

Pretty Much Normal

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Pretty Much Normal

by [eldee](#)

Summary

"I can't believe you've only been back four days and already need my help," Stiles says as he sweeps into the loft. "No, wait, scratch that. I totally believe it."

(Or, five times Derek and Stiles shared a room because of a supernatural threat, and one time there was no threat at all.)

Notes

Hope you enjoy, sherunswithwolves! I had a blast writing this. Happy holidays! :)

While it's written post-S3A, it jumps ahead a year to when the pack are all seniors (or, at least, that's the timeline I'm using -- canonical timeline is a bit confusing.) There are some very vague Season 3B spoilers here that came out of NYCC, but if you haven't been paying attention then you probably won't even notice. Also written before the majority of promotion for Season 3B, so I'm sure it'll be Jossed soon enough anyway. :)

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1. The Loft

"I can't believe you've only been back four days and already need my help," Stiles says as he sweeps into the loft. "No, wait, scratch that. I totally believe it."

"In my defense," Derek says as he slides the door shut, "that thing had moved in here while I was away. It's taken up residence in the night shadows." Derek's surprised to see Stiles; when he'd spoken to Deaton earlier, he assumed Deaton would be coming over to help out with the little problem in the loft.

"Hm, yeah," Stiles says, walking over to the couch and dropping his backpack onto it, "that's actually pretty likely."

"Not *likely*," Derek says, rolling his eyes. "That's what's happened."

"Right," Stiles says absently, backpack now opened as he digs around in it. He triumphantly pulls out a large glass jar. "Don't you worry, I'll catch it."

Derek points to the jar. "With that? Really?"

Stiles pulls off the wooden lid and flips it over. There's a ring of mountain ash lacquered onto the bottom. "Once it's in here, it won't get out, and Deaton knows how to dispose of them properly. He's the one who sent me over here after you called. We know the haps with these things."

"How do you know?" Derek doesn't want to admit it, but he's mildly impressed at the pack's quick action when he couldn't find any substantial info on his own.

Stiles shrugs, and it's almost disconcerting how casual he is with all of this. "We had a small infestation of them about four months ago. Guess we missed one."

"Do you deal with this kind of thing a lot?"

"Um," Stiles says, scratching the back of his head. "Yeah, guess you could say we sorta do. A lot."

"Sorta," Derek replies, raising an eyebrow. "A lot."

"Okay, well, yes, all the time," Stiles says, splaying his arms out to the side, nearly fumbling the jar before he catches himself and pulls it in closer to his body again. Derek sighs, and Stiles puts it down carefully on the coffee table. "It's, like, okay last year around Halloween was sort of the worst, right after--" Stiles waves his hand to encompass all the horrible things that went down last fall, and Derek is glad for it because he doesn't need to hear it all again "- but we're finding our groove. We're dealing."

"Groove."

Stiles nods. "And dealing."

"Well, okay then," Derek says. He points at the jar again. "So what are we dealing with now?"

Despite the fact he looks really tired, with dark circles under his eyes and showing less energy than he used to, Stiles' face brightens at that. Like he's clinging onto knowledge to get himself by. "We haven't pinpointed the exact origin of it, since it sort of happens in different lore all over the world, and Beacon Hills has become a melting pot in this colonized world of globalization for the supernaturally inclined."

Derek blinks.

"Dude," Stiles says, grinning wide, "second week of senior year and I am killing it in all my subjects."

"Thought I could skip taking Supernatural Threats 101. Silly me," Derek replies dryly, startling a laugh out of Stiles. Derek smirks, and crosses his arms over his chest. "So, what, the Nemeton is attracting things from all over the world? That seems... far."

"Well some of them, but mostly we think they've already ended up here before in different ways but now the Nemeton gives them the power to be -- well, to *be*."

"Makes sense," Derek says. "You still haven't answered my question -- what the hell is living in my loft, and how do we get it into the jar?"

"Oh! Right," Stiles says. "Last time, we did find some lore. They can't really hurt you themselves, physically, but they're mischievous and will mess around with you. Especially if you offend them."

Derek licks his lips and shifts on his feet uncomfortably.

Stiles is clearly trying to hide his delight, and doing a really bad job of it. "Derek," he drawls slowly, "what did you do?"

Derek untucks one hand long enough to wave it around absently before bringing it back in close to his body. "I may have yelled at it to shut up with all its scratching at the drainpipes last night when I was trying to sleep."

Stiles puts his hands on his hips and looks up at the ceiling, and is obviously trying not to laugh. "Of course you did. Of course you yelled at the malevolent little shadow creature. Why wouldn't you?"

"Well, it was annoying."

"And what did it do to retaliate?"

"I own approximately eight things in this loft," Derek says, looking around. "And it moved every single one of them to really inconvenient places by morning."

Stiles laughs for a moment, but then becomes a bit more serious. "They're intelligent and tricky. They might not be able to hurt you themselves, but they'll find a way to get you hurt,

or killed."

"Then I say let's get the little bastard."

"Oh, good, name calling. That's going to help," Stiles says as he starts digging through his backpack again. He pulls out a little baggie full of dry rice grains.

"What's that for?"

"Put out a pile of grain or sand, and they feel compelled to count it until they get to the very last one." Stiles walks a couple feet away from the couch, toward the large open area of the loft, and starts to pour it onto the floor.

"And while it is, swoop in with the jar."

Stiles straightens up with a smile. "Exactly."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

"Cool," Stiles says, and sits down on the couch. He starts taking a textbook out of his bag. "It won't come out until it's dark. I'm going to do my homework while we wait. I can't afford to fall behind."

"Oh," Derek says, surprised. "You're staying."

"Uh, yeah," Stiles says, eyebrows raised. "If that's not a problem. I mean, I said I'd help out. I don't even know if you can use the wooden lid."

"Right. Mountain ash."

"Unless you want me to leave," Stiles says, although he's putting his feet up on the coffee table and settling in like he doesn't plan on leaving at all.

"No, it's fine. Stay." Derek finds he's telling the truth; since he's dropped Cora off at college a few weeks before, it's the longest he's gone without having someone else around in quite a while. He doesn't really like it.

"All right," Stiles says, already flipping through his textbook.

Derek gets his laptop from the steel table on the far side of the room and comes back to sit on the other end of the couch, putting his feet up in a mimic of Stiles' position. He brings up the web pages he was looking at earlier.

Stiles is quiet for about three minutes before he asks, "You looking at the bestiary? I swear, I told you all I know about it." Derek isn't surprised to see he's craning his neck, though he sits back when Derek catches him at it.

"I believe you. I'm looking up realtors," Derek says, looking back at the screen. "I'm going to sell the loft."

There's a thud of Stiles' shoes hitting the floor as he sits up. Derek glances over, and Stiles is frowning. He looks pissed, actually.

"You're selling the loft?"

"Yes."

"Oh, so what, you're leaving again? After just getting back? And talking to Scott about--" Stiles waves his hand around "-- the pack and stuff? What, a bunch of high school students isn't what you're looking for? You didn't seem to have a problem with that before."

Derek's thrown off by the outburst. He knows Stiles is prone to them, but this particular one is surprising. He didn't think anyone cared much he was gone, and although they seem politely welcoming over the fact he's back, he isn't sure if they really like it.

He doesn't want to give this away as a weakness, or something that Stiles can use over him. Instead, he gives Stiles a mild look, raising his eyebrows. "You're upset."

"Well, I wouldn't say *upset*," Stiles says, punctuating the last word with jerking his shoulders, "but that's a shitty thing to do. You just got here. Let us know you were here, which kind of implied you planned on staying. We could use your help with things, you know."

"In dealing with the Nemeton." Judging by Stiles' reaction, Derek guesses that it's becoming a bit of a strain on him, on all of them. He'd gotten that impression from Scott too.

"Yeah!" Stiles says. "Dealing. Being in our groove. Derek, you could so be part of the groove."

"I can't believe you just said that to me," Derek says, deadpanned, but then he adds a little snort. "Stiles, I'm not leaving Beacon Hills again. I'm just selling my loft, but I'll get another place."

"Oh."

"Yes, *oh*."

Stiles settles back down, lifting his feet to rest on the table again. "I see." He doesn't apologize for his outburst, and he doesn't look embarrassed by it either. He just asks, "How come?"

Derek looks around and sees nothing but bad memories. Death, heartache, loss. He wants to move on with his life, quit living in shadows of guilt and haunting memories, and this isn't the right place to try and do it.

He has no idea how to say that, though, wouldn't feel comfortable doing so even if he did. Instead, he simply replies, "I don't like it anymore."

"I can see that," Stiles says, and he's probably seeing the same things that Derek is, even if he feels the cuts and bruises differently. None of it had been easy on any of them.

"Besides," Derek says, trying to shrug it off, "it's infested with a shadow creature. Who wants that?"

"Nobody," Stiles says, nodding in agreement. "Nobody wants that. Good move, I say."

"I think so," Derek says. "Anyway, don't you have homework to do?"

"Don't you have a loft to sell?" Stiles shoots back, but he grins and goes back to his calculus.

"That I do," Derek says, clicking at another web page.

**

Derek wakes up when he hears a soft scratching, always on a hair trigger for danger now. He opens his eyes slowly. He's on the couch, a paperback novel resting on his lap. He looks over towards the noise.

There's a small shadow not much larger than a Chihuahua hovering beside the pile of rice. The shadow has what could only be called an arm reached out, long black claws extending from the darkness of the hovering cloud, moving the rice from one pile to another.

Derek tries to sit up slowly, not catch its attention, but the shadow turns its head in his direction. Little electric blue eyes on a shapeless face stare at him for one moment, but then it turns back to the piles. It moves a single grain from the old pile to the new one, and Derek knows it's not going to bother him while it's focused on the task at hand.

Stiles is asleep, sprawled out on his side of the couch, neck at an awkward angle with a chemistry book fallen to the floor at his feet. His mouth is opened slightly, the even breath of sleep whistling lightly between his teeth.

Derek puts his book on the table, then picks up Stiles'. He touches Stiles' thigh and says quietly, "Stiles, wake up."

The combination is enough for Stiles' eyes to fly open. It's not confusion there but panic, as if he awoke somewhere deeply disturbing.

Derek grabs his arm and gives a light tug, dragging Stiles out of his momentary worry. As their eyes meet, Stiles visibly relaxes. Derek puts a finger up to his own lips to shush Stiles, then points to the middle of the loft. Stiles sits up straight, nodding, ready to take out the creature. Derek points again, this time between Stiles and the wooden lid.

In one fluid movement, Derek jumps from his sitting position over the coffee table, grabbing the jar at the same time, and landing with it over the shadow creature. Logistically, it shouldn't fit, but it does; it compresses in size and is trapped between the floor and walls of glass.

"Ready?" Derek asks, and Stiles is right there beside him, crouching down. He's holding the lid.

"Yup."

In one more motion, Derek scoops the jar up and Stiles plugs the opening.

"Got you," Derek says, grinning at the jar as they stand up. There's a dark little cloud in there, twirling and angry, no longer in any real shape. It's just vapor, other than the occasional flash of blue eyes. When Derek flashes his back, the vapor cowers as down low as it can.

"I'll take it to Deaton," Stiles says, pleased, as he takes the jar from Derek.

"Sure," Derek says. "Thanks for the help."

"Any time," Stiles says, no lie to his words. He's holding up the little glass prison, watching in wonder at the swirling black cloud. Then he looks over the top of it at Derek, grinning widely. "Welcome back to Beacon Hills, Derek."

2. The Root Cellar

Derek runs through the woods, following Stiles' faint calls of his name. They're beginning to sound more and more distressed. That's not right, he's only out here to look for the gnome hole. Derek wishes Stiles would've taken his suggestion to come to the Preserve together, rather than meeting here, but, no, of course Stiles had to be stubborn and repetitive on the phone until Derek conceded to join him. Now Derek can't find him at all.

He breaks through a clearing and stops in his tracks. In front of him is the stump of a tree that should be way too large to have ever grown in these forests.

The Nemeton.

Chills shiver down Derek's spine. He hasn't been out here in the past couple months he's been back. He hasn't wanted to, and everyone else usually stays clear too, when they can.

Apparently they had to kick out a witch that rebuilt the cellar earlier in the year to be her new home, but Derek hadn't been here for that yet.

He looks at it. He remembers it. And he hates it.

Sometimes he wonders what the hell he's doing back at all. Everywhere he turns in Beacon Hills, there are only bad memories. The good ones of long ago have faded away, buried underneath all the ash and death that's happened since.

"Stiles?" Derek calls out.

He tries to catch a whiff of scent on the air. He swears this is where he heard Stiles calling from, but no. Stiles has not been here recently. There's something else, a lingering smell of blood and flesh, like a deer that's been hunted down and killed, but nothing human.

Derek walks away from the Nemeton -- no amount of curiosity could get him to go back down into that cellar. He's working himself up into ranting at Stiles the next time they talk just when Derek's phone rings, caller ID showing Stiles' number for the second time that day.

"Stiles," Derek nearly growls into the phone, "where the hell are you?"

"Oh, hi, hello to you too," Stiles says dryly.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at Deaton's and about to go home," Stiles says impatiently.

"Home," Derek says flatly, pushing a tree branch out of his way.

"Yes, home. I have a test tomorrow to study for. Where the hell are *you*, since apparently that's a big deal for you right now."

Derek pauses for a moment. Something isn't right. "I'm in the woods. By the Nemeton."

"*Dude*, why are you there? Stay away from it. Shit, is something acting creepy?"

It's all suspiciously creepy now.

"Stiles, what about the gnome hole?"

"Oh, yeah! That's why I'm calling," Stiles says. "It's getting late and it'll be dark soon, so I'm going to go check it out tomorrow before school. Can you meet up? Or, oh! You're at the Preserve anyway? We think it's on the west side. By that tree that looks like a wishbone. Know the one?"

"There are thousands of trees here," Derek says absently while he frowns, thinking about the conversation from an hour before. When Stiles had already told him this information. "Stiles, did you call me earlier?"

"What? Not today," Stiles says. Concern slips into his voice. "Derek, what's wrong?"

Derek sighs and scrubs a hand over his hair. He steps over a log, and then picks up his pace. He needs to get away from here as soon as he can. It's playing with his mind, and that's troublesome. It's not exactly surprising, though. Deaton told him how the others suffered after the Nemeton's power was sparked up last fall, how they had daydreams and hallucinations and nightmares.

It's his turn, apparently. But they dealt with it and moved on, so he could too.

"Nothing," Derek says. "Nothing's wrong."

"Derek."

"I'm fine," he replies. "I'm going to go see Deaton right now. And, yes, I'll meet up with you at the tree tomorrow."

"Okay," Stiles says, though he doesn't sound very convinced. That's his problem, though, so Derek says goodbye and hangs up.

He scrolls through his history and sees that, no, Stiles didn't actually call him an hour before.

"Great," Derek mutters. "I'm losing my mind."

He frowns and tucks the phone into his back pocket and starts jogging his way out of the woods. After a couple minutes, he hears it again.

"Derek!"

Derek stops, turns around in circles to find the source. It sounds like Stiles, exactly like Stiles, but it *couldn't* be. He just got off the phone with him.

Maybe.

"Derek!" That's so much closer, the closest yet.

And then Stiles steps out from behind a tree, grinning. "Hello, Derek."

Only, Derek knows instantly that this isn't Stiles. It looks like him, right down to the moles on his neck, but there's something off. His features are too sharp, his smile too crooked, his eyes too malicious.

He smells like wet dog rather than a human.

No. Derek's not losing his mind. But someone -- *something* -- is messing with it.

"Hello, Derek," it repeats, sounding *exactly* the same. It grins wide, too wide, and then takes off into the brush.

Derek's claws come out, and he shifts into his beta form. Then he runs, runs as fast as he can like this.

It's got a head start on him, and it is *fast*.

It laughs, Stiles' laugh, echoing through the trees. It's going back to the Nemeton. Derek knows this is a trap, it can't be anything else, but he's angry at it for using him and a member of the pack this way, and he has been *restless* lately. There is no other choice for him other than giving it a chase.

It breaks into the clearing around the Nemeton and stops suddenly, turning to face Derek. It gives a toothy smile as Derek roars and launches himself into the air, claws out and ready to swipe. Even though it's wearing Stiles' face, Derek can do this. It's not Stiles, and that alone makes him want to even more.

Its eyes flash red, and it laughs as it sticks out Stiles' arms, which are suddenly too long and growing sharp claws of its own. It grabs onto Derek's forearms, claws sinking in, and jerks Derek through the air as easy as a practiced WWE wrestling move.

Derek lands on his stomach in the hard packed dirt, right over a root. He groans.

He moves to get up quickly, but he nearly stumbles back down with the dizziness that hits him. He looks at his arms, and the claw marks are not fading.

He's poisoned.

It's nothing as bad as the kanima's venom, he's not completely paralyzed, but he feels energy draining from him. He's getting weaker.

It's clear he's dealing with some sort of shapeshifter. A mimic, a trickster, a tease, he's not sure. Human, animal, corporeal ghost, it could be anything. Anything but the real Stiles, this he knows.

He glowers at the shapeshifter, who laughs like it's all a joke. "What do you want?" Derek asks gruffly. Derek's body shifts back to human again -- it can't hold onto the wolf anymore. He's suddenly too tired.

The shapeshifter digs into its pocket and pulls out a phone. Its long finger swipes over the screen, and then Derek's phone starts ringing in his back pocket.

The fake-Stiles gestures at him as if waiting for Derek to answer. "Hello, Derek."

Derek's starting to think he can't say anything else. But he reaches for his phone, and the caller ID says *Stiles*. Derek answers, but he has a feeling he knows who it really is. "Hello?"

Fake-Stiles talks into his own phone, which is not the same blue of Stiles' but a plain black. "Hello, Derek. I'm going to the west side of the Preserve to check out the gnome hole. Meet me?"

It's a perfect replica of the conversation Derek had with Stiles earlier. Not the one ten minutes ago, but an hour ago, and now Derek knows that this creature has learned not only how to mimic a person -- probably overhearing Stiles talking to Scott or Deaton about the gnomes, in this case, piecing it together enough to fool Derek -- but their own fucking phone number too.

Inconvenient. Damn creatures, adapting to technology.

Derek hangs up the call and puts his phone back in his pocket. "What do you want?" he tries again.

The fake-Stiles gives Derek a confident smirk, getting Stiles' look down perfect for when he's being a cocky little jerk who is way too pleased with himself. He points. "Derek."

Then he chomps his jaw, as if munching down on a good meal.

This is not good.

The shapeshifter suddenly moves, rushing at Derek in attack. He barely has time to get his claws out in defense, but it doesn't even matter. The shifter digs his own into Derek's chest and flings him again.

Derek hits a thick tree, back cracking in pain, and crumbles down to the ground. Everything goes back.

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When Derek wakes up, he feels exhausted and has a wicked headache. He feels flakes of dried blood in his hair when he gingerly touches the back of his head. When his eyes focus, he sees a stairway leading up and he figures he was dragged down it, hitting every step on the way.

He's in the rebuilt root cellar of the Nemeton. He has no idea how long he's been out.

He doesn't know why he isn't dead yet and becoming a snack. The cellar smells like death -- fresh blood and torn flesh, a hint of bone, but looking around Derek sees absolutely no evidence of that. It's terrifying, actually.

Derek has a feeling the shifter likes to play with his food first.

"Derek."

He looks over and sees the fake-Stiles sitting on the floor about ten feet away, legs crossed with his elbows propped on his knees and chin resting on his hands. It's eerie how much like Stiles he really looks.

"Hello, Derek."

Derek groans and rolls over, trying to push himself up. "You have got to learn to say something else." He gets to his feet. The shifter doesn't even move, but he starts talking again.

This time he's saying something new.

"How do you know Derek's going to stick around?" the Stiles-shifter says.

Then, even though his body stays the same, the voice changes. He sounds like Scott. "I think he's in it this time, Stiles, like *really*."

Derek freezes in spot as he realizes what's happening -- the shifter is mimicking back a conversation he overheard between Stiles and Scott. One they had about Derek.

Stiles snorts. "I don't know, man. He has a habit of taking off. He sold the loft but he only got an apartment. To *rent*. Easy out."

Scott says, "If he needs to leave, he needs to leave, and we can't stop him. But I think he'd let us know this time. At least say goodbye."

Stiles is apparently unconvinced. "Five bucks says he's going to up and disappear. No, no wait. Dinner's on you when it happens. And not some pizza or Micky D's. You taking me out on the *town*."

Scott laughs. "Fine, it's a bet, but I really hope I win."

The conversation is over, and the shifter-Stiles grins at Derek, wide and creepy. He points a finger at him, and says in a voice that could never belong to Stiles, "Dinner's on you." Then Stiles' face changes; it's still him, but his eyes flash red, mouth opening impossibly wide, and double rows of sharp, jagged teeth grow over the human ones along the top and bottom.

Derek's insides coat with an icy fear. He gets the point. This thing is going to play with him, taunt and tease and bat him around, and then it's going to eat him. It's going to drink up his blood and rip his flesh and grind down his bone until there's nothing left. And when the pack notices he's gone, they'll just think it's because he left them. Disappeared without a word.

The shifter probably doesn't know that Cora will ask around, probably sooner than later. It might not even know that he talked to the real Stiles earlier, told him he was going to see Deaton and then meet him in the morning. The shifter is wrong -- people will notice.

But, in the long run, that probably won't matter. It'll be too late.

Or will it?

Derek might be physically weak right now, but his hearing is as good as ever. There's something in the distance, a call on the wind that carries a renewed hope to it. Stiles is trekking through the forest, and he's not too far away now. The shifter doesn't notice -- it seems its hearing is not as fine-tuned as Derek's. It probably uses another method to get close to those it wants to mimic.

Calling out to Stiles will only alert the shifter to his presence, so Derek needs to distract it from Stiles' approach. He holds off as long as he can, staring the shifter down while it just flashes its rows of teeth at him, taunting. He waits until Stiles is closer to the Nemeton, close enough that the shifter looks towards the cellar stairs, startles and jumps to its feet, and then Derek does what he does best when he doesn't have any other options.

He attacks.

With a growl, he bowls head first into the fake Stiles' thin frame. The shifter catches Derek around the middle, and with a supernatural power the real Stiles doesn't possess, flips Derek up over head and then slams him down onto his back. Before Derek can kick him away, the shifter leans down and viciously bites into the flesh of Derek's upper right arm.

Derek howls. Not only do the rows of jagged teeth hurt as they sink into his skin, but he can tell there's another form of poison that enters into his body. Not too much, though, as Derek reacts quickly and bucks the shifter off him. The teeth tear through Derek's flesh as he does, and the fake Stiles' demented smile has blood dripping back down onto Derek.

Derek kicks it in the stomach, pure hate that something would dare use a member of the pack that way, and it fuels the power. The shifter goes flying backwards, hitting the far dirt wall.

The real Stiles is hurrying down the cellar stairs, two small glass vials in his hand. From one, he flings purple wolfsbane at the crude and horrid version of himself; the noise it releases is a

high-pitched shriek. While it trembles on the floor, skin peeling away to reveal patchy fur like a wolf with mange, Stiles rushes towards Derek. He falls to his knees, nearly sliding right into Derek's side. He flicks the other vial up in the air and little cloud of mountain ash floats up and then falls into a perfect circle around them.

Stiles has been working on his moves.

"Derek?" Stiles says, leaning over him. "Still with me, buddy?"

"Yeah," Derek says, straining his neck to find the shifter. It's in a dog form, unlike any breed Derek is familiar with. It rushes towards them. "Watch out!" He instinctively curls around Stiles as best he can, though his hurt arm feels like dead weight.

The dog-shifter hits the magical field of mountain ash, the air sparking purple for a second before it's thrown back with a wounded noise.

"Heh," Stiles says. "That looks like the stray dog I was telling you guys about the other day. Is it just me or did that thing look like, well, *me* twenty seconds ago?"

"I think it's been tracking the pack," Derek says through clenched teeth, lying back onto the floor again. "You specifically. It's a shapeshifter, and it mimicked some of the things you've said, but I don't think it can talk on its own."

They watch as it struggles up off the floor, woozy from the wolfsbane thrown at it and its run-in with a wall of magic. It picks up the shredded jeans it had been wearing with its mouth and makes its way up the stairs.

"Where the hell is it going with those?" Stiles asks.

"Cell phone in the pocket," Derek starts to explain, but then he hunches over more as pain moves through him in waves. It catches Stiles' attention.

"Okay, come on, big guy. Let's get out of here."

"I don't think I can." He hates saying that, but it's true, and it's safer for them both if he admits it right away. "Stuck me with fingernails of poison that have made me weaker. I feel like I'm going to be sick. And," he tries shrugging his shoulder, "I think my arm is paralyzed from the bite."

"But not all of you, right?" Stiles' hands hover over the wound on Derek's arm.

Derek shakes his head. "No. But if it's still out there and recovers from the wolfsbane, then I don't know if I can protect us both like this." Hell, he couldn't even protect himself.

"We need back up," Stiles says, and pulls out his phone. "I think Scott's with Allison tonight. I'm going to text him a 911" -- he must do it, because in the next second he brings the phone up to his ear -- "and then call and he better pick up, oh my god -- Scott, buddy, hi! Listen. Derek and I need your help."

He puts the phone on speaker so that Derek can chime in when needed, and the situation is explained. Scott and Allison immediately say they're on their way, but Allison keeps Stiles and Derek on the line to get more explanation even as they get into their car and start driving. This is how Derek finds out that Stiles was suspicious after their phone conversation and decided to come to the forest to check on him. Derek tells them how he was lured back to the Nemeton by a fake-Stiles.

"So how do I know this is you?" Scott asks.

"Dude, I'm with Derek. There are two of us actually talking to you."

"There could be two shifters. Or one shifter who is saying all this stuff, like Derek said it did."

"Why would a shifter give away all its secrets?" Stiles replies in exasperation.

"My arm is going to rot off before you two figure this out," Derek grits out in pain.

"We're on our way, Derek," Allison says, humoring him. "Promise."

"You could be messing with my head," Scott adds in, sounding very serious. "Tell me something only Stiles and I would know."

"For Christ's sake, I don't know," Stiles says, throwing a hand up while he stares at the cell phone he's holding. "The first dude I jerked off to was Edward Norton as Bruce Banner."

Scott laughs and Allison says, "Nice, he's hot."

"This pack over shares," Derek says, feeling incredibly woozy and nauseous. "Mine was Justin Timberlake in the Sexy Back video."

Everyone goes quiet, and the only sound is a distant, hurt howl.

"Guys," Stiles says, look on his face torn between shock and concern, "you better hurry the hell up. I think the poison is getting to Derek's brain."

"I think you're right," Derek says. He rolls onto his side away from Stiles and vomits black ooze.

"Oh, man," Stiles says, disgusted, "that is never not going to be gross. Inside the circle? Really?"

The black bile stops oozing before it gets to the line of mountain ash. He rolls onto his back again, staring up at the ceiling of the root cellar. "I need to get to Deaton's. Right now."

"We're on our way," Scott says immediately. "How do we defeat this thing?"

"I'm thinking pointy objects," Stiles says. "That almost always works, and you guys generally have a lot of them."

"Sounds like a plan," Allison says.

"We are going to stay in the cellar until you get here," Stiles says. "Unless it becomes unsafe. So, if you see a version of either of us walking around, probably naked or in a pair of really ripped jeans, it's not us."

"Got it," Scott says, and they hang up the line after saying goodbye.

Stiles fusses over Derek, which is both annoying and also kind of comforting. He sticks his plaid shirt under Derek's head, and then rips a strip of material off the bottom of Derek's torn one.

"Oh whatever," Stiles says when Derek makes a noise of complaint. "As if it wasn't already ruined."

"As if I even have a wardrobe left," Derek mutters, and Stiles chuckles as he ties the strip tight up high on his injured arm.

"Yeah, you have bad luck with that," Stiles says, checking the knot. He frowns at it. "I don't know if this will help stop the poison from spreading or not."

Derek thinks probably not, but says anyway, "Guess we'll see."

"Yeah. God, you look like hell."

"Better or worse than the time with the bullet?"

"Worse," Stiles replies immediately. "But also not like you're dying. If that makes sense."

"I'll be fine."

"Good," Stiles says, and settles cross-legged towards the root cellar entrance in case the shapeshifter decided to come back. He glances down at Derek. "Don't pass out. Keep talking to me."

"And say what?"

"I don't know," Stiles says. "Tell me about good ol' JT, huh?"

"I will deflate your tires with my claws."

"Oh, idle threats, you must be okay," Stiles says, smirking. Then he shrugs. "I just didn't know, that's all."

"Doesn't even matter now," Derek says. He shifts on the floor, uncomfortable, and tries to ignore the pain in his arm. Hopefully that means the poison is fading. He sighs heavily. "I'm living a celibate life forever."

"A totally valid life choice," Stiles says, "but forever is a really long time."

"Well, for a while," Derek amends. He feels light headed, and while he's telling the truth, he has no idea why he's telling it at all.

Stiles doesn't make fun of it, or tease him. He looks around at where they are, and then gives a nod. "Yeah."

"Yeah. I don't know. Given my track record -- you know what, I don't want to talk about it," Derek says flatly.

"Okay," Stiles says, and he falls silent for once. It only feels awkward because Stiles obviously has no idea what else to say, which is rare for him.

It's a couple moments before Derek says, "You're just leaving it there?"

"Um, yeah. You don't want to talk about it."

"No, but that's never stopped you from asking before," Derek says.

"I don't -- you're kinda drugged up right now on the poison of something that wanted to eat you for dinner," Stiles says, frowning. "Something's in your system, and you're not healing right yet, and basically I don't want you to resent me for saying something you never meant to tell."

Appreciation floods through Derek, sparking something warm in his stomach against all the pain and discomfort. It's got to be the poison messing with him. "I wouldn't," Derek says. "Though I resent the fuck out of that thing that tried to eat me."

"No shit," Stiles says, laughing a little. He goes quiet again, but it's not awkward anymore. He pulls his knees up and rests his chin on them, finger tapping at the edge of the phone. Being stuck in this little circle with a hurt werewolf and his black oozy vomit probably isn't his idea of a good night.

"I'm not going to leave, you know," Derek says as the thought crosses his mind. That's something he doesn't need or want to keep private.

"Um, dude, you can't. Inside a mountain ash circle -- for your own protection, I'm not holding you hostage here!"

"No, I mean -- I'm not going to just up and leave. No dinner bets necessary."

Stiles' body goes entirely tense, and he looks down at Derek with a scowl. "I know you have supernatural hearing, but eavesdropping on conversations isn't cool. That's just rude."

"I didn't," Derek says. "That was the conversation the shapeshifter repeated. Because, you know, after he ate me then none of you would've worried about me missing."

"That's not true," Stiles says immediately. "I'd worry. I'd think you were a dick for leaving without saying goodbye, but we'd all try to find out what happened to you."

"Like you did when Peter disappeared?" No one has heard from him in pretty much a year, not even Derek or Cora after they left. Derek knows none of them looked that hard, and it worries him that he doesn't care as much as he probably should.

"That's different. Peter is... well, *Peter*." Stiles looks at Derek, serious. "You are not him. Not to any of us."

Before he can answer, a sudden wave of nausea hits Derek again, and he starts coughing. He tries to roll over again, has trouble with it, and then Stiles is pushing on him to help. Derek coughs some more, but he doesn't throw up again.

"Okay, that's it. You need to conserve your energy. Enough talking, Jesus, don't you ever shut up?" Derek can't help but snort, but then he starts coughing again. "Seriously, enough," Stiles says, hands resting lightly on Derek's arm and shoulder, as if he's unsure what to do with them. "They'll be here soon and we'll be fine."

"I really hate it down here," Derek says. "A lot."

"I hear you."

They remain quiet, and Derek drifts in and out of a haze of pain, though he thinks the poison is starting to dissipate. Stiles remains a solid presence at his side, and they don't see hide nor hair of the shifter again. Stiles gets a phone call and he confirms that they're still in the root cellar.

After a while, there's a howl that rings out through the forest, and Derek can focus enough that he hears arrows shooting through the air. There's a second high-pitched howl, pained, before it cuts off suddenly.

"They're here to help us," Stiles says.

Derek nods. Yes, they are.

3. Stiles' Room

Derek's apartment is haunted.

That's why, on the eve of Christmas Eve, Cora and Derek find themselves joining the Stilinskis for dinner, with an invitation they weren't allowed to refuse to stay a couple of days so they don't have to check into a hotel.

Usually, Derek's ghostly roommate is calm and serene and doesn't cause any trouble. She couldn't be seen, but Derek knew she was near because a patch of air will get chilly. Sometimes things are out of place, or the television turns on at particular times to particular channels, but other than that, she generally leaves Derek alone. He doesn't mind her there at all.

Except that, the closer the holiday draws near, the more that incidents happened. It started off with the destruction of the two foot fake tree Derek got to stick on the end table -- Lydia had insisted he buy it if he was going to have his sister over for the holidays. By the time Cora arrived, it was in pieces hidden all over the apartment.

The worst happened when he was trying to bake a pie with the secret Hale recipe to take to the McCall's for Christmas dinner. While walking with a bowl of flour, she pulled the kitchen mat right out from under him. He fell on his ass and Cora laughed.

And then a knife was pushed off the counter and almost stabbed him in the eye. Things got less funny.

Apparently, his ghost is not a fan of the holiday season.

The pack gets wind of it and insists they can't stay in a hotel. And the Sheriff, probably with Stiles' encouragement, invites the Hales to stay.

"So, Cora," the Sheriff says at dinner, "what's it like being in college? Safe, right? Perfectly safe."

"Oh my god, Dad," Stiles says, slapping his forehead. "We're not starting that again."

"I'm just making conversation, Stiles," the Sheriff says.

"No. No, you're trying to use Cora to convince me that going away to college -- possibly away from my pack -- is a perfectly okay thing to do." Stiles huffs. It seems that Scott, Stiles, and Allison's decision to stay in Beacon Hills after high school is not going over well with their parents. "Which I'm sure it is. But it's not for me. I *am* going to continue to go to school, Dad. There's nothing wrong with the community college here."

"You could be going to Stanford or Berkeley or any other university you want," the Sheriff says. "You're not even considering other options."

"I *have* considered them," Stiles says seriously. "And I've made my choice. *My* choice. Besides, Derek's going to the local college in the New Year, so insulting BHCC is like insulting him. Am I right, or am I right?"

Derek answers, "The situation is entirely different. You'd be able to get into a good university, so you should be going to one. And he wasn't insulting me or the school. You're overreacting."

"Shut up, Derek, no one asked you," Stiles says, scowling at him. Derek just smiles and bites some broccoli off his fork.

"Even though I still think he should consider the police force, Derek knows I think his going back to school is a step in the right direction," the Sheriff says. "And you're the one who brought up your own schooling when I was trying to talk to Cora about hers." The Sheriff turns away from his son and smiles at Cora. "I'd still like to know how things are going for you."

"It's fine," Cora says, gaze shifting between Stiles and his dad, as if unsure whether or not she should be getting into the middle of this.

"And there's no trouble? With hunters or supernatural things that come out at night?"

"I'm a supernatural thing that comes out at night," Cora points out, and the Sheriff looks a little bit abashed. She just smiles and goes on. "But, no, there's not been any trouble, but other members of the pack I'm in go there too."

"Other members of your pack?" the Sheriff asks. He looks between her and Derek. Derek just takes another bite of his Shepherd's pie. He has a lot of opinions on this but he's discussed them all with Cora before. He's accepted that Cora had her own decisions to make that she felt were best for her.

"Yes, the Johnson pack," Cora says.

The Sheriff looks confused. "I thought you both were--"

"I'm not a member of the Johnson pack," Derek says, a little more tightly than he means to. "Although they let me stay in their territory last year while Cora finished high school."

They had been the ones who took Cora in after the fire, but she'd left them when she had heard the rumors of Derek being alive. She wanted to go back to Iowa after they had left Beacon Hills together, and Derek had no reason to say no. But he hadn't stayed after she'd started college.

"So, Cora, with members of your pack, you say?" Stiles says slyly, then gives his father a frank look. "My guess is you're going with safety in numbers."

The Sheriff sighs, and it's obvious that he knows where this is going. Especially when Cora says, "Yes, that's the way we feel about it. It's sort of a tradition, for them to go there. One is even a professor in the Psychiatry department."

"Well doesn't that sound nice. And safe. And like a really good plan," Stiles says. "Everyone sticking together. At the same school."

"Stiles," the Sheriff says warningly.

"Yes, I like it. I like the school too." Cora fiddles with the knife sitting beside her plate. She carefully says, without looking at Derek at all, "Plus, my boyfriend also goes there."

"Oh," Derek says mildly, reaching for his glass of water, "he finally worked up the balls to ask you out?" She had neglected to mention that thus far, but he understands why.

"Oh man," Stiles says, "this is going to be *good*."

"He probably would have sooner if you hadn't glared at him every time he came within ten feet of me," Cora says. "Especially all wolfed out and flashing your eyes around."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Derek lies. Cora rolls her eyes at him. Derek adds, "Besides, it worked out, right? Even if he did wait for me to leave town."

"That just goes to show I'm worth waiting for," Cora says primly. Derek snorts, but he can't help his little grin.

"I've always meant to ask," Stiles says, "is that a thing? Like, a whole thing?"

"What?" Derek asks.

"The whole" -- Stiles waves his fork around -- "wolf mates thing. Like, does it apply to werewolves? I mean, if you look at Scott and Allison, they went through a lot of back and forth, but now that they're together, like *together*, they both say it was worth it." He scratches his chin and looks at Cora. "And you just said the same thing, basically."

"There are a lot of different opinions on it," Cora says carefully. She gives a small smile. "But I like to think so, yes."

Derek says, "Well, if you ask me--"

Cora mutters, "Oh, here we go," and brings her fingers up to her temple to rub delicately.

"--it's a crock of shit," Derek finishes.

No one laughs. He wishes they would, to ease the tension a little bit.

"You're so cynical," Cora gripes.

"I've earned that right," Derek says, calmly taking a sip of water and avoiding everyone's pitying gazes. He puts his glass down. "It's not something that's limited to wolves. It's people, it's human emotions." Peter's words echo in him, and he hates that they do. "It's attraction, and that does not mean destiny or soul mates or whatever it is people, wolf or not, try to label it as."

"I think some people were meant to be together," Cora says, shrugging.

"And some people really weren't," Derek adds.

"I think," the Sheriff says, surprising them all with his input, "that, yes, there's lust and attraction, but that relationships take time and effort. Sometimes the person is right for you, and sometimes they're not. Sometimes it takes a while to find that right person, or maybe it takes a while to get to the place where it is right. Sometimes you're lucky enough to find a right person more than once."

"This is a thinly-veiled reference to him dating Ms. McCall and for some reason they decided not to tell me or Scott," Stiles says with a big grin. "As if they'd be able to keep it from us. We knew within, like, three days."

The Sheriff says, "You think you knew."

"Oh, come on," Stiles says, snorting. "We've known for weeks."

"Then you didn't really know," the Sheriff says. He turns to Cora. "So what's your major?"

"Oh, no you don't," Stiles demands, glaring at his father. "I think you have some explaining to do."

Cora and Derek exchange an amused look, going silent as the Stilinskis bicker with each other in a way that could only be described as good-natured and teasing. Loving. It washes away how wrong-footed Derek feels, and he doesn't let himself fall into a bad mood. His mother would've called this progress.

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Later that night, Stiles, Cora, and Derek are sitting on the couch watching a Christmas movie on the TV, something recent that Derek hasn't seen before. It's pretty ridiculous and he's only partly paying attention, his mind on their dinner conversation.

The Sheriff walks into the room with a pile of blankets and a pillow. "Cora, you can have the couch," he says. "Stiles, will you find the air mattress for Derek?"

"Sure," Stiles says.

The Sheriff looks around, frowning. With the furniture arranged the way it was to accommodate the large tree in the corner, there isn't a lot of room left for walking, let alone an air mattress. When Cora had commented on the large tree earlier, all Stiles had said was that his mom had really loved Christmas. He didn't need to say any more. Derek owned up to baking pie because of his own mother.

"Maybe set it up in your room," the Sheriff says. Then adds, "For *Derek*."

"Yes, Dad," Stiles says, rolling his eyes. The Sheriff says goodnight, and go upstairs.

"Wow, he missed that part about my boyfriend, huh?" Cora asks, amused.

Stiles rolls his eyes again. "Nothing to do with you. He, uh, sorta walked in on me and a girl from school last year. We were -- well, you get it." He ran a hand through his hair and was starting to turn pink in the cheeks. He chuckles. "Around Christmas time too, actually. So, you know, he's just being overprotective."

"Stiles," Cora says coyly, "I didn't know you were seeing anyone." Derek hadn't realized either, not that it's really his business either way. Stiles just seems really busy with school, his sports, and dealing with Nemeton stuff. But it makes sense, though. Derek doesn't see someone like Stiles staying single for very long.

"I'm not. Not right now, anyway. Haven't been for a while." He's definitely a little more red, and he's very carefully not looking at Derek. "I made sure to not get caught with the guy I ended up with after her. Although, I mean, my dad knows I was sorta seeing a guy. Just not that we were ..."

"Hooking up," Cora says when Stiles trails off.

"Yeah. It didn't work out, though, in the long run. You have no idea how difficult dating is when you're trying to deal with the supernatural side of Beacon Hills." He pauses when Cora and Derek both raise identical eyebrows at him. "Um, yeah. Never mind. You know exactly how that is."

"Huh," Cora says. She looks at Derek. "It's probably good the Sheriff doesn't know about your little mancrush on Chris Evans then. You'd be sleeping out on the porch."

"Oh, it's the Captain America thing, isn't it?" Stiles immediately asks.

"Is he in a Christmas movie?" Derek answers instead, looking at the TV again. He's not getting into this with his sister *or* Stiles. "It'd probably be better than this."

Derek snorts as Stiles and Cora both pull their phones out of their pockets to check. They don't find anything that isn't animated, and what's the point of that? They finish the movie that's on before Derek and Stiles go upstairs and set up the air mattress so that Cora can have some peace and go to sleep.

"Can I ask you something?" Stiles ends up asking later on, when they're both lying down but neither of them are sleeping yet, Stiles in his bed and Derek comfortable enough on the air mattress with a sleeping bag.

Derek turns his head, and sees Stiles' eyes reflecting the Christmas lights shining in from around his bedroom window. "Yes, it's the Captain America thing."

Stiles laughs. "No, actually that's not -- but interesting." He clears his throat. "I mean, I wanted to ask about the Johnson pack."

"And why I'm not part of it."

"Yeah. It's -- it has something to do with your eyes, doesn't it?" Stiles asks. Derek's unsurprised he was that observant. "I mean, just the way Cora said you'd flash them at her boyfriend."

Derek's quiet for a moment, trying to find the right words to explain. Stiles waits patiently, and it's a lot, to see those observant eyes focused on him now. Derek looks back up at the ceiling.

Stiles says quietly, "I know what they mean."

"I know. Cora told me that Peter told you guys about Paige," Derek says stiffly, finding it hard even now, all these years later, to say her name. Peter had no right to do that, but now that it's out there, Derek can't take it back. He doesn't know how. But he isn't particularly interested in talking about it; not about *her*, anyway. So he answers what he can. "For some werewolf packs, especially ones that are as established as the Johnson one -- well. To them, blue eyes are a sign of being uncivilized. Of danger. They don't believe that werewolves should give in to their instincts in that sort of way."

"So they wouldn't accept you as part of their pack, is what you're saying."

"No," Derek says, "they won't."

"That's so stupid," Stiles says immediately. "There is... what happened... there are *circumstances*. Jackson's eyes are blue. Yes, he took lives, but in a way it wasn't his fault. He was being controlled. And you -- like I said. Circumstances."

"I get emails from him once in a while," Derek says, purposely deflecting. He doesn't know how to handle how defensive of him Stiles sounds. "He's in a pack in the UK that seems a bit more accepting about that. It usually sort of depends on the opinions of the wolves."

"And the Iowa pack wouldn't make allowances for you?"

"No. Not like that. They tolerated my presence because of Cora. Because they care about her, and because they knew that I gave up my alpha power to save her life, so they had respect for that. But I would never be one of them."

"I still think it's dumb."

Derek shrugs. "It's fine. I don't want to be. It's not a right fit for me either."

When Cora had been in Beacon Hills last year, she'd been angry -- at the alpha pack, for abducting her and all she went through, and wanting to jump at the chance to get revenge. But as soon as they were in Iowa, putting all that behind them, Derek saw how she changed. How she slipped into something more calm, elegant. Her anchor was there amongst them. Derek never felt that there.

Derek's pulled out of these thoughts when Stiles speaks again. "Do you think she'd leave them if you asked her to?"

"I don't know." Derek is almost afraid of what that answer might truly be. "I won't ask her to, after all they've done for her, and I don't think they'll ask her to do that to me. I'm her brother. I'm her blood."

"But you're not in the same packs," Stiles says thoughtfully.

"No, but that happens sometimes. Marriages, moving across country for a school or for a job. Werewolves always try to find our own kind because being on our own leaves us more vulnerable, but life is life. We adapt."

"Why did you come back here?" Stiles asks.

That is a loaded question. One that Derek has asked himself a million times. He shouldn't want to be here, but he can't deny that there's a pull, a draw. He can't make himself stay away. Even while he and Laura were on the run, all he wanted was to be back. Even when he and Cora were in Iowa, he didn't put in as full an effort as he could've to try to be accepted. He hadn't wanted to stay there anyway.

"Beacon Hills is my home," Derek eventually says.

Stiles is quiet for a couple more minutes, which would almost be surprising except that Derek can practically hear the gears in his head turning. Derek closes his eyes and waits, and if he falls asleep before Stiles works up to ask he wants to say, so be it.

He doesn't get a chance before Derek sits up suddenly, a whimper from downstairs waking him up completely.

"What?" Stiles says, startled.

Derek's moving fast. "Something's down there with her." He doesn't wait for Stiles, instead taking the stairs two at a time and rushing into the living room.

In the lights from the trees, he can see something sitting on Cora's chest while she whimpers and twitches in her sleep. The creature looks like an ugly black cat, supernaturally amber eyes flashing at Derek while it jumps off the couch and Cora gasps awake.

Derek goes to Cora's side to make sure she's okay. Supernatural cat be damned. But he turns as it hisses, a ring of mountain ash surrounding it just before it made an escape under the tree. Stiles is standing in the room, staring at it, arm extended after throwing the powder. He's very prepared for this sort of thing; Derek wonders how else he has the house ready to be defended.

"And what do we have here?" Stiles asks. He looks at Cora.

"Nightmares," she says, sitting up and shaking slightly. "I couldn't wake up out of it."

Derek says, "It feeds off them. I've read about these creatures before."

Surprisingly, the cat hisses. "*I was sent here.*" Its voice slurs like a snake. "*But this is a dreamless house.*"

"Obviously not true," Cora says, shuddering.

Derek stands and takes a step forward. "Stiles, break the circle. I'll deal with it."

"*Wait, wolf,*" it hisses. "*Let me have the dreams I want and I'll tell you who my master is.*"

"Getting us to do your dirty work and have you set free?" Stiles snorts. "Not happening." He steps towards the circle.

"*She'll keep coming and coming until she has her revenge,*" the cat says. "*I swear to you, let me take the dreams from this dreamless house, and I'll tell you where to find her.*"

"I'll make you tell us anyway," Derek says, and his claws pop out of his fingers.

"*You cannot harm me.*"

Cora stands too. "It's telling the truth. Everything it's said has been the truth. You heard its heart. And I saw it in the nightmares, Derek." Cora looks at Stiles. "It was about you. Unless we know who is behind this, you're in danger."

Derek doesn't hesitate. "Fine. You can feed off me."

"Derek," Cora says, shaking her head. "No."

"Your nightmares are misery." It turns its head towards Stiles. "But yours are darkness. I will be full for a very long time."

"No," Derek says. "Forget it. No deal."

"Why did you go after me?" Cora asks, looking between Stiles and the cat. Stiles' face is unusually blank, which means he's trying very hard to guard something. "You said this is a dreamless house."

"I was sent to give him nightmares," the cat says, poking its paw through the air at Stiles. "But he has his own and he hides them. He thinks they are gone but they are not. They are waiting in the wings for the dam to break. Let me take them."

"You are not taking anything," Derek says, growling lowly. "Tell us who sent you."

It barely looks at Derek, and it is not afraid. It is watching Stiles patiently.

"Okay," Stiles says.

"What, no," Derek says, head turning sharply to stare at Stiles.

Stiles pays him no mind. He's staring at the cat. "I know what you are, too. I've even thought about calling you here myself."

"I will take them and I will tell you who she is," the cat says. "Call for me on the morrow's eve."

"It's a deal," Stiles says, and takes two steps forward and scuffs the line of mountain ash. The cat is gone in nothing but a quick blur.

"Well that's disturbing," Cora says, sinking back down to the couch.

"What did you just do?" Derek asks Stiles angrily.

"What I had to," Stiles says, and it sounds like he has no emotion. Derek knows recognizes that from his own habits -- it means there's too much of it simmering beneath the surface Stiles doesn't want anyone to see.

"That's not an explanation," Derek says, scowling.

"And I don't have to give one to you," Stiles snaps back at him. "In case you've forgotten, you're not the alpha here."

Cora makes a disgusted noise. "Low blow."

"No, it's not," Derek says. "It's the truth. But, hey, why don't we tell your alpha that you're out making deals with little nightmare creatures so he can be the one to tell you you're being an idiot."

"He would understand!" Stiles practically shouts back at him.

A voice floats down from upstairs. "Stiles? What's going on?"

Stiles curses under his breath. "Sorry, Dad! Didn't mean to wake you."

The Sheriff comes downstairs anyway.

"It's my fault," Cora says immediately. "I had a nightmare. I think I woke them up."

"Yes, we're pretty light sleepers around here," the Sheriff says. Derek has to purse his lips together to stop making a sarcastic comment at Stiles' expense. He's pretty sure he's figured out what's going on around here.

"Sorry, sir," Derek says instead. "We were just going back up."

"I thought I heard yelling," the Sheriff says.

"A difference in opinions," Stiles says. "Everything's fine. Goodnight, everyone." He turns and starts up the stairs.

Derek doesn't hesitate to follow. Even as he does, he hears Cora settle in on the couch and the Sheriff come up the stairs too. Derek follows Stiles back into his bedroom and shuts the door behind them.

"You have wards up in this house," Derek immediately says, keeping his voice low. He looks around the room, tries to find some runes that must be drawn somewhere. They're probably hidden underneath all the news articles and pictures Stiles keeps up on his walls of Beacon Hills' current events. "It keeps you from dreaming."

"So what of it?" Stiles says grumpily, climbing in under his covers.

"Protects you and your dad, didn't work for Cora and probably me because we don't technically live here," Derek mutters to himself, and he walks around some more, looking at the baseboards and the window sills, trying to find where Stiles hides them.

Stiles pointedly turns off the lights. The outside Christmas lights on the house still twinkle.

"You can't do that, not in the long run," Derek says, going back to the air mattress. "People need to sleep properly."

"Well, I didn't do that before anyway," Stiles say, voice short and clipped. "At least this way I don't wake up terrified."

"You do sometimes, if you're not here," Derek points out. Stiles just huffs, so Derek elaborates. "I've seen it. And even when you are here, I bet anything it's just short bursts of

sleep, nothing real. Nothing that makes you feel rested."

Stiles doesn't say anything, for once. It means that Derek's right, if there's no cause to argue. It's an admission. Derek's actually disappointed in that, and it concerns him.

"It's because of that ritual you did last year, isn't it?"

Stiles sighs, but he doesn't sound angry anymore. Just really tired. "You weren't here for the aftermath, but for a while... things were hard. But we adjusted. We coped. This is one way that I do."

"If that thing is to be trusted, and I'm pretty sure it knows its stuff about dreaming and sleep, then it's not working the way you want," Derek says. "You need to sleep, Stiles."

"Then you should probably shut up," Stiles snarks back at him, light and forgiving. "Always with the talking, Hale."

Derek huffs, but he decides not to push it anymore. Not right now. They're seeing Scott tomorrow anyway, they can discuss it then. There's still time for a new plan.

Wards or not, neither of them fall asleep for a long time, even though they both keep their thoughts to themselves.

With the dark circles under Stiles' eyes in the morning, Derek's not sure he went to sleep at all.

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"Ha ha," Stiles says tauntingly, "alpha's got my back." He draws some runes onto a piece of lined paper.

"I got your back too," Derek says grumpily from where he's sitting on a chair by Stiles' window. It's open just a crack, cool air creeping in. "I just don't agree with this plan. At all."

Earlier that afternoon, while Cora, Allison, Lydia and Isaac had all decided to brave the mall for last minute shopping, Derek and Stiles had a good talk with Scott. Derek had insisted inviting a nightmare creature into the Stilinski home was a stupid plan, and he'd been very close to winning Scott over.

Stiles had pointed out that there were two werewolves staying in his house, one in his *room* that would make sure everything was all right. When even that wasn't quite enough, he had pulled out his trump card. "Scott, you know that I need this. You know this could help me." He had added, fiercely, "If this helps us find out about some sort of *master* that is sending creatures to my house -- where my *dad* is -- you better believe I'm doing this."

Derek had known in that moment his case was lost.

Now he's sitting watching Stiles prepare to call a creature to feed off his nightmares. With the protection runes erased from their hidden places, Stiles places the calling card at the foot of his bed.

"Oh my god, just go to sleep," Stiles says, sighing, as he crawls into bed and arranges his covers.

"Not a chance."

"What if it doesn't come because you're being all loom-y?" Stiles makes a face.

"Counterpoint to the plan."

"It'll be here," Derek says with certainty. "It desperately wants what you have."

"Well, it can fucking have it."

"How bad--"

"Bad, okay?" Stiles says shortly. "Bad enough that I had to see my friends and loved ones in various displays of maimed and murdered. That I found myself running through an endless maze being chased by all sorts of evil things, with no escape and no hope. That I saw the world burning down around me and I was powerless to stop it. Is that what you wanted to hear, Derek?" Stiles adds, voice bitter. "Because those are the kinds of nightmares and hallucinations I got to experience while you were off farming fields or whatever the hell you do in Iowa."

"Culling corn," Derek supplies lightly.

"Shut up, you asshole," Stiles says, still on the defensive, but he laughs a little anyway.

Derek's quiet for a moment, letting it sink in, before he asks, "They're not prophetic--"

"No," Stiles stresses immediately. "Thank god, no. I'm not a seer or anything. Just a dude with a permanent scar of darkness around his heart that's slowly driving him insane. That's all. No biggie."

"Then I hope this helps," Derek says, relenting. He hadn't realised the burden Stiles is carrying weighs on him so heavily. He hides it pretty well, probably better now than when he was just some kid whose friend was a newly turned werewolf, but Derek is starting to see the cracks.

"Thanks," Stiles says. He swallows hard. "I saw myself as -- as the Darach. That I could be like that, wanting the power--"

"Not prophetic, remember?" Derek says, his hands rolling up into tight balls. "Scott would never let you go down that path. Never."

"No," Stiles says, rolling over onto his side, looking at Derek. "No, he wouldn't."

"Neither would I," Derek says, unable to stop himself. "You're not her."

"No," Stiles says firmly. "I am definitely not her."

Derek nods once. "Go to sleep, Stiles."

"Right," Stiles says, finally closing his eyes. "That's a thing I'm supposed to do sometimes."

It takes a while for Stiles to fall asleep, and Derek wonders if it's pure exhaustion despite the worry that finally drives him there. It's still an hour or so before Derek feels a brush of wind against his arm from the window, something heavier and cooler than the natural night air. Next he knows, there's a black cat jumping up onto Stiles' bed.

Derek goes tense. He forces himself to stay sitting right where he is, not attack like his instincts want. The cat sits regally, looks at Derek but doesn't say anything. Its amber eyes flash, and it pokes its paw at Stiles' thigh. Stiles automatically rolls over so that he's on his back, and the cat daintily walks onto Stiles. It curls up into a ball in the center of Stiles' chest.

Time passes, and it feels so slow. As the minutes go by, Derek can hear Stiles' breath become quicker, his pulse beat faster. The cat grows uglier; ears more pointed, fangs extended out of its mouth, fur going matted. It is turning more grotesque with the more it feeds off Stiles' whimpering and frightened moans.

With a particularly sharp, dry sob, Derek can't take it anymore. And he doesn't think Stiles should have to either. He's on his feet and approaching the bed. "Enough."

"*Wait.*" The cat hisses at Derek, but then stands. It turns three circles on Stiles' chest, and lays down to curl into a ball again. Stiles sleeps through it all, although he's frowning and his eyes are fluttering behind his eyelids. His limbs twitch.

"You've had your fill. Leave him alone."

"*Almost,*" the creature agrees. It sits up again, claws gathering some of Stiles' shirt. "*I will tell him what I promised.*" The cat leans its forehead down against Stiles', who mutters, "Oh, oh, her," though he doesn't wake.

In the next second, the cat is gone like a flash right off of Stiles, past Derek and through the small crack in the window, like a puff of smoke. Stiles sits up, awake, gasping for breath.

"Cora!" Derek says, loud enough for her to hear but not loud enough to wake Stiles' dad. Derek sits on the edge of the bed, hands hovering, not sure what to do. "Stiles, are you okay?"

"Oh for Christ sake, *her* again?" he asks, sounding annoyed. His body is trembling slightly, like Cora's had when she woke up out of her nightmare. There's a sheen of sweat on his face, and the neckline and pits of his shirt are wet.

"Tell me you're okay." Derek frowns.

"I'm okay," Stiles says, nodding. Cora comes into the room, and she has a couple of vitamin waters with her, giving them each one.

"It's gone?" she asks. "I didn't see it come downstairs."

"It's gone," Derek says, watching closely as Stiles gulps back his drink. "That was stupid and dangerous and don't you ever do anything like that again without me or Scott or Isaac here."

Or Allison, because she'll shoot. Or Lydia, because she'll scream to scare anything away for you."

Stiles side-eyes him while he finishes his drink. When he's done, he throws the bottle at Derek's head. Derek catches it easily, pulling a face at Stiles.

"What? You were here, why the hell am I getting lectured at?"

"Never again," Derek says, scowling.

Stiles rolls his eyes. "I'm going to go to sleep now." He lies back down. "I'm fine. Thank you, Cora."

She smiles, glancing between them. "No problem. See you in the morning. Merry Christmas, by the way."

"Oh," Stiles says, rolling over to grab his cell phone off the headboard. "Hey. It's after midnight. Merry Christmas."

Derek nods to them both, and after Cora leaves the room, Derek picks up the piece of paper with the runes on it, tears it several times, and dumps it in the trash. "You need to put up protection runes against that thing now."

"It won't come here," Stiles says, face half-smushed into a pillow. "It's fine. They're not only meant to cause nightmares, you know. They *are* called upon to take them away. I think I'm fine for a while."

Derek's standing awkwardly at the end of the bed, but he has to ask. "Are they gone? How do you know?"

Stiles rolls onto his back again, lifting his head a little. He looks serious, though, not annoyed or like he's going to tell Derek to mind his own business. He sighs and lets his head thud back down. "I just... feel lighter. I don't feel afraid to shut my eyes." He yawns. "See? For the first time in a long time, I feel like I *want* to go to sleep."

"Okay," Derek says, and goes to the air mattress reluctantly.

"You're going to stay awake to make sure I am okay, aren't you?"

"Probably," Derek says as he settles in

"Great, just great," Stiles mutters. "Just do it quietly."

"Who was she?"

"Oh my god, I am trying to sleep, let me sleep, I actually *want* to sleeeeeeep," Stiles complains. He's quiet for all of three seconds before he answers. "The witch we kicked out of the Nemeton cellar. The one who had rebuilt it. I think I almost ran into her the other day -- like, literally, at the mall while trying to find my dad's gift. I *knew* I knew her somehow. She was working a glamor."

"She's still pissed at you?"

Stiles snorts into his pillow. "Apparently. Whatever, she doesn't want to, like, kill me or anything. Just be a pain in my ass. She's being petty because we didn't let her stay at the Nemeton. Scott and I will go deal with her after Christmas."

"I'll go with, for backup."

"Sure," Stiles says. "And, hey. You know. Thanks. For keeping an eye on me during all that."

"No problem," Derek says, because it really isn't.

**

Christmas Day happens in a flurry of gift exchanging, visiting, and dinner with his sister and the pack and their families. It's the busiest, most crowded Christmas that Derek has had in years, and it goes surprisingly well. Everyone likes the pie. The next day, Cora gets on the bus to go back to Iowa to spend New Year's with her boyfriend and her pack, and Stiles, Scott, and Derek engage in a territory negotiation with the witch. She doesn't get the Nemeton cellar back, but they work out something they can all be happy with, including her promise to stop pestering Stiles for the fun of it.

When all is said and done, Derek returns to his apartment. All the pieces of the fake tree are in the garbage, and the kitchen is spotless of any flour, like a silent apology.

Derek stretches out on the couch, deciding that taking a well-earned nap -- and several days of peace and quiet before New Year's at Lydia's and the start of school -- is perfectly deserved. He doesn't even mind the slight chill on air as the ghost hovers nearby.

4. The Metal Cube

Peter's back.

Derek can tell when Peter slides open the steel door of the large, windowless cube-shaped room Peter's been keeping Derek in. There's a hint of fresh air mixing in with the stale, recycled stuff he's been breathing for days as the door is pulled open even more. Light shines off the clean, sterile walls. He still hasn't figured out where he is or what this room could belong to, but it's cold and impersonal. Impenetrable. It's perfect for keeping a werewolf in and stopping him from getting out.

Derek hears the beat of a second heart, and his own stutters with worry at the familiar scent that wafts in.

Peter's back. And he's not alone.

"What the hell?" Stiles exclaims as he's pushed unceremoniously into the room, nearly tripping over his own feet. He rights himself in time, and there's enough light shining in that

he sees into the corner. "Derek?" Stiles asks, almost disbelievingly. He moves to rush forward. "Oh my god, you're alive--"

He's cut off when Peter grabs the hood of his red team sweatshirt. Stiles stumbles backwards with the force, making a strangled noise.

"Now, now, Stiles," Peter says calmly. "No getting ahead of yourself." Peter reaches over to the wall and flicks on the light. Stiles blinks against the sudden harshness, and then he takes in where he is and what he sees.

"What the hell are you doing to him?" Stiles exclaims indignantly, trying to move to Derek. "That's your own nephew, you fucking psycho."

Derek's doesn't think it's as bad as how Stiles is reacting. It doesn't feel that way. Sure, he's chained to the wall so he can't get away, and there are smooth silver manacles handcuffing his hands in front of him, but he's not hurt anymore. He's healed. His clothes probably looked trashed, though, from the car accident and the fight he had with Peter.

There's a silver collar around his neck, smooth like the handcuffs except the collar isn't carrying any electric currents in it. It does prevent him from speaking, though. He thinks there are runes inside it that are somehow binding his voice.

"This is sick, let him go, we thought he was dead!" Stiles exclaims in an angry rush. His hand twitches, like he wants to reach out and touch Derek, but he's a dozen feet away. He whips around to face Peter, arms flailing out to the side. "You asshole, you were keeping him here, weren't you? Letting us think -- what the hell is going on?"

"Sit down," Peter says calmly. He points to a metal folding chair against the wall. Peter has been sitting on it when he comes in to talk to Derek -- taunt him, more like, telling stories about how the pack is running around look for him, refusing to believe he's dead but unable to track him down properly. Well, until the day before, anyway, when they found his SUV in the river about thirty miles out of town, completely totaled, with no sign of Derek at all. Apparently that shook them more than a little.

Stiles is furious. "Maybe I don't want to. What are you going to do, huh? You need me for something, I know it."

"I said sit down," Peter says again, perfectly calm, hands folded behind his back. "Or Derek will pay for your insolence." Peter turns to look at Derek, a casual ease to him. "Derek's been through a lot the past couple days. Should we see how much more he can take?"

Stiles raises his chin, defiant, and stares Peter down for twenty seconds, not moving. Testing. Peter waits patiently, but then raises his eyebrows and Stiles' jaw clenches. Peter says, in a voice that's low and hard, "Sit."

Stiles huffs and scuffles his way to the chair, never turning his back to Peter. That, at least, is smart but Derek knows Stiles has lost this round. Peter's little smile proves it; he has Stiles right where he wants him, even if Stiles and Derek don't have a clue what for.

"You know, Stiles, I was just telling Derek the other day I wasn't surprised at how easily he seems to be fitting in with Scott's little pack. Maybe I should be, considering how resistant Scott was to him at the beginning, but I'm not." Peter turns to look at Derek, head tilted to the side. "He wants so badly to be in a stable pack again."

"You know they became allies. We all did." Stiles is slouched down in the chair, legs stretched out and hands resting on his stomach. Like he hasn't a care in the world. His sharp eyes tracking Peter's every move tells differently.

"Yes, but it's more than that now. I mean, Derek defers to Scott. And *that* isn't surprising at all. He's always been more of a follower. Born and raised to be a beta. He is so much better at that, don't you think? He doesn't have what it takes to be an alpha. *Clearly*."

"Shut up," Stiles says, rolling his eyes. "You've been back for, what, three days? How could you even know?"

"Oh, I've been here much longer than that," Peter says, waving a hand dismissively.

"No way," Stiles says. "One of the werewolves would've known. The Argents. Hell, I think even Lydia would've been able to sense it."

"I've learned a way to move a bit more undetectably throughout the world."

"Is that so?" Stiles asks, raising an eyebrow. "How's that?"

"Now, now, Stiles," Peter says, turning to look at him again. He tuts and shakes his head. "I'm not going to give away *all* my secrets."

"The medallion around your neck," Stiles says, nodding his chin in Peter's direction. There is a medallion there, showing in the V of the shirt Peter's wearing. He never wore it before. Stiles sits up more, reaches a hand out to the side and puts it against the metal wall. His fingernails scratch a little. "Coated in the same stuff as these walls." Stiles cranes his neck around. "Reason why my locator spell wouldn't work to find Derek."

"I'm impressed," Peter says. He doesn't sound surprised or shocked, though, and that alone is dangerous. "I've had a growing suspicion you'll be a powerful druid. You've been training with Deaton, yes, but it's more than that. Natural." Peter smiles. "You're going to be more powerful than even Jennifer Blake was."

"No, I'm not," Stiles retorts, obviously offended. "I'm not going to be anything like her."

"Your power would come differently, yes, but it'll still come." Peter smiles wanly. "Provided it gets the chance."

"Fuck *you*."

"Language, Stiles. I'm trying to have a civilized conversation here."

"After kidnapping me and then bringing me to a metal box of a room that you have your nephew chained up in? After trying to make us believe he was dead? How the hell is that

civilized? You're an animal, and it has nothing to do with being a werewolf."

"We all go about things differently." Peter shrugs. He turns his attention back to Derek. "I'm going about the ways I need to get my revenge."

"Derek has nothing to pay for," Stiles says. "Not more than he already has. The things that happened were not his fault. You've done worse, and with purpose."

"The things that happened were *all* his fault," Peter says, "because he's weak and people knew how to use that. He let them."

Peter crouches down in front of Derek, like a catcher on the baseball field, but far enough out of reach. Even with Derek chained up Peter knows to stay out of harm's way. "The thing about Derek is he is one of the most easily manipulated people I have ever known."

"Shut up," Stiles says, sitting on the edge of his seat now. "No one wants to hear it."

"I think you should," Peter says, not paying Stiles any real mind. He's focused on Derek. "I think you'd understand him better."

"I understand him just fine."

Peter shakes his head. "No, you don't. Everyone thinks he's this mysterious guy, all brooding and secretive. He's not. He wears his heart on his sleeve. It's just that when you first met him, his heart was so damaged he tried to hide it under anger and violence. But he was broadcasting just how fucked up he really is. That whole mess of creating a pack out of outcast teenagers was projection. He wanted to fix them because he couldn't fix himself. And he failed them. He failed every single one of his pack."

Derek's hands twitch, wanting to reach out and *hurt*, or at least get him to shut up, but Peter only shakes his head and smiles. "As for relationships, that whole Paige thing is exactly what broke him, isn't it?"

Derek tries to lunge at Peter, but the chains keep him right in place. Peter laughs.

"Enough," Stiles says. "You really love to hear the sound of your own voice, don't you?"

"Coming from you? Nice," Peter says mildly. He's still staring at Derek. "Kate Argent saw that heart on your sleeve, all sad and lonely. Maybe she didn't know exactly what had happened, but she saw an opportunity and *took it*." Peter's voice finally raises, blue eyes flashing in anger. "You let your bleeding heart ruin our family. And," Peter says, voice calming back down, "Jennifer Blake, Julia Baccari, whatever her name was. She did the exact same thing. Just moved on in and used you for what she needed, and you let her. You're pathetic, Derek."

Stiles is angry now, looks spitting mad. "Is this why I'm here? So you can humiliate Derek in front of someone? Derek, come on, man, don't let him talk to you like that!"

Derek doesn't say anything. Because he can't. He looks down at the floor, and knows that even if he could, there's little arguing with what Peter's saying. It's true. He's using it like a

knife, but it's true.

Peter doesn't stop there. "And what about Scott? Maybe he wasn't your alpha at the time, and you weren't his, but Scott has used you in the past to gain what he wanted. And then you go back to him with your tail between your legs, cozy up and get an in with the pack just so you're not all alone anymore."

"That is *not* the way it is," Stiles says. "Derek, you can't think--" Stiles trails off and his eyes flicker down to the collar and then back up. "You can't talk right now!"

"My hopes for your brilliance are dwindling," Peter says, finally standing up. He casts one more disgusted look at Derek but then turns to Stiles. "It took you several minutes to figure that part out."

"Like you said, he's not the most talkative guy. So what the hell is even the point?"

"Doing a little test drive for my dear Lydia," Peter says, shrugging.

Stiles is up out of the chair in an instant, body tight and composed and *angry*. He points a finger. "You stay away from her, you hear me? You don't go near--"

Peter moves lightning fast, and in a second grabs Stiles by the front of his shirt and pushes him back up against the wall. Stiles' head thuds against the steel. He gasps and winces. Derek's chains clink against the wall as he instinctively moves to try and help, but he can't get there.

"I'm done with you telling me what to do," Peter says. "Let's summarize this here, shall we? I've been lurking around for months and stalking the pack. I have a plan. I successfully abducted Derek and made you all believe he was dead. I have now successfully abducted you, and you will do what I say or Derek is going to be put through a lot of pain. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you." Stiles finally sounds afraid, and his heart is beating rabbit-fast.

Peter smiles and backs off, straightening Stiles' hoodie for him, brushing off the shoulders like he really cares. "Good." Peter steps back and points to the chair. Stiles doesn't even need to be told. He sits back down.

Peter pulls something out of his pants pocket. It looks like a car starter but it's the same silver as the collar and manacles Derek is in. Derek knows what this is, and he braces his feet on the floor.

"Let's do a demonstration on how serious I am here," Peter says.

Stiles looks between Peter and Derek. "That's not necessary-- *no*."

Peter presses the button, and Derek's arms convulse in pain from the manacles shocking him. It's different than electricity suppressing the wolf -- this, instead, makes it want to come out. He throws back his head in a soundless howl, and he shifts; cheeks hairy, canines out, claws extended. He hunches over the floor in pain.

"Going forward, for every time you mouth off or disobey me, he gets more. Got it?"

Stiles swallows and nods slowly. "Got it."

"Good." Peter walks to the door. "I'll be back shortly. Stay where you are."

And then he's out the door and has it slid back in place, the little number pad beeping as he locks them in.

It takes Stiles all of twenty seconds before he's off the chair and sliding down to the floor on his knees in front of Derek. Derek's back in human form, and shakes his head and points to where Stiles should be.

"Yeah, okay, just... in a minute," Stiles says, hands hovering in the air over Derek. "I need to be sure -- so you're not dead." Derek shakes his head. "Are you hurt? Injured from -- whatever he did to you?" Derek shakes his head again. He's healed. "And you really can't talk like some sort of Disney princess? You are literally the Little Mermaid right now, aren't you?"

Derek glares at him.

"Okay, okay, touchy subject," Stiles says. "Let me take a look at this stupid thing." Derek tilts his chin up while Stiles' fingertips graze over the edges of the collar. Then Stiles puts his hand on the back of Derek's head, pushing it down lightly while he gets up enough to look over Derek to the back of his neck. "There's a little clasp there, looks easy enough to get off, but it might need some sort of key."

Stiles sits back down and Derek straightens back up too. "Okay, hands," Stiles says, and Derek holds up his bound wrists, the chains clinking against the floor as he does. Stiles lightly puts his fingertips on the underside of Derek's arms, holding them up while he bends in close to look at the manacles. "Okay, looks similar--*fuck*," Stiles yells out in pain when his fingers brush against the silver. Derek jerks back when he gets the same current, though it isn't enough to make the wolf automatically pop out again.

Stiles shakes out his hands. "Ouch. Fuck. Okay, so those probably need the -- thing. Your uncle is seriously a sociopath. You know that, right?"

Derek nods. He's let himself hold a soft spot for Peter after he returned from the dead, even if he didn't like him, because he hadn't seemed crazy any more. He seemed like he had before the fire. And maybe, Derek finally realizes, that's where the issue is. Peter is... Peter, and Peter is only out for himself, no matter who is in the way. Derek can't afford to hold onto that soft spot anymore, even if it is for blood family, or he's going to lose the rest of what he has.

Stiles gets up and examines the chains, carefully not touching anything again. "Okay. Okay, so," Stiles says, sounding discouraged, "I can't do anything about this shit right now. Maybe the collar, but if Peter comes in and finds it gone -- we need a plan first. We need to find out more. Okay?"

Derek nods. Peter might be threatening harm against him right now, but he really doesn't want to know what Peter will do if he gets pissed off enough at Stiles. Derek can take it but Stiles wouldn't be able to in the same way.

Which is why he should go and sit the hell down. Stiles is slowly walking around the room, looking up at all angles. There's a vent where the air must come through, but it's small and very high up, and has two bright ceiling lights rigged up beside it. There is a switch on the far wall that controls it. Other than that, they are literally stuck in a cube, a square room sheeted in metal with no other cracks or visible ways out. There is nothing in there but the chair and a pail that Peter thankfully dumped out earlier. He's even cleared away the sandwich wrapper and water bottle he'd given to Derek for what he assumed was lunch, but maybe it was dinner. He's lost track of time.

Derek bangs his feet against the ground to get Stiles' attention. He gestures over to the chair when he does, and gives him a pointed look.

"Okay, okay," Stiles grumbles. But he doesn't go directly there, instead coming back to sit down in front of Derek. "Dude," he says softly, "don't you dare listen to a word Peter says, you got it?"

Derek looks at him blankly. He doesn't want to get into this right now, even if he could.

"Even if you could tell me to shut up and mind my own business, I would still try to make myself be heard. I would talk and talk until you listen, and you know you can't stop that. So here it is: Peter is a manipulator and has absolutely no capability for empathy, and you are six million times a better man than he can ever be because you *do* care. There are a fuckton of people who are assholes for using that against you, including him." Stiles takes a deep breath. "Even Scott, but I know you guys got past that. You've talked about it. Scott's made mistakes. I have too. Hell, Allison and Lydia and Isaac have. And so have you. But the difference between us and guys like Peter is that we're all trying to move in the right direction from it, while he is a fucking crazy asshole who completely lacks the ability to do that. Okay?"

Even if Derek could talk, he'd still have absolutely no idea what to say. Stiles' words sink in, determined and caring and so far from what Derek has been used to hearing in a long time from someone who is not one of his sisters, but they ring true. They make Derek want to believe them, and that's something.

"Our pack is not perfect, far from it, but we're all awesome and most importantly, we're all awesome together," Stiles says. "And they are not going to stop until they find us, and then we'll deal with Peter."

Derek taps his own chest.

"Yeah, yeah I'm sure you personally want to take that one on again," Stiles says, standing up. "If it can be arranged, it will."

Stiles lightly toes at Derek's foot. "Don't take what Peter said to heart, okay? Don't let it be another thing for him to use against you."

It'll be hard, because Peter's words swirl around in Derek's head, reinforcing all the things Derek has thought about himself for years. But he tries to focus on Stiles' words, and he thinks about the pack and the place they've made for him there, how they've accepted him in recent months. And he's not going to let Peter take that from him.

He looks up and meets Stiles' eyes, and nods.

Stiles' smile is relieved, like he believes that Derek believes him, and he retreats to the chair again.

And they wait.

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Derek isn't sure how long they sit there. It could've been twenty minutes or it could've been two hours. Neither of them have a way to tell the time, and it feels like a snail's pace when locked up in a room like this. Conversation is reduced to Stiles trying to piece things together with Derek simply nodding or shaking his head, and it quickly becomes frustrating for them both.

Derek didn't realize how much of their time together they actually spent talking until they couldn't do it anymore.

Finally, Peter comes back, sliding open the door and demanding Stiles stay right where he is. Then he pushes in a metal cart, covered with a bed sheet so they couldn't see what's on it. He wheels it to the opposite side of the room from Stiles and far enough away from Derek that he can't get to it.

"I'm surprised you haven't asked me where I've been all this time," Peter says.

"Because I don't give a shit," Stiles says flatly.

"You're going to wish you had," Peter says. He walks around the cart to the other side, so he can face Stiles and Derek, like he's about to put on a demonstration. Derek's a little worried he might be. Peter continues, "I've been travelling the world, you see. Far and wide. I've seen things, done things, that none of you here in town could even imagine."

"On a big quest?" Stiles asks sarcastically.

"Of a fashion. Searching both for knowledge, and certain items to fulfill that quest."

"Let me guess. You're here to tell us all about it. Show us even."

"I'm here to finish it," Peter says. He pulls the sheet off the cart. "And you, Stiles, are going to help me."

"Like hell I am," Stiles says, even though he's looking at the cart. Derek can see some of it; it looks like plants and herbs, some liquids in vials, possibly items with magical properties. A pot on a Bunsen burner. An old, ratty book. "I'm not helping you with anything."

"Yes you will, or there will be consequences. Come here," Peter says, gesturing for Stiles to join him. Stiles doesn't move, and Peter rolls his eyes. "Are we going to start this so soon? If so, the next little while is going to be a bumpy ride for Derek."

Stiles huffs in annoyance, but makes quick eye-contact with Derek. Derek gives a short nod, and Stiles is up out of the chair.

"Oh, how sweet," Peter says, "you think you're a team." He waits until Stiles is standing directly across from him, and then sweeps his arm over the chart. "What you see here are the ingredients to create a potion needed for a ritual that will steal the powers of a true alpha."

"To hell with you," Stiles says immediately, taking two steps back. "You have got to be fucking kidding me. You really think I'm going to help you with that?"

"I know you will," Peter says. He pauses dramatically. "Or I'll kill Derek."

It's a lie.

There's an uptick to Peter's heart that is rarely there, because he's so good at being vague and careful with his words. There is no covering this. Derek can tell it is an outright lie, and Stiles has no way of knowing that.

"But not before I kill you. Slowly. In front of him."

That is not a lie.

"You need me," Stiles says, thinking he's calling Peter on a bluff. "You won't kill me, not if you need me." He points to the table. "Which you do, because being a werewolf, you can't manipulate some of these things. That's why you brought me here."

"Very good, you do make a point," Peter says. "The ritual calls specifically for the emissary of the alpha's pack, which would be you."

"You're mistaken," Stiles says. "That would not be me. I'm not an emissary. I don't have that kind of power."

"Yes, you do. You're still in training, but you do. And while Deaton and Morrell guide both you and Scott, they're more like freelancers. I think they'd do in a pinch, actually, which is why I have no problems getting rid of you if I have to. But I'd much rather start with you. You are Scott's true emissary, his human support with a fine knack for the mystical."

Stiles is shaking his head. "I'm not doing this. I'm not," he says. "I'm not helping you with anything you can use against Scott. You are not becoming an alpha again."

Peter's hands grip the edge of the cart, and his claws are out. "Oh yes I am. Scott and Derek took that from me, and don't forget that you helped them. I am taking it back." He stands up straight again, and walks around the cart. Stiles backs up another couple steps, but Peter's quick; he reaches out and grabs Stiles by the back of the neck, his claw-tips grazing Stiles' skin. Stiles goes entirely tense, refusing to look at Peter. Peter pushes his face close to Stiles, so much so that his nose is practically touching Stiles' temple. Peter looks at Derek as he

says, "Weigh your options carefully. Refuse me and die. Do this, and it can buy you a couple of hours at least."

"But I'd have to make you something to use against Scott. What the hell kind of option is that?"

"You are between a rock and a hard place, but even then, decisions have to be made." Peter lets go of Stiles with a force that sends him stumbling forward. Stiles straightens up and glares at Peter. Peter says, "You have no idea the amount of patience I've exercised in the past year and a half. The time for that is over. Make your decision now."

Stiles turns to Derek, and Derek gives another short nod. He hates that Peter is using them like this, but buying the pack any amount of time to find them will help. Besides, Stiles is very smart and will find a way to mess with Peter. Derek doesn't doubt this at all.

Stiles sighs and nods back, face grim. He goes around the side of the cart and picks up the book.

"To the marked page," Peter says, sounding pleased. He drags the chair closer, next to where Stiles is working and sits down. He's watching very carefully. "Don't try anything funny. I know what needs to be done, inside and out. You don't have the experience or knowledge to purposely mess it up without my noticing. Another reason I didn't use Deaton or Morrell. Stiles, it would be very bad for you if you tried to pull one over on me."

"Fine," Stiles says, petulant. He ignores Peter and starts reviewing the book. He quickly flips a couple of pages, then sighs when he sees how much is there. He puts the book down and gets to work.

Even though he doesn't want to do this task, Stiles gives it his full attention and concentration. Derek finds himself soothed just by watching; the way Stiles' tongue pokes out of the corner of his mouth while weighing a perfect amount of wolfsbane, or the way his shoulder works as he swivels the pestle to carefully grind down little balls of mistletoe. He adds things to the big pot, and eventually has to light the Bunsen burner under it -- Peter takes a lighter from his pocket to give to Stiles, and makes him give it back immediately when finished.

Soon, the room fills with a scent that's something close to rosemary. Derek's eyes start to sting, and he has to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand when they water from irritation. Peter is affected the same way, and he gets up to turn the fan in the room on to help the air move. He even opens the door a little, though he doesn't look happy with doing so.

At one point, Stiles turns a page and reads, and then starts swearing. Loudly. "Oh fuck you," he says, arms flailing out to the side. He paces in a line behind the cart, running a hand over his face. "Forget it. No. No way, man, you cannot ask me to do this."

Peter calmly watches him. He takes the little silver controller for the manacles out of his pocket. "You'll be needing this." He tosses it at Stiles.

Stiles catches it but looks like he wants to drop it immediately. "No I won't," Stiles says, gesturing at Peter in agitation. "Volunteer yourself."

"You know I can't," Peter says, shrugging. "I didn't offer up anything, remember? I don't fit the bill."

This entire exchange makes Derek tense, because he has no idea what is going on, but it clearly has to do with him. Stiles is angry and resistant to something, and Peter knew it was coming. Derek gets up onto his knees, tries to see the book, but of course it's too far away.

His motion catches Stiles' attention, and Stiles looks over. He's miserable and upset. Stiles shakes his head, all the while keeping eye contact Derek. "No. No way."

Peter gets up, and Stiles flinches back, but all Peter does is go to the cart and pick up an instrument that looks like pliers. "You'll be needing this. Time is of the essence, Stiles. Act now."

Stiles takes the pliers from him and walks over to Derek. He sits on his knees so that they're mirroring each other's positions. Stiles puts the controller on the floor next to him. "I don't care what Peter says, I'm not using this." He looks at Derek. "It's going to be your choice. He's not allowed to manipulate us like this anymore. It's clear now. He was lying. He's not going to kill you. He needs you for this."

Stiles looks absolutely wrecked, and his breathing is coming heavier. Derek puts his fingertips on Stiles' thighs, trying to ground him, trying to get his attention enough so that he'll tell Derek what the hell is going on.

Stiles is looking down at Derek's hands. "It says the emissary needs to *harvest*--" he spits the word out with disgust-- "the next ingredient." He turns the pliers over in his hands twice, and then meets Derek's eyes. "The claws of a willingly fallen alpha."

It all makes sense now -- no, not sense, Peter will never makes sense to Derek again. But he sees the reason behind everything that Peter has done the last couple of days. Much longer than that, even. It's built up to this, his attempt of revenge. To steal power. To use Derek and Stiles against each other, and against Scott.

Stiles says, "This is your choice. And if you refuse, then Peter can go fuck himself."

Derek glances over to where Peter is. He's sitting on the chair, leg cross over knee, watching with ease. Like it's some sort of television program on before him, letting Stiles and Derek play it out by themselves. But Derek doesn't think for a second that Peter won't be there, jumping in with fangs and claws in retribution for not getting his way.

Derek looks back at Stiles. Stiles speaks softly, intimate and just meant for them, even if Peter could hear. "I won't do it, Derek, not if you don't want me to."

It's that alone that makes Derek's heart swell, know that someone close to him isn't going to use him, force him into anything. It makes his choice to protect Stiles even easier.

Derek cranes his neck side to side, pulls on his wolf, and lets out a soundless growl as his body shifts. His claws extend, resting lightly on Stiles' jeans.

He lifts up his hands as an offer.

Stiles looks like he's going to be sick, but he nods, whispering, "I'm so sorry," and starts to go about his task.

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Derek drifts in and out. The throbbing in his fingers becomes less and less; it's already healing quickly, even if there are no claws there anymore. He accidentally lost one when he was a kid, getting it stuck in tree bark, and while it takes time to grow back, it won't hurt for long. Stiles had taken the time to use the bottle of water off the cart to clean his hands up, taking off his own t-shirt to wipe them clean so they could heal properly. Stiles is only wearing his hoodie now, and all Derek can think is he hopes Stiles isn't too cold.

By the time Derek's completely with it and able to sit up, there's only a dull ache in his hands that's barely noticeable. And Stiles is done with making the ritual potion.

"Excellent," Peter says, standing up. "I'm impressed with your efforts."

"Then be impressed with this," Stiles says. He has a handful of mistletoe balls he's grabbed off the table in his palm. His hand is over the beaker he's poured the potion into, tilted just a little bit.

Peter freezes. "Stiles. What are you doing?"

"Dropping these in will ruin the whole thing," Stiles says. "I read it all very carefully, and it was explicit in mentioning not to add too much mistletoe or it is completely ineffective. It'll ruin all your plans."

"You're playing a dangerous game here," Peter says, taking a step towards Derek. He realizes too late that Stiles never gave the controller back. He was probably enjoying seeing the hell he was putting Stiles and Derek through too much to really notice.

"I am," Stiles says. "You're not going to kill Derek. Not yet. You need him in case your plan goes sideways and you have to wait until he grows his claws back. And I know you're not going to let either of us go. All I'm asking is that you unchain him. And for god's sake, let the man talk."

Peter eyes him coldly, but then reaches into his pocket. "This is the key for it all," he says, holding it up. "I'll give it to you once you step away. Derek?"

Derek nods. There's no lie there.

"Fat chance, give it to us first. Stay back," he says when Peter takes a step toward him. "Slide the key to Derek."

"Fat chance," Peter echoes. "He may be declawed, but I know he'll be after me the second he has the opportunity. A compromise." Peter goes and sets the key on the floor near Derek, though out of reach, and then backs away. "Now that I've fulfilled my part, it's your turn."

"Okay," Stiles says. He moves to put the mistletoe down, but instead scoops up a vial with lavender liquid and shoves one ball in, quickly putting in the stopper. He backs away as Peter lunges forward and shifts into his wolf form, but Stiles holds the vial out in front of him like a shield. The liquid has turned to a blue vapor.

"I'll drop it," Stiles threatens. His hand shakes but his voice is firm. "Believe me, you don't want that. Just get the hell out, Peter."

"You are going to pay for this, Stiles," Peter growls, but he's grabbed the cart and is wheeling it away. He's too protective of what's on it to test Stiles further. "You've won this little battle, but I'm winning the war."

Stiles waits until Peter is completely gone, outside the door and the beeping lock in place, and then shoves the vial into his pocket as he rushes over to Derek, picking up the key as he comes. "I hate him, I hate him, he's an evil son of a bitch," Stiles says, a mantra while he works on getting Derek free of his bonds. "Oh my god, Derek, tell me you're okay."

"I'm okay," Derek says, voice cracking after not being in use for days. He coughs and swallows, and says more clearly, "I'm okay, Stiles."

"I'm not," Stiles says, sinking to his knees beside Derek. "That was -- I am so sorry, that was awful, how are your hands?"

Derek flexes his fists. "Sore, but I'll be fine. I've healed from worse. It's okay."

"It is *not* okay," Stiles says vehemently. "Nothing that has happened here is *okay*."

Derek puts a hand on Stiles' shoulder to stop him from getting too worked up. That's not going to help right now. Instead, he says, "Thank you."

Stiles looks at him sharply but laughs weakly, deflated a little. "What the hell are you thanking me for?"

"For asking me. For being brave and smart," Derek says. He touches his own throat. "For getting me free."

"We're not free," Stiles says, placated a little, and looks around. "Not yet."

"We will be," Derek says. "Come on, let's check out the air vent."

They try to find a weakness to the room, now that there's two of them free to move around. They don't find one, not right away. It was probably why Peter agreed to Stiles' demands the way he had. He'll either come back as an alpha and kill them, or if things do go sideways like Stiles says, he'll need to keep them here. There is nothing they can do, and it's frustrating, so they break for a few minutes to recoup.

Stiles insists Derek sits on the chair since he's been on the floor all this time. Stiles sits nearby, knees drawn up so his chin can rest on them.

And then Derek talks. He talks about how he ended up in this room, about what he knows from Peter, about all the things Peter told him about the pack. Stiles has something to input once in a while, just to clarify things, but he mostly lets Derek get out all he needs.

Derek talks, and Stiles listens. And vice versa. It keeps both of them from, as Stiles would say, losing their shit. From letting the gravity of the situation pull them down. They breathe, and talk, and they push on through.

They've been doing that for a while, it seems.

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"What was that?" Derek gets up from the chair and walks over under the air vent.

"What was what?" Stiles asks, following him.

Derek can hear it, little bits of tinkering echoing out, and then as if someone was moving through the air duct. "I think there's something in there. Someone, maybe."

"It's pretty small."

"We know small people," Derek says, and there's a bit of hope now. Lydia could fit in it, so could Allison. Scott, even. Stiles would've been able to, if they'd been able to get him up there from this end carefully, but there was no way to get the grating off.

He uses his senses; he hears a heartbeat, one that he heard nearly every day for a year, and smells the citrus of her favorite shampoo.

He calls out, "Cora?"

There's a pause. "*Derek?*"

Stiles yells, "Cora, we're both in here!" He rushes over to the wall and turns off the switch for the fan. Derek can hear better now as she moves through the small duct.

"I didn't know Cora was in Beacon Hills," Derek says. "You said she was going to wait in Iowa."

"Yeah, that's what we all decided, just in case you showed up there. But I know Scott called her yesterday after your car was found. She must've got to town after Peter took me."

"Look out!" Cora calls out, and there's banging on the vent. Derek pulls Stiles back out of the way. A minute later, the grating falls to the floor with a clatter. Cora easily swings her way out of the duct and gracefully lands on the floor below.

"Derek!" Cora says, and she runs at him, grabbing him in a tight hug. "We thought -- we weren't sure -- you're not dead."

"I'm not dead," Derek says into her hair, hugging her close and kissing the top of her head. He could only imagine what she had been thinking, what she'd been going through. If it was reverse and he'd heard she was missing, he would've gone out of his mind with worry.

"You're hurt," she says, when she pulls away. She goes to reach for his hands but he tugs them away.

"I'm fine. Really."

"Long story," Stiles says.

"Stiles," