There's Monsters at Home

by calrissian18

Summary

“How did you get past the wards?” Derek had put them up, with Peter’s grudging assistance, after the Alpha pack had made themselves at home a few times too many.

The guy pulled a face. “You mean the wards a five-year-old girl with the mental ability of a goldfish could deconstruct?” He blinked wide eyes at Derek. “Gee, I don’t know. It’s bound to go down as one of life’s great mysteries.”

Derek despised him.

Notes

As noted: THIS IS ALREADY FINISHED - DO NOT FREAK OVER ITS UNFINISHED STATUS. It will be updated with a chapter per week throughout the month of June as an AO3-versary gift to myself. Two years, I can barely believe it! *squees*

I started this before 3A began but I kept up with the new season as I wrote most of it so there are bits and pieces of it thrown in but it’s not canon by a long shot (even without
changing Stiles’ age and, oh... everything else besides his sarcastic streak and nerdetry). This was originally for an open-ended tw_heat_wave prompt of how Derek learned to trust Stiles. I *totally* expected it to explode into this. Er.

I can only blame the massive length of this on the fact that Derek is one untrusting bugger. Also, Derek is canonically... Derek, circa s1 and 2, so... failwolf.

Somewhere in part two some, uh, Wade Wilson quotes happened (I’m pleading the fifth) and I decided to use his wise (vaguely related to the following goings-on) words to differentiate between the six different chapters because Deadpool might, a little bit be my crazy-fuck spirit animal. I’m not even sorry. I don’t have my comic books with me where I live now (ARGH) so I had to rely on the internet to get the wording just right but we all know how the casual loser doesn’t care for getting things verbatim the way I do so if there are any misquotes, please let me know! (Seriously, a comma out of place will make me lose my shit - you do not fuck with Deadpool... because he’s psychotic.)

Many thanks to Jonjo for the beta! You made this so much better, babe!

All that said - enjoy!
I. “See how you like it when I smack you with an interspatial distorter that will temporarily phase your brain into Dimension X!”

“I found him.” The voice in Derek’s ear was breathless and wary. It didn’t inspire confidence.

“Scott,” Derek snarled, strained and demanding his focus. “Where is he?” Derek could hear branches snapping and leaves rustling over the other end of the line. Scott’s breath, ratcheted up and short, was the only sound that assured Derek he was still alive and well. “Scott.”

“He’s just... standing there in the middle of the woods.” Scott sounded confused. Derek could practically see the furrowed brow that made him look like a kicked puppy. He could hear Erica snort from somewhere near Scott’s phone. “It has to be a trap.”

“You think?” Erica huffed, sounding annoyed to cover for the tense stretch of her voice.

“Don’t approach him,” Derek ordered. He put his phone on speaker as he pulled on his jacket. “Tell me exactly where you are and I’ll come meet you.”

“We’re right here,” Scott hissed.

Derek rolled his eyes. “In what even you have cleverly deduced is a trap. Where are you, McCall?”

Derek could hear something move on the other end of the line. The catch of Erica’s breath quickly followed. Scott piped up, tentative and cautious. “Isaac?”

“Who the hell are you?”

Fuck.

Derek drove as quickly as he could to the clearing on the other end of the Preserve. Isaac’s voice had sounded jittery and frightened. Derek hadn’t heard it sound like that since his father was still alive and well and beating the snot out of him on a nightly basis.

The Camaro’s tires slid on wet leaves before gaining traction and skidding to a stop. Derek barely had it in park before he was out of the car and storming over to the three teenagers standing awkwardly around each other in a circle. Isaac was hunched in on himself – hiding his towering height and making himself smaller, eyes flitting from Erica to Scott to Derek and back again. There wasn’t even a hint of recognition.

Scott was frozen in a half-step forward, wanting to go to Isaac. Only the Isaac he wanted to reassure no longer existed. Erica was acting as sheriff between the two of them, in case one of them should nut up and make a move.

Derek knew the response he’d get but still he made himself say, “Isaac?”
Isaac’s eyes flashed over to him from where they’d been focused on Erica’s heel. He stared back at Derek, wide-eyed and looking vulnerable in a way Derek had forgotten he could. “How the hell do all of you know my name?”

It was as Derek had expected then. A heavy weight settled in the hollow between his shoulders and pushed hard against his spine. Derek flipped his keys into his hand and shoved them into his jacket pocket. He took a step forward and Isaac flinched. Derek stopped and gritted his teeth. “What’s the last thing you remember?” He knew he sounded threatening and short-tempered but that didn’t matter anymore. The last thing this battered kid would relate to was Derek Hale, whether Derek tried out a kind and cuddly version or not.

“I was at my house. With my dad.” Isaac’s jaw clenched as he mentioned his father and a hunted look came into his eyes. “He has to know I didn’t leave on my own. I wouldn’t break curfew.” The line of his shoulders trembled and Derek could only imagine the trouble he’d gotten into for breaking it in the past. He knew the few times Isaac had showed up after the curfew Derek had set for him, he’d looked like he might wet himself. It didn’t help Derek feel any less like a monster.

“Your father’s dead,” Derek told him bluntly. Twin glares, of anger mixed with disbelief, whirled on him.

Isaac scrambled back, tripped over a root and fell hard and sat shaking on the ground. “You k-killed my dad?”

Derek ran a hand through his hair with a growl, his ragged nails getting caught on a few hairs and pulling. “Your dad died almost a year ago,” Derek tried again but Isaac now just looked confused and close to tears.

“Derek,” Scott growled, “shut the fuck up.”

Derek’s eyes flashed red as they glared at one another, before he glanced away with a sharp nod of his head. The Alpha in him clawed at his insides, dug in and tried to climb its way up and out, eager to teach this bold beta his place, but that would only further traumatize Isaac. More than Derek already had.

Besides Scott – technically – wasn’t his to punish.

Scott finished taking the step he’d aborted earlier and Isaac’s hands reflexively moved up to cover his face. Scott knelt down in front of him and slowly curled his fingers around Isaac’s shielding forearm. “Isaac,” he said softly.

Carefully the arms came down far enough that Isaac could blink at Scott with wide, wet eyes. He’d gone from predator back to prey and it made Derek want to feel something break beneath his hands.

Scott smiled at him, not showing any teeth. “I think – we think you’ve lost at least two years of your memory.” Scott glanced up at Erica. Her face was tight and serious. “We’re your friends. You were kidnapped by some very bad people and they must have done something to make you forget.”

Derek didn’t miss the way Isaac’s eyes slid over to him when Scott said ‘very bad people.’

“There’s someone who may be able to help.” Scott held Isaac’s gaze while he spoke and Derek was grateful for the innocence that had never really bled out of Scott’s features – through becoming a monster and after. “Will you come with us?”
Isaac looked up at Erica, as if gauging her trustworthiness. Apparently he’d already decided he was safe as houses with Scott. Fast friends, all over again. It appeared only his opinion on Derek had changed as he blinked over at him with wide eyes and gave a sharp jerk of his head.

Erica leaned down and bared her teeth in a smile. “Don’t worry, his bark’s far worse than his bite.” It was quite probably the least reassuring thing anyone had said, ever. Judging from the dark amusement on Erica’s face, she knew it too.

Derek’s growl was subvocal and all three betas cringed at the piercing quality of it. Though Isaac didn’t seem to fully understand why he was doing so.

Erica straightened back up, her lip raised petulantly, and Scott squeezed the forearm he was still holding. “Derek’s a bit rough around the edges.” Erica snorted. Derek was going to break her leg at least twice in their next ‘training’ session. “But,” Scott forced out with an angry glare thrown in Erica’s direction, “he wouldn’t hurt you. You’re friends with him, too. You actually live with him.”

Isaac’s jaw dropped open and he stared at Derek in disbelief.

Just in case Derek didn’t already feel like enough of a threat. Derek’s shoulders pulled in, hunched and protective, and he turned on his heel and stalked off back to the Camaro. “Just get him in the car,” he bit out over his shoulder.

He unlocked the doors and threw himself into the driver’s seat, fiddling with the radio so he didn’t have to listen to the conversation going on thirty feet in front of him. He could still hear the gentle, coaxing lilt to Scott’s words and Isaac’s answering murmurs. Erica stood at their sides, her eyes glowing gold while Isaac was distracted. They flashed around in every direction while her head snapped to gauge each minute sound.

It was why she was Derek’s second. She was fierce and protective and her ability to reason through problems was unparalleled among Derek’s betas. He couldn’t have imagined it when he first turned her, not when she hardly seemed suited to the power she already had. She still had the cruel streak that Derek couldn’t seem to break her of. The epileptic girl who’d been teased mercilessly was buried but not forgotten, lashing out and hurting others just because she could. None of them were a perfect fit for command but Erica was the best option he had.

He’d wanted Boyd at first, but Derek could never get a proper handle on him and that made him uneasy. He moved in the shadows and to his own agenda and, when it came down to it, Derek wasn’t sure Boyd considered himself to be a part of Derek’s pack. He wasn’t sure what Boyd had wanted when he’d asked for the bite, but he suspected he hadn’t gotten it.

The creak of the door’s hinges scraped down Derek’s neck and shoulders and made his muscles tense and pull. Isaac eased into the seat farthest away from him and Derek suppressed a snort, as if that wasn’t utterly predictable. Erica sat next to him in the backseat while Scott took the front.

Derek peeled out and drove to Deaton’s, breaking the speed limit every stretch of the way. The sooner Isaac was dealt with, the sooner he would stop looking at Derek like he suspected him of having a dead body in his trunk.

He didn’t. This week.

He could hear Isaac’s fingers digging into the leather by his knees the whole way there, little nervous squeaks grating against Derek’s eardrums as Isaac’s nails pressed in. He wanted to snarl at him that he would damage the upholstery but Isaac already looked as if one word from Derek
would make him jump out of his skin. Derek tightened his hands around the steering wheel, claws digging into his palms, and stepped a little harder on the gas.

He squealed into the parking space ‘Reserved for Clinic Customers’ nearest the front door. The road was wet and the spin of the wheels tossed up droplets of water on his window. The sign on the door was flipped to closed. Derek ignored it, tugging the locked door open as though it was nothing more than a flimsy piece of cardboard.

Isaac watched the whole thing curiously, as though wondering why a door with a closed sign on it would (appear to) be unlocked.

Deaton walked out from the back, wiping his hands on a rag. Derek could smell something like dirt and moss on it. He glanced mournfully at the split in the wood where the other side of the lock used to be fastened to the frame. “I’m going to have to put a line of mountain ash up around the front too, it seems,” he said tiredly, as though adding something else to his ever-growing to-do list. He offered Derek a stern look. “Knocking would have been just as effective.”

Derek grunted. He wasn’t going to admit that breaking and entering was his form of payback for Deaton hoarding answers like a squirrel hiding nuts for winter.

“Ah, Isaac,” Deaton said warmly, noticing him for the first time. “How nice to see you again, and looking well too.”

Isaac looked a bit shell-shocked. “Uh.”

“He’s memory’s been wiped,” Derek interrupted. It was time to get this fucking show on the road. He’d forgotten how pathetic Isaac had been. It was making his stomach clench and roil. Looking at weak things only made Derek want to put them out of their misery.

Deaton frowned and gestured for Isaac to follow him to the exam room.

Isaac went a bit bug-eyed when he noticed the cages. “You’re a vet?”

Deaton smiled enigmatically. “Among other things.” He patted the metal table and Isaac obediently slid up onto it, even though he looked as if it went against his better judgment. This was Isaac: conditioned to follow every order. It made Derek cringe. Deaton moved around Isaac’s back, while Isaac’s hair stood on end and his shoulders hunched in.

On the back of his neck were the claw marks of an Alpha. Derek had expected the scars but the shiny skin still felt like an accusation. He crossed his arms over his chest.

Deaton’s eyes flicked up to Derek’s. “Do you know how much time he’s lost?”

Derek shrugged. “At least two years. He thought his dad was still alive and I don’t think he knows about—anything else.”

Deaton nodded as though he’d expected nothing less. Isaac revealing his ignorance of Deaton took away some of his all-knowing mystique there. “There are a few things I can try.” Deaton pinned Derek with a gaze that said he already knew the answer. “You went to Peter already?”

Derek’s fingers curled tighter over the crease of his elbows. “We’ve done this once before.” Derek nodded to Erica. “To find Boyd and Erica. Peter’s a novice at best.”

Deaton made an agreeable sound as he examined the back of Isaac’s neck. “I’m afraid I’m not much better. I’m a student of magic these days, not much of a practitioner.” Deaton walked over
to the wall of vials and let his fingers wander over the stoppers before pulling out two slender tubes and a jar full of something that looked like mulch.

It didn’t smell like mulch. It most closely resembled salt water taffy and the taste of it on the air was strong. Deaton plucked out a few of the sticks with metal tongs and then uncorked the two vials. One was filled with a moss green sludge while the other was opaque yellow. The first didn’t have much of a scent but it sparked up and smoked when poured on the mulch.

The yellow vial smelled overwhelmingly like vinegar and Derek couldn’t keep the distaste off his face as Deaton sprinkled a few drops into the mortar with the other two ingredients. What was left after mixing was a smooth liquid that was dark, dark purple in color.

Deaton poured it into a beaker and held it out to Isaac. “Drink up, Mr. Lahey.”

Isaac eyed him warily and, realizing he was serious, looked around the room as though hoping someone would stop him or announce this was all an elaborate prank. He landed on Scott, who looked serious and tight. Scott gave a slight nod of his head.

Isaac drank. He pulled a face and smoke curled up from his nostrils when he choked on the taste, coughing. A flash dropped down through Isaac, highlighting his veins and arteries as it raced through. Derek could see them as clear as if someone had tattooed them onto his skin.

He took a step forward but Isaac didn’t seem to be in any pain. When it disappeared from the tips of his fingers, Deaton snapped his fingers to make Isaac open his eyes.

Isaac blinked and swallowed hard, sticking out his tongue like a bad taste was left in his mouth.

“Isaac, do you know where you are?”

Isaac stared at him, his brow furrowed. He looked as if he was still waiting for the admission that this was all one big, and poorly constructed, joke. “I’m at a vet’s office, with people I’ve never met, who look like they’re in some really ineffective gang, and a man who’s making me drink things that taste like sweat and vinegar.”

Scott let out a frustrated breath.

Erica went back to examining her nails.

Derek wasn’t exactly holding his breath but the little bit of hope he’d allowed himself to feel at the visible effects of the concoction drained out of him. “That’s the best you can do then?” he asked sourly.

Deaton looked as calm as ever when he looked back at Derek. “I told you I wasn’t a practitioner any longer.” He frowned, staring down at the beaker, only a drop of the mixture was left and it had spread to ring the inside. “There are a few more things I can try.”

Erica pulled herself up onto the counter and Derek leaned more heavily against the wall.

Deaton sighed. “All right then.” The next thing involved crystals and chanting and it only made Isaac look at them all as if he suspected them of being a cult rather than a gang. Then Deaton tried hypnotism, which Erica got quite a bit of enjoyment out of as Isaac spent the next hour or so cross-eyed and annoyed.

Deaton pulled away, looking grim. “I’m afraid those were the only methods I’d ever heard of that might reverse the memory manipulation of an Alpha.”
Derek snorted. “Real effective.” Isaac looked as if he agreed with the sentiment but he was still too wary of Derek to say anything of the sort out loud. He didn’t question what was meant by ‘Alpha.’ It was clear he wanted to, but this Isaac did not speak out of turn.

Deaton shrugged. “Deucalion is a powerful Alpha. A demon-wolf. I would bet it was he who removed Isaac’s memories.” Deaton spread the fingers of his hand like he was imagining claws. He held them an inch or so away from Isaac’s neck, hovering. Isaac instinctually tensed. “The set of these marks is wide and the length of each scar is larger than I’ve ever seen. Whoever did this dug in deep, far deeper than necessary to do this.”

Scott pushed off his back foot and a tic in his jaw fluttered. “Are you saying you can’t fix this?”

Isaac glanced at Scott with an almost sympathetic expression, like he regretted not being the friend Scott had known. Or perhaps it was pity because they were all clearly insane, talking about demon-wolves and digging fingers into necks.

Deaton stepped back from Isaac and said in low tones, “That’s exactly what I’m saying, Scott. I’m not sure it is reversible when someone as powerful as Deucalion is the one changing the picture.”

Derek refused to accept that. “There must be something you can do.” This Isaac was not what Derek wanted for his pack. He would force Isaac to become an Omega before he let a boy, who looked at him like a murderer, hang around.

Deaton shook his head. “Short of Deucalion undoing this himself, I don’t see a way of restoring Isaac’s memories.”

Derek held his fist down by his side to hide the way his claws were extending. His eyes were filtering red, his vision attuning itself to twitches of movement and rabbiting heart beats. “That’s not good enough.” His voice was raw, hoarse like the wolf’s.

Deaton didn’t look even slightly intimidated. Derek almost preferred that, to know there was at least one person who wasn’t afraid of him and never had been. It might have endeared Deaton to Derek if he wasn’t such a pretentious, superior con artist.

Deaton frowned deeply in thought. “There is someone I could call. A friend. He’s got quite a bit more experience than I do with all things supernatural and he works as a freelancer of sorts. He’s set up in Boston so I’ll contact him in the morning regarding Isaac.”

Derek’s fangs were digging into the soft insides of his lower lip when he growled, “Call him now.”

Deaton gave a resigned sigh and moved to pick up the receiver from the wall mount. It wasn’t cordless and it reminded Derek of the one his family had in the kitchen. It was the same ugly mustard color. Deaton dialed a number from memory and it was rolling into its fourth ring when a sleep-scratchy voice asked, “Deaton?” It sounded like it belonged to someone young, which wasn’t what Derek had been expecting at all. He could hear the sound of a heavy thump, rustling, and then a voice reemerged over the static. “What the hell? You know it’s 3:30 in the morning here, right?”

The heartbeat that belonged to the voice was fast and hummingbird-light. It pressed at Derek’s temples in a way that made his head throb. There was a slower, steadier one in the background that was accompanied by heavy, sloping breaths.

“You know werewolves better than I,” Deaton said warmly, shared stories and camaraderie behind his tone.
The man on the other end snorted and it sounded like he was scrubbing at his face. “Pushy, stubborn, full of a false sense of entitlement.” He paused and there was a definite grin in his voice when he said, “Tell me they’re there.”

Derek hated him already and he could feel his claws extending all over again.

“Of course,” Deaton said calmly. “I would have waited until morning given the choice.”

There was a yawn and then a lazy, “I appreciate the professional courtesy, Special K.” Deaton smiled, letting out an amused breath, and Derek heard mattress springs creak like someone was getting comfortable rather than getting up. The heartbeat in the background got louder. “What is it that’s so urgent?”

“A problem I believe only you have the skill and power to undo,” Deaton told him.

The man laughed and said incisively, “Buttering me up?” The springs squeaked. “How bad is it exactly?”

Deaton inhaled sharply, playing up the drama of the moment the way the man loved to do. “I believe Deucalion is involved.”

The springs screeched for half a second and what Derek had thought was the man’s heartbeat on adrenaline was now fluttering so fast that Derek could barely separate one palpitation from the next. “The Alpha pack?” he said harshly, his voice twisting over the words. “Where?”


“Shit,” was the reply, fraught with disbelief and something like fear. “I’ll be on the first plane out,” he said gruffly and there was definitely accusation and fury there, and it was meant for Deaton. The receiver slammed down on the other end and the line went dead.

Deaton looked weary, affected by a few harsh words in a way that Derek had never managed, even fully wolfed out. “If I know our mercenary… and I believe I do,” Deaton said with a slight smirk, tinged with a certain regret, “he’ll find you.”

Isaac didn’t sleep. He paced in front of the wall of windows and refused to believe that he lived in the spacious loft with Derek, or that his father was truly dead. If this supernaturally-experienced guy of Deaton’s didn’t arrive by tomorrow night then Derek would take him to the graveyard to see the headstone Isaac had picked out himself. Despite Derek’s own aversion to the sick-sour smell of cemeteries.

Derek didn’t sleep listening to the continuous sound of his footfalls.

Erica went home but Scott stayed on the couch that night, presumably watching Isaac. At least until his breaths went heavy and muffled and he fell into slumber.

Derek suspected Peter was down the hall in the spare bedroom – since ripping his throat out, Peter’s scent and heartbeat had gone wonky, unpredictable, so it was impossible to keep preternatural tabs on him. Which was just another in a long list of reasons to be on constant alert around him. He was likely aware of everything though, in that obnoxious way he always was.
Scott took Isaac to his old house around two – it was still on the market and it looked innocuous now. Derek knew it was anything but to Isaac. Just after four, his door slid open and confident, unfamiliar steps breezed into his loft. The rabbiting heartbeat that pushed at his skull was one he recognized instantly.

Derek was up, claws and fangs out by the time those footsteps rounded the corner. The man – boy – they belonged to hardly even glanced at him. Derek’s image of an older, wiser man than Deaton, with wrinkles and white hair and beard – which had been dampened by the youthful voice on the phone – was now fully dispelled.

The boy had his neck tipped back so he could gaze up at the high ceilings, a tribal-looking tattoo snaked halfway up it. He whistled. “Dayum. This is a nice place, Growly. I didn’t even know they had properties like this in B-Hills. Been classing up the joint since my last visit.”

Derek despised him.

“Stiles?” Peter had slinked out of the shadows of the spiral staircase, a predatory grin stretching across his cheeks. Derek hadn’t even known he was there.

Derek blanched. Was that supposed to be a name?

Stiles clicked his tongue. “And here I’d heard you were dead. A full month of celebrations and it wasn’t even true.”

Hunger and something softer, smoother, burned in Peter’s eyes as he came up on Stiles. “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

Stiles rolled his eyes and went back to exploring the apartment again, rather than watching the way Peter was staring unblinkingly at him. “Twain you are not. Stick to quoting authors who are more your level. I suggest Meyer.” Stiles ducked down to look in the cabinets under the kitchen island. Derek couldn’t quite contain his growl. “You’ve already got the whole ‘back from the dead’ quirk in common with her characters,” Stiles said, ignoring Derek entirely.

Peter was right there when Stiles stood again, his hand smoothing over Stiles’ shoulder before rubbing a thumb up the dark ink on the side of his neck. “I’m wounded,” he said in low tones.

Stiles grinned and a darkly amused light was dancing in his amber eyes. “I could do better.”

“I’m sure you could,” Peter murmured while Stiles pulled away from him and rounded the support beam down the hall, no doubt off to explore the bedrooms. Derek wanted to call him back but he had the feeling it wouldn’t be worth the argument that followed. Not to mention, he doubted he would win it. He suspected Stiles would talk him to death until he finally gave in, so it was better to skip the exhaustive exercise and just let him have at it.

“It’s expanded since I last saw it,” Peter called after him, motioning to his own neck.
“You have no idea,” Stiles said teasingly from down the hall and Derek was sure now. His uncle was flirting with a kid who was even younger than Derek. And the kid was flirting back. Derek’s opinion of this ‘Stiles’ soured even further.

After a minute or two, he wandered back into the main room and stared at Peter gravely, his eyes dark and focused. Derek wouldn’t have expected him capable of such intensity. It sent an odd shiver of discomfort and curiosity down his spine. Stiles tilted his head and said grimly, “You smell like death.”

Derek didn’t know what this boy could smell that he didn’t. There was a void where Peter’s scent should be, not old and familiar or new and grating, only a vacuum. It was as if Derek’s senses couldn’t reach Peter. It was part of what left Derek feeling so on edge around him. That, and the fact that he’d killed his own niece.

Peter held his arms out at his sides, the expression on his face unconcerned. “It’s a hazard of cheating it.”

Stiles walked over to him and the gravity didn’t leave his face. He placed a hand on Peter’s shoulder and said, “I was sorry to hear about your family. They were good people.”

Peter’s mouth turned down, lips twisting, before he fought it off and quirked them up. “It’s probably for the best,” he said with acidic cheeriness. “Talia would put me back in the ground if she knew we were in the same room again.”

Derek hadn’t heard Peter mention his mother – any of his family – so casually even once since the fire.

“Good woman,” Stiles said wistfully.

Stiles had known his mother? Who the hell was this kid? Derek was sure he’d never seen him before.

Peter’s green eyes flashed over to Derek. “This is my nephew, Derek. I don’t think you were ever properly introduced.”

Stiles frowned thoughtfully before sticking his hand out to Derek. Derek ignored it. “Nope, we never met,” he said happily, shrugging and pulling his hand back in as though it was a cultural difference rather than a purposefully rude gesture on Derek’s part. He smoothed the hand down his jeans and looked back up at Derek with a strange empathy. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Derek grunted. It was better than ‘whatever’ and not quite as good as ‘thanks’ but it was acknowledgement at least.

Stiles’ unstoppable grin was back in place and he threaded his fingers together and turned them out, cracking his knuckles. “Welp, where’s the patient?”

Derek already had his phone out. He pulled up his contacts and jabbed his finger into Isaac’s name. The faster they got this done the faster this inquisitive, tattooed, friend of the family could get out of his territory. It unnerved Derek how completely comfortable he was in a foreign wolf’s territory. Derek cut Isaac off mid-greeting and growled, “Get back here. Now.”

“You are just all kinds of charming, aren’t you?” Stiles said, exaggeratedly blinking impressively long lashes at him.

Derek gritted his teeth in a sneer and turned away.
Stiles hummed and whirled around to dig through Derek’s fridge. He pulled out an apple and plopped down on Derek’s sofa like he spent every lazy afternoon camped out there. He crunched into the skin and said around the bite he’d come away with, “You know, you could add a few homey touches. Art, photographs, etcetera. Make it look a little less like a serial killer lives here.”

Peter settled on the couch next to Stiles, forgoing his usual strategy of slinking around in the shadows and watching from a distance. He dropped his arm over the back frame, pressing his forearm into Stiles’ shoulders. “It’d be false advertising.”

Stiles’ grin was sharp when he turned it on Peter. “I did hear something about you going on a killing spree of sorts. I thought about coming back to put you down myself.”

Peter leaned in close to Stiles’ neck and dropped his voice low. “I think I would have liked that.” Strangely, he seemed to mean that.

They sat in silence for the next few minutes, except for the deliberate wet crunch of Stiles eating. Derek watched the juice drip down the largest vein of his wrist, twining around his skin. Stiles didn’t seem to notice.

Now that he wasn’t making (as much of) a nuisance of himself, Derek could see that he was older than he’d first thought. It wasn’t given away in the youthful exuberance of his honey-colored eyes or the near-invisible lines on his face but by the dark, rubbery skin under his lower lashes. He was pale but not unhealthily so and Derek thought he might be fit but it was impossible to tell under the t-shirt and plaid overshirt he was wearing. Only the breadth of his shoulders and the way his chest would sometimes press against the novelty design on the front gave away that there was anything worthwhile there.

Derek had no idea what it was supposed to be referring to either. There was a picture of an orca on it and underneath were the pixelated words: ‘A wizard has turned you into a whale. Is this awesome (Y/N)?’ What the hell was the point of that?

Stiles stretched out his legs, kicking his heels up on Derek’s coffee table. He had a lanky, klutzy persona about him and the way he used his hands and arms when he spoke, said he flung his limbs about to enforce that impression. Derek wondered if that was a tactic to make him seem young and careless, so predators would see him as less of a threat. He was tall, nearly as tall as Derek, and he had moles dotting his face and neck that suited him somehow.

He was a mess of energy and motion and the thumping of his heart was the soundtrack conducting Derek’s headache. Derek shifted forward in the seat across the coffee table from Peter and Stiles, watched his claws grow out an inch or so with a bored expression and swiped them over the soles of Stiles’ shoes in one quick movement.

Stiles squawked and pulled his feet away. Derek smirked at the newly empty space on the coffee table while Stiles scowled at him. “I don’t think you’ll be winning any hospitality awards this visit, Grump.” Stiles stared mournfully down at the sole of one of his shoes. Little strips of rubber were curling up from the four claw marks. Stiles placed a hand over the gouges and Derek could now see that the tattoo curled around the top of said hand. He hadn’t been able to see it before because the sleeves of Stiles’ shirt had slipped down to cover the mark.

A flash of red tore from the tip of the tattoo at his neck down to the ink on his hand and Stiles pulled his fingers away to reveal a perfectly whole sole. He did the same with the other shoe and this time Derek saw his eyes spark yellow. He was fire in human form, Derek thought with a sneer as he settled further into his seat, leaning away from this mortal matchstick.
Peter didn’t have the same compulsion. Instead he looked fascinated and slightly desirous. It made Derek feel ill.

Stiles took a last bite of his apple and looked from the core to the kitchen and back. He glanced at the coffee table like he was considering setting it down there before flicking his gaze up to Derek and grinning when he found himself watched with a scowl. He sighed, leaned back, pushed out his lips and gave the apple a curious look before it, *pop*, vanished from his fingers.

Derek blinked. There had been no puff of smoke or spark or flash over, nothing. One moment it was in his hands and the next it wasn’t, as if invisible paint had been poured over it.

Stiles rubbed his sticky fingers together and huffed. The silence stretched out for all of a moment. He glanced at Peter, then Derek, and burst out laughing.

Derek’s first thought was that magic released some kind of endorphins – he didn’t really know much about it after all – but when the kid didn’t stop after a minute, Derek bit out an annoyed, “What?”

Stiles pulled himself together enough to point around at them. “Come on, we’re sitting here: a mage, a werewolf, and a zombie.” He snorted hard and got out brokenly, “We should walk into a bar. See what people come up with.”

Peter chuckled softly before he covered it with the back of his hand.

Derek didn’t think it was *that* funny.

When Stiles finally caught his breath with a long, happy sound, he said, popping his mouth, “Total silence is good, too.”

Peter’s teeth glinted behind his smile and he said into Stiles’ ear, “I can think of one way to pass the time.” The door mercifully slid open barely a second after the words were out and two sets of heavy footsteps stomped into the room.

Isaac looked uneasy and Stiles popped up from the couch and bounded over to him. “You must be the patient,” he said gamely and Isaac’s expression immediately calmed as Stiles stuck out his hand.

Isaac smiled uncertainly and slid his fingers into Stiles’.

Stiles grinned, brought his other hand up like he was going to clasp Isaac’s neck and instead slapped him in the back of the head, bringing their foreheads together. Isaac opened his eyes again, his expression jarred and irises glowing gold.

Stiles pulled away and said cheerfully, “Welp, that’s me done.” He whirled around and added, “I’ll just take the plane fare, round trip. Won’t charge you for the actual—” He waved his fingers around as if to say, ‘ooga booga.’ “Since, you know, it was pathetically easy and an excuse to come home besides.”

“You *live* here?” Derek said, shock making his voice loud.

At the same time, Scott squawked, “How are we supposed to know it worked?”

“Yes to you, Grumpygills,” Stiles said, pointing at Derek. He shrugged his shoulders at Scott and nudged Isaac in the collarbone. “Dude, say something you would say.”
“Uh, thanks for the memories?” Isaac tried.

“Ew,” Stiles wrinkled his nose, “does he usually make Fall Out Boy references? Are you sure you wanted him back?”

“Isaac,” Derek ground out, dragging the focus back to what mattered. This kid seemed to have an obnoxious habit of diverting that. “What do you remember?”

Isaac shrugged. “Everything. The Alpha pack taking me; torturing me for three days and Deucalion digging his claws into my neck.”

“Glad I could brighten your day,” Stiles said and his smile was more of an apologetic grimace. “Anyway,” Stiles stressed. “The ticket cost 530 bucks, round-trip. I’ll take a check if you don’t have that much on you.”

Derek rolled his eyes, paid the man without arguing – just because it hadn’t looked difficult didn’t mean it wasn’t worth every cent – and watched as Stiles flounced out with a fluttering wave of his fingers. A swell of relief crashed over Derek. The man was unsettling and Derek was glad to have him and his foreboding scent gone.

“They’re not going to stop coming after you.” Peter’s gaze roamed up the stairs to where Isaac was sleeping. His eyes focused on the ceiling just under his room. Derek tilted his head, listening to the steady breaths to make sure they stayed that way. “Having Isaac cured is only going to make them come harder.”

Derek hunched his shoulders. Peter had an annoying habit of telling him what he already knew. “What do you suggest I do then?”

Peter leaned in and said forcefully, “A preemptive strike.”

Derek snorted.

“You know they aren’t giving up until you kill one of them.” Us would have been the more accurate terminology but Derek doubted Peter wanted to remind him that this might all go away if Derek just slashed his throat. Again. “Why should we sit back and wait for them to come to you when we could utilize the element of surprise?”

The manipulative light in Peter’s eyes was shining eagerly. No doubt he was hoping Derek and the rest of the pack would rush in and get themselves killed and make him Alpha by default. While he was safe and sound, and far away from the action as he always seemed to be. “The element of surprise won’t change the fact that they’re stronger than us.”

Peter’s brows perked. “Can’t hurt.”

Derek stared at him, forehead furrowed. It was true that another confrontation with the Alpha pack was inevitable, whether they came for him or vice versa and any advantage was better than none. They knew where they were now but, unfortunately, the Alphas were perfectly aware of that. “Actually all it can do is hurt.”

Peter huffed out a breath, amused and loose. “A world of hurt is coming either way. Might as well be leading the charge this time.”

Derek’s nod was barely noticeable. “Fine.” It felt like hammering another nail in his coffin but he didn’t know of anything that wouldn’t.
It had been simple enough to get the plans to the Argent’s building. Erica was an attractive girl, who had no qualms about using her breasts like weapons. It was an effortless ruse that led to Isaac being able to slip in and out. Scott seemed grudgingly impressed that Derek had come up with a plan that skimped on the death and gore.

There were three air ducts, an elevator shaft and roof access that all seemed like promising means of ingress. Derek stood back, staring down at the blueprints and picturing all the horrible ways it could go wrong. Whatever happened, it would be his call that led to it.

The idea that he was never meant to be an Alpha nagged at him at times like these. He was the last option that made sense when it came to the Hale family and only because he was literally the last option – aside from a teenager and a power mad uncle who had trouble obeying basic laws of the universe – was he at the helm now.

“The roof,” Derek said gruffly. “If they do see us coming, at least it’s an open space, and we won’t be trapped if – when – they challenge us.”

“Not a bad strategy.” Peter actually sounded reluctantly impressed. “But it’s useless now,” he added with casual indifference.

Derek’s brow furrowed. “And why’s that?” he ground out roughly.

Peter’s head tilted and he stared at Derek like he pitied him. “Because they’ve come to us.”

Derek could hear them now, the distinct beat of five different hearts stationed at different points around his building, all steady and waiting. Derek’s fingers tightened into fists and the weight of not knowing what was coming settled heavily in his gut.

Boyd’s eyes were the first to glow gold, claws and fangs extending, and Derek appreciated that he wouldn’t have to ask them to fight. Though he wasn’t sure he saw much point in fighting at all. The Alphas were more powerful than Derek and his pack could ever hope to be.

Erica and Boyd had already ditched him once, Scott changed his mind on whether he was pack daily and Derek suspected Isaac would follow Scott, whatever he finally decided. He didn’t trust Peter as far as Lydia could throw him and Cora was an enigma. When she was around, all she had did was watch him with accusation and disappointment. Jackson hardly considered himself a werewolf, let alone the beta to anyone’s Alpha.

The sad fact was they didn’t even need an outside force to destroy them.

“Shall we?” Peter asked, eyes darkly amused. All the rest of them were fanged and clawed but Peter looked as if he was sitting down to coffee rather than preparing for battle. Derek suspected that was because he hadn’t yet chosen which side he was fighting on. If any.

Erica was the first to leave and, predictably, Boyd followed her lead. Derek was the last, save for Peter, and he didn’t really expect Peter would follow him.

Kali already had Erica by the throat. Scott and Isaac were tackling Ennis, moving swiftly around him and stabbing their claws in when he left himself unprotected, but they were getting cut as much as they were cutting. The twins were toying with Boyd and Cora, becoming one and then bounding off into two separate forms to play much the same game as Scott and Isaac were with Ennis.

Deucalion and Derek both stood on the sidelines. Derek’s eyes flashed red and he ran for him but
Kali broke away from Erica and caught him with claws in his back. Derek roared as they stripped up from the inside and he whirled on her. He punched her in the breastbone and it was enough to push her back and dislodge her claws.

Derek didn’t stop to hit her again, gunning instead for Deucalion. He was knocked off course by Ennis, who had broken free of Scott and Isaac. He could hear Isaac’s rattling breaths that sounded like he had a punctured lung, likely caused by one of his own ribs. He couldn’t hear anything from Scott.

Derek pushed Ennis back, dragging claws down his cheek. Ennis caught his wrist, twisted it back and broke his arm. Derek howled and used his left hand to grab Ennis’ throat. It didn’t take much pressure before blood was pouring down his forearm from where his claws had sliced in.

He shoved Ennis off and pulled his hand away. The blood from the wound spurted out thicker and blacker. Derek was about to get a running start towards Deucalion when Erica screamed. It was a twisted, desperate sound and when Derek turned, Kali was trying to literally tear her in two.

Derek’s first and only thought was: Laura.

Scott got to Kali first and pulled her off from where her hands were dug into the wound in Erica’s side, stretching it open. Derek went straight for Erica, hefting her up into his arms, the broken one protesting at every shift of her weight. She was limp in his grip and her head lolled exaggeratedly. She was paler than Derek had ever seen her and her breaths were coming in sharp and short. She wouldn’t heal from this on her own.

Derek backed away, eyes red and fixed on Deucalion. They had to get her to Deaton now. The smirk on Deucalion’s face said he knew it, too. There was no way they were going to let him leave.

This was what they’d wanted. They wanted him to kill a beta and what better way to trap him into it than to injure one of them so badly that a swift death would be the kindest option. Derek could see Deucalion’s eyes glowing red even behind his shades.

The Camaro’s tires squealed into the alley, the side of it slammed hard into one of the, now separated, Alpha twins. Derek tried not to be annoyed by the dent left above the back wheel.

Peter threw open the passenger door. He leaned over the armrest and said tightly, “I think it’s time this party came to an end, don’t you?”

Derek gritted his teeth, yanked the seat forward and slid into the backseat with Erica while Scott, Isaac and Cora all crammed in next to him, sitting mostly on top of each other or wedged down on the floor. Boyd took the front and Peter reversed out and whipped onto the main road. He looked into the rearview mirror and asked, “Did you have fun? Meet anyone interesting?”

Derek glowered back at him. “Keep your eyes on the fucking road.”

Peter pulled a face. “Oo, touchy.”

Derek pressed his hand harder over the wound in Erica’s side, trying to staunch the blood that was making his fingers tacky and wet. No one spoke the rest of the way to Deaton’s and the air was tense and jittery.

Peter pulled into the handicapped spot and got out of the car. Boyd jerked the seat forward and ran around to Derek’s side before he could even push his own seat forward. He helped to get Erica out slowly, taking some of the pressure off Derek’s broken bones, and they carried her in together,
through the front door.

Deaton didn’t come out to greet them as he nearly always did.

The mountain ash that lined the counter wouldn’t let Derek pass so Derek simply roared. That was all the warning he was capable of, emotionally drained as he was. Deaton sauntered out after a short moment and frowned as he looked at Erica. He broke the line with his heel easily. “Bring her back,” he said grimly.

Derek shifted her arm up higher around his neck and he and Boyd stepped through the swinging door. Derek froze as he saw who was sitting in the back room, dangling his feet off the counter.

*Stiles.*

He was wiping the fingers of one hand on his jeans and the other was holding a bag of Fritos. His eyes went wide when he saw the state they were all in. He hopped down off the counter, catching Deaton’s eye as he walked in. His gaze flicked back over to Derek as he and Boyd laid Erica down on the exam table. “Whoa, your idea of a good time and mine are *wildly* different.”

Derek couldn’t quite hold back a snarl. He’d never enjoyed anyone trying to make light of serious situations.

Deaton tipped his head towards Stiles. “This is more your forte than mine,” he said generously.

Stiles set the bag of chips down on the counter and sucked one thumb into his mouth before wiping both hands on his t-shirt. He rubbed them together and stepped over to Erica.

Derek shouldered in front of her and his eyes flashed red.

Stiles didn’t look even marginally impressed. He frowned at Derek and said sternly, “Down, Fido.” Derek took a step forward and his growl got so loud that it reverberated off the walls. Stiles rolled his eyes. “Let’s lay this out, shall we? Me,” he pointed to himself, “capable of leaping tall buildings in a single bound and knitting skin together with a snap of my fingers. You,” his finger poked into Derek’s chest, “impediment to that happening.”

Derek stepped aside, still growling. He didn’t trust this cocky Superman and it went against all his instincts to let him lay hands on any one of his betas. The only consolation he had was that if Stiles did try anything, he’d be dead before he could get out of the room.

Stiles smiled widely at him and said happily, “Welp, let’s get started then.” He looked over Erica with a clinical detachment and suddenly Derek didn’t doubt that he’d seen much worse than this. Stiles gently turned Erica’s chin with a finger so she was looking at him. “I’m going to put my hands on you, Barbie.”

“Erica,” Derek groused.

“Erica,” Stiles corrected without bothering to look up at him. It itched at Derek’s skin for reasons he didn’t understand. “I’m telling you this because I am *very* attractive and any scent-reaction you might have would be embarrassing for you in a room full of werewolves.” Erica actually managed to huff out a laugh and her eyes became more focused on Stiles, warmth bleeding into them. Stiles leaned back from speaking into her ear and brightened. “Try to steel yourself, my dear.”

He did as promised and pressed his hands to Erica’s side. His eyes sparked a cool, serene blue this time and the color ran down the lines of his tattoo. For the first time, Derek wondered how much of his skin it spanned. He shifted a little uncomfortably as he remembered that Peter had once
known the answer to that.

Stiles drew back to reveal whole, unblemished skin. Only dried blood was left behind, on both of them. He held up his hands and stared at them with disgust. He looked back at the healed site of Erica’s wound and said with a sigh, “I suppose it was worth it.” He turned and washed his hands in the sink.

Scott took a step towards him, eyes narrowed. “How did you do that?”

Stiles grinned and placed his damp hand on Scott’s shoulder. He leaned close like he was sharing a secret. “Are you really going to make me say it?” Scott’s brows furrowed in confusion and Stiles rolled his eyes. He fluttered the fingers of his free hand. “Magic.”

Isaac cleared his throat, staring at Deaton. “Why can’t you do that?”

“As I’ve told you,” he said calmly, “I am not a practitioner any longer.” He gazed over at Stiles thoughtfully. “Even if I was, there are few who are capable of what Stiles is.”

Stiles shrugged. “I’m kind of the shit.”

Erica sat up and despite some residual shaking and her sickly pallor, she looked as well as she ever had. “How do you know this guy?”

Stiles tilted his head and smiled at her. “Right, we haven’t been introduced,” he said cheerfully. “Where are your manners, young lady? You get all hot and bothered over a dude and you don’t even bother to learn his name first? Scandalous. Victorian women everywhere are judging you.” Deaton frowned at Stiles as he held out his hand to Erica. She half-heartedly shook it, using all of her energy to keep the smile that was fighting to show from breaking over her lips. “I’m Stiles.”

“Erica. Not Barbie,” she said with a deadly smile. “Call me that again and I’ll rip your throat out.” She widened her smile so it showed her teeth.

Stiles winked at her. “You mean you’ll try.”

“You haven’t taken your pills lately, have you?” Deaton directed at Stiles’ back, the slightest bit of accusation in his tone.

Derek stopped, scenting the air. He would bet the others were as well. There was no medicinal scent on Stiles. He didn’t smell sick either though.

A guilty look flashed across Stiles’ face but it was gone by the time he was facing Deaton again. “I got distracted,” he said with a tireless grin. “As you know, that can, and does happen with some regularity to me.” Deaton didn’t look amused and Stiles flailed his arms towards Erica, arguing, “I’ve been solving near-death crises.”

“Momentary near-death crises,” Deaton said sharply.

“It’s not as if—”

The bell above the clinic door chimed and Derek froze, tilting his head towards the sound. His muscles tensed and his claws peeked out slowly as the footsteps drew nearer.

It was a moment before Deaton and Stiles could hear them too and they shared a look. Whomever it was, their heartbeat, scent, and breathing all pointed towards human. Derek knew better than most that those could be just as dangerous as any other creature. Maybe even more so.
The Sheriff rounded the corner, in full uniform. Derek would know him even without it. He had been there on the night of the fire, with kind eyes and gruff voice. From what Derek knew of him, he was a good man who was well out of his league when it came to the supernatural rumblings in Beacon Hills.

The wolves only tensed further when they recognized him. Erica was healed but the rest of them weren’t. They were injured, their clothes were torn and there were red lines of drying blood running down from the exam table and onto the floor. The Sheriff’s eyes darted over all of them, his expression growing darker and darker, before they landed on Stiles and he let out a rush of air.

“Jesus, Stiles. You’re barely here one day – one day – and not only have you already found all the werewolves in town,” Derek’s eyes widened, “but you’ve taken up with them all.” The Sheriff stopped walking over to Stiles long enough to point a shaking finger at Deaton. “I blame you for this.”

The expression on Deaton’s face was indulgent and amused. “Fair enough, Sheriff.”

“I told you I was here for a job, Dad,” Stiles whined while everyone else’s jaws – save Deaton’s and Peter’s – dropped.


“A job that ended yesterday if I recall correctly,” the Sheriff ground out, giving Stiles an exasperated look.

Stiles held up his hands. “Whoa, this,” he pointed around at the bleeding werewolves, “I had nothing to do with. I was innocently eating Fritos, I swear.” He pointed at the chip bag as though it was exonerating evidence.

“You are not getting involved in this,” the Sheriff said in a low voice and it sounded like he was reinforcing something he’d said before.

Stiles’ features went dark. “I don’t think that’s an option even if I do keep my distance from all this. Blinding people tends to get you on their hit list for life.”

Derek started. “You blinded Deucalion?”

Stiles opened his mouth to answer, his eyes wide and fierce and for the first time Derek glimpsed the power this cocky kid had inside him. It nearly made him fall back a step.

The Sheriff spoke before Stiles could. “Then get out of Beacon Hills.”

Stiles held his ground. “It’s been dangerous enough leaving you here unprotected.” His eyes hardened. “My scent is all over the house. He’s bound to find it sooner or later. I’m not running this time.”

The Sheriff ran a hand through his hair and huffed. “He nearly killed you the last time you confronted him.”

Stiles’ mouth curved into a smirk. “I gave as good as I got and I’ve only gotten stronger.”

The Sheriff gave him a long, gauging look before finally offering a sharp nod. “Fine,” he said gruffly. “But you keep me in the loop this time.” The Sheriff turned on his heel and dipped his head towards Derek. “Hale.” He looked around the room. “This is your pack?” He cringed a bit as he said it.
Derek really didn’t need the reminder that his pack was fairly pathetic.

The Sheriff leaned his head towards Stiles but didn’t take his eyes off the assembled teenagers. “It does look like they’ll need all the help they can get.”

Stiles grinned. “My thoughts exactly.”

So Derek had two more allies. Whether he wanted them or not. Stiles didn’t seem to care about Derek’s thoughts on the matter and his father followed wherever Stiles led, looming over his shoulder like a disapproving shadow. It didn’t look like he’d completely given up the ghost of keeping Stiles out of this entirely.

Peter stuck close to Stiles, talking in low tones with him in the corner or standing in the shadows behind his back like he was daring any of them to try something. It was relegated to a non-issue however, when the others took to him instantly.

Erica seemed amused by him and he had kept her from bleeding out so being friendly wasn’t much of a stretch for her. Boyd seemed mainly indifferent to him, which was mostly status quo for him. Cora hadn’t snarled at him once, which was practically a hug from her. Isaac was the only one who seemed a little wary but that was because Stiles and Scott seemed instantly taken with one another. They spoke the same language, which wasn’t something Derek could understand, and had similar temperaments.

Only Derek seemed to actively want him gone. Though that desire had dampened some since he’d found out about Stiles blinding Deucalion. It was hard not to find some goodwill for him after that revelation.

Peter and, grudgingly, Derek shared everything they knew about the Alphas with Stiles and the Sheriff, who’d gruffly introduced himself as ‘John’ after entering Derek’s loft.

Stiles didn’t reciprocate.

He frowned over the blueprints before moving away towards the window. He stared up at the half moon, resting the side of Derek’s coffee cup against his chin. Peter and the Sheriff were talking quietly over the table about their next move and the rest of the betas were fading fast. Erica and Boyd had already gone home for the night. Isaac and Scott were sitting on the couches, both of them stretched out and near sleep. Cora was watching them from the shadows, leaning against the banister.

Derek didn’t think she slept.

He walked over to Stiles and pitched his voice low. “How did you blind Deucalion?” he asked gruffly.

Stiles turned around and his mouth twitched into a tired smile. “State secret.”

Derek snorted, but it was mean and his eyes were dark. “It’s about the only thing you’ve done that’s made me like you.”

Stiles looked at the ceiling and his lips quirked up further. “Right, restoring your beta’s memories and keeping one of them from bleeding out, totally unworthy of likability.”

Derek ignored him. “How did you do it?”
Stiles drew in a deep breath. “I spelled a dagger and I gouged it into his eyes.” He tried to make it sound as anticlimactic as possible. Derek continued to watch him and Stiles tensed and added, “He still feels it every second of every day. Right now, wherever he is, he’s feeling a knife plunge into his face.” Stiles’ shoulders pulled in and his smile went dark and vicious. “It’s a small consolation.”

Derek could feel something like fear snaking up his back. “For what?”

Stiles’ eyes flashed deep red and the lights in the room flickered. “For killing my mom.”

Derek frowned, feeling wrong-footed. “I’m sorry.” He’d never understood why that was the proper response. He supposed people were apologizing for the universe in general and what utter shit it was, rather than taking on any personal responsibility.

Stiles shrugged but Derek could tell his nonchalance was feigned. The minute shaking of his cup gave him away. “You didn’t kill her,” he said simply.

Derek didn’t know what to say to that but Stiles’ presence grated against his skin less than it ever had, his heartbeat no longer thumping like a tattoo against the sides of his head. Derek nodded his head towards where Peter and the Sheriff were standing. “My uncle likes you.”

Stiles snorted. “Really? What gave that away?” he said with heavy sarcasm.

Derek shook his head. “I don’t mean he wants to fuck you,” he clarified bluntly. “He likes you.”

Derek’s shoulders hunched. “I didn’t think there was enough human left in him for that.”

Stiles frowned thoughtfully and followed Derek’s gaze. “I know. It’s odd, isn’t it?”

Derek nodded, brow furrowed in heavy confusion. Stiles was a piece of Peter’s past and this was one piece that Peter apparently wanted to keep safe. It made Derek want to squirm out of his skin. Why was this kid, that Derek didn’t even recognize, more important to Peter than his own niece?

Stiles held out his coffee cup and Derek automatically took it. Stiles’ mouth widened into a slight grin and he rubbed his thumb and middle finger over his eyes before sighing and glancing over at Peter and his father. “I don’t think we’ll figure out anything further tonight.”

Derek grunted, annoyed that he’d been turned into a pack mule without realizing it. He set the cup down on the edge of the sill.

Stiles walked over and placed a leading hand on the Sheriff’s elbow. “I think it’s time to pack it in.” Stiles looked at Peter as he said, “We’ll come up with something.”

Peter nodded, sharp and certain.

Stiles stopped on his way out and looked back at Derek with an inscrutable expression. “Why do they want you to kill one of your betas by the way? Is it just to tear your pack apart from the inside?”

Derek shook his head. “They seem to think if I kill one, I’ll be unable to keep from killing the others.” It didn’t make any sense to Derek and it only made him warier of the Alphas than ever before. Killing their own pack, it went against every instinct. “Something about their power becoming mine.”

Stiles dipped his chin, looking thoughtful. He affected a shiver. “They’re like fucking Reavers. Once human and now so far gone that they’re feeding on them.”
“Exactly,” Scott piped up from the couch.

Derek hadn’t even realized he was still awake. This was what he meant, their own completely esoteric language.

Stiles snapped out of whatever loop of horror he’d locked into and he patted his dad’s back to get him moving again. “Well, that’s sure to lead to some truly terrifying nightmares tonight. We’ll see you around.” He gave one last wave and left the loft.

Derek was suddenly overcome with a bone-deep exhaustion and he barely made it up to his bedroom before he fell into a restive sleep.

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Derek woke the next morning feeling like he’d only just closed his eyes. He squinted at his clock and the blurred numbers said 6:11. Derek flipped over onto his back and stared at the spinning blades of his ceiling fan. When he next glanced at the clock it was 6:43 and he rolled out of bed with a heavy sigh.

He came down the stairs and was surprised to find that he was far from the first one awake. His entire pack was sitting in his living room, speaking in quiet tones and snacking on his trail mix. Derek froze, staring at them in utter confusion.

“Ah, our fearless leader has arrived,” Peter said from the kitchen, teeth glinting behind a sharp smile.

Of course he wasn’t over with the others. Uncle Peter, not a part of the pack but with nowhere else to go and no one else to take him in.

Lydia looked up from the book she had in her hands. Derek recognized it as the hard copy of the Argent’s bestiary she’d translated. Jackson was sitting next to her, looking grumpy and blinking down at his knees with beady eyes.

Scott and Isaac were on the sofa, Cora standing just behind them and Boyd and Erica were in the armchairs opposite.

Derek walked over to stand at the head of the table, looking uneasy.

It was Lydia who broke the silence with a roll of her eyes. “Scott tells us you have a plan for the Alphas.” She furrowed her brow and twirled her hand around. “Or you’re in the process of a plan at least.”

Derek nodded, eyes narrowing. “We’re working on something.”

Scott shifted forward and corrected, “Stiles is working on something.”

Jackson and Lydia shared a look over the name. Apparently they hadn’t been brought that far into their confidence. Which would only help Derek now. “He’s not needed,” he said firmly.

Scott, Erica and – to Derek’s surprise – Boyd immediately stiffened and started voicing their disagreements over one another. “He’s the only person who is needed, Derek,” Erica said forcefully.

“We don’t even have a wisp of a plan without him,” Scott pointed out angrily.

Boyd moved in front of Erica, his voice even. “He’s hurt them once before. It’s more than any of
us have done.”

Derek crossed his arms protectively over his chest. “I don’t trust him,” he gritted out.

Erica rolled her eyes. “You don’t trust anyone. None of us is willing to sit around waiting for something that will never happen.”

Lydia closed the book and placed it on the table in front of her. She looked around at them primly before settling on Derek. “I’m betting that, by now, this Stiles has a plan and we’d be stupid not to take part in it just because you are chronically incapable of showing faith in anyone.”

Derek clenched his jaw.

Scott stood and levelled Derek with an intense stare. “You have to depend on us the same way we have to depend on you, Derek.” Scott glanced around them and decided, “We choose to trust Stiles. We’ll follow him whether you do or not.”

Stiles was dangerous, with fire burned into his skin, but Derek understood the implication behind Scott’s words. He could order them to stay away from him and he would be disobeyed. Scott was telling him because he didn’t want it to come to that. “It’s on your head if he betrays us, McCall.”

Scott let out a heavy breath of relief and dipped his chin. “Fair enough.” He sat back down and wagged his phone. “Besides, I texted him about fifteen minutes ago.”

They barely waited another two before Stiles was strolling through the door with his father in tow.

“Surprised to see you again so soon, Sheriff,” Peter said from the kitchen, eyes narrowed and curious.

The Sheriff’s gaze cut over to him, distrust festering behind it. “I’m on indefinite leave until this is over,” he growled. He refocused on Stiles’ back, as though daring him to take a single step out of sight.

Stiles beamed at them and his brows quirked. “I’m resisting blasting an ‘Avengers assemble!’ so hard right now.”

Scott snorted from the couch and Derek’s scowl deepened. He really did not like him.

Stiles walked over with a skip in his step. He froze as he passed Lydia and whistled. “You must be the incomparable Lydia Martin,” he said, kneeling down and taking her hand. “Beauty, brains and a snappy fashion sense.”

Jackson growled from beside her, eyes flashing blue.

Stiles winked at her. “Come on, Lyds, you’re too smart for labels.” He stood before she could respond. Derek’s skin itched with annoyance. Apparently Stiles would hit on most anything that moved. It irked Derek in some deep-set, indefinable way.

“So,” Stiles shared a look with his father, “we have a plan, of sorts.”

“We have no way of knowing if it will work, and we won’t know until we actually go through with
“it,” the Sheriff put in bluntly.

Stiles’ expression soured. “My father has chosen to take the optimistic approach as you can see.”

“What’s this plan?” Derek said, pulling attention back around to the matter at hand.

Stiles breathed in deep, catching the Sheriff’s eye. “We’re going to need a load of mountain ash, a place that’s more familiar to you than the Alphas – preferably one without a lot of hiding places,” he pointed at Lydia, “her brains and all the help we can get.” He looked up at Derek, gaze fierce. “Do you have any other allies?”

Derek was halfway through saying ‘no’ when Scott piped up. “We could ask the Argents.”

Derek’s growl was overrun by Stiles’ curious, “Victoria and Chris?” Derek’s brow furrowed as he stared harder at Stiles. Was there anyone this kid didn’t know? He watched as Stiles threw himself down on the couch next to Scott. Isaac grudgingly slid over so Scott could make room for him.

“Victoria’s dead,” Derek said gruffly. He considered it before adding reluctantly, “Gerard and Kate, too.”

“The latter I had heard about,” Stiles said with a smirk, glancing over at a self-satisfied Peter. He turned back to Derek. “Then I suggest we invite Chris into this little powwow.”

“And Allison,” Scott said before Derek could answer one way or another.

Stiles’ mouth spread into a slow grin and he waggled his eyebrows. “The Allison?”

Derek stared between the two. Stiles already knew about Scott’s epic love for Allison? Only Isaac’s face mirrored his surprise.

Stiles nudged Scott in the shoulder. “You neglected to tell me this was Allison as in Allison Argent. The Romeo and Juliet trope is overplayed as it is.” Stiles made an exaggerated face of disappointment and clapped Scott on the shoulder. “I expected something more original from you, Scotty.”

Scott grinned, honest and pure. It wasn’t something Derek had ever seen before. There had always been something in his eyes, dark and unamused, that wasn’t there now. “We’re star-crossed. It’s classic.”

Stiles snorted at the same time that Derek cleared his throat. It was supremely annoying how... distracting this kid was. “The Argents are werewolf hunters,” Derek said, since apparently everyone wanted to forget they were inherently on opposite sides.

“And we’re after some seriously well-equipped and badass werewolves,” Stiles put in with a shrug. “It’s a match made in heaven.” He slapped his hands down on his knees and stood up. It left Derek feeling off balance, the way Stiles couldn’t seem to sit still. “I suggest you call Chris and get him here ASAP. In the meantime, we can figure out where we’re going to hold the Ultimate Smackdown.”

Derek perked a dark brow. “Why can’t you talk like a normal person?” He hadn’t exactly meant to say that out loud but the question was still valid. These constant pop culture references distanced everything Stiles said by just a hair. But enough that, on a very fine and – truthfully – unimportant level, Derek couldn’t relate to it. He didn’t know why that bothered him.
Stiles just grinned at him, his eyes alight with amusement. It left Derek’s stomach squirming.

Derek left it to Scott to call Allison while his betas squabbled over the best locale. He rubbed a hand over his forehead, wishing he’d gotten more sleep the night before. The community center, the public pool and the movie theater were all considered and thrown aside. They kept coming back to the high school. It wasn’t ideal when it came to cutting down on places to hide but it was the only place they all knew better than the Alphas.

Stiles huffed out a harsh breath through his nose and pinched his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. “It won’t be easy creating a perimeter that large. We’ll have to set it up beforehand and hope it’s not disturbed before we can close it off, night of.”

Lydia pursed her lips. “There’s no way to protect it from being agitated?”

Stiles shook his head. “Not without drawing attention to it.” He looked up at Scott. “You said the twins went to school with you, right?”

Scott nodded.

“Then it’ll be gamble enough just having the ash there at all,” Stiles said, nostrils flaring. “No doubt Deucalion’s trained them the best he can against magic – the first lesson being detecting it.”

A knock at the door interrupted any further planning. The Sheriff was the one to answer it. Chris and Allison stood on the other side. Chris smirked and held up his hand to the barrier between hallway and loft. He looked into the apartment to stare at Derek. “Wards, Derek. Really?”

Stiles was dropping a fistful of trail mix into his mouth when he snapped his free fingers and the wards tore apart like they were made of tissue paper.

Derek shuffled his shoulders uncomfortably. It was a bit discouraging to see days’ worth of work ruined in mere nanoseconds, and with the ease of scratching an itch.

Allison breezed past him without a single glance and took the spot on the couch next to Scott that Stiles had so recently vacated. Stiles sent a thumbs up to Scott as she leaned in to kiss his cheek and Scott smiled back.

Chris, on the other hand, had frozen on his way in once he’d laid eyes on Stiles. His expression soured and he said bitterly, “Stiles.”

Stiles’ mouth curled into a winsome half-smile and his brows perked. “Heard about the demise of your murdering psychopath of a sister. I’d say I was sorry but it’d be a filthy, filthy lie.” He dipped his head towards Derek and for a moment ice flooded Derek’s insides. Stiles couldn’t know about Kate. Could he? His next words explained his attention and Derek could breathe again. “Derek here tells me your dad bit it, too. Shame, he was such a nice guy,” Stiles said, tone dripping with sarcasm.

Chris squared his shoulders and said tightly, “We hope he did.”

That made Stiles fall back a step. It was one of the first times Derek had seen him look uncertain. “You don’t know for sure?”

Chris shook his head and hedged, “Not exactly.”

They stared at each other for a long moment and the way they did felt... intimate. It must have felt that way to the Sheriff, too, because he cleared his throat as obtrusively as he could.
Chris glanced away, looking like he’d been caught out. He coughed and said, “I didn’t expect to see you back here.”

Stiles opened his mouth to respond but the Sheriff stepped forward and squeezed his shoulder, saying, “He does have some ties to the town.”

Chris smirked and again his eyes locked on Stiles’. “I suppose he does.”

Peter’s lips twitched and he joined the Sheriff in stepping up behind Stiles and glaring at Chris. He leaned in to Stiles but didn’t take his eyes off Chris. “And how do you know Chris?”

Stiles’ smile widened into a grin. “He taught me hand to hand combat many moons ago,” he said with a snort. His sense of humor was painfully immature, Derek thought with a roll of his eyes.

Chris shrugged a shoulder and said smugly, “Someone had to waste the time trying.”

Stiles’ eyebrow quirked, unimpressed. “I’ve only gotten better, you know?”

Chris pitched his voice low and leaned in to say warmly in Stiles’ ear as he passed him, “I would like to judge that for myself sometime.”

The Sheriff interrupted the moment with a hard, “As much as I enjoy watching my son get hit on by a man twice his age, I think we should get to the reason we invited you here, Argent.” If words were knives, Argent would be cut to hell.

Strangely, Derek felt the same about their blatant, not to mention wildly inappropriate, flirting. Apparently Stiles had a thing for older men. Derek was struck by the thought that maybe the person who had been breathing in the background on the other end of Deaton’s call had been an older man, too.

For some reason, the thought left him feeling wholly unsettled.

He had never thought of himself as homophobic before. Other people’s sexualities had never bothered him one way or another. He’d never seen why he should be concerned with something that didn’t directly concern him. But he couldn’t deny being put off by the idea of Stiles with a man, any man. He shook the thoughts away. “Now the Argents are here,” he said with an unhappy growl, “maybe you can let us in on this plan of yours.”

Stiles grinned up at him, a sharpness behind it while his eyes flashed a deep green. “We’re going to play thief,” he said with vicious satisfaction.

Derek couldn’t sleep. He joined the Sheriff in being as far from optimistic about this plan as possible. They were effectively trapping themselves inside the school with mountain ash for some kind of Battle Royale while Stiles and Lydia cooked up a magic spell that had precisely zero guarantee of working. It had never been done before. Stiles had said that about a half dozen times. And that was Derek’s largest problem with this plan. All the risk was Stiles’. This was Derek’s pack, Derek’s home, he should be the one facing that kind of danger. If Deucalion figured out what Stiles was up to even a second ahead of schedule, there was no way he wouldn’t rip his throat out.

Stiles’ power would be diverted for the spell and he wouldn’t be able to protect himself from even the weakest of attacks. Derek pressed a fist to his forehead as worst case scenarios played out behind his eyelids.
Stiles’ warm eyes cut over to him and he said tightly, “You’re sure you can get them here?”

He looked utterly serious and there were definite nerves in the trembling of his fingers. There was still an energy and anticipation underlying every twitch of his muscles. He was impossible to pin down and the challenge appealed to some part of Derek he didn’t necessarily approve of. Derek pulled out his phone and grunted out, “I’m sure.”

He scrolled down his contact list and frowned before deciding to go ahead with it. He pulled up Jennifer’s info and typed out the message: *Stay away from the school tonight.* He didn’t know what they were. If anything. But he did know he didn’t want her dead, especially not due to some plan *he’d* engineered.

Derek glanced back up to find Stiles’ inquisitive look hadn’t gone anywhere. He sighed and explained, “They know I have no true ties to this pack. I know they think it’s only a matter of time before I decide power is better than the weak connection I have to a group of teenagers who, more often than not, hate me.”

Derek’s expression turned into one of pity and, likely realizing it would only piss Derek off, he quickly looked away.

Derek got the feeling he understood the importance of pack better than most, as well as the fact that Derek’s being so broken had to be like torture. Especially considering he no longer had any family to truly speak of.

Derek obligingly pretended he hadn’t seen it. He paused walking past Lydia as she arranged some sort of geometric sigil in red sand. He glanced back at Stiles and said, “Keep him from doing anything stupid.” He frowned with his eyebrows. “I expect him to still be alive when all this is over.” The Sheriff would kill him if he wasn’t, Derek was sure of that.

Lydia smirked, her eyes shining like she knew something he didn’t. Derek didn’t doubt that was true. “I’ll keep him safe,” she said smugly.

Derek didn’t bother trying to decipher the look she was giving him, instead he walked the rest of the way down to the school. Allison and Chris were stationed just outside the perimeter. Chris was ready with ultrasonic emitters, in case any of the Alphas tried to escape the mountain ash boundary before it could be sealed off, while Allison had her bow and flash-grenade arrows. The Sheriff wasn’t far away from them, undoubtedly with wolfsbane bullets in his gun.

The others were already inside, disguising their heartbeats and scents with clever little tricks of Stiles’. Derek dialed Deucalion’s number at the penthouse above the Argent’s apartment. A voice dripping with confidence answered, “Derek, how can I be of assistance this evening?”

“I’m ready,” Derek said bluntly, refusing to rise to any bait. “I’ll be at the high school.” He hung up before Deucalion could get in another word.

He nodded to the Argents and said, for better or worse, “They’ll be here soon.”

He wasn’t disappointed when Deucalion and his four Alphas arrived after a scarce few minutes had passed. They were already sporting fangs and claws. Derek roared and matched them.

“You’ll need to kill at least one beta here if you mean to join us,” Deucalion told him around sharp teeth. “Unless you’re going to try to convince me you already have?” His gaze over the edges of his sunglasses was sharp and knowing.
“They’re inside,” Derek growled.

Deucalion wouldn’t be able to sense them with the spells in place but hopefully he would think it was due to distance rather than subterfuge.

Deucalion’s fangs retracted and he turned back to look at his lackeys. He grinned and faced Derek once again. “We fully expect a trap, you realize?” The other Alphas gave off braying laughs. “You’re just so terrible at being an Alpha, Derek, that we’re as far from intimidated as it’s possible to be.”

Derek straightened up and tilted his head with a smile. “I was kind of counting on that actually.” He turned and ran back towards the school as quickly as he could and Derek was pleased to hear the sound of five sets of footfalls following him. It meant that Lydia and Stiles would be able to sneak down to the ash line and close it.

One set stopped dead and Derek hoped it was because the twins had joined but when he turned back, it was to see Deucalion frozen, scenting the air. Shit. Derek had to get to him. He spun to change direction but Ennis caught him hard in the shoulder. Derek tumbled and rolled, skidding onto all fours, roaring.

Deucalion was racing for the ash line on the other side of the building and Derek could see Stiles running down the length of it. The boundary hadn’t been closed with the first attempt. The ash had been disturbed somewhere else in the night and Stiles’ only hope was to find the break, pray it was the only one, and close it before Deucalion got to him. The words ‘suicide mission’ rang in Derek’s head.

Deucalion was gunning for Stiles and the only chance Stiles had of completing the barrier, was if Derek got to Deucalion first. He started to run for them, only to be caught around the ankle by Ennis. Derek roared and slashed him hard across the face. Ennis growled but his hands flew to his face and it was enough of a distraction for Derek to break free and run for Deucalion, who had one hell of a head start.

Stiles had found the break in the line but Deucalion was bearing down on him fast. Stiles pulled out a fistful of ash from the bag slung over his shoulder. He dropped it with a start as Deucalion’s mouth, huge and bloodthirsty, broke open for him. Stiles fell back on his ass, hands splayed behind him and heart pounding hard while Deucalion snapped at the barrier that weakly shimmered into existence. The ash had fallen where it was meant to. Mostly.

Deucalion roared when he realized he’d missed his opportunity by scant seconds and he clawed at the wall of magic. “You.” His voice was inhuman and so raw and fierce that it was difficult to understand.

Derek watched Stiles’ chest heave but even his obvious fear didn’t stop him playing with fire. He crawled forward on his knees and put his face right up to the barrier, a vicious grin spreading over his face. “Me,” he hissed and his voice was just as cutting.

Deucalion’s head whipped around in realization and his sightless eyes landed on Derek. He lunged for him and caught Derek in the side with his teeth. Derek howled but he couldn’t break Deucalion’s hold. Everything colored with a red haze and he vaguely heard Stiles say something under his breath, something with soft consonants and hard vowels and Deucalion pulled back with a deep groan, doubling over.

Derek ran before Deucalion could collect himself, trying to get back to the school. He just had to keep him distracted from Stiles long enough for Stiles to get back to the sigil and perform the spell.
It didn’t matter if Derek died in the process, so long as this didn’t end up being a pointless exercise.

He passed Allison and Chris who had Kali cornered and snarling and he could vaguely hear the sound of gunshots inside the school. There were snapping jaws and hard thumps coming from the basement. He broke through the double doors but was still in the main hall, Deucalion on his heels, when Deucalion stopped, as though yanked back by an invisible string.

His eyes narrowed and he turned to look through the patterned window on the doors, back at Stiles. Even though they were nearly half a mile away from him, Derek knew Deucalion would be able to see him clearly. He dropped his chin, eyebrows furrowed curiously and he said in a hushed tone, “And just what do you think you’re doing, Stiles?”

Stiles’ voice boomed out over the distance and it was cheeky and fierce and every inch the Stiles that had so confidently strolled into Derek’s loft like he’d owned it that first day. “You’ve taken something that doesn’t belong to you, Duke. Didn’t your mother ever teach you that stealing is wrong?”

Deucalion’s thin lips flitted up into a grin. “Funny, isn’t it? You, mentioning mothers.” His eyes burned red and even Derek was tempted to rip out Deucalion’s throat for the taunt.

Stiles just laughed, short and breathy. “Yes, well. I did have a mother who knew right from wrong. I think I’ll make her proud today, don’t you?” The sounds of fighting that had been building to a crescendo around and below them had tapered off completely. There wasn’t a person or wolf who could hear them, that wasn’t hanging on Stiles’ every word. “I think I should take. It. Back.”

“What are you—” But the connection was severed before Deucalion could finish the question.

Derek wasn’t sure what he’d expected when the spell began but it wasn’t this. This was far more satisfying than he’d hoped it could be. He watched as power leached from Deucalion in painful jolts, like electric currents being run – visibly – through his body. He stared down at him with vicious pleasure.

Every single one of the betas Deucalion had killed – that all of them had killed – were unwittingly taking their revenge now. It wasn’t natural for one wolf to have that much power, to amass his own kin’s strength and it wanted to tear out of him. Stiles had come up with the idea to rip it away. Lydia had found a description in the bestiary of witches who had stripped a wolf of his Alpha rank before so they knew, in principle, it could be done and they set about creating their own spell. Or curse, more aptly put. And it was a fucking masterpiece.

Deucalion staggered as fatal blows never felt etched into his skin. Every death his stolen power had helped him escape befall him now. Slash marks carved into his jaw and neck; puncture wounds bled through his shirt; his leg dropped out from under him as the musculature grew mangled and unusable.

Stiles’ voice emerged from nothingness and this time it was whispered and low. Derek wouldn’t have heard it at all if he hadn’t been standing close enough to get Deucalion’s blood on his shoes. “I told you I would be the end of you,” he said, like he was tearing a bite out of Deucalion’s flesh with the words.

Deucalion’s eyes burned the fiercest red Derek had ever seen before the light in them was snuffed out.
Derek stood there, stunned. It had worked. Their plan had actually worked. It suspended belief, honestly. Which was when Derek heard Lydia scream.

Kali was still alive. Worse for wear, but alive, and headed straight for Stiles. Kali backhanded Lydia hard across the face as she moved to stop her. Her body went limp almost instantaneously. She didn’t slow at all as she made straight for Stiles, who didn’t move. Why wasn’t he moving? What had the spell done to him?

Stiles’ constant reminder of ‘it’s never been done before’ reverberated in Derek’s head.

Derek had started towards him before the panic had truly set in, but it was obvious now that Stiles was weak. The barrier had fallen as soon as the spell was cast because he couldn’t sustain the power – the belief – it took, and now he could barely stand on his own two feet let alone put up any kind of wall between him and Kali.

One arm was hanging awkwardly at her side, like it’d been popped out of its socket, and there were claw and bite marks over seventy-five percent of her body but it had only been enough to maim and not kill. She bore down on Stiles and her mouth drew wide, wider than any human’s could go, fangs growing and eyes burning red. She was going to kill him unless Derek got there.

He was barely fifty yards away when she sunk her teeth deep into Stiles’ side. Blood gushed out over her mouth and Stiles’ scream was hoarse and broken. Derek dug his claws into her face and dragged upwards and pushed forward until he could feel brain. She didn’t even have time to react before she hit the ground, ugly and deader than a fucking door nail.

Derek roughly dragged Stiles up by his collar as he knelt down. He was angry and... terrified by turns.

“I’m fine,” Stiles choked out but the words were garbled around the blood trickling down from the corner of his mouth.

“Shut up,” Derek spat. He pulled up Stiles’ shirt for reasons even he didn’t understand. He’d seen her do it but he needed to see the proof to believe it was real. You could see every individual puncture wound of each one of her teeth, even beneath all the blood and the tattoo that invaded even here. It curled around his sides from his back, snaking up his chest along the edges of his torso. The thick, black lines spanned so much of his pale skin. Derek couldn’t begin to imagine how his back looked, which seemed to be where the tattoo originated from. “You’ll either turn or you’ll die,” he said. He managed to keep his voice steady, much to his own surprise.

Stiles shook his head and it lolled dangerously. “I won’t turn,” he said with certainty, not a single stutter in his heartbeat. Derek’s throat seized. He knew what would happen now. Stiles’ body would reject the bite and his blood would turn black and pour out of him in purest agony. He placed his hand on Stiles’ shoulder, veins turning black as the plain flowed away from Stiles and into him. Stiles’ grin was bloody. “I knew you liked me, Sourwolf.”

“Shut up,” Derek said again. If Stiles was going to die, at least Derek could make it as painless as possible for him and, when it was done, he would get up and move on just as he always did. He only hoped the kid’s father wouldn’t come to watch.

Stiles blinked and his eyes opened and closed separately. Derek looked away. Stiles placed his hand over Derek’s and shook his head again. He jutted his chin forward and Derek could tell it was taking all of his energy to focus on him with the intensity he was displaying. “I’m fine,” he said clearly and the words weren’t as slurred, though they were just as believable as the first time he’d uttered them. Stiles smiled and looked down at the tooth marks in his skin before locking
eyes with Derek again. “Watch,” he said firmly.

Derek stared down at the bite but nothing happened. It bled nonstop and the shine from the school’s security lights made it look like the torn flesh was ripping further. Derek wanted to stop looking but then he might have to meet Stiles’ eyes again, watch the life extinguish in them the same way it had in Deucalion’s. Somehow Derek didn’t think it would be nearly as easy to take this time around.

He watched the wound rise and fall, expand and contract with each rattling breath Stiles took, when the ink on his side *shifted*. Derek fell back onto his ass. The ink curled over the wound, like the spirals of his own triskele, sparking a cool blue. Where there had been hard lines of a tribal tattoo there were now soft swirls that moved in time with the slow pulse of Stiles’ heart.

“It’s—It’s.”

“Magic,” Stiles choked out, voice tight as he clenched his stomach. Whatever the lines on his skin were doing, it wasn’t painless. “You think I’m crazy enough to get a full body tattoo?” He huffed. “I would rather not look like a gang member, you know. It would’ve made getting a job ten thousand times easier, trust me.”

Derek stared in awe as the marks began to fade as though someone were going over them, back and forth, with a crappy eraser.

“I’m marked by magic, my mom used to say.” Stiles snorted. “No one ever expects it to be so literal.”

Within minutes, the bite was gone completely and Stiles winced but propped himself up nonetheless. He staggered into a standing position and the first thing he did was stare at Kali and her destroyed face. He glanced back at Derek. “Thanks for that, by the way.” He wiped bloody hands on his jeans and coughed badly enough that it upset his balance.

Derek steadied him automatically. “Was it always that big?” he asked, nodding at the tattoo.

Stiles laughed outright. “Hell no. It used to be a little thing in the small of my back. The older I get, the more dictatorial it gets. It’s fighting for control of every inch of my beautiful, beautiful skin,” he said with an exaggerated pout, rubbing a thumb over the ink that was now firmly planted on his neck – perfectly inert. So much so that Derek almost doubted that he’d seen what he’d seen.

He opened his mouth to say... what, he didn’t know, when he heard the sounds of people running towards them. Scott was leading the charge. Jackson stopped and hefted Lydia into his arms. Her heartbeat was calm and even. She was knocked out cold and she’d probably have one hell of a headache when she woke up, but she’d be all right.

Scott didn’t stop until he’d pulled Stiles into a fast hug. He stepped back and held Stiles by the shoulders, blurt out quickly, “We heard Lydia scream and we thought—” which was when Scott noticed the still-tacky blood on Stiles’ shirt and the rip that was so clearly from a werewolf’s teeth. Scott grabbed at the hole and tugged. “Shit. No, *no*, shi—” He finally coaxed his shaking digits into enough cooperation that he could pull up Stiles’ shirt... where there was nothing but unblemished skin. And yet he was still painfully human.

Derek heard the collective breath taken by the group assembled. They really had taken, all too quickly, to this kid. The Sheriff trudged forward and dragged Stiles into his arms. “You take a lot of risks, kid,” he said gruffly, squeezing him tight.
Stiles grinned. “And no worse the wear for it. I like the lesson it teaches little children – there are no permanent consequences to anything you do!” he said brightly.

The Sheriff smiled back, somewhat exasperatedly, at him. It was clear, though, how much he respected and loved his son judging by the warmth of his gaze.

Stiles smacked his lips and looked at all of them like now all the fuss was over, he couldn’t figure out why they were all still standing around. “I don’t know about all of you, but I am starving. And considering we all look like we’ve been down at the O.K. Corral, albeit with more claws and teeth than guns—” Stiles nodded at the Sheriff, “no offense, Dad – I’m thinking delivery?”

Derek bit down on a surprised snort. Not one of them, good guys or bad, was sporting a bullet wound. Stiles was just dick enough to point that out. Derek tried, and failed, not to find it amusing.

The Sheriff glowered at him.

Stiles ignored it. “So, food. At Derek’s,” he said, without even looking to Derek for confirmation, “Pizza?”

Scott let out a massive groan. “Oh my God, yes.”

“Pineapple,” Boyd put in instantly.

Erica rolled her eyes and huffed. “Anchovies.”

“You are disgusting, Reyes,” Jackson said, hefting Lydia up higher. “Green peppers. And mushrooms.”

Erica glared at him. “And you call me disgusting?”

Stiles clapped Derek on the shoulder and grinned while his betas continued sniping over toppings. “Sounds like you’ll be lucky if you spend less than sixty bucks on our victory party.”

Great, so not only was his loft being invaded – again – but he was apparently funding the invasion. Derek growled at Stiles and, happily, it was intimidating enough that he snatched his hand back.

Derek was surprised the pack didn’t want to go back to their own homes, at least to shower and change, before coming over but he couldn’t deny that there was some sort of pull to solidify the victory. Together.

Stiles followed Derek into his bedroom and pulled at the tatters of his shirt. “What about it, Grumpy? You pity me and my near-death experience enough to lend me a new shirt?”

Derek grumbled but pulled a moss green t-shirt, that was a bit too small for him, down off its hanger. He didn’t let on that he was willing to acquiesce to the request yet though. “You can’t fix it yourself,” Derek perked a brow, “with your magic?” It was said mostly to be sarcastic and obnoxious but Stiles just shrugged, staring around at Derek’s room as he hadn’t had a chance to adequately explore it before.

He answered, only half-focused on it, “Magic, it’s—it’s like you have to have a full, manual understanding of the task you’re trying to perform before you try doing it with a cheat, you know. I still can’t sew, can’t even grasp the mechanics of it, and the spell reflects that lack of skill.” Stiles expanded when Derek just continued to stare blankly at him. “You don’t necessarily have
to be able to do it – like I can’t physically rip the beta power from an Alpha – but you have to be able to wrap your mind around it.” He squinted one eye and pulled up a shoulder. “If that makes sense.”

“It doesn’t,” Derek told him gruffly. He turned and held out the shirt for Stiles.

Stiles grinned and pulled off his overshirt, dropping it on Derek’s bed, before tugging off his t-shirt and throwing it somewhere near the foot of Derek’s closet. He turned away from Derek to shrug on the new one but Derek stopped him.

He could finally see the full extent of the tattoo. It was a phoenix. What Derek had thought were tribal markings, the ones that curled over Stiles’ sides and up his neck, were actually the feathers of its wings in sharp, geometric shapes. Derek gazed at it in awe, resisting the urge to touch his fingers to the ink. Every shift of Stiles’ muscles or breath that moved through his torso made it look like the thing was alive and breathing on his skin. And, Derek knew, there was a chance that maybe it was.

Its head was thrown back, beak open, chest puffed out, talons curled, while lines that were clearly from the feathers of its tail dipped beneath the waistband of Stiles’ jeans. The wings spread out everywhere else.

Stiles stepped away from Derek and pulled the borrowed shirt all the way on. “Huge, right?” He snorted. “Pain in my fucking ass I can tell you that.” Derek stared at the twisting, twining lines down his arms that were usually hidden by his second shirt. It made him look older and dangerous. “Can you imagine explaining this to anyone without being able to tack on ‘oh, and, uh, it’s magical.’ It’s a bitch, let me tell you.” He picked up his overshirt again and shrugged that on, too.

Derek’s hand clenched on thin air. Exactly how many times had Stiles had to explain this to someone? How many people got to see this much of him?

Peter walked in before Derek could respond. “Pizza has arrived,” he said, annoyingly formal. He stared at Stiles and waited until Derek grudgingly left the room to grab him by the scruff of his neck – which Derek turned around to watch him do. “You always were idiotically brave,” he said harshly.

Stiles winked. “Or bravely idiotic.”

The pizzas barely lasted a full fifteen minutes before they were utterly laid to waste. Derek hardly felt like moving. In fact, only Stiles and the Sheriff stood. Stiles looked around at all of them with a genuine smile. “It was fun as hell plotting the death of psychopathic werewolves with you dudes but, deed done, I think it’s time I head back to Boston.”

Derek started. He had nearly forgotten, and in barely any time at all, that Stiles wasn’t a part of them. Not really. He’d only fit in surprisingly well. He could tell by the sour looks on his betas’ faces that they’d forgotten, too.

Scott was the first up. He stuck out his hand, which Stiles shook, before deciding on a hug anyway.

“I’m going to miss you, man,” Stiles said happily. He squeezed Scott’s shoulder. “You’ve got my number, Scotty. Don’t be a stranger.”

Derek didn’t know how old Stiles was but he had to be in his early-to-mid twenties. At least now
when the pack made... *insinuations* about him hanging out with a bunch of teenagers, he could toss Stiles back in their faces as a distraction.

They all said goodbye to him in turns, only Erica and Lydia’s *as* heartfelt as McCall’s, but even Jackson managed to grumble something out. Stiles had bonded with all of them it seemed. He’d accomplished in a few days what Derek had yet to manage himself.

It left him feeling far from endeared to the kid.

Still, he stuck out his hand for Stiles to shake, though he couldn’t keep his lip from raising in a sneer. “I... appreciate the help.” He wasn’t sure it was true, but it felt like it might be one of the better things he could say.

Stiles huffed, amused, and slid his fingers into Derek’s for a firm, quick shake. “Thanks for the shirt, Sourwolf. I’ll see you around.”

With that, Stiles practically skipped out the door while his parting words rubbed uncomfortably against Derek’s skin. Likely because they weren’t true and the lie somehow bothered him.

The pack, and Allison and Chris, didn’t stay long after Stiles had left and Peter slunk off to, undoubtedly, go be evil and inhuman without his influence around.

It was for the best though. They didn’t truly know anything about Stiles, and what they did know was enough to leave anyone wary. He was too powerful, too capable and too unchecked. He wasn’t someone Derek felt entirely safe being around and having him out of Beacon Hills left Derek relaxed for the first time since Stiles had come into it.

That night, he slept better than he had in weeks.

Derek didn’t remember it until two days later, when he was looking for his old boots in the bottom of his closet. Stiles’ stiff, bloody, tattered shirt was crumpled in the corner exactly where he’d thrown it. It had some stupid logo on the front and it was a soft, faded blue in color – like Stiles’ eyes when he healed someone. It looked like it had been through the wash numerous times, which probably accounted for the fade. Derek didn’t want to toss it into the laundry, knowing it would probably only tear more if he did, but something made him pause when he went to throw it out.

He ended up hanging it on the same hanger that was vacant from the shirt Stiles had taken. He didn’t know why he was keeping it and he didn’t want to explore the why either. It still smelled like Stiles, like ash and electricity and energy made scent, like the way the smell of a lightning storm hung in the air just before it hit.

Derek moved the hanger near the back of his closet and dragged out his boots. Within a few days, the bloody t-shirt – and Stiles – had slipped his mind completely.
II. “You just killed the nice, deranged chick from the juice bar that I was gonna score with someday maybe!”

Chapter Summary

“There’s the same: mud, vegetation, water.”

“Swamp,” Derek said, squinting.

Scott nodded. “Drowned in the middle of an empty gymnasium.”

Derek grunted. “Makes as much sense as a movie theater, a convenience store and a parking lot.”

Scott watched Derek as he prowled around the edge of the body. “You’ve really never heard of anything that drowns its victims like this?”

Derek shook his head, trying to think back to Laura, to his family, but he didn’t remember even a single mention of something capable of this. “Lydia says there’s nothing in the bestiary either.” It was still odd that he could relate what Lydia had said – that they spoke directly at all – but she was pack now. It was she and Jackson or neither and Derek could accept that, however grudgingly.

Scott pursed his lips. “I’ll check Stiles’, it might have something on this.”

Derek straightened. He hadn’t even heard that name in months. He’d had no idea that any of his pack was keeping in contact with him. He didn’t know how he felt about it either. He still didn’t trust that Stiles wasn’t dangerous to them. “Stiles?” He perked a brow.

Scott hmed noncommittally, staring down at the girl’s blue-tinged skin. “He’s got a much more exhaustive one than we have. Actually,” he frowned, “I’ll bet Lydia’s already looked into it.”
Scott pulled out his phone and scrolled down the contacts while Derek blinked at him.

So Lydia had kept in touch as well?

Not even a full minute had passed before Scott’s phone pinged and he made a low noise in the back of his throat. “Yep, she’s checked what he’s transcribed already and there was nothing that even came close.” Scott’s phone pinged a second time. He snorted. “She thinks he’s holding out though.” Scott glanced up at Derek. “He does let his notes get a bit out of hand. You should see his apartment, papers and books everywhere.”

“How have you seen his apartment?” Only after the words were out did Derek realize how fierce and threatening they had sounded. He winced internally. He hadn’t meant to say anything to that but Stiles lived in Boston, it defied all logic that Scott had seen where he lived. Unless he meant here in Beacon Hills and, again, Derek was left wondering when exactly they had gotten so close.

Scott shrugged. “We Skype,” he said blandly, as though the information was as interesting as the biology of a slug. Scott sighed and looked back at the girl’s face. She was younger than him by only a few years and he swallowed hard. “I think we should ask for his help. Again.” He undoubtedly tacked on the last so he could remind Derek he’d already said yes to this once.

Derek bristled instantly. “We don’t need him,” he growled.

Scott pulled in his shoulders. “That’s what you thought the last time, too.” Scott stood up and faced him. “Listen, now’s the best time to ask him. His classes are out for the next two weeks because of winter break. He could be here tomorrow.”

Derek could have sworn Stiles was past college-aged. He must have been in Grad school. Derek knew, from when Laura was considering it, how that could drag on for years. “You’ve just said there’s nothing he knows that we don’t.”

Scott raised his chin defiantly. “We don’t know that.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “You two are, apparently, in each other’s pocket,” he said, the accusatory tone coming through despite trying to slam the floodgates closed on his feelings on the matter. “I’m sure he would have told you if he knew anything when you asked.”

Scott looked a bit uneasy. “That’s just it, I haven’t had the chance to ask him directly yet. He’s been busy working something else in New York for the pack there. His phone just goes straight to voicemail.” Scott looked like he suspected Derek might pounce on the opportunity to point out that they weren’t as close as Scott had thought. Underneath that though was a very real concern that Derek couldn’t bring himself to poke at.

“You don’t need the excuse of a case to bring him here and check he’s all right.” Derek nearly pulled a muscle trying to look reassuring. “I’m sure he’ll get in touch when he can.”

Scott stood up straighter. “That’s not what this is,” he insisted. “We’re having no luck ourselves and I really think Stiles will know something.” Derek glared out at the bleachers. “Derek,” Scott said firmly, “this is the fifth person it’s killed and, the way it’s going, it’ll get to fifty without us so much as putting a dent in its killing spree.”

Derek tensed his shoulders. “And we don’t know that Stiles can do any better.”

That should have been the end of it but Scott managed to hold his ground and mutter at his back, “We don’t know that he can’t.”
Derek ignored him. He checked all his contacts, unchecking Jennifer and Laura, whose number he still hadn’t – and wouldn’t – delete from his phone and sent out a mass text message to the pack: The loft in ten. Pack meeting, not optional.

Scott glanced down at his phone and snorted. “You know they’ll agree with me if we put it to a vote.”

Which was as good as saying he was going to put it to a vote. Great.

He and Scott didn’t talk all the way back to the loft. Scott sat in the passenger seat and fidgeted and frowned and just generally looked as if the entire design of Derek’s existence was to make his miserable. He opened the glove compartment and pulled out the case folder that Derek had already read and reread. He cradled it to his chest and stared out the window moodily.

He’d apparently found the next tack he wanted to take by the time they were walking up the stairs and he puffed out his chest.

“If it’s about the money, I bet Peter would pay it.”

And that was really the last thing Derek wanted to think about and therefore absolutely the worst way to convince him. He didn’t answer, instead shrugging off his jacket and dropping it on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. He stalked off down the hallway, Scott’s steps right behind him.

“And he can more than take care of himself, he proved that the last time, so it’s not like you have to worry about him along with the rest of the pack.”

Derek shook his head, annoyed, but didn’t respond. Scott followed Derek into his bedroom to continue throwing arguments at his back. Derek rolled his eyes, he’d been hoping that would be enough to cut him off but apparently Scott felt no sense of boundaries. Derek blamed Stiles’ invasion the last time he was here for the new comfort level the pack felt in his loft.

“You’ve admitted you have no idea what’s causing this,” Scott said, tacking on, “and neither do any of the rest of us,” likely so it wouldn’t seem like he was calling Derek a bad Alpha. Or at least so it wouldn’t be so obvious that he was. “I’m just saying, he could help. Isn’t that kind of what he does?”

“His help is not necessary,” Derek growled, stripping off his tank, which still reeked of his own sweat from his earlier training session with Jackson and Erica. He flexed his back, their scratch marks were long healed but it still itched as though they were scabbing up.

Scott frowned and he perked his eyebrows. “Like it wasn’t with the Alphas?”

Derek paused and said grudgingly, “That was different.”

Scott tossed down the folder full of the crime scene photos – courtesy of the Sheriff – on Derek’s bedspread. The glossy images slid out to fan across his mattress. “So is this,” he said fiercely.

Derek turned his gaze away from the blank eyes of the second victim, the fifteen-year-old girl who had drowned in the middle of a half-full theater. “I’m not paying for his airfare,” Derek did decide sourly.

“So get Peter to do it,” Scott reiterated with an unconcerned shrug. “or you could even——” Scott stopped and his forehead furrowed heavily. “Has Stiles been here?” he said sharply, slightly accusing.

Scott took a step further into the room, not looking at Derek. “It smells like him,” he said absently, breaking towards Derek’s closet.

Derek watched him go when he figured out what Scott might be honing in on. “It’s his shirt,” Derek said unconcernedly, pulling on his own. He was surprised it had carried the scent for so long. Derek had stopped smelling it himself as it had become ingratiated into the general aroma of his room. He was sure that normal scents faded faster than this but Stiles didn’t smell like anyone else. He smelt like natural disaster and rogue elements.

He saw Scott reach in and find it, pulling the dark-stained hem out so he could see it properly. “You kept it?” Scott said, looking back at Derek with confusion.

Derek shrugged.

Scott looked like he wanted to ask why but he stayed the impulse, probably because he knew Derek wouldn’t answer. Scott dropped the shirt back into the closet. “You know if we leave it up to the pack, they’ll decide for you and Stiles will be involved regardless.” Scott’s smile went the slightest bit sharp. “You might as well make it look like your idea.”

Which was how Derek found himself telling the pack that Stiles would be joining them in a few days’ time if all went well.

Two days passed and there was no word from Stiles. The pack hadn’t been told when to expect him but from the increasingly drawn look on Scott’s face, it was clear Stiles hadn’t even gotten in touch yet. His growing worry was starting to make Derek’s muscles tight every time they were in the same room.

Derek woke up to clanging sounds coming from his kitchen. It was barely four in the morning. He was going to kill Peter.

Again.

He was still rubbing at his eyes, dragging his feet down the stairs, when he growled roughly, “I’m going to eviscerate you.”

“It’s not my fault all you have is eggs, cheese and bread,” was the bright response.

Derek’s eyes felt like they nearly popped out of their sockets with how wide they got. Stiles looked as tired as Derek felt and he wasn’t moving about with his usual energy. His scent was there, still nonsensical, but buried beneath a layer of something antiseptic and bitter. It was muted. All of him was. Derek didn’t like it.

It was change. He wasn’t great with that at the best of times.

“I’m doing the best I can with limited resources,” Stiles said and even the light in his honey-colored eyes wasn’t as bright as it had been the last time Derek had seen it.

Derek might have chalked it up to exhaustion but, combined with the rest of it, uneasiness itched at his skin. Derek’s mouth twisted into a frown and he fought with himself before he gritted out, “You smell different.”

“Huh?” Stiles looked up at him, confused. He had two pans going on the stove and he was
apparently cooking all the eggs Derek had. Which was about a carton and a half. “Oh,” he said, realizing, “it’s my medication. It’s the only way I can concentrate on my classes at all. It’s hard enough to get the students interested, I don’t need to war with my own attention span. It’ll wear off in a few hours.” He flipped a few of the eggs with flair and sucked butter off his thumb. “I hopped right on a plane after I got Scott’s email.”

Derek crossed his arms over his chest. There were a thousand different things he wanted to address at once. It wasn’t an unfamiliar feeling when it came to Stiles. He decided to go with the one that would say the least about how he felt having Stiles in his kitchen. “He called you as well.”

Stiles looked up at that and blinked. “Did he?” He shook off his surprise. He looked like he was running on fumes. “Well, I suppose he would’ve.” He shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. My phone got melted by a Narasingha in Sri Lanka.” His features soured and he said bitterly, “That’s the third one this year.”

Again, Derek had to choose which part of that to attack first. And there were plenty of juicy bits there for the tasting. “Scott said you were in New York.”

Stiles snatched the toast from the toaster and slathered butter on it. “I was the last time I talked to him,” he said agreeably. “Then I had to go to Sri Lanka for this cursed vase——” he snorted. “It was a whole, big thing and it turned out to be guarded by a Narasingha, which, yeah. Who knew those were real, right?” He glanced up at Derek with a grin. “Paid well though.”

“Narhas-sing-hah?” Derek repeated slowly, squinting.

Stiles made a knowing sound in the back of his throat and parcelled out four eggs and six pieces of toast onto a plate, which he placed on the other side of the counter. “These painfully smart lion things. I mean, they’re mostly normal, right? Only they have those huge, dark-rimmed eyes like lions and fangs, too. They can shift from two legs to four in the span of, like, a nanosecond. Oh, and they breathe fire.” Stiles chuckled. “Because apparently they didn’t have enough evolutionary advantages.”

He put three eggs and four pieces of toast onto his own plate and sat down next to the other untouched plate.

Derek grudgingly took the seat next to him and was forced to admit that Stiles wasn’t a horrid cook. He could do cheesy eggs and toast at the very least. He glanced over at Stiles with slitted eyes and was about to say something sort of complimentary when he noticed something else that was different about him. His hand reached out without his mind’s consent and his thumb just barely brushed his neck. His skin was warm and completely unmarked there. “It’s gone,” Derek said blankly.

Stiles, whose eyes had bugged completely at the first touch of Derek’s hand, now mostly just looked lost. He smiled after a second as he realized what Derek was talking about and he set his makeshift egg sandwich down on his plate and wiped the crumbs off on his overshirt. He reached over and tugged down the neck of his t-shirt and overshirt where Derek’s hand had been.

His skin was red, singed and warped. It looked like Peter’s had after he’d had a month or so to heal from the fire. Twisted through the wrinkles in his skin were the black lines of his tattoo, feeding into the burn. “Yeah,” he said simply, sounding as though this sort of thing happened every day, “it regrouped after Sri Lanka. Hurt like a bitch too, and it decided to shift on the plane so I had to pretend like I wasn’t in total agony or I’d probably have been shot by an air marshal or something.”

He sounded like he was amused by the whole idea of that.
Derek really did not understand him at all. He was on his third piece of toast when he said doubtfully, “And I’m supposed to believe you teach students?”

Stiles grinned. “I’m still working on my thesis,” Derek had been right about the Grad school then, “but I teach an Anthropology course that meets twice a week.”

“Do I even want to know?” Derek said with a raised brow.

“Magic, Witchcraft and Religion.” He shrugged and said happily, “Most of the students get really into it so their end-of-term projects and mid-term papers get pretty out there.”

Derek didn’t doubt that. Stiles was the kind of person whose enthusiasm was catching.

Stiles polished off the last of his egg, cheese and toast sandwich and asked, still chewing, “So what exactly am I doing here then? I read Scott’s email on one of my back-up phones on the plane but it’s a back-up phone because the screen’s busted right down the middle from a Karate Kid reenactment so I only got the gist.” He tugged a paper towel off the roll on Derek’s counter unceremoniously, having to dart out another hand to stop it toppling over. “Something about drowning.”

Derek nodded. “Five victims so far, between the ages of 15 and 19. Two boys and three girls. Your dad’s file is here somewhere.”

Stiles gave an approving jut of his chin. “Glad to see he’s helping out.”

Derek certainly agreed with that. Not having to tiptoe around law enforcement had definitely been a boon. “All of them were drowned in places that were at least a mile out from any water source. It smells natural, no chlorine or treatment of any kind, like bog or lake water.” Derek stared at him with arched eyebrows. “You know of anything like that?”

Stiles made a noncommittal sound. “Not off the top,” he decided. He tilted his head at a sound on the stairs and Derek turned to see Isaac standing there, blinking wide, bleary eyes at them. Stiles said without turning, “There’s food on the stove, kiddo. Still good, too.”

Derek whirled on him with narrowed eyes. He had no idea how Stiles did things like that.

Isaac came around carefully and loaded up a plate with a hazy smile in Stiles’ direction.

Stiles yawned. “Shit,” he said weakly. “I need to crash. Get me everything you’ve got from my dad and any possible suspects Lydia’s compiled and I’ll be back around,” Stiles checked the clock on the microwave. It was just after five, “ten or eleven probably.” He pushed off the counter so he could hop off his stool, gave a salute and left.

Which was timely, as Derek had been on the verge of telling him he could ‘crash’ there.

Stiles’ house had something far more hardcore than mountain ash protecting it. Derek physically couldn’t come within five feet of it. If he moved within ten then a voice that grew louder and louder with each step he took kept him there was nothing there he wanted to see.

He was about to use his Alpha roar to just bellow Stiles’ name when the front door opened. The Sheriff stood there with coffee in one hand and a file clutched between his elbow and his side as he closed the door behind him. He shook his head when he saw Derek, legs spread and hands out at his sides, fingers curled in like claws were only seconds away from appearing. Derek didn’t doubt
he looked battle ready.

