There was a shuffle from behind him, Stiles got up to his knees to peer over his seat again.

Derek tapped the holo a few times, bringing up the ouroboros line. It blinked alive and then crashed down before it could even connect.


Derek tried again, but the result was the same.

“It was working fine on the way here,” he said, tapping the holo a few times to restart the system. The lights around them blinked on and off a few times as the main console restarted.

Derek punched in the same command. The ouroboros failed to start again.

“Damn it.”

“Wait, let me see.” Stiles moved to the side and pushed his hand through between the seat and the walls of the pinner. It extended all the way to the control panel, with Stiles’ shoulder pressing against the seat. He pushed his palm against the console, barely able to reach it even with how much he was stretching through the small space.

Derek looked over and saw his nose scrunch up in concentration behind the edge of his seat. And then light erupted through, sliding down his palm and into the arm. He watched it travel down along the veins, until it reached the palm and then soaked into the console.

He sat quiet as the Nanos danced through the console, flickering in and out of view.

“Ah,” Stiles said suddenly. “It’s the emitter.”

His fingers at the console spasmed and pressed against the metal. The Nanos disappeared all heading for the same spot. And after a few heartbeats, they appeared back again, sucked up by Stiles’ palm. They travelled up, moving slowly, almost lazily and disappeared from the sight.

The light went out. Stiles’ arm relaxed and he pulled it back out up to his elbow, his forearm leaning against the small alcove in the wall right next to Derek’s seat.

“Try,” Stiles said.

Derek leaned over and tapped at the holo, bringing out the ouroboros command again. And this time, it went through.

“They put crap emitters into these rentals,” Stiles complained, getting more comfortable. His forearm pressed against Derek’s shoulder. “It’s so people actually return them at some point. Not worth getting that deep in for most people.”

“It’s working,” Derek informed him as the ouroboros clicked through, alive. It was a rather unnecessary info, since Stiles could probably see it through the gap on the side, but… it was as much of a thank you he could manage at the time.

He was too busy watching the screen.

Hoping for Peter’s face.

For anything.
But the holo remained empty.

Derek killed the uroboros line and tried again, commanding it to a different connection point.

Nothing.

He tried again.

And again.

But none of his lines opened.

They connected with each and every point.

But nobody picked up.

“Maybe he’s busy,” Stiles offered.

“I guess,” Derek said, punching in one more point for the ouroboros to connect to. That one didn’t work out as well.

He tried another one.

And another.

He began tapping at the metal control panel, thinking back to all the points he had already tried, his leg jigging restlessly. Maybe he just didn’t try the right one. Maybe Peter was too deep in hiding for the ones he had already tried.

Maybe... no. Derek would have known if something happened to him - once upon a time that thought would have calmed him down, but now, with Cora right there in the prism - it only fueled into his anxiety. He didn’t feel her string of life tugging at him. It was probably all just a myth, the invisible connection all Shifters supposedly shared.

He wouldn’t have known.

And Peter... Peter might be dead already.

“Maybe I didn’t fix it right,” Stiles said out of nowhere, reaching to put his hand back against the control panel.

“You did,” Derek said sternly. “You did. He just isn’t answering now.”

“Is that normal?” Stiles asked, leaning his forearm back at the parapet.

“I don’t know,” Derek admitted. “I guess. We were never really split up for this long before.”

“Ah.”

“But when he was External he would get MIA all the time,” Derek said remembering back to the time his mom used to complain to his dad. “Maybe...maybe it’s just that.”

“Yeah, probably,” Stiles agreed. He pointed at the holo. “Leave a few eggs behind so he knows you’ve been trying to contact him. I bet he will get back to you as soon as he can.”

“Right,” Derek said, glad for some distraction and for the instructions. He would probably have
ended up lost in his own worries weren’t is for Stiles engaging him in conversation.

He reached over for the holo again, tapping in the needed coordinates for one of their eggs. A screen popped up, recording his face.

“Seventeen, twelve, thousand-three,” he said in greeting. “I’m at the Med Central. It’s Cora. I’m sure about it. She is in a very bad state. We need your help, Peter.”

He stopped the recording and logged out.

“Just one will do?” Stiles wondered.

“Yea,” Derek said leaning back. “It’s gonna automatically spread all over the net of eggs Peter planted for us.”

“How does that work?” Stiles asked.

Derek shrugged, rolling his shoulders slowly. “I don’t know. You will have to ask Peter.”

Stiles hummed. “And that code at the beginning?”

“It’s a system we got,” Derek explained, reaching up to run his fingers through his hair. It was a mess. It felt sticky. “In case one of us got corrupted,” he added.

“What does seventeen, twelve, thousand-something mean?” Stiles asked.

Derek smiled. “That’s the thing, it doesn’t really mean anything.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No, not the numbers themselves,” he said. “We are just counting off a very long row of numbers we learned by heart. Three by three in each conversation, going down the line. They were generated at random.” Derek slid his palms over his thighs to get rid of the sweaty feeling he had on his skin.

“Ah.”

Derek nodded albeit Stiles could probably not see his face. “Having a system would be too dangerous, Peter said. It could be figured out if somebody was watching our conversations. Any computer could just run a diagnostic and latch onto the meaning.”

Stiles hummed, tapping his fingers at the parapet they were resting on. The movement caught Derek’s eyes. “That’s pretty smart.”

“Peter’s pretty smart,” he said watching Stiles run his thumbs over his forefinger.

“So are you for remembering that many rows of numbers. I can’t barely remember what I did yesterday yanno.”

Derek snorted. “That’s not true, I’m sure.”

“It’s usually true.

“Hmmm,” he didn’t answer anymore, folding his arms over his chest. He turned his head to the right, his eyes going slowly up Stiles’ forearm, all the way to the gap it disappeared into. He could hear Stiles breathe behind him, the air coming steadily in and out of his nose. He could hear the
song, silent but ever-present. He could hear him shuffle slightly as he moved his feet around.

Derek swallowed, looking over at the holo.

“Would you mind if we stayed out for a bit longer?” he asked. ”Just in case Peter’d-”

Stiles answered before he could even finish the question: “No problem.”

“Okay.”

There was a slight shuffle behind as Stiles got more comfortable, his arm twitching a bit, but remaining out next to him.

Derek stretched out his legs a bit, lifting his head to watch the ceiling. It was quiet in the pinner. Slightly chilly, but so peacefully quiet. Quiet enhanced only by the relaxing hum of Stiles’ song in the background.

He could hear Stiles sigh gently, his head leaning against his shoulder. If he leaned over a bit, he could see the top of his head in the gap between his seat and the wall.

His hand lay close, his fingers curled up, his forearm pressed against his biceps still.

Derek pulled his hand out from where it was resting folded over his chest and brought it up to his lips. He pressed his thumb again his lower lip, studying Stiles’ fingers.

He checked the holo for any change and then glanced back again.

And then back at the holo.

And back again.

He almost reached over, but then returned his hand back to his face, running his fingers over the stubble on his chin.

He looked to the right, listening in to the deep breaths coming out from Stiles. He wondered if he could be napping in such an uncomfortable position, but he refused to disturb the moment and ask. He probably wasn’t though. He was probably staring into space lost in his own thoughts. Enjoying the silence. Which… was pretty weird for Sties, but also, quite fitting for the moment.

Derek sighed.

His eyes slid back to his hand.

He thought back to the spacewalk.

To the gloved hand holding onto his own.

He thought back to the gelatine pod.

The infested flesh, falling apart in his own.

He thought back to the Moon.

The hand pressed against the tiny fogged-up window.

And he pulled his own hand away from his face, letting it linger somewhere in the space in front of
him as he glanced to his right, watching for who-knew-what.

Only after there was no change to Stiles’ state did he reach over and slowly press his fingertip against Stiles’. The hand twitched a little, but otherwise didn’t move.

And so Derek ran his fingertips slowly up the side of his forefinger. Stiles’ thumb moved out of the way to let him through. He went over the side of the knuckle and continued down to Stiles’ wrist and then slowly back up over the back of his thumb.

When he let go, Stiles hand opened slightly and before Derek could think any deeper into it, he pushed his fingertips against the inside of his palm, where he slowly traced the most visible lines.

Stiles exhaled.

Derek inhaled. And his fingers travelled along the paths etched over Stiles’ palm, like streams along the hillside, defying the gravity as they climbed back up again and took a different route… only to return back to the first one and be traced over again as if it was for the first time ever. Down to the inside of Stiles’ wrist. Over the two prominent tendons and then up into the palm again…

Stiles’ fingers reached for him too after a while, barely touching his own palm, the touch like a tickle of a delicate feather.

Derek closed his hand around them, cradling them. And Stiles caressed his knuckles with his thumb…gently pressing in-between them every once in a while

He watched their fingers move in a comfortable silence.

Silence that was more loud than anything he’d ever heard.

Derek turned a bit to the side to get a bit more comfortable and his fingers slid in-between Stiles’. He didn’t get an answering squeeze. Stiles just left his fingers loose, tapping at his skin in some random rhythm. It was so in tune with his internal song that it made him snort softly.

The tapping got a notch wilder at that and Derek smiled, pulling his fingers out a bit to grab the end of Stiles’ fingers, immobilizing them.

Stiles pulled them out without any struggle and then just simply pressed his hand against his.

Derek watched their hands for a bit more and then said. “I don’t like my neck touched.” It came out as a hushed whisper. “Like that.”

Stiles cradled his fingertips. “Ah.”

Derek braced himself for the questions that were inevitably following, but the one that came caught him off guard. “Anything else I should be careful about?”

Derek turned his head to the side and not for the first time, he was glad they couldn’t exactly make any eye contact in this position.

“Yes,” he confessed, his voice no more than a silent breath. “A few things.”

“Keep me posted then,” Stiles answered, squeezing his hand.

Derek squeezed back, holding Stiles’ hand until they decided to head back for the Med Central.
“The malign cells keep swallowing up all your healthy ones,” Derek was saying, his Shifter lingo scratching along his human throat. He kept following Melissa’s direct instructions anyways. “This is why- Just don’t give up and keep shifting as much as you can. The more you shift, even partially, the longer we have to find a way to help you.”

He watched Cora all the while. Her reactions were weaker than before, barely there. Every once in a while, the goo would rise up a little, some sort of body part emerging from it to try and get the hang of him, but alas… he was still just a projection to her. The body part always feel apart before it could even reach him anyways.

Could she even hear what he was saying? There was no hearing apparatus in sight, but there were
more ways to listen, Derek knew.

“That’s right, keep shifting whenever you can,” he said, repeating word-by-word what Melissa was telling him. “Keep it up. As much as you can.”

Maybe it was just the sound of his voice that kept her wanting to emerge. Maybe it was her anger at him, fueling the need to do something. That was fine with Derek too. As long as it kept her active.

“I called Peter,” he whispered as he sat there. Melissa was instructing him to repeat their instructions again, but he decided to ignore her this time. “He will come and help you. So you just have to hold on. For just a little bit longer, Cora. I know you can do it.”

The goo sighed at that, falling back into the unmoving puddle.

“Peter will be here soon,” Derek repeated helplessly. It didn’t bring out any reaction this time. Cora was probably way too tired to keep it up. If she even was doing it consciously.

Melissa decided to end their second session there. Derek wasn’t really surprised. Just... disappointed. The reaction he got was a lot weaker than the cycle before. Maybe…

Maybe...

The loops stopped oscillating far too quickly. They floated back up and revealed the gloomy interior of the big prism and his direct view of Cora disappeared to be replaced by a murky view from further away.

She - the goo - just looked the same as before. Nothing like a Shifter. Nothing like any actual living being.

“This is useless,” he sighed, turning around to face anything other than his baby sister.

Melissa was right next to him. She gave him a sympathetic look. “I get it doesn’t look like it,” she said. “But it’s not useless. None of this is useless. You are helping her. Keeping her alive.”

Derek looked back at the goo, the memories of his little sister flashing before him. “Keeping her alive?” he said with a sudden surge of disgust. “This?” He gestured at the goo. “This is no life. She is clearly suffering. I- I am just restarting her suffering every time you make me do this!”

Melissa was clearly used to people cussing in her face, because she seemed very calm even in sight of his harsh words.

“You can’t let the visuals obscure your view of her,” she said sternly. “The reactions are better than ever before. She was deteriorating rapidly before. We had no positive triggers by hand.”

Derek couldn’t help but feel shitty about it anyways. By all means he should feel shitty regardless of the state Cora was in. It was his fault after all. But somehow, he was just too tired to care.

They have called them over from their outing, made them hurry over from the pinner and back into this stifling place.

Derek looked over at Stiles, who was leaning against the wall, blinking at them tiredly. He doubted he was even listening to their conversation at that moment.

“What would you have us do?” Melissa asked gently.
“I don’t know,” he admitted as Stiles raised his eyebrows at him in a silent question. “But if my uncle was here-”

“Well, your uncle is not here now though is he?” Melissa argued. “You are the only one who can help Cora now.”

He nodded over at Stiles and returned his eyes back to Melissa. “I know. I’m just-

“Tired, I know. I wouldn’t have called you back that soon, but the cells…,” her words receded into the background very fast. Derek’s eyes drifted beyond her shoulder at the only other Medic that joined them this time. He was comparing the recent scans of Cora’s cell activity.

It didn’t look very positive, but it was better than nothing.

It would be nothing if he wasn’t there for her.

“...have to be patient,” he heard from Melissa as he tuned in again. “Healing is a progress. A slow one.”

“Not with us,” he said, but there was no bitterness in his voice anymore. He was too tired for any of that. “Not usually.”

She smiled over at him. “Welcome to us simple folk.”

He sighed, fixing his eyes back at Cora.

“Look,” Melissa said, moving in to obscure his view. “You just need some rest. Some food before we go on. Some- whatever Shifters do to relax.”

He didn’t move.

“I can-”

“None of that,” she insisted, pushing lightly at his biceps. “We need you in full strength for the next session and I need to plan out the next steps of the therapy, so you’d just be in the way hanging around here.”

Derek considered that, knowing full well that she was outright lying to him. There wasn’t anybody he would be in the way of, if he remained exactly where he was. And if it was just about him he would have remained adamant about staying, but Stiles looked very tired and he was a stubborn little fucker who would keep him company regardless of his own exhaustion, Derek knew as much already.

“Alright,” he agreed. “Keep me updated if-”

“Of course.” Melissa smiled, pushing him away a bit more forcefully. “Go now. And take Stiles with you for star’s sake before he falls asleep on the floor.”

Her words followed him to the back of the prism where Stiles was leaning weirdly against the wall. His eyes were glued to the holo in front of him and he was staring at the exact same scans the medic was watching behind Melissa before.

“She did much better this time actually,” he said without lifting his eyes. His finger tapped at some sections in the model, but Derek didn’t see a difference compared to the stuff he saw before. On the contrary...
“Looks the same,” he muttered. “If not worse.”

Stiles considered his assessment. “Well, I didn’t get better right away either. But I did in the end, remember?”

Derek watched him as he towered over his folded body. He wasn’t really sure what to say to that. While what he said was true, this was a totally different situation. A situation he didn’t really have a plan for. Unlike before. Not having a plan was making him anxious.

Stiles glanced down and pulled a face. “So hungry, man.”

“Let’s just go then,” Derek agreed, reaching down. Stiles grabbed his hand without a second thought, the holo jumped back into his bracelet on automat.

He let go off him way too fast, patting down his pants. Not that there was any dust around. The floors in the facility were close to pristine.

“We can go get some of those green noodles?” Stiles asked.

Derek shrugged at that, playing it nonchalant. “The sticks were alright too,” he added.

Stiles smiled over at him, a knowing twinkle in his eyes. “We can get both. In fact, I totally feel like going for a spread again.”

He grabbed Derek’s hand, tugging him out of the maze of prisms so quickly he barely had time to glance back at his sick little sister in a silent goodbye.

~o~

“Alright, I know I said I’m done, but we definitely need some of these too,” Stiles said as they walked along the row of food automats.

If truth be told, Derek would have had enough after the 3rd one but since he barely ate anything more than the standard package ever since he came here (except for the one time he took Stiles’ leftovers), he was slightly curious about all of this food. So curious it actually drowned out the annoyance over all of the food overload here.

“What about this one?” Stiles asked, turning around to glance at him. Derek looked over at the weird picture of small purple cubes stacked on each other.

“What’s that supposed to be?”

“Dunno?” Stiles squinted over at the description under the picture and then waved his hand before he could even delve into the text. “I just go with whatever looks fun. Usually.”

“That’s kinda-”

“Exciting?” Stiles supplied, tapping the holo to initiate a production of a small portion.

“More like dangerous,” Derek said, moving the baggies in his arms to make space for more.

“Why? Got any dietary restrictions?” Stiles asked, putting the baggie of purple cubes into his arms,
as he continued to peruse the displays.

“Not really, no,” Derek admitted.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” Stiles muttered, hurrying over to an automat with a white steaming glob of soft dough.

“Not sure how true that is,” Derek argued, watching Stiles tap in the order for one of those steamed things as well.

Stiles shrugged. “Depends I guess.” And added the baggie into Derek’s arms.

He surveyed the assortment critically.

“I think we’ve got enough,” Derek said, looking down at the twelve odd baggies stacked in his arms.

“There’s never enough food how dare you,” Stiles said. He pursed his lips, thinking. Derek waited patiently as he scanned through all of the automates again and then walked over to some sort of red beans backed at the far corner.

“This looks like the most boring item here,” he said, putting his arms on his hips. “It will be the best one, I’m sure.”

Derek snorted silently.

Stiles smiled over at him and tapped in the order. And while they waited for the automat to produce what was apparently a bag of weirdly shaped beans from the Whittemorian worlds, (that Whittemorians didn’t really deem worthy of eating,) Stiles walked over to the liquid dispensers and got then an array of different drinks.

Derek grabbed the bean baggie with the tips of his fingers, which were only partly maneuverable and walked over to the table Stiles claimed in the food area. He deposited the baggie on the long table pushed against a wall and sat down on a high chair right next to Stiles. He watched him move the baggies around until they were in a sort of a neat row in front of them, opened and inviting. Two of the big cups were put in front of him and then it was time to dig in.

Which… Derek wasn’t sure where to start. Stiles didn’t seem to have that problem, he just went down the row, trying the green leaves from the first baggie and then the purple cubes from the next one -

“These are so weird,” he said, scrunching his nose, only to take a second one. “Ew, I can’t.” And yet he took a third one. “What the heck. This is so freaking weird.”

“Why do you keep eating them then?” Derek wondered, playing with one of the cups. The red liquid in it whirled around lazily.

“I don’t even know,” Stiles said, looking disgusted. He nudged the baggie in his direction. “Just take it.” He stuck his tongue out in disgust. It was purple. “Just take it before I’ll eat all of them.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “Just don’t then,” he said, but he pulled the baggie over anyways. It smelled alright to him. Although that wouldn’t tell you much since he never was picky about his food.

“What the living fuck,” Stiles choked, spitting a few of the tiny red beads. They clattered onto the table, rolling around. Derek reached over to nudge them all into a messy wet pile with his cup.
“You should have read the info,” he chastised, frowning as Stiles gulped down a whole cup of water.

“Those was spicy as hell,” he grumbled. He leaned over the wet pile and carefully gathered each bead into his empty cup and then, as if that wasn’t enough, he just reached into the baggie with the red beads again.

“Eat this one in moderation. Noted,” Stiles said, pulling out one and sticking out his tongue to lick it. Derek would have face-palmed himself over all of this shit but to encompass how strong the feeling was he’d have to punch his nose through his skull and he didn’t feel like it. Not yet anyways. He decided to give Stiles a bit more time. He’ll probably get there.

He reached over and took one of the beads himself and put it carefully into his mouth. Stiles watched him from the corner of his eyes, his tongue plastered onto his own bead, unmoving.

And at first there was nothing and he started to feel pretty sure that Stiles was just bullshitting him, but then he bit in and his whole mouth exploded.

He coughed, his eyes watering.

“What the fffff-,” he wheezed and Stiles, that fucking asshole, cackled like a madman. Well, Derek won’t be giving him this one, so he, the stupid fucker that he was, started to chew in through the bead. That only made Stiles laugh harder.

He was full on trashing and Derek would be worried he might fall from the fucking chair weren’t it for the fact he was dying on the inside. Seriously, it was worse than when that Whittemorian gutted him.

And yet, he kept on chewing until it was sufficiently dissolved in his saliva. And then he gulped it down with a shitton of water.

He sniffed and rubbed the tears from his eyes before looking over at Stiles. He wasn’t laughing anymore. He looked obscurely impressed.

“Here,” he said, pushing over the baggie with the warm steaming bun. “That should help it a bit.”

Derek looked inside suspiciously and Stiles just laughed a bit more before stuffing his mouth full of something else from the next baggie. Something that was yellow and glittery.

The bun really did help though and in a bit Derek’s mouth was feeling much better. Especially after he tried a few of those simple beans Stiles raved about. They might have as well been the best thing out of the bunch, but Derek wasn’t really gonna admit it out loud.

“So, dad and Marin are back at the Beacon,” Stiles said out of nowhere, before taking a gulp of his water. “The Solar’s been completed all good. My temporary replacement is doing fine enough. Is why I was able to take a vac.”

“I see,” Derek said, playing with the edge of the baggie in front of him.

Stiles nodded, sucking on one of the purple cubes. Derek wasn’t able to stop him when he reached over for another one. “Myeah, I mean Erica said there is a significant backlog, but it’s nothing they couldn’t handle.”

Derek didn’t know what to say to that, so he just, as per usual, decided to say nothing.
“Not really looking forward to getting back,” Stiles signed, leaning his head against his lifted palm. “It’s not just the backlog, but the research too and then building Marin a new body.”

Derek only then realized Stiles was talking about Morrell. He frowned. “I thought she was damaged beyond repair.”

“Well, I managed to save the black box,” Stiles said, sliding lower to lean his head against the table. He looked more tired than before, the lack of sleep and the full stomach weighting on him.

“That thing I kicked out of her head,” he added. “Still not sure how much of her was updated on it, but guess I will find out once I get back. Or if the temp has time to boot her, which I bet they won’t have.”

Derek nodded silently, watching Stiles turn his head and press his forehead against the table. “She was in fight mode so I am hoping she had an autosync on. If yea, we should have most of her codes mirrored in the black box, so it should be fine, but still.”

Stiles brought up his holo under the table, scrolling tiredly through it. Most of the baggies in front of them still had some food in them, but it would seem none of them felt like eating any more, so Derek started to close them off and cleaning the rest away for the bots to take care of.

“Erica says hi,” Stiles said, typing into his holo. “She’s asking how you’re doing.” He blinked over at him, his finger hovering over the holo, waiting to type in his answer.

Instead of giving him one, Derek asked: “Do they know? About me…” He pursed his lips, not sure why it would or should bother him even if they did know. He wasn’t planning on seeing them again, was he?

“No,” Stiles said, straightening up. The holo jumped back into his bracelet. “And look, don’t be angry, but officially, you are just on an IA sick leave here on Med since barging me out of that shithole got you hurt and-”

Derek frowned. “… but I left.”

“Well, yes, but-”

“Stiles.”

“We made up a cover story,” Stiles said shrugging. “I promised I wouldn’t tell anybody. About you and stuff, so… and this way you can… die or something and then Derek Kasai will be gone and you can just…” Stiles shrugged, waving his fingers around. “…do whatever.”

Derek thought about it and then nodded. “That’s actually pretty smart.”

“Don’t sound so surprised, I do have my moments, yanno,” Stiles said, snorting.

“Very rarely,” Derek teased leaning against his palm to stare at Stiles. He put his head on the table again, blinking over at him with a mild surprise. “You’re not so bad yourself, sir,” Stiles muttered and then smiled.

And Derek had to look away before he would smile back.

~o~
“Ahh, I wanna sleep for like… forever,” Stiles sighed as they were walking up the spiraling path to their places.

“You should have gone right after we returned, if not sooner,” Derek said, chastising him even if he was glad Stiles was there with him. Just the memory of it made his skin tingle and he had to press his fingertips against his palm to calm down.

“One can’t really appreciate something one gets enough of,” Stiles kept on. “I haven’t been sleeping well anyways, getting myself super tired by walking outside only helps so much, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Is it the nature sounds?” Derek asked.

“Uhh no,” Stiles said, scanning the crowds passing them. “Not the nature sounds, no.”

Derek glanced over at him knowingly.

“Wouldn’t it be so much better if we didn’t have to sleep?” Stiles said suddenly when they were walking around a very large species Derek didn’t know the name of. “Like at all? Isn’t it like so weird all organisms have a sort of sleep thing going on? What is that about? I wonder about that sometimes when I can’t sleep, which is kinda ironic, like…”

Derek stopped listening somewhere at the beginning of Stiles’ monologue just enjoying the sound of his voice mixing up with his song. Now granted, the rustle of steps all around and the surrounding conversations did prevent him from enjoying it on a full scale, but it was fine. He-

A weird scent hit his nose. It was fleeting, but so familiar that he couldn’t help but stop and turn around. He followed the scent with a sort of dread.

Around and around.

No.

No.

He ran his eyes over the surrounding shapes, but none of them could be assigned to the scent still filling his nostrils. He tried to sniff at it again, hoping to make sense of it, but he suddenly couldn’t smell it anymore, nor could he recall where he had smelled it before. It was rather-

Derek, her voice whispered and Derek held his breath.

Ah, so that’s what it was.

He turned around, scanning the crowd more intently.

Was this just a mirage again or was this really Kate? She couldn’t really be here or could she? What if-

Derek needed to-

He needed to-

Ah shit.
“You okay?” Stiles asked and Derek’s eyes zoomed in on him almost immediately.

“What?” he blinked, breathless.

Stiles frowned, walking slowly closer. “You just…” He didn’t finish, instead he bent down and started to pick up the baggies of food that, for the lack of better description, Derek didn’t remember throwing on the floor. Nor did he move to pick them up now.

He just stared, confused.

Annoyed.

Scared.

“You okay?” Stiles asked again, pushing himself up to his feet. The baggies were in his arms. Four of them. Derek couldn’t remember what kind of foods they had left over.

“Hey,” Stiles breathed.

Derek blinked. “I’m fine, just… tired,” he said, reaching over to take the baggies again. Stiles deposited them into his arms.

“See? Wouldn’t it be better if we didn’t have to sleep at all? I’m telling you, this whole system is rigged. It’s some sort of a conspiracy for us to never reach the all new level of being. Imagine not sleeping. I bet we would unlock the secrets beyond the current comprehension, stuff that…”

They were walking again, Derek was forcing himself to mimic Stiles’ movements, trying to rip away the spiderwebs cluttering his mind. He felt like zoning out again, felt her reaching out for him and he wasn’t sure if he could fight it here, in front of all the people.

The only thing he could do was to concentrate on what Stiles was saying, on each letter, putting them together into words, those into sentences, finding the meaning behind them and in front of them (if such a thing existed). If he didn’t, he would slip in and not emerge for a while, he was sure of it. His previous victory felt like a faraway dream only.

And that’s why, when Stiles stopped in front of the door to his cabin, Derek almost got a fucking heart attack right there and then.

“Well, I’ll see you later then, right?” Stiles said, waving him off. “Get some sleep.”

Derek gulped. *Don’t go.*

“I’m serious, get some sleep,” Stiles instructed, shuffling away from him and Derek just watched him with a clenching feeling inside of his chest. It felt as if his ribcage was suddenly two sizes too small for him and the ends of his ribs were puncturing his lungs. Over and over.

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe and the stink of her perfume was so close he could almost smell it again and it was suffocating him the further away Stiles’ song disappeared.

*Don’t go,* Derek thought desperately. *Don’t go.*

Stiles smiled over at him reassuringly. “Stay sa-

“I have a free bed,” Derek said, his mouth dry.
Stiles blinked, stopping in the middle of his turn. “Um…?”

“I’m not using the bed at all and you said you can barely sleep with Scott and his nature sounds on, so... I have a free bed and it’s silent in my cabin. You can have it,” Derek continued thinking that if he was already fucking burying his own body, he should do it properly. “It’s no problem.”

“Um…?” Stiles repeated, turning back around with a weird sort of look on his face. His eyes squinted over at him.

But he was still there and his song was near, so near Derek could still hear it in the background and he… didn’t want to be alone with her. Not now. Not when being so tired. He’d slip into her waiting embrace way too easily. He wouldn’t be able to shift. Too weak. So weak.

“I owe you a good sleep,” Derek said, trying to induce at least some illusion of being only logical and not… desperate. “And I never use that bed anyways.”

“I don’t have my stuff here,” Stiles countered, confusion palpable in his tone.

“You can borrow my… stuff,” Derek reasoned.

Stiles just looked at him for a bit, his face going through a few different emotions, that Derek was wasn’t in the right state of mind to read. All of them included a frown it seemed. Except a few, which just made his eyebrows fly up.

“Uh, I mean,” he started slowly. “Are you sure? I wouldn’t wann-”

“I’m sure.”

~o~

“Oh, cool, I was curious how the normal cabins look like here,” Stiles said when the door shut off behind him. “It’s so similar to Beacon it’s actually scary.”

“IA pretty much just goes with the same pattern everywhere,” Derek muttered, depositing all of the baggies on the small table that slid out of the wall on his request. He forced himself to talk on. “Why change it when you already figured out the most efficient layout?”

“Because it gets real boring real fast?” Stiles said, looking around at the things he had lying around. Which, wasn’t really much of anything.

Well, at least there was no more blood and fur and chipped off bones. No matter how gory that visual was, just the thought of it, just the memory resurfacing helped him calm down a bit more. Helped him drown her out slightly further. It reminded him he was able to fight this off.

She couldn’t touch him.

Not anymore.

He was safe.

Stiles was still here.
It felt safe.

It felt...

“Hey, you okay?” Stiles asked slowly, shuffling on the spot, clearly hesitant.

Derek pursed his lips, retracting from his mind. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” He looked away from him. “You’ve been kinda out of it ever since we left the food place,” he said shrugging. And when he didn’t get any explanation, his hand went up to wave at the door. “Look, I can just-”

“You don’t have to,” Derek argued. “It’s just…” It was weird how much he actually wanted to share all of it with Stiles. But he knew he shouldn’t. He shouldn’t, right? It’s not what-

“Something I did, I guess?” Stiles asked, giving him an awkward smile. “I get it. It’s the same for me sometimes. I’m sure once I learn all of the-”

“No,” Derek said, shaking his head. “This was unrelated. To you. Unrelated to you.”

“Ah, I see.” Stiles nodded a few times. “Well that’s good then.” He frowned. “Except it’s not exactly good. Just that I wasn’t the trigger this time. That’s… that’s the good part. Not the… uhm.” His frown deepened and then Derek could hear a very loud and long sigh escape his lips. “You know what?” he said clapping his hands. “I think I’m just gonna go ahead and use your showlet and clean and do my business and… then I’ll just hit the bed because it’s been a long day and yep, I’m babbling, so.” He nodded in Derek’s general direction, both of his hands pointing over at his dry shower. “Mind if I go first?”

“Go ahead,” Derek said, gesturing as well. There was a lot of awkward gesturing in the past few moments for some reason. The weirdest part about it was that it wasn’t just Stiles. Derek suddenly felt all awkward too. He wasn’t really used to people crowding up his space like this. Unless it was Peter. But having his uncle was a lot more different than this.

This felt-

“Right, well, let me just-,” Stiles muttered, grabbing the hem of his shirt and pulling it up and over his head. He was holding it in his hands within a few heartbeats, his chest bare as he watched around for a-

Ah.

Right.

“Here,” Derek stammered. Walking closer to open one of the panels over the bed. It was empty. “You can just-”

“Cool,” Stiles said, balling up his shirt and throwing it into the shelf. He then disappeared from Derek’s peripheral vision only to emerge again soon to throw his sweatpants in as well.

Derek was still staring at the shelf for some reason. Before he could dive in deeper as to what that reason was, there was a click of the shower door and the signature whirring sound of the dry mechanics.

He looked over in the direction of the shower pod, his eyes lingering at the side of the door for a tad too long.
He then reached over to the next storage panel and brought out two of the generic overalls the unit offered him. It weren’t his own clothes. He didn’t have that many. Why would he? Each-

The shower door burst open, the sound stark and sudden with a loud hiss of steam billowing out in massive amounts. It filled the cabin almost immediately, leaving it misty. The tiny cleaning particles swirled around erratically, obscuring his vision way too fast. It was disorienting.

“Wha…?”

Before Derek could react in any way, Stiles’ silhouette stepped out. He hunched down, hugging his knees.

“Fucking hell,” he cursed, but Derek wasn’t listening to him. He jumped to the shower, kicking the door back closed and then reached over to the holo by the door to active the ventilation system. The noise of shower was exchanged by a woosh of air and only once the space cleared out a bit, did Derek lower its intensity and turned back to Stiles.

He was still hunched down in front of the shower, his forehead pushed against his knees, his hands pressed against the top of his head. “Fucking hell,” he repeated, his voice strained.

“You okay?” Derek asked, worried. “What happened? Was there some kind of a malfun-”

Stiles sighed, sliding down even more. His naked ass hit the floor and he pulled his head from his knees, leaning back. His face was pale and clammy, much the same as it was when Derek mined him out of that pod.

Ah.

“We’re both pretty fucked up, aren’t we?” Stiles murmured, the corner of his lips twitching up a bit as he stared over at him.

“Why did you even go in there?” Derek wondered.

Stiles just shrugged, looking up at the ceiling. Derek’s eyes lingered on his trembling fingers and then snapped away before they could continue any further. He walked around him and grabbed the first pair of overalls, throwing them over at Stiles, which made him snort.

Derek smiled at that.

He left the second overall rolled into a roulade on the small table next to the baggies with food and then pulled off his clothes to go ahead and use the shower himself.

He could hear more of Stiles’ whispered curses behind, but paid it no heed. He wouldn’t want people pointing out his obvious meltdown either if it happened in front of somebody.

And so he just left Stiles to his own devices and jumped into the shower. There was definitely an “oh my fucking universe” as he walked around. And so he made sure to remain in the shower longer than he usually would have, just to give him the time to shake it off without an annoying audience.

When he stepped out of the shower, Stiles was already clothes and sitting on the bed, one of the blankets wrapped around him, his eyes glued to his holo.

Derek walked in front of him and grabbed his overalls.
“Anything else you need?” he asked as he was pulling the overalls up his feet.

“Nope,” Stiles answered, staring stubbornly at his holo.

It would seem the color returned back to his face and so Derek let it drop. He was obviously embarrassed about the whole thing and Derek knew well enough how that felt.

“I was thinking maybe we could watch an episode before going to sleep,” Stiles suggested once Derek zipped up his overalls.

“How are you not asleep yet?” he wondered, but he didn’t wait for the answer. It wasn’t like he was gonna get one anyways. Instead, he just climbed on the bed and settled down next to Stiles.

“Hell yea.” Stiles smiled, draping a piece of his blanket over Derek too. Now, he would have protested, that he wasn’t really that cold and the words were already on his tongue, but then Stiles leaned in a bit to offer him a better view of his holo and the words died out right then and there.

It was warm.

It was comfortable.

It was-

Needles to say, Derek didn’t find a logical reason to pull away for a very long time.
“This is when we went to Miriard,” Stiles explained. His finger hovered over a picture of him as a child. His father and mother were standing on either side of him. All of them were laughing, at the edge of an endless sea, their toes digging into the sand. They looked happy, so happy.

“Has the best beaches ever, I swear,” he continued, flipping through a few more pictures from the same setting. “Not too overcrowded either, since it’s so salty.”

“I see,” Derek said, watching Stiles’ mother turn around in a short video loop and splash the water all over her son. Giggles filled the cabin. It was a ringing sound that made him think of the twins.

Stiles flipped through a few more pictures and a couple of loops. Sometimes he would stop at the
least unexpected ones, the mundane ones - the ones shot from behind a corner as Stiles watched his mother repair a machine or another. She would always smile over at him, her Nanos darting in and out of view in lazy circles. And then she would beckon him closer, ignorant of the recording device and point out this or that with great care. And Stiles always listened in, his eyes wide and curious.

Stiles sighed, watching the latest picture, one that had so many lens flares from the Nanos around, he could barely see what was in it. “I miss her,” he whispered, flitting through the next dozen pictures so fast Derek couldn’t really register any of the visuals.

“You always will,” he said, thinking about his own pack.

Stiles hummed under his breath, his eyes glued to a loop of his mother as she stood over an array of parts. A small baby was lying in the midst of all the junk, lifting its tiny arm in the air in wonder.

“What do you miss the most?” Stiles asked, rather foolishly. Everything, Derek wanted to say, every fucking thing.

He reached over to pull the edge of the blanket over Stiles’ exposed knee, biding his time.

“The sleep,” he admitted.

“Let me guess, on the floor?” Stiles snorted, putting his hand over his bracelet which triggered the automatic shut down. “Can’t imagine missing that.”

Derek just shrugged.

“Is sleep any special for Shifters?” Stiles asked, his fingers reaching over to tug at the blanket in his lap. “Do you like… share dreams or something?”

“We don’t,” Derek said, shaking his head. “We didn’t,” he corrected. “It wasn’t about dreams. Or about the floor per se. It wasn’t really floor anyways, there was a place in the den where we would all pile up, curl up and… nest.” He frowned, the word not fitting the scenario in his head.

“Burrow,” he tried again with not much more success. “Curl up close,” he decided on after a while of mental struggling. “We would curl up close and just… keep each other warm and... be close.” The lack of an actual definition in his head didn’t make him happy. He was usually very good with words.

What the hell.

Ah.

He knew why, didn’t he?

“Like-” Like we are doing now, he wanted to say, but he pulled his tongue away before it could form the sound. Alas, it was the only practical explanation he had and his brain was very set on circling around it without offering an alternative.

“Cuddle, you mean?” Stiles supplied. And since apparently he didn’t get the silent memo from Derek’s mind, he added: “Like we are doing now?”

Derek stilled, trying to control whatever responses his body might betray him on. The question hung there, backing him in the corner and he was really not ready to answer it.

He willed his hands to move, slowly smoothing the blanket thrown over his thighs. “Yes,” he
admitted slowly. “It’s- it was a general Shifter thing. Just a very practical and platonic... thing. We aren’t suited for being alone. It was all about the pack, about the sense of belonging. Only Externals were trained for solitude. And even that was a very thin stretch,” he decided to add, staring down at the blanket.

“Ah,” was all he got in reply. And when he looked up at Stiles, he saw him staring at the ceiling with an unreadable expression.

“Hate to break it off here, but I am really wrecked,” Stiles said, blinking.

Derek nodded at that, pulling the blanket off him and folding it over Stiles so there were no uncovered parts of his body.

He grabbed the spare blanket at the end of the bed and dragged it down to the floor. And while he was settling in - bundling the blanket under his arm and rolling to his side - he could hear Stiles flop down on the mattress, pulling the blanket up to cover his whole body. There was a silent rustle as he pressed the pillow into the wanted shape.

“Lights,” Derek said and the cabin around them dimmed automatically.

“Sleep well,” Stiles whispered.

“You too.”

Stiles rolled over to his side then - presumably, Derek couldn’t really see him, but the position of the hand peeking out from over the edge of the bed made him think so.

And Derek stared at it for a long time.

Stared at it while he wondered if the floor had always been this chilly.

Stared at it while he thought back to their conversation.

To all of their conversations.

And somehow that led his mind to dive into an array of memories stored in his brain.

Memories that were centered around Stiles.

Stiles and his song. That was the first thing that stood out to Derek, wasn’t it?

He could still hear it now, caressing his nerves and making him feel relatively safe. As if Kate couldn’t reach him here. As if she was just a nightmare he had forgotten about right after he opened his eyes. As if she had never been real to begin with. Just a mirage.

Derek watched the fingers spasm as sleep attempted to grab at Stiles.

As he let his own mind grab at him while he stayed awake.

Now, normally he would have forced himself to stop, as he did many times before, but the soft sound of Stiles’ breathing and the calming melody soothed his unsure feelings and nudged him directly into the deepest pit of his mind.

Right there where he had refused to look ever since he heard the Nanos for the first time.

Ever since his eyes lingered for a tad too long.
Ever since he tore up his body to claw Stiles out of that pod.

Ever since he realized what this was all about.

Because he had been too afraid. He could admit that much now. He had been afraid. Afraid things were gonna just repeat themselves if he let himself go in any deeper. If he-

But the truth was…

The truth was…

Derek stared at Stiles’ hand.

The truth was he wanted to hold it again.

And more.

Much more.

He knew.

He had known for a while now, even if he never wouldn’t have admitted it. Not even to himself.

Derek rolled to his back, covering his eyes with his forearm. He tried to silence the thoughts, but this time they wouldn’t just disappear as easily.

He pressed his hand against his chest, stupidly thinking the pressure would help. It didn’t. It didn’t matter. His head was too full. Just as full as his heart felt.

*Oh stars.*

This wasn’t just gonna go away if he waited long enough, was it?

Derek ran his hands over his face and glared up at the ceiling. A sigh escaped him.

He just-

He just wanted to-

He stared.

Blinked.

*Ah*, he thought, *but that was the problem, wasn’t it?*

He wanted.

He *wanted* to live.

He *wanted* to feel something other than just remorse.

He *wanted* to think about something other than revenge.

He *wanted* more than just the cracked off crust of a pack he had.

More.
He wanted more.
He did.
And yet he didn’t, because how could he?
How could he when *they* were all…
Derek ran his fingers through his hair.
This, he knew, was the same old struggle he had had ever since the fire.
He wanted.
But he didn’t *want* to allow himself to have any of it.
Until he decided to go to the Beacon.
To be part of the crew.
To live.
Because what he had before was nowhere near living.
It was just an endless circle of nothing.
He glanced over at Stiles’ hand again, his thoughts trickling down into a small but steady flow.
It was time.
It was, wasn’t it?
He was more sure of it with each passing breath.
Time to let go of the fear.
Time to make a next step in getting rid of-
“Can’t sleep?” Stiles asked out of nowhere, tearing Derek out of the depths of his mind. He resurfaced quickly. More alert than ever before, even despite the lack of sleep in the recent circles.
“Busy thinking,” Derek admitted. “Why are you still up?”
“Same reason,” Stiles muttered. He shifted beneath his blanket, the rustle the only indication Derek had. “I was thinking about those platonic cuddles.”
“Yeah, about that-”
“It could be maybe why the projection isn’t doing much for Cora anymore,” he continued. “I mean, she basically just keeps forcibly pulling you in, doesn’t she? Ever since you first went in. Yeah, the way she goes about it is all kinds of twisted, but if you break it down into-”
Derek pushed himself up to stare over at Stiles.
“It’s just a thought,” Stiles muttered, rolling over to the side to stare back at Derek. Although he probably couldn’t see that much in the dim light surrounding them.
“I mean, I could be totally wrong,” Stiles added.

Derek wanted to shake his head, but he wasn’t really sure about it, so the motion got all messed up. Indecisive. “It does make sense when you put it like that, though.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Stiles said, humming under his breath in thought. “If, as you say, Shifters bode ill with being alone and she had been alone all this time, in that pod for stars know how long, in that prism now. Alone.”

Derek sighed, pursing his lips.

“We can talk to Melissa tomorrow. See if she can work something out,” Stiles said, flashing him a reassuring smile.

Derek just nodded silently, staring down at his lap. He had thought that he couldn’t possibly handle any of this without Peter. Even as he was heading to the Med Station, even then - he hadn’t been sure what to do and how to approach this whole messed up situation.

“So what were you thinking about?” Stiles asked and Derek looked over at him, so overwhelmed he didn’t know what to say.

This fucking Nano Hybrid.

This fucking nuisance of a Technician who wouldn’t leave him the fuck alone.

He came all this way just to help Derek, didn’t he?

Why was it that they were ready to drop everything and race through half the universe just to help each other?

“It’s fine, if you don’t wanna tell,” Stiles laughed, interpreting his silence as reluctance to answer rather than a fucking mental enlightenment (or a breakdown as Derek would call it.)

“I mean, you do you, if it lulls you to fall asle-”

“Stiles,” Derek said taking a long breath in. Ah fuck. It was time, wasn’t it?

Stiles rolled his eyes and started to say: “Alright, I’ll just shut-” but the words died out as Derek moved in closer.

Bracing his hand on the edge of the bed, he leaned over Stiles, looking down at him. He was pretty sure of it now. Yeah, it was time.

“What?” Stiles breathed, looking up at him in confusion. Confusion that lasted a mere heartbeat. It slowly reshaped itself into wonder and after that… well, Derek didn’t really know anymore, because he had closed his eyes and went ahead and freaking kissed him. Yep.

Maybe the surprised intake of breath could have been a lead as to what the wonder transformed into. Maybe the slight movement of the warm lips under his. Maybe the fingers that brushed his forearm fleetingly.

He didn’t know until he pulled back and saw the utter disbelief on Stiles’ face. Something he didn’t really expect.

Stiles rolled onto his back. “What the…” he whispered, his head whipping back at Derek. “Oh my fucking…” he waved his hand around for a bit in a startled silence and then let out an even more
startled: “Are you joking?”

“No,” Derek answered simply.

“Oh my fucking… fucking,” Stiles sat up, sliding his fingers up his face and through his short hair. “You better not be messing with me. Derek?” He said as he pointed at him, twisting around. “You better not be fucking-”

“I’m not,” Derek said, pursing his lips.

“So, what... what, you- are we just gonna do this then?” Stiles said, shaking his head. “I thought… oh my stars, you better not fuck with me now, you hear me?”

“I’m not, Stiles,” he repeated, trying to remain calm. Or sound calm anyways. His heart hasn’t been calm ever since he decided to go through with all of this.

“You’re not joking, are you?” Stiles looked over at him, their eyes meeting. “I was trying real hard not to fuck this up you know. I really was.”

Derek just nodded.

“Because you said,” Stiles went on. “Because you did say that you would never date a coworker and I was gonna respect that. No matter how much-”

“We aren’t really coworkers anymore,” Derek inserted. “Not that it would mat-”

“Yes, I remember that conversation,” Stiles snorted, waving his hand around. “It ended with you leaving.”

Derek nodded, glancing down at his fingers.

“And leaving is still your plan after all of this is done, isn’t it?” Stiles asked with a harsh sigh on his lips. “How do you want to-”

“I don’t know yet,” Derek said.

Stiles watched him with an unhappy look on his face, his teeth kneading on the inside of his lower lip and Derek… well, he already decided he was gonna do this whatever it took, so he couldn’t possibly give up at the first obstacle now, could he?

“We can figure it out together,” he tried. “If you want.”

“Dude.” Stiles snorted, shaking his head as he looked away. “I’ve wanted this ever since I- well, for a long time.”

“Oh.”

Stiles gave him a look. “Oh?”

“Well, I thought-”

“Stop, come on.”

“What, I didn’t-”

“You didn’t notice?”
“Well, I-”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No, I was too busy... I mean, did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Notice I liked you?”

Stiles stopped, staring at him. “I mean, I suspected... or hoped I guess, but I couldn’t be sure, now, could I?”

“It was pretty obvious.”

“Not to me it wasn’t.” Stiled scoffed. “Also stop trying to turn this around. How could I have noticed anything? You were constantly pushing me away.” There was hurt in his voice. “Mostly I just thought I was being an annoyance.”

Derek sighed. “Well, you were a huge pain in the-”

“Dude,” Stiles gasped, pushing at his shoulder. “You can’t talk like that after confessing your undying love for me.”

Derek moved away from the bed to get out of the reach. His back hit the leg of the provisional table and he leaned against it, folding his arms over his chest. “I think I better reconsider this whole...”

Stiles gave him a look. “You’re such an asshole, stars,” he complained, flopping down at the bed. Derek pursed his lips, trying to force down the smile threatening to break his serious expression. His lips twitched up regardless. Ah.

Stiles glanced over at him, a smile of his own playing on his lips. Ah indeed.

“Oh stars, are we really doing this?” Stiles asked, staring at him with those huge curious eyes. Those eyes that haven’t changed a bit since he was a child.

“If you want to,” Derek said

Stiles rolled over at his stomach, pushing himself up to his elbows. “Do you?” he asked.

Derek nodded. “Yeah.”

“Yes,” Stiles echoed fondly. And then smiled wider. And then he laughed out, shaking his head as if he still couldn’t believe it.

Neither could Derek if truth be told.

Stiles buried his head in the pillow as he snickered giddily and Derek watched him, the sound seeping deep into his chest, coating his ribcage from the inside, nestling his heart in a warm and fluffy blanket as if it was the most precious thing in the universe, in need of protecting, in need of adoring.

He couldn’t help smiling to himself.
Looking back up after a bit, he noticed Stiles watching him over the rim of the pillow. “C’mere,”
he whispered, pushing the pillow aside to pull himself closer to the edge of the bed, closer to
Derek. His head did a jerky movement beckoning him in.

He followed without a question.

Stiles reached over, leaning heavily on his left arm. His free hand touched his cheek, his fingertips
barely touching his skin, watching him carefully.

Up this close, Derek could see the color of his eyes, the black hole in the middle, seeping out the
color from his eyes in a gradient that slowly but surely faded outwards from a dark brown into a
vivid amber color. It was a really nice design.

Their faces angled and the tips of their noses brushed teasingly before their lips connected again.
A fleeting touch skittered over his jaw. It was so gentle and tender it made his heart ache. He felt
his own fingers twitch in response and it made him wonder if he was supposed to mirror the
motion. He didn’t dare to reach out though, worried Stiles might… so instead he decided to relish
the movement of their lips, testing out different angles, pressures, finding the ones that felt the best.
All of them did.

No matter how clumsy or how ill-fitting they may have been compared to the manuals of perfect
execution.

They left Derek breathless

Left him breathless within a few frantic beats of his heart and yet he could breathe just fine. It
wasn’t about the lack of oxygen at all, he noted somewhere at the back of his head.

He leaned in closer, chasing the warmth, wanting to taste more, wanting to feel... it was then when
Stiles’ fingers slid off his cheek and Derek’s movement faltered automatically.

“Ah, sorry,” he muttered, pulling away. “I didn-”

Stiles’s hand enveloped his own before he could get away. He pressed forward, touching their
foreheads together. “You good?”

Derek couldn’t look at him. He felt… warm and his breathing was all over the place and his head
was in pieces. He scrambled to put some of it back together, but failed. So he just nodded and let
himself press a small kiss in the corner of Stiles’ mouth in some silent reassurance.

Why was he the one reassuring Stiles was a mystery.

Stiles wasn’t-

Stiles didn’t-

“Ah stars, I love you so much,” Stiles exhaled, tearing Derek out of his thoughts. “Or well, as
much as I can after such a short-” he stopped. “Okay, wait, that was a bit creepy.” He frowned “ I
like you. A lot.” He thought over it for a bit. “I got a crush on you. Like… a massive one. There.
Better.” He stopped again. “Not better, ugh.”

Derek’s lips twitched.

“Was that weird?” Stiles asked, facepalming the matrace. “It was weird, wasn’t it?” came a
muffled reply. “Yanno what? Don’t answer that,” Stiles said right away, patting his hand blindly. “I’ll just suffocate myself right now,” he muttered, pushing his face deeper into the matrace. “Save us both the trouble.”

Derek snorted. And then when Stiles didn’t move he dared to lie his head down next to his. Stiles turned his and watched him, his lips pouting.

“I’ll probably screw up a lot, yanno.”

Derek shrugged. “I don’t think you will.”

Stiles’ eyebrow shot up and he sighed. “When did you get so positive, dude.”

Derek just shrugged again.

They were silent for a long while, looking at each other as they held hands. So long Derek’s heart calmed back down and his eyes started to blink in slower and slower intervals.

“I thought we’ll be too excited to sleep after all of this,” Stiles whispered, blinking back at him tiredly. “I mean, I’m pretty excited and I would very much love to continue, but sleep, yeah sleep sounds pretty appealing too.”

Derek just nodded.

“Still in for the floor? Plenty of space up here too, yanno,” Stiles said, watching him.

Derek pursed his lips. “Floor’s fine. For now.”

“Sure thing.”

~o~

“And that’s why we thought that continuing with the projection treatment might not be the best course of action,” Stiles explained to Melissa as they stood just outside Cora’s prism.

“We will have to think of a better way then,” Melissa said, pursing her lips. She looked over at him.

Derek remained silent. He was studying her. He’s been watching her silently this whole time while Stiles spoke and explained his theory.

“Yeah, but I would still be against letting Derek go in again,” Stiles continued. “The last time he went in…”

Melissa looked over at Cora, at the motionless goo spilled over the floor. She hummed. “We will have to think of something else then.”

“How much time do we have?” Stiles asked worriedly.

“Not much,” she answered.

Derek watched her still.
“I will confer with a few-”

“Haven’t you had enough fun already?” Derek interrupted, letting out a sigh.

Stiles frowned over at him, opening his mouth to say something, but Derek just shook his head, silencing him with a wave of his hand.

“Haven’t you, Peter?” he repeated, giving Melissa an annoyed look.

She looked at him with some sort of a confused surprise and then her lips melted into a toothy, sardonic smile. “Well hello there, dear nephew.”
“So much for the grand reveal,” Melissa said, offering them a teasing grin. She lifted her hand and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. It looked natural even if it was Peter moving the body. Of course it did.

Derek sighed. “I’ve left you an egg. A dozen of them actually.”

Melissa shrugged. “I didn’t have time to pick up stray messages yet. Not that I needed to, your Hybrid here managed to loop me in quite quickly."

“You’re welcome,” Stiles said. “Except that wasn’t a-”

“Then why are you here?” Derek asked, interrupting Stiles. “Why come all this way? Why now?”
Oh, he knew what would get Peter to race across the universe and hide out like this. To infiltrate, to stalk, to grin like a maniac in a sick kind of anticipation. And yet he asked.

“You know why,” Peter said, as if reading his thoughts.

Derek pursed his lips, thinking back to the past few cycles. To the whiff of her perfume clouding his mind, to the ghost of her touch following him, to the elusive phantasms circling around, lurking in the corner of his eyes, just barely out of sight… he didn’t want to voice it out loud. He didn’t want to let himself believe the signs. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t.

“That’s your niece right there,” Stiles said out of nowhere, stepping in closer to Derek. “That’s your fucking niece.”

“So I’ve heard,” Peter answered through her lips.

“And what are you gonna do about it?” Stiles asked, gesturing over at the motionless goo spread over the floor behind the glass-like wall.

Melissa’s head didn’t move to look over. “I am going to wait for Kate to come get her,” she said, her voice too low to sound natural. “And then I’m going to rip her throat out with my teeth.”

As she smiled over at Stiles, her teeth lengthened into pointy fangs.

Stiles just shook his head in disbelief. “So what’s the ETA on that?” He threw his hands up in the air. “I mean, you didn’t exactly bring a blanket with you, so I’m guessing she will arrive in the next few-”

“Oh, you’re a feisty one,” Melissa interrupted, her eyes glowing red. Her face looked slightly bizarre, deformed, threatening.

Stiles’s jaw set into a stubborn expression.

“Answer the question,” Derek joined in again, shaking off the panic. He couldn’t let himself be carried away by it. Not now.

Kate didn’t matter. She didn’t.

“Well now-”

“Answer the fucking question,” he repeated, putting his hand on Stiles’ shoulder to ground himself.

Melissa rolled her brown eyes, a long sigh pushing out between her lips as her fangs receded back into normal human teeth.

“You don’t know,” Derek realized in wonder. “Is she even here?”

Peter shrugged. “She is… or she will be. Time is really not of concern. As long as I get to-”

“It should be,” Stiles muttered, just as Derek spoke up too: “Cora doesn’t have that kind of a time, Peter. She keeps getting worse. I tried to-”

“And you obviously failed,” Peter noted.

“But he tried,” Stiles cut in. “That’s a lot more than you did.”
Peter gave him a look that seemed to only make him angrier.

“Aren’t you supposed to care?” Stiles asked. “I thought being an Alpha—”

Peter moved before Stiles could even react, but Derek was faster than that. He knew what the sudden flash of redness in her pupils meant. He reacted in turn, flashing his own eyes as he pushed Stiles out of the way, grabbing Melissa’s human arm. It was a good thing Peter was in a human body. Were he hidden in some other shift, Derek wasn’t sure he would have been able to handle him this well.

“Don’t,” he said warningly, his shining eyes bathing Melissa’s skin in a bluish hue.

Peter took a deep breath in and stepped away. His mouth split back into a teasing grin. “Well well well, what do we have here?” He lifted his hands in a welcoming gesture. “Was that a challenge? Are you sure you’re up for it, Derek?”

He chuckled when Derek didn’t answer. He never was up for any sort of conflict with his uncle.

Stiles pressed forward again. “But I might be if you don’t quit screwing around,” he warned.

“By all means,” Peter said, squinting over at him with amusement.

And at that Stiles just looked exasperated. He might have been channeling Derek’s own feelings - if running into the nearest wall and knocking himself out was an option, he would have done it long ago. Though Peter would have probably just roused him from unconsciousness just to play his games.

This was Peter after all. Peter did what he wanted to do. And revenge was all he wanted to do ever since Kate did what she did. Ever since Derek did what he did.

Stiles probably figured as much by himself at that point. “So it’s all about revenge with you?”

Melissa shrugged. “What can I say, I am a creature of habit.”

“But helping Cora wou—” Stiles started to argue, only to be interrupted right away.

“Don’t you get it, Hybrid?” Melissa asked, putting her hands on her hips. “If what you are saying is true I will be inside with my back exposed to Kate once she gets here.” He snorted. “I have to lay low and preserve my energy. Rest assured she won’t come alone.”

Stiles shook his head. “So you are willing to sacrifice your only niece? What about priorities?”

“I am willing to sacrifice anybody to get my revenge.”

“That’s—”

“Selfish? Insensitive? Maniacal?” Peter laughed, Melissa’s human teeth flashing in the low light of their surroundings. “Please, Derek is doing this to soothe his own guilt, how am I any worse?

Derek gave him one of his default glares, but Peter was very well immune to them at this point. He just waved Melissa’s hand at him. “Practice what you preach, dear nephew. Then maybe—”

“I am trying to,” Derek bit out frustration overcoming him. “I am fucking trying to. But I can’t help her. I can’t.” He looked over at Cora, tears stinging his eyes. He blinked, trying to force them away. “I thought maybe if I was an Alpha. Maybe then I could. I did think of that. I did. But I would be a shitty Alpha. I can’t lead shit. I can’t do shit.”
He gulped, the words a tangle of letters at the back of his throat, choking him. He switched to their own language without even noticing, not that it made the talking easier. “I can’t win against you. I’ve never wanted to! It needs to be you, don’t you see? Only you can help her. Peter, it’s Cora. Look at her. It’s baby Cora!”

Peter just rolled his eyes. “Dram-”

“Fucking look at her!!” Derek barked, surging forward to grab him. The shift was supposed to stop him from violent actions, emulating Melissa’s fragile human body, but he didn’t let that stop him. It was a part of the strategy. It didn’t mean anything to him.

Peter slapped his hand away. “Sto-”

“This is not US, don’t you get it?” Derek asked, gesturing at them. “This life-”

Peter snorted, shaking his head. Melissa’s hair swung lazily around her face as he did it. “WE are extinct. Thanks to your hormones, if I might add,” he hissed out. “So save your motivational speeches for someone who actually cares, because I-

“Yes and I will live with that for the rest of my life, but it’s time for you to start-”

“There is nothing left to live for, you fool!” Peter exhaled, Melissa’s voice bubbling with seething anger. “You destroyed us! You let HER destroy everything and then you have the audacity to let her escape and live? To care about other-”

“I didn’t want this.” Derek shook his head, recoiling a bit. “You know I didn’t. YOU KNOW.”

Peter snorted, the corner of Melissa’s lips coming up in a mocking grin. It was more of a pained grimace though. “And yet here we are, ” he noted. “The least you could do is fucking own up to your mistakes and-”

“I am trying to,” Derek breathed, moving in closer to his uncle, his hands held up - pleading, placating. “But I can’t do it alone, Peter. I can’t. Cora can’t. You can’t. We have to-”

Melissa shook her head.

“This is all my fault,” Derek admitted honestly. “I know it is. Not just… Kate.” He breathed in. “Also you. I did this to you. I did this to myself. To us. I should have taken care of you, but I just kept burrowing myself deeper in guilt, pulling you with me. This was never our way.”

“Revenge is our only way, Derek,” Peter said.

Derek pursed his lips, looking into Melissa’s non-descriptive eyes. There was nothing in them, no emotion. It was pushed back down by Peter which only meant his words were actually getting through to him. If he took the care to hide his emotions then maybe there was a chance still.

Derek nodded. “And when the stars explode and fill the skies with the light of a thousand fires,” he said. “It shall not blind us. For we will see it for what it really is. We will SEE the darkness behind it and our mind will be clear.” He laughed bitterly. “Our minds haven’t been clear for a long time, uncle.”

Melissa watched him silently.

“I think it’s time we changed that,” Derek added, switching back to the SLA lingo because Stiles was looking more and more confused with each sentence spoken. “It’s time, Peter.”
Melissa didn’t move for a few moments and then sighed. She looked over at Cora as if assessing her anew, as if thinking about the whole situation again, reevaluating - at least Derek hoped that was what was happening.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Peter said through her lips.

Stiles blinked. “So, I guess that means he’ll help Cora?”

“I guess it does,” Derek said, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Good, it’s not like people can break into Med Station anyways, so...”

~o~

Peter’s fingers passed through the prism’s walls without any resistance at all. Now granted, he was still in Melissa’s shift, but that didn’t explain why the prism let him in so effortlessly. It wasn’t about the form but about the substance, so the only logical explanation was that Peter also managed to somehow replicate Melissa’s chip?

Stiles was obviously thinking along the same lines. “How did he get here anyways?”

Derek shrugged. “I don-”

And then suddenly:

A silent hiss from somewhere around the corner.

A zap in the air followed by total darkness.

And at the same time, the walls around them all turned into a solid mirror.

It all happened before any of them could even realize something was going on.

In fact, Derek’s eyes were still glued to the space where Peter was just a moment ago. He could still see a piece of Melissa’s shoulder and a part of her arm that didn’t manage to pass through in time. It fell down with a wet slap, blood splattering the mirror. He watched the droplets slide down the shiny surface until his brain caught up.

Silence. The prism seemed to have been perfectly sealed off.

“Stiles?” Derek wheezed, his breath coming up short. He looked around and a dozen of his own reflections looked back at him with the same expression of panic his face felt stuck in.

“Lockdown?” Stiles answered unsure. He was looking around too.

“Because of Pet-?” Derek started to ask, but a thunderous boom drowned out the sound of his voice. The walls around them shook, mirrors creaking ominously.

“No, that’s something else,” Stiles breathed, his eyes darting around as if that would help him zero in on the source of the approaching blasts. Not that Derek could either. The sound seemed to be echoing around in circles, multiplying and growing more deafening with each moment.
They backed in closer to Cora’s prism as it seemed to get closer and then the wall in front of them just decided to explode into a thousand shards without any warning whatsoever.

They averted their bodies as quickly as they could, Derek pulling Stiles out of the way as much as he could in such a short time.

It wasn’t enough though. Not enough to shield him from what followed.

A bundle of blue lights broke through the hole in the wall and engulfed them. The splinters of glass crunched underneath feet that spilled through, the sound making it obvious they were very much outnumbered.

Derek took a breath in, ready to attack and as he did so, his body suddenly went rigid. And so did Stiles’. They both fell down almost immediately, sprawling on the floor like two blocks of ice, unable to move a muscle.

_Oh shit._

There was a boom from down the wall, the ends of massive cracks coming into Derek’s frozen view. They got into Cora’s prism too.

He tried to move but couldn’t. Not even his eyes would blink. It felt as if there was a case of hardened iron locking him in place. A thousand chains wrapped all around his body.

It was hard to breathe, because he could only take in really small breaths, his chest fighting with each inhale. He couldn’t even blink the pain away from his eyes. Worst of all, he couldn’t even close them when _she_ came into view.

Kate was standing over him, her head covered with a breathing mask, but it was her, no doubt. And while he couldn’t see her mouth, he was pretty sure she had the same ugly grin on her face as she did in all of his nightmares.

“I was hoping to find you here, puppy,” she purred through the speakers on her mask. She knelt down to look at him closely. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you ever since that Moon scan came through. It was as if you wanted me to recognize you. This human form, only a bit older, more seasoned, more...refined. Wanted me to bid for you. Were you that desperate to see me again?”

She reached over to stroke his cheek. He couldn’t feel the touch through the sheen of Whittemorian paralysis, but he felt panic rising regardless. He tried to move away, to run, but his body refused to listen. It just lay there unmoving, his breath stuttering all over the place.

“Poor puppy, can’t move. Can’t even shift. It’s all in the air, you know. The 1-0-0 did a great job, didn’t they?” Something must have reflected in his eyes because she crooned: “Oh don’t worry. It’ll pass. But until then...”

She reached over to push her hand against his chest. Or at least Derek thought she did, he couldn’t really see nor feel much at that point anymore.

She leaned over him, her eyes shining. “Until then, you’re all mine.”

And if Derek could he would have screamed.
A/N: Upgrading to a weekly schedule, my dudes! Fingers crossed it works out!

__________

They pulled him through the hole, the anti-grav floating him up in a height comfortable enough to grab his collar and pull him along. Without breaking a sweat. Without a struggle.
Though the lack of struggle wasn’t to be ascribed to the lack of artificial gravity affecting his body - it was due to the air he had no choice but to breathe in. It was full of the Whittemorian poison, that much was clear. That and something more. A block. A block made by the 1-0-0 to keep him from shifting, to immobilize Stiles’s Nanos... and probably much more.

How many races did they have trapped back at the illegal facility? Buying them off all over the universe, experimenting on them, infecting them, hurting them, killing them... and for what? For this ultimate weapon?

Or was there more behind it?

Derek wished he knew what the Hunters wanted him for. Why were they so set on finding him? On finding the Shifters? What could be worth breaking into an IA station?

They had nothing. Nothing valuable. Nothing...

Not that any of that mattered right then. He will probably find out sooner or later. Or maybe never. Maybe he was supposed to be clueless right until the very bitter end.

He was pulled through another hole. His eyes were still frozen, feeling itchy and dry, but he could see the prisms they were passing between. All of them were set in the default shiny surface, mirroring his own body back to him, mirroring the Hunters and all kind of other people lying all around the cylinder and the spiraling path. The Hunters seemed to be ignoring those.

No Peter in sight.

No Cora… or a shapeless back goo in a jar.

No Stiles.

And Derek was glad for that. He was pretty sure Peter would be next to be pulled out. Maybe even Cora. But Stiles? Stiles will be safe. They had no use for a Nano, for a Nano Hybrid even. There were enough of those in the universe. Stiles was safe. He was glad for that at least.

~o~

They stashed him in one of the pods in their ship. The docking area was full of them - some of them empty and opened, some already closed as they waited for their future occupants. All of them ready to be pumped with the same invisible yet dangerous gas to keep them from breaking out.

And if Derek had any sort of capacity in his head for logical thoughts, he would have wondered how the Hunters got in in the Med Station in the first place and how they were planning to flee from the pulsar. The Station was on a lockdown and so the bridges must have been down.

But he didn’t care.

His eyes were open and yet he couldn’t really see anything. They were frozen to be glued to the same exact spot - the frame of the pod. His field of vision only barely reached the dock area of the ship.

There was nothing to be seen there anyways.
Just a couple of Hunters running to and fro.

Until he couldn’t see those either.

Maybe they were already out in space.

He didn’t care.

This was all for the best. This was what he had deserved right from the start. This was in a way his destiny - his fate. His punishment for what he did.

If it was, then the fate would allow Peter to get away. It was not an impossible hope, was it? And it would make them leave Cora alone. It wasn’t like she would be any useful to them like that - and with the poison in the air, she wouldn’t even be able to shift.

They had him and that should be enough for whatever their plan was.

It should-

Wait.

*Oh shit.*

She wouldn’t be able to shift.

Cora’s ability to shift was blocked.

But she needed to in order to keep the malign cells at bay. To keep them from consuming her, from dissolving her into…

*Oh no.*

This was not okay.

This was *so not okay.*

He needed to get the fuck out and help Cora.

But how?

He couldn’t move.

He could barely breathe.

His head felt light.

So light he could actually see lights floating around his eyes. So bright, so livid - they would carry him into the unconsciousness soon if he didn’t do something about it.

Except they didn’t.

And his lungs had just about enough oxygen even if it was a pain to cave his lungs in to accomplish something akin to breathing..

He would have frowned if he could have moved.

The lights moved around in a coordinated pattern, flying in and out of the pod and then they
disappeared and the lock on the pod clicked open.

The lid slid open, slowly and silently and the pod was filled with a song Derek knew way too well. A song that would have made him choke out in relief if it could.

“Would you look at that, full circle,” whispered an all too familiar voice. “Now come on. We don’t got much time.”

Stiles came into the view and… his eyes were shining, all bright and hopeful. Derek didn’t comprehend what he was seeing at first. It couldn’t be Stiles now could it? He was still lying immobilized on the floor of the… except it looked exactly like him. And the song, the song that couldn’t really be copied by any mirage or simulation, it was right there with him.

“Come on.”

I can’t move , he wanted to say.

“Just shift it out, buddy,” Stiles whispered, his eyes darting around as if he was looking around. “Preferably fast.”

But I can’t , Derek wanted to argue.

Stiles must have seen the words painted in his eyes or simply just interpreted the silence and the lack of shifting for what it was.

“I’m pretty sure you got the antibodies too,” Stiles said hurriedly. “They obviously based in on the 1-0-0 shit. What they didn’t know is that we already managed to overcome it - or some version or it anyways. And my Nanos aren’t stupid. Nor are your shifting… cells or whatever. So, come on, let’s get the hell ou- oh shit.” And with that he disappeared from the view.

Derek couldn’t exactly see what was happening, but he could hear shooting in midst the frantic skirmishes and… alright, it was fucking time he shifted out of the cage holding him, wasn’t it? And if Stiles was right…

His body responded without any difficulty at all. And the pod was soon too small to hold the entirety for his Shifter build.

He pushed the lid open and stepped out of it.

Stepped right into the mayhem that had consumed the docking area: Smoke was billowing around in thick whiffs as four huge droids cruising around proceeded to methodically shoot their way out of the area, pressing at Hunters that covered outside and behind the two partly opened doors at the sides.

The place was full of dancing Nanos, diving in and out of droids, in and out of any and all visible weapons, malfunctioning all they went through, ordering a platoon of smaller cleaner droids to haphazardly change their direction and run into the nearest moving target. It was...

“You might wanna get in cover!” Stiles yelled from a safer distance further down the row of pods. He managed to overturn one of the empty ones and hide behind it while his Nanos wreaked havoc.

Stiles. He was the eye of the tornado, he was the safe and calm spot of a whole hurricane of destruction and Derek allowed himself to just watch for a few heartbeats. Watch as his eyes darted around the space, registering one gunpoint after another and sending Nanos their way. Some of them rebounded back, the Hunters probably powering up their Nano shields, but just as they did so,
a cleaner droid would ram into the nearest wall and explode acidic fluids all over them.

It was a beautifully chaotic orchestra. It was a small-scale siege. And Stiles was-

“Jellybean!” Stiles yelled. “Jelly-fucking-bean! Get the fuck out of there!”

One of the big droids that was in front of him fell down, Nanos scattering out of it since a Hunter shot a hole in its processing unit. It was too destroyed to be salvaged in an instant and thus discarded.

A second droid slid in front of him, trying to cover his big form just as his previous comrade did, but the Hunters now figured Derek was the simplest target and focused their attention on him. Which… made Stiles’ job a lot harder.

They hit Derek’s shoulder and he could feel the laser cut through his main artery. Blood billowed out of his body as he jumped behind Stiles’ makeshift barricade.

“I told you to get out of the fucking way, didn’t I?” Stiles shouted, holding his ground. “You good?”

“Yahhh,” Derek breathed, shifting out of the wound before he could lose any more blood. He replenished as much of it as he could and then pushed himself off the floor to crouch next to him.

“Alright, it’s time to leave then,” Stiles said, closing his eyes. “I’ve sent a bunch of my Nanos to-ah, here we are! Get ready!” The door on the right exploded open, with Hunters barreling out of the way as a huge erratic flock of their own droids rushed through. Some of the Hunters got trampled in the process, some managed to evade them running out of the ship through the opened hangar door.

“Come on!” Stiles yelled, jumping over their barricade and running behind the flock of droids. Derek followed.

The Hunters started to shout, trying to stop them, but their own droids rushed them - they didn’t really have any weapons on them, the simple service droids, but their sheer number managed to incapacitate them long enough for them to pass through.

They jumped over the edge of the ship and ran over the parking space that the Med Station designated for the ship. It was a big one. Which in turn meant the escape route back was way too far from them. And there was nothing to take cover behind.

Stiles cursed and let the remaining big droids circle around and cover their retreat. Except, the door in front of them wasn’t empty either. And there were just two of the droids left.

Stiles faltered.

The Hunter in the door lifted his arm and tapped something into his holo. A pulse run through the area. It did nothing and Derek just used the moment of confusion to speed up and barrel through him without any regard for his safety whatsoever. In fact, he was glad when he heard some of his bones crack even through the armor he had on.

“Good luck finding my Nano frequency, you fucker!” Stiles yelled as he ran around the Hunter sprawled on the floor. “Hybrids all the waaay!”

The two big droids behind them clogged the door behind them, shooting one load after another, trapping the Hunters on their ship. Stiles whooped, his Nanos leaking through the walls to rejoin
“We have to get to Cora,” Derek barked as he spit an arm of some other Hunter that was in their way.

“Yeah,” Stiles wheezed, gesturing down the spiraling path. Some Hunters were running up, ignoring the paralysed bodies on the floor, trying to intercept them. Not to mention one of the big droids barring the door from the parking was down and Stiles, Stiles was pretty winded.

“Fuck,” he swore, his eyes flickering in and out and he pressed his hand against his chest. “I can’t do this much longer.”

Derek pulled him behind the nearest pillar to avoid the lasers shooting their way.

“My turn then,” he breathed, baring his teeth in a very sharp grin.

And with that he shifted.

He never shifted a Tenc. Not if he didn’t have to that was. He barely ever had to, except the few times his father made him.

It wasn’t easy because of three important things - the mass was at least five times his usual distribution and there were muscles that were hard to steer and... well the communication was just hard through the shift. But his adrenaline was running high and they needed something strong and preferably avian. And a Tenc could get them out of there quickly.

And so he channeled his adrenaline, the anger at being caught and the worry for Cora and his body started to elongate, splitting his limbs in the process. They divided down into a few tens of thin but strong limbs. All of them equipped with small claws at the end, perfect for gripping.

His back curled as valves shot out of his two side-spines - his dark fur melting down into translucent scales, running up the newly formed body parts, all the way back to the tip of his multiple tails.

He turned his head away from Stiles as it shrunk back to his body, the brain moving along the main spine. And as his last brain cell reached the base of his central tail and an utter silence enveloped his senses, he was done.

A perfect Tenc.

His father would have been proud.

Provided Derek could actually use the shift properly.

He moved his valves around, angling them to scan his surroundings. The Hunters were almost at them, hiding behind the nearest pillar and shooting at the parts of his body that were sticking out.

His scales were not sturdy enough to repel the lasers, but the damage was small and he was able to ignore it. For now anyways.

The last droid clogging up the door fell just as he took a moment to survey the situation there. More Hunters spilled out via there and one of them was carrying something big.

Shit.

There was no time to lose.
He powered up his valves, sucking in a quantum of air and concentrated on Stiles. He needed to send him the right visual. There was a spot right between the rows of his limbs that could possibly carry him. He tried to project that into the space around him, hoping the visual would reach Stiles’ brain coherently enough.

It must have because just a heartbeat later, Stiles crawled under him and Derek was able to use his limbs to circle his torso and hold him close.

And with that he powered up his valves and shot out of the alcove. He soared through the space between the spiraling path and the central cylinder. The valves jetting air by pairs in perfectly timed turns.

Stiles’ chest vibrated and Derek wasn’t sure if he was screaming or laughing but he hoped for the latter.

He soared all the way up the Med Station, because vertical flight was the fastest with Tencs, but there was some movement his valves caught on top too and he wasn’t gonna stay there to find out what else the Hunters had in store.

And so he sank back down and circled the cylinder scanning for the hole created by the Hunters. He found it quickly enough.

As he was sweeping lower to get to it, something vibrated in the air, hitting one of his valves. He roared in pain - figuratively anyways, the Tencs had no mouth - and used the rest of his valves to gracelessly jettison them right against the central cylinder.

They were still shooting at him with… whatever his senses couldn’t comprehend, but his Shifter-thinking knew it was some sort of a heavy-duty canon.

*Perfect, just fucking perfect.*

He grabbed onto the wall, and crawled down to the hole.

He tried to scan for any movement inside, but the mirrored surfaces kept rebounding it all to him, scrambling his brain. And the Hunters were still shooting and their aim was getting better, so he supposed they were getting closer, which, yeah, time to scram.

He deposited Stiles into the hole and after checking there was no innocent bystander lying helplessly on the bridge, he rammed a half of his body into it. The bridge creaked but held. He did it again and again until the bridge dislodged and fell down to the Oxygen forest.

Chances somebody was down there were very small, so… well, better than letting the Hunters through to them.

They managed to fuck him pretty bad from the other side of the Station even so. Most of his valves were torn to pieces, damaged. He was missing several tails and only stars knew what other damage he sustained - Derek wasn’t that used to a Tenc body to know.

And so he crawled in quickly and once he was more or less away from the imminent danger, he started to shift out into his human build.

Stiles was right there when he did.

“Fucking hell,” he breathed, sliding his hands over Derek’s back. “You good?”
“Yahh,” Derek answered breathlessly. “We have to go,” he added quickly. “This will only stall them for so long.”

Before they could run off in the direction of Cora’s prism, the lights came back on. They were accompanied by a loud creaking sound he’d never heard in Med Station before.

“Wha-” Stiles started, but there was no time to wonder what was going on. Derek grabbed his hand and started to run.

Air wooshed around them as they ran.

And it wasn’t air resistance, nor were they running that fast - it seemed almost as if there was it was some sort of an artificial air distribution system fueling a raft through the space. Except the Med Station ran on Oxygen trees, did it not? They didn’t have-

“Do you think they are trying to pump more of that gas in to stop us or something?” Derek asked, running.

Stiles breathed in and out a few times as if sniffing the air and shrugged. “Not sure, it- look , med droids!”

He looked up, spotting a couple of them flying up the nearest shaft.

“Did you do that?” Derek wondered as they slipped through another one of those holes in the walls.

“Not mine,” Stiles huffed, gesturing to his right. “There’s more of them.” Another three of them mirrored in the opposite wall, slowly circling on their path down.

“Some other Nanos maybe?”

“Didn’t see any. Did you?”

“No.”

“Oh look, more!”

“Is that a good thing?” Derek asked, running to another hole. He jumped through without stopping.

Stiles sighed and clambered through himself. “Looks like the Station is booting back up, s-”

“It could be the Hunters still,” Derek noted. “If they managed to get to Root, maybe they-”

“Oh shoot,” Stiles said, scrambling out of the way as maintenance droids drove between their legs, heading for the wall.

Derek skittered to a pause and watched them start a repair sequence on the hole in the wall.

“It’s the Med Station,” he breathed.

Stiles agreed, pulling Derek along. And as they run, the Med Station kept slowly awakening all around them - more and more droids roamed around, continuing with their chores, following their code. Some of the people lying on the ground were slowly moving their limbs, artificial lifeforms blinked back to life.

And Derek and Stiles still ran.
They ran until they were right in front of the hole to the inner prism, so close to the spot they were standing in when the Med Station fell offline. Just a few more steps and they would be at Cora’s prism.

Just a few more steps.

*Hang in there Cora*, Derek thought. *Hang in there. We’re coming...*
It seemed as if they were looking into a whole different dimension, through the hole, away from the light and the eerie silence of awakening people, of booting systems, hushed droids and creaking filters - right into the middle of a harsh fight.

Cora’s prism was in shambles, the shards lying all around the area, crouching under the mingling bodies, feet and surprisingly... tentacles. The tentacles originated in a bulb at the back corner - a lifeform Derek had never seen before. With a stalk protruding from the glistening center, xe kept the full reflex angle in check, keeping the Hunters at bay.

And Hunters there still were, albeit some of them were lying on the floor - one sprawled in a pool of blood looking like he was crashed by something massive, another with an impaled chest and a
severed tentacle hanging limply around his neck, another with a torn arm, and a couple more with a different assortment of lacerations.

But a lot more of them were still on their feet, dancing around the lifeform or covering behind their heavy ram. Kate was right there with them. And she was the most vicious of them all.

Derek looked around frantically, searching for Peter, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Is that Peter?” Stiles asked, pointing at Tentacle just as a few shots managed to get through xyr defense and land directly in xyr eye.

Derek turned back to Stiles. “Stay here. Stay safe. I’ll go help.”

There wasn’t really time to think or strategize. He only took a moment to shift into his Shifter build. Jumping in through the hole, he bolted for the closest Hunter, tackling him to the ground with the sheer power of his velocity. His weapon snapped in half in his jaws. They toppled to the ground, the armor saving the Hunter from multiple fractures, if not from death.

There was a crackle of electricity. The Hunter’s armor powered up in automated self-defense and Derek had to jump away before he could get himself knocked out.

The tentacles were closing in within an instant - the eye must have regenerated already. Luckily for the soon-to-be-victim, a second Hunter ran in, shooting at all them off with perfect precision. The tentacles fell off, the stumps curling in on themselves.

He grabbed the tackled Hunter and pulled him back to safety. No place was safe though, Derek made sure of it. He jumped at the fallen Hunter, stuck his fangs into his leg and tore him away. He flew, skittering on the floor until a tentacle got him.

The other started to shoot his way so fast, he hit Derek a few times before he could even turn around. Worst of it, one of the bullets got his spine and exploded there, so he clambered to the floor. He was just in the process of moving his brain out of his skull in case the Hunter decided to gift him with the killing shot (that would only get him unconscious) when there was light and the gun fell apart.

He only then noticed Stiles’s Nanos drifting through the air. They were methodically attacking the devices around, rendering them useless just as they did back at the dock, except instead of a huge storm, it was more of a gentle breeze now. Stiles was obviously too tired to do anything more.

Derek was glad for any help.

The Hunter above him powered up his Nano shield and took out another weapon but it was too late at that point, Derek’s spine was fixed and his brain was back at the skull to execute a deadly command. He bounced at the Hunter fumbling with his weapon and tore his head off.

There was a shout.

Derek looked around and saw one of the Hunters run head first onto Tentacle. The tentacles only slid from the shield he was engulfed in as he powered through. Derek started to run as well, hoping to intercept him - ah, it was a woman, he realized upon closer inspection.

Ah, shit.

It was Kate.
Derek hesitated and got hit by another Hunter. This time it was something stronger than a simple bullet or a laser. He felt himself fly through the air and into the nearest wall.

Meanwhile, Kate reached Tentacle without a problem and managed to stab xe with a knife she must have had in the hand. The blade slid down through the surface of xyr body. And although xyr tentacles reacted almost immediately - trying to get a hold of her - they only slid over the surface of the shield without any contact whatsoever.

Kate pulled the knife away and brought out a small glowing ball. And Derek could only watch with horror as she stuck it inside of Tentacle and walked back a few steps, waiting for it to detonate.

It was a void grenade, Derek was sure of it.

Not even a Shifter could survive such an explosion, especially if it happened right inside of one’s body.

Tentacles curled in on themselves, trying to reach for the grenade, but they were too big for such a delicate wound.

It was too late, Derek thought, too late anyways.

He averted his eyes, waiting for it.

The explosion would probably get him too.

There was no point in running away from a void grenade.

There was only waiting.

And waiting.

And… waiting?

He looked back in - the wound was glowing with a mass of Stiles’ Nanos. He must have made an attempt of disarming the void grenade, but… there wasn’t really time to do that, was there?

“You gotta do better than that, bitch,” he heard Stiles mutter from across the room. He was sitting near the wall, eyes glued to the wound as his Nanos worked on decomposing the grenade. Drenched in sweat he barely got a breath in before Kate noticed him. She turned around to aim her customized crossbow. She was about to take a shot and Stiles wasn’t moving away nor covering even if his eyes did flicker to her briefly. He couldn’t, Derek realized. He needed to hold the grenade in check.

Derek roared, bolting for her, but she was too far and way too confident in her shield, so there was no… except, suddenly, a shadow passed through the floor in front of her. It moved up like a curtain being pulled inside of her shield - a straight vertical trajectory and a steady pace.

It passed through her wrist and she hissed, letting go of her crossbow. She pulled her hand out of the shadow and as she did so, the glove, the skin, the flesh, the bones that came into contact with the shadow started to dissolve, so what she pulled away was just an ashy, splintering stump.

She screamed, backing away, but the shadow was already pulled up behind her too and as she stumbled into it with her back, her armor dissipating. She pulled away before it could touch her bare skin.
But at that point, there was nowhere else to go, the shadow was all around her, lodging itself perfectly at the inner borders of her shield, like sheets of paper folding in on themselves. It even slid under her where the shield didn’t reach, wedging itself between her feet. She was already missing the soles of her shoes.

No weapon worked against the shadow and Derek watched in sick fascination as the shadowy bubble around her started to shrink on itself, digesting her cell by cell, slowly and painfully, eating up all of her weapons, all of her desperate attempts to save herself.

She screamed and curled in on herself, but that only helped so much as the shadow approached. It licked her shoulder, sliding slowly down her back like a mother caressing her sick child.

And so it went.

Her feet disappeared next, making her unbalanced. She yelled, toppling forward and struck her stump forward, right into the shadow’s hungry embrace.

It was gruesome to watch.

And yet Derek kept watching.

Kate used her remaining hand to electrize the last of her armor, but the jolts of lightning didn’t hurt the shadow. In fact, they just passed through as if nothing.

Kate shrieked in anger.

The anger slowly transformed into pain and then a blind sort of terror as the shadow swallowed her whole, bit by bit, cell by cell. All the way.

Derek watched until it was just her heart hanging uselessly in the loving grasp. And then there was nothing left of her.

He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

He let go of many thing he didn’t know he was still holding within his own heart at that moment as he stood there and watched the shadow move up again. Folding up into a shape of a human, organs solidifying inside of it one by one. They were enveloped by bones shooting out of nothing, coated with flesh and muscles and then dressed in shiny new skin.

Within a few moments it was a full-grown male human - a very much naked male human.

Peter grinned over at them with a victorious smile. He was breathing hard, same as all of them, maybe except the Hunters scattered around who… well, for the not most part were definitely not breathing anymore.

And those that were breathing were not in the room anymore. The Hunters that didn’t manage to run out as Kate was being devoured in the most gruesome way got taken out by tentacles and the rest was probably running off to their ship. Provided they could get to it before the Med station got them.

Derek looked through the hole and saw that most of the Med Station seemed to be back online, with droids cruising around, with medics running around and security droids patrolling the hallways. Their own hole was already being fixed by three small maintenance bots. One of those little suckers was even standing next to the last few shards sticking out - shards that were left out of Cora’s prism and it was valiantly trying to put it back together.
Derek snorted and looked over at Peter.

“I think an I told you so is in order,” Peter noted, waving his arms around to gesture at the mess of blood, shards and weapons.

Derek sighed, lowering his head as he shifted into his human form. “You’ve earned that at least.”

“That and much more, my dear nephew,” Peter grinned, looking at Tentacle and surprisingly Stiles who was already standing near xe, eying the waving tentacles.

“Um, so... taking out the grenade would be good,” he said, pointing out the wound that wasn’t healing. The grenade was wedged deeply inside, the handle sticking out like a sore thorn.

Peter walked over to look at the wound and Stiles averted his eyes in a very polite manner. Except averting them meant he was staring right at Derek. Not that Derek minded.

“Fucking hell,” Stiles breathed, running a hand over his sweaty face.

“I think she can shift out of it by herself,” Peter said as he assessed the wound. “Can’t you, Cora?”

His eyes burned red, brighter than a red dwarf and ever so imposing.

“It’s save now, child,” Peter continued, reaching out to touch the closest tentacle with his gentle fingertips. “A human would do nicely, I reckon.”

And Cora obeyed as if shifting was the easiest thing in the universe. As if it was nothing more than letting yourself be carried away by the wind. As if Peter’s eyes were pulling her in out of the shift into another, fueling an endless dance similar to twin moons and a chaotic mass of water.

The tentacles shriveled down into the body as it stretched up into a smaller, more defined shape. The eyes turned around and in that one motions shifted into a human head, her limbs popping out like bursting bubbles.

The grenade fell down with a mechanic thunk, rolling away. Stiles crouched down to pick it up.

And then she was there - Cora. In her custom human build. Still just as young, still just as beautiful.

And just as naked.

Stiles just threw his hands up in defeat and simply turned around, but Derek, Derek couldn’t take his eyes of her. It was really her. It was really-

“Cora,” he breathed, not sure if he should believe it or if it was some weird fever dream and he was still stuck in the pod or what. Cora twitched, watching his movements closely like a cornered animal, like a babe torn away from her mother’s embrace.

“Cora, I’m-”

Before Cora, or any of them really, could say anything, a voice drifted through the hole in the wall.

“What in the name of all that is holy is going on here?”

Melissa was staring through the hole, her hair in a very chaotic disarray. A bunch of medics and droids were standing right behind her, watching the ansamble inside of the prism.

It was all really bizarre.
Laughable even.

Three very naked humans and Stiles drenched in sweat, blood and stars knew what else amidst a lot of dead bodies.

Very bizzare indeed.

Laughable.

~o~

Cora refused any sort of touch or anybody else to come closer and the medics agreed it would be for the best to just leave her curl up next to Peter and sit there cradling her knees.

Peter hummed under his breath as he closed his eyes and for the first time in what seemed like forever, he seemed at peace and perfectly satisfied with the silence of their breathing.

And Derek, well even if he felt slightly unwelcome by how Cora avoided his eyes, he sat down next to them and stayed there.

They sat there together as the maintenance droids hummed around, decomposing the bodies and cleaning up the blood. Sat there as they started to built up the prism again. The prism that no longer felt like a cage. It felt as if something protective was being built up around them - and something was building back up within them as well. And while everything was far from being okay, Derek felt like it was at least better. Better than it had been in a very very long while.

At some point the droids deposited some clothes into the prism. Clothes that ended up ignored. And so did the portable shower they installed in the faraway corner and the nest at the other side. What wasn’t ignored were the bags of food and drinks Stiles dropped next to Derek and then discreetly disappeared out of the prism again. Derek shot him a thankful smile and grabbed the bags to put them in a neat row in front of them. He wasn’t really hungry himself, even if his stomach kept growling for the past lifetime, but Cora attacked the baggies right away and munched down most of it within the first few moments.

Peter reached over and grabbed a baggie of Whittemorians beans for himself.

“*Not a bad mate you got there,*” he noted after a while.

Derek snorted. He looked over at his uncle and shrugged. “*Not a bad one at all,*” he agreed.

“*Quite surprising really, you actually making some good choices in your life,*” Peter teased. Cora snorted next to him and then covered it back up with more munching.

Derek nodded, the corner of his lips twitching. “*Yeah, I... yeah.*”

The conversation lapsed out into silence again, until Peter reached out for one of the drinks and offered the other to Derek. Cora was already slurping down her third at that point.

“*So aren’t you going to ask me?*” his uncle suggested. Or tried to anyways.

“*Ask what?*”
“How come the 1-0-0 blocker didn’t work on me. How come the Whitpoison in it didn’t either. How come Cora was able to shift out into a complete Morgorian. And what the hell was that shadowy shift I sported when I finally managed to do what you thought I will never be able to do.”

Peter’s eyes were gleaming as he listed all the possible questions that admittedly were cruising somewhere at the back of Derek’s mind.

Still, it wasn’t his main worry right then. “Don’t care,” he admitted.

“Oh, come on,” Peter said, grinning over at him. “I know you are dying to find out.”

Derek sighed, taking a sip out of his cup. “And stroke your already huge ego? No, thanks.”

Peter lifted an eyebrow in his direction and then shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

They watched the droid finish up the last parts of the prism. It booted up all around them, flickering from the mirror into a see-through glass again and Derek could see Stiles talk to Melissa right behind it.

“So what’s the plan now?” he asked, watching as Stiles nodded along something Melissa was saying.

“Once Cora gets better, we will go,” Peter said. “Somewhere far away, somewhere safe.”

Derek frowned, something heavy settling itself in his chest. “Is that even necessary?” he asked. “The Hunters-”

“-are still out there.” Peter finished for him. “I don’t think the Argents will give up that quickly. We have to remain vigilant. More so now,” Peter aid, his eyes wandering to Cora.

Derek nodded, his eyes own still glued to Stiles.

~o~

“Need more food?” Stiles asked as Derek approached him. He left the prism when Melissa got inside to check up on Cora and pester Peter about his methods, which in both cases wasn’t something he needed to be present for.

Derek reached out and Stiles reacted without any special prompting, sliding their fingers together.

“No, I think,” he looked over to confirm there were still some baggies Cora didn’t touch. “I think we’re fine for now.”

“Alright, well, listen,” Stiles started, gesturing. “I will have to go off for a bit to, you know, help save a bunch of blocked people, hah. Turns out I am the chosen one and only my antibodies can help with all of this mess. I also have to meet with a bunch of Nanos and give them one of my babies to travel with them. They will take it to the Nano worlds so that the antibodies can spread faster and… I suppose a vaccine will follow after for the rest of the universe later. Well, first for the people from the 1-0-0 facility that are already far too… down the road, you know, but then the rest. I am the only non-Shifter that managed to heal from the blocker, so, yeah.”

Derek nodded. He suspected as much, since him and Cora wouldn’t be able to give them any
samples, the only other solution was talking Stiles into helping. And Stiles obviously had no problem with any of it.

“So, I mean,” Stiles continued. “I guess this is a goodbye for now, but-”

*Wait, what?*

“I am guessing you will have to leave real quick since now they know where you all are and… well, their-”

“Stiles.”

“It’s fine though, I understand.”

“Stiles.”

“Cora needs you.”

“Stiles.”

“And Peter probab-”

“St-”

“It’s fine,” he argued, pulling his hand out. His eyes were darting around while he nodded along with his stupid words.

“It’s not fine,” Derek said, tugging at his hand. Each syllable Stiles uttered was pulling him further away from Derek and he… he wasn’t ready to not let go. Not now. And probably not ever.

Stiles gave him a pained look.

“It’s not fine,” Derek repeated.

“No, it’s not, but-” Stiles just shrugged, staring down at their linked hands. “I-”

“I’m not going with them,” Derek said, squeezing his hand.

Stiles frowned. “If the Sheriff lets me, that is.”

“-needs Peter now, not me,” Derek said, knowing full well that was true. And it was fine. They would get to reconnect again, just not right now. It would be too much for Cora right now. She had enough trauma to work through and having the main trigger within view was not gonna work - he knew that well. She needed a safe space with someone she could trust. And that wasn’t him.

“Derek,” Stiles started to argue again, but Derek didn’t let him.

He shook his head. “That’s fine. I-..,” he hesitated. “In fact, I was thinking that I am feeling a lot better now, so maybe… maybe it’s time I go back to work?”

Stiles blinked. “What wor-… ohhh.”

“If the Sheriff lets me, that is.”

“Oh my s-, I mean, yeah that can be arranged. I can, yea… are you sure?”

“Yes.” Derek smiled. “I’m sure.”
EPILOGUE

Chapter Notes

A/N: Wowza... we are done here. I thank you all for the support and hope you will enjoy this lovely nsfw epilogue. It’s been one helluva ride!

The 1-0-0 was slowly gliding up the rising masses of water, xyr tendrils stretching up and up all the way to the human form floating on the surface.

With a firm flap of xyr flat body, xe powered up through the strong current ignoring the allure of gliding into the open sea. The water got slowly warmer and warmer, the rays of harsh sunshine
caressing xyr fragile body. The lack of visual senses made it easier for xyr to ascend, but harder to xe to find the target. But then the body moved and xe knew - it was right there. Xe stretched out one tendril, sliding its tip over the shin of the human and then reaching up to circle it around the ankle.

The iron hold pulled the human under the surface of the water. And just as the body sank down, the 1-0-0 used the rest of its tentacles to trap him - they wrapped loosely around the thrashing limbs, circling the torso in a deadly embrace.

Human hands pushed against the 1-0-0’s body and legs kicked out, rising back up above water. And the 1-0-0 let xyrself to be pulled up, xyr tendrils slowly shrinking, the body solidifying until Derek’s human form was wrapped around Stiles, laughing.

“What the fuck, dude!” Stiles spluttered as he blinked the water out of his eyes. “Get the fuck off me.”

He pushed against Derek’s chest, but Derek only squeezed in closer, hanging onto him. Stiles had to furiously kick through the water to stay over the surface to fight against their combined weight.

“I’ll drown, you fucker!” he wheezed, splashing some water into Derek’s face to pry him off his struggling body. Needless to say, that didn’t exactly work.

“Jellybean, jellybean!” Stiles yelled, wedging his hands into Derek’s biceps to pull him off. He somehow managed to get his arms free completely with that move and grab his shoulders. With one mighty kick, he tensed his arms and pushes at Derek’s shoulders. Stiles’ weight pushed him under the water and he was forced to let go off him so that he could swim back up.

Stiles was already swimming away, laughing and kicking around him as Derek started to follow.

“I said get the fuck away from me, you nuisance!” Stiles yelled, splashing water his way.

Derek jumped his way, trying to reach him again, but Stiles was too far. Well, too far for his normal human arm, but a Norgarian’s arm would have no problem at all. He started to shift mid-jump, his hand elongating and tripling on the fur coverage. His long fingers glazed Stiles’ ankle, making him yelp.

He jerked his foot out of the way and spun around to glare at him. “So not fair.”

Derek shrugged, waving his Norgarian hand at him.

“Yeah, no, I am banning shifting from this sea,” Stiles grumbled, gesturing at the calm waves around.

Derek smirked, swimming a lap around Stiles. “It’s not like you can stop me from shifting, Stiles.”

“Oh I very much can,” Stiles said smugly, turning around to keep him in the eye.

“Yeah and how?”

“I don’t know.” Stiles leered, pretending to think about it. “Maybe, and I am just freestyling it here, maybe the next time you have an urgent task for the Tech I can just move you to the bottom of my list.” he backed up from Derek a bit, the waves helping to carry him. “And you know what happens to the stuff at the bottom of my tasklist.” His smile widened. “Nothing. Nothing at all.” Stiles cackled.
“You’re bluffing,” Derek said. He gave up on swimming laps around Stiles and just went ahead to slowly approach him.

“Oh no, mister, I am real serious here. This is my serious face.” Stiles said, gesturing at the wide smile plastered over his face. He didn’t even try to pull it into a more serious expression. “You dared to pull me under water, man. You dared to mess with my perfect hair.” His hand went up to flatten his hair. It was longer now, longer than when they first met and he still didn’t exactly get used to it, especially when it was wet like this - it would always try poke out his eyes, he’d say.

Derek snorted, swimming closer. “Stiles, you always put my stuff on top,” he said, reaching out to stroke some of the stray hair out of the way. “Boyd doesn’t even let anybody else send you tasks anymore. Says it improved your efektivity a tenfold, us getting together.”

Stiles rolled his eyes, but his head did turn into Derek’s touch as he swam on the spot. “Yea well, Boyd knows shit.”

“No, I think he’s onto something alright,” Derek teased.

“Nope,” Stiles said, shaking his head. He reached over to brace himself on Derek’s shoulder, so he wouldn’t have to kick his legs around so frantically anymore. He did that a lot in the past few cycles, leaning onto Derek to keep them above the water. It was a simple gesture and yet it felt grand.

“Want to know what I think?” Derek said, leaning closer.

“Yea, what?” Stiles challenged, watching him.

“I think you have a soft spot for this one Rooter,” Derek whispered, bumping their noses together.

Stiles shrugged. “Yeah, Erica’s alright.” And Derek was ready to dunk him again just because he was being an asshole, but then Stiles grinned and pecked his lips and… well, all the thoughts of petty mischief flew out of Derek’s mind.

He smiled and kissed Stiles.

And then something bumped into his shoulder - something round. He looked over and saw some sort of Miriard fruit floating on the waves.

“Oh cool, wanna play catch with that?” Stiles said when he noticed it too. He reached over to grab-

“Don- seriously Stiles?” Derek asked when Stiles gripped it and pulled up his nose to sniff at it.

“You don’t know what that is.”

“I’m not gonna eat it,” Stiles said in exasperation. “We can still play catch with it.”

“It could be poisonous or something,” Derek said carefully.

Instead of answering Stiles pressed the ripe fruit against Derek’s cheek. If was slightly squishy in all the weird places.

“Seriously?” Derek sighed and Stiles laughed pushing off him to swim further into the sea.

Derek just watched him get in position. He did his best to look utterly unimpressed.

“Come on,” Stiles yelled over at him, his hand out in the air as he waited for Derek to show at least a speckle of enthusiastic consent. He didn’t. And yet Stiles lobbed the fruit right at him anyways.
His aim was way too good. The fruit landed right in front of Derek, splashing him with a mouthful of water.

“Sorry!” Stiles yelled with the biggest shiteating grin on his face.

“You don’t look sorry.”

“What?”

“I said-”

“WHAT?”

“I SAID-”

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU, THROW THE BALL!”

“IT'S NOT A-”

“WHAT?”

“IT’S NOT A BALL!”

“What?”

“STOP PRETENDING YOU CAN’T HEAR ME!”

“THROW IT BACK AND I WILL!”

Needless to say they’ve spent the rest of their time in the sea playing catch with a potentially poisonous fruit. And Derek actually enjoyed every fucking moment of it.

~0~

A shadow fell over Derek. Stiles towered over him, the artificial sunshine covered by his already clothed body. Derek looked up from where he was sitting on the fine sand, typing on his holo.

“Ready to go?” Stiles asked, turning around to look over the expanse of their small private beach. The sands were lavishly lapped by the brilliant-clear waters of the rising sea. Within a bit it would be flooded up to the elevator and the two palm trees in the middle.

“Not quite,” Derek muttered, squinting at his holo.

Stiles hummed and moved to flop down next to him.

“Cora?” he asked, leaning over to check what he was writing.

Derek nodded, pursing his lips. “They left an egg for me to pick up,” he said. “It’s just some general info on how they are doing. It’s… this is so awkward, still. I don’t really know what to write back to this?”

Stiles peered over, his eyes scanning the very short and factual text - they were safe, they were squatting down with a friend of Peter’s and that was pretty much it. Nothing overly personal.
Nothing... nothing a younger sister would write to her brother while he’s on a vacation. Nothing like what Scott wrote to Stiles, Derek knew, he had seen those messages. Compared to that what Cora wrote felt too tense, too forced. As if Peter told her to write it. As if he ordered it.

Stiles hummed under his breath, the sound an obvious agreement.

*Great.*

“Let’s send her a video message,” Stiles proposed.

“What? No.”

“Look, just because she is not disclosing anything in this… report of hers doesn’t mean you can’t. You should in fact, I think,” he said, sliding his bracelet from his own hand and already tapping in the commands. “Show her it’s okay to do so.”

“I don’t know if that’s-”

“We can just make it now and you can decide if you want to send it to her later, hm?” Stiles said, turning the bracelet into their faces. “If nothing else we will have something to remember this by.”

“I hate making videos, Stiles,” he said right when Stiles hit the record button, which: “You will cut that beginning out,” he stated, glaring over at Stiles, who just smiled.

“Sure, sure,” he said, his tone suggesting he will in no way do such thing.

“Stiles.”

“Derek,” Stiles mocked, giving him a look. He waved his hand at the bracelet recording them and waited for Derek to say something, but he just glared at it grumpily and then turned to look away.

Stiles sighed, put a small kiss on his bare shoulder and then turned into the view himself. “Hi, Cora! And hi whoever else I will show this video to later.”

“You won’t show this to anyone,” Derek grumbled. “In fact, we will stop here,” he added, reaching out for his bracelet.

Stiles jerked his hand away and literally somersaulted out of reach. He jumped up, pivoting on the spot and then pointed the bracelet back at Derek.

“Sourwolf extraordinaire here wanted to say hello in a very special way,” he said, zooming in on Derek’s eyebrows - Derek could see it at the back of the holo and it only made his eyebrow knit together even more furiously.

“I didn’t want any of this,” Derek noted.

Stiles reached out to put his hand in front of the bracelet, his finger lining up with the view of Derek’s eyebrows. He started to move his forefinger between them as if he wanted to pull his eyebrows apart.

When he didn’t succeed, he tsked and started to talk himself again: “Deep down in the majestic oceans of Miriard lives a creature with unique-”

“Stiles.”

“-morphing ability,” he continued. “This magnificent specimen is the true miracle of the nature,
able to transform its face into the most haunting thing of nightmares.”

“Stiles.”

“Once a cycle it is forced to follow its instinctual drive to copulate...”

“Stiles!”

“...forward its genes. This is when it emerges from the deep oceans,” he went on, turning around to get their surroundings in the shot. “And descends upon this specific private beach to find a mate to copulate...”

“Enough.” Derek got up to walk over to Stiles and freaking wrestle the bracelet from his hand if he had to just so he would stop his shenanigans.

“Overcome by the sudden lust,” Stiles giggled, pointing his bracelet at Derek. “It doesn’t waste time to approach and pounce, no-!”

He yelped when Derek actually sped up and gently tackled him. Putting his arms around his waist, he lifted him up and spun around until Stiles was laughing like crazy, too breathless to talk anymore.

“Okay, okay, turning it off, stop!” Stiles begged, gripping at Derek’s shoulder.

“Bye, Cora!” he yelled into his bracelet before tapping the stop button.

Derek stopped to let him go and then they both flopped down into the sand until the world stopped spinning. To be honest though, the world never did stop spinning with Stiles around. It kept spinning and spinning, time always flying by faster than it should and for the most part it just left Derek feeling utterly and perfectly fulfilled.

~o~

“Wanna stop somewhere to grab a bite?” Stiles said as they stepped into the elevator leading up to the sky. Derek gave the artificial blue above their heads one last look before shrugging in answer and following.

“Not hungry?” Stiles asked, his finger hovering over the control panel.

“Not much,” Derek admitted, as the glass slid closed behind them. “But you can-”

“Alright, well you were shifting so we should get some food anyways. What if we stopped by the district and walked around a bit?” Stiles proposed, hitting the needed button before Derek could even answer. “Maybe something catches your eye? I’ll just grab whatever if there’s nothing.”

Derek nodded, reaching for Stiles’s hand. Their fingers entangled as the silence around them grew pregnant, but it was a comfortable sort of silence, entwined with the hum of waves slowly disappearing, the last rays of sunshine kissing their skin goodbye and the salty air filtering off into the atmosphere.

The elevator dinged at the district and Stiles lead the way. They walked through the hallway, passing entrances to different food places - the planet resort actually had separate places instead of
automats, which had their own attractions for the visitors. Stiles took him to a few that he remembered from the family vacation long ago and most of them were really good. But this time, Derek’s mind just kept circling back to Cora and the grumbling in his stomach never reached his brain.

He read over a few holo menus, just looking at them really, without actually remembering the offer.

“Sorry,” he said when he realized he had just been dragging Stiles through a hallway after hallway without actually committing to any of it. “I don’t-”

Stiles squeezed his hand. “Right, so is this like a situation 1 or 2?” he asked, knowing him well enough to catch the signs.

Derek sighed, giving it a thought. “I don’t know, both? Sor-”

“Say no more kind sir,” Stiles said. He nodded and walked Derek to the nearest free bench. “Wait here. I will be right back.” And then he disappeared into the hallway on the left.

Derek sat down. He stared into the space for a bit, his stomach squeezing tight and then brought up his holo to read Cora’s last message again. Reread it a few times if truth be told. After a brief thought, he just sighed and pulled the video Stiles made earlier from their shared cloud and sent it of to their network of eggs with no message at all.

Stiles returned right after that a food container in his arms. Derek got up to glance through the lid and saw an assortment of different foods and a few drinks.

“Patio?” Stiles asked, shaking the container.

Derek smiled. “Sounds good.”

~o~

The patio adjoined to their room was one of Derek’s favorite places from the whole planetary resort. And he heavily suspected he himself was the reason Stiles chose this district to stay in. It was literally hanging in the air right at the edge of a dense forest with lush bluish-green trees that were higher than the entire building, rising up above, covering the white dwarf in the actual sky, letting just a few stray rays of sunshine through.

They were sitting on the ottoman pushed against the railing, the food scattered over the small table in front of them.

Derek was leaning on the railing, breathing in the scent of blooming trees and listening to the gentle rustling. That and Stiles’ tapping and chewing, which one would have thought would be really annoying, but it only made Derek smile. The sound of another living person near… it was something he had missed for a long time. The close presence, the distant warmth, the intimate moments-

“So, Scott says hey,” Stiles say, snorting as he tapped away.

“Hey back,” Derek said automatically, leaning away from the railing to look over the expanse of
their table. He reached over for another small portion of scrambled eggs (of unknown origin) and started to slowly eat them.

He watched Stiles switch between a few different conversations on his holo before asking: “How many people did you share the video with?”

“Like literally everyone, come on,” Stiles snorted, stuffing his mouth full with his vegetable salad. “More or less.”

Derek just hummed under his breath in acknowledgment and looked back into the trees. His eyes tracked their swaying movement for a bit. It was so peaceful there on the patio, it was almost unbelievable. It made Derek’s thoughts loose, it made them sverve back to-

There was a silent ding that pulled Derek back from his own thoughts. Stiles shuffled closer and brought up his holo so he could see too.

“Hey guys,” Erica greeted from the pop-up covering the entirety of Stiles’ holo. Her wavy blond hair blocked the background, but it was clear she was calling from Root. “How’s the vac?”

“Stop it,” Stiles ordered, pressing his hand against the screen. “Now reroot me to my intern before he breaks the whole-”

Erica pouted. “I wanna talk to Derek first, come on.”

“Well then, call his holo,” Stiles said.

“He never picks up,” Erica complained, making Derek shrug. At this point he was already used to such disclaimers - he was notoriously bad at conversations and she always complained about it.

“Not my problem,” Stiles retorted sternly. “Now reroot me.”

“Uh no, I wanna talk to Derek,” Erica said, making a lazy motion with her hand. “Shoo.”

Stiles looked offended. “Do your freaking job, woman. This isn’t a courtesy call.”

“I just made it one,” she replied, gesturing at someone behind her.

“Come on, Erica,” Stiles begged. “You can’t just forward that copy to me and then expect me to not care, okay? He could be fucking up my baby for all that I know.”

While Stiles ranted, a second face joined in on the screen, his hair just as blond, a tad more curly. “Oh, hey guys,” Isaac greeted.

“Now, that’s just cheating,” Stiles groaned, throwing eye-daggers at Erica. “And before you ask, Isaac, we are doing great, thank you very much, now can I please get that reroot?”

“How’s vacation, Derek?” Isaac asked, ignoring Stiles, for which he got a silent whisper of: “Backstabbing homewrecker.”

“It’s alright,” Derek answered quickly to drown out Stiles’ cursing. “How’s work?”


Derek nodded turning back to his food.

“Seriously?” Stiles complained.
Isaac smiled. “I guess this is the part where I say something witty to stall you further, but,” he shrugged. “I’m not witty and there is a lot of work piling up, so.” He waved in goodbye, gave Erica a pointed look of “stop slacking off on your shift” and returned to his station.

“Thank you,” Stiles said. “Now-”

“Derek, you are invited to my wedding, no excuses accepted!” Erica yelled over Stiles.

Derek just stared.

“Oh my stars!” Stiles exclaimed. “It’s finally happening? I can’t-... wait, how is Derek invited before me, I call bullshit!”

Erica grinned, winking at Derek - or at Stiles… honestly it was hard to tell through the screen. “Me and Derek are besties, what are you on about? Of course I will invite him first.”

Stiles gave her a look.

“You can be Derek’s plus one,” she teased, pouring more combustibles into the fire.

“Oh that’s it!” Stiles cried out. “That’s freaking it! I am-”

“Stiles, stop disrupting our work,” came from behind Erica. Boyd squeezed his head into the screen from the left side. “You are invited too, the whole crew is invited. Now-”

“Even Jackson?”

“Yes, even Jackson.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No.”

“I was supposed to be invited first then if nothing else,” Stiles argued, affronted.

“Next time don’t go on a vacation when we plan to invite people then,” Boyd noted calmly.

“You wound me, sir,” Stiles said, pushing a hand against his heart. “I think I’ll just withdraw all my services from your department, seeing as you treat me like trash!”

Boyd smiled. “See if you say no when I send Derek over.”

Stiles pursed his lips together. “I will.”

“Sure you will,” Boyd said, nodding solemnly. “Reroot him through, Erica. We need to prepare for the Solar.”

“Sure thing, boss,” she sing-sang and Boyd disappeared from the view before they could see the usual embarrassment painting his face over being called as such.

“See ya,” Erica said, waving her hand. The screen went black again as they waited for Stiles’ coworker to pick up.

“What do you need to talk to the intern for?” Derek asked curiously, putting the empty food box back at the table, his thoughts straying back to-
“I got forwarded a report on a recent yellow task he was trying to complete and-”

_Hm._ “Ah, so nothing important.”

“Oh no, it’s very well important.”

_Hmm._ “Important like…?”

“Important like he might fuck something up.”

_Hmmmm._ “He is a very skilled Tech, Stiles, I’m sure-”

“Yeah, except _I_ tuned the Beacon, okay, so I know best how to solve-”

“Okay,” Derek said, giving up on the conversation. He stood up to walk back inside. "I’ll just jump into the shower while you do your thing.

“Sure, go ahead,” Stiles muttered, already tapping away at his holo to bring up the report he needed.

Derek lingered at the door, watching him knit his eyebrows in contemplation and wondered if he should go for it now or maybe just leave it to later. It wasn’t as if anything he had to say couldn’t wait… it has waited till now and - although he had been meaning to ask ever since he found out their cabin will be equipped with a liquid shower... somehow it never seemed the right timing.

_It could wait, _he decided, _it’s not like they were in a rush._

Except he didn’t want to wait anymore.

It was okay to ask.

It was okay, he knew.

It was always okay to ask anything of Stiles.

It was okay to say if he wanted something.

Anything.

He knew that.

He _did._

And yet.

And...

And _so,_ Derek corrected after a bit. And _so:_ “Unless you’d want to come with?” he asked.

Stiles’ hand hovered over the holo, his eye flitting up to him. “Huh?”

“The shower,” Derek muttered quickly, jerking his hand to gesture inside.

Stiles blinked, processing and then his eyebrows went up as he processed some more. “As in together?”

“Yes.”
Stiles opened his mouth to answer just as his holo gave a ding and a screen popped up with the intern already greeting him: “Look, if you are calling about-”

“No, no,” Stiles answered, his eyes still glued to Derek. “You got it, dude, I trust you.” And with that he terminated the connection and jumped to follow Derek inside.

~o~

Derek started to undress before Stiles even entered the bathroom. He grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head and then dropped it on the floor as Stiles walked in.

It wasn’t because he was embarrassed, impossible. He had been naked around Stiles a lot of times - mostly when they were running for their lives or... well, pretty much every time he wanted to shift. Why, just a while before, back at the beach, he had been naked too. Except, one could argue that this time, it was by design. By a very, very specific design.

Stiles walked in and stopped, staring. “Oh.” And then he just reached behind him and closed the bathroom door. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.” He nodded again and pulled off his own shirt. It ended up on the floor next to Derek’s.

Derek watched him, staring at the expanses of skin as if it was something new. And in a way it was, wasn’t it?

He hadn’t been allowed to touch anybody in this way before and it took him forever to finally ram it through his thick skull that he was in fact very much allowed to do so when he wanted to.

And he did.

He had wanted to for a while now.

It was finally time to actually-

Derek slid his fingers under his waistband and just pulled off his sweatpants together with his underwear. He kicked them off to join the crumpled shirt on the floor.

He knew Stiles was watching, his movement stilled in the corner of his eyes, but he didn’t glance his way to check if he was following suit. He just walked into the shower and started to fiddle with the holo there, bringing up his usual settings.

Water poured from the minuscule jets above him, sliding down his skin. It calmed him down a bit. The warmth, the steam, the slight pressure of the sprays.

He brought his hand up to wipe the droplets from his face and looked over at Stiles, who was still standing where Derek left him, his hands at the waistband of his pants, his gaze fixed upon him.

Derek raised an eyebrow in his direction and it took a while until Stiles noticed it, but once he did he just muttered something under his breath and wrestled the rest of his clothes off.

Derek moved to make place for him when he approached, turning back into the water to let it wash away his frantic thoughts.

He only looked back when Stiles yelped and jumped from the shower. He looked over - directly at
his dick... and only later at the shocked face he was making.

“What?” Derek asked, confused.

“Dude, that’s like scolding hot,” Stiles exclaimed, gesturing at the water.

“What? No, it isn’t,” Derek said and reached out to put his palm right under the spray. It seemed normal.

“What the actual fuck,” Stiles said in disbelief. He reached over too and then nodded a few times. “Yep, that’s gonna like... boil me alive within-”

“It’s not going to boil you alive, it’s a normal temperature,” Derek argued incredulously. “I mean, of course the sea is colder, but-”

“Much colder,” Stiles agreed. “Much, much colder.”

Derek sighed.

“This is what stepping into hell feels like, honestly,” Stiles said, finding the whole situation way too hilarious. “I’m not-”

“Alright,” Derek interrupted, tapping at the holo to stop the water. “Why don’t you just set it up.”

Stiles snorted and waved his hand around to disperse some of the steam and Derek just folded his arms over his chest, waiting. The gusts of wind made his skin prickle. Or maybe it was the slight annoyance creeping up on him since things weren’t really going as planned. It was nowhere near as planned. As imagined. As-

Stiles jumped into the shower and tapped the holo to pull out his own settings from the previous cycle. Water rained down on them and Derek couldn’t help but shy away from it, its coldness uncomfortable after the warmth he had set up before.

“Are you kidding me?” he grumbled, gesturing at the water Stiles was standing in comfortably. “Are you fucking-”

“What?” Stiles laughed. “I swear I’m not. This is my usual water setting, come on.”

“This is definitely colder than the sea. And I was deep in, Stiles. Deep in. I would know what’s cold and what’s-”

“Well, the sea is warmed up by-”

“Is this a jo-”

“How even? You’ve seen me. I pulled it up just as it was saved from-”

“Stiles, I swear to-”

At which Stiles just laughed even more, drowning out Derek’s words. “I am honestly not messing with you. Just because you want to bath in the sun.”

“Don’t you start,” Derek said, itching away from the cold water. “This is in no way-”

Stiles jerked his hand around to divert a few droplets in his direction. Derek slapped his hand away. “Fuck off,” he growled and Stiles just laughed harder.
“Ah, I can’t,” he wheezed, pushing his hands against his stomach as if it hurt. “I can’t.”

“Stop laughing. This is not funny,” Derek ordered, albeit failing himself judging by the begrudging smile on his lips.

“Alright, alright,” Stiles said, trying to calm down (and failing miserably). He turned off the water and then just grabbed the shower head. “We’ll just switch to manual then.”

Derek had nothing else left but to agree and push his exasperation down as they proceeded to wash themselves in the most inconvenient way, trading the shower head and resetting the water temperature after every turn.

It was a disaster or a shower.

Stiles laughed whenever he got the water just right, because it still amused him that Derek simply liked it a bit warmer than he did. And then he laughed even harder when Derek scowled at the cold streams of water.

Derek suspected Stiles was just never gonna stop laughing judging by the uncontrollable wheezing coming from him.

It was the most ridiculous conjoint shower ever.

Derek wouldn’t have traded it for any other.

But still.

~o~

“Alright, well, this went totally different than what I’d expected when you invited me to shower with you. I mean in a good way, but you know,” Stiles said and then he just giggled again. We was still lost in the fit of laughter, albeit it was already slightly subsiding, thanks the stars.

Derek handed him the second towel and then went ahead to dry his hair.

“Not what I was going for either,” he admitted with the towel over his head.

Stiles just snorted, drying himself too. “What were you going for?” he asked, still smiling.

“Not that,” Derek admitted, his amusement mixing with illogical exasperation. Though maybe not that illogical when one actually thought about it. He couldn’t help but to bury his face in his towel and sigh.

Stiles threw the towel over his head and then grabbed it by its ends and started to pull it to and fro, drying his hair. “What then?” he asked, distracted.

Derek glanced over at him, tracking the droplets of water pampering his fair skin, hoping that one look would bare all his feelings and thoughts out to Stiles. That was not something looks could do though.

“What then?” Stiles repeated more seriously, his hands stilling as their eyes met.
Derek pursed his lips.

“Hm?”

The towel slipped from Derek’s hands as he stepped in closer. Or maybe he just threw it on the ground because he needed his hand free so that he could reach out and caress Stiles’ cheek.

He must have lingered at the edge of Stiles’ personal space for a tad too long, because Stiles hummed and wound his arms around Derek’s waist, pulling him closer.

And then they were kissing. The gentle presses of their lips making Derek feel as if his rib cage was suddenly two sizes too small for his huge heart. Even if it wasn’t for the first time their lips touched, it somehow still made his heart ache every time they did. It thudded in his chest, harder with each brush of their lips.

Harder and harder.

He sighed into it, sliding his fingers into Stiles’ wet hair to run them through.

Once.

Twice.

Until he got lost in their kisses and forgot all about it.

They were sweet in an overwhelming sort of way, bringing them closer and closer together, fusing their skin together. Derek didn’t realize his arms were around Stiles’ neck until he found himself caught in a tight embrace.

He sighed in content, pressing a kiss in the corner of Stiles’ mouth and then another one on his cheek, slowly continuing down his jaw to his neck. Stiles turned his face away from his with a soft exhale.

Derek’s fingers skittering over his shoulder and then he buried his nose in the crook of Stiles’ neck, his lips moving over the soft skin still. He wanted to taste more of it. So much more. And with that thought coursing through his head, his tongue just came out on its own as he slowly licked his way up Stiles’ neck, making him gasp silently, grab at his waist, pull him closer.

It was when his tongue caressed the lobe of Stiles ear, that Stiles pulled away from him, whispering: “Let’s just-” But before he could finish, he was back on him, kissing him again as if there was nothing to be said anymore.

It was only later, when they were breathless and their lips swollen, that Stiles braced his forehead against Derek’s and repeated his suggestion.

Derek breathed, sliding his fingers over Stiles’ back. “You didn’t dry off yet,” he said, because his palm kept collecting droplets of water on its path down Stiles’ spine.

Stiles shivered and then shrugged, leaning in to kiss him again. “It’s fine, it’s-”

“Stiles, your whole back is wet,” he argued. “You can’t just-” He let go of him and leaned down to pick up one of the towels decorating the floor of the bathroom.

Stiles just laughed, a slight hysteria creeping into his voice as Derek bent down. And then his laugh caught in his throat when Derek just looked up at him, his hand sneaking around his leg. He
pressed his lips against Stiles’ thigh and Stiles, he... just kept staring at him, his chest rising and sinking unevenly.

“Ah fuck,” Stiles whispered as Derek got sidetracked and nibbled at the skin of his thigh, his fingers slowly tracing up his skin.

He pressed his cheek against the thigh as his hand got high enough to touch Stiles’ dick that hang heavily between his legs. Derek could feel the muscles beneath his cheek clench as he ran his fingertips over the slick head and then slowly over the underside, all the way up to its base. The skin beneath his fingers was soft and thin and oh-so-delicate and Derek couldn’t help but lean in and press his lips against its side.

“Oh shit,” Stiles breathed, glancing down at him, his hand stroking Derek’s head encouragingly.

Derek shifted closer, his hand taking hold of the base of Stiles’ dick, and his mouth opening to swallow the head. He could hear Stiles curse more. Could feel him curl over Derek when he sucked the head, when he moved his tongue around it, and when…

He looked up at Stiles, still lapping at his dick and the look Stiles gave him was… a bit too much. He closed his eyes as Stiles stroked over his temples, staring at him, breathing heavily.

Derek bobbed his head a few times just to try it out, his hand still gripping the base of Stiles’ dick, because there was no way he could go that deep and… within a few moments, Stiles was gently pushing him away and pulling him back up.

“...fucking kidding me, this is too much,” he muttered, leaning in to kiss him. Derek turned away, but Stiles chased after him, getting his kiss anyways.

“C’mon,” Stiles urged, gesturing at the bathroom door. “Let’s just~”

“Wait,” Derek said, grabbing the towel. “Wait.” He draped it over Stiles back and scrubbed him dry as best as he could.

Stiles could only shake his head fondly as he did so, before he tsked that it was fine and actually managed to push him out of the bathroom.

~o~

Stiles flopped on the bed, rolling around to get to the middle and then reached out for Derek.

“C’mere,” he muttered, twirling his fingers.

Derek huffed a laugh, crawling up next to him and lied down on his side. Grabbing the hem of a blanket, Stiles pulled it over them, cuddling in closer to Derek - head nestled under his chin, arm around his chest, leg over his thighs, the rest somehow squished between them.

Derek sighed in content and ran his hand over Stiles’ hair, smoothing it out of his eyes.

“You should be my hair stylist,” Stiles muttered planting a kiss on his clavicle.

“’S what you always say,” Derek answered, sliding his thigh between Stiles’ legs. “And then you say sleek’s not your thing.” He leaned over, nosing at his temple.
“It isn’t,” Stiles agreed, looking over at him.

“How’s that different from your buzzcut?” Derek snorted, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Exactly,” Stiles answered, his fingers tracing Derek’s spine. “I grew my hair out to have some change, not to end up with the same visual.”

Derek shrugged, kissing him again and this time he didn’t get to pull away anymore. Stiles’ mouth melted against his, all velvet and warmth and his body followed soon after.

They grinded against each other slowly, the angle odd and the press of their bodies not enough, but it sent up spikes over Derek’s nerve endings regardless. It was an enthralling motion, creating a slow uncoiling spiral that rose higher with each repetition.

And soon it was warmer than any other shower Derek had ever taken, more heated than the hot springs back at their home planet, bubbling and steamy. So much that the blanket was soon almost obsolete. And yet, Stiles grabbed its edge with his hand when it threatened to pull up, keeping it over Derek’s back as they kissed.

“‘S fine,” Derek muttered, reaching back to pull the blanket from his hold. He wanted to feel a cool breeze over his heated skin.

“Shut it,” Stiles huffed, pushing Derek down on the bed and pulling the blanket with him as he leaned over. “I gotta make up for the freezing shower.”

“You don’t,” Derek breathed as Stiles dipped down to kiss his exposed shoulder. He continued up his skin, over the neck, making Derek shiver slightly.

“See,” Stiles noted, licking slowly down his neck, the shivers returning with a breathless sigh.

“Just proving my point really,” Derek whispered, sliding his hands down his waist and lower still - to stop at his moving hips.

Stiles’ mouth traveled down his body and he didn’t have the strength to pull him back up, although his lips were left hanging - open and empty. Empty enough to moan breathlessly when Stiles ran his tongue flatly over his nipple, teasing; when he pressed a kiss against his side, when he nibbled at the lower part of his abdomen. Not even when the blanket slid down from them, leaving their skin exposed.

Stiles was so close to Derek’s dick at that point that it didn’t matter. And yet his mouth was nowhere near. It was almost unbearable. Stiles moved to lie between his legs, prying them apart a bit more to fit in and Derek just stared as he pressed his lips against his inner thigh, waiting, smiling to himself.

Derek sighed impatiently as Stiles completely ignored the hot cock in front of him and moved to his other thigh, pressing a soft kiss there too. Derek let out a frustrated huff and all that he got in answer was a soft chuckle.

He was about to say something, but coherency was put at the back burner when Stiles began to mouth at his balls, the tip of his nose brushing the base of Derek’s cock.

Ah yeah.

He looked down, his breath lost somewhere at the back of his throat.
And then Stiles looked over at him and stuck out his tongue, slowly licking up the underside of Derek’s aching cock.

And…

*Shit* … That was gonna be forever seared behind Derek’s eyelids, he was sure of that. That and Stiles’ mouth around his dick because that’s pretty much what followed once he reached the top.

Derek let his head fall down on the pillow with a soft moan as Stiles slowly sucked him off.

*Of all the stars in the universe*…

Reaching over he grasped Stiles’ hand and their fingers entwined. He squeezed them, hoping it would get across whatever his breathless silence couldn’t - that the tongue swirling the underside of the head was sending tingling sensations over his body, that the slick warmth of his mouth was making his skin burn, that the hand wrapped tightly around the base of his dick was just right and the gentle squeeze of his balls Stiles managed to somehow add in was just so, so good.

*So good.*

He might have even muttered that somewhere between his ragged breathing, somewhere in the haze of silent cursing and held breaths.

Stiles bobbed his head a few times, sucking in on his way up and Derek-

“Wait,” he gasped suddenly. He jerked his hand free and pressed it against Stiles’ cheek to still him.

“Wai...,” he repeated, overwhelmed by the look of his mouth wrapped around the head of his dick.

Stiles popped it off his mouth and then raised his eyebrows when Derek remained silent. Can’t really blame him, can you, words were hard, he could barely manage thinking and even that went around in circles.

Stiles just grinned and gave the underside of Derek’s cock a small teasing flick with his tongue.

“C’mere.” Derek gripped at his shoulder to pull him back up and Stiles went, pressing a kiss to Derek’s abdomen, his chest and leaning in to hover over him.

“What?” he asked. “Wanna switch?”

Derek shook his head, turning to gesture at the drawer on their bed-side table. Stiles frowned, but reached over for the handle anyways. When he pulled out the drawer and peered in, his face brightened in a pleasant surprise.

“Well, that’s… okay,” he noted, bringing out the bottle of lube. He rolled it around in his hand.

“Just this or?”

“That,” Derek agreed. “Just that. This time.”

Stiles blew a breath, nodding. He backed up, kneeling between Derek’s legs, the bottle in his hands. He fiddled with the cap for a bit, trying to wedge his nail in-between to open it.

“Shit,” he muttered, shaking it impatiently.

“There’s a button,” Derek noted, pointing over at it.
“Of course there is,” Stiles grumbled, turning it over and pushing it. The bottle whizzed and spilled a generous amount of lube over Derek’s abdomen.

“Mother fuck-, it’s fine, it’s fine ,” he said, tossing the bottle somewhere out of view. “Stop fucking laughing,” he squawked when Derek’s mouth stretched out in the very same action.

“I wasn’t,” he lied, trying to purse his lips together to keep them from smiling. Not that that worked. What did work though was when Stiles grabbed Derek’s hand and pressed it against the puddle of lube chilling on his abdomen.

“Here you go,” he smiled pleasantly (which was nowhere near pleasant). “Why don’t you go for it?” he offered, grabbing Derek’s waist to pull him up closer. Their hardened dicks slid against each other, slotting together perfectly.

“Stiles, wha-”

“Yes?” Stiles grinned, his cheeks reddened by the rush of blood from the sudden thrill. Derek guessed he was looking very much alike. “Something on your mind?”

“A lot,” Derek huffed, staring down at his lube-covered palm and their impatiently waiting cocks. It was a simple equation really, one that didn’t take long for him to figure out. The only thing holding him back was something at the back of his head, something telling him to not - he just pushed it back down again quickly. It was forgotten even quicker when he finally wrapped his slick hand around their cocks.

He slid it slowly up and down, making sure their skin was coated in all the right places and then looked up at Stiles who was already biting his lower lip as he watched him work.

“Oh stars,” Stiles sighed, stroking Derek’s legs encouragingly. “Can we just go for quick and dirty? I don’t think I can hold on much longer. If I hadn’t...”

Derek hummed, sliding his fingertips around them oh-so-slowly, teasing their heads. That shut Stiles up. At least for a moment.

“C’mon,” Stiles breathed, pulling away to thrust into his loose hold. “Tighter.” Their dicks slid against each other clumsily, but the contact was there, and it was slowly but steadily turning them into a gasping, entangled mess.

Derek tightened his hold, moving his hand over the full length and his eyes inadvertently traveled up Stiles’ body to encompass the whole damn visual - his heaving chest, his flexing arms, the hanging head - his gleaming eyes fixed hungrily on their dicks.

Oh stars.

He glanced back down when Stiles couldn’t help himself any longer and started thrusting into his hold and after that it was just a mess of a fucked-up rhythm, heavy breathing and taunt muscles. Derek tightened his hold when he felt them both harden within his hold and it only took a few more strokes before Stiles was coming all over his chest - a strangled cry escaping his lips as he leaned over to brace himself against the side of Derek’s waist.

“Oh shit,” Stiles cursed as he pressed his hand against Derek’s so stop him from moving it over his overly sensitive dick. He exhaled a few times, his eyes closed.

There was a moment of absolute silence when Derek just watched him descend from the high, his own want all forgotten.
“I love you so much,” Stiles breathed into the silence, making Derek’s chest swell with emotion.

“Doesn’t count if you say it after sex,” he noted, going for a very nonchalant tone and failing at it on every possible level.

Stiles snorted. “We’re not done yet though, are we?” he asked, batting Derek’s hand away to wrap his own around his still hard and aching cock. “This looks far from done.”

“Much closer than you might think,” Derek said, but honestly, it might just have come out as a voiceless gasp, because Stiles grinned down at him and gave him a few playful tugs and Derek’s was out of actual words very quickly, the want simmering under his skin all the while.

He reached up for Stiles with his clean hand, sliding his fingers up his chest and around his neck to pull him into his embrace. And when Stiles leaned down close enough, bracing himself Shakily, he surged up into a sloppy kiss. The hand on his cock quickened as he panted against Stiles’ lips, the kisses swallowing his breathy moans.

And he was so close.

So so close…

And yet it seemed frustratingly unachievable.

The nag at the back of his head grew stronger at each wave of thrill, pushing it away, extinguishing the fire in the pit of his body every time it tried to burn brighter.

“I can’t,” he whined, gripping at Stiles. “Can’t.”

So close.

Yet so far.

Stiles pressed a kiss against his sweaty forehead. “You can,” he whispered, squeezing his hand around Derek’s dick, the hold so tight as it moved he wasn’t able to resists thrusting in… oh-so tight and oh-so-wonderful.

So close.

He panted.

His thoughts unable to circle around the past anymore.

There was just the now.

Just Stiles’ hand on him.

Just the body above him.

Just the whisper of his voice.

Just the buzzing air around.

Just the-

Just them.
That single thought filled him up to the brim and then spilled over as he orgasmed.

~o~

After an executive command to shower, within which Stiles didn’t even step inside the shower - he just washed off in the basin giggling at Derek’s choice to set his water a notch warmer than usual - Stiles issued a second executive order and they had to return back to bed where he proceeded to obsessively tug the blanket around them.

Only when he was satisfied with all their body parts being sufficiently covered, did he let Derek put his head on his shoulder and went ahead to play with his hair.

“We should do this more often,” Derek noted out of nowhere.

Stiles snorted. “Totally.”

He put a kiss in Derek’s hair, humming under his breath. “I mean you got us enough stash to last a while,” he noted.

Derek just shrugged, too content for words.

“Not complaining mind you,” Stiles added after a while. “Real into you doing that.”

“I love you,” Derek answered simply as if that explained everything. Which, it kind of did, didn’t it?

“I heard it doesn’t count after sex,” Stiles laughed and Derek just snorted, splaying his fingers over Stiles’ chest.

He lifted his head to look at him. “It should go without saying anyways.”

“It does,” Stiles agreed, smiling over at him. “Doesn’t hurt to say it sometimes tho.” And Derek nodded, kissing his smile.

There was a beep from his holo and Derek turned around to free his right hand and have a look what was going on.

It was a notification from an egg.

An update.

Derek opened it and a blurry picture sprung up at them. There was no message with it, but the waterfall in it was clearly recognizable.

“Huh, that’s neat,” Stiles noted, peering down at his screen.

“Yeah,” Derek agreed happily. “It is.”

THE END
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