Derek opened his mouth but the Sheriff held up his hand and snorted. “Kid, I don’t want to know.” It had been a long time since Derek had been ‘kid’ to anyone. The Sheriff jerked his thumb in the direction of Stiles’ window. “He’s upstairs but he looks like he’s been trampled by the entire cast of *Jumanji* – human and animal alike.” He gave Derek a quick once over and sighed. “I’m betting whatever this has to do with, it can’t wait, am I right?”

Derek gave a stiff nod of his head. “Another girl was murdered. Drowned without water,” he said gruffly.

The Sheriff pinched the bridge of his nose and hefted up the file under his arm to indicate it. “That’s why I’m going in. I suppose you’d best wake him then.”

Derek held back his snarl. “If I *could*, I would.”

The Sheriff’s brow furrowed for half a second before a look of complete distaste stole over his features. He raised his lip and glared back at the house. He shook his head, breathed deeply, and muttered, “I swear I hate that kid sometimes.” Derek didn’t think he’d have caught it if not for the extrasensory hearing. The Sheriff pulled a face and said miserably, “Hoover spleen.”

Derek could feel the force that had been pushing him away from the house fall to nothing. He cocked his head and opened his mouth.

The Sheriff held up a hand to stop him and snarled, “*Do not* ask.” He stomped over to his cruiser to ensure Derek couldn’t.

He waited for the Sheriff to pull out of the drive before bypassing the door altogether and jumping halfway up the tree by Stiles’ window, pushing off when his foot landed and using the momentum to reach Stiles’ windowsill. He slid up the pane. Stiles didn’t even twitch. He was buried in his comforter, ass still up in the air, face plastered to his pillow, mouth open and drooling. His shoes were still on.

Derek almost snorted at the picture he made. Instead he picked up the wireless mouse on his desk and threw it in Stiles’ general direction.

Stiles snuffled, dropped down, rolled over, rubbed at his face and came to with a start, half-sitting up. “Wha’ hap’n’d?” Stiles blinked rapidfire before managing to focus on Derek leaning against his desk and trying not to look smug. Stiles dragged a hand down his face, stretching his lower lip with the motion. “Shit. What time is it?”

Derek crossed his arms over his chest and picked at his nails with his thumb. “A little after eight,” he said tightly.

Stiles groaned. “I’m assuming something happened. Something with some serious time-constraints on it.”

Derek’s shoulders pulled in tighter. “Another girl was killed. Scott’s mom has her body down in the morgue. We have access to it now.”

Stiles yawned, nodded, and flipped him the bird. “That’s for throwing... whatever it is you threw at me.” He rubbed his face again, clearly trying to wake up. “Scott’s mom? Nurse, right?”

Derek nodded while Stiles practically fell out of bed.
He popped back up and ran his hand down his shirt as though that would get rid of the wrinkles in it. He held up a single finger and said, “Coffee. Then the hospital morgue. To poke at a dead girl. Who was drowned without drowning. Which I’m investigating with a very grumpy werewolf.”

Derek rolled his eyes and bit out as Stiles opened his mouth again, “Is there a reason you’re doing this?”

“Come on, how often do you get to say any of those things? You just keep going and it only gets weirder. That is my life. A series of increasingly strange events.” Stiles patted him on the arm and said brightly, “You’ve got to take pleasure in the little things, Sourwolf.”

Derek snapped his jaws at him.

Stiles just laughed and practically skipped out of the room.

Derek followed him down the stairs, staring suspiciously at his back. Finally he said, “Hoover spleen?” And, really, he should have listened to the Sheriff and just not asked.

Stiles was back to his usual self by the time Derek was opening the door to the morgue for him, chattering away endlessly and without even the slightest dampening of his scent from pills or anything else. “Nut porn is what it is. Disgusting,” Stiles said, nodding his thanks and popping a cashew into his mouth.

Derek sincerely hoped, and severely doubted, this would be the last he ever heard about comic book anything. He couldn’t even pretend to be interested.

“If you knew anything about anything,” Stiles said with a grin, “you could tell me your favorite Wade Wilson quote—I’d even drop that down to just a Marvel-verse quote—but you don’t and so I’m forced to pick up the slack for both of us.”

Derek offered him a grin full of sharp teeth. “How chivalrous of you.” Stiles’ hummingbird-quick heartbeat and incessant spewing of words that weren’t even his were beginning to make his head throb. Not to mention the way they were both frustrating him to no end.

Scott and his mom were already waiting for them. Melissa looked up at Derek when he entered and asked raggedly, “You are going to figure this out, aren’t you?”

This girl was younger than the others, only thirteen and she’d already taken her last breath. Memories clawed at Derek for all of a moment but they were shaken away when Stiles patted Melissa on the shoulder and said in a voice that stretched with seriousness, “They don’t call us the Thaumaturge Scourge for nothing.”

Scott snorted outright. “They don’t call us that.”

Stiles glared at him. “Well I’m betting your mom didn’t know that. This could’ve been something for me, Scotty.”

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Derek rolled his eyes. He’d forgotten how terrible Stiles was at dealing with serious situations. “You think it’s a magician?” Derek said, drawn out and sarcastic.

Stiles shrugged, unconcerned, as he leaned down to squint into the girl’s ear. “Honestly, I haven’t the slightest idea but I’m not ruling anything out.” He looked around before glancing up at Melissa and saying, “You wouldn’t happen to have gloves anywhere, would you?”
Melissa jumped a bit. “Oh, of course.”

She handed white, rubber gloves over to Stiles and he pulled them on with an obnoxious snap, for some reason needing to have his tongue out while he did it, Derek noted sourly. He flexed his fingers and then turned a blinding grin on Melissa. “Right, sorry, rude of me. I’m Stiles, by the way.”

Melissa shook his gloved hand, only looking a bit confused by it. She flashed a quick half-smile at him. “Nice to meet you.” She tipped her head towards Scott. “Scott’s told me a lot about you.”

Both Derek and Stiles stared at Scott who seemed to be actively attempting not to feel embarrassed. Stiles smiled and went back to the dead girl while Derek glared.

What followed was a newfound understanding of exactly how comfortable Stiles was around dead bodies and increasingly gross experiments. Stiles cut her open twice before resealing her skin with a yellow glow in his eyes. It was as simple and easy as opening and closing a Ziploc bag and Derek was making his own stomach churn.

Stiles couldn’t find anything out of the ordinary though. He checked her eyes and nose and ears and insides. He used a tongue depressor and his fingers to open her mouth. His eyes flashed a cool grey and he pulled back with a victorious shout. “Aha! Something off, finally.”

“What is it?” Melissa asked quickly, head jerking over to Stiles.

“The back of her throat. It’s red, inflamed—”

Melissa deflated. “She had her tonsils out the week prior,” she said, going over her chart.

“And coated in some thick sort of slime,” Stiles finished with a flourish. “I’m betting your medical examiner didn’t see it because he, or she – no sexism here, m’lady, saw the evidence of the tonsils being removed and didn’t look any further.” He offered an abashed grin and added, “Also, you kind of need magic to see it.”

Melissa moved forward to look herself but Stiles stopped her, saying, “Uh, you wouldn’t have anything to—” He mimed scooping something out.

Melissa nodded and came back with a thin scalpel.

Stiles leaned down and carefully reached in with the flat side of the knife to lift out the viscous gunk. It was clear and goopy and a line of it stayed connected to the source of it in the back of the girl’s mouth. Derek wrinkled his nose while Stiles smiled winningly. “Well, I’m going to go ahead and call this seriously foul, foul play.”

Scott looked as disgusted as Derek felt. “What is it?”

Stiles stared at it wonderingly. “If I had to guess,” he said carefully, “I would say it’s some kind of toxin. As for what its purpose is,” he shrugged, “I’ve got nothing.” He turned to Melissa and wobbled the scalpel purposefully. “You wouldn’t have a jar or something for this?”

Melissa looked around anxiously like she expected they might be chased out any second. She grappled around on the table behind Derek and said, biting her lip, “Would a syringe do?”

Stiles blinked wide eyes at her before pulling up one of his shoulders and deciding, “It’s not like it can hurt to try.” He looked back at the dead girl as though to impress the point.
Derek really didn’t find his blasé attitude dealing with dead bodies appealing.

“Scott, buddy, would you mind?” he said, jerking his elbow towards the box of gloves.

Scott looked at it with distaste but plucked out two and pulled them on.

“Excellent,” Stiles said, flashing him a bright grin. “If you could hold her mouth open please?”

Scott pulled a face and turned his whole head away as he pulled her jaws apart so Stiles could get a proper look.

Stiles carefully pulled back on the plunger once he’d gotten the metal tip into the gelatinous gunk in the back of her throat and pulled it away with a flourish. “Brilliant job, Scotty. Now we just need to dress you in something slutty and you can officially become my assistant.”

Scott covered his laugh with a cough while Melissa looked on vaguely disapproving. Derek mirrored her expression.

Stiles flicked the body of the syringe, staring at it curiously while he tilted it back and forth and stuck the cap back on. “I’m betting Deaton will know how to deduce what this is. He totally has his Sherlockian moments.” He glanced at Derek for the first time since they’d entered the morgue. “Up for a road trip? I say we stock up on Slim Jims and Peanut Butter Snickers and gather up a few of my mixes.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “It’s ten minutes away. Everything is ten minutes away. Or less.”

Stiles wagged his head back and forth, pursing his lips. “I’m failing to see your point. So, gas station, my place, Deaton’s, yeah?”

Derek grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and forcibly led him out.

Stiles got a super-sized Mountain Dew that was as big as his head in addition to the Slim Jims and Peanut Butter Snickers. He also bought Derek something called Diesel Dix that was apparently an energy drink of some kind with a wolf head logo on the front. And a full bag of pork rinds, which he told Derek he should open by huffing and puffing.

He came out of his house with something like sixteen CDs in his hand, none of which were in cases. Derek was sure that they were all scratched to hell. Not that he got the chance to find out. Stiles would put in one CD, listen to the first few seconds until he’d figured out what the song was, make some comment like, “My sixteen-year-old self had the best fucking taste,” and then skip to the next track, Slim Jim half-hanging out of his mouth. Stiles spent the rest of the ride mostly talking to himself in happy, nostalgic little snippets.

“Oh man, I think this is the one with—it totally is.

“Oh God, senior prom redux. I should be shot for putting this on there. No wonder Stacey Chapman wouldn’t bang me with this playing. I should call her up and tell her she had fantastic taste for a girl who wore overalls.

“This was my anthem the summer I was fifteen. Riding my bike with big-ass headphones over my ears and my walkman shoved halfway down my pants. Dangerous but totally life-affirming.

“I think I have the tape of this somewhere. The 23rd of loneliness and we don’t talk like we used to
“I draw the line at singing,” Derek growled, throwing the Camaro into park. “We’re here.” *Thank God.* He didn’t listen to much music but even he had recognized – and loathed – a few of those.

“You are a total spoilsport, you realize that?” Stiles told him, hopping out of the car with the syringe shoved down the front pocket of his jeans. He wiped his greasy hands on his overshirt and it was ridiculous that for a guy in his mid-twenties he still behaved like a teenager.

He took great pleasure in throwing open Deaton’s door. He was in the middle of something with a customer but glanced up at Stiles with raised eyebrows. Stiles took the syringe out of his pocket with a grin and flicked it.

Deaton looked a bit exasperated but he still politely excused himself from the woman with the yappy dog at the counter and followed Stiles into the back. As soon as Derek had entered, the tiny furball had dropped low to the ground, eyes narrowed in suspicion and a low rumble came from its tiny body. The woman looked embarrassed and she kept trying to distract her dog from glaring at Derek.

She offered him a pained smile and an appreciative sweep of her gaze. Derek felt the back of his neck and ears heat and he cleared his throat awkwardly and walked swiftly into the back.

“—pulled it out of her mouth. The stuff is *thick* too, and strong as hell. I was half convinced it was going to pull my hand halfway down her throat.” Stiles took a bite of his Snickers and Derek refrained from telling him he really shouldn’t eat in a sterile environment. Deaton seemed to be resisting the same urge. He glanced over when Derek walked in. “Hey, Derek, we can spare you if you want to chat up the dog lady.” Stiles wagged his eyebrows. He frowned. “I mean, the lady with the dog. *She’s* not a dog. At least looks-wise. I mean, that chick was kinda smokin’”—

“*Stiles,*” Deaton said sharply.

Stiles smiled a tad sheepishly. “Right. Shutting up.” He leaned back and said in a low voice that Deaton most certainly could still hear, “Seriously, though, we can soldier on without you if you wanna...” He clicked his tongue.

“The only thing I want to do is find out what this is.” Derek crossed his arms over his chest. “And maybe punch you in the face.”

Stiles batted his lashes with a grin. “I have that effect on people,” he said in a pseudo-seductive voice.

The desire to punch him got that much harder to ignore.

“Boys,” Deaton admonished without looking up. He had already emptied the syringe onto a slide and was staring at it under a microscope. “Interesting.”

Stiles heaved out a melodramatic sigh. He elbowed Derek in the ribs. “Have you noticed that ‘interesting’ with him never really bodes well?"  

Derek grunted.

Deaton looked up and said with surprise, “I’ll have to run a few more tests but I’d say this is venom.”

Stiles frowned. “What are we talking here? Reptile, arachnid, cephalopod, cnidaria?”
“I can’t say for sure,” Deaton admitted, “but I hardly think it’s going to be so traditional an explanation.”

Stiles huffed out a breath and leaned back against the counter dejectedly. “Of course not.” He chewed the skin around his thumb. “How soon until you can tell us what it is?” Stiles added at Deaton’s frown, “Or at least what type of species it came from?”

“I should have something for you in a few hours,” Deaton hedged.

Stiles turned to Derek. “Can we have a Team Wolf meeting at yours?”

Derek stared at him. “Team Wolf?”

Stiles punched his fist into the air and said loudly, “Team Wolf!”

Derek pinched the bridge of his nose. “I regret saying anything.”

Stiles grinned at him. “I knew you would, Sourwolf. So. Pack meeting, yes, no?”

Derek chose to answer by not. “Why?”

“I need access to your copy of the Argent’s bestiary and every other supernatural compendium you’ve got.” Derek winced and Stiles’ jaw dropped. “Tell me you have other supernatural compendiums,” he demanded.

Derek shrugged while Stiles shook his head, looking utterly disappointed in the world around him.

He paced for a second, waved at Deaton and walked out to the parking lot. Derek followed, feeling chastised, even though it was hardly his responsibility to keep Stiles stocked in research materials. “Shit. That’s going to slow us down a bit,” he said, tugging on his lower lip. He walked to and fro in front of the Camaro’s back bumper before he pulled out his phone and punched a few buttons. The person on the other end barely got out a greeting before Stiles said brightly, “Trav, baby, I need a favor.”

There was a very deliberate snort and a drawling voice said, “No, absolutely no way, your last favor ended up with me in jail. In Canada.”

Stiles made an indignant noise and flailed his free hand. “Which I promptly bailed you out of but you never mention that part, do you?” The man on the other end scoffed and Stiles said, “Before you say no—”

“No,” said the unamused voice on the other end.

“Before you say no,” Stiles insisted, “this involves committing absolutely no felonies.” There was a pause and Stiles rolled his eyes and added, “Or misdemeanors.”

The voice was low and suspicious. “What is it?”

“I just need you to scan a few of my notes and upload them to my server,” Stiles said innocently.

The person on the other end clearly knew Stiles well enough not to fall for it. “How much is a few?”

Stiles cringed. “All of them,” he said weakly.

“No fucking way, Stiles,” the guy exploded, “I’ve seen your notes. That’s thousands of pages
worth of work!”

“It’s the weekend?” Stiles tried meekly.

The guy sounded exasperated now. “Exactly, Stiles. The last thing I want to do on a weekend is work, work that isn’t even mine by the way.”

“Need I remind you that I bailed you out of jail,” Stiles said, raising his eyebrows.

“You put me in jail,” the guy snapped.

“And got you back out. You’re telling me that isn’t deserving of a favor?” Stiles was nothing if not persistent. Derek almost respected the never say die spirit. Almost.

“It’s going to cost you,” the guy on the other end said, sounding calculating.

Stiles swallowed and said uneasily, “What?”

The guy answered back smugly, “Your tickets to Comic Con.”

“Don’t you dare go after Haggis and Esther,” Stiles said in a shrill voice. He had named tickets? Derek looked around, hoping not to be seen with the flaily, yelling kid by anyone who might recognize him.

The guy wasn’t moved. “No tickets, no deal.”

“Bastard,” Stiles said it like a curse. He chewed on his lower lip and spat out, “Fine.” He was still for a second and then he said slyly, “Now what sexual favors would I have to trade for me being the person you took with you?”

Derek stiffened and the guy definitely sounded amused and indulgent now. “It wouldn’t be the standard fare,” he said.

Stiles’ grin was cheeky. “I’ll try anything once.”

Derek looked away awkwardly, wishing he had lingered inside with Deaton. He did not want the mental images of Stiles fucking some nameless bloke with a cigarette-smoky voice. Apparently Stiles really was gay – or at least bi, as he’d implied to Lydia when the Alpha pack was still around – and apparently Derek really did have a problem with it. It bothered him that we wasn’t more accepting but he wasn’t sure how you talked yourself into changing that.

“You might have a fighting chance then, Hot Pants,” the guy said with a laugh. He sighed and relented, “All right, I’m hanging up now, Stiles. Some dick I know just gave me a massive project.”

Stiles made a low sound in the back of his throat. “All I heard was ‘Stiles’ and ‘massive dick.’”

“I hate you,” the guy said but the fondness and affection in his voice was easy to hear.

Stiles caught him with a sober, “Travis. Seriously, thank you.”

The guy waved away Stiles’ gratitude with a casual, “Yeah, yeah, later.”

Stiles was grinning when he answered, “Later.” He jabbed his finger into the outdated little junk phone and Derek could clearly see the crack down the middle of the screen, lines spiderwebbing out from the break. Stiles looked up at Derek, squinting against the sun. “Do you have a laptop,
Cro-Magnon Man, or are you still hoping it cycles back to cave paintings?"

Derek scowled. He wasn’t technologically challenged exactly but he didn’t see the point of buying something he could use free at any public library.

“Mm-hm.” Stiles nodded knowingly, finger on his chin. “I’m taking your extended silence as a sign that your fingers are crossed for crushed berries and rocks to become the preferred method of communication again.” He ran a hand through his shaggy hair. “Fuck.” Stiles worried his lower lip. “I might still have my old Alienware junker if my dad didn’t toss it.” He shot Derek a dark look. “Tell me you at least have wi-fi.”

Derek may occasionally be behind the times but he wasn’t crazy enough to not have wi-fi. He was happy to be able to answer something in the affirmative and he nodded, the tiniest bit smug.

“At least that’s one thing I don’t have to worry about,” Stiles said, not sounding all that impressed. “Right, so, errands.” He wagged his piece of crap phone and muttered to himself, “New phone for me – hooray – and then back to mine in the hopes that my shitty laptop still resides in the junk heap under my bed so,” he looked up at Derek, “maybe we should meet in an hour? Hour and a half?”

Derek’s brows shot up. He might have assumed he’d be chauffeuring Stiles to and fro since they’d driven together to Deaton’s. “How are you going to get anywhere?” he asked gruffly, glancing towards his car.

Stiles snorted. “Dude, you said it yourself, everything is right on top of everything else in B-Hills. I’ll walk, it’s no biggie, plus I’ll get to see all the, no doubt, radical changes the town’s made since I left. I think I saw that the movie theater finally fixed the short in the E so it no longer reads BACON HILLS THEATER.” Stiles grinned. “I hardly even recognize the place.”

Stiles waved, already starting to walk away jauntily, when Derek growled after him, “Don’t call me dude.”

Stiles turned around from a few feet away with a smile. “Can’t promise it, dude. It’s automatic vocabulary now. You might have noticed I don’t have much of a filter? Even if I wanted to, can’t really control it.”

Derek scowled at him and slid into the Camaro, watching Stiles walk down the sidewalk from his periphery as he pulled out. He dragged out his phone at the next red light and told the pack to ‘assemble’ at the loft in an hour and fifteen. Stiles’ influence really was detrimental to his mental health. And his own vocabulary.

Jackson and Lydia were the last to arrive, an hour and a half after Derek had sent the message, save Stiles. Each minute that passed without his frenetic energy bursting through Derek’s door itched at his skin a little more.

Scott looked a tad uneasy, eyeing Derek as though he thought he might’ve imagined the conversation with Stiles entirely. “You’re sure he said an hour and a half at most?”

Derek glared at him in answer.

“Have you tried calling him?” Scott suggested unobtrusively.

Which was when Derek realized he didn’t have Stiles’ number. Scott did. Lydia did. Derek didn’t. He had no idea why that made his chest feel tight, like animal skin stretched over a drum’s frame. He saw Scott pull out his phone from his periphery and drag up his contacts while Derek
scowled down at his own crossed arms, like Scott knew why Derek hadn’t tried calling.

“Sorry, shit. Lost track of time.”

Derek’s head jerked upright to find Stiles standing in his doorway wearing a blinding grin. His laptop was in pieces in his hands and the power cord was wrapped around his ankle and dragging behind him.

The tight feeling in Derek’s chest only intensified.

He strode in without waiting for any further invitation, spilled out his laptop parts on the coffee table, leaned in quickly and pecked Lydia on the cheek while she smiled approvingly. “Lydia, my love, light of my life, apple of my eye, I’ve missed you more than words can say.” Jackson clenched his jaw and Stiles chuckled and ruffled Jackson’s hair before he could stop him. “You’re still prettier, Scaly,” he said with a wink. Jackson made a half-hearted attempt at biting Stiles’ hand as he withdrew it.

He shot a blue-eyed glare over in Scott’s direction, who had the decency to duck his head and look abashed.

Stiles took the spot of the couch next to Peter and grinned widely. “Rasputin,” he said with a nod.

Peter snorted before he could catch it.

Stiles’ grin grew. “The great part is it works historically or as Len Wein’s vision, and with the latter you even have the same first name. It’s a match made in reanimated corpses.” He poked Peter in the side before starting to arrange the parts sprawled over Derek’s coffee table. “You’re just barrels of fun, Colossus.” Stiles glanced up at Derek, tongue caught between his teeth as he mucked about with his deconstructed laptop. The back of it had been taken off completely so the circuits and whatever else were visible and Stiles appeared to be switching out parts with a multi-tool. “Has Deaton called?” he stopped and asked, eyes hooded.

Derek shook his head, both enjoying and feeling flustered being at the center of Stiles’ attention. It happened so rarely that it was ever focused on one thing that being in the middle of it was just the slightest bit overwhelming. Thankfully, it didn’t last long as his eyes were pulled back down to what he was doing with his hands.

“Scott,” Stiles said, not looking up, “maybe you should call him and give him a nudge. We all know how he loves to hoard information given the opportunity.”

Derek snorted. He ignored the wide-eyed looks of surprise from his pack.

Scott dutifully rang the vet’s office.

Derek was a little annoyed that his orders weren’t followed as blindly.

Scott put the phone on speaker when the call picked up.

Stiles spoke before Deaton could. “And precisely what phylum are we looking at, Special K?”

Scott laughed a little gruffly, trying to cover it.

“It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen,” was the careful answer. Stiles rolled his eyes, flipping his laptop back over now that he’d screwed the back on once again. “It’s definitely heavily influenced by cnidarian and reptilian ancestry but I can’t say it truly belongs to either.”
Stiles chewed on his lower lip, leaning towards Scott’s phone thoughtfully. “That should at least narrow it down some.” Stiles’ forehead furrowed. “Care to take a guess as to its purpose?”

“It’s definitely a poison – a paralytic to be more exact. It appears to numb the victim in addition to paralyzing them,” Deaton said clinically, adding like it was some grand gift, “I doubt the victims felt any pain before drowning.” He seemed to have real difficulties relating emotion to anything.

Stiles narrowed his eyes. “Why do I have the feeling something defenseless and furry helped you come to this conclusion?”

Deaton sounded both annoyed and indulgent. Stiles seemed to have that effect on people. “The rat is fine, Stiles. A small amount seems to last about an hour. From your description of how much of it was in the back of the most recent victim’s throat – disregarding how much she might’ve ingested – and extrapolating it from how little was used compared to the rat’s physiology—”

“He has a name, and it’s Ratty,” Stiles inserted sharply.

Deaton paused for barely a half second. “I would guesstimate that she would have been paralyzed for at least a day.”

Stiles leaned back heavily against the couch. “Do you think that’s precaution or strategy?” He looked around at the group. “How long were the victims missing before they were found?”

Derek answered. “A few of them were only hours after they were last seen.”

Stiles nodded like something was slotting into place. “So it’s probably not playing with its victims before it drowns them. That’s something.” He looked down at the phone again. “Alan, do you think you could come up with an antidote?”

There was a slight hesitation before Deaton sighed and said, “I can certainly try,” before hanging up.

Stiles powered up his laptop with newfound determination, a chiming sound greeting him as the screen glowed blue. He looked up at Derek. “Wi-fi password, big guy? Also, I’m just going out on a limb here, but I’m assuming you’re the completely uninspired Netgear27?”

Derek tightened his jaw, heat creeping up his cheeks. “Friendlyleaves813.” So he hadn’t changed the presets. He wasn’t the type of guy that used quotes or comic book characters or pop culture references to individualize him. If it had been up to him, he probably would have gone the ‘Guest’ and ‘password’ route, despite it being utterly predictable. If his biggest problem was that people wanted to steal his wi-fi then he would welcome that.

Stiles blinked at him while the rest of the pack seemed to be actively attempting not to dissolve into giggles. “Wow,” Stiles said drily. “Learning all kinds of things about you today, Sourwolf.”

Stiles connected his laptop, pulled out his new phone that was as big as his whole hand and plugged in the password there too. He became completely absorbed in what he was doing on his computer, saying under his breath, “Trav, you are a fucking godsend.” He looked up to find everyone watching him. “Um, really all I’ve got in terms of further planning is research, research and, uh, research.” He nodded to Lydia and Boyd. “I’ve linked you to the doc where my roommate is uploading the new pages to my bestiary so you’re welcome to join me but I can probably navigate it better, being honest. Now that we know we’re looking for aquatic reptiles or something of the sort.”

Derek stiffened a bit at the ‘roommate’ comment. He noticed the way Erica’s whole body
twitched towards him curiously, nostrils flaring, and valiantly ignored it.

Stiles shrugged. “Basically, guys, constant vigilance, keep your phones on and don’t go off on your own for the next however long. We don’t know if this stuff works on werewolves but I’m willing to bet that this being, in all likelihood, a supernatural creature means it can knock other supes on their asses.”

Amazingly, his pack turned to Derek, as though asking for his input or, maybe, waiting for his endorsement? That had... never happened before. Derek grunted, trying not to let on how surprised he was by this turn of events. “Stiles is right,” he said authoritatively. “We’ll do perimeter checks tonight. In pairs.”

Stiles stopped them as they all started to rise, eyes still on his computer screen and tongue sticking out of his mouth again. “Scott, you should call the Argents and get them in on this.”

Scott glanced at Derek and nodded when he didn’t object. What the hell was happening here?

Stiles looked up at Derek as the rest of the pack filed out. “I was going to spread out here but I can go back to my dad’s if you want,” he offered with a one-armed shrug.

Derek looked away and said blankly, “I don’t care one way or the other.” He paused and added, “I’m going for a run in the Preserve.”

Stiles was staring vacuously at his computer screen again but he held up a finger and said smugly, “I assume you’re taking Rasputin with you then as that ‘not going off alone’ bit applies to you too, O Alpha mine.”

Something slithered down Derek’s spine as Stiles said the words. He knew Stiles didn’t mean that Derek was his Alpha but his wolf didn’t seem to be able to make the distinction. He couldn’t tell if he was pleased or irked by the idea. He glared uneasily over at Peter, who hopped off the couch agreeably.

He clapped Derek on the shoulder. “A run in the woods with my favorite nephew. It’s just the bonding session we’ve needed, don’t you think, Derek?”

Derek snapped his jaws at him.

Stiles snorted. “That’s the kind of familial love you just don’t see these days.”

When Derek walked in nearly three hours later, Peter panting behind him, it was to find his coffee table littered with legal pads, books, crumpled up paper balls, empty bags of trail mix and beef jerky and Cora and Stiles’ feet. He was reclined back on the sofa, neck stretched out as he threw a cheese ball up in the air and caught it in his mouth.

His head was far back enough that he could see the door, upside down, from where he was and he grinned. “Found your printer, big guy. Wireless, nice. Sorry about the mess.”

Cora had a book in her lap but she was unapologetically staring at the smooth line of Stiles’ neck. Derek couldn’t tell if it was with hunger or hunger. He didn’t know which bothered him more.

He turned around to get a power drink from the fridge only to find Peter was doing the same.

“Don’t taunt the savages,” Derek growled, rolling his eyes.
Stiles actually choked on a laugh, shifting forward so he didn’t actually choke on his cheese puff. He side-eyed Cora. “Your brother just called you a savage.”

Derek froze, his back to her. It was strange to hear the word said aloud when he hadn’t in years: brother. It was a role he’d shed against his will, solely because he couldn’t fill it anymore. It’d fallen away when Laura had. It was strange that he hadn’t consciously reconnected the term with himself yet but Cora hadn’t said it and Derek hadn’t thought it. He was a brother again. It felt jarring.

His gaze flickered over to Cora, who was sitting up straight and staring at him searchingly, like she was trying to determine the sentiment behind his words. If they’d been as light-hearted as they seemed or if there was something darker in them.

Derek tried to show her there wasn’t.

Cora finally looked away, apparently satisfied.

Stiles glanced back at him, frozen in the middle of the kitchen. “Why didn’t you tell me Cora was a research guru?”

Because he hadn’t known. He didn’t know anything about her. Only that she was standoffish, disappointed in him and no longer felt like family to him. She felt like ash and memory. He wasn’t even sure he trusted she was what or who she claimed to be. For all he knew, she was a figment that had been implanted by the Alphas. Derek knew those could survive the death of the Alpha responsible if they’d been powerful enough while alive.

Deucalion was definitely that, still was, even in absentia. The timing certainly left him feeling cold.

Cora watched Stiles, hawk-like and emotionless. “I’m not half as skilled at eliminating potential suspects as you are.”

Stiles grinned and lightly punched her in the shoulder. “Aw, Cor, you flatterer.”

Cora’s mouth fumbled into a smile, like it was unfamiliar with the mechanics of it.

Stiles picked up a Twizzler from off the table, shoved it halfway in his mouth and let it hang there while he chewed on the end. He sifted through a few of the legal pads and pulled out the one with the least amount of pages left. He slapped his hand against the front with a bright, “A-ha. Okay, so I think we have three genuine possibilities with cnidarian and reptilian ancestry that, as of right now, we can’t rule out.” He watched Derek from the corner of his eye as he settled into the armchair perpendicular to the couch. “And, can I just add, I have no idea how any of them would have found their way to our lovely little Beacon Hills. Because, despite the name, I don’t consider this an actual beacon – for supernatural shit or otherwise, with our one Starbucks. We’re not even trying, okay.”

Peter sat down on the other side of Cora and said casually, “We have a Nemeton.”

Stiles’ eyes widened.

Derek snarled. “Had.” He looked back at Stiles. “We had a few emissaries drain it of power a month or so ago,” he dropped Stiles’ gaze and said in low tones, “but not before it flared to life.”

Peter smirked. “We still get the occasional visitor that hasn’t heard the news.”
Stiles rubbed his forehead, muttered, “Well, that explains a few things.” He spread out a few packets of paper and said glibly, “First up we’ve got the Dobhar-chú, a dog-otter thing or,” he squinted at the pages, “‘water hound’ from Ireland. There’s no mention of it having venom but it does drown its victims and lives primarily in water while retaining the ability to venture on land. Not to mention, it’s inconspicuous. If this thing was running around town, it’s conceivable that it could do so undetected. People would likely mistake it for an incredibly ugly stray dog. The Quasimodo of canines basically.”

Stiles held up a stack of papers and shook them. “My money’s on the Lariosauro. It’s a reptile, komodo dragon-esque, and it lives at the bottom of large lakes. It’s rumored to poison its victims before it drowns them. It’s between the size of a tiger and a rhino so it has mobility down.” He shifted through to the last packet of papers. “Last but not least we’ve got the Lernaean Hydra. Hopefully we’re all familiar with Hercules, yes? ‘He comes on with his big, innocent farm boy routine, but I could see through that in a Peloponnesian minute.’” Cora blinks at him and Derek has literally no idea what Stiles is talking about. It’s not the first time and he doubts it will be the last. Stiles mimes something going over his head and makes a whooshing noise. “Apart from the replicating heads, it has poisonous breath and fits the reptilian/aquatic caveat. As for a hydra inconspicuously getting around town? Not sure how plausible that is.” He leaned back and let out an explosive breath. “If it is the hydra, then I should also probably tell you that its blood is acidic – hooray,” he added, deadpan.

Derek swished his drink before swallowing it and looked down at the research with his eyes unfocused. “These are all it could be?”

Stiles blinked over at him. “Well. I can’t say for sure. I haven’t seen everything out there that goes bump in the night, have I? I can tell you that, going by my bestiary, those three options are the most likely contenders.”

Derek nodded. That was good enough for him. He swirled his drink in its bottle. “What should we be looking for then?” he asked grudgingly.

“Honestly?” Stiles asked, dropping back hard against the couch cushion. “I have no idea. Paw prints, claw marks, I don’t know, I think if it had been leaving a trail to follow you’d have found it already.”

It was the first time that Stiles hadn’t had an answer to something. It struck Derek as odd. He tried not to look accusatory over it though, Stiles shouldn’t have to have all the answers.

Stiles rubbed his eyes. “I’d say you should go after where you think its home base is. Scott says the victims smell like swamp or marsh so I’d start trying to find which swamp or marsh and then we go from there.”

Derek didn’t point that of course they’d already looked for the scent-alike body of water. He couldn’t think of a better plan though and he didn’t think he should shoot down Stiles’ until he did.

Peter didn’t have the same view. He rolled his eyes. “We haven’t sat around idle waiting for you to come around and play hero, Stiles. We’ve already looked.”

Peter didn’t have the same view. He rolled his eyes. “We haven’t sat around idle waiting for you to come around and play hero, Stiles. We’ve already looked.”

Stiles’ eyes narrowed, forehead furrowed in thought. He glanced back at Peter. “And you couldn’t find it?” Peter shook his head. Stiles twisted in his seat. “How likely do you think it is that you genuinely looked into every possibility?”

Peter shrugged. “I’d say,” he glanced at Derek thoughtfully, “between 85 and 90 percent certain that we found every possible location this thing could be hiding in.”
Stiles flopped back. “Then you must be smelling the creature itself’s scent and not its surroundings.” Stiles rubbed his chin. “Maybe this thing doesn’t even live in water. Maybe it is water.”

Derek leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Is there anything like that?”

Stiles shook his head, eyes flying back and forth over thin air. “Not that I know of.” He heaved a full-body breath. “Think of the mechanics of it though. How exactly would this thing drown its victims without being near a body of water? How would it do it in the presence of other people?” He sat up and looked straight at Derek, the focus in his eyes intense. “The girl in the movie theater. She was in a row of seats by herself, right? But there were people in rows behind her. What if she wasn’t alone though, she was sixteen, she could have conceivably been on a date and lied to her parents about it. No one noticed her but chances are you’d be more likely to notice someone who was alone in a movie theater.”

“You think she was with the thing that killed her,” Derek said carefully.

Stiles nodded eagerly. “What if it has a human form? What if it poisoned and killed her under the guise of teenage necking? Who’s going to think anything of it in a movie theater? What if you’re smelling the scent of a person that killed her rather than what she was drowned with?”

Derek had to admit, the theory was an attractive one. “Do any of the things you mentioned have the ability to shapeshift?”

Stiles bit his lip. “No, not according to the legend. But, more often than not, that’s not something those recording the information would know about. The whole point of shapeshifting is to blend in. You wouldn’t know it had the ability until it was too late.”

That made sense but it meant they were still flying blind. It was a great theory but Derek didn’t see how it helped them. “We can’t go around smelling everyone in town,” he pointed out gruffly.

Stiles’ shoulders drooped. “I know.” He sighed. “I’m more curious about what it gets out of drowning its victims. I’ve rarely run into something that killed indiscriminately and I don’t see how drowning teenagers benefits... anything. It’s not feeding on them, so, what’s the point?”

Derek didn’t have an answer to that. A glance at Cora and Peter said that they didn’t either. Derek hadn’t thought about what the monster’s motivation might be. He hadn’t known it mattered one way or another. He doubted that anyone aside from Stiles would have even considered it, but his mind didn’t work like anyone else’s Derek had met.

“So,” Peter said from the kitchen, “if we’ve already scent-tested all water-related locations and we’re all agreed that we can’t sniff out the killer through trial and error, then what’s the new plan?”

Stiles chewed on his nail, deciding, “We get my dad or Melissa to get me into the morgue. I don’t think the most recent victim’s been buried yet. Then I try to extrapolate a tracking spell from whatever the killer left on her – skin cells, scent, hair follicles, etcetera.”

Derek perked a brow. “You can do that?”

Stiles shrugged. “I can try.”

The Sheriff had agreed to smuggle Stiles into the morgue early the next morning and, hopefully, from there they could find the thing that was decimating the teenaged population of Beacon Hills.
Derek woke up slowly, the electric scent of Stiles better than the strongest shot of caffeine.

He sat up, feeling his muscles stretch and burn as he glanced into the main room where Stiles was sleeping on his couch, his mouth open and his right hand and foot hanging off the edge. There was a blanket twisted around his middle that hadn’t been there when Derek had fallen asleep.

Cora was sitting in the seat next to the couch, staring unblinkingly at the rise and fall of Stiles’ chest while she sipped at her tea. It was a strange feeling when Derek looked between them and couldn’t figure out which of them was the bigger threat. Something in his chest twinged. He hated feeling so disconnected from Cora – to have another family member that he couldn’t have his back to without waiting to feel the plunge of a knife – but he couldn’t say he wasn’t justified in feeling it.

Stiles made a snuffling noise and flung himself further into the crevice of the couch. For all Derek knew, the case could be over today and Stiles could be out of his hair in time that could be counted in hours rather than days. He couldn’t pinpoint how he felt about it.

He still didn’t trust Stiles but he no longer felt like an active threat either. Not after Derek had watched him shovel Twizzlers into his mouth and drool on his couch and sing mid-‘90s TLC. It was hard to think of him as some sort of criminal mastermind after that.

Derek rubbed his forehead just as Stiles’ alarm went off at full volume:

“I get up in the morning and I see your face, girl. You’re looking so good, everything’s in place. Don’t you know I could never leave your side, girl? Won’t you stay here with me and be my bride? Don’t you know—”

Stiles flailed and slammed his hand down against the edge of the coffee table with a whimper before scrambling with his phone and cutting off the alarm. He blinked around quickly, eyes still bleary. He smiled uneasily. “Uh. Would you believe it was a preset?”

Derek raised a dark brow and said deadpan, “No.”

“You’re my God, you’re just what I like. Girl, you’re everything, don’t you know you’re all right? The only girl I’ve always needed for so long,” Peter was singing softly, smirking, as he came down the spiral steps.

“Oh oh-oh, she’s my cover girl,” Cora joined in when Peter sang the chorus, getting louder with each word. Laura had completely corrupted the Hale’s musical tastes as a teenager. Derek could still remember her blasting her pop music down the hall while she studied or, more accurately, danced around her room, floorboards and even occasionally bed springs creaking as she jumped about.

A smile came unbidden at the memory, Derek smothered it before anyone noticed.

Isaac came into the room, rubbing his head. “What the hell are you singing?”

Stiles snorted, muttered, “And here I was, convinced New Kids were timeless.” He sat up properly, his cheek wrinkled from the couch. He rubbed the palms of his hands up and down his face. “I need a shower. And my mouth tastes like ass.” He made a show of opening and closing it and rubbing his tongue against the roof. He checked the time on his phone. “Okay, I’m going home for a few then I’ll meet my dad at the morgue in thirty. I’ll let you know if the tracking spell works,” he said, shoving his feet into his shoes.

Derek nodded and stood up. “We’ll be expecting your call.”
Barely an hour had passed and Derek had just paid for his meatball sub when his pocket started buzzing, quickly followed by a familiar tune and the lyrics:

“I was working in the lab late one night when my eyes beheld an eerie sight, for my monster from his slab began to rise and suddenly to my surprise—”

Despite himself, Derek let out a snort of laughter as he jabbed his finger into the answer button. The number on his screen was labeled ‘The Coolest Guy You Know’ and accompanying it was a photo of Stiles, looking sleepy but grinning widely. The sun was strong over his shoulder and created an annoying bit of glare that washed out most of his features. Derek had to wonder when he’d managed to program himself into his phone.

“Well?” he said before Stiles could speak, digging his keys out of his pocket as he walked to the Camaro.

“It worked. I think.” There was an odd note to Stiles’ voice, something uneasy and worrying.

Derek stopped cold. “What is it?”

There was a pause, Stiles licked his lip and said carefully, “I need you to come get me.”

Derek threw the sub into his backseat and jammed the key into the ignition. “Where are you? Still at the morgue?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, his voice still with that odd pitch.

“Stiles,” Derek growled, swinging out of his parking spot, “what is it? What’s going on?”

“I’m sort of, ah,” Derek could practically see him cringe before he said, “blind.” Derek snarled and Stiles added quickly, “Just a bit.”

“You’re a bit blind?” Derek ground out sarcastically, foot getting heavier on the gas.

Stiles sighed. “I’m not explaining this well. I can see light and shadow, just not so much... anything else. But I’m pretty sure it’ll only last as long as the spell does.”

“Pretty sure?” Derek bit out, hearing his own voice go higher.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a lot like a mother hen?” Stiles said, cheeky.

“Stiles—” Derek started warningly.

“Okay, yes, I know.” Stiles huffed. “Didn’t exactly go to plan, agreed,” he let out a frustrated sound, “but I should be able to find this thing now and then I can go right back to seeing things. Hooray. Oh, and sunglasses, bring me sunglasses.”

Derek made an affirmative sound. “I’ll be there in five,” he gritted out, hanging up before Stiles could respond.

He made it to the hospital in three. Stiles was sitting in one of the uncomfortable metal chairs just outside the morgue, squeezing his hands together nervously. “Stiles,” Derek barked.

Stiles turned towards him, head tilting to the side and eyes not focusing on him. They were glowing white. He grinned slightly. “Dad says I look epically evil with the white eyes.”
“I doubt that’s all he had to say about it,” Derek muttered, holding out his sunglasses to Stiles. He didn’t notice them.

He popped up and walked in his general direction, each step careful and small. “There was a bit of yelling, and a lot of insults tossed in my direction, which, rude.”

Derek pressed the glasses into Stiles’ chest and watched as his fingers fumbled for them. “You’re an idiot,” Derek told him seriously, trying to sound unaffected but the blank glaze over Stiles’ eyes made his stomach knot and his throat tight.

“Hey, just because I can’t see you properly doesn’t mean I can’t throw a curse in your general direction that has a 75 percent chance of actually hitting you.” He held up a finger not exactly in Derek’s direction and Derek’s gut clenched harder. “Don’t test me.” He shoved the glasses onto his face without poking himself in the eye with the arm. He grinned up at Derek and, now that Derek couldn’t tell his gaze wasn’t focused in the right direction, it was much easier to look at him. “I look badass, don’t I?” He frowned a bit. “You didn’t get me, like, Disney princess ones to wear, right?”

Derek rolled his eyes and muttered, “You think I own Disney princess sunglasses?”

Stiles shrugged. “You never know, Cora could have a very well hidden fluffy streak.”

Derek ignored him with a snort and grabbed Stiles’ wrist. He was glad he could no longer see the outline of his eyes beneath the white layer that would look almost like a cover of wax if not for the glow. He glanced back at Stiles as he was agreeably dragged towards the elevators. “So, how exactly does this work?”

Stiles shrugged a bit. “I’ve read up on this, obviously not thoroughly,” he griped before Derek could get a word in, “but right now everything’s in shades of white or gray. Some other color should pop when I see this thing.”

Derek stopped and snorted. Stiles nearly ran into him. “You’re saying I need to drive you around town in the hopes that you see something colorful?”

Stiles tugged his wrist out of Derek’s grip. “We’re playing it by ear. Have a little faith, Sourwolf.”

Derek shook his head, snatched up Stiles’ forearm again and led him out of the hospital. He opened the passenger’s side of the Camaro and shoved him in.

Stiles rubbed his arm. “You could try a little finesse, you know,” he groused.

Derek flashed sharp teeth at him before he remembered Stiles couldn’t see him. “Where are we going then?” he asked, barely containing his sarcasm.

Stiles shrugged and said with an uncaring wave of his hand, “Pick a direction.”

Derek drove north, more than annoyed that the mercenary they’d called in had not only been hobbled but was also currently without a plan to boot. He was going to have a talk with Scott about the caliber of his ‘help.’ At least next time that he said Stiles wasn’t needed, maybe someone would actually listen to him.

“Dude,” Stiles said, his mouth pursed seriously, “I would put my CDs in but I’m a little with the... I’d probably poke you in the face if I tried.”
Derek’s lips quirked. “Your music is terrible,” he reminded Stiles.

Stiles grinned and said wistfully, “My music whisks you back to simpler times – like high school study hall and make outs in the back of crappy Ford Taurus’ while trying not to get mauled by the chick’s braces and 3am drives to Taco Bell to sober up before you have to face deputy dad.”

Derek shook his head, staring at Stiles. “What was your childhood?”

“Aside from awesome?” Stiles said with a snort, raising an eyebrow, his face not quite turned all the way towards Derek.

Derek’s stomach squirmed and he looked away.

Stiles tapped his fingers on the knee of his jeans and sucked his lower lip into his mouth.

Derek sighed, relented, and turned on the radio. Stiles’ CD was still in the changer and some awful, poppy song from the early 90s started blasting.

Stiles grinned, pleased, and he made a show of biting his lip to keep from singing. He only made it through another two songs before he was mouthing the words. Then singing. Then belting out:

“What if God was one of us, just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus trying to make his—Stop!”

Derek slammed on the brakes. The road was empty of other cars, thankfully. He turned to Stiles, staring at the place where Stiles’ hand had flung out and grabbed his arm. “What?” he barked.

Stiles swallowed. “Red,” he said, looking out his window. There was a large stretch of dried out grass just beyond the edge of the road and behind it a sparsely wooded area filled with mostly dead trees. He swallowed. “I see red.”

Derek pulled off to the side of the road and parked. He unbuckled his seatbelt and Stiles’ fingers tightened against his skin.

“Call the rest of the pack,” he commanded gently.

Derek nodded, forgetting Stiles wouldn’t see it, and pulled out his phone. He tapped the second number on his speed dial. Erica answered before Derek even heard it ring. Derek ground out the mile marker and a demand to hurry. He snapped his phone shut and walked around to open Stiles’ door.

He shook his head at Derek’s proffered arm and said croakily, “I know where I’m going.” He pulled off the sunglasses and left them on the dash. He got a leg over the low gate that separated the road from the pasture and kept going past the woods. He walked with determination and without any indication that he couldn’t see exactly what was in front of him. Derek was still careful to stay right behind him.

He skirted fallen branches, roots and rabbit holes expertly and some of the tenseness between Derek’s shoulders eased.

Derek smelled it before they saw it. The lake was exactly the scent that had been left on all the victims. They broke through the clearing, the trees thick and dense even dead as they were. The sun broke through in blinding slats of light, though it rarely reached the forest floor. The lake was small, not even a mile around, and it didn’t look deep. Though, oddly, it smelled deep.
Dead branches and leaves, moss and drowned bugs floated on its surface. It looked like a place forgot.

Stiles nodded to himself and swallowed. “This is it.” He looked into the middle of the lake, like he was seeing down into it. “This is where it lives.” He licked his lip. “It’s not there now but it will be.”

Derek took a step forward and Stiles instinctively turned towards him. Derek swallowed and snapped, “End the spell.”

Stiles looked a little taken aback by the gruff tone but he nodded agreeably all the same. He looked down, closed his eyes and took a deep breath in. He hissed lowly, “Látum þetta augum slíta.”

Derek watched warily as Stiles blinked a few times.

He grinned and looked up at him, his bright brown eyes filled with amusement. “Welp,” he said happily, “that was a fun little experiment.” He rubbed his palms on the thighs of his jeans. “Let’s never do it again, shall we?”

Derek grunted his agreement.

“This is its hideout?”

Derek and Stiles spun around to see Erica staring at the swamp with her nose wrinkled. Isaac, Scott and Boyd were right behind her. She shrugged her shoulders when she saw Derek looking. “I don’t think this is really to Jackson and Lydia’s tastes and Peter and Cora didn’t answer.”

Derek nodded. It was enough that they at least knew where they were.

Scott took a step forward and glanced at Stiles. “You’re sure this is it?”

Stiles nodded. “Totally its evil lair. I’m not saying it’s not a rinky-dink lair but, hey, to each murderous creature its own, right?”

Scott snorted. “So, what, we wait till tonight and then come back?” He looked to Derek.

To Derek’s amazement, so did Stiles. “What do you think, big guy?”

He clenched and loosened his jaw. “Sounds like a plan. We all meet back here at ten and hope it’s here by then.”

“Until then,” Stiles said brightly, clapping Scott on the shoulder, “in honor of me being able to see Isaac’s completely weather-inappropriate scarf, I say we stock up on Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups and watch The Cabin in the Woods back at Derek’s.”

Derek scowled. It was ignored as Isaac let out a wounded, “Hey!”

Erica flipped her hair. “Can we get those brown sugar pop-tarts if we’re going shopping? Derek keeps getting frosted strawberry.”

Stiles gave him a pseudo-stern look. “Okay, if you’re going to go the strawberry route, only unfrosted is acceptable. How do you not know this?”

“Exactly,” Erica said snottily.
“Gummy worms need to happen and worms, not bears. Why does no one understand that biting into a bear offers no satisfaction?” Scott whined.

“And worms do?” Erica asked, brow perked as she walked back to Scott’s mom’s car.

Derek sniffed, smelling stale beer and plastic wrappers. Clearly this forest wasn’t as dead as he’d first thought. He considered mentioning it to Stiles but he was grinning happily while the followed the betas out. Derek chose not to interrupt.

“I’ll text Jackson to bring those cinnamon swirly things his mom gets,” Isaac said before Scott could answer.

“Oh my God, yes,” Scott said, exaggerating the vowels.


Stiles watched their backs for a second as they argued over what junk food to get before looking over at Derek with a small, knowing smile.

Derek huffed, covering a quiet laugh. He lowered his head so Stiles wouldn’t see the way his eyes crinkled. Because, yes, they were a pack. Sort of. For the first time.

Stiles insisted on stopping at a tiny convenience store and buying them out of Reese’s and a whole bunch of other food that, eaten at once, would probably stop his heart.

They were the last to arrive and Stiles dropped his mountain of junk on top of the hill that Erica, Scott, Boyd, Isaac, Jackson, Lydia and even Allison Argent had already made. He hooked up his laptop to Derek’s TV – which Derek had only gotten for Isaac – and popped a Reese’s cup in his mouth as he started the movie.

He sat back on the couch next to Derek with a grin. A few of them had seen it before so there was a lot of talking, yelling over each other, and throwing of gummy worms, so even if Derek had wanted to watch it, it wouldn’t have been easy. Stiles had the annoying habit of quoting along with the characters and pointing out his favorite parts just before they happened.

The scenes Derek actually saw, he did like but those were few and far between. When he wasn’t distracted by everyone else, he was focused on the way Stiles’ shoulder kept knocking into his. Though he valiantly pretended not to be. He wasn’t sure why he was so attuned to it but he chalked it up to the fact that no one – not even his pack – sat close enough to accidentally touch him. Though he wasn’t regularly in a situation where there were so many of them over at once that people had to sit on the floor and scrunch together to make room. That only seemed to happen when Stiles was there.

The movie finished and barely any of them noticed as they argued over whether or not their next project should be getting Derek to watch the Marvel-verse movies, culminating in *The Avengers*, or the entire *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series. Derek ignored them, rolling his eyes over their desire to ‘educate him in Joss,’ and checked the time on his phone. It was already nearly quarter to ten.

Stiles looked over his shoulder and groaned. “Children, I do believe it’s time to face our demons.”

Erica popped up and squinted at Stiles. “Do we have a plan then?”

Stiles looked at Derek. Derek raised his eyebrows. Stiles turned and stared seriously at Erica. “Don’t die.” He patted Derek on the thigh as he stood. “That’s the best we’ve got. Considering
we’re not even sure what it is, we can’t exactly be any more specific.”

It took a second to sink in that in that simple exchange, it was as if they were equals, both of them someone the pack looked to for guidance. Derek supposed it only hit him that way because, while his pack had started to look to him as their Alpha, this was only the second time he’d noticed Stiles consult with him before announcing his next step.

“Well,” Lydia said with false brightness, sharing a look with Allison, “I’m now feeling overwhelmingly prepared.”

Stiles winked at her and gravitated to Peter as he was standing closest to the door. Their heads bent close together. Derek tilted his head so he could stay attuned to them despite the flurry of activity now taking place around him. Peter said quietly, privately, “You’re sure you’re ready for this?”

Stiles sighed and hitched up one of his sleeves, shaking his head. “Honestly, I don’t know enough about it to be able to answer that. And that is...” his jaw shifted to the side, “not a great feeling.”

Peter reached out and gripped Stiles’ elbow for a moment before letting go.

Derek turned with narrowed eyes, glaring at them openly. He was certain if he had asked the same question, he would have gotten a pithy remark and nothing so honest from Stiles. He just thought Stiles didn’t have real moments but it turned out he did, just not for Derek. It was a stupid thing to bother him. It didn’t stop it from doing just that.

“Shall we?” he growled.

Stiles clapped his hands together and smirked. “Pick a car, kiddies, Allison, myself, Jackson and Derek will be driving. Find your buddy and hold hands.” Stiles really shouldn’t have been surprised when that led to Peter snatching up his hand but it was clear from the size of his eyes that he was.

Derek snorted. The rest of his pack was less restrained in their amusement.

Stiles eventually rolled his eyes, not thrown off for long, and stabbed his fingers around Peter’s hand. “Great, let us adjourn then.” He glanced over to Derek. “I figure its only right that our fearless leader head the caravan?”

Derek nodded his agreement, shoving his keys into his pocket. Isaac, Boyd and Erica followed him out. Derek hid his intense surprise and swallowed down a pleased smile as they got into the Camaro with him. All his bitten betas, aside from Jackson – who was taking his own car, right behind him. He’d all but written it off as an impossibility. Peter and Cora piled into Stiles’ Jeep with him. Allison took Scott and Jackson took Lydia.

Derek had underestimated how dark it would be by ten and he was feeling more than a little uneasy about their ‘play it by ear’ strategy when they reached the mile marker he and Stiles had stopped at hours before. It wasn’t long before the others pulled off next to him.

Stiles bounded out of his Jeep, his hip bumping into Cora’s as she came around next to him. She smiled a little but tried to hide it.

Stiles practically skipped over to Derek and clapped him on the shoulder with a brilliant grin. “Well, Mr. Wolf Eyes, you’re the only one who a) knows where we’re going, and b) can see in the dark, so lead the way.”
Derek shrugged him off with a grunt and Erica, Boyd and Isaac fell into step behind him. Scott and Stiles brought up the rear, talking nonsense and shoving each other in the shoulders like they were lifelong friends. Derek still didn’t really understand how they worked.

The scent of the lake was strong, making it easy to find.

“This... is not what I was expecting,” Peter said, brows furrowing.

Cora joined him in incredulity. “Seriously, how badass can this thing be when its home resembles a neglected swimming pool?”

Stiles snorted loudly, nearly obscuring the snap of the twig behind them.

Derek whipped around but it was just a kid, sixteen or seventeen maybe, and looking pissed off. “Who the fuck are all of you?” he demanded in a whiny voice.

Derek was tempted to completely ignore him and had nearly turned his back on the kid when he clenched his fist and said, “This is our place. Find your own. I suggest somewhere that accepts social rejects.” He crossed his arms, clearly pleased with the insult.

Derek strained his ears and heard at least three other heartbeats.

Isaac, impertinent as always, flashed gold eyes at him and let his claws and fangs grow. “Get out of here,” he growled lowly.

Derek could see Erica and Boyd changing their stances to back him up if need be.

The kid backed up, eyes wide, and stumbled over a root. He was still staring at Isaac with round eyes – like he expected if he blinked or looked down to gauge his footing that Isaac would take that opportunity to pounce – when it happened.

Water drenched them and the roar shook the few leaves still clinging to the trees from their branches. The entire ground rocked beneath them and Derek nearly lost his balance. He shielded his eyes and when he looked back, the kid was gone.

“Uh, Stiles?” That was Erica and her voice was small and quavering.

Stiles licked his lip and took a step back. “Yeah?” he said weakly and Derek followed his eye line back to the lake. He fell back, swallowing hard.

Isaac’s voice was hoarse. “That is definitely not a lizard thing.”

“No, it’s not,” Stiles agreed, taking another step back.

“Or a dog-otter thing,” Scott added, voice strained.

“Nope.” Stiles took another step back.

Peter nodded his head, not taking his eyes off the thing’s head, which far surpassed the tree line. “And it’s bigger than a hydra,” he put in blankly.

“Yep.” Stiles took another step back. He blinked slowly and croaked out, “Am I alone in thinking this most closely resembles a motherfucking dragon?”

Everyone shook their heads rapidly.
Stiles nodded, chewed on his lower lip and said shakily, “This is just a suggestion – and feel free to ignore it – but I’m thinking maybe we should run like fucking hell.”

Boyd raised his hand. “I’m for it.”

Derek nodded dumbly and found his feet again, his legs feeling numb. The creature lunged towards him at the movement and it reminded him of those Chinese dragons that were paraded through the streets, where a different person controlled each segment of its serpentine body. It coiled and twisted through the air like that, like it was used to moving through water.

Derek ducked its jaws as they snapped for him and he heard Stiles say breathily, “Shit.”

Derek looked over at him but he wasn’t looking back. He was staring at one of the contortions of its body and then Derek could see what Stiles could. The kid from earlier was wrapped in its coil like a boa constricting its prey.

The dragon retreated when its mouth snapped closed on nothing but air and it splashed back down into the lake’s depths.

Isaac piped up. “I seem to recall someone mentioning running?”

Stiles clenched his jaw, eyes flying back and forth over the ground before he looked up, right at Derek.

Derek shook his head, somehow already knowing what he was planning.

Stiles shrugged a shoulder and offered him a cringing smile. “Why’d this kid have to be an asshole, eh? So much easier to go in after a valedictorian or a hall monitor.” He tore off his plaid overshirt, his tattoo looking so incredibly black against his skin, and kicked off his shoes. Dark ink even curled over the tops of his feet. He panted out haltingly, “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” before diving in after them.

“Goddamnit, Stiles,” Derek exploded just as he broke the surface. He dragged off his own shoes, stripped off his jacket, shook out his hands at his sides, cracked his neck and jumped in right behind him. The water was dark, murky and cold as fuck. Derek swam carefully, using a breaststroke to part the water in front of him. His eyes were burning red as they darted around.

He could just barely make out something curled at the bottom of the lake. He swam harder and he smelled the blood before he saw the red, amorphous line in the water. There was a cut in Stiles’ arm and the talon that had put it there was still embedded. Derek reared back and moved to pull it out when Stiles shook his head frantically.

He opened his mouth and around the bubbles, Derek could make out his lips forming the word, ‘Poison.’

Stiles swam a bit away from the curve of the dragon’s scales and squinted. He grabbed on to Derek’s arm to drag him with him, his nails digging in hard. He held out his hand in front of him, the one with the talon in it hanging useless at his side. A red bolt of something shot out of him and into the creature’s side.

Derek could smell it before the bubbles cleared and he could see where Stiles had sliced halfway through its body. It thrashed and uncoiled and the asshole kid’s hand flopped out of its strangling embrace. Derek grabbed it instantly, using the creature's distraction to ease the kid out of its coiled grip. He snatched at the shoulder of Stiles’ t-shirt once he was sure he had the kid and shot back up.
It seemed to take forever to break the surface and all the time Derek could feel the vibrations of the monster below them, writhing, slamming into the lake’s bottom, its tail slicing through the water indiscriminately. Derek pushed hard for the shore and Isaac and Erica had already waded into the water to grab Stiles and the kid.

Erica knelt down at the boy’s side once he was clear and listened to his chest. She opened his mouth and fell back. There was something gelatinous covering it, keeping him from swallowing any water. “He’s not breathing,” she said blankly, “but his heart’s still beating and he’s got a pulse.”

Derek could still hear as much and he nodded, fingers still twisted in Stiles’ shirt.

Stiles coughed and scrambled up on shore, using his hands as much as his feet to get out of the water.

Derek finally hauled him upright by his t-shirt.

Stiles stared at the talon in his shoulder and blinked hard. He stumbled and Derek caught him before he could fall. He licked his lip slowly. “I—fuck, I don’t think I’m okay,” he got out, slurring the words.

Derek tightened his hands around him and looked up fiercely while everyone stared wordlessly at Stiles. “We’re taking them to Deaton,” he snarled, eyes cutting over to Peter, who nodded instantly. He picked up Stiles’ discarded overshirt and tossed it to Scott. “Drive his Jeep home so the Sheriff doesn’t worry. The rest of you, go home.”

“Fuck that,” Isaac said, raising up to his full height. “He’s our friend and he needs us.”

Derek looked to Peter before answering, “We’ll keep you updated. Right now,” Derek fought with himself but eventually admitted, “I need to know you’re all safe. You’re my pack,” he said finitely and he saw the way they all straightened up a little proudly at that, even Lydia and Jackson. Allison looked uneasy, darted a glance at a fierce-looking Scott, and settled. Derek had told them all about what pack could be but he’d never called them his before, “as an Alpha, as your Alpha, I need you safe now.”

Isaac was quiet for a minute before he shared a look with Scott, who dipped his chin, and said quietly, “I’ll stay with Scott tonight.”

Derek let out the breath he’d been holding and hefted Stiles into his arms, curling his fingers into his jacket too as he stood. He was unconscious now but Derek could feel his heart beating out that piercing rabbiting beat it always did and it calmed him like little else could right then. Peter and Cora picked up the kid under his armpits and carried him out of the woods, right behind Derek.

Derek slammed into the parking space at the front of the animal clinic, his thumb on the pulse at Stiles’ throat, large hand wrapped around the back of his neck. He could hear it thrumming steadily but he didn’t trust it as much as feeling the blood rush beneath Stiles’ warm skin.

Peter and Cora pulled into the space next to him just as Derek came around and dragged Stiles out of the passenger side. He kicked open the door of the clinic, the wood splintering as it swung open. Deaton was there before he could even reach the counter. “What happened?” he asked tightly, taking in the way Derek was dripping wet and Stiles was limp in his arms, eyes critical.

Derek ignored the question and grunted, “You’re going to need to have a workable antidote now.”
Deaton pursed his lips seriously and waved him back with a short nod, holding open the half door at the counter for him. Probably so he wouldn’t kick that in, too.

Derek shouldered past him and tossed back, “Cora and Peter are right behind me.”

Deaton acknowledged him with a nod just as they dragged in the kid.

Derek didn’t pause. He walked into the back room and laid Stiles down on the closest metal exam table. He pressed his palm flat over Stiles’ chest but his heartbeat was still just as strong as it always was. He’d dropped his hand down by his side by the time Deaton entered, helping Peter and Cora carry the kid in.

“Get him up on the table,” Deaton told them urgently. He grabbed a vial of something off the back wall and hurried back to the kid’s head.

“Stiles first,” Derek snarled, eyes flashing red.

Deaton started but instantly redirected as though he’d forgotten himself for a moment. He tilted Stiles’ head back and pulled off the cork, the bottom of it ending in an eyedropper. He used the side of his pinky finger to pull down Stiles’ chin and open his mouth. He paused. “He hasn’t been poisoned,” he said sharply, staring up accusingly at Derek.

Derek rolled his eyes and picked up Stiles’ arm, shifting it over his stomach so Deaton could better see his bicep and the big fucking talon sticking out of it.

Deaton blinked. “I don’t even know if that carries the same venom as whatever it uses to paralyze its victims.”

Derek swallowed.

“If I give him this and we’re wrong, the reaction could very well kill him,” he said gravely.

Derek scowled and dug his claws into the crook of his elbow under the guise of crossing his arms. “So we should do nothing?” he demanded. Deaton perked his brows and Derek ordered, “Give it to him.”

Deaton sighed and gave a defeated nod of his head. He stoppered the vial again and set it down next to Stiles’ head as he rummaged around in one of his drawers. He pulled out a pair of thick gloves that were clearly meant to have claws or teeth dug into them without so much as a tear. He held fast to Stiles’ arm, wrapped his gloved fingers around the end of the talon and yanked it out in one clean jerk.

The smell of Stiles’ blood increased tenfold and Derek had to physically stop himself from taking a step back from the scent. Barely a half-second later, the smell of unadulterated pain tore through the room and Stiles’ body arched off the metal surface and contorted in agony as his tattoo coiled and slithered over his skin, darting up to the dark red blood sliding down his arm from the gaping hole in his arm. Black ink fed into it endlessly, like snakes crawling into his skin. Derek turned away from the sight.

“Derek,” Deaton said forcefully and Derek suspected it wasn’t the first time he’d said it, “you have to hold him down if you want me to do this.”

Derek swallowed and there was no question of whose fault it would be if this killed him. ‘If you want me to do this.’ Derek took a deep breath and surged forward, slamming his forearm across Stiles’ collarbone and using his free hand to splay his palm over Stiles’ chest and hold him...
Deaton pulled his chin down a second time to open his mouth and placed two drops on his tongue. Stiles’ body jerked twice and then stopped. *Everything* stopped. He didn’t breathe in, his pulse didn’t throb and the hummingbird-quick heartbeat beneath Derek’s hand that was a constant background noise in Derek’s head cut off mid-pump.

Derek didn’t even have time to react before it was back and Stiles was arching off the table, gulping in huge lungfuls of air. His eyelids fluttered and he coughed hard. Deaton didn’t even pause before he was crossing over to the other boy and doing the same.

Derek slipped a hand under Stiles’ neck to help him sit up while he coughed so hard he nearly gagged. Eventually he looked up at Derek, eyes streaming and face red. He smiled and said croakily, “Still alive. Hooray.”

Derek cuffed him in the back of the head before crossing his arms over his chest.

Stiles’ grin widened even as he winced and clapped a hand over the wound in his arm with a weak, “Ow.” He squinted up at Derek, who was now standing far back from him. “You, uh, didn’t tell my dad about—”

“Not a word,” Derek told him.

An answering cough from the kid met his words. Cora helped him lean over as he pulled in shaky cuts of air, choking and sputtering.

Stiles sighed again, relieved. “Excellent. I would’ve hated if my grand moment of self-sacrifice was rendered moot.”

Derek rolled his eyes, pushing down a grin. “Impressive how his near-death experience is all about you.”

Stiles’ head jerked up and he smiled, soft and small, like he was impressed that Derek had a sense of humor. Out of nowhere, Stiles groaned and shoved a hand into his jeans’ pocket. Derek furrowed his brow, confused, until he pulled out his dripping wet phone. “Rest in peace, number four,” Stiles said, heaving out a soulful breath. He shook it out a little and frowned. “At least it’s still under warranty.”

Stiles looked up at him again, amber eyes earnest. “There are a few calls I need to make about this fucking dragon thing. I have the numbers stored online, thank fuck.”

Derek nodded. “Your computer’s still back at the loft and you can use my phone.” He eyed Stiles warily as he held out his hand for it. Derek pulled it away from him with a perked brow. “I’ve had it for two years. Try not to break it.”

Stiles snorted. “Dude, you’ve had the same phone for two years? Breaking it might be a blessing in disguise.”

Derek flashed red eyes at him and growled, “You break it, I break you.” He shoved his phone back in his jacket pocket and muttered, “You don’t need it yet.”
Stiles rolled his eyes but, mercifully, didn’t argue.

Cora and Peter were taking care of getting the kid home while Stiles talked nonstop all the way back to Derek’s loft, hands cutting through the air like switches. He was still going at full steam when Derek closed the door behind him.

“—some kind of stasis. I mean, the kid didn’t take in any water and Erica said he wasn’t breathing so obviously it’s meant to be, I don’t know, protective somehow? Maybe it’s like this thing’s version of a spiderweb, right? Like, it drags its prey back to its underwater lair but who doesn’t want a warm meal as opposed to a cold, bloated thing so it keeps them alive until it’s ready to chow down.” Stiles ran a hand through his hair, looking almost manic as he narrated his thought process. “It doesn’t ingest anything physical but perhaps something like life-force maybe?”

Thankfully, he didn’t seem to need much input from Derek, who had busied himself hanging up his jacket by the door and dragging out his phone to place it on the side table whenever Stiles was ready for it.

Stiles stopped and Derek appreciated it as he’d been getting dizzy just watching him. He looked down at himself and held his hands out at his sides. His shirt made a squelching sound. He grinned up at Derek. “What about it, big guy?” he said with a cheeky grin. “You willing to loan me some dry clothes or what?”

Derek bit back an answering smile and perked a stern brow. “You call it a loan but I’ve never seen that shirt again, have I?”

Stiles didn’t even have the decency to look sheepish about it. He just stared at Derek with amused defiance until Derek rolled his eyes and turned around to get him a change of clothes.

He was stopped by Stiles’ hand reaching out and gripping his forearm. Derek turned back, staring at it in surprise and slight distaste. The large, wide black lines of Stiles’ tattoo that were regularly hidden from sight stood out stark against his pale skin. They twisted down Stiles’ arm, his forearm more veined and muscular than Derek had ever realized. The rest of him trended towards ‘boy’ but his hands and arms were those of a man.

“Hey, Derek,” he said softly and everything about him was serious. The contrast between this and his usual joking nature was jarring. His eyes were darker and more intense and he looked like a wholly different person with the set of his mouth into a thin line. Derek wasn’t sure if he liked it or not. He squeezed his fingers on Derek’s arm and said sincerely, “Thanks. For jumping in after me.”

Derek cleared his throat and said with a roll of his eyes, trying to lighten the sudden heaviness, “I’m beginning to just assume you’re in perpetual need of assistance and act accordingly.”

Stiles tightened his grip and tugged on Derek, who took an unwitting step forward. He looked up at him through long lashes and smirked. At least that made Derek feel like he was on more even footing. Something had shifted between them in the last few minutes and Derek had no idea what it was but he felt uneasy all the same. Stiles’ stance relaxed some. “This is the second time you’ve saved my life,” he said carefully and licked his lip, “should I be reading anything into that?”

Derek’s brow furrowed. There was obviously something in the subtext there but it eclipsed him. “Stiles—”

Stiles’ fingers broke their grip around his arm, slid around the back of his neck, tightened and
hauled him forward. Derek made a shocked sound in the back of his throat that distantly reminded him of the screech of tires on pavement and then Stiles’ mouth was on his. His lips were plump and Derek had never paid much attention to them but he felt he fully appreciated them now.

He watched the determination on Stiles’ face before letting his eyes fall closed. His hands, which had been hanging limply at his sides, hesitantly came up to slide around the back of Stiles’ shirt. Derek had forgotten all about the cold and dampness as his fingers splayed across the hollow of Stiles’ back, fitting perfectly.

Stiles slowly sucked Derek’s lower lip into his mouth, his tongue sweeping over the curve of it torturously. Derek had never been kissed like this, so carefully yet somehow still passionate. He pushed in closer to Stiles and Stiles lifted up onto the balls of his feet and wrapped his arms around Derek’s shoulders. He accompanied the move with the opening of his mouth and Derek licked into it. His eyes shocked back open.

Stiles was electric even there, crackling with intensity, and Derek slotted their mouths together with more force. His fingers crept under the hem of Stiles’ wet t-shirt, the fabric suctioning to the back of his hand, and Derek curled his fingers around Stiles’ hips and took enough of his weight that he could back him into one of the support beams.

Stiles' hand ran up his neck and fisted in his hair. Derek groaned into Stiles’ mouth and used the flat of his palm to press over the small of Stiles’ back and pull him in closer. Parts of his skin there were on fire and Derek tore away from him in shock.

Stiles gasped and stared back at him, pupils blown and panting. “Sorry, my tattoo, when I get... um. Yeah, it, ah, burns sometimes.” He looked embarrassed but not enough to stop him gazing at the heave of Derek’s chest like he was hungry for it.

Derek took a step back from him, eyes widening and feeling something like dread and terror curl through him and coil in the bottom of his gut. He stared unblinkingly at Stiles and his voice was low, more the wolf’s than his own when he snarled, “Don’t ever do that again.”

Stiles looked shocked for half a second before he dropped his chin, staring down at the floor. He pursed his lips and dipped it once.

Derek couldn’t look at him any longer and he turned to go back to his room. He was half-hard and it was made even more uncomfortable by the cold and stiffness of his jeans. He hadn’t even reached his dresser when he heard the door slam – honestly, he was surprised it had taken as long as it did for Stiles to storm out – and he let out a shaky breath.

He stopped and rested his forehead against the wall. He didn’t know anything about Stiles and everything he saw was shadows. He was someone who used sarcasm to deflect even the simplest of emotions and that was no one to be losing himself to. Stile wasn’t his pack. Stiles wasn’t anything to him besides someone who showed up at the eleventh hour with a little too much insight and far too much power. Derek couldn’t fall into something with him. It would mean he’d learned nothing from the hellish experiences he’d had and he refused to let that be true.

He curled his hand into a fist against the cool paint of his bedroom wall. He shouldn’t even be tempted. Stiles was a man and Derek had never considered, even in passing, getting involved with someone of the same sex. Though now that his dick had all but spoken for him, he could recognize that a lot of the times that he hadn’t been able to pinpoint what he was feeling towards Stiles, it could most easily be translated to attraction or desire, even jealousy.

He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. He would finish this last thing with Stiles and then
the pack wouldn’t call on him again and the choice would be made for him. He wouldn’t have any reason to ever lay eyes on him again.

He pulled away, peeled off his wet clothes, ignored the persistence of his cock and pulled on his sweatpants, flopping back into his bed.

He didn’t get any sleep.

Derek rolled out of bed when he heard Scott and Jackson arguing as they slid open the door of his loft. He ruffled the back of his hair, still feeling the phantom curl of Stiles’ fingers around the strands. He wasn’t surprised when he walked out of his room and saw the rest of the pack was with them. And Cora and Peter were right behind him. Erica was in his kitchen, looking through all of his cabinets. Boyd was standing sentry behind her, leaning against the counter while she hummed happily.

Isaac was at Scott’s shoulder and Lydia was bounding in happily just behind him and a still-sniping Jackson.

Derek rubbed his face and Scott seemed to notice him for the first time. He brightened up and scrolled through something on his phone. He stared at the screen and said, “Hey, so it’s a Mizuchi,” he sounded the word out awkwardly, “water dragon. A shapeshifter too, just like Stiles thought.”

And Derek was glad to have the excuse to ask after the first thing he’d noticed after waking: “Where is he?”

Scott shrugged, looking just the slightest bit bummed out. “He took off last night. He said he got a flight out and he figured we could handle it on our own.” Scott shifted on his feet. “I figure his class probably started up again so he had to get back.”

“Rude,” Lydia said with a sniff but Derek could tell she was genuinely disappointed. The rest of the pack clearly was too and there was a collective and synchronized droop of their shoulders. Erica actually pouted.

Derek felt winded and he swallowed painfully. “Did he say anything else?”

“No.” Scott looked up at him, eyes sharp and suspicious suddenly. “Why?”

Derek forced his features into neutrality and he said gruffly, “I—” he cleared his throat, “I never paid him.”

The suspicion slipped off Scott’s features easily and he was back to his chipper self. “I’m sure he’ll send you an invoice, dude.”

Derek closed his eyes against the sudden influx of pain. Those were Stiles’ nuances of tone and his vocabulary. He shook it away and crossed his arms over his bare chest. “So how do we kill it?”

Scott caught his tongue between his teeth and used his finger to scroll through his phone when Lydia plucked it out of his hand with a roll of her eyes.

She easily dragged something up on the screen and her eyes flew back and forth as she read. “We have to wait for it to shift into human form – which, according to Stiles’ notes, is its most likely alter,” she said carefully, pursing her lips. “There’s apparently some myth about them turning into
other animals but Stiles doesn’t seem to give those much weight.” She scrolled down further with a flick of her painted nail and spoke like she couldn’t think of anything more interesting than this. “Then it’s susceptible to all the same mortal injury humans are.” She narrowed her eyes and added, “Though it’s still got the venom according to Stiles so we’re supposed to avoid getting scratched or letting it put its mouth on us, especially as its endgame seems to be to drain life-force. That’s what the poison is for, to keep the victim under sedation while it feeds on its ‘spirit.’”

Derek dug his fingers into his eyes and said, “How can we force it to shift?”

Lydia made a thoughtful noise and dropped her eyes down the page but it was Scott who answered, pulling the strap of his backpack higher up on his shoulder. “Stiles said it was probably feeding from the wildlife around the lake since it was drawn here by the Nemeton. Lately teenagers have been coming into the woods to drink and have sex and, since they’re in its territory, it sees them as fair game. Anyone who crossed into its boundaries, it went after.” Scott fiddled with the straps over his shoulders. “He suggested we use someone as bait.”

Derek stared at him, ready to object to that terrible, terrible plan when Scott held up a hand. “Stiles said that he doubts it’s usually a dragon when it snatches its victims and that the other night was an anomaly and probably only happened because there were so many of us. It probably uses its human form to seduce its prey and then it can poison them under the guise of a kiss.”

Derek’s nostrils flared at the last word and he forced himself to say, “There are more ‘probably’s in that sentence than I’m comfortable with.”

Scott shrugged but didn’t deny it. “We don’t exactly have a better plan, do we?”

Derek couldn’t exactly argue that and they agreed to meet back by the mile marker that led to the lake later that night. The pack looked eager for it to be finished as they went off to school but it was more lackluster than it had been the last time they’d agreed to meet there.

Or maybe Derek was projecting.

Scott ran back in after making it all the way down to the street and said, panting, “Oh right, Stiles asked me to get his stuff and take it to his dad’s so…”

Derek’s eyes cut over to where Stiles’ laptop and research were still spilled out over his coffee table. He’d left so fast he hadn’t even taken his things with him. He waved a hand towards it in permission and Scott grinned. Derek turned around and went back to bed so he wouldn’t have to watch Scott take it away.

They used Jackson as bait. He was still being kissed when Boyd plunged the knife into the dragon’s back. Her dark hair flipped back and she managed to scratch Isaac across the cheek as she reached behind her for the handle. She fell to her knees, her pretty features pinched and ugly as she spat curses at them. Erica rolled her eyes, said, “We’re not much for letting the bad guy get the last word around here,” and kicked the blade in deeper. The girl’s face contorted and she toppled over, dead.

Lydia and Cora dealt with Jackson and Isaac respectively, Lydia driving Jackson’s Porsche over to Deaton’s for the antidote. There were a few high-fives but no one suggested going back to Derek’s to celebrate. And Derek wasn’t sure he would have let them even if someone had.

There was something noticeably missing and this time Derek knew he wasn’t the only one who felt it.
Next week: Demons and possessed! Derek. Tell me you don't waaaaaant it.

I have a tumblr. I do some fun stuff on it. Not all the time. Moderation, guys.
III. “Let’s wear elbow pads and shin guards with spikes coming out of them.”

Chapter Summary

He’d forgotten the timber of Stiles’ voice, remembered him saying what seemed like a lifetime ago now, ‘Children, I do believe it’s time to face our demons.’

What a nice bit of foreshadowing. You have to love when the narrative works in your favor like that, no?

Chapter Notes

I scrapped last week. Just purely pretended it didn't exist. Because I didn't do anything, so it can't have existed. I got thrown off by an unexpected trip to Brooksville and for some reason never recovered. My original intention was to be back on Thursday - which I was - and post the new chapter then - which I could have. But I decided, hmm, it's totally late enough in the week that I should just wait until Monday. And then I didn't tell anyone about it because I knew FOR SURE you guys would be able to talk me out of it. And I didn't want to give you the opportunity!

I appreciate the utter lack of nastiness over it, by the way. It's very easy to get into the 'I'm owed this' mindset and no one did that (and that would have really sucked considering it would've marred my present to me - and I can have nice things). Which is awesome and makes me so happy about the fandom that chose me I've chosen. So. Thank you, guys. :)

Also, 300+ subscriptions, HOLY WHOA. I'mma party like tomorrow doesn't exist.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

III. “Let’s wear elbow pads and shin guards with spikes coming out of them.”

Derek rolled out of bed, body heavy. The heartbeat on the other side of it was slow and even and he hated it. It didn’t beat back like a physical force, didn’t push its way inside his head and lodge itself there even after the source of it was long gone. When Jennifer left tonight, he knew he wouldn’t be having her back.

He never was quite sure where he stood with her, only that she felt safe enough, boring enough, that he wasn’t on constant alert when he was with her. But that wasn’t good enough anymore. She wasn’t a challenge he couldn’t help but rise to or a constant buzzing beneath his skin. She didn’t stick. As soon as she was gone, she would be forgotten.

He looked back over his shoulder at the soft swath of warm skin. He wanted to see it darkened up with black ink, tanner, rougher. He wanted—wanted things he shouldn’t want.
It didn’t stop him wanting them.

He rubbed a hand down his face, dragging more than it should. His skin felt like rubber. He plucked his phone up off his nightstand, depth perception slightly off. He pulled up his contacts and deleted Jennifer’s number without hesitating. He kept scrolling but there was nothing past ‘Sheriff,’ no sunny, grinning, bleary-eyed photo with an obnoxious and completely inaccurate title next to it.

He pinched the bridge of his nose a little too hard. He knew now why Stiles had lingered before storming out of his life. He hadn’t bothered to grab anything he owned but he took the time to delete Derek’s only way to contact him. That didn’t leave much room for doubt about where he stood on what had happened between them.

It had been months anyway. The last thing Derek should be thinking about was a single kiss full of heat and danger. It was why he’d stopped it in the first place, because he knew better. His dick might not, but his head did. Jennifer wasn’t going to burn him up from the inside out. Stiles, he wasn’t so sure.

His phone vibrated in his hand and Derek nearly dropped it in surprise, palm flattening into a tremble. It was Erica, texting him a succinct:

*Another one.*

Derek rubbed at his temple with clumsy fingers. He looked back at Jennifer and her dark brown hair and knew she was the easy choice. As much as he knew that she would never be the one he made. She could find her own way out while he dealt with this. Maybe it was a little callous but he found he didn’t care all that much. He had done a lot worse to people who mattered a lot more.

“It’s difficult to tell when she was killed exactly, but the coroner seems to think the body is at least a few weeks old. It’s just like all the others though. Not a drop of moisture left in her,” Melissa told them, biting into her lower lip until the skin turned white, eyes wide and worried.

She pulled back the sheet. The three of them were familiar enough with the sight of thin skin drawn tight across protruding bone that it could no longer turn their stomachs.

Derek tried not to look as lost as Melissa did. He pursed his lips, falling back into gravity while he thought. He had no idea what could do this to a person, what could literally evaporate all the water in a human body. He leaned in, stared at paper-thin skin and chapped lips with what he hoped looked like a discerning eye. Nothing jumped out at him and he couldn’t unzip a corpse with nothing more than a flash of his eyes, unlike some. He felt more than heard Erica take a step closer to him, the constant cast of tension still clinging to her.

He knew it was secondhand.

Scott was obviously seconds away from voicing the very last name Derek wanted to hear and he swallowed hard. It was ironic that he tried to channel Stiles in seeking to avoid him. And there was a good chance that Stiles would go to Deaton first, especially as he didn’t have the deep-set aversion to him that Derek did. Still, he was the more preferable option. “Have you asked Deaton about this?”

Scott redirected mid-thought. Opened and closed his mouth. “No?” He squinted. “Are you giving me permission to?” He was more certain of himself since the Alpha pack, less indiscriminately contrary and more willing to take on both leadership and subordinate positions.
None of it meant he didn’t still regularly butt heads with Derek but it did mean he didn’t butt heads with Derek solely because it was Derek on the other side of the argument.

“Since when do you wait for my permission?” Derek pointed out, perhaps a bit sourly.

Instead of looking chastised by the rebuke, Scott merely looked pleased with himself. He hid a proud little smirk that bloomed after meeting Erica’s gaze by biting his lip and shrugged. “I just figured we could ask—”

“Deaton will work fine,” Derek ground out, cutting Scott off before he could so much as form the word. “There’s also the added benefit of him being local.” It was logical enough reasoning that it couldn’t be argued away. At least not immediately.

Scott grumbled something under his breath that Derek couldn’t be bothered to care about. He was busy listening to something that actually mattered, head cocked to the side as he honed in on the slight movement of footsteps on stairs. The clicking sound of orthopedic shoes meeting the metal end of the stair.

He gestured for Melissa to cover up the body with a quick jerk of his head and led Scott and Erica out of the morgue. He avoided letting his eyes rove over the chairs out in the hall as he made his way to the elevators.

Scott decided to wait around for the end of his mom’s shift, which left Derek and Erica making their way out of the hospital together. She waited mere seconds until they were out of range of Scott’s senses, tossed her hair while her eyes narrowed into an inquisitive stare. “Are we going to talk about what’s got your Under Armour wedged halfway up your ass?”

Derek ignored her. There was an itch of curiosity regarding how the hell she knew what kind of underwear he preferred but he decided that was definitely something he’d rather not know.

“You’ve been tense and short and a raging dick for way too long now. It was cute at first but after a week… Well, there's a pool for who’s going to snap and murder you first. Smart money’s on Isaac,” she said faux-perkily, smile wide and deadly. “And you’re even getting laid so there’s literally no excuse for it.”

Derek’s jaw clenched. Accepting her as his second meant she was privy to his… baser urges more so than any of the others. Aside from shoving his tongue down Stiles’ throat, it was one of the worst decisions he’d made in a while.

“I was slightly beginning to accept that you were asexual but you’ve been kind of… raring to go lately,” she mused with a click of her tongue. A look back at her showed that she was lost to considering it all over again, mouth tilted off-center and expression invested.

Asexual, Derek thought with a snort. He’d prefer that’s what his betas thought of him.

It was certainly better than talking about his recently reawakened sex drive. While trapped in an elevator. With, arguably, his most violent beta. After inspecting a body that was drained of all its moisture.

‘Come on, how often do you get to say any of those things? You just keep going and it only gets weirder. You’ve got to take pleasure in the little things, Sourwolf.’

Fuck. What would it take to be rid of him already? Derek folded his fingers into a fist, claws shallowly digging into his palm.
“Derek,” her eyes bore into him from behind, squinty and judgmental, “whatever it is, you need to get a handle on it. If screwing Ms. Blake isn’t doing it for you then there’s no shortage of women – or men – who would fall all over themselves to get into your pants. Because – and I know it’s impossible to notice – but your stellar attitude is starting to reflect back on the pack and not in a good way.”

“Erica,” Derek snarled at her when he could finally unclench his jaw, “mind your own fucking business.” He couldn’t believe how easily she’d dropped ‘or men’ into that. Had he been so obvious? He hadn’t even considered—not until—he had no reason to suspect anything when he hadn’t even known until Stiles was standing in front of his door, dripping wet and looking an odd mix of furious and resigned.

When the doors finally opened, Erica let him go without trying to get the last word in but Derek didn’t miss the calculating look she threw at him as he fled.

He tried not to jerk off to Stiles that night, knowing Erica would be aware of it if he did. He lasted twenty minutes, remembering the slide of warm fingers into his hair, hot skin burning under his hand, electricity in his mouth before his hand was slipping into his pants.

He lost himself to the payoff of the anticipation, the trembling of his own thighs and the hypersensitivity of his skin, flesh prickling under his attention.

He was beyond pathetic and he was certain that Stiles had dismissed him ages ago as an asshole and not given him another thought after returning to Boston, gone back to that heavy heartbeat that had been at his side when Derek had first heard his voice. Derek wished he could do the same, but one kiss with Stiles had been better than the best sex of his fairly meager pickings.

He didn’t wish he’d done things any differently. Stiles was still fire in human skin and Derek knew better than anyone how destructive that could be. None of that meant that he couldn’t appreciate how hot it was though.

Derek’s phone lit up next to his elbow, dashed any hope he’d had of an easy fix for this when Scott reported back:

_Deaton doesn’t have any ideas._

Derek rubbed a fumbling hand over his forehead, let his phone clatter down onto the counter next to the fridge with disgust before glancing up to find Cora exactly where he’d left her the night before.

Everything with her was… slightly removed. Removed from normalcy, removed from relatability, removed from anything he could recognize as fundamentally ‘Cora.’

“Find anything?” he asked tightly. There was a book spread open in her lap but she didn’t seem to be focusing on it.

He rounded the support beam, found her holding a pencil between her thumb and forefinger and carefully wobbling it to give it the illusion of being made from rubber. Laura’d used to do it all the time. She could watch the same thing like that for hours on end. Derek had never understood it and he’d never stopped her doing it even though it occasionally made him want to tear at his own skin in frustration, especially after the fire when he’d wanted to find ways to make her hate him. He wondered if Cora knew where she’d gotten it from or if was merely ingrained in her
subconscious.

She shrugged her shoulders when she noticed him watching her. “It’s not mummification, like anyone might expect, and Stiles isn’t answering my emails.”

Derek gripped his glass so hard it shattered. He stared down at the jagged shards, shifted his feet so the soles of his shoes crunched and screeched against the tile. “You already contacted him?” He sounded more accusatory than he’d meant to. His palm was bloodied. He dealt with that rather than meeting her eyes. Not that he was even sure she was looking at him, though breaking things did tend to garner stares in his experience.

She said somewhat snidely, “Well, he didn’t answer. So I only tried to.”

Derek’s spine went rigid. She was so oppositional, so clear in her dislike of him and Derek wasn’t sure what he’d done to earn her derision. He hadn’t reacted with joy when she’d shown up without rhyme or reason, too broken with suspicion and paranoia not to see something darker in her sudden – and timely - reappearance, and maybe that was enough. That he’d embraced her with misgivings rather than affection. If so, then Derek didn’t even feel badly about it.

He tossed the larger glass shards into the sink and swept up the rest. The cut in his palm was already resealed by the time he was sitting across from her in the main room – coffee table between them. He couldn’t deny that he liked her in plain view, as well as doing something to occupy her time. It was only an added benefit that it might actually end up being useful.

She did seem to like research, liked reading basically anything as much as she had when she was a kid, when she’d crawl under her bed, eyes glowing gold, and read until the wee hours of the morning. Maybe there was something left of her then.

Derek pulled back from staring at her. There would never not be at least the potential of family when it came to her. With Peter, it was as if there was a wedge between who he’d been before the fire and who he was after but Cora had been taken from him, she hadn’t chosen to leave. She could still very well be his little sister.

She could just as easily not be.

He knew he’d eventually have to broach the subject of how she’d survived the fire, how she’d been captured by the Alpha pack. He watched her jiggle the pencil between her fingers.

He closed his mouth, decided – again – that today wasn’t the day to interrogate the only sister he had left.

Maybe tomorrow.

“You want to go for a run?” It didn’t require talking. It didn’t require letting her out of his sight. It was the only thing he could think of that met both those caveats. She’d had better opportunities to kill him for his Alpha status before this if that was what she was after. Besides, he wanted to run with her, to do something more primal when everything human seemed to fail them.

Cora narrowed her eyes at him, unfolded her legs out from under her and pursed her lips. “Okay.”

She was fast, faster than any of the bitten wolves, faster than Derek. She laughed at Derek’s beta form, tackled him when he couldn’t make the change to full wolf the way their mom had always been able to. It wasn’t quite playful but neither was it a challenge, somewhere between the two, finding an acceptable medium. And the rush of adrenaline helped him form the snout.
It was the closest he’d ever gotten.

He chased Cora through the woods for an hour longer than he meant to. They only stopped when they found the body. It didn’t look particularly fresh.

Lydia sniffed. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve had to cancel this nail appointment?”

Derek was saved from rolling his eyes at her by Jackson doing it for him. He pulled out his phone, tapped on the Sheriff’s number a few times before managing to hit the ‘call’ button and walked away from where Lydia and Jackson were now hissing under their breath at each other. John took down his location, rattled off a handful of routine questions before asking point blank, “You talked to Deaton about this?”

Derek nodded automatically and dumbly, adding, “Scott did,” after realizing the Sheriff couldn’t see him.

“And?”

“He didn’t have any ideas,” he repeated Scott’s text nearly verbatim.

The Sheriff made an inquisitive sound in the back of his throat. “I’d suggest Chris Argent then. His movements have been a bit more careful lately, like he’s purposefully trying not to draw my eye.”

“The Argents are werewolf hunters,” Derek spat, halfway to exasperated. Seriously, why did everyone in Beacon Hills seem to have such trouble holding on to that fact?

“Way I hear, Chris and Vicky followed that Code of theirs.” Which didn’t make it a good Code to be following. “Besides, you’ve got Scott. Likable kid and dating the daughter if I remember right.”

And wasn’t that something Derek loved being reminded of. He was being forced to watch history repeat because Scott was too hardheaded to listen to reason.

“I’m only telling you because I’m pretty certain he knows something that he’s not going to share with the class without prompting. Stiles seemed to think the Scott and Allison situation could only benefit you when it came to forming an alliance with the Argents.”

Derek’s chest felt tight at the mention of Stiles and he couldn’t help but wonder when he had said as much, at what point in time had he been thinking about the pack’s well-being, and whether or not he was still. “He’s ignoring Cora,” he said gruffly, taking himself a bit by surprise. It was better than saying, ‘I don’t trust your kid any more than I did Deucalion but I still regularly fantasize about fucking him. Thoughts?’

The Sheriff sighed heavily. “He’s wrapped up in something over there,” he said, taciturn. “Won’t tell me what, of course. I’m sure he thinks keeping me in the dark makes me worry less.” He huffed out an uneasy laugh. “He’s wrong, naturally.” Derek could hear the creak of springs, like the Sheriff was settling into his chair. “You hear from him—”

“I’ll let you know,” Derek promised, almost garbling the words he was so quick to get them out.

The Sheriff cleared his throat. “Check in with Chris Argent, or at least have Scott do as much, see what he knows about all this.”
The Sheriff hung up before Derek could answer one way or another.

Chris Argent apparently knew: “It’s a demon.”

His jaw was tense, muscles strung tight while he crossed his arms over his chest. But it didn’t seem to be Derek that was putting him on edge as much as it was Scott and Allison sitting so close to one another at Derek’s side. However much Chris proclaimed to accept the union, it was clear he still had his reservations.

“Were you planning on sharing that information?” Derek snarled at him, dragging his attention back.

Chris gave him an unimpressed once over, turning his back to shift through a heavy wooden box that Derek would bet was made of rowan wood. The insult scraped against Derek’s spine, Chris treating him like something innocuous rather than a genuine threat. It would be different if there were a treaty or pact of some sort in place but they were still on opposite sides and Derek was still a danger, just as Chris was to him.

“I’d never dealt with one personally,” Chris admitted, looking as if it cost him something to say it aloud. “Had to get verification from hunters up north. Exorcism should be easy enough and the vet should be able to help in procuring everything.” He swapped out the gun in his thigh holster for something quite a bit more heavy duty. It only seemed to be about seventy percent engineered to intimidate Scott.

Allison rolled her eyes.

Derek shook away the vivid image of grabbing Chris around the throat and slamming him into something. His Alpha side couldn’t help but be challenged by the lack of respect, the slight scent of wolfsbane and the deluge of werewolf-specific weapons surrounding him. “There’s only one problem with that,” he said, enjoying pointing out the illogic in Chris’ confidence. “You have to know who it’s possessing before you can perform an exorcism.”

Chris smirked, eyes narrowing in challenge. “That’s what the holy water is for.”

“You’re just going to go around spritzing people in town with holy water? Brilliant plan.”

Next to him, Scott snorted and looked like he instantly regretted it when both Chris and Allison rounded on him. It really was trying the very little luck he had and Derek couldn’t be more pleased with him over it.

At least they knew what it was even if they still weren’t sure how to be rid of it. They were better off than they had been when they’d arrived at the Argent’s door. Derek kept reiterating that to himself.

He hoped Cora could do something better with the information than the Argents had.

Derek passed it off to her, left her with all the supernatural compendiums he’d gotten in the last few months, the Argent’s bestiary and his laptop. He went upstairs to bed, feeling drained and now with the added stress of worrying about what had occupied Stiles so thoroughly that he didn’t have the time to send back one simple email.

He slept hard but in fits and, when he finally opened his eyes, it was nine hours later and his limbs were sleep-heavy and clumsy and his mind disoriented. He dragged his feet, let the soles of them
slide on the stairs and took himself off-guard with a committed yawn.

When he reached the landing, Cora told him with narrowed eyes, “You look like hell.” She was still perched in her spot on the couch, expression judgmental but pinched like there might be concern hidden in it somewhere.

It should’ve been a crack to chip at if he ever decided he actually wanted a relationship at her. Instead, his mouth was loose with exhaustion and his mind a little slow to catch the words, “You look like a sociopath.” He hadn’t meant to say that. And certainly not with such a steady heartbeat behind it. He blinked eyelids that felt beyond heavy and muttered, “That was—I didn’t mean that.”

Cora’s mouth twisted, recognizing it for the lie it was. “Good to know what you really think, big bro.”

She left the room before Derek could think of anything clever to negate the words. He sighed, feeling the breath move through him slowly, before he was interrupted from that particular failure by the vibration of his phone. He’d left it on his nightstand back in his room and picked up on the fourth ring. “What?”

Scott didn’t seem fazed by the rude greeting. “Chris is thinking about blessing the town’s drinking water since holy water wouldn’t affect anyone else aside from the demon. Providing it isn’t working the loner angle, which isn’t very viable as a scenario, then someone should notice.” Scott sounded a bit like he was quoting.

Derek felt an intense pressure push against his temples and winced. It wasn’t the best plan, too many variables. He said as much.

Scott let out an explosive breath. “I’m not saying you’re wrong,” he admitted, almost like it was a concession rather than simple fact, “but unless you and Cora have come up with something better…” He let the sentence trail off, already knowing the answer.

“I want you involved then, keeping an eye on things.”

“I think we should revisit the idea of forming a treaty with them then,” Scott said firmly, as if he had just been waiting for the opportunity.

“You’re naive, Scott,” Derek told him harshly, the sentence tasting strange. It was what he’d been planning to say, only his lips had formed the words before his mind did. Like something had intercepted the message, spoke it for him using his mouth to do it too. He shook it off. “They’re hunters and you have no idea what that means.” Images of Kate, of his family burning assaulted him as he said it and Derek scowled at himself and pushed it back down. He usually kept a much tighter lock on that.

“It means you become totally unreasonable,” Scott shot back, hackles clearly raised.

“Better that than dead,” Derek snarled, hanging up on him. Again the action had been too fast, too premeditated. He stared down at his hands, flexing his fingers, touching the tips of them to his thumb. They moved easily and exactly as he told them to. He blamed the stupefaction on the heaviness of his sleep and the way it still seemed to be clinging to him like persistent mold.

He tuned out his own heartbeat – Cora’s, Isaac’s, Peter’s – and focused on the traffic down in his parking lot, the light drops of rain falling on pavement. It wasn’t too persistent that he couldn’t clear the haze from his mind with a run in the Preserve.

He half-considered shifting but decided it was too early in the day, he risked running into someone
else. Instead, he focused on the smooth movements of his muscles working together, sliding into the reassuring rhythm of his run, letting his mind drift to the ambient noise of drops of water hitting leaves with dull *plops*, insects buzzing and branches creaking. When he snapped back into his own head, it was to realize that he was no longer controlling his run.

His gait had changed, pushing him harder, and his mind hadn’t been in on it. This couldn’t be written off as exhaustion, as anything other than him being under something else’s control. Something was learning him, first moving with him, then slightly ahead of him, and now independent of him and he had no idea how long it had been there. He’d felt disconnected for a long time now, far longer than he would’ve been able to pick out any solid evidence of his actions not being his own. He tried to slow but a burst of adrenaline exploded in his gut and he was running faster, eyes flashing red, shorting in and out with it, fangs peeking out over his lips.

He could make a guess for what was inside of him, controlling him, but he couldn’t get a grip on it, couldn’t feel it aside from the way it was manipulating him. It wasn’t like a presence inside him as much as it was like it had fused with him and, considering Derek couldn’t even stop running before this thing decided it was through, he doubted he’d be able to let anyone know that he was now playing host to a demon.

Which was pretty much par for the course when it came to his life.

It was no longer interested in giving him the illusion of power now that Derek knew it was there. However long it had been laying dormant within him – and the last victim had been… weeks ago now so potentially all that time – it had clearly decided it’d learned all it needed to of Derek’s natural interactions. Now it was fascinated with the way his hands opened and his muscles stretched along with it, the way his nails could lengthen at will. It placed one of Derek’s hands over the tattoo of his heart, feeling it thrum beneath his palm and his chest rise and fall. It must have burned through its other hosts spectacularly quickly if it hadn’t had time to do the same exploration with them.

*Nonsense. You’re all different. Special and unique snowflakes, you know?* 

It wasn’t a voice so much as the words were impressed into his head, forced into the folds of his brain’s language center.

*Such vivid, painful imagery. The others were hardly so creative, or so dour.*

Derek couldn’t respond, couldn’t figure out how when nearly all his mind was focused on the curve of his fingers around his water bottle.

*I’ve never had a werewolf before. The sensory information alone, it’s overwhelming.*

It tilted Derek’s head, listened to the shuffle of Isaac flipping through the pages of one of his textbooks, the flap of a bird’s wings outside the window, Cora’s grunts as she did push-ups in her bedroom.

*Untempered strength and a bad attitude. That’s all you are.* There was a pause and then: *I can work with that.*

The sad thing was, it easily could. Derek had no ties, certainly not anything strong enough to ground him, and he was impulsive – acted first and thought second. Not to mention borderline unstable. It wouldn’t be difficult to accept erratic or reckless behavior from him.

Exactly.
It jerked his chin up, the measured click of high heels on concrete easily heard all the way down the hall. Erica slid open his door a few moments later and offered him a gauging look. “Okay, what is wrong with you?”

The thing controlling him blinked at her. There were some things that could be faked but instinct, pack, wasn’t one of them.

“First, you can’t keep your hand out of your damn pants and now it’s like you’ve turned to clay or something, no thoughts, no emotions, no instincts to go off of at all.” She scowled at him and tried to turn away into the main room before he could catch the real flash of concern in her eyes. “I thought you were dead.”

Apparently it could only block Derek’s connection to his betas, not replace it. And it probably hadn’t even realized it had done so. Pack was an effortless, inherent thing when it came to a born werewolf like Derek. It wasn’t an overt process, which meant it could go entirely unnoticed and wasn’t easily replicated. Erica was bound to realize something was wrong then. Derek hadn’t ever cut her off before and he’d certainly had reason to, especially lately.

His shoulders were shrugged, more forcefully than he might have done had he been the one behind it and he said, almost bored, “I figured you’d appreciate the reprieve.” His vocal cords felt tense, like it was trying to figure out how to manipulate them properly. Derek never really thought about what went into making him him but there was more than he ever would have guessed, more for it to fuck up than he’d realized.

She crossed her arms under her chest, pushing up her breasts almost like a defense mechanism, thankfully unsatisfied with the response. She stalked over to him, squinted into his face from across the counter. “I did the math, you know. Does this have anything to do with Stiles?”

Derek clamped down on the panic that flared inside him, jerking his mind away from everything that name wanted to conjure. He got the feeling that while it was lying in wait, it hadn’t been able to call up anything Derek didn’t explicitly offer. Which was why it’d pulled up the images of Kate and the fire while he was on the phone with Scott, when it had finally begun to reveal itself. Though Derek had thought of both before that, it hadn’t been able to access his thoughts while it was learning his actions. And Stiles—that, it didn’t get to know about. Not that, not ever. That was his and his alone. He focused on the knots his father had taught him to tie when he was eight, mentally pictured the contortions of the rope.

“Derek?”

Derek’s vision jerked up from the marble countertop to zero in on her narrowed eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He felt his mouth form the words and Erica would never know how true they were.

“A little warning would have been nice,” she snarked, eyes pinched.

And Derek could tell what she was really saying was that she hadn’t minded it, had maybe even liked it, having that connection to her Alpha and now it was severed. He smirked, mouth curving cruelly rather than teasingly. “Maybe it was me who could use the reprieve then.”

She flinched like she’d been slapped.

“Erica?”

Derek’s gaze swung around to find Isaac standing on the bottom stair, eyes darting between them.
cautiously. “Something you wanted to add, Isaac? That would be new and exciting for you.” Derek’s pack was easily defeated on the best day and, with him swinging the wrecking ball, it wouldn’t last out the afternoon. He was their Alpha and he was bad enough on his own without adding purposeful destruction to it.

It seemed to have given up on faking its way into an accurate depiction, seemed to realize it wouldn’t be able to imitate a bond it could never hope to understand, and went for broke.

Isaac shrunk in on himself, looking petulant but not indignant and, fuck, this really would take no time at all.

It was severing all his, even loose, ties.

Peter stepped out of the shadows, still void space – no scent to define him. His gaze was calculating, suspicious and, for once, Derek was glad he insisted on hanging around. “That was a bit sharp for you,” he said, an eager curiosity coloring the words.

Derek bared a mouth full of fangs at him, eyes burning red over the grin and claws slowly lengthening. “Let me prove just how sharp I can be.”

Peter smirked, tilted his head to the side, said, “Derek?” almost like he didn’t expect to get an answer.

“That is not my brother,” Cora snarled from the upstairs landing.

Derek laughed and said truthfully, “How on earth would you know?” He was so enjoying the way Cora blanched that he missed Erica coming up behind him, something heavy hitting him just over his temple.

A bright explosion of pain whited out his vision and he was unconscious before his face even hit the counter.

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It’s worked out in my favor that you surround yourself with inefficient children.

Even Derek’s breaths no longer belonged to him but he could still feel them move through him. And pain. He could still feel pain. His leg was burning but it was nothing compared to his wrist and forearm. They were mangled, a mess of broken bones and torn ligaments.

I really am pleased with this choice.

It held up Derek’s arm so he could see the extent of the damage. It was bloody, shattered, like something out of a horror movie that had spared no expense on the gore.

I have no qualms about breaking my hosts, understand, but they so rarely have the ability to knit themselves back together.

Derek’s fingers wiggled and he stood, thigh muscle shaking. He looked down to see the metal rod stuck through it. He turned back and saw that it was a part of the chair he’d been strapped to, which was now torn apart. His gaze swung up, around, and Derek would have stumbled if he’d had control of his legs.

The bodies of his pack surrounded him. It took a moment for him to make out their still-beating hearts over the roar of panic in his ears. Chris was unconscious right in front of him, bloody gash on his head. Scott, Erica, Isaac and Cora all looked like they’d been thrown into the walls behind
them. There were cracks in the plaster and, though they were slumped like marionette dolls, they didn’t seem to have sustained any permanent injury.

He sneered down at the circle that surrounded him. He didn’t recognize the ash but it was clear the demon did. The room looked like a fierce wind had swept through it, line smeared.

_You’ve been in the dark for days but I wanted you to see their failure. Do you know the absolute worst thing you can do for a possessed person? Excuse me. Possessed werewolf? Perform an exorcism incorrectly. It only helps us take root._

Derek felt like something was clawing into his chest and his knees actually gave out under him.

_You see the command I have over you now?_

His gaze flashed over to Chris and Derek’s mind started racing.

_Don’t blame the hunter. We have a tendency to leave our hosts once they start chanting, it’s an annoyance that’s easier to avoid than wait out. However, it means they simply have no idea how to get rid of us._

Derek’s gaze came into focus slowly, blur becoming clean lines despite the pounding in his head. He blinked twice and the film of water dissipated.

Eyes that were almost gold they were so bright stared back into him. Derek felt his breath punch out of him, almost pulling up more than the name through nothing more than relief and word association. He purposefully reinforced the wall he’d carefully built around all mention or memory of him. He redirected his mind, focusing it inward, counting the stripes on the top Laura wore almost every day during the summer when she was ten.

_Come now, that’s not being a very good host. What is he?_

Derek looked back cautiously. Stiles was crouched low before him, elbows resting on strong thighs and long-fingered hands clasped between his knees. His tattoo crossed itself over the back of his left hand, bracketing his middle finger in a ‘V.’ It’d spread over more of his skin since the last time Derek had seen it and he wanted to know all the new places it had gone.

He wasn’t hiding under an overshirt now, like he wanted the demon to know exactly what he was capable of, and it was stark black against his skin and looked like nothing more than _power_. His sleeves were rolled up slightly, but unevenly, like it had been due to heat rather than a fashion statement and now Derek could see the sweat stains under the arms of his t-shirt, at the ridge of his abdomen, beading on his upper lip.

Stiles’ hair was buzzed and there was a scar on his jaw that looked like it was still in the stages of healing. Derek wanted to put his mouth on it.

_What. Is. He?_

Derek didn’t know the answer to that, at least not beyond: the guy who was almost certainly going to be responsible for this thing’s death.

_Quite sure of him, aren’t you?_

Derek jerked away, realizing this was what it wanted, for Derek to focus on Stiles. But it didn’t get to play with that. Stiles and everything to do with him was off-limits. “Funny,” he said and his
voice was hoarse, dry, like he didn’t have enough moisture in his mouth, “he’ll let me into anything else, the hunter girl he bounced around in bed with while his family burned down around him, but you – you he won’t let me touch. Why is that?”

Stiles’ mouth curved into a sly grin. It would almost look amused if there wasn’t something plasticine about the expression. Derek had forgotten the finer points of him, imagined him as more of a tinderbox waiting to go up in the absence of the real thing. Instead, he had bright eyes, youthful, smooth skin that looked warm to the touch and that omnipresent air of amusement and frivolity.

But he was more drawn now. The skin under his eyes was dark and rubbery. He looked like he’d forgotten to shave for at least two days running. He turned his head and Derek saw the tattoo that licked up his neck. Stiles dragged his tongue over his lower lip, seeming utterly unfazed looking into eyes that weren’t Derek’s. If anything, he seemed to take this as some grand entertainment arranged just for him. “That is curious,” he agreed. “Why don’t I ask Derek all about it for you?”

Derek pulled in a deep breath. He’d forgotten the timber of Stiles’ voice, the way it sounded working over his name, remembered Stiles saying what seemed like a lifetime ago now, ‘Children, I do believe it’s time to face our demons.’

What a nice bit of foreshadowing. You have to love when the narrative works in your favor like that, no?

The demon drew back from taunting Derek and watched Stiles with piercing eyes. “He’s nothing more than misery and guilt. I don’t see how anyone could possibly prefer that to something a bit more fun-loving.”

Stiles stood easily, pushing off his knees. His smile kicked out wider, lips slightly red like he’d been biting at them, and Derek tried not to think of his mouth, to focus on it, to remember the way his eyes had seemed to dance with mirth before he—“Mayhem and death are not quite as fun as you seem to’ve imagined them and they don’t necessarily correlate to preferable.”

His mouth, you say?

“Now, now, Stiles, I’m sure we could come up with a compromise we could both live with.” Derek’s hands were tied behind his back once again—Derek’s attention only just brought around to it, distracted as he was with all of Stiles—but, this time, the little hunter knew what he was doing and they were laced with iron, the chair made of yarrow. His feet, however, weren’t strapped down. He slouched, slid his ass across the seat, shot out and caught Stiles around the backs of his thighs with his calf and hauled him in.

Stiles lost his balance, planted his hands on Derek’s chest to catch himself, palms digging in hard, while Derek’s leg shifted up, tightened around his waist and pulled him closer. He felt Stiles’ breath catch. And it couldn’t happen again like this. It couldn’t be someone—something—else behind it.

Stiles leaned in and Derek could practically feel the slide of his tongue, the sparks in his mouth, but Stiles didn’t give in to the heat between them, the way their bodies were thrumming against one another’s. Instead he hissed into Derek’s ear, “I’m not a whore.” He broke Derek’s grip on him and took several huge steps back.

Derek smirked and it could scent Stiles’ arousal on the air as much as Derek could. “You sure about that?” he crowed.
A hand closed around the ball of Stiles’ shoulder and they both startled, following the hand up to Scott’s exhausted face. His arm trembled holding up an open book. “This is the spell we used. It should’ve worked, we did everything we were supposed to.”

Stiles’ eyes darted down the page and he sighed, shook his head.

One kiss, that’s what you were hiding from me? Quite the blushing virgin when it comes to this boy. A pause. Oh, I see, you are, aren’t you? Never even thought of cocks, of getting fucked, until this one.

Stiles closed the book around Scott’s thumb and tapped the cover. “This is bunk, dude. You need the demon’s name in order to exorcise it. That’s why it’s such time-consuming bullcrap,” he rubbed a hand back and forth over his buzzed hair. Derek wondered how it would feel under his hand, “and they usually either jump before you get rid of them or they just kill the host.”

“Is it killing Derek?” Erica. Derek appreciated the fear in her voice.

Stiles shrugged, muscles rippling under his t-shirt. No. Under Derek’s t-shirt. It was the one Derek had loaned him, moss green and a tad too small on him but perfect on Stiles. Derek’s throat felt tight and, only now that Stiles’ back was to him, did he realize how often Stiles had tried to avoid his eyes. He’d seemed so intent on holding Derek’s gaze when Derek had first come to but the demon had only been able to catch him off-guard because Stiles’ eyes had shifted to stare at Derek’s elbow, his earlobe, anything other than his face. Now he’d turned away from Derek completely and Derek instinctively tried to find the body of the phoenix he knew was hidden under the soft cotton.

He was pulled away from the examination by Stiles answering, “Slowly. Normally the host would be dead by now. Demons run anywhere from eight to thirty degrees hotter than humans. Werewolves run anywhere from six to twelve. That’s why it dries out human hosts so quickly. Derek’s body is already used to warmer temperatures and has the ability to regenerate and replace the water he’s losing nearly as fast as it goes. It’s a losing battle though. It will kill him if it doesn’t leave,” Stiles sighed, “it’s simply going to get a lot of use out of him before that happens.”

Derek’s mouth curved into a deep smile and he said softly, voice gravelly, “Are you even sure you want to save him, Stiles?” Derek didn’t like the way it said his name, like a hiss, like something venomous.

Stiles’ back stiffened and he turned slowly, eyes focused on Derek’s cheek rather than his amused gaze. “He’s got a pack to look after and you’ve got a circle of hell to get back to. I’ve always been partial to Heresy, myself.”

“And here I thought you liked Lust.”

Stiles’ tattoo sparked up a deep maroon before the color was whisked away again. He wore a tight grin and his eyes narrowed. “How ‘bout Badalam? An obsession with love spells and an iffy definition of consent.”

They both ignored the looks they were getting from the pack. Chris Argent seemed to have puzzled it all out, stepping slightly in front of Stiles as though keeping him from rising to any bait.

The demon smirked using Derek’s mouth. “You’ve done your homework.” His muscles twitched, momentarily losing the fine control they’d been under, and then settled. “I’m afraid I’m not so… uninspired however.”
Stiles’ eyes zeroed in on the brief stumble. He stepped around Chris and stared darkly into Derek’s face. “Your control seems to be getting a little… shaky.” His eyes flitted between Derek’s and he leaned in. Cool fingers brushed against Derek’s knees, palms smoothing over the balls of both as he grew more sure of himself. Stiles’ thumbs dug into the insides of his thighs as his palms skated up. Derek parted his legs with a shiver, goosebumps raising on his skin, knees spreading automatically. “Not all of us are so easily defeated,” Stiles purred.

He was trying to tempt the demon out of Derek and into him and it was as fake as all of his flirting. Derek abruptly realized that Stiles had never flirted with him the way he did with everyone else. He was more than grateful for it now because watching the insincere seduction in his face, Derek felt his stomach turn.

The demon shifted forward, leaned into Stiles’ space and bared Derek’s teeth. “Unfortunately for you, the wolf’s a tad… intent on you. Every inch of your body that he’s seen, I have as well. I know what marks like that mean even if he doesn’t. I know I can’t get in.”

Derek could practically feel everyone in the room aside from Stiles wondering how much he had seen.

Not nearly as much as he would’ve liked.

“Stiles?”

Stiles stepped back sourly, momentarily foiled, and met Scott’s furrowed brow.

“The name. How are we supposed to find it?”

Stiles pulled in a deep breath, clapped Scott on the shoulder. “That, Scotty, my boy,” he said tiredly, “is the question.” He sounded less sure of himself than Derek had ever heard him, spread thin and running on fumes.

Derek would just have to try to have faith enough in him for the both of them.

It wouldn’t be easy. It didn’t exactly come naturally to him.

Ropes burned against the skin of his wrists and they felt rubbed raw, like the demon had been taking off layers while Derek had been unaware. “The great irony here is,” Derek found himself saying, “he’s more afraid of you than he is of me.”

Stiles was on the other side of the room, already hunched over like he’d been sheltering against a barrage of all too revealing statements for some time now. Derek hoped Stiles never found out how true that one was. Stiles kept his gaze averted, chewed on the skin around his thumb and leaned further into the book that was resting on his lap. He had tensed all over as soon as Derek spoke and only now did he slowly let it bleed back out.

Derek watched him freely now that he was able to. He looked worn, like he was replacing sleep with research and came up wanting.

Derek’s mouth curled smoothly, easily. “You’ve ruined him, you realize?” the demon said slyly. “A bit of fun for you but positively devastating for him. I wasn’t exaggerating when I said the wolf was intent, and all over a single kiss.”

Stiles jerked upright, hands clenching on the pages of his book dangerously tight. “It wasn’t a bit of—” He stopped, realized he was being goaded. He ground his teeth together, smiled viciously at
him. There were dark hollows under his eyes, thick scrub of hair on his jaw. “I’m going to take great pleasure in sending you back to Hell, you know?” His gaze went calculating and he said coldly, “Enarkalê.”

Derek’s vocal cords produced a grating laughter he never would have thought himself capable. “A demon of illusion, isn’t it? I bare the wolf’s soul to you and you can’t so much as accept he has one.” Derek’s lips thinned, pleased. “Oh, I like you.”

Stiles’ expression darkened as his guess was proved incorrect and he went back to his research.

The demon was only quiet for a moment before it said blasély, “He thinks of you constantly.” Stiles’ shoulders flinched inward, drawing into his chest, and he seemed to become—somewhat desperately—more invested in the pages in front of him. “He doesn’t even understand all the ways he wants you.”

“You know,” Stiles spat harshly, jaw clenched and glaring down at his book rather than looking back at Derek. “I may not know much about demons but I can guarantee I can find a way to shut you up.” Derek had no doubt Stiles would do it either. He’d seen how powerful Stiles was, how effortless it was to perform even the most complex tasks. Stiles finished it off with a sharp grin and the thing inside Derek wisely kept his mouth shut.

Derek raised his head to find Stiles standing in front of him, gaze gauging, dark. He didn’t know what he’d missed but undoubtedly the thing had finally succeeded in prodding Stiles to react with something other than snark. The loft was empty but for them and Derek half-hoped Stiles would simply finish it and, for a moment, the blackness in his gaze made it look like he might. Then he was sliding into Derek’s lap, rubbing his thumb over the corner of his mouth, dragging it down hard over his lower lip. He only stopped once he’d reached the middle of it, stretching the skin. “Derek?”

Derek had no idea what was happening, only knew he ached with the desire to touch him and it felt like torture that his hands were tied behind his back, that his body wasn’t his. He licked his lip as soon as Stiles let go of it. “Untie me,” he said gruffly, twisting his wrists against the burn of rope. He was practically begging and his eyes widened as he realized it was his voice, his begging. He blinked up at Stiles. “Stiles?”

Stiles’ lips twitched, expression still shadowed. “All right in there, Grumpy Gills?”

“Untie me.” His voice still sounded like he’d been gargling sand but at least he was the only one behind it.

Stiles shook his head carefully. “It won’t last.” He held up his thumb and Derek saw something black, shiny smudged over the skin. He rested it against Derek’s jaw. “Iron.”

“Stiles, what it—”

Stiles shifted on his lap, straightening up, mouth pursed in a silent effort to keep Derek from talking. It was clear he didn’t want Derek going off script, didn’t care for anything else Derek had to say. Derek groaned in exquisite agony. He was so hard – hard from the moment Stiles had touched him, so desperate for him and he’d wanted this so badly. “You need to tell me if you’ve heard a name, anything that might give it away.”

“Nothing,” Derek whined, turning his head and catching Stiles’ thumb in his mouth, sucking in the taste of iron and electricity.
Stiles gasped against him in shock and *want* and his tattoo seemed to *throb* against his skin.

Derek nearly whimpered at the sight, a second from pushing Stiles off him with his hips and pinning him with his weight, hands tied or not, when Stiles said, “Derek,” his voice breathy, “what changed?” It didn’t sound like that was what he’d meant to ask.

Derek dragged his mouth up Stiles’ neck without parting his lips. “I might not survive this,” he admitted, voice rumbling, “and it wasn’t lying. Not about any of it.” Derek was less than an inch away from catching Stiles’ mouth with his own before Stiles was scrambling away from him. “Stiles—” he groaned, twisting in an effort to get to him.

Stiles’ eyes were blazing. “So fucking far from good enough,” he spat coldly, straightening up. He stopped long enough to flip closed the book he’d been reading – different from the last time Derek had been conscious – and snatch it up. He left the room without looking back.

Derek dropped his head back against the cushion behind it and roared out his frustration.

Peter’s fingernails tapped a repetitive *one, two, three, one two, three* against the countertop. It would’ve made the muscles between Derek’s shoulders tighten and twitch but the demon was rather placid about the annoyance. “I’ve decided to accept that you are going to keep this thing from scorching my nephew from the inside out and leaving him nothing more than a dried husk,” he said evenly, not entirely condescending, “in which case there would be an exorcism.” He left it hanging, clearly waiting for Stiles to pick it up.

Stiles rolled his eyes. “Your faith is somehow underwhelming,” he said bitterly. He did, however, explain, “He needs someone to ground him.” He looked from Scott all the way back to Peter. He shrugged, guessed, “Cora?”

Peter smirked. “I’m assuming it needs to be someone he feels a more than spurious connection to?”

Stiles nodded uneasily, looking between Cora and Derek with a keen curiosity and maybe the barest hint of… understanding. The silence lingered, becoming uncomfortable as Derek’s self-imposed isolation came into stark relief.

“Ms. Blake?” Scott said suddenly.

Derek’s lungs constricted in his chest and his head jerked towards Stiles, whose expression had shuttered, becoming carefully neutral.

Scott shrugged and Derek wanted to tear out his tongue before he could say, “Her scent’s in his bedroom and Erica said he’d been with her recently.”

Stiles slowly unclenched his fingers from a fist on the countertop and cleared his throat evenly. He worked his jaw slightly, got out, “Perfect.” He shook out his hand, letting Chris Argent smooth a palm over his shoulder and squeeze. He shrugged it off after a second and he clearly thought—he thought that Derek had been cheating on Jennifer with him. Maybe even that that’s why Derek had rejected him to begin with. And now last night—whatever night it was—*fuck*, what he must *think*.

And Derek couldn’t open his mouth, couldn’t correct the assumption, couldn’t say that Jennifer meant *nothing* to him, that he’d only been with her recently to try to drive *Stiles* out of his head.

It wouldn’t have mattered even if he could’ve, Derek didn’t think, because Stiles hadn’t looked
back at him. Not once. And he didn’t look like he meant to ever again either.

Derek told himself it was what he’d wanted. Again when it only made his chest feel tight. Again when he could read the cold finality in Stiles’ gaze. Again when he realized that when Stiles walked out of here this time, he truly wouldn’t be back.

Again and again and again until his consciousness faded.

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Derek blinked dazed eyes, staring into Stiles’ smiling face. It wasn’t a happy thing. There was something dark in it, something victorious and cruel. He tapped twice at Derek’s knee and Derek saw how swollen it looked.

“Thank God for Reading Rainbow, let me tell you,” Stiles said peppily, leaning back on his palms, spreading his thighs. He shifted his hips up, effortlessly obscene and Derek had to wonder if this was designed to taunt him, or it. Maybe Stiles figured one was just as bad as the other. “I might’ve given up,” he admitted, voice rounded out with sincerity. “Might’ve just had to force you to jump, not the best solution by any means,” he agreed with the unspoken rebuke, “but forgoing you deciding to adopt some manners and introduce yourself like a proper little goblin, it really was the only solution.”

Derek sneered, blood dripping onto his lower lip, he didn’t know from where, and he had to wonder what the fuck the two of them had been up to. He hoped it hadn’t gotten too violent and took some comfort that the rest of the pack seemed to be nearby even if they weren’t in his direct line of sight.

Stiles clicked his tongue. “Imagine my surprise when I realized one of the many reasons that there are so few successful exorcisms are because demons actually like Hell.” The thing in Derek tensed every muscle in his body. Stiles’ brows raised like he knew it. “Go figure, right? This whole surface Rumspringa nonsense? It’s meant to be a joyride,” he waved a hand, “ride it until you crash it and then run home type of dealie.” Derek was trying to follow what he was saying but he was too disoriented, his consciousness too… stringy. “So. I had to wonder,” he paused for effect, “what the Hell are you doing jumping hosts when everything says you demons pretty much only choose one so as not to draw attention to yourselves? Maybe you pissed off daddy, right?”

Now it was positively clawing inside of Derek, trying to get out but trapped by the iron bonds, the yarrow wood, whatever circle entrapped him.

Stiles nodded simply, letting it know it had guessed correctly. “Made a couple really long distance calls and found out there was someone looking for you.” Stiles’ eyes flashed a deep red and the timber of his voice went deep, cavernous. “Xezbeth.” There was horrid flinch at the name and Derek had zero doubts over whether or not it was the right one. Stiles didn’t seem to need the confirmation, kept right on going. “And he is not in a good mood. Not sure what you did but he really didn’t like it. I offered to perform the exorcism for him but he wanted to come collect you himself.” Every inch of Derek’s skin prickled, scalp tingling and hair raising. Stiles smirked. “I’d run while you still can.”

Derek wasn’t even sure what that meant as the thing was trapped and then he felt it shifting along inside him, felt it slithering and slipping and pulling away from him, leaving his entire body vibrating with a low-level buzzing. Apparently, it could still leave provided it didn’t try to take Derek with it. And whatever was coming for it was clearly worth giving up its host.

“Keep your eyes closed,” Stiles shouted across the room.
Derek tried to focus on the words but his mind wasn’t reorienting. It felt like he was being dragged along with the darkness that was leaving him, oozing out of his own physicality. He could feel himself slipping, was drifting along the flow of it when something razor sharp pierced into his forearm, pain exploding in him. He roared and claws were cutting through the ropes at the same time that they dug into his skin. His gaze sliced over to find Cora kneeling at his side, wolfed out and snarling fiercely.

He ripped out of the last of the threads of rope. His chest was still heaving, his body rubbery, when he realized what exactly she’d done.

She’d… anchored him.

Cora fell back when the air around them grew scarce and the room darkened, throwing a forearm over her eyes to shield them. Derek started to tip his head back when Stiles grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him down onto the floor. Derek fell into him, forehead knocking into Stiles’ jaw painfully. “Derek?” he said tightly, voice somewhat uncertain.

Derek tightened his hands around him, clenching into his shirt, and pressed his closed eyes against Stiles’ neck, let his mouth rest against his hammering pulse. He breathed him in, answered back, “Stiles.” There was something wrong with him, something so fundamentally flawed that he wasn’t trying to pull away from this. Stiles shifted uneasily under him but Derek had too tight a hold on him.

He gave up after a moment, palmed the back of Derek’s head, pushed it more firmly into the crook of his neck and said with hint of fondness in his voice, “Head down, Sourwolf.”

Stiles had been gone so long that his scent had faded completely. It was the first thing Derek noted upon waking. The second was that his loft was in shambles. The third was that his entire pack was in the next room, waiting for him to wake. The fourth was that Cora was sitting on the foot of his bed, flipping through a magazine.

She glanced up when she noticed the change in his heartbeat. Her mouth twisted and she said, “You’re just a barrel of laughs, you know.”

Derek snorted.

The pack greeted him cautiously and, while it was clear they cared about their Alpha’s well-being, they were still just as splintered as they always had been. If not more. Deaton arrived a half hour or so after he’d eaten something and gave him a clean bill of health.

After nearly everyone had cleared out again, Erica offered to call Jennifer.

Derek snapped his jaws at her.

She waited a respectable amount of time. Didn’t make him look at her, waited until there was the distraction of hunting a rogue Omega in their territory to ask, “It was Stiles, wasn’t it?”

Derek snarled, jerked his head to the side. But what left his mouth was a defeated, “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes
Next week: Shapeshifters and Pack Dynamics! But real next week.

*thumblr, tumblr, tumblr* because of reasons, reasons, reasons.
IV. “Hey, you're not in my pants, don't speak for my bladder.”

Chapter Summary

“I don’t like you.”

Derek’s head snapped up and, really, he should have expected something like this.

Chapter Notes

You guys have no idea how much trouble I’ve had remembering Monday = new chapter. I know it's Monday, I just don't recognize it as something that means anything in AO3-world (and I'm a little sucked into my teenwolf_bb plotting, whoops) so I made an alert on my phone on, like, Wednesday last week when that whole 'new chapter' idea kept popping up, slipping away, popping up, etc. So phone all chimey-ed at me yesterday around lunch and said, really ominously, 'REMEMBER THE THING, DUMB.'

So... I bought my sister a birthday present. I don't even know what I'm reminding myself of anymore! THANKFULLY callunavulgari on tumblr was like: 'remember that thing you do, you didn't do it.' Only with different, better words. I am dumb and I SO appreciate the help, so thank you, my dear! Really, do not feel pushy at all for reminding me. I clearly can't help myself here so we're making this into a group effort.

Okay, but, seriously, 400 subs? *stumbles* I WAS NOT PREPARED. Do you see the sub count, comments, kudos, bookmarks? I WAS SO NOT PREPARED. You guys are doing my head in with all this positive reinforcement. *is all verklempt*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IV. “Hey, you're not in my pants, don't speak for my bladder.”

“I don’t like you.”

Derek’s head snapped up and, really, he should have expected something like this. Erica always split off with Boyd and this time she’d volunteered to go with him looking for the dryads. They were just over the county line when she’d decided she was too hungry to go on and dragged him into a diner.

It was obviously a trap. And he’d missed it.

She stabbed a fry at him from across their table, mouth wide in an exaggerated grin. “You sold me on this whole supernatural creature stuff knowing your pitch was lacking on a few of the finer points.” She carelessly dropped the fry onto her plate rather than eating it, rubbing her hands together to ineffectively rid them of the salt and grease. “You swindled me, made this look like an
answer when it’s so fucking far from it.” Her gaze hardened as she watched him. “You’re the most miserable person in existence and you smiled, and lied, and changed my life knowing I had no idea what I was in for, what I was changing it into.” She narrowed her eyes, reiterated firmly, “I don’t like you.”

Derek said nothing. Couldn’t think of anything to say. She wasn’t wrong.

She sat back in the booth, worked her jaw, and leaned forward again. “Here’s what you’ve got working to your advantage though: I want to like you. You’re my Alpha and I get that there’s all this pack politic stuff that says I could find another one but I don’t want another one. You are my Alpha, for better or worse, you are, and you made me your second.” Her mouth curved in a deep, somewhat menacing grin. “I get now that I was a last resort, that I wasn’t really what you wanted for it, but I accepted. Which means you’re stuck with me. Which means I think you might want to like me too.”

Derek rubbed his forehead, sighed. “I do,” he admitted. Which was tantamount to admitting he didn’t like her now. And he didn’t.

Erica tilted her head to the side and she looked incisive and smart and motivated and Derek’d had no idea she was any of those things. He didn’t really know her though, he didn’t really know any of them. He’d been building a power base more than a pack. “I have no idea why you offered the Bite to the three of us, why you let Jackson goad you into biting him, when you can’t seem to stand any of us, so start with that.” She’d clearly been planning this conversation for some time, organizing this piece of her mind so she could give it to Derek in whole rather than in part. “Tell me that. Why did you come to my hospital room and sell me on being a werewolf when you don’t give two shits about me?”

Derek pursed his lips, pushed down the urge to keep his silence and explained – because she did deserve to know, “I was a newly made Alpha. Vulnerable. My family was a well-known pack and it was also well-known that I wasn’t the next in line to become the Alpha. I didn’t think about what it would mean for my territory, for myself, when I slit Peter’s throat but I realized soon after how unprotected I’d left myself. When the Alpha pack started circling—Teenagers have the highest probability of surviving the Bite. I tried to find kids I thought would need it, who could actually benefit from it. Jackson just pissed me off.”

Erica looked torn between some dark amusement and fury. “You threw us into battle without telling us we were soldiers.”

Derek shrugged. “Essentially, yeah, and you can try to tell me you were better off without it but I guarantee I’ll hear the stutter in your heartbeat as you do. You can pretend like you weren’t a miserable person too but I know the truth. All I did was lie about making your life better. I didn’t make it any worse.” He remembered Erica in that little room, small, mousy, angry at the world and with a softness in her that made her look prone to tears. Now she looked strong, healthy, and Derek didn’t fucking break her and he wasn’t about to pretend otherwise.

“You didn’t tell me everything, you glossed over the hunters, the Alpha pack, the dangers.”

“I needed you to say yes,” Derek said tightly. “It was more than just the Alpha pack, it was instinct. I felt like I had to build a pack and I needed you to say yes.”

Erica glared at him for a long moment before sinking back into the vinyl, letting her eyes slowly unpinch as she said easily, “Fine. I believe you.” She chewed on the inside of her lower lip, glanced out at the mostly empty restaurant. “You’re right, you didn’t make my life any worse. Only because it was so terrible to begin with though.” Her eyes cut back to him and her lips
quirked weakly. “Which, if I got all that, is the *reason* you picked me, because you knew it would take a lot to leave me worse off than you found me. And Isaac. And Boyd. Even Jackson, though he picked you.”

Derek dipped his chin. “Yes.”

She rolled her lower lip in, bit down, scraped her teeth over it as it rolled back out. “I still don’t like you. I still want to. So just keep talking to me like we’re already there. Better than that, like I’m your second and you’re my Alpha.” She grinned, properly. “Tell me about Stiles. Trust me with that.”

Derek stiffened. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

She nodded her head in concession. “I know, that’s why it’s a new thing we’re trying out. You’re going to confide in me and I’m going to prove you should. Tell me about Stiles.”

Derek clenched his jaw.

“Something’s obviously going on. I don’t know how much of that month you were aware of—” It still amazed him that it had been close to a month when it had only felt like one exceptionally long week “—but he got pretty… *intense* when he thought. Well, when *we* thought we wouldn’t be able to save you. I think he stopped sleeping towards the end and the Sheriff had to keep coming to corral him, take him home and make him crash.”

Derek had gotten a few leading comments from Cora about Stiles but it was clear the pack as a whole was keeping his involvement from Derek, not sure what he remembered and not wanting to give him any more fodder when it came to Stiles. They all took to the idea that he was fucking around with him while dating Jennifer far too easily and he wasn’t about to explain himself to his betas, not when he had nothing to explain. Nevermind that Scott had basically stopped speaking to him in anything other than curt monosyllables.

“After Scott mentioned Jennifer, he got weirdly tense and Argent kept taking him out to shoot things. So.” Derek didn’t jump in and she shrugged as though she didn’t need his input to put it all together. “It certainly seemed like you’d been sleeping with Ms. Blake for months on end, yet you also fucked Stiles and made him complicit in cheating on her even though he had no idea you were dating. Which is a really dick thing to do, by the way.”

She was clearly trying to goad him into explaining, eyes glittering with her own daring, though he couldn’t tell if that was from an oversexed virgin saying the word ‘fucked’ or because she was trying to get at him. Either way, Derek was just amazed that it was working. “Jennifer and I were never dating and Stiles and I have never had sex.” He clenched his hands into fists, irrationally angry and mind blurring the line between getting this out for Erica’s sake and Stiles’. It was Stiles he wanted the chance to explain this to but Stiles had made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with Derek. “We—Before he left, after the dragon, he kissed me. I stopped him.”

Erica snorted, loudly. “Which makes perfect sense. It’s not like you’re *gagging* for him or anything.”

“Shut up,” Derek snarled at her. “Jennifer, it was just sex and it wasn’t even—I hadn’t seen her in months.”

“Trust me, even without the dick-link, everyone was tuned in to the fact that you were *not* getting your jollies.”
“Shut—up. I didn’t cheat on her, I didn’t do anything to Stiles.” He wasn’t telling her about the demonic interlude. That wasn’t—It was hard to even think about, the way it’d been tarnished, the way Stiles had looked at him after.

Erica’s brow furrowed. “Um, except kiss him and then kick him out even though you’re clearly head over heels in love with the guy.”

Derek’s eyes widened. “I am—There’s no—I’m not in love with him.” At least that he was sure of. He barely knew Stiles and what he did know didn’t exactly inspire warm and fuzzy feelings. Well, warm, hot, fiery feelings but not fuzzy ones.

Erica rolled her eyes. “Fine, head over heels in lust then.” Her gaze roamed his face for a half second before she let out a breathy sound. “It’s you. You’re the weak link, the reason this pack doesn’t work. That’s…” she flicked the edge of her plate, wincing at the ringing sound it made, “really fucking disappointing.” It was almost like she’d wanted it to be them.

Derek could agree with all of that, that he was the major flaw. They all had a hand in its ineffectiveness, but he definitely had the biggest.

He ran with Cora. Ran until he couldn’t think anymore. Ran until he felt the animal thrumming beneath his skin, Cora’s footfalls pounding into the earth just ahead of him. He closed his eyes, followed the drafts of wind she made, and listened to his own heartbeat.

Something hard slammed into his side, scent told him it was Cora and they rolled over each other, Derek pinning her with red eyes. It didn’t last, she twisted, heaved up her thigh and dropped him easily, snapping her jaws at him. Her eyes were crinkled at the side, like she was happy. Like she was smiling.

Derek couldn’t even remember what that looked like on her. He fell back in the leaves, panting, the sun so bright it was disorienting.

“Don’t you get tired of being slow as molasses?” Cora wondered aloud, she was breathless but she sounded… warm, amused.

It was new. Not fearing everything that came out of his sister’s mouth, not tensing every time she came within a foot of him, thinking ‘sister’ and not just ‘Cora.’ He didn’t hate it. “You’ve had years more practice,” he tossed back, which was cruel, reminding her that she’d been on her own for so long, that she’d been running for her life most of that time. But they’d agreed. They’d agreed after the demon, after she’d come back and called him a disappointment, after he’d been possessed and called her a sociopath, that they wouldn’t hold back.

“And you planted here, in a veritable cemetery, and learned to brood so excellently it’s like you have a perpetual storm cloud overhead.” She grinned at him, teeth bared and sharp. “I won that.”

Derek snorted. “Sure, that makes up for spending—how long was it with the Alpha pack? Oh right, too traumatized to share.”

Her eyes narrowed and she said somewhat coldly, “Wow. You really wanted to win.”

Derek struggled upright, shrugged. “What else have I got going for me?”

Cora grinned now, no trace of the anger and agony in her from only moments ago. Derek had found that if he ever got too sharp, all he had to do was turn it around on himself to smooth it out. “There is that.” She shuffled closer and Derek eyed her warily. She sighed, snatched up a huge
pile of leaves and shoved it down the back of his shirt.

Derek tackled her again. She got out of it again.

She was laughing, wheezing almost when she said, “You shifted, you know.”

Derek shrugged, he hadn’t really known but it wasn’t that surprising. They both tended to shift when they ran, especially when they were racing each other. Which was almost always.

“No,” she said with sudden gravity, “I mean, you shifted, past beta form. Your ears went and your hands started to too.” She smiled at him softly. “You’re going to be able to do it soon, just like mom.”

They sat in silence after Cora mentioned their mom. It was surprisingly not uncomfortable.

“What.” Derek rubbed a hand over his face, pressing the phone more firmly to his ear. He glanced at the clock. Three am. He was going to kill whoever this was.

“All kinds of charming,” said a dry voice on the other end that Derek recognized instantly.

Derek’s heart started racing. “Stiles? What are you—Why are you—”

“Not a social call, big guy,” he said quickly, clipped. His heartbeat was steady on the other end. “I’m going to be in town in about three hours.”

“Oh. Okay. I can—”

“I’m bringing an Alpha with me,” Stiles said, ignoring him and his fumbling interjection. “And two betas. We’re tracking something from Nevada, think it headed your way. This is me,” this was the first time he faltered, tone going sour, “asking permission of the resident Alpha of Beacon Hills.”

It was rigid, tense, unnecessarily formal. Derek hated it. “Stiles—”

“Do I have your permission or not?” he asked sharply.

Derek’s free hand clenched into a fist next to his thigh. “You’re already on a plane.” He could hear the sounds of it under Stiles’ heartbeat. It was still faster, louder, stuck in a way no one else’s ever had. “Doesn’t seem like you really care what the answer is.”

Stiles didn’t respond but somehow his silence sounded angry.

“I expect to be kept in the loop. You’ll stay here.” He practically growled out the words, tensing for the fight that would undoubtedly follow the declaration. He already knew it wasn’t something he was going to back down from even though he’d only decided it a moment ago.

“At the loft? Derek—”

Derek shivered at the way Stiles said his name, the one time he broke character, became less stiff, more like the worming, obnoxious guy who had first strolled into Derek’s loft and made himself at home. Derek wanted that back. “Not negotiable. I want the wolves in sight and I want you—I want—” Yeah, he had no idea how to finish that. Was pretty sure he just did.

Stiles snorted. “Don’t hurt yourself.”
Derek rubbed his head, annoyed but engaged, challenged, in that way that only Stiles could do. “You’re the one who’s going to be hunting this thing, means they’re going to be following your lead, means all of us are, means you need to be here too.”

Stiles sighed, sounding exhausted suddenly. “Derek, I’m not trying to involve you or your pack in this. Just—let me handle this.”

He didn’t sound like he was trying to rile him, sounded genuine, concerned. There was no way he was going to show up at Derek’s loft unless Derek gave him a real reason. Or at least something that sounded like one. “I’m new at this, which I’m sure is obvious. I don’t have any allies. Having them stay here, proving we’re not wholly inept, it could be good for the pack.”

Stiles was silent for a full minute. Finally he let out a heavy breath and snarked, “Are you sure you can fake competency for that long?” He hung up before Derek could even open his mouth.

Three hours. He pulled up Erica’s number, texted her: Stiles called – no commentary necessary – he’s bringing an Alpha, two betas, hunting something he thinks is headed our way. Don’t know what yet. He’ll be here in three hours.

Erica was there in less than ten minutes. And not really interested in helping him prepare for a visiting pack – or part of one, at least – and a… Stiles. Mostly she just seemed to want to give him a hard time. “Is he going to sleep with you? Are you going to give him the good pillow, wake up as the little spoon because, let’s be real, Stiles looks like he would big spoon the shit out of you.”

“You can’t—I’m not. No jokes,” he ground out. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I… told you,” he waved his hand, not sure what he was trying to indicate. Unprompted maybe? “so you can’t.”

“You’re literally no fun but, okay, I get it. You told me so I can lay off, I guess. Although I feel I should point out again – no fun.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “Still don’t like me?”

“Nope.”

Derek bared his teeth at her. “I don’t like you either.”

Erica snorted. “Like that’s a secret.”

But Derek was smiling. He didn’t really know why, but he was. He would’ve felt stranger about it but Erica was too.

“You’re early.”

Stiles rolled his eyes. He looked. He looked really good. Derek was pretty sure Erica wolf-whistled behind him. Derek’s neck heated up as if that was its cue. “I did call ahead, sweetie,” Stiles crooned, then blanched, like their history caught up with him only once the words were out of his mouth.

He wasn’t wearing anything long-sleeved, which meant his tattoo was on full display, and he looked a bit rumpled, slightly sweaty from the plane and he smelled like a million other people in a way that was making Derek feel half-crazed. Even so, it didn’t completely obliterate the scent of natural disaster that hung around him.
“This is James,” Stiles said, gesturing to the guy behind him.

Derek hadn’t even noticed him. He blinked.

“That’s Mira and Deb,” he added, indicating other people Derek hadn’t seen.

James was clean-shaven, had clear blue eyes, dark, curly hair, wasn’t all that muscular but had a wide torso. He was maybe younger than Derek, maybe around the same age, it was hard to tell, and he was dark-skinned, Egyptian maybe. Mira also had curly hair and was tall and thin and looked vaguely foreign, they might be related – she and James. Deb looked... annoying. Like she chewed gum with her mouth open.

Derek turned back to Stiles. His tattoo still criss-crossed at the base of his middle finger and for some reason looking at it made Derek’s skin break out in goosebumps.

James clicked his tongue, drawing Derek’s attention back. “Nice place.” His eyes were wide, naturally big. “We appreciate the invitation, Alpha Hale.” James didn’t seem to be exactly settled as Alpha either, slipping in and out of formality like he was making it up as he went.

Derek appreciated that they were on a level playing field in that regard, at least. And that Stiles wasn’t rubbing a competent Alpha in his face, that he wasn’t here proving how much better off he was with literally any other wolf. Derek stuck out his hand, watched Stiles’ eyes widen in surprise and felt a bit of vindictive glee over it when he and James shook. “Nice to meet you, Alpha—”

“Hasani.”

The name niggled at something, like he’d heard it before, or maybe like he should know it. He turned back to Stiles. “The couch is set up, if you don’t mind—”

Stiles waved his hand. “That’s fine.” He looked around, almost uneasily. “You’ve a full enough house, my dad’s is—”

“The deal was that you stay here,” Derek cut him off, vocally putting his foot down. Just because Stiles was trying to run away from him didn’t mean Derek was going to make it easy for him. He still had to find a way to explain about Jennifer and he was determined to. He turned away before Stiles could argue. “What do you think you’re chasing here?”

James’ gaze flickered over to Stiles, assessing, somewhat venerated. “We don’t know.” Which meant Stiles didn’t know. That was a situation Derek was used to being in, being looked to for an answer only to have to relay Stiles’.

Stiles added, “Whatever it is, it killed one of their pack.”

“Devoured him,” James said tightly. “Left him intact everywhere but on the inside.”

Derek dipped his chin, conciliatory. “My pack is at your disposal until this situation is resolved, Alpha Hasani.”

James’ lips quirked into a slight smile, like he knew that Derek was faking his way through it as much as he was. “I appreciate that, Alpha Hale.”

There was one guest room. James and Mira took it. Isaac gave up his room to Deb and crashed with the Mc CALLs. Stiles took the couch and wasn’t there when Derek woke up. Probably back at the Sheriff’s, the fucking liar.
“Who puts less than a finger’s worth of milk back in the fridge?”

Cora pulled a face. “Who pissed in your coffee?” She snatched it out of his hand, drank the last swallow straight out of the jug. Derek snapped his jaws at her. She glanced into the living room, frowned. “Where’s Stiles?”

Derek opened his mouth.

“Right behind you.” Stiles was standing at the door in a t-shirt that was soaked through with sweat around the neck and armpits – it should’ve been gross and yet somehow really, really wasn’t – and red pants made from some synthetic material that made noise when he walked. He looked out of breath and Peter was right behind him.

Derek’s mood soured further.

Stiles cracked his neck, ran a quick hand over his buzzed head and shook it out. “Excess energy from the cramped cabin.” His tattoo looked like it was doing that thrumming thing again, where it was moving on his skin.

Derek pictured a way of helping him relieve said energy and forcefully jerked his thoughts away. “What makes you think this thing, whatever it is, is here?”

Stiles shrugged. “I don’t. James does or, rather, James’ emissary does.”

Peter raised an eyebrow. “And why didn’t he come and sort this out himself then?” He leaned in, grinned at Stiles “Not that it’s not a pleasure to see you, Stiles. As always.”

Stiles offered back a sarcastic, somewhat smarmy smile. “She doesn’t fly. I do and I owed her a favor.”

“What exactly is an emissary?” Derek asked, interrupting them. He’d seen them before, even dealt with a few of them when they drained the Nemeton but he didn’t really know how it worked, what they were, what they did. He didn’t think there’d ever been a proper one in Beacon Hills, that belonged to it and wasn’t loaned out.

Peter nodded his head towards Stiles. “You’re looking at one. Well, a former emissary.”

Stiles’ jaw clenched, clearly uncomfortable.

“Why former?” Derek asked carefully.

Stiles jerked his head up, looked at him with narrowed eyes. “I had my own issues to deal with. I was… young, inexperienced and I got distracted with my own shit.” He dipped his head, conceded, “By Deucalion, by my mom. By the time my priorities reoriented, there wasn’t much of a pack left to protect.”

Derek crossed his arms over his chest. “What happened to them?”

Stiles gave him a grim look. “Nothing good.” He shrugged. “I can’t manage a goldfish, let alone an extended pack of werewolves, the mercenary thing’s more in my wheelhouse. I like money and mysteries.” He smiled, one of his wide, trademark smiles, but it seemed disingenuous somehow.

“Stiles?”

Stiles turned curiously, grinned more authentically when he saw who was calling him. “Mira,
what’s up?” He was more relaxed with her than he had been with Derek in months. It was annoying.

“James was looking for you,” she said with something of a yawn, giving Derek a nod of deference.

“Eggs?” he asked uncomfortably. He wasn’t really sure if he was meant to provide for them or not but he’d gone shopping just in case.

Mira smiled at him, so clearly it was at least acceptable that he’d offered.

When Stiles reemerged, it was with James’ palm settled in the curve between Stiles’s neck and shoulder, over his tattoo, somewhere between scent-marking and reassurance. Derek really didn’t like that and had to turn away before someone saw his eyes flash red.

James took Mira and Deb out to search the Preserve and the bordering town that night. Derek offered to help but Deb was the one who’d gotten a whiff of the thing apparently. Stiles was stretched out on Derek’s couch with his laptop and a bag full of books. Cora took the spot next to him instantly, picking up one of them off the table and burying herself in it.

Derek sat down in the armchair next to him, clasped his hands together. “I have a few sources of my own if you want them.”

Stiles glanced over at him, frozen in biting into the skin of an apple.

Maybe Derek had gotten those just for him. Maybe it was one of the few things he knew Stiles liked to eat. And maybe he only had those sources to offer after Stiles had mocked him for not having anything beyond the Argent’s bestiary.

Stiles snorted, shook his head, moved the apple down from his mouth. “Look at you, becoming a real boy with your own compendiums.” His eyes narrowed and Derek could tell he was actively trying not to be as mean as he wanted to be. “Thanks for the offer but I’m sure I can make do without.”

Derek watched him carefully. Stiles looked jittery, uncomfortable, and his scent was richer, more intense, crackling. Derek couldn’t push right now, not while Stiles smelled like he might explode if he did. He wasn’t going to explain about Jennifer when they were anything but alone anyway so the best thing to do here would either be to leave or get Stiles focused on something neutral.

Derek couldn’t leave, not when Stiles was back, so, the other thing. “Did I hear right that Deb has this thing’s scent?”

Stiles relaxed marginally, his scent becoming less… compressed. He nodded. “Deb and the guy who was killed, Rainn, they were kind of like I gather Scott and Allison are. Mercurial but, ultimately, even when they’re apart they’re kind of together?” Stiles leaned forward, tapping a pen against his knee. “Deb saw him with some woman a few times. Pretty, almost ethereally so, and with the strange scent of water and venom clinging to her. Deb tried to warn him, she assumed she was jealous and—boom, dead less than 24 hours later. Jordana, the Hasani emissary, said she could feel that it was drawn here, probably because it felt the pull of the Nemeton months ago and has been slowly making its way here not realizing it’s already drained.”

Derek perked a brow at him. “Are we sure it’s not a dragon?”

Stiles’ lips twitched before he schooled them back down. “No,” he said bluntly. “It could be anything and the only hints we have are: shapeshifting, water and venom. It does sound really
familiar. Only our dragon didn’t suck out people’s insides.”

Derek’s heartbeat tripped embarrassingly over the word ‘our.’

Cora’s head shot up and her eyes narrowed at him.

Derek pretended not to see it. Looked up just in time to see Scott wander in. His face broke out in a huge grin when he saw who was on Derek’s couch. “Stiles, the rumors were true!”

Stiles grinned back, popped up and pulled Scott into an embrace, clapping him on the back. “How goes it, my man? Still stressing over the special agent situation?”

Derek had no idea what they were talking about, and obviously it had been designed by Scott that way. No question of whether or not he was still pissed at Derek then.

He left them to it, skin feeling tight that not only was Stiles this close at hand and still completely unreachable, but there were other wolves – another Alpha – in his territory, in his home.

And the wolf in him did not like to share.

Stiles was already awake, tongue pushing on the pen in his mouth as he typed something into his laptop, when Derek came downstairs the next morning. Cora was asleep, head on her book, on the other end. Stiles’ eyes flashed up to him, lighter than Derek remembered, lips stretched around the pen. He seemed to listen for a half second then decide, “I think I might know what this is and I’ve been really adamant about not going after this thing alone so – safety buddy?”

Derek felt like he might break his neck with how adamantly he nodded. He got dressed quickly, met Stiles by the door and fitted his palm over the back of his neck, the warm skin, the warmer dark ink and squeezed to announce his presence.

Stiles shouldered him off. “We are so not doing that.” He turned around, eyes flashing a dark green. “I’m neither pack’s property so this scent-marking thing? This is me officially putting my foot down.”

Derek shrugged his shoulders, feeling chastised but not deterred. “It’s instinct. You smell like another Alpha and—”

“And I can.” Stiles stepped closer, eyes narrowing and lowering his voice to a hiss. “I don’t belong to you, Derek. You are not my Alpha, you are not my anything, understand?” He whirled around and slammed out the door before Derek could respond, which was for the best as Derek’s first and only response was to prove how much Stiles did belong to him.

He followed him out when he felt he had control of himself, caught up to Stiles easily. “Don’t let James rub all over you either and I’ll be fine,” Derek snarled at him, voice gravelly.

Stiles ignored him all the way out to the Preserve and Derek let him until they were drawing in on the Nemeton.

“I wasn’t sleeping with Jennifer.”

Stiles froze.

“I mean, I was, but only once since I even met you and that—It had more to do with you than with her. I wasn’t cheating on her with you, I was—when you kissed me, when I tried to kiss you, there
wasn’t—she wasn’t in the picture. At all. I don’t feel anything for her.”

Stiles turned back to look at him slowly, eyes hooded, dark. “I don’t know why you think I’d give a fuck.” His voice wasn’t like anything Derek had ever heard from him, it was deeper, gruffer, twisted somehow. “You don’t owe me an explanation. You don’t owe me anything because we are nothing to each other.”

Derek narrowed his eyes, nostrils flaring. “You looked like you cared when Scott mentioned her.” Maybe that was a low blow, Derek didn’t care.

Stiles’ eyes narrowed right back. “Well, wasn’t your awareness convenient?” he said with a scoff.

Derek grabbed his arm before he could twist away from him. “Erica said you ran yourself ragged trying to get it out of me.” He wasn’t sure what he was trying to prove, trying to get Stiles to own up to. Maybe he just wanted him to say he cared about Derek, verbal proof that he hadn’t ruined everything between them.

“I don’t like to lose,” he spat. He ripped his forearm out of Derek’s grip and stalked off towards the Nemeton.

Derek clenched his jaw. “What are you going to do?”

Stiles ignored him, already leaning over it, holding his hand out over the rings. “Not exactly as dead as you promised,” he said with a raised brow, still strung tight from their conversation.

Derek shrugged. “The emissaries said there would always be something left of it, not enough to draw anything in though.”

Stiles planted his foot on one of the raised roots, pushed off and got up on the face of it.

“What are you doing?” Derek squawked.

“I’m going to ask it,” he said as though it was obvious. “It knows what’s in its territory.” He sat down cross-legged in the center while Derek watched him uneasily.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

Stiles closed his eyes, held his arms out in front of him, fingers together and thumbs out as he rested one hand on top of the other and held them parallel to the Nemeton’s face. “Not even a little bit,” he said without opening his eyes and then he went silent, still, his heartbeat calming to something that didn’t sound like a constant battering ram in Derek’s head. There wasn’t so much as a gust of wind as Stiles sat there, the look on his face intensely focused.

Derek took the opportunity to stare at him, to count his moles, to obsess over the wetness on his lower lip. He was also trying not to remember that the last time Stiles had done something like this he’d ended up blind.

Stiles’ tattoo started to glow faintly purple and then—the rings of the Nemeton were reflecting back the same color, engulfing him. The color converged in on itself, swirling together, forming a solid picture. Stiles’ eyes opened slowly, dark purple glittering in his irises. He blinked at the image the Nemeton was drawing together.

It was a woman made of light, hair long, eyes slitted. She flickered, image blurring, like she was a 3D picture and Derek didn’t have the glasses for it.
Stiles let out a blank, “huh,” and just like that the image collapsed. He kind of… giggled, looked up at Derek with a goofy smile. “Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You’re my only hope.”

Derek rolled his eyes.

Stiles breathed deeply for a moment before unfolding his legs, eyes shorting back into honey-colored. “It’s not a Shen, doesn’t create mirages. It is one.” He shook his head as though he was trying to clear it. “Back to the drawing board, I guess.” He scooted to the edge of the Nemeton only to stumble as soon as he got to his feet.

Derek steadied him instantly. “What did that do to you?” he demanded.

Stiles clenched his eyes shut tight before opening them again. “Connected me to her,” he said hoarsely. “I do not want to grab a drink in a bar with that chick.”

“You… could feel her?”

Stiles nodded. “Yep, and she is not human. Her thoughts were… I couldn’t really make sense of them. Whatever she is, she doesn’t think like we do, isn’t rational, doesn’t have a grasp on language that well. She’s animal, and not a nice one. All kinds of vindictive pleasure in that not-lady.”

Derek let Stiles lean on him for another few seconds. “Think you can walk?”

Stiles took a measured step away from him and Derek forcefully stopped himself from reaching out for him. “Did I mention that was not a Shen? Because that was so not a Shen. The Shen is all, ‘I’m a clam-monster, I don’t know any better, I didn’t mean to eat people’s insides, I’m a shellfish and social situations confuse and frustrate me.’ That chick was not like that. That chick was like, ‘I don’t even need language to get across evil.’ And she did not. She was all over that.”

Derek broke out into a wide smile. Stiles hadn’t spoken to him like that, like himself, in so long now. Where every word wasn’t careful, cold, disconnected. “Do you have any other ideas?”

Stiles shook his head. “Not yet.” His mouth pulled to the side, considering. “Cora might by now though.”

Derek heard the unspoken direction to head back to the loft. Stiles walked at his side rather than just ahead of him. It was nice.

“He’s talking to you again,” Erica noted, watching Stiles and Cora as they passed information back and forth. James was sitting at Stiles’ side, not contributing but clearly listening.

Derek didn’t like it. He nodded to Erica. “He is,” he agreed. He had no idea why, nor did he really care. All that mattered was that Stiles didn’t look at him like he was furious or disgusted with him anymore.

“So you explained, about Jennifer?”

Derek nodded carefully. Stiles hadn’t seemed to care about that though. Either hadn’t believed him or it simply hadn’t fixed anything. Derek wasn’t sure what had encouraged the change in him, but somehow he didn’t think that was it. If it was, then there was a serious lag in Stiles’ processing capabilities – which Derek didn’t believe. “He knows,” he said anyway.

James leaned in over Stiles’ shoulder and a low growl started to rumble in his chest.
Erica punched him in the breastplate, hard. She drew him back further into the kitchen until the three of them were hidden from view. “You need to cut it the fuck out.” Her eyes flashed gold. It hadn’t seemed purposeful.

“He—”

Erica snarled and her teeth were going sharp. “The way you explained this to me, we need them to like us. You getting all propriety over a guy you’ve got no right to be proprietary over? Not going to help us get there.”

Derek’s eyes flashed red and he ground out, “He’s been scent-marking him.”

Erica’s gaze was cold. “So let him.”

Derek’s nails lengthened into claws and he left a scratch mark on the counter when he pulled them away. “I can’t. It’s instinct to try to—”

Erica crossed her arms under her breasts, lips pouting in thought. “Explain it to Stiles then, and then give him something of yours to wear, something that not only has your scent but carries it.”

It wasn’t a bad plan. Of course, it was all dependent on Stiles willingly doing him a favor.

“A rope bracelet?”

Derek shrugged, feeling his neck go hot. “I wore it a lot when I was a teenager.” Stiles’ brow raised further. “My sister Laura got it for me, I think as a joke now to make me look like a douche, but back then I thought it was cool.” He shrugged again, rather helplessly.

Stiles tried to tamp down on a smile, couldn’t. “That is, like, you all over.” Stiles was full on grinning as he looked back up at Derek. “Trying to do something awesome and just managing to look like a douche. You have perfected that, Sourwolf.”

Stiles was still grinning and there was a soft fondness in his gaze. He licked his lower lip almost nervously and Derek zeroed in on his mouth, taking an automatic step closer. They were in Derek’s bedroom, where Derek kept the bracelet in his bedside drawer, but the door was still wide open. Anyone could see them, hear them. “Stiles,” he said breathlessly, palming his hip.

Stiles’ eyes went wide, skittish, and he tried to take a step back but ran into the edge of Derek’s nightstand. “Derek—”

But Derek wasn’t going to be talked out of this, not this time, and he wasn’t going to let Stiles tease him. Let him get close only to—he sealed their mouths together and Stiles groaned, opening to him instantly, back arching into Derek’s front. He didn’t wait for Derek’s tongue, instead pressed forward into Derek’s mouth with his own, nails scraping over Derek’s scalp as he dug into his hair. Derek’s hand shifted from Stiles’ hip, up the back of his shirt, flattening over the heat of his tattoo and Derek’s cock twitched in his jeans.

It was ridiculous how tangled up fire and arousal had gotten in his head. He wanted Stiles’s skin to get hot, for his tattoo to turn yellow, orange, red, for it to shiver on his skin like flames, for it to burn. Derek dropped his other hand from where it was pressed to the wall next to Stiles’ head down to his ass, lifted him up. Stiles’ legs came up around him easily because he wanted this. Derek could feel the hard, hot line of Stiles’ cock pressing into his stomach and, fuck, he had never needed anything the way he did Stiles. He shifted his hips, let their cocks slide together through their jeans and let his mouth fall to just under Stiles’ chin, sucking a mark into his skin.
Derek’s ribs felt tight, air knocked out of them and, when he opened his eyes, Stiles was standing over him from where he’d fallen to the ground, looking wild and shocked. His tattoo was red and glowing more brightly than Derek had ever seen it.

“That wasn’t supposed to—” he licked his lip, hardened his expression. “I’m not doing this with you.”

Derek grabbed his ankle before he could leave, scrambling upright. He stood between Stiles and the door. “I meant to do that slower,” Derek admitted.

Stiles crossed his arms over his chest. His eyes were less bright and the glow from his tattoo had nearly faded. “I meant to do that never.” He ran a hand over his buzzed hair, tattoo still looking warm to the touch. “I need you to keep your hands off me.”

Derek worked his jaw. “Fine.” And it wasn’t. It really fucking was not but Derek also knew there was very little keeping Stiles here and pushing the boundaries of that wasn’t a great plan.

When Erica came into his room the next day to find his phone, she said it smelled like wildfire and scorched wilderness. Derek resisted the urge to punch something. Barely.

He’d made the decision first. Told Stiles never to touch him again. Stiles was just honoring that. It didn’t make Derek any happier.

Stiles was still wearing the bracelet though. Derek couldn’t even pretend to know what that meant.

“What about a doppelgänger?” Derek asked, passing the book to Stiles. James was at his side again, sitting far too close for Derek’s comfort level. Erica was sitting by Derek’s shin and had already discreetly shoved a claw into his foot once when he’d tried to make his displeasure known.

Stiles pursed his lips, shook his head. “It would have to be doppel—er—gänging something not human and we’d still have to figure out what that was.”

Cora dropped a heavy book over the other in Stiles’ lap and he grunted. “Lamia,” she put up.

“Don’t those only eat children?” Stiles asked curiously, pulling the book around right side up.

James read over his shoulder, shaking his head. “That’s old myth. There’s a lot of misinformation, eye-stealing, serpent’s tail, unfaithful lovers.” He shifted closer. “But I think there’s also something about dining on people’s insides.” He paused, listened for a half second, as though ensuring Deb hadn’t heard him. Both he and Mira seemed to be walking on eggshells around her and Derek had to wonder why they’d brought her.

He blinked at Stiles. If something had happened to him though, Derek wasn’t sure how helpful he would be either, though he was certain he’d want to be involved. Need to be involved. So maybe he did understand it.

His eyes widened, heart hammering, as he realized what he’d just compared his relationship with Stiles to.

“You okay?” Erica asked softly.

“No,” Derek croaked back, not caring if everyone could hear them. He broke away from the rest
of the pack, ignoring Lydia’s contribution to the conversation in favor of getting some air. He made it all the way downstairs to the parking lot before running into Deb.

She was flicking ash off the end of her cigarette with a painted nail, leaning back against his building and staring up at the stars.

Derek watched her a long moment before finally saying diplomatically, “I didn’t get a chance to say that I was sorry for your loss.”

She stared at him with slitted eyes, short bob brushing her jaw. Her hair was the color of copper, her lips painted and smacking every time she spoke. “This mage, he’s good, isn’t he?”

Derek shrugged, standing up a little straighter. “He hasn’t failed us yet.”

She nodded, leaning back again and letting out a column of smoke. “I’m not sure I want him to be that good.”

“I don’t understand,” Derek said carefully. And he didn’t.

She shrugged, flicking her cigarette again even though it didn’t need it. Her lips twitched in a weak attempt at a smile but it died almost instantly. “What is there after I get this thing that killed Rainn? I’ve avenged him and so what? He’s still dead. He’s still dead and then I’ve exhausted my purpose so fucking fast and I’m supposed to, what? I don’t have a fucking plan and do you know why?” Her eyes were flashing furiously but she didn’t seem to be really asking for an answer. “Because that goddamn idiot was the plan. I warned him—I said—” She deflated nearly as fast as she’d riled herself, collapsing back against the wall. “And there’s no point in being angry with a dead man. You can’t get closure on that.”

Derek didn’t know what to say to that. To tell her to go home, not to find the monster responsible? He hated how well he understood her, how there was nothing left but to live after the vengeance was done and the whole point of the vengeance was to put that living bit off because you didn’t know how anymore. “It won’t get better,” Derek told her truthfully.

She looked back at him, eyes gauging. “Not if you don’t let it,” she agreed. Her mouth pulled to the side and she kicked off the wall, stepped closer to him. She lifted her head, like she was indicating the loft. “Kid was all tense on the ride over here. Either because he hates you or because he really doesn’t.” She raised her brows. “Hate isn’t the vibe I’m getting off either one of you.” She stubbed out her cigarette under her heel and walked back upstairs without looking back.

She was weirdly invasive and depressing and way too made-up and Derek liked her. He didn’t want to play some game with Stiles, didn’t want to pretend he didn’t feel exactly as intensely for him as he did. He wasn’t going to let Stiles get into a situation where a pretty girl could kill him, because Stiles was his, he was taken, and he could pretend like he didn’t want Derek but Derek had been there for that kiss.

For both of them.

He knew Stiles was lying just as badly as he was and he had every intention of proving it.

He didn’t even get to the bottom stair before he was knocked unconscious.

“You have monster magnetism, dude.”

Derek blinked his eyes open. His head was throbbing. “Stiles?” He was in a cave of some sort,
cavernous and expansive and he couldn’t move his legs. It smelled damp and Stiles smelled like lightning. Smelled good, really, really good. Derek leaned into him, trying to get his nose to Stiles’ neck.

Stiles’ smile was wide and relieved, even as he pressed Derek back so he was sitting up. “Hey, bud. We found out what it was.” He was sawing through something that looked like silk string wrapped around Derek’s legs.

Derek’s eyes blinked separately as he tried to bring everything into focus. “Oh yeah?” He sounded a bit punch drunk and he still felt woozy, stupid.

“Jorōgumo,” Stiles said with a grin full of gritted teeth as he fought with the covering on Derek’s legs, “which I prefer to translate as ‘whore-spider.’ Because, I mean, how do you pass that up?”

Derek snorted before his eyes widened. It was a web, he was wrapped up in a web. That was so not okay. He remembered the way the image the Nemeton and Stiles had projected had flickered, like it was 3D without the glasses and realized it wasn’t a glitch, wasn’t blurring it accidentally. it was trying to show them the multiple limbs. The eight legs. He shivered.

Fucking spiders.

“Nasty bitch, she is. And I normally do not use female-specific slurs but the bitch deserves the title, I swear.” Stiles finally broke through enough of it that Derek could kick his way out of the rest. He placed a hand on Derek’s shoulder to steady him. “You’d been envenomated by the time we found you so you’re going to be a little dizzy while your system works it through.” Stiles shook his head, clicking his tongue as he helped Derek get to his feet. “I didn’t even know there were waterfalls in Beacon Hills but once we figured what it was, we just had to find one and thankfully there only is the one.”

“Thanks for—I prefer my insides to remain on the inside,” Derek told him gamely.

Stiles grinned, letting Derek lean into him maybe more than Derek technically needed to. He patted Derek’s chest amially. “Yeah, you’re totally one of those anal guys. Everything in its place and a place for everything.”

Derek grinned back, stumbled some and Stiles held him more tightly around the waist. Derek liked the way his fingers dug in, the way his arm fitted over Stiles’ shoulders. “Is she dead?”

Stiles shook his head. “Jamie and his pack are dealing with her. I think they’re letting Deb—you know. The rest of your pack decided to stick around, at Erica’s insistence, in case they’re needed. Trying to cement the alliance, I think.” Stiles smiled over at him. “You’ve trained her up well.”

Derek felt his fangs drop at the nickname for Hasani and tried not to let on how much it gutted him. His scent was already all over Stiles and apparently that wasn’t enough for him. He focused on Erica instead, before he could fully wolf out. She was learning fast and Derek had to give her more credit than he had previously. She might actually have been the right choice for second, enough that he could stop lamenting the fact that Boyd was an enigma and Scott hated him.

“We think it was after Deb, trying to complete the set or something and you just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Yippee,” Derek deadpanned.

Stiles laughed and Derek felt lighter knowing he’d been responsible for it.
Stiles drove Derek’s Camaro back to the loft, ignoring Derek’s growling when he saw it there in the parking lot of Beacon Hills’ one nature trail. Stiles wasn’t even apologetic about stealing it to come rescue him and Derek reluctantly dropped the point. Even though he still stood by the statement that Stiles could have gotten his Jeep from the Sheriff’s instead.

He clunkily helped Derek inside, maybe purposefully running him into the railing on the stairs a few times, but the venom was wearing off and already Derek’s head felt less fuzzy so he could give as good as he got, ramming Stiles into the other side. He thought about asking how long he’d been out of commission but he was half-afraid to get the response of a month again.

Stiles’ phone vibrated in his pocket as soon as they were inside but Derek stopped him reaching for it, hooking a thumb through the rope bracelet that was still looped loosely around his wrist. Already their scents had mixed. Derek had worn it too long, too often, and it had meant too much for his own to fade from it and Stiles’ so instantly subsumed everything.

“You’re still wearing it,” Derek said blankly.

Stiles’ face darkened and he snapped, “It doesn’t mean—”

Derek slammed him into the back of the door and growled in his face, “Yes, it fucking does,” before shoving his tongue down Stiles’ throat. He wasn’t going to let Stiles lie to him, not when he was trying so hard to stop lying to himself.

Stiles ripped him back off by his hair, bit into Derek’s throat. “You are so fucking infuriating,” he snarled against his skin, mouth moving over his stubble.

Derek smirked at him, more confident than he actually felt. “You don’t hate me.”

Stiles grabbed at him, pushed him back hard enough that Derek fell to the ground but he hadn’t let go so he’d brought himself down too. He leaned in, straddling Derek’s lap, bared teeth in his face. “Wanna bet?”

He looked manic, mad, and Derek wanted him so fucking badly. He grabbed Stiles by the hips, slammed him down into the wood floor hard to get the upper hand. “Yeah, I do. I think you want to hate me,” he leaned in, flicked his tongue at the seam between Stiles’ lips and he gasped, spreading his legs automatically, and Derek grinned, “but you can’t.”

Stiles elbowed him off, hit him hard in the cheek and scrambled out from under him.

Derek half-expected he would leave but then he was scrabbling back atop Derek’s hips, hissing, “And you? Is that what it is for you?”

Derek shook his head, reached up to brush his thumb over Stiles’ mouth, but gently, not wanting to hurt. “I don’t hate you. I never hated you, never wanted to.”

Stiles closed his eyes and groaned, catching Derek’s thumb in his mouth and sucking the way Derek had done to him the last time they’d seen each other. His thighs were spread, knees planted
on either side of Derek’s hips and he finally shifted so that their cocks were brushing. Derek knew, could smell it on the air, that they’d both been hard from the second Derek had pressed him up against the door and only now was Stiles finally doing something about it.

Derek let out a deep sound and pressed up into him, wanting to get the upper hand but Stiles’ hands were planted too firmly on his chest. His mouth popped off Derek’s thumb and then he was getting up, moving his knees between Derek’s thighs, using his legs and his palms to spread Derek’s thighs wide, getting them to rest on top of his own as he pressed them together, pelvis to pelvis.

Fuck, it felt—Stiles was leaning over him, palms planted next to Derek’s shoulders now, their cocks brought together at a new angle, Stiles’ brushing more against Derek’s sac, his perineum, closer to fucking him than rubbing off on him and Derek couldn’t help his whimper when Stiles finally started to move against him.

Derek hadn’t done this since Kate, since the very inception of Kate when dry humping had been the be all end all but it had never felt like this. It had never made him this hot, never made his heart pound like this, and maybe it was just the way the position was teasing so close to, was promising—he spread his legs wider, wanting to give Stiles better access, shifting his hips up, trying to get him to brush his hole with his dick through his jeans as much as he was rubbing against Derek’s cock.

Stiles was already panting, circling and thrusting his hips and he shifted down onto his elbows, bracketed Derek’s neck with his forearm and twined the hand into his damp hair, dragging his head back, burying his nose in Derek’s neck and breathing there.

Derek wrapped his arms around him, rocked his hips more, puffed his breaths into Stiles’ hairline. His body felt like it was on fire and they both had far too many clothes on and Stiles’ dick kept hitting in all the right places, and Derek was leaking precome, and the lights were flickering and he said against Stiles’ temple, tasting sweat and want, “Fuck me.”

Stiles moaned, wrapped his arms under Derek’s thighs to pull his hips up further, to bend Derek in half and grind his dick into Derek’s ass and all it took was Stiles’ cock sliding up and down the crack of it once for Derek to come hard. So hard it left him breathless, straining for air and heart pounding so hard it hurt.

Stiles barely held on a minute after him and Derek could feel the second he came. His body exploded with heat, tattoo flashing colors too quickly to catch them, and suddenly there was something to hold onto. Derek’s hand had been holding him close, gripping the back of his neck, obliterating that rival Alpha’s scent, keeping him tight to Derek’s body but now—now Derek slid his fingers up into soft, long hair. He let Derek do it, dropped Derek’s legs and slid down on top of him, his mouth trailing the sweaty skin along the collar of Derek’s shirt.

Fuck, he was beautiful.

Stiles’ heartbeat was just as haywire, just as out of control and he didn’t move again until it’d settled to something closer to his regular hummingbird-quick rhythm.

He rolled off of Derek as soon as it did and Derek said blankly, feeling like all his brain-cells had stopped firing, “Your hair grew out.”

Stiles snorted, shrugged. “Strange shit happens when the mind-blowing sex occurs.” He ruffled up his hair, almost self-consciously. It was a good look for him, just as good as the buzzcut. Derek wondered if he’d keep it.
He leaned up on his elbow so he could look at Stiles properly. “Mind-blowing?” he said, grin unstoppable and pride making his chest swell.

Stiles shook his head, laughed. He patted Derek’s cheek. “Yes, you’re very good in bed.” He frowned. “Well, on floor. Hopefully that’s enough ego-stroking for one day but we can play, ‘Things People Can Tell Just by Looking at You’ some other time if you like.”

Derek couldn’t stop beaming at him, especially glad he hadn’t disappointed on that front now. He didn’t have much experience and he had zero experience with men and he wanted Stiles to fuck him. Still.

Stiles sat up, wiped at his sweaty brow with the hem of his t-shirt. His stomach was still heaving and he was so unfairly attractive. He rested his forearms on his drawn knees, letting his heartbeat come down even more and something… settled in him. He said quietly after a moment, “I’m not coming back here.”

Derek felt like he’d been punched hard enough to have the wind knocked out of him and he careened upright. “Stiles—”

Stiles turned back to look at him, eyes dark. “I like you, Derek.” No stutter in his heartbeat and Derek wasn’t sure what to make of that when Stiles was all but saying Derek would never see him again. Stiles’ shoulders were slumped, defeated. Surely this had to prove it was mutual though? He shrugged. “I definitely shouldn’t, but I do.”

“Stiles, I—”

He clenched his jaw, expression going hard. “I don’t like the way you look at me,” he said, eyes flashing. “The way you make me feel about myself. You look at me like you’re losing something, like you want me and you hate yourself for it.” Derek opened his mouth but he couldn’t argue it, not any of it. Stiles smirked coldly, like he knew it. But also like—like he’d wanted to be proved wrong. “So,” he said clearly. “I’m not coming back here.”

Derek didn’t stop him as he walked away. He had no idea how.

Chapter End Notes

Next week: Cherufe (go ahead and spoil yourselves a bit *winks*) and feelings. More than halfway - we are closing in on the end here, guys!

As always, in this life and the next: tumblr.
Derek wrinkled his nose, fighting the urge to flinch away from the smoke billowing towards him. The Sheriff rubbed his forehead, sighed. “Three bodies so far,” he said heavily, turning back to look at where the fire department was still battling the blaze. His uniform was rumpled, his radio giving off a thin screech of static that likely couldn’t be heard by human ears and the scent of death was strong on the air.

Sharp nails dug into Derek’s shoulder and his muscles contracted before relaxing under the pressure.

He knew it was Erica without having to turn. She was the only one who would have dared. He couldn’t feel their bond half as well as she seemed to be able to but there was a bare connection there, one that he didn’t have to claw for either.

It worked, rooting him in the present rather than allowing him to wallow in memory. She carefully pried her hand away after he’d settled, indents in the leather of his jacket but no blood. He thought about doing the same for Cora but she rarely accepted his touch and now – with her so tightly strung – he knew he’d likely succeed in doing nothing but making her lose grip on her wolf. He offered her a cautious, distant glance and tried gruffly, “Cora?”

“Fine.” She practically ground the word into ash before she got it out but Derek obeyed the unspoken direction to leave her to cycle through this alone. They weren’t quite family enough to handle this together but enough of one that Derek didn’t think his presence was making it worse.

“Six. At least six.”
Derek’s gaze snapped over to Scott. He was panting and there was ash residue on his face, expression bleak. There had been children in that house. It was too familiar, too much like standing in a suspended scene from his own history.

The Sheriff grunted, the noise sounding punched out of him and Derek was glad for the excuse to focus on him instead of Scott’s new figure. “The department’s talking about handing it over to the FBI—” Scott went rigid and Derek twitched towards him curiously, “—can’t figure out how all these fires are being set with no evidence of arson or natural cause. The two counties to the north of us are still dealing with the wildfire and now this.” The Sheriff rubbed a hand over his lower lip, stretching it as he tried to chase away his exhaustion. It was a gesture Derek had seen before and he closed his eyes briefly, pained, ignoring the way Erica’s gaze grew keener in his periphery.

She knew, had felt his heartbeat during and after the last time he had seen Stiles. He hadn’t had to say a word. Derek had stared at his clasped hands, hanging between his knees, and Erica had sat across from him and not asked.

“You’ve no leads?” the Sheriff asked, voice rough.

Derek hunched his shoulders, all but cowering under the accusation behind the words. “Deaton thought it was a Kapre, the way it seemed to be sticking to wooded areas but now.” He shrugged, looking up at the still-burning house and feeling a shiver snake up his spine.

A hand clapped down on his shoulder and this time it wasn’t Erica’s. Peter squeezed too tightly at the juncture where Derek’s neck met his shoulder, shifting around and grabbing at his scruff. Derek cringed. Peter was uncomfortably involved in this rather than lurking in the shadows as he usually did.

Fire wasn’t exactly something any of them could ignore though.

The Sheriff eyed Peter warily and Derek had to wonder what Stiles had told him about his uncle. He jerked away from the thought and the Sheriff turned the speculative gaze on him, obviously having noticed the twinge. Derek ignored him. “Glad you’re keeping up with Deaton on this,” he said, seemingly for something to say so the awkwardness of the earlier moment didn’t have time to land.

Derek grunted.

The Sheriff didn’t mention Stiles, which most likely meant that he was wrapped up in something else, somewhere else. Either that or he’d told his father he wasn’t coming back to Beacon Hills. And somehow Derek doubted that. His nose wrinkled and he clapped Scott on the shoulder. He’d leave it to he and Isaac to find out what the fire department’s official report was; he couldn’t stand there smelling burned flesh even a moment longer.

He left Cora to the rage and despair simmering through her and let Peter follow him back to his loft without snapping at him.

Boyd and Lydia looked up as soon as he walked through the door, Peter still right behind him. Boyd gave him a quick, disapproving once over – expression souring at Derek’s scent – before saying, “There’s a good chance it’s an Ifrit.”

Derek took the book Boyd was holding up out of his hands. A creature of fire. It certainly seemed plausible.

“If it were an Ifrit though, you would expect a bit more cunning out of them,” Lydia tacked on,
slightly condescending, as though Boyd had given a good effort and nothing more. “According to legend, they tend to trick travelers, leading them into traps, swamps, even changing shape to disorient soldiers during World War II. They’re tricksters and kind of indiscriminately sinister, but they don’t strike without a design to it.”

“Evil after my own heart,” Peter said, tossing a smug look Derek’s way as he plopped down next to Lydia on the couch. She wrinkled her nose but didn’t abandon her seat.

Derek ignored him, skimming quickly down the open pages, saying more to himself, “Maybe we can’t see the design yet?”

Lydia popped the cap on her pen, snapping it back down after a few seconds. “No, if it were there, I would see it,” she said simply, offering a peppy little shrug of her shoulder. “This is purposeless destruction.”

Boyd didn’t even bother to look at her as he pointed out, “She’s yet to come up with a better option.”

Derek tapped the open page of the book. “So we go with this for now,” he agreed with a careful nod. There didn’t seem to be anything about how to kill it. He looked up at Boyd, forcibly stopping himself from looking around for someone else—someone else. “How do we stop an Ifrit?”

“I called Deaton to ask,” Boyd told him easily, clearly having expected that to be Derek’s next question. “He said he’d be here in twenty. That was fifteen minutes ago.”

Derek’s wards were lowered in another three. He stood only to stumble back down.

Stiles scratched at his chin, slight stubble bothering him like he hadn’t gotten a chance to shave that day. His scent was overpowering, crackling, strong, intense. Derek blinked at him. His hand reached up, smoothed back over buzzed hair and somehow the cropped cut felt like Derek had been stabbed in the gut. “Just as minimalist and indicatively homicidal as I remember it.” Stiles drew in a deep inhale before his eyes flashed over to the couch and he grinned. “Lydia, light of my life, it’s been ages.”

Lydia smirked back at him but Peter rose at her side before she could speak. “I see you got my message,” he said lightheartedly but his expression gave away his seriousness, brow perked.

Stiles nodded, eyes still dancing with mirth. “Yep. Surprised this is what you cashed your favor in for but, hey, no judgment over here.” He held his hands out at his sides, mouth curved in an easy smile. He looked perfectly at ease but Derek couldn’t see how that could possibly be the reality.

“Well worth it,” Peter said with a sharp grin.

“You owe him a favor?” Derek blurted out in shock.

To his surprise, Stiles’ expression didn’t dim in the slightest when his gaze cut over to Derek. He looked... totally okay with seeing him again. There was no evidence that there was any history between them in his face, let alone an unpleasant one. “Nope, owed,” he said happily, emphasizing the past tense. His smile soured slightly before he picked it back up again. “Clearing my debts all over the place.”

“We think it’s an Ifrit,” Peter told him, jumping right to it.

“Boyd thinks it’s an Ifrit,” Lydia clarified, dismissive.
Stiles smirked at her. “You don’t agree?” he asked, clearly already suspecting the answer.

“Ifrits are said to be almost Machiavellian in nature,” she explained carefully, fiddling with the pen between her fingers. “There’s an… art to the chaos they cause. This is just setting fires and not caring if or how long they burn.”

Stiles hummed and leaned over the back of Derek’s chair. Derek could feel the warmth of him, the press of his collarbone into his back as he read over Derek’s shoulder. Stiles reached out a hand, trailing it down the page and Derek only remembered to breathe once he’d removed it again. He knew those hands, knew how it felt to have Stiles’ fingers digging into his chest, running up the insides of his thighs, parting his legs. “The problem with legends is that they change,” he said slowly, breath ruffling the top of Derek’s hair. “Bestiaries are like a historical game of telephone and there’s no way to know what’s accurate and what’s utter fantasy.”

Stiles came around and plopped into the space next to Derek on the loveseat without the slightest hint of hesitation while Derek tried not to look directly at him. Since he apparently didn’t do it right, didn’t look at him like he was worth something. And Derek didn’t want to look at him the way Stiles thought he did. Boyd obligingly passed Derek’s laptop over to him and Stiles reached across Derek to get it. He was back to the long sleeves again, to hiding the power he had, to pretending to be meek.

Derek watched him from his periphery as he navigated to his own online bestiary – the one the pack all still had access to. Derek had it bookmarked, Stiles blinking a little in surprise when it filled in the address for him. He shook it off quickly, chewing on his thumbnail as he scrolled down the screen, eyes flashing back and forth. He let out a triumphant breath. “This mentions the form of a bird made of fire as a footnote. The main entry has them being born of the blood of victims of unnatural or violent deaths and implies they can shapeshift into any animal form.” He clicked his tongue, reiterating, “You can’t fully trust any source.”

Lydia tutted, zipping through a notebook full of cramped, pink writing, looking truly offended that Stiles hadn’t gone in assuming she’d done the due diligence. “It has at least four different, independent sources verifying both fire and duplicity.”

Stiles held out his hand for her notes, eyes still on the screen, which she passed over without argument. Derek watched him flip through it in a haze, still not quite believing that Stiles was there and acting as though they hadn’t nearly fucked five feet from where they were sitting. As though he hadn’t sworn that he would never be that close again. “That does make the case more compelling,” Stiles agreed reluctantly. “Still, for now we should—”

“Sorry I’m late,” Deaton interrupted, strolling in without knocking. He didn’t even double take at seeing Stiles sitting there and it was really obnoxious how omnipotent the man behaved.

Stiles grinned and shot up. Derek’s side suddenly felt cold even though Stiles hadn’t been sitting close enough to touch him. “Special K, it’s about time you started helping out.”

“Stiles,” Deaton said warmly as they shook hands, “this is a pleasant surprise.”

Stiles shrugged. “Peter cashed in his favor to drag me out of B-town.”

“Oh,” was the only contribution Deaton had to give to that. He raised an eyebrow, looking behind Stiles to Boyd. “According to Boyd here, we’re looking at an Ifrit?”

“It’s possible,” Stiles conceded, not sounding as firm in it as he had before looking through Lydia’s notes. “And I’m hoping you’ve come up with some way of testing that?”
“I did only get the call minutes ago,” Deaton said, a bit of rebuke in the words.

Stiles clicked his tongue. “Slacker,” he said with a wink. His gaze wandered between Derek and Peter, again without any sort of emotion attached to it. “You have the location of the last fire?”

Peter answered before Derek could so much as open his mouth. He wasn’t sure he would have tried anyway. “I’ll take you.” Stiles obligingly followed Peter out while Derek tried not to feel blindsided. Stiles had sworn he was never coming back but apparently Peter had the power to change that. The conversation washed over him and, though Deaton asked him direct questions, Derek couldn’t concentrate long enough to answer.

Stiles had been in his loft, had broken in with just as much confidence and disregard as he had the very first time Derek met him. And Derek finally put his finger on what had left him so unsettled. Stiles had treated him exactly as he had the day they met, as though there was nothing between them, and that did not sit well with Derek at all.

Stiles didn’t come back with Peter. Derek got halfway to the Sheriff’s before realizing there was no way Stiles would go home. He didn’t just want to avoid Derek, he wanted to get rid of the entire impetus to ever see him again. He redirected easily.

Stiles was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the Nemeton and it looked less dead than ever. Derek could feel it thrumming, the ground pulsing beneath his feet, and sparks of white light were pouring out of the rings of the tree stump and playing across the tips of Stiles’ fingers, suspended in a glittering line between the two surfaces as he held his hand out over the open face.

“What does it feel like?” Derek couldn’t help but ask, a bit blinded by the unnaturalness and wonder of it.

Stiles looked up at him, not seeming surprised to find him there in the least. He rubbed his fingertips together carefully, as though trying to find a way to explain. “Like an answer, to a question you’ve been asking for years. There’s this sensation like you’ve been pushing hard and this is the fulfillment of all that effort. It’s… release.” His mouth twisted down into a frown and he let out a fraught laugh. He looked smaller somehow, not the guy you’d call in to drag a demon out of an Alpha werewolf at the very least. “I have no idea how you knew I was here,” he said calmly. “There’s nothing that says you should know me this well.”

Of course Derek knew him, Stiles had gotten under his skin in a way no one else ever had, Derek had made it his mission to know him. And all because he’d gotten completely tangled up in him without even realizing he was at risk for it. Stiles was like a challenge perfectly curtailed to him, one Derek was completely unable to ignore or resist.

The magic around Stiles collapsed and he rubbed at his forehead with long fingers, snorting. He shook his head, eyelids fluttering, and stared straight into Derek’s face. “I’m sorry about—I’m not giving you custody of an entire fucking town.”

Derek blinked at him. “I didn’t ask you to,” he snarled, immediately defensive. If Stiles was somehow implying that he had told him to leave or even wanted—

Stiles rolled his eyes. “I’m not saying you did, Grumpy Gills. You just—You’re a complete and total asshole, you know,” he decided, “and I got caught up in that and trying to out-asshole you and I ended up sounding like I was stuck in some harlequin romance playing the melodramatic idiot. I’m not giving you Beacon Hills and I’m not letting you dictate any of my future actions.”

“Awesome,” Stiles said, exaggerating the word. “We’re in agreement then. We have zero affect on each other.”

“Besides you managing to be the biggest pain in my ass, yeah, we’re in agreement,” Derek said with a sharp grin, feeling riled and furious and… anticipatory.

“Oh yeah, because I regularly ruin your day,” he said sarcastically. He unfurled himself, getting up in Derek’s face. “You’re the douchebag with issues the size of Canada who treats me like a fucking yo-yo. You’ve given me fucking whiplash, dude. Sometimes you want me, sometimes you want to kill yourself over wanting me and sometimes you look at me like you can’t stand me. Make up your goddamn mind.”

“And you’re so much better,” Derek snarled back at him, “you shove your tongue down my throat but I try to do the same and suddenly it’s not good enough for you.”

“Because you were doing it as some last hurrah before you died, you prick,” Stiles retorted, eyes bugging and lips thinning. “Not only had you already decided that I was going to fail but you were using me as a bit of pleasure before the lights went out,” he ground out, flailing his arms slightly, “and maybe I decided I wanted more than a fuck and run.” His eyes widened, like he hadn’t meant to say that last bit out loud.

Derek deflated too and shook his head. “I’m not built for that,” he said, swallowing hard. He stared into Stiles’ eyes as they tracked his face. “I can’t give you what you want.” It killed him to know that it wasn’t that they didn’t want each other, to have finally gotten confirmation that Stiles was as far in this as he was, only to find out that Stiles was farther. And Derek didn’t have that in him anymore. He wanted to fuck Stiles, but he didn’t want to be with him.

Stiles let out a heavy breath, took a step back. “I know,” he said, shoulders slumping. “I got that. I know.” He bit into his lower lip and even though Derek knew now that they were on different sides of the same issue, it didn’t stop him wanting to fit his hands over Stiles’ biceps and drag him into the heat of his body, into the press of his mouth, to feel Stiles come alive under him. “It wasn’t fair of me to punish you when everything about you screamed that you couldn’t give me what I was after.” Stiles waved a hand over him and offered a cringing sort of grin. “I’m trying to reset, find our defaults, you know?”

“You want to forget everything that happened?” Derek said carefully, not quite believing that he was understanding him correctly.

Stiles shrugged. “Unless you’ve got a better suggestion?”

Derek didn’t. It didn’t stop him feeling like he’d been gutted though.

“Scott caught an off scent on the far side of the Preserve.”

Stiles glanced up as Derek walked in, setting his laptop down next to Derek’s on the coffee table. He cracked his neck and stood.

Derek narrowed his eyes at him. “I was talking to Peter.”

Stiles shrugged. “No reason I can’t tag along, right?”

“Right,” Derek ground out, clenching his fingers into fists. Except there was a reason. Just
because Stiles wanted a relationship and Derek didn’t, it didn’t mean that had stopped Derek wanting him, and now it was like he was wearing a sign on his forehead that read quite clearly ‘off limits.’

And Derek’s dick was illiterate apparently.

Stiles stuck closer to Peter than Derek, which was annoying. His scent was alarmingly present, overpowering Derek’s ability to find the one Scott had caught wind of. Also annoying. He was also still close enough that Derek could feel the heat of him, which made it all too easy to imagine the warmth of his skin. Massively annoying. “Would you go be anywhere else?” Derek snapped at him.

Peter raised an eyebrow, looking gleeful. “Trouble in paradise?”

Stiles rounded on him, gave him a feigned sweet smile. “You’re shitty enough morally that I don’t think anyone would stop me if I tried to kill you. Let’s not test it, shall we?” Stiles didn’t even wait for an answer before he was splitting off away from them.

It didn’t help Derek relax even slightly. Now he was envisioning all the ways Stiles could get eviscerated or burned alive by this thing. The faster he found the scent, the faster Derek could get away from Stiles. Both mentally and physically.

“You seem awfully tense,” Peter noted, rather joyously. “Not exactly smart for the Alpha of a masterfully disjointed pack to be this agitated.”

Derek resisted the urge to disembowel him. Barely. Grudgingly, he could admit that ‘tense’ didn’t even come close. He wanted to fuck Stiles, or for Stiles to fuck him – he wasn’t picky – and now that he had finally come to terms with that – and knew that Stiles wanted it too – he couldn’t have it.

Erica was probably cursing him and his unresolved sexual tension on the other side of the tree line.

Derek wasn’t shitty enough to pretend he could be what Stiles wanted though, even if Stiles would have no way of knowing for sure it was a lie. Which sounded a lot like Derek was trying to talk himself into it. He shook his head to clear it, which was when he was rammed into from the side.

He went with the momentum, rolling onto all fours and roaring… into the face of another wolf, this one with blue eyes. It was packless and half-mad and weak from it. The pack came sprinting at his howl and the omega managed to lead them on a bit of a chase, had them doubling back on themselves more than once, and got a good swipe in at Isaac before Cora put it down.

The slice in Isaac’s abdomen was thin but deep. It would’ve healed on its own, albeit a lot less swiftly, but Stiles took it upon himself to prop Isaac back up against a tree, pressing a palm low on his abdomen. Isaac drew in a sharp breath, staring up at the branches and standing on shaky legs. Stiles squeezed his shoulder reassuringly in one hand and pushed with the other, as though shoving his insides back where they belonged while the tattoo bracketing his middle finger and covering the back of his hand ran a serene blue.

Isaac gasped, doubling over as the skin knitted itself back together over the cut.

Erica volunteered to get him home and Derek let them go, the rest of the pack following. Peter had disappeared at the first hint of a threat, which left only Derek and Stiles standing in the clearing alone. Stiles frowned off into the woods, more thoughtful than unhappy.

“What?” Derek demanded, not entirely sure he wanted to know what Stiles was thinking.
Stiles rubbed the back of his neck, wincing like he was trying to think of the best way to phrase it. "Your pack kinda..." he twirled his hand, seemed to realize a metaphor wasn’t going to do it and said bluntly, "sucks."

Derek growled at him, eyes flashing red.

"I mean," he rushed in quickly. Though not to make it better, "you’ve all kind of always sucked but it’s been, like, a year since I first met you? That’s more than enough time to get your shit together. Do you even train with them?" Stiles looked almost secondhand embarrassed for him and Derek could feel the back of his neck getting hot. "You just almost got owned by an omega. A really, really, super lame omega. I mean, that was painful to watch. Genuinely painful."

"I train them," Derek bit out, angrily crossing his arms over his chest. Or he had at least, before Jackson came into the picture and Scott started orbiting and Derek realized they were never going to listen to him anyway.

"Hah, lie!" Stiles said triumphantly, pointing at Derek’s chest. "I don’t even need werewolf-y lie detector powers to see what a pile of bullshit that is. You are a damn, dirty prevaricator."

Derek snapped his jaws at Stiles’ finger until he yanked it back, scandalized. "I did train them."

Stiles seemed to consider that. "How?" he asked eventually, apparently deciding to believe that Derek had—in fact—at one point—trained them.

Derek shrugged. "I had them attack me so I could critique it."

"You didn’t have them go after each other?" Derek’s mouth tightened and Stiles’ face fell, almost disbeliefing. "Instead you had them try to take down a guy who had an unfair power advantage—oh, and who they’re also instinctually predisposed to protect, all that after being given zero training? I have no idea how you didn’t come up with the A-Team out of that," Stiles said, blinking wide eyes at him. "It’s perfect."

Derek glowered at him. "I hate you."

Stiles grinned, correcting smugly, "You want to bang me." He shrugged, seeming to think about it, and Derek was amazed at how easily the words had popped out of his mouth. "Alan’s still trying to come up with a way to test if this is an Ifrit, the Nemeton has fuck all to say on the subject, and our best lead turned out to be a wimpy omega that nearly wiped out your most baby-faced pack member. I could help you train them, make them suck less," he offered.

Derek eyed him for a moment, deciding, "I’m not letting them tear apart my loft."

Stiles smirked and said cockily, "Done."

"This, my dear sucktastic betas, is a cage match. You don’t leave the ring until one of you can’t leave the ring, got it?"

Derek rolled his eyes. It was a warehouse in downtown Beacon Hills, the pageantry Stiles was giving it made it sound like the freaking Colosseum.

Stiles perched himself on top of a wooden crate, his father leaning up against one side of it as he apparently had nothing better to do with his Saturday afternoon and this counted as a bonding session.
Stiles snapped his fingers and the sound of a loud gong clanged in the air before Erica and Jackson threw themselves at each other. He leaned down from his seat, close enough that Derek could feel his breath on his cheek, and asked over the sound of snarling, “You need a scorecard or something?”

Derek ignored him. He was meant to be looking for their weaknesses and he figured he was supposed to come up with a better answer than: *everything.*

The Sheriff left around five, having oohed and ahhed and cringed and hissed and put all his money on Boyd only to see him outdone by Scott. Stiles took that opportunity to start separating them and had them fight golems that he made out of broken bits of wood and concrete rather than their packmates.

He finally stopped them roughly three hours later, clapping his hands together greedily. The whole of Derek’s pack was panting and bloody and they hadn’t come off well in the least. Derek included as he’d been thrown in towards the end. “All right, I think that’s enough data to extrapolate,” Stiles said with a smirk. He turned to Derek. “I’m assuming you saw everything I did?” he asked, brow perked.

Derek refrained from scratching at the healing scrape on his back. He raised both brows in response. “Only one way to find out.” Stiles stopped in front of Boyd, looked to Derek beseechingly. “He hesitates,” Derek said gruffly.

Stiles nodded, saying to Boyd, “There’s a lack of confidence behind every one of your attacks, which gives opponents like Erica and Cora an easy advantage. It’s why you did so poorly against them.” Stiles placed a hand on Boyd’s shoulder. “You have to learn to lean on your power just as you have to learn to lean on your pack.” He shifted closer, as through sharing a secret in a room full of werewolves. “Hopefully Derek’ll give you a reason to do both, eh?”

Boyd snorted. Derek scoffed. Stiles paused in front of Cora next, waited.

“Indiscriminate ferocity,” Derek grunted out while Cora scowled at him. Well. He wasn’t wrong. Stiles added, “You have a wildness to you but no finesse to temper it. It means you often swing wide, miss completely, and it lets people like Isaac get in good blows.”

Cora rolled her fingers in, claws poking out, but she seemed to accept Stiles’ assessment. And by association, Derek’s.

Erica was next.

Derek shrugged and Stiles huffed. “Of course you wouldn’t notice it, it’s so close to your own strategy.” Erica bared her teeth, half in pain and half to keep from dragging in heaving breaths that would effortlessly drown out what Stiles was saying. She was easily the most exhausted of all of them. “Your style is *violent* but there’s an advantage to being able to break away from your opponent. That you don’t take. You just keep *attacking* and you end up wearing yourself down as much as you do the person you’re sparring with. If they’re stronger than you or have greater stamina, you will die going the way you are.” It didn’t sound like a scare tactic and he didn’t play up the words. He stated it as simple fact.

Erica’s gaze was hooded and she didn’t react to the words in any way Derek could see. Or feel. Stiles stepped up to Isaac next and Derek said gruffly, “Too slow.”

“And I would add: too textbook,” Stiles put in. “Your opponent instantly knows what you’re going
to do next because it’s so easy to watch the attack form. Being technically proficient isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. You need to find a way to do it faster, make it yours, make it less predictable.”

Isaac nodded once, staring down at his shoes, taking criticism as poorly as he ever had. Jackson was after that and he didn’t meet anyone’s eye as Stiles stopped in front of him.

“Kanima,” was all Derek said and Stiles glared at him for the lack of delicacy. Derek just shrugged.

“Derek should be teaching you control exercises, though I’m not entirely sure he’s got it down himself.” Isaac and Cora snickered and Jackson smirked. It helped break the tension some. At Derek’s expense, of course. “In which case, Alan would be happy to help you. I’m sure you already know it, that there’s fear and reticence in every attack you make. I get you not wanting to dig too deeply because you’re afraid of pulling something up that you can’t push back down. Like I said, control exercises.”

Jackson sneered but Stiles didn’t seem to take it personally and he moved onto Scott without pausing.

Derek’s expression soured. “Too good to fight,” he mocked.

Stiles rolled his eyes. “Too good to kill, more like.” He gave Scott an apologetic grimace. “Even when it came to the golem, you wouldn’t land a killing blow.” Stiles searched Scott’s face and said grimly, “I know you want to be a normal teenager, Scotty, but that ship’s sailed and this is life and death. You’re going to have to accept that sooner or later.”

Scott pursed his lips as though he wanted to argue it but couldn’t find a way to. Stiles turned on his heel, looking almost gleeful as he rounded on Derek. “And you… are an idiot.” He poked Derek in the chest hard enough to make him grunt. “You fight like you don’t care if you come out the other side of it as long as you take the thing down with you.” Stiles batted his eyelashes. “Gets a guy all hot and bothered, I can tell you. Death wishes, they’re oh so charming.”

Derek bared his teeth but Stiles cut him off, saying out loud to the warehouse at large, “And the living dead guy didn’t fight, but that’s sort of his whole issue, isn’t it? That general air of avoidance is because you’re too weak to do anything other than out-think them and even that would get you too close to the action for comfort, am I right?”

Peter didn’t reappear but Derek would swear he heard him grumble.

Stiles seemed to have expected he wouldn’t get an answer and smiled around at all of them. “Welp, now you all know your biggest issues and training together as a pack,” his gaze cut sharply over to Derek, driving the point home, “could help with pretty much all of them.”

And Derek got what he was saying, that their real issue was that there was no trust between them. Not only didn’t they trust their pack to help, they didn’t trust them enough to believe they wouldn’t turn around and attack next.

It was a problem.

The call from the Sheriff came just as Derek had nearly convinced himself that there wouldn’t be another fire.

It had started in Beacon Hills’ only department store, thankfully after hours. But it had still managed to cause the death of a maintenance worker and two employees doing inventory.
Derek stood, watching the flames climb, tightly wound. He was waiting for the Sheriff to report back to them from the other side of the crime scene tape about any possible clues as to what had set it or where it had originated. Stiles kept side-eyeing him but Derek ignored it, almost frozen waiting for the blaze to be put out. He was so disconnected that he didn’t notice the Argents were there until the conversation they were having with Stiles was happening practically on top of him.

Derek immediately stepped between them as soon as he realized, upper lip raising as he snarled, “Leave.”

Stiles’ hand wrapped around his elbow from behind, pulling Derek back into his chest.

Chris looked as far from intimidated as possible. “Derek, wouldn’t have expected to run into you here.” He smirked.

Derek growled.

Stiles stepped around him and elbowed Chris in the side. He made it look accidental but it was clear from the way Chris sucked in a sharp breath afterward that it had to have been purposeful. “Let’s not antagonize the very on edge Alpha werewolf here.” He added in an undertone, “Especially not a bright idea for someone with your last name.”

Allison glanced between them curiously but didn’t ask.

Chris placed a hand on Stiles’ bicep, drawing him in as a deputy came over to corral the crowd, ostensibly so they could continue their conversation in hushed voices. Derek yanked Stiles away from him, growling lowly in Stiles’ ear, “I don’t want them here.”

Stiles’ eyes searched his face for a long moment. He nodded once. “We’ll talk via text,” he told Chris without waiting for a response. He led Derek away from the crime scene without giving him a chance to argue either. “We talking about this?” he asked softly, once they were out of range of even the scent of smoke.

“You can’t be surprised I don’t do well with fire,” Derek bit out, still trying to get his breathing to even out.

“Not sure why you feel guilty about that though,” Stiles said carefully. He settled the heel of his palms over the front of Derek’s shoulders, as though trying to keep him calm as well as a good distance back from him. “It’s more than survivor’s guilt.” His eyes pinched and he said evenly, “What exactly was your relationship to Kate Argent?”

Derek’s lungs constricted and he couldn’t breathe.

Stiles slapped him with the flat of his hand in his sternum instantaneously and Derek reflexively pulled in a deep breath. “It doesn’t matter,” Stiles decided firmly, cutting off the panic that fast.

Derek didn’t think this was the first time Stiles had suspected his connection to Kate; this was merely the first time he’d said it out loud. And it wasn’t okay that he’d figured it out. It wasn’t okay that Derek’s family was dead and that Derek was the cause of it.

He expected Stiles to go cold, to judge, to sneer, to do almost anything other than say:

“The reason your family’s dead? I’m it.” Stiles’ eyes were serious, wide, flashing, and Derek didn’t understand what he was trying to say to him. “I was your emissary, Derek. The pack I left behind, it was yours. The reason I’m here now is because I owed Peter that much, because I left your entire family unprotected to get revenge for mine.”
Derek broke Stiles’ grip on him and punched him as hard as he could in the face.

“I’m afraid Lydia was right and this can’t possibly be an Ifrit,” Deaton said cautiously, eyes flicking between Derek and Stiles without his usual subtlety, “there’s no pleasure or trickery derived from these killings. It’s a body count this creature is after, nothing more. Why that is, I can’t say without knowing more about the creature itself.”

The dark blue-black bruise on Stiles’ jaw stood out starkly against his pale skin and he did nothing to hide it, almost seeming to jut out his chin more just to be sure everyone knew it was there. Surprisingly, however, the person who looked most furious over it was Scott and Derek couldn’t even pretend to fathom why. Stiles worked his jaw back and forth, cradling it with a hovering palm before saying, “What about the Black One?”

Deaton’s brow furrowed. “Surtr?” he confirmed uncertainly.

Stiles nodded, shrugged. “It fits. It’s fire and brimstone without rhyme or reason. It caused wildfires before all this, which supports that it’s in it for destruction and not necessarily body counts.”

“But there were body counts attached to the wildfires,” Deaton pointed out grimly.

“There’s the possibility that was a consequence of a fire that was already set and not the reason the fire was set,” Stiles retorted, playing devil’s advocate while probing at the bruise with his fingers. He was clearly doing nothing more than trying to draw Derek’s attention to it. Because he was a dick.

“I suppose it’s possible,” Deaton conceded, though he didn’t sound all that convinced.

It was clear the two of them were used to this, playing off each other, quoting legends back and forth, vetoing some ideas while supporting others. Derek had to wonder if Deaton was so familiar with all this because he was an emissary too, or a former emissary maybe. The thought stuck.

Stiles had said he’d left them unprotected but what if he hadn’t, what if he’d left them in Deaton’s care? Deaton, who had been in Beacon Hills as long as Derek had been alive. What had he said when they brought Isaac to him? That he wasn’t a practitioner any longer. Stiles was the kind of person who followed through, he’d proven that time and again, so he wouldn’t have left them with nothing. He would have done something to provide for them, but for some reason he had wanted Derek to think he’d practically let the fire happen.

Stiles spoke, drawing Derek back into the argument taking place in front of him. “Easy enough to test. Giants with swords bent on cleansing the Earth of impurity? They tend to come when you call,” he said cheekily.

Deaton looked mildly impressed. “You have the summoning spell?”

Stiles shifted forward in his seat, opening up his laptop. He studied it for a moment or two then turned it around so it was facing Deaton. He grinned smugly, lip twitching slightly as it stretched the bruise on his face. “Seems as if I do.” He printed it out with a flourish, already standing to snatch it off Derek’s printer. He shook it in front of Deaton’s face as soon as it was done.

Deaton ignored him for the most part, accepting the page when Stiles finally stopped being obnoxious with it. He skimmed down the text and murmured, “Seems simple enough and I believe I have all of this back at the clinic.”
“Off we go then!” Stiles said happily, clapping his hands together.

Derek stood too.

Neither of them looked particularly surprised when he followed them out.

Deaton arranged the sigil and the ingredients and Stiles said the incantation.

Absolutely nothing happened.

Stiles opted not to go back to the loft, instead taking off for the Sheriff’s, and Deaton promised to keep looking through his own sources and to call if he found anything.

Derek returned to the loft alone and was surprised to find Scott waiting for him when he came through the door. He kicked off the base of the kitchen counter and uncrossed his arms, brimming with anger and frustration. Enough that Derek could smell it on him.

“You can’t even help yourself. Stiles doesn’t see it but the rest of us do.” Derek raised both eyebrows, glaring. “You’re different since you met him, and every time he shows up you get better. He thinks you can’t change but you do every time you see him, you just go out of your way trying to prove the opposite.” Scott’s eyes were dark, the brackets around his mouth deep set and Derek knew now why he’d looked so furious about Stiles’ jaw.

Apparently—huh—apparently he was actually rooting for Derek to get Stiles out of this whole mess. Which was… nice, Derek guessed, but also invasive. “It’s none of your business,” he snarled, fangs making the words slurred.

“You’re my Alpha, Derek,” Scott snapped. “You made it my business.” His eyes flashed gold before he stormed out.

It was exactly what he’d wanted—for Scott to accept him as Alpha—couched in something he didn’t—Scott involved in the clusterfuck that was Derek’s feelings for Stiles. That was becoming something of a theme.

Derek grabbed Stiles’ arm, stopping him from babbling on about the Sheriff’s diet and his check-up the day before and yanked him back. Stiles froze instantly, expression growing serious. “Hear something?”

The bruise on his jaw was still dark against his skin. It wasn’t like his tattoo, which looked etched into him, not so much something added as something that belonged, that defined him. “I don’t blame you.”

Stiles smirked, eyes bright and dancing. He didn’t have to ask what Derek was talking about, just said slyly, “Don’t you?”

Derek’s eyes flicked down to Stiles’ mouth, his lower lip wet and shining and Derek could hear Stiles’ heartbeat, the steady too-quick thrum of it that made him take notice. He took a step closer almost against his will, Stiles’ eyelashes fluttering and his skin taking on a faint orange glow. It took a second for him to realize it wasn’t just Stiles that was glowing, his own skin was bathed in light. The forest around them too.

Derek’s brow furrowed. “What is—” he started.

“Oh fuck,” Stiles burst out, spinning Derek around.
Dread made Derek’s stomach feel like lead and, as he watched, flames rose far above the tree line, licking at the darkness of the sky. It took Derek a moment to see that the flames weren’t simply burning, they were moving. Unnaturally so. They were curling at the top, forming a barrel, bearing down like the wave of a tsunami. It was too wide for them to outrun, covered too much ground, and they were going to burn to death.

Derek only remembered where he was and whom he was with when Stiles’ fingers dug into his forearm and tugged. His voice was shaky but trying for strong. “Derek, kind of need you to stay with me here.” Only Derek couldn’t as a literal wall of fire was about to crash down on them. “Hey, look at me,” Stiles insisted, grip getting firmer. Derek didn’t even twitch.

Hands came up to frame his face, gently twisting it around until Derek was blinking into Stiles’ unfazed eyes. They were amber and warm in a way that was somehow soothing rather than a reminder of what they were facing. “I’m not going to let anything happen.”

“What are you going to do?” Derek’s voice was barely more than a rasp.

Stiles let out a weak chuckle. “Okay, it probably doesn’t look great that I don’t have, like, a concrete plan here but I’m going to come up with something so don’t you worry.” The palms on Derek’s face were sweaty but it was hard to tell if that was from nerves or the heat.

“Stiles,” Derek hissed.

“I’ll figure something out because I am definitely not going to let you get crispy-fied so—”

“Stiles.”

Stiles blinked, eyes going wide. “Whoa.” They were standing in a vacuum of space where the flames couldn’t reach them. Derek hadn’t even realized the tidal wave was passing them until the heat had been abruptly cut off. Stiles tilted his head back and said, slightly awed, “Derek, look up.”

The fire—

It was sentient.

Something was throwing off the flames but the body of it was rock and it was giant. “What the hell is it?” Derek’s voice was strangled and he felt like strength was being leached out of him the longer he looked.

“I have no idea,” Stiles answered, voice still bowd out with wonder. His grin was slow to form and blinding. “But it’s fucking awesome.” Derek stared at him in disbelief. “I mean, terrible, you know,” he backpedaled quickly, looking slightly guilty. Derek didn’t miss it when he lowered his voice and added surreptitiously, “But also awesome.”

Thankfully the description of it sparked something with Deaton. He pondered over it in the back office before frowning and leaving them there, Derek still pale and Stiles still full of inappropriate glee. He walked back in with a heavy hardcover and poked a knuckle out at Stiles, saying, “You actually weren’t that far off with Surtr.” He turned the book out to them, setting it on the table in front of them. “I believe it’s a Cherufe.”

Stiles’ smile grew as he looked at the drawing of it. “That’s totally it,” he agreed, tossing a look Derek’s way that was trying not to seem half as excited as he clearly was. He gave up after barely a second and let himself be titillated by the revelation of a new beastie.
When Stiles’ eyes didn’t budge from the page, Deaton offered to drive them back to Derek’s loft so Derek could call the pack to meet them and Stiles could read over what they had on this thing.

Derek grunted his approval of the plan.

Stiles piled into the passenger seat, devouring the section Deaton had pointed them towards. He didn’t speak again until he was walking through the door of Derek’s loft, eyes flicking up halfheartedly to note that the betas had beat them there. “Huh,” he said curiously, kind of eager, like how Lydia got when she was researching. “So it’s a Cherufe,” he relayed, “and it’s looking for sacrifices apparently. Seems like it’s out of its element though, both time and geography-wise.” Stiles glanced back at Deaton as he said the last, looking for confirmation of some kind.

“Sacrifices?” Boyd interrupted, seeming slightly queasy at the idea.

Stiles nodded, plopping down in the only free armchair left, book still open and perched on his forearms. “They generally live deep in the bowels of volcanoes and they fed on the victims thrown into them, back when people believed making offerings to volcanic gods would keep them from erupting.” Stiles held the book up, tapped the picture of the creature made of igneous rock. It was not to scale, Derek could say that much. It was also impossible to tell it was made from rock until it was literally right on top of you, otherwise it threw off too many flames to see its true image. But he was sure they’d all find that out sooner rather than later. “This is the dude they were making sacrifices to. Over the last few centuries though, people kind of science-d themselves out of that so it seems like this guy took it upon himself to make with the sacrificing.” Stiles snorted. “That’s the kind of go-get-’em attitude you just don’t see these days.”

Right. Derek had almost forgotten. Stiles was shit at dealing with anything serious. Derek almost wondered how he’d taken the news of the Hale fire, if he’d just laughed it off and moved on. The thought made him scowl, especially as it didn’t seem all that far-fetched.

“Um, so how do we stop it going and, er, getting?” Isaac piped up from the corner.

Stiles bit the inside of his cheek, looking back over his shoulder at Deaton. He shrugged, said, “These things are fueled by an internal fire. We find a way to freeze that,” he snapped his fingers, “and that should do it.”

Deaton took a step closer, peering into Stiles’ face from over his shoulder. “Do you think you can do that?” he asked, sounding genuinely curious.

Stiles shrugged again. “Only one way to find out.”

“We should trap it,” Erica said tartly from the couch. “That way if it gets past us, we can still limit its movements.”

Deaton gave Erica a considering look before nodding once. “I believe I can come up with something.”

“It’s going to be heading for the Nemeton,” Derek said, realizing it all at once. Stiles was right, it was out of its element. The only thing that could have drawn it so far away from anything it knew was the Nemeton.

Stiles nodded almost proudly, smiling at him, while Deaton agreed, “We’ll start there then.”

Deaton used crystals, imbued each with one of the four elements and then said some malarkey about balance. Stiles chortled and leaned back into Derek’s chest, shoulder digging into his
sternum, to mutter under his breath, “I swear he just makes shit up, tacks the word ‘balance’ onto it and calls it a day.”

Derek snorted before he could stop himself.

Deaton didn’t look amused. Which only made it funnier.

It didn’t take all that long but, unfortunately, Derek smelled the smoke long before they got to the Nemeton. He caught eyes with Erica and they both took off at a sprint but the Cherufe was far closer than they were. They didn’t have to stop it though, just keep it from getting too close to the Nemeton before Deaton could set up the crystals.

Derek tried and failed not to be surprised when the rest of the pack fanned out without needing to be told or have anything explained, heat beating strong against their faces as they distracted the thing from lumbering any closer to the Nemeton.

The glow of the flames was only rivaled by the ones coming from the crystals, which were all shining preternaturally bright and were now placed at an even four points around the roots from the stump. Derek watched them flicker, the light almost dazzling, and missed the Cherufe circling him, swiping at him with a flaming limb.

Stiles didn’t though.

Warm, long-fingered hands closed over his shoulders and shoved him aside, out of the perimeter of the crystals and the path of the flames.

Derek found his feet just in time to see Stiles engulfed in them.

The crystals exploded one after another in loud, eardrum-shattering pops and purple erupted among all the orange. Then white like Derek had never seen before. A glittering, brilliant white in the center of it.

Ice.

Stiles had turned to ice.

It was there for a moment and then it—*he*—was melting, feeding into the cracks of the rock, freezing the flames as it met them. Derek held up his forearm, shielding his eyes with it as the fire sizzled and vapor came pouring out of it. He was too close, lungs filling with smoke and cough scraping his throat but he couldn’t bring himself to move away.

He wondered bitterly if Stiles had planned it, if he’d known, if this had always been his way of ‘freezing the internal fire.’

His eyes were watering and the rocks started to fall, nothing keeping the Cherufe going now, flames extinguished and smoke heavy in the air.

“Derek.” It was Scott, his voice croaky, shaky with unshed tears or maybe just rough from the smoke damage.

The rocks settled. The fire and smoke were swept out in a great breath of wind that ripped and clawed at Derek’s clothes and skin. And then, in the spot where Stiles had been standing, the dirt began to swirl and the fire exploded again in the form of a phoenix.

A phoenix Derek recognized, but one that he’d only ever seen in straight, black geometric lines on
smooth skin, not spreading flames in midair. The wind and fire and dirt swirled together and water was pulled up from the ground beneath and froze solid but not into ice. Not this time.

Now it was forming skin with multiple lines of bright red ink drawing up from the soles of two feet, racing along the backs of strong calves and muscled thighs. Resting in the dimples of the small of a man’s back were two curved feet, talons looking sharp where they bracketed a firm ass. The expanse of his spine made up the curve of a feathered torso and the breadth of his shoulders formed the bend of the wings, parallel lines running down both arms. The head of the bird—of the phoenix—was at the base of his neck, beak thrown back and mouth open as though in the middle of letting out a call.

The phoenix wrapped around nearly every inch of Stiles, the feathers of its tail twining down around his legs, the ones from its wings bracketing his sides, his arms, his neck. It wasn’t conquering him like Stiles had said when Derek first met him, it was protecting him.

Stiles stood there, inexplicably whole and unburned and perfectly nude. He stumbled over his own feet and Deaton rushed forward, throwing his jacket over Stiles’ shoulders while Stiles hacked and coughed.

“Shit, Stiles,” Scott breathed and then he was surging forward to help steady him.

Derek didn’t remember moving but he must have because he was standing right in front of him, blinking into Stiles’ wide brown eyes, his own heart still thrumming away in his gut from when he’d swallowed it and throat scratchy.

Stiles couldn’t seem to keep his feet as he wheezed, clutching tight to Deaton’s jacket seemingly for something to do with his hands. “Whoa,” he said, sounding scorched on the inside. He grinned, or tried to. Mostly his lips just twitched weakly but Derek recognized it, having watched it form so many times. He was still a little goofy when he added, “Jus’ burnin’ doin’ the neutron dance.”

Scott snorted in surprise, eyes still red.

“Stiles?” Deaton tried.

Stiles’ nose wrinkled, twitching, and he blinked. “I’m pretty sure I just rose from the fucking ashes, dude,” he pointed out, waving his hand aimlessly.

“How do you feel?” Deaton asked carefully.

Stiles held up his hands, rubbing the fingers together. The gesture made the jacket fall open and Derek automatically grabbed for either side, pulling it shut for him. Stiles seemed too dazed to notice. “Weird. Tingly. But balanced.” He let out a whuff of breath at that. “Like it was... restorative somehow.”

Something seemed to click for Deaton and he abandoned Stiles’ side to hover over the stump. For once, he actually sounded affected, surprised even, as he said almost reverently, “The Nemeton’s... finished.”

“Balance,” Stiles reiterated. He perked his eyebrows at Derek, a huge smile spreading across his lips. “Might not be complete bullshit,” he said, sounding less looped.

Derek frowned, could only seem to say, “I thought you’d died.”

Stiles stared up at him with wide, earnest eyes. He shook his head. “Told you I wasn’t going to let
you get crispy-fied, didn’t I?”

Whatever had been keeping Derek so numb shattered and he exploded in nerves, anger and something that felt a lot like genuine terror. “Can’t you be serious for five fucking seconds?”

Stiles tracked Derek’s drawn, anxious face. “It’s better for both of us if I’m not,” he decided, saying the words slowly, giving them a heady sort of weight.

And Derek saw it. Stiles—Stiles—he couldn’t, but he did. It was there, in every bit of him. And even though it didn’t make any sense, it was still there.

Stiles loved him.

Derek fell back a step, feeling cornered, feeling terrified anew. “Stiles, you can’t—”

Stiles’ expression snapped closed and he bit out, “Fuck. You.”

And, yeah, Derek got that. He’d asked for the truth and then panicked when he’d gotten it. He was a hypocrite and, apparently, Stiles loved him anyway.

It took him too long to see it, all things considered. Though there had been a whole wealth of distractions between Stiles taking on responsibility for the fire and now. Derek had already told Stiles he didn’t blame him but that wasn’t the same as it not being his fault. Which Derek now knew it wasn’t—though he should have known it much earlier and didn’t, because Derek hadn’t realized what was right in front of his face to realize.

He caught up to Stiles outside his building. He was sitting on the curb after being chewed out by his father as Deaton had spilled the beans on their most recent adventure. Someone had had to explain how the whole phoenix had turned a brilliant shade of red though. It wasn’t exactly something that was going to go unnoticed.

Stiles didn’t look up as Derek sat next to him, just scratched at his chin and stared blankly out at the parking lot.

Derek bumped their knees together. “You asked my mother, didn’t you?” he said carefully. “For permission to leave Beacon Hills?” He’d asked permission to enter it as soon as there was an Alpha to ask, it only stood to reason that he’d done the same to leave it.

Stiles used his own hand to turn his head towards Derek. The bruise on his jaw had gone with his ‘rebirth.’ Oddly, Derek missed it. He smiled but it wasn’t a happy thing. “Of course,” he said simply. “I answered to her, my connection was to her, my responsibility was to her.”

Derek considered him for a long moment, asked, “Would you have gone if she’d said no?” Truthfully, he wasn’t even sure he wanted to know the answer.

Stiles shrugged, admitted, “I honestly don’t know.” He smiled, more genuinely this time, a certain fondness to it. “But I also knew that she wouldn’t say no.”

There was reminiscence in his tone and Derek wondered how well Stiles had actually known his parents, if they had liked him, how long he’d been with them, why Derek didn’t remember him. He could ask Stiles but he didn’t have the right to much when it came to him, and Derek wasn’t sure he would trust Peter’s answers even if he did take the time to ask. “If it was your fault then it was hers too,” Derek told him, watching Stiles’ eyelashes fan over his cheeks. “You left but she let you.”
Stiles shrugged again, nonchalance in the gesture. “She and I are just as responsible as you are,” he said, almost challenging somehow.

Derek shook his head. “You’re not.” He closed his eyes, breathed. “I’m the one who brought Kate into our lives, I—”

Stiles cut him off. “You think if she hadn’t gotten what she wanted out of you that she would have left your family alone then?”

The words hit him hard for some reason and Derek couldn’t say anything other than an honest, “No.”

“So she would’ve found an in completely apart from you,” he suggested, but it was too certain to be a question.

Derek pursed his mouth. “Maybe she wouldn’t have succeeded if I hadn’t made it so easy for her.”

Stiles let out a huff of breath, shaking his head. “Let me tell you something about true evil, Derek, it tends to get what it’s after.” He scratched his thumbnail along the line of his lower lip. “Kate didn’t have reason, wasn’t like the Alpha pack trying to recruit, to build itself up to gain power,” he swirled his hand, rubbed at his eyes, “wasn’t like the dragon protecting its territory, the demon using you as an escape, the spider enjoying a meal, the Cherufe looking for sacrifices in a world it didn’t fit. They had methods to their madness.”

Derek opened his mouth to argue that but Stiles wasn’t finished.

“Kate wanted to kill your family because she wanted to kill your family. The fact that some of them were werewolves was an arbitrary line Gerard drew but, when it came down to it, even that wasn’t strictly adhered to. She didn’t need you. You just made it more fun for her. You ensured she’d leave behind something with a conscience that could destroy itself far better than she could after she was done. It’s pure luck of the draw that that happened to be you.” Derek swallowed and Stiles was watching him without blinking, like he wanted Derek not just to hear the words but to understand them. “This guilt you’re carrying?” he said incisively. “The only thing it’s serving is the monster who engineered the circumstances for it.”

“It was my fault,” Derek argued blankly because he knew. Maybe the one thing he knew.

Stiles snorted, as if that was the stupidest thing he’d ever heard. “It was Kate Argent’s fault,” he said, hitting the word hard. “The problem here, Derek, is that you think the world is full of monsters because you met one when you were fifteen.”

Derek scowled, pointing out the entire reason behind their association. “There are monsters out there.”

Stiles shook his head, correcting. “There’s balance out there. Demons balance seraphims. Dragons balance unicorns.” He waved his hand dismissively. “They’re not monsters, they’re the other side of the spectrum. Monsters are rare. Monsters are Kate Argent and I am sorry that you came across her, I’m sorry for what she did to you. But that’s not all there is.” He placed his hand on Derek’s knee, squeezed, and his smile was sad. “Not everything is out to get you, Derek.”

He stood and left Derek there on the curb.

Then he left Derek Beacon Hills.
And Derek let him. Because, for the first time, their parting didn’t feel like a period, it felt like an ellipsis.

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Chapter End Notes

Next week: THE FINAL CHAPTER. THANK ALL THE GODS. No spoilers this time. I can't tell you the monster because then you won't be surprised by it, even though I waaaaaanna. It is super trope-y, that's all you get. :)

I promise to tell you guys on tumblr if I do fall to my sinkhole-y, bad feelings-y, candy corn-y, arachnid-ish death. 'Cos I like ya and stuff.
VI. “Man, I love duct tape. I love how it tapes. I love the sound it makes. I love saying it. Duct tape. Duct tape. Duct tape.”

Chapter Summary

A beginning as much as an end.

Chapter Notes

Bit later than I thought I would be but one of the scenes wasn't telling itself right. Anyway, slight warning for those of you who are sensitive to Dubious Consent in the end notes, it will spoil a majority of the chapter for you so read at your own risk either way. ;)

This is it, the final chapter. Please excuse the grateful twaddle I'm about to indulge in here. I just want to say a huge thank you to everyone who took this journey with me. I made you a thing even. It was an absolute joy to write this and to see that mindset reflected back in the squeeful, engaged, ravenous comments (full of the occasional hair-tugging, hand-wringer and blissed out bouncing as you guys cheered these characters on) has been an absolute thrill, beyond rewarding and beyond what I possibly could have hoped for in my greatest and best fantasy for this. Your capslock and exclamation points touched my friggin' heart and no matter whether you were one of the subscriptions, the kudoses, the bookmarks or the comments, you were noticed and your trust in me when you had no idea what the payoff would be was beyond appreciated. I truly hope I did not disappoint. ♥

*wipes eyes and grins shakily* If you're just now finding this then to you I say: well done on avoiding my horrible updating practices(!), and I hope you enjoyed the story I've unfolded here.

*salutes*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VI. “Man, I love duct tape. I love how it tapes. I love the sound it makes. I love saying it. Duct tape. Duct tape. Duct tape.”

“Don’t you dare say one word.” The growl behind the words was not playful.

Lydia rolled her lips into her mouth, perkily shrugged a shoulder. “What on Earth would I say? It looks… fine.” Derek nudged her in the shoulder and Lydia sniffed unapologetically.

Deb’s lips pulled back from her teeth. They were pointed. “Fucking Mira,” she grumbled out in a
voice that went low, barely audible, but one that reverberated in supernatural ears. “I’m,” she
glowered, “proving I’m still alive, or some bullshit like that.”

“Oh honey,” Lydia clicked her tongue and gestured at the screen where Deb’s ear was, “with a
perm though?”

Deb snapped her jaws. “I will kill you.”

“Does Hasani have any idea of what this might be?” Derek interrupted them, not looking at Deb’s
hair. It was beyond wavy, curled, or crimped – Derek suspected the English language had yet to
come up with a word that encapsulated the true horror of it – and short, remarkably short. It had
been a bob the last time Derek had seen her and now it fell at some level no hairdresser, or person
with functioning eyeballs, would ever recommend.

“You’re not looking at me, Derek,” Deb ground out, clenching her jaw when it came to his name.
Lydia had kept in close touch with the Hasani pack, Deb in particular, and this made the second
time Derek had contacted them for a problem they were having. Hasani had reached out three
times.

They were both from old packs with new Alphas and very few allies. And they liked each other,
which had been an unexpected plus.

Derek stared straight into Deb’s eyes.

“So, how do I look?”

_Fucking werewolves._ She knew he couldn’t lie. He also _could not_ tell the truth. Because he would
definitely mention Edward Scissorhands if he did. “Healthy,” he grunted out.

Deb let out a bark of a laugh. “Nice deflection, asshole.” She reached out of frame, grabbed a
book and pulled it into her lap. “Fine, down to business. Given everything you’ve said and
factoring in what Isaac said he smelled on the thing, it’s got to be a ghoul.” Deb pulled a face.
“And I hate to tell you this but – those fuckers like to travel in packs.”

“Excellent,” Derek grunted out, rubbing his forehead. “How do we kill them?”

“Hmm,” she pursed her mouth, murmuring as she read, “not necessarily corporeal. A little more
solid than air but they feed on human flesh because they don’t have any.” She held up the book so
they could see the pages. Lydia and Derek leaned in together, eyes narrowing. A Dementor-like
figure, robed and skeletal, was drawn on one side of it. “You’re going to have to give them a solid
form and then, _supposedly_, they’re susceptible to all the same mortal injuries and ailments humans
are.”

Derek pulled back, eyes unpinching. “How do we do that?”

Deb shrugged, lowering the book again, and made a sound like ‘I don’t know,’ that came out
“Iuhno.” Which was spectacularly childish for a woman two years Derek’s senior. The chemicals
in her hair had clearly fried her brain.

Derek was just about to say so when Boyd snorted over his shoulder. Derek hadn’t even heard him
arrive and ignored him regardless. “That all you got for us?” he asked tersely.

Deb rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that’s all. I only just solved the case for you, forgive me for not gift-
wrapping it too. Dick. Well, James solved it really,” she waved a hand, “semantics. You could
show a little appreciation though.”
Derek huffed out a put upon sigh. “Deb, genuinely, and from the bottom of my heart—” He closed the lid of his laptop on her.

Lydia glared at him. “That was rude.” Her lips were twitching though.

“That was good,” Boyd countered with a chuckle while Derek smirked proudly. That could be Boyd genuinely agreeing with him or taking any opportunity to disagree with Lydia. They were both brains as it turned out and, while they respected each other, there was also a healthy competition between them.

Maybe a little more than healthy.

“So, what comes next? How do we figure out how to turn ghouls corporeal?” Lydia asked, sitting up straighter and eyes pinched like she already had an answer in mind.

Derek stood, stretched, shrugged. “We check our own sources and, if it’s not there, then we go to Deaton.”

“We could ask Stiles,” Lydia said mellifluously, the nonchalance of the statement so forced it almost made Derek wince.

He no longer tensed at the name, got angry at the mention, or threw the pack out when they talked about him. He respected Stiles, cared about him, and he’d come to terms with that as much as he had that the best thing he could do for Stiles was to stay out of his life. Whether Derek understood it or not, Stiles was in love with him and the last thing Derek wanted was to exploit that. He knew exactly how destructive that could be.

And Stiles deserved better than that. Better than him.

“We could,” he agreed easily. “Or we could rely on our pack and our connections to see this through.”

Lydia almost pouted, looking annoyed that not only hadn’t she been able to goad him into a more explosive reaction but also that what he’d said actually made sense.

No one could deny that it was more than past the time for his pack to start functioning on its own, standing on its own merit.

“We did meet James and Deb and Mira through Stiles but fine,” she waved a hand, “I cede to your point.” She tapped her fingernails against the hard shell of his laptop in thought. “Jackson should still be with Deaton now, I can text him.”

Jackson had actually taken Stiles’ advice and gone to Deaton for help with his control, finding an anchor that worked for him when Derek hadn’t been able to help him. Derek’s own anchor had been slipping badly for well over a year, which was why he couldn’t shift the way his and Cora’s mom had been able to.

As long as he could keep the wolf under wraps, even if he couldn’t draw it out when he wanted, he figured that was good enough.

And good enough was good enough.

“I might remember how to give something of the not-so-solid variety a form you could stick a claw or two in,” Peter said evenly, shifting out of the shadows like a bad noir villain. “There was a… poltergeist if I remember correctly, not all that long ago, lots of chanting in Latin and then your
father ripped its throat out.”

“Are you offering to help?” Derek asked warily, brow perked.

Peter considered him for a long moment, as though he was actually deciding on his answer on the spot. “Yes,” he said finally. “I am.”

“Fine,” Derek ground out, hating that he was relying on Peter for anything. But he was pack, distasteful as that was.

“We should gather everyone and meet at the cemetery that Isaac last chased them to. They tend to nest in places where death is pervasive so they’ll probably be living in one of the crypts there. Peter,” Lydia’s lip raised automatically, “will start the chant and that should draw them out.”

Derek nodded with a grunt. “Boyd, let everyone know.”

Boyd pulled out his phone agreeably while Derek took the stairs two at a time to find Cora. She would be running no doubt, running to avoid the thoughts of what the Alpha pack had done to her. It had been all about Derek, about turning her mindless, about making him kill her first so he would then kill all the others.

She’d told him a month ago, about the methods they’d used and Derek could only be glad that Stiles had picked such a gruesome way to end them.

He couldn’t scent her on the air, the wind too strong, and he roared into the woods, fangs dropping and claws popping as he did, loud but localized. He heard her long before she broke past the tree line, panting, snapping branches, crunching over dry leaves. She jogged out, the back of her hand pushing sweat and loose strands of hair off her forehead. “What is it?”

“We think we know how to kill the zombies,” Derek told her, adding, “Also, not zombies but ghouls.”

Cora frowned heavily and said deadpan, “Zombies would’ve been cooler.”

Derek didn’t agree. At least not out loud.

They half-walked, half-jogged to the cemetery, giving the others time to show – or assemble, Derek thought with an ache. Even so, they weren’t the last to arrive. Jackson climbed out of his Porsche, unapologetic and sneering. No matter how close the pack became or how solidified his anchor got, the kid was still a prick at heart.

Derek looked at him as a lesson on why counting to ten before acting was a good idea.

Erica was, predictably, sitting atop one of the headstones, completely unmoved by what she was swinging her feet over. Boyd and Lydia appeared to be squabbling over something a few feet from her. Isaac’s nose was wrinkled, arms crossed, because despite his familiarity with the place, the scent clearly didn’t sit well with him.

Derek could relate.

Scott was at his shoulder, stoic and ready for whatever came next. He’d gotten more settled, less open, in the past few months and he’d confided to Derek only days ago that his father was in town. Derek was led to believe that was not a good thing. He also, possibly, was on the outs with Allison again, which was undoubtedly a contributing factor to the suddenly gloom surrounding him. Derek never could keep up with that though.
Peter was set up a ways away from all of them. Because he was Peter and that’s what Peter did. He had a small, leatherbound book Derek had never seen before propped up on one of the gravestones. He nodded to Derek, grinned widely enough that it showed his teeth. “Ready whenever you are, boss.” There were lethal levels of sarcasm in that last word.

Derek fought down the urge to snarl, knowing Peter was only trying to get at him. He didn’t need to know he was succeeding. Derek shifted into beta form, not trying for anything past that, and slurred out past fangs, “Do it.”

Peter raised both brows, taking that small moment to undermine him, before he started chanting.

“Et præcipies eis ut solidam formam,
aer autem, os,
caro et os, ut,
carnem mortalitatem.”

Again and again he said the words, a chill creeping up Derek’s spine, winding through his arteries, vessels, and making his blood run cold. The air around them felt static, was frigid, and then a creaking sound rose up, shaving away bone from his shoulders as he hunched them up.

One of the crypts was opening and Derek prepared himself to see skeletal, fleshless hands, prepared himself for hollow eyes, prepared himself for really anything other than what he was seeing.

Cora ground out next to him, “I thought you said these were ghouls.”

“I thought they were ghouls,” Derek snapped back, heart racing. He was pulled back by his shoulder and Lydia thrust her phone out at him. Derek recognized the layout of Stiles’ bestiary on the screen and, there it was, almost an afterthought to the entry:

Those with firsthand experience of ghouls say they tend to appear in the guise of an animal, most often as—

“Hyenas,” Jackson burst out, voice high and strident. “You have got to be fucking kidding me, hyenas? Hyenas the size of a fucking horse, that’s what’s happening here?”

Because, yes, that was exactly what they were looking at. Ghouls. Scavengers. Hyenas that were covered in rotting flesh over visible bone that still looked spectral even if they no longer were.

“Shut the fuck up, Jackson,” Isaac hissed, looking jittery and obviously hoping not to draw the things towards them.

Three had stepped through the open door of the crypt, flanking a different compass point. It didn’t look as if they could see, their eyes lacking irises completely, just a blank expanse of gray, but – as one – their muzzles raised and it was clear they were scenting the air. Shit. “Stay back,” he snapped at Lydia before lunging forward, at the exact same moment the ghouls did.

Derek met the one in the center with the side of his shoulder, ramming into its neck. He’d half-expected to pass right through it, sure Peter had been engineering a rather gruesome end for him, but he connected and he connected hard. The thing whined just like a wounded animal and then it was shaking itself off, picking itself up and it was even bigger than it had looked when Derek had first seen it. Its pointed ear came to the top of Derek’s ribcage and there was a very good chance,
solid or not, that this thing was going to tear him apart.

He was trying to gauge where to strike next that would keep him away from its mouth, where his claws might do some damage, when one of them slammed into him from behind. The one in front leapt forward the moment he was caught off guard, caught him around the middle with powerful jaws and sunk in. Derek howled in pain, scrabbling to find something to make it release when the claws of one hand found its eye, the other its ear. He dug in with both.

It shook him like a ragdoll, reflexively biting down harder and then Erica was on one side of it, Scott the other and they were literally prying the thing’s jaws open. The one behind him was no longer a solid weight at his back and Derek collapsed as soon as he was free of the thing’s teeth.

He could barely breathe, insides shredded, and his mind was fuzzy, vision spotty. The ground was hard under him and he couldn’t find his feet. He pressed a clumsy hand to his slippery stomach but there was no way of slowing down the flow of blood. He was too torn up, too broken. He leaned his head back, trying to get perspective, blinking up at dark sky. Someone was hauling him up, snapping, “I am not dying for you, Derek Hale, so get—up.”

Derek tried to stumble upright but he was far from steady and Lydia was hardly a match for him. She didn’t give up though, dug her nails into his bicep, bit out, “Stay conscious,” before clenching in harder.

The bite of pain was hardly a consideration though, not with Derek ripped apart from the very center of him.

Lydia kept him levered up, let him lean on her as she half-dragged, half-staggered with him away from the center of things. She dropped him at the base of the gravestone Peter was still chanting on the other side of. She grabbed Derek’s face unpleasantly tight. “Derek. Stay awake.” It was an order, couldn’t be taken as anything else.

Derek swallowed, nodded, trying, eyes blinking separately. He would heal but the pack—

He looked over Lydia’s shoulder only to find that one of the things had already been put down. Its legs were still twitching, the scent of stomach bile and blood strong, its insides spilling out onto the cold ground. Derek’s lips twitched. It hadn’t been a fluke either. The pack—they’d arranged themselves, not only by strength but by weaknesses.

Scott, who couldn’t kill anything to save his life – literally, had paired up with Erica, who had no qualms about killing, really, anything. In return, he was pulling her back, attacking, distracting and tiring the thing so she could move in for the fatal strikes. Isaac and Jackson were sticking close to each other. Isaac, who couldn’t get sloppy but who could deliver a more precise and well-placed blow than any of the rest of them and Jackson, who only knew sloppy and primal. Which left Cora and Boyd. Boyd, who had none of Cora’s fierceness but all of the intelligence to know where that fierceness was best put to use.

Peter’s chanting was a constant stream behind them and he hadn’t run. They were feet from the fight and Peter was still there, reluctant and insubordinate, but there. The same with Lydia, at his side, rooting Jackson, anchoring him, and helping Derek because she wanted to, despite the danger it put her in.

It was seamless. Effortless.

It was pack.
Derek’s pack.

Derek was still laughing, breathless and delirious, when Cora sliced the last one’s throat, nearly taking its head off entirely. She was covered in black blood and pale beneath it when she looked down at him grimly. Erica took his other side and together they hefted him up, murmuring something about Deaton.

They were ginger with him, even in their haste, and Derek appreciated it. Because he wanted to come out the other side of this. Strange as that was. He snorted, which came out as mostly a huff of air and made his lungs ache. The last thought he had before losing consciousness was:

Stiles would be so fucking proud.

Derek came to, back cold and everything in him stiff and unused to movement. He curled his fingers into his palm slowly, the action stuttering slightly. His bicep flexed, muscles jumping, and he pulled in a deep breath. It went down easy, if a little sharp, and he felt settled enough to open his eyes and look down.

He was wearing a different shirt than he had been when they’d faced off with the ghouls. He inched it up and, as he’d suspected, he was whole and unblemished. He leaned his head back, clunking down on the exam table, and let out a harsh breath.

“Nice to have you back with us.”

Derek tilted his head further, staring upside down at the doorway, neck arched oddly. Deaton was wearing his default enigmatic expression and Derek redirected his gaze towards the ceiling, as that was much less innocuous. And annoying. “How long did it take to heal?”

Deaton came around, frowning. “Three days. I had to keep you unconscious for the majority of it. It was the only way to keep you from going into shock. Your injuries were rather catastrophic.” His eyes brightened, mouth pulling to one side. “Your pack was quite concerned.”

Derek blinked. That was the only time in memory that he could recall Deaton using the word ‘pack’ in reference to them. He doubted that had been accidental either.

“I informed Erica as soon as you were out of the woods. Would you like me to let her know you’re awake and well?”

Derek shook his head, grunted. “She probably already knows,” he admitted, easing into an upright position. He was like a brand spanking new toy, just out of the package and never before played with, everything still shocky and movements far from smooth.

Deaton’s eyes danced almost proudly. “That she does,” he agreed. He left the room with a pleased little tilt to his mouth while Derek pressed at his shoulder, windmilling his arm and feeling things crack and reset. Felt good, felt settled. He found his feet, surprised at how steady he was on them, and walked out to the front. “Cora left these for you,” Deaton said as he passed, dropping the Camaro’s keys into his hand.

Derek clenched his fingers around them, never more glad that Cora had decided to stop hating him because a drive in the Camaro sounded perfect right then.

The light went off in the clinic as soon as Derek was outside, lock clicking behind him and sign flipping to closed.
He yawned, stretching his arms above his head as high as they would go, twisting his fingers together around the keyring.

“Hot like burning.”

Derek dropped the keys.

Stiles leaned further back into the Camaro door, foot up on the paint, hands in the pockets of worn jeans. A rumpled, navy blue t-shirt that looked soft to the touch was the only thing he was wearing otherwise. His tattoo was still almost cornea-scarring red and—and, fuck, his hair was long, long like it had been when they’d—the last time they’d—and he was smiling warmly.

“Stiles?” Derek got out hoarsely. His throat was dry and no matter how many times he swallowed, he couldn’t seem to find any moisture.

Stiles’ lips quirked and they were so pink and fat and, God, Derek had forgotten what Stiles could do to him. He hadn’t seen him in months, had tried with everything he had in him to let his attraction go.

“Miss me, Sourwolf?” he asked, eyes flashing playfully and they were still that almost golden-brown that reminded Derek of sun flares.

And the answer was yes because of course the answer was yes. “Stiles, what are you—why are you here?”

Stiles smiled, soft and wide, and everything he did made Derek ache inside. “This is home for me, remember?” The ache grew so much more intense and Stiles pulled his hands out of this pockets, shrugged, “I thought it was about time I came back to it.”

“For good?”

Stiles smiled so wide that Derek could see the white of his teeth. “I would have to come across something really good for that to happen.”

Derek felt drawn to him, was boxing him in before he even realized he’d closed the distance between them. Stiles was so close, so warm beneath him and his mouth was open, enticing.

“Stiles, I can’t—” Derek breathed against his lips, brushing them with his own. Fuck, he needed to get some perspective but Stiles was here, had come to find him.

A finger hooked into his belt loop, pulled him across the last bit of distance separating them, and Stiles looked up at him with eyes that were pinched with happiness, wrinkling at the corners. “I’m not asking for anything you don’t want to give,” he said softly, gold in his gaze dancing, and Derek groaned and gave in.

He fell into Stiles, licking his lower lip, tasting him, dragging it into his mouth and sucking. Hands crawled up Derek’s back, buried in his hair, clenched in the small of his back, pulling Derek into him, further into the bliss that was his mouth and the way Stiles kissed came back to him, with his whole being, with passion and fire and bluntness.

Stiles’ tongue slid into Derek’s mouth, the sensation zinging through Derek’s body, and his kiss grew hungrier and Derek was helpless to do anything but answer it. Stiles’ thighs spread and at the first brush of Stiles’ dick against his, Derek’s gave a throb and he ripped his mouth away, having to steady himself against the car to keep from coming.

Stiles’ lips pressed a pouty kiss to the underside of his jaw and he whispered, “Take me home,
Derek grabbed him around the wrist, dragged him over to the passenger side and shoved him inside. He settled into the driver’s seat after gasping in a few breaths of air. He held his palms against the steering wheel, fingers spread. They were shaking, badly.

Something smoothed onto his thigh, making the muscles there jump, and Stiles’s hand squeezed. “Hey.” Derek looked over at him, watched him drag his tongue over his lower lip almost anxiously. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Derek nodded, somewhat dazed, and let out a stuttery breath. This was all happening so quickly, so jumbled, but Stiles was here, Stiles wanted him and was willing to settle for all Derek had to give. It was—it was just as good as he had imagined it.

He didn’t really remember the drive. Couldn’t think past the heat of Stiles’ palm on his thigh, the heaviness of his breaths and the anticipation making Derek’s entire body vibrate. Highway hypnosis and want had him pulling into the space in front of his loft, yanking Stiles up the stairs, half-afraid he’d disappear. He shoved him through the door, then back up against it. It was a familiar scene, one he’d wanted so badly to play out differently.

“You never answered my question,” Stiles said, bright, unassuming.

They were so close, Derek’s forearms planted on either side of Stiles’ head and every time he breathed out, their chests brushed. “I missed you,” Derek said gruffly, like the answer was dragged up from somewhere deep. He grabbed Stiles around the waist, fingers digging into his hips, and lifted him up. Stiles’ legs obediently came up, locking around him. Derek dropped his head, breathing deeply, the press of their dicks as intense as he remembered it. His nostrils flared and he got out through a clenched jaw, “I want you. Want to fuck you.”

Stiles smirked, dragged his lower lip up Derek’s neck slowly. “So do it,” he said bluntly, challenging, dark.

Derek growled, eyes flashing red and hand digging into Stiles’ ass. He was being too rough, too unmindful with his strength, but Stiles only moaned and gasped the harder he dug in and Derek got him to his bed with bruises already forming. Stiles didn’t stop him, bruised back, only Derek’s faded almost as fast as they came.

He pinned Stiles, hands wrapped around Stiles’ wrists, watched him as he panted and twisted his hips and was broken by how fucking much he wanted him. He fitted both Stiles’ hands beneath one of his own, fingers curling around each other’s, and placed the flat of his palm on the heave of Stiles’ stomach, his thighs spread obscenely wide around Derek’s hips.

He cautiously inched up Stiles’ shirt, dragging his thumb over warm, smooth skin.

“Whatcha doin’ down there, big guy?” Stiles asked breathlessly, hips shimmying and pressing up into him.

Derek let out a sharp breath, clenching harder on Stiles’ hands as he rode out the spike of arousal. He pulled his head back up when he felt under control again, pushing Stiles’ shirt up higher, over his nipples. He felt his mouth go dry and said throatily, “Appreciating the view.”

Stiles’ tattoo curled over his sides, just barely breaching the flat of Stiles’ torso and Derek unhurriedly ran his fingertips over all he could see, caressing the ink almost reverently. “You’re perfect,” Derek told him, awe-filled, Stiles’ skin flushing in response.
“Derek,” Stiles licked his lip, “fuck me.”

Derek’s pupils blew wide and he hoped he could even get that far. “How do you—”

Stiles wriggled out from under him, hands pulling away, slick and clumsy with sweat. His body surged up and into Derek’s before he rolled over, pushing Derek up with his ass as he got to his knees. Derek clenched his hands into his sheets, cock pulsing as Stiles pressed back into it. He was panting as he shifted onto his elbows, ass tight to Derek’s dick and thighs spreading. “Like this, I want you to mount me, fuck me, take me like this.”

Claws tore into Derek’s sheet and Stiles fumbled with the catch of his jeans, pulling them down only so far as mid-thigh, just enough to expose him to Derek’s hungry gaze.

Derek pushed Stiles’ shirt halfway up his back, skin warm and damp and heaving, and he realized that there was no way either of them were undressing any more than this. Derek needed too much and Stiles didn’t seem to be faring any better. He reached for the button on his own jeans but the fucking claws. He was too shaky to concentrate, couldn’t pull it back. “Fuck,” he slurred out past fangs.

“Derek,” Stiles whined, sounding punch drunk and beyond want.

Derek whimpered in response and couldn’t wait long enough to get himself under control, not when the idea of control seemed so fucking laughable.

He’d heal anyway.

He scratched and scraped his abdomen to hell getting the front unbuttoned, was careful on the zip and shoved his pants and boxers down with the heels of his palms like he’d done with Stiles’ shirt. He was on fire in his clothes and he didn’t care, had to get inside Stiles.

“Derek, your tongue. You need to—” Oh fuck, Derek could smell Stiles start leaking as he spread his legs as far as his jeans would allow. “You need to fuck me with your mouth first, get me wet, get me loose.”

Derek pulled back, pressed his hand to the base of his dick, hard, to keep from coming from the words alone. He was still fanged, still half-furred but that didn’t affect the reach of his tongue. He moaned at the musky scent of Stiles, the untouched perfection of him, spread his ass cheeks – nails carefully angled up and away. He breathed out against his hole and watched it quiver in response, Stiles whimpering under him, cock actually dripping precome onto Derek’s sheets.

At the first brush of his tongue, Stiles flattened further into the bed and his whole body shuddered.

Derek’s confidence grew and he licked across the pucker, blowing hot and cool air over it, and watched Stiles’ fists twist into the sheets. He thrust in more eagerly after a bit of teasing, pointing his tongue while Stiles shivered under him. He was careful with it, stretching as much as he was pleasuring, rimming to get him to grow looser. It wasn’t long before he got sloppy though, started pushing harder. The scent of Stiles, buried in it and the how wet he was getting, made Derek more forceful, made him clench his claws into Stiles’ hips and drag him back into the thrust of this mouth, eating him out and making a meal of it.

Derek lifted his mouth away, feeling light-headed. Stiles’ face was scrunched up as though he was in pain, his teeth gritted while he sucked in air through the clench of them. “Stiles?”

Stiles let out a hiss. “ Fucking fuck me already.” His eyes scrunched tighter and tears squeezed out as he panted. “Derek, I swear to fucking God if you don’t get inside me—”
Derek licked over his hole one more time before pressing his cock between the warmth of Stiles’ ass cheeks. He dragged himself down the crack once, letting the tip of his dick catch at Stiles’ hole before pulling away.

“Don’t fucking wimp out on me, Hale,” Stiles snarled. “I want it all at once, none of this ‘testing the waters’ shit.”

Derek blinked. “Stiles—”

Stiles pressed back into him, jaw still clenched even as he ground out, “What did you motherfucking think I meant when I said fuck—me?” His breaths were deep, anticipatory, puffing out his cheeks as he pulled them in.

Derek pressed his thumbs into Stiles’ back, glad to find the claws were gone. He pushed them into Stiles’ skin on either side of his spine, dragging them up the bright red torso of the phoenix and watching Stiles’ shirt fall the farther up he went. He twisted the fabric in a fist when he reached the dip between Stiles’ shoulder blades and held. He dropped the other to the base of his dick, took two shallow breaths and thrust in.

Stiles burst out a weak, “Fuck,” and his cock jerked twice as he came hard without even touching himself and, holy fuck, despite that being the biggest fucking turn on it also made him tighten even further around Derek’s dick. And he had already been tight. Now Derek didn’t have a word to describe it, but ‘vice-grip’ probably came closest.

He tried to calm his breathing, tried to stop every muscle in his body from twitching but it was a lost cause. He puffed out, “Not gonna last,” and pulled his hips back.

It was like Stiles was burning inside and the claws were back and everything was filtering red, Derek’s hips snapping forward, burying his dick in Stiles’ ass and still trying to get closer, deeper. He didn’t know when he’d started growling, his fists down on either side of Stiles’ elbows and claws cutting into his own palms, his wrists, as he levered himself up, dropping his full weight back down so Stiles was practically flattened under him in his efforts to fuck him harder.

Stiles had gone boneless under him when he’d come but slowly he was coming back to himself, arm reaching up, wrapping around Derek’s and clenching his fingers into Derek’s bicep.

That was all it took, the feel of him desperately holding onto Derek and Derek was coming inside him, thrust in as deep as he could go, roaring with his orgasm. It was a loud, sonorous thing and even if the betas didn’t know he was fucking someone… they would know he was fucking someone.

He felt broken, limp, drained when he finally pulled out. He collapsed onto the bed next to Stiles, dizzy, the room spinning, bed rocking, a thousand degrees and drenched. “You’re going to kill me,” Derek puffed out and, God, his heart was racing and he was shivery like he’d pushed his body past its limits, muscles contracting almost painfully.

Stiles grinned, rolled over and into him lazily. He closed his eyes and nosed under Derek’s chin, saying sleepily, “Not yet.”

Derek got an arm under him, wrapped it around Stiles’ waist, and barely had a moment to marvel in the fit of it before he was asleep.

He was reaching across the bed before he opened his eyes, before the knowledge of why had even settled. He smiled when it did, though it barely lasted out the moment when his hand hit nothing
but cool sheets. Derek opened his eyes, sat up with a frown. Stiles wasn’t in bed with him. He wasn’t in the loft at all.

Derek pulled up his jeans, buttoned them, ruffled up the back of his hair and tried to think. It was remarkably difficult. He still felt fuzzy, sluggish, destroyed by easily the best orgasm of his life.

Easily.

He blinked hard. Stiles was probably at the Sheriff’s. He wouldn’t have left without a word, even if he and Derek had agreed to nothing more than sex. He wouldn’t come all that way for one night.

Though it was possible that he’d been in town longer than that and had only approached Derek on his last night.

Derek rubbed a hand down his face, letting his stubble scratch his skin. Stiles was at the Sheriff’s, that was it. Derek just had to track him down. He scooted to the edge of his bed, yawned and stripped off his musty shirt. He pulled another from his closet and yanked on his boots with slack fingers.

Stiles wasn’t at the Sheriff’s.

He wasn’t at Deaton’s.

He wasn’t at the Nemeton.

He’d left. He’d really gone after that without even bothering to wake Derek up to say so.

Derek put his fist through a tree.

“Okay, well, you’re obviously wrong because he wouldn’t have just left.” Erica cracked two knuckles on her left hand, seemingly unruffled. “He did not strike me as the type of guy to get it on with someone and then run in the opposite direction as soon as it was over.”

Derek snarled before he could stop himself. “Except that’s exactly what he did,” he pointed out tersely.

He hadn’t even had to tell Erica. She’d known, and she’d known exactly who it was with too. She tossed her hair, decided despite all factual evidence, “You’re missing something then. Maybe there was an emergency in Boston? Or maybe something happened with another of his,” she waved her hand, “packs?” Derek did not like that terminology. If Stiles was a part of any pack, then it was theirs. She shrugged. “Maybe he hasn’t even gone? You had sex yesterday, it’s conceivable he’s been busy until today.”

“I would know if he were here,” Derek retorted sharply. Stiles’ scent was too recognizable, tripping electricity across whole blocks.

“Hmm,” Erica began thoughtfully, pausing for effect, “then there’s no way that’s him over there with Chris Argent?”

Derek whipped around, peering owlishly at where she was pointing, already leaning towards disbelief. They were downtown, under the guise of doing a perimeter check while in reality they were merely getting far enough away from the pack that they wouldn’t be – even accidentally –
overheard. Apparently they’d stopped across the street from some rinky-dink little bar Derek had never even noticed.

The window was far from clean but, even so, Derek could make out both Stiles and Chris Argent sitting at the counter. Stiles’ back was to him and he was leaning into Chris, who was turned towards him, the expression on his face impossible to make out. It was a clear enough picture that Derek could tell that this wasn’t Stiles’ regular harmless flirting. This was him hitting on Chris in the hopes that it would lead to something.

Derek felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. Stiles and Chris was not okay. He swallowed, admitting to himself in that moment that Stiles and anyone wasn’t okay.

“Derek—”

Derek ignored the warning in Erica’s tone, striding over and ripping the door open.

Stiles turned lazily at the tinkle of the bell and Chris looked up from where he’d been staring at his mouth. Stiles’ expression wasn’t apologetic, didn’t look caught out. His lips curved into a smirk and he hopped off his stool without so much as glancing back at Chris, who’d clearly caught on to the fact that this wasn’t something he should involve himself in and kept his seat.

Stiles brushed past Derek on his way out, knocked into him hard enough that it made Derek’s breath catch and stalked into the alley next to the bar.

Erica was nowhere to be seen and Derek was glad she’d given him privacy for this. Especially as he was half-afraid he might start begging. For what, he wasn’t sure, but the word ‘please’ was on the tip of his tongue. “What the fuck was that?” he spat out, shaking all over and even he wasn’t sure if it was with anger or fear.

What if Derek hadn’t been any good? He thought Stiles must have—but he’d gone to Chris. Left without a word. Derek’s hands clenched into fists. Maybe it hadn’t been what Stiles had imagined after that first time, maybe he hadn’t lived up to the promise Stiles had seen in him.

Stiles was still smirking, almost meanly. “Oh, come on, Derek. You can’t tell me that wasn’t exactly what you expected of me.”

And, actually, it wasn’t.

It should have been. It wouldn’t even register a blip in the long line of shit things that happened to Derek Hale. Only Stiles wasn’t meant to be a part of that, he couldn’t be. Derek swallowed. Because Derek had expected Stiles to stay, expected Stiles to be there, expected Stiles to care because—because—Stiles loved him and Derek—

Derek loved him back. Had for a lot longer than he’d realized.

And that felt like such a miserable thing because so much more importantly than that: Derek trusted him. And Derek didn’t trust anyone. There were other people he loved, his family – even in absentia, his sister Cora, but no one he trusted. Except, apparently, for Stiles.

He trusted Stiles not to hurt him, not if he could help it. And, oh God, Derek had said he’d be able to smell him. And now? Now Stiles’ scent—it was completely absent. Derek’s eyes widened as the realization hit. “You’re not Stiles,” he said on a shallow breath.

Stiles’ smirk grew into a wide grin, looking almost like he was trying to show off every tooth. “Ding, ding, ding,” he crooned slickly, hand coming up to fist in Derek’s hair the second before he slammed Derek’s head as hard as he could into the brick behind him.
Derek’s world went dark, narrowing down on Stiles’ terrifying smile.

Derek’s head was fuzzy, mouth cotton-y, but it was quickly forgotten in favor of the sharp, stinging pain in his wrists and the weight in his lap. His eyes shot open.

Stiles grinned down at him.

No, not Stiles.

Some thing that had stolen his face.

It was so obvious, now that the high of seeing him again had faded. His heartbeat was indecipherable, wasn’t rabbiting inside Derek’s head like the damn tell-tale heart. His scent was absent entirely. If Derek concentrated hard enough then he could get a weak perfume of arousal. And nothing had happened when they’d had sex. There was no eruption of magic, no effect on Stiles’ tattoo.

And Derek hadn’t noticed any of it.

He’d wanted Stiles too much to question the inconsistencies.

He pulled at his wrists but he couldn’t break what had them tethered. Feeling apprehensive, Derek shifted his head back so he could see them – tied to the posts of his bed, wrapped in pure wolfsbane.

He was distracted from it by the heels of Stiles’ feet digging into his thighs painfully. His legs were splayed on either side of Derek’s hips and Stiles was frowning exaggeratedly, leaning in closer to him, hands poised on Derek’s chest. “Aw, you don’t like me anymore?” He thrust down but Derek couldn’t be further from hard. “I’m still the same guy from yesterday,” he said, pouty set to his lips.

Derek felt his stomach turn. He couldn’t believe this thing had stolen his first time with Stiles. The thought made Derek realize that not only had he been sure they were going to have sex, but he’d been sure it was going to happen more than once. “What are you?” he hissed.

Stiles smiled, more warmly, more like Stiles would and Derek turned away from it. “I think you already know,” he said slyly. The words felt like they’d knifed directly into Derek’s gut. “So rare anyone ever realizes. People are happy with the surface, never look much deeper, takes something rather profound between two people to see past the facade.”

Derek couldn’t bring himself to think of that, otherwise he might be sick. This had been something he was meant to experience with Stiles for the first time and instead it had been taken from him by this—this—“Incubus.”

Stiles looked practically giddy. “Oh, smart too. Quite the catch, aren’t you?”

Derek kept from looking at him, staring at the hollow of his own elbow. “Just kill me and get it over with,” he ground out.

Stiles’ voice was wry. “You do know how an Incubus kills its victims, don’t you?” Something wet—Stiles’ tongue—teased the shell of Derek’s ear, licked inside while Derek winced. “Don’t worry, handsome, I’ll make it good for you too.”

“Don’t—” Derek choked on his own words, his horror more like. “Don’t look like him to do it.”
Stiles chuckled against his cheek, raising the hair on Derek’s neck until goosebumps had spread unpleasantly over that entire side of his face. “Just because you know it isn’t real, it doesn’t mean he’s not what you want for this. And as long as you want him, he’s what I’ll look like.”

Derek swallowed, screwing up his face. It was right. It would only ever be Stiles and, at the same time, Stiles was also the worst possible option. A wave of pure disgust rocked his insides as the button of his jeans was undone, the zipper lowered.

“Derek, look at me.”

It was trying to use Stiles’ voice, Stiles’ affection, but it wouldn’t fool him again. If it was going to do this then Derek sure as fuck wasn’t going to make it easy for the thing.

Cold air hit his stomach and warm lips pressed soft kisses to his skin. His muscles jumped at each drag of Stiles’ mouth and the thing was saying, “I had to come back for you, idiot that you are. It was only a matter of time until you realized the mistake you’d made.” Stiles was trailing his tongue up, barely low enough to reach Derek’s abdomen, and Derek’s skin was pebbling in response and it felt good. To be worshipped like this, wanted like this.

Stiles’ hand found the front of his boxers, palmed him through the fabric without pushing for more. “Think about you constantly,” Stiles breathed against his nipple and Derek arched up into his mouth, Stiles’ teeth teasing, shocking before he pulled back, talking against his skin, “think about finishing what we started, about riding you.”

Derek’s legs spread automatically, whimper building in his throat, and he opened his eyes. This wasn’t Stiles. But it looked like him, it said everything Derek wanted Stiles to say, did everything he wanted Stiles to do. “Stiles,” he gasped out.

“Derek, I want you so fucking much.” He said it like he ached with it, like it had taken him over and he couldn’t think of anything else.

The scent was gone though. The heartbeat. It wasn’t enough of him. It wasn’t him and Derek couldn’t give in to this.

Hands yanked at Derek’s pants and he twisted, kneeing the thing hard in the chest.

Stiles doubled over in pain—no, it wasn’t Stiles. It wasn’t even a good imitation. The thing grinned widely, maliciously, and Derek felt panic rise in his chest when it clutched onto his hips.

He closed his eyes as it lunged forward, waiting from some violent token of his oncoming death—a kiss, a bite, a suck.

Nothing came.

Derek opened his eyes, finding Isaac’s wide ones blinking straight into them. Something thin and long, like a skinny shoelace was looped twice around Stiles’ neck, dragging him back off of Derek.

Isaac was panting even though it didn’t seem to be from the effort of holding Stiles at bay, gaze flicking to Derek’s wrists. “It’s not him, right?”

Derek swallowed, shook his head. “Incubus,” he bit out.

Isaac nodded, instinctively tightening the rope around Stiles’ neck while Stiles clawed at the thin string and Isaac’s forearms in turns, trying anything to get him to let go while his eyes bugged.

Derek couldn’t watch it. He focused instead on his wrists and barely even had time to struggle
with the bindings before Scott was clumsily pawing at them, hands burning before he grabbed scissors from the bathroom across the hall and cut through them. He was staring at Derek like he’d never seen him before. “I felt you,” he said dumbly, “felt your distress like it was mine.”

Derek swallowed, cradling the torn skin around his wrists as they were freed. He had an inkling of what that meant but he didn’t want to be wrong about something else that important again.

“How do you kill it?” Isaac puffed out, struggling with a still-flailing Stiles.

Derek shook his head blankly. “I don’t know,” he admitted breathlessly.

Which was when Boyd rushed in and knocked Stiles in the head with his elbow as hard as he could while he was still scrabbling at Isaac. Stiles instantly went limp and Derek could see that what was wrapped around the Incubus’ neck was a thin, shiny string of floss. Boyd stared at him with wide eyes. “When you panic, you fucking panic,” he said with a raise of his lip. It was clearly meant to be a judgment of some kind, only Derek could see evidence of that same panic in Boyd’s expression.

He tried not to feel surprised when Erica, Jackson, Cora and Lydia showed up minutes later. He failed.

They’d all felt it. His panic, his distress, his disgust.

Boyd and Lydia dealt with tying the thing up while Derek called Deaton and told him what they were dealing with.

Cora stood next to him, side-eying him, before saying lowly, carefully – clearly trying to keep the rest of the pack from overhearing. “You’re good, right? You still had your pants on so I’m thinking the bad touch was kept to a minimum?”

“I’m fine,” Derek got out gruffly, tense all over while he waited for the penny to drop.

It took Erica almost ten minutes. One moment she was rummaging through all his cupboards and the next she was stock still, not so much as a twitch coming from her as she froze with the realization. There was nothing to say, nothing to be done. She turned to look at him, eyes torn between fury and empathy and Derek could do nothing but grit his teeth and bear it.

What was done was done and there was no way back.

No one would fight him on cutting Stiles out now, no one would push him any further than Derek wanted to go. His relationship with Stiles was now entirely in his own hands and he got to decide what he wanted from it.

That was fucking terrifying.

Deaton arrived while the Incubus was still unconscious and still wearing Stiles’ face. Isaac asked the question on the tip of Derek’s tongue. “Shouldn’t it have gone back to… whatever the hell its real appearance is by now?”

Deaton shook his head, frowning thoughtfully. “Incubi have no true form. They’re nothing but a mirror for their victim’s desires – a mixture of some low-level telepathy, wish fulfillment and pheromones.” Pointedly, none of the pack looked Derek’s way. “Until it chooses another to feed from, it will look like this.” Deaton seemed to be purposefully shying away from the name.

Derek preferred that.
It was bad enough that he’d had to come to terms with the fact that Stiles was what he wanted – in every interpretation of the word – but now he had to share that realization with his pack almost as soon as he’d had it.

“Incubi are much like Erinyes, Yulungur and Roc, in that they can all be exorcised,” Deaton explained, seemingly to keep everyone distracted from the revelation about the extent of Derek’s feelings for Stiles. He knelt in front of the chair the Incubus was now strapped into. He settled a heavy tome on his knee, licked his thumb, and started flipping. “The rites, the cleansing fire, doesn’t work on demons,” he said, almost amused, letting out a knowing breath as he found his page, “but it does on incarnations of strong emotion – lust, fury, vengeance, and pain. Which is why Incubi, along with the others, are often classified as demons, though they have no common ancestors.”

“ Wait, so,” Isaac started slowly, “if you’re exorcising it, does that mean that it’s possessing the real Stiles?” His hands flexed a little guiltily, like if he’d known that he never would have pulled it off Derek the way he had.

Deaton frowned sympathetically, like he knew the path Isaac’s thoughts were walking. It wasn’t Stiles though and Derek knew it. Deaton confirmed it a second later. “Not at all. I’m not exorcising it from a human, I’m exorcising it from a plane of existence. As this is not one its meant to be on.”

Scott cleared his throat, said roughly, “We all felt it, when it was attacking Derek, like a burst of fear and somehow, instinctively, I knew it belonged to Derek.”

The rest of them nodded or murmured quiet agreements.

Deaton smiled, small, pleased. “What you felt was the beginnings of a pack bond, something that only happens when the members of a pack have grown close enough for a link to form – an emotional and physical bond.”

Derek could feel the shock in the room and, under the guise of shifting his position, Deaton stood and added in an undertone, so the others would know the words weren’t meant for them, “It’s one that couldn’t have formed unless all members participated in that bond.”

Which meant not only did the pack trust Derek but Derek trusted them. And the more he considered it, the more it made sense. They’d all come running at the first hint of danger, even Lydia who hadn’t been able to feel his need, and Isaac hadn’t even questioned whom to trust when it came down to Derek and Stiles.

He was their Alpha, he had their trust.

More surprisingly, they had his. But he couldn’t deny that they’d earned it.

“So,” Erica interrupted his thoughts, voice hard, “you say the magic words and this thing disappears?”

Deaton nodded. “After being cleansed with fire, yes, that is the hope.”

He said the magic words – a lot of them – while the thing wearing Stiles’ face writhed and hissed and Deaton asked for a match when the words were done and Derek couldn’t watch this. He stood outside his apartment door, back leaned up against it and breathed deeply just as the screeching started. The smell of burnt flesh followed almost immediately.

It wasn’t real. He reiterated it more firmly. That wasn’t Stiles. He was safe and hundreds of
miles away and Derek—Derek wanted him, loved him, trusted him. And had no idea what that meant. He felt like he was perpetually running five steps behind Stiles, unable to catch up. By the time he’d realized he was attracted to him and willing to act on it, Stiles had wanted more than that. And now this, the Incubus, it spoke to his unbroken record of having shit things happen, it kicked off this thing with Stiles in the worst way imaginable.

It was a sign, if anything was. A sign to give it up, call it a lost cause, move on. And Derek was kind of the king of pushing down his emotions, of not dealing and he could walk away from this mostly unscathed. Honestly he shouldn’t even still be standing, let alone considering—

He pulled up Stiles’ number, having stolen it back from Erica nearly half a year ago. He’d never put it to use, stared at it, thought about it, but never pushed that button. He’d just… he’d felt an incalculable amount safer having it. It was only labeled ‘Stiles’ now and, before he could talk himself out of it, he sent the message:

*Come back to Beacon Hills. Please.*

Because he thought he might be ready for that, for better or worse. He closed his eyes, breathed deep, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

The knock at the door was quick and sharp and Derek left it to Isaac to answer it because whomever was on the other side already sounded annoyed and that was not something Derek wanted to deal with this early in the morning. Isaac hadn’t even crossed the room before the wards dropped like a ton of bricks and the door flew open.

Stiles saw Isaac first, hair buzzed, energy frenetic and electric scent crackling in the air. Everything about him seemed to add to the power he already practically embodied. He shoved his phone into Isaac’s face with a scowl. “He said please.” Derek must have made some helpless sound because Stiles whipped around, redirecting instantly. He stepped up to Derek and shook it in his face instead. He was thrumming with adrenaline, sweat beading on his forehead, and Derek barely pulled his eyes away long enough to catch Isaac darting out the door behind them. “You said please,” he reiterated, exploding out with a sigh, “I get out of bumfuck Kansas, go back to the land where cell phone towers exist and find a ‘please’ waiting for me. So what is it? Because this,” he tapped the screen of his phone, which had gone dark since he started waving it around, “has got disaster written all over it.”

Derek blinked, said blankly, “You came.” It had been nearly two weeks. He’d stopped expecting him to show after one.

Stiles threw up his hands. “You said ‘please.’” He gestured wildly, like that was some universal sign of impending doom. “What fresh hell is it, huh? What exactly am I walking into and tell me you have some idea here.” He rubbed his forehead and Derek didn’t know how he had ever confused an Incubus with the real thing. Already Stiles’ heartbeat was thumping away wildly in Derek’s head, his scent reaching out like a physical force and making Derek’s skin tingle, and the way he moved, wild but fluid, it couldn’t be recreated.

The Incubus had been nothing like that. Nothing like him.
“Because,” Stiles ground out, drawing Derek’s attention back, “I kind of got the feeling you wouldn’t ask me back here for anything short of the Hellmouth opening and considering I took care of your Hellmouth the last time I was here, that means—”

“It was an Incubus,” Derek cut him off. Stiles fell back a few steps, standing in Derek’s doorway and Derek rushed to assure him, “Deaton already took care of it.”

Stiles let out a huff of breath – close to but somehow very far from – a laugh. “Oh. So.” He seemed to roll the words around in his mouth before he said carefully, “This is you coming to terms with the fact that you’re in love with me.”

Derek’s limbs felt heavier, shock making them hard to move. “You knew I was.” It came out flat, not a question at all. Because of course Stiles had known.

Stiles shrugged, expression going a bit wry even if it wasn’t genuine. “You seemed to be the only one who wasn’t in on it.”

Derek came to the realization slowly. “Yet you still left.”

Stiles turned away from him, letting out a harsh breath and walking halfway down Derek’s hall, out of his loft. He spun back, stabbed into his own chest with blunt fingertips and burst out, “Did you miss the part where I said you loving me made me feel like shit?” He gestured between them. “I can’t imagine someone who wanted this less than you.”

He remembered everything Stiles had said to him every time he’d walked away. He’d said Derek looked at him like he was losing something, treated everything like it was a monster out to get him. And maybe that was true once.

It wasn’t now.

Stiles sat down at the top of his apartment building’s stairs with a heavy sigh, back to Derek.

Derek hesitated for a half-second before sitting down next to him, not so close that they were touching but close enough that Derek could feel the warmth of his skin. “I knew it wasn’t you. The Incubus.”

That got Stiles to look at him and he couldn’t quite hide his surprise, brows raising. “How?”

“It tried to crush me,” he got out, hands clenching into fists on his knees, “wearing your face. It stopped being believable the second it did.”

Stiles froze, breath catching and it took him a long moment to breathe out, “Derek—”

And even though Derek knew Stiles got what he wasn’t saying, he wanted to say it. To prove he could, to be sure there was no chance for this to be misunderstood. “I trust you.” Stiles gaped, mouth fumbling for a response, but Derek wasn’t finished. “I trust my pack.” This wasn’t just a flash in the pan, an exception that proved the rule, Scott had been right – he’d been getting better, thanks to Stiles. “And I still believe in monsters, and I believe that some of them are out to get me, but they’re rarer than I thought. Not everything is wearing a mask and waiting to strike.”

Stiles’ hands unclenched and he let out a choked, disbelieving little laugh, eyes warm and bright. “Look at you,” he said softly, fondly, “becoming a real wolf, an Alpha with a pack he can actually lean on. Took you long enough.”

Derek watched him, watched Stiles shift his elbows on his knees, fold his arms together and
breathe, watched him and didn’t try to pretend he was doing anything else. He shouldn’t have called Stiles here. He should’ve done what he’d been doing since Laura died, keeping himself isolated, keeping himself safe, keeping himself from caring. But there wasn’t an ounce of regret in him, sitting next to Stiles on the stair and watching his eyelashes flutter, closing his eyes and feeling the pack at the edges of his awareness.

Derek wondered if Stiles was telling himself the same thing, that he had to stop showing up for this emotionally stunted werewolf who would never realize how lucky he had it, if he was telling himself he shouldn’t have come.

If he’d do it again anyway.

Stiles sighed, shifted, and the plaid sleeve of his overshirt fell back. Around his wrist was Laura’s bracelet. Derek blinked at it in pure disbelief. “You still have it,” he said blankly. But that was impossible. It had to be. If he’d been wearing it right along then—“It should’ve been burned to cinders.”

Stiles’ eyes went wide and he flushed a slight pink as embarrassment crept up to his ears. “I wasn’t wearing it,” he admitted in a murmur. He rubbed the hand with the bracelet over the dome of his skull, brushing back and forth over the cropped cut. He shrugged, saying lowly, “I was mad at you.”

Derek’s lips spread in a slow smile, like he was realizing he was happy with every new bit it stretched. “You’re not mad at me now?” he asked, brow perked.

Stiles pursed his lips, like he was considering not answering. Finally he turned to look at Derek and said bluntly, “When I woke up this morning I had no idea I’d be seeing you.”

Derek felt his heart stutter in his chest. Which meant Stiles had put it on this morning because he put it on every morning. Derek had told Stiles that he trusted him, Stiles had told Derek that he was a presence in his life even when he wasn’t a presence in his life.

“It took our first time,” Derek blurted out, ruining the moment, and he didn’t want to say it but it wasn’t exactly something he could justify Stiles not knowing. So he said it quick, like snapping a bone to kickstart the healing process.

Stiles whipped around to look at him and his eyes… the whites of them were still there but the iris wasn’t. His pupils were the size of bullet holes, black as tar. He took in a sharp cut of air, looked away. “It took a first time.” And his voice was low, twisted, dark. Derek had never heard anything like it before. When Stiles looked back up, he was blinking rapidly but his eyes were still a dark gray rather than their familiar brown.

Derek swallowed, throat working hard over the name, “Stiles?”

Stiles shook his head. Breathed deep. He glanced back, caught Derek’s gaze and his eyes were recognizable again, honeyed and strained, but warm. His lips twitched and his fingers brushed the line of Derek’s jaw, smoothing down his stubble, thumb caressing his lower lip. “Trust me,” he said hoarsely, “by the time I’m through with you, you won’t remember it.”

Derek licked his lip. “You plan to be through with me?”

Stiles blinked, the dazed expression falling away to be replaced by something less open. He snorted to himself, hand rubbing against his hair, and admitted, “Still not sure I plan to start with you.”
“Okay,” Derek said after a moment. He got that just because he trusted Stiles, it didn’t mean Stiles trusted him. He hadn’t given Stiles a lot of reasons to think he’d stick this out and he got having to earn credit. “I’m not backing down from this,” Derek told him firmly. Stiles’ brow had furrowed, curious, and Derek said, “When you’re here, things don’t seem so dark.” Which was markedly true, Stiles had been there at some of his lowest moments and yet, looking back at them, all Derek could remember about them was how his pack had worked, how well Stiles had seemed to fit in it. He shrugged. “Be stupid of me not to want to keep you around.”

Stiles’ lips curved up into a slow smile. He shook his head, huffed out, “I hate that you can surprise me.”

Derek smiled back. “No, you don’t.”

Stiles snorted, hauling himself up with the handrail and he said wryly, “Maybe not,” before he was bounding back down the stairs.

Derek grinned after him, sitting on the steps until dawn broke.

Cora had left barely a minute earlier when Stiles threw himself back through Derek’s door. Stalked up to him. Grabbed both sides of his face and slotted their mouths together. His hands pressed too hard, his mouth too eager and he pulled back with a breathy little laugh. “I feel like I’m trying to outdo lust personified.” He dropped his hands, spread them helplessly. “A literal sex-monster, I don’t know how you win that.”

Derek tilted his head to the side, staring at the flush on Stiles’ cheeks, the heave of his chest, the scent of him that almost smelled like it was poised somehow. “You already did.” It wasn’t a placation, Stiles was actually Stiles so the game was already over. “You came back,” Derek pointed out.

Stiles rolled his eyes. “I never wasn’t going to come back,” he said, as though it was obvious. He shrugged. “Not sure how prepared for this you are but,” he clicked his tongue, “a teenage boy did live in my room for a few years and he was always prepared.” He turned around, waved Derek off over his shoulder and said cheekily, “Don’t worry, I remember where the bedroom is.”

He was halfway down the hall when Derek caught up to him, spun him around, kissed him hard. Stiles’ mouth opened and it was like lightning hit, blowing out the circuit breakers in Derek’s brain, and Derek smiled clumsily into the press of their mouths. Stiles’ hands slid up into his hair, thumb pressing into Derek’s scalp and a soothing feeling spread out from the point of contact. Stiles surged up against him, battered at his defenses like a tidal wave and all Derek could do – all Derek wanted to do – was hold on, find Stiles’ hips and grip tight.

Stiles let Derek walk him backwards, let him take most of his weight. He closed his bedroom door behind them and Stiles pressed him up against it, palming Derek through his jeans with large, lazy strokes until Derek could feel it like Stiles was touching skin.

Because he was.

The fabric under his hand had gone thinner, stringy, a hole actually forming where Stiles was touching. “Stiles,” Derek gasped out, thighs quivering as the sensation only got more intense the more fabric wore away.

Stiles looked down, blinked. He bit down on his lower lip, snorted, eyes dancing violet. “Er, sorry.” He did not sound sorry in the least. “Eager might be a thing that’s happening here.”
Derek tipped Stiles’ chin up, wanted his mouth back, wanted to see Stiles reflected back at him.

Stiles turned his face into Derek’s forearm, mouthing his way back up his arm until he found Derek’s lips again. His tongue rolled into Derek’s mouth and Derek brought his hands up to pull Stiles closer, finding fire under his touch. Stiles had shed the plaid and his skin burned beneath the slide of Derek’s hands.

Stiles dragged his mouth away, licked at Derek’s lip before hauling his t-shirt off up over his head. Derek followed his example, kicking out of his shoes and socks next while Stiles did the same. He didn’t have much modesty left, Stiles had made sure of that, and Derek actually snorted as he slipped out of his ruined jeans.

He looked back up and stared. The Incubus had reflected the way Derek remembered Stiles’s body, not the way it actually was. The tattoo had spread to his front now, curled around from the back and Derek placed a hand flat over Stiles’ heart to get him to stand still. Bright red lines swirled around his nipples, spread over his sides and touched the edges of his stomach, painted on his skin in willowy brush strokes.

The shape of it wasn’t geometric anymore, wasn’t all sharp edges. The lines had softened, looked less tribal and more wondrous.

“Turn around,” Derek said gruffly, not bothering to move his hand so he stroked across the warm skin as it was presented to him. The phoenix no longer looked static, seemed to be moving in tandem with the stretch and tense of Stiles’ muscles, feathers ruffling with the prickle of hair on Stiles’ skin. It wasn’t a symbol anymore, now it was… something of its own. Something alive.

“Stiles,” Derek breathed out, running his fingertips over the puff of the bird’s chest on Stiles’ back, swearing it felt as soft as plumage.

Stiles let out a huff of a laugh, turning back around. “Red seems to be its color, huh?” His expression was amused and Derek had imagined this all wrong. Stiles wasn’t demanding – because of course he wouldn’t be. He’d never forced Derek any father than he wanted to go. He wasn’t so eager that he couldn’t slow down and make fun of himself. Or Derek.

This was better. This was real. Beyond his wildest imagination.

Derek got onto his bed, teased at the elastic of his boxers because Stiles was watching him with eyes that were flashing dark fire. He took a mindless step closer and Derek hooked his thumb in the waistband of them and dragged them down.

Stiles swallowed reflexively, reaching out a hand to steady himself and finding Derek’s ankle. His fingers curled around it easily. Something tickled the top of Derek’s foot but he only had eyes for Stiles, for the way he was dragging in air like he couldn’t get enough of it. “You okay?” Derek asked carefully, wiggling his toes.

Stiles’ eyes stopped their slow drag up his body and snapped to his face. His gaze tracked Derek’s and a slow grin spread over his cheeks as he crawled onto the bed, perching himself in Derek’s lap after settling the heavy, hot weight of Derek’s cock in his hand, stroking evenly but slowly between them, under the arch of his own jeans. “Yeah,” he said finally, looking almost giddy when Derek’s eyes rolled back because the first brush of Stiles’ fingers had been intense, made his muscles flutter, but this was more. This was Stiles’ unnaturally warm hand, the tight seal of his fingers and Derek couldn’t thrust because Stiles’ knees were pinning his hips so he was helpless do anything other than suffer the torturous, leisurely pace of his strokes. “It’s just—“ Stiles clicked his tongue, “you love me so much, it’s almost disgusting.” Derek stared up at him, scowled at the huge grin he was wearing and halfheartedly tried to buck him off. Stiles tsked. “Look at you,
there are practically hearts in your eyes. You look like you might vomit rainbows. You look like…” he trailed off, eyes going warm and fond and Derek knew he couldn’t find the word to describe him and Derek knew what he meant anyway.

The closest Derek had come didn’t quite encapsulate Stiles either but he choked down a swallow, veins in his neck working hard and hissed out, “Stiles, you’re—you’re awesome.” He hoped Stiles understood how he meant it, how much he meant it.

Stiles leaned in and it made his jeans brush the tip of Derek’s cock, hand still working. He dragged a long, wanting kiss out of Derek’s mouth mid-moan. “You get that I think that about you too, right?” he asked softly when he’d pulled back, nosing into Derek’s chin. He caught the stubble between his teeth and tugged. “Derek. You’re still standing.” His eyelashes brushed Derek’s earlobe. “Somehow you found a way to let me in, to let your entire pack in, when everything says you should’ve been done when it came to that.” Stiles found his hand, his own sweaty and fumbling and threading their fingers together clumsily and off-center. “You get how amazing that is, right?”

“I thought—I thought I wasn’t doing it fast enough,” Derek said gruffly, squeezing back against Stiles’ grip, slowly lifting his hips up into the circle of his hand, the pleasure like a low-level thrum between them now, “or well enough for you.”

Stiles laughed, accused, “Because you’re an idiot. Or I am. Someone is. Potentially both of us are.” He sat up in Derek’s lap again and said, “I didn’t think you could do this and I’m,” he shook his head, gripped Derek’s dick that much tighter, “I’m ‘abandon people midsentence, make scenes in airports, wear your douchebaggy rope bracelet every day’ head over heels in love with you.” He shrugged. “I didn’t know how to hide that, obviously, and I kind of figured that’s what you needed me to do.”

Derek laughed for no other reason than that he was stupidly, perfectly happy. “You made scenes?” he teased, slowly rolling his hips, enough that Stiles had to ride the crest of them.

“Scenes,” Stiles reiterated firmly. He bit at Derek’s jaw. “Multiple.”

Derek wouldn’t have guessed it, wouldn’t have known, and that’s why this was perfect. He untangled their fingers, smoothed a palm over the nape of Stiles’ neck, dragging up over his buzzed hair while Stiles rubbed back into it. Derek grinned, said on a heavy breath, “You should fuck me probably.”

Stiles’ hand stopped lazily stroking him, not trying to get Derek off so much as he was trying to keep up a constant pleasure. He rolled his lips into his mouth and countered, “You should try not to look terrified by the prospect.”

Derek shrugged, admitted easily, “I am terrified.” And that wasn’t something he’d ever said out loud before. It took a second for it to even strike him as odd.

Stiles swallowed, admitting slowly, “We do that and I’m pretty sure that means this is a thing, a thing where I might start to expect other things.”

Derek grinned, grabbed Stiles’ hand and rested his mouth at the center of his palm. “Do I look terrified now?” he asked, brows perked and challenging.

Stiles grinned, reaching into his pocket and revealing that teenage boy’s stash of lube. “I’ve intuited that you’ve never done this before,” he said in his best Deaton impression. It was creepily accurate.
Derek snapped his jaws at him. “Doesn’t mean I don’t know what I want.”

Stiles conceded the point, popping the cap of the lube.

Derek interrupted. “You are not naked.”

Stiles stared down at his jeans. “What are those doing there?” It was said so incredulously that Derek couldn’t help but chuckle, feeling embarrassed because it had been such an obvious brand of humor, which normally wouldn’t have made him crack so much as a smile. Stiles snapped the top closed, dropped the lube and popped open the button on his jeans. He looked up to find Derek watching him. “Oh you are into this. You totally want to see me naked.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

Stiles, of course, took that opportunity to inch his pants down.

Derek’s nails were starting to lengthen as the anticipation clenched in his gut and he snarled, eyes flashing red. “Do you like these jeans, Stiles? Because there’s a very good chance I’m going to shred them.”

Stiles grinned, hooked his thumbs in the sides and pulled them off in one smooth movement.

It was better than Derek had expected, seeing him hard, knowing that Stiles wanted him, knowing that Derek was what had gotten him so worked up. He didn’t know much in the realm of dick-dom but he suspected Stiles’ was pretty fucking great. And Derek said the first thought that came to mind, “Really glad your tattoo does not spread all the way to your dick.”

Stiles threw his head back and laughed. “Dude, that fucker shifts and it hurts. My fingers are crossed that no God is that cruel.” His mouth quirked into a half-smirk. “Actually,” he wiggled his hand, “my fingers are busy feeling you up and feeling you… in.”

Derek looked away, almost annoyed with himself that he was turned on by this. “This is not sexy. You are not sexy,” he told Stiles… and his dick. “I have no idea how you’ve ever gotten laid before.”

“A series of flukes,” Stiles assured him, pressing his grinning mouth to Derek’s, thighs pushing up under Derek’s as he leaned over him.

Derek kissed him back lazily, let Stiles’ tongue shock its way across the roof of his mouth, the slackness of his lips making it easy for Derek to get them between his teeth. The barometer in the room seemed to drop, air going thick, and that was all the warning he got before Stiles’ cock was brushing against his. He arched into it automatically, the feeling making his mouth go shocky as it fell open.

Stiles used the reflexive movement of Derek’s hips to bring him down on a slick finger.

Derek’s eyes shot open, every muscle in his body clenching automatically. A heavy, warm hand smoothed over his abdomen and he slowly started to relax. Derek grabbed at it, threading their fingers together and resting them over his chest, eyes flickering into red and out again.

Stiles pulled back out after barely reaching the second knuckle. He pressed his thumb to Derek’s hole, sinking in with the tip before easing back out, watching Derek quiver in response. Which was just cruel.

“Stiles,” Derek ground out.
Stiles blinked up at him, almost like he’d forgotten Derek was there. Which would have been truly impressive. He offered a cheeky sort of grin and teased at the rim with the pad of his finger. Derek would have been embarrassed by the way his hips twitched into it at even the slight hint of pressure if he wasn’t so fucking annoyed. Stiles pressed in with his thumb again and it wasn’t even close to enough.

“Stiles, would you just fucking—”

Stiles pulled back and thrust all the way in with his middle finger and Derek felt the breath punch out of his chest, thighs spreading wider as he flexed back into it. Fuck, that felt good, felt untainted by anything anyone else had ever done to him. Stiles thrust back in with two fingers after seeing how well he took the first and a wanting, constant rumble built in Derek’s diaphragm, almost like a growl but lower. He wasn’t sure if Stiles could hear it but he knew he could feel it through the hand Derek was still holding to his chest.

Stiles stroked in, pulled back out and stretched the rim of Derek’s hole with insistent fingers and Derek needed him to stop begging off, needed him to start thrusting into him with more force behind it. Stiles worked him up, worked him open, until he was pressing in with four fingers, stretching Derek so wide and stuffing him so full that he felt he might burst. But even that didn’t stop him from being careful, from letting the pressure build only to have it drop off unsatisfied.

“Stiles, I’m ready,” he ground out. The words came out half-stupid, dragging past fangs and Derek hadn’t even realized he’d shifted, had been so focused on the ache inside of him that every other sense had fallen away.

Stiles swallowed roughly, going for pat but too breathless and gruff to manage it. “Forgive me if I don’t think you have any idea what you’re talking about.”

Derek waited for Stiles to pull his fingers back again, slid his hand out of Stiles’ grip and grabbed him by the hips. He clenched hard enough to bruise, trying to keep his claws from biting in. He slammed Stiles down on the bed next to him, throwing a leg over him and sinking down on his dick.

“Holy—fucking—shit,” Stiles burst out, eyes springing up with standing water while Derek puffed out shallow breaths.

It was intense, a thousand times more… more everything than he’d expected and he felt whole and dazed but good. He looked down at Stiles, his heartbeat exceptionally strong as Derek watched him through red eyes. “Hi,” he said stupidly.

Stiles snorted, hands on Derek’s thighs, forcefully keeping him still. He eased one away, like he was afraid Derek would start moving if he wasn’t holding on, clicked open the lube again and said gently, “Lift up slowly, okay?”

Derek nodded, he flexed his legs, stomach muscles jumping as he raised up. He sunk back down when the pressure of Stiles’ hand grew heavier on his thigh and he could feel the difference. Stiles was slicker now.

He squeezed Derek’s thighs, asked with a laugh, “How you doing, Colombo?”

The muscles in Derek’s legs were shocky and he could feel them shaking. He let his weight settle more fully and Stiles groaned as Derek took another inch. It didn’t hurt so much as it felt like it shouldn’t fit, like at any moment he was going to stress himself too much. He barely raised up the next time, taking it slow, getting used to the feel of something moving inside him and figuring out
how to flex his hips as much as he raised them.

Derek’s vision felt spotty, head fuzzy with the effort and the bone-deep feeling of *good* when Stiles started to move with him, hips rolling up with every raise of Derek’s.

Derek’s cock twitched and he leaked precome onto Stiles’ stomach because, holy fucking God, that had felt incredible. Stiles did it again and again until Derek wasn’t moving, just poised over Stiles. Stiles’ hips snapped up into him and Derek moaned, eyes prickling, claws twisting into his sheets while he folded himself over Stiles’ chest.

Their mouths found each other’s messily, panting against each other’s lips, dragging their tongues together. Stiles grabbed Derek’s ass, clenching in as he drove up more forcefully, sending jolt after intense jolt through Derek’s body while Derek grunted over him. His cock was *throbbing* and his face was red and Stiles’ body heat was making everything between them slick and slippery and Derek’d had no idea that sex could be like this.

Stiles growled, eyes flashing the same red of his tattoo, and then he was rolling them over, yanking Derek’s hips back onto his cock, folding him over and pounding in. The angle made that spark of pleasure in Derek easier to hit and Stiles battered at it relentlessly. Derek tensed, arched, and came as soon as Stiles wrapped a hand around his cock.

He dragged and pulled at Stiles with stupid, slack fingers, making Stiles get deep, making him ride out Derek’s orgasm before tripping into his own with a roll of thunder, the scent of it strong in the air. Derek groaned low at the feel of it and his body felt pushed hard, past its limits, loose and wrung out and he couldn’t stop Stiles collapsing on top of him.

His heartbeat was racing, driving him to distraction, but it was nothing compared to Stiles and the wild trip-skip of his. He couldn’t catch his breath, felt half-alive and drained but so beyond *fulfilled*.

Stiles pulled out of him carefully, whining as he did, and shifted so only his arm was left draped over Derek’s chest.

Derek stroked the warm skin lazily, the tips of his claws making it pebble, and he looked down at Stiles’ forearm through heavy-lidded eyes. “*Stiles.*” Stiles made a groggy, heavy sound that Derek wanted to keep. “*Stiles,*” he tried again.

Stiles huffed, made an inquisitive noise in the back of his throat but didn’t open his eyes, settling in more bonelessly on the bed.

“*Stiles?*”

“I fucking needed that,” he slurred out, rubbing his nose into the sheets.

“*Stiles?*”

Stiles lifted his head, brow perked high up on his forehead.

Derek looked down at his arm pointedly.

Stiles raised up further, blinking. The ink of his tattoo, which usually twined down around his arm, tracing the bulge of his veins and conforming to the contours of his skin was only visible on the flat of his forearm. Rather than curving *in*, it stretched *out*, onto *Derek’s* skin. And it was easy to see they were wings now, now they had the space to spread out. The spine of it was still on Stiles’ arm but the feathers hanging down were on *Derek’s* chest.
“Huh,” Stiles said, like it was only worth the small puff of air. He leaned in closer and it moved his arm, which dragged the tattoo on Derek’s skin, which made Derek shiver in response. Stiles frowned thoughtfully. “Well that’s new.” Derek glowered at him and Stiles grinned, resting his chin on Derek’s shoulder. “What does it feel like?” he asked around a yawn. His eyelids fluttered and his chin tilted, cheek pressing into Derek.

Derek smiled, rubbed a hand back over Stiles’ still-cropped hair and breathed, “Like you.”

He was still there when Derek woke up.

The warm, lazy weight of him had sunk further into Derek’s side and the tattoo had retreated back to being inked solely onto him. Derek didn’t know if he was relieved or disappointed. He stroked up the heated skin of Stiles’ back, lulling in and out of a doze, enjoying the completeness of the moment.

Stiles yawned hugely before opening his eyes, pressing his mouth to Derek’s nipple with a lazy sort of intent.

Derek’s lips twitched and Stiles smiled when he saw he was being watched and Derek said, “You should stay. Here.”

Stiles tensed and Derek’s stomach dropped, because that was answer enough. Stiles licked his lower lip carefully, sitting up, sheet tenting over his knees as he brought his hands down to loop around them. He rubbed at his forehead, Derek helpless to do anything but watch him while he trailed his fingers over the new paths of Stiles’ tattoo. “My life’s in Boston, my doctorate is in Boston,” he said heavily, like this was a conversation he’d practiced before. He shrugged. “Maybe when that’s finished—”

Derek sat up too, dragged a hand up the curve of Stiles’ spine, facing his shoulder. “When will that be?” he asked instantly.

Stiles’ eyes flickered back to him. “About another two years,” he said, voice stretched and thin.

Derek pressed his mouth to Stiles’ shoulder, not kissing as much as holding it there. “I could move,” he suggested. He didn’t particularly want to but he would. All Derek knew for sure was that two years without this – that wasn’t happening.

Stiles snorted but it sounded more sad than amused. “No, you couldn’t,” he said bluntly. “Your pack is a fragile, pink-skinned, disgusting baby bird.” He smirked, hiding it in his bicep while he stared at Derek. “They still need you to regurgitate nutrients directly into their ineffectual little
Derek felt cracked inside and tried not to show it. “Vivid imagery,” he said dryly, hands slowly clenching into fists. “Thank you.”

Just like that, it had gone to shit. Derek should have expected it. Would have expected it, once upon a time.

The silence lingered between them, seeming almost malicious, until Stiles broke it. “You know,” he said slowly and Derek swallowed, watching Stiles’ mouth form the words, wanting any answer to this, “there used to be a big house in the heart of the Preserve, perfect for a pack of werewolves.” Derek’s heart clenched in his chest and Stiles kept up the careful wording. “It was destroyed over a decade ago but I think… I think two years might be enough time to rebuild it.”

Derek couldn’t quite believe what Stiles was saying. Because that was. That was forever. No more. No less. Derek said against Stiles’ skin, “I build you a house and you’ll come back?”

Stiles grinned into his own shoulder – mouth close to Derek’s – and shrugged, eyes dancing. “You build me a home and there’s only one place I’ll belong, right?”

Derek was going to kill them. He had no idea why he’d agreed to let his pack help rebuild the house when he knew they hardly had a firm grasp of what the word meant. He watched Jackson throw a piece of plaster at Erica, which hit her in the thigh, because they were fighting. Again. Because they were idiots. Still. Scott and Isaac were doing nothing and Boyd and Lydia were ten seconds away from coming to blows. Peter was ignoring all of them. They might be a pack – capable of bringing down threats and actually bonded together, but they were still Derek’s little assholes at heart.

It was, somehow, oddly reassuring.

He sighed, about to break it up between Jackson and Erica, when Cover Girl blasted out from his pocket. Derek’s eyes were already pinched in a grin as he fished it out. He had one text from, ‘The Light of your Life, you Sappy Fuck.’ The message inside was not at all unexpected given the sender.

‘I’ve found someone else.’

Derek rolled his eyes, about to shove the thing back in his pocket when an attachment followed it. He laughed out loud. A woman who was clearly in her seventies and smiling benignly was staring out of the screen at him. Derek’s phone buzzed twice more with the succinct messages:

Prettier than you.

Less baggage by about a train car.

Sadly, Derek had come to expect this. Maybe even enjoyed it if he was remarkably honest with himself. They’d seen each other only last weekend but already it felt like it had been months. Another attachment followed after a minute, this one a picture of Stiles’ hand wrapped around a coffee mug with a leaf design drawn in white on the dark surface.

She also makes leaves in my coffee with the perfect amount of cream. Perhaps a bit cruel to tell you this way, but it’s kaput between us.

Derek snorted, stepped back far enough that he could get the whole skeleton of the house in frame
and snapped the picture. He sent it off with the message: I’m building you a house. It’ll have the perfect amount of house. Checkmate.

It took a full few minutes for Stiles to respond but, when he did, it was with a serious:

Looks like home.

And, yeah, it did. Derek shoved his phone back into his pocket, tilted his head back and breathed deep.

Cora nudged him in the shoulder, squinting against the sun, and asked curiously, “Derek?”

Derek held onto the bright flash of Stiles’ grin, the natural disaster in his scent and the hummingbird-quick thump of his heartbeat. He shifted, hands into paws, nose into muzzle, skin into fur and ran.

☆ gorgeous, perfect, amazing fic gifset
(which was eaten in the great nsfw purge... but not before i cloned my blog; suck it, tumbles!)
by eeames ☆
Chapter End Notes

**Dub-con warning:** Everyone fully consents to intercourse at the time it takes place, though Derek later finds out that Stiles wasn't Stiles and never would have consented had he known.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING. I only want the best of the best, soldiers.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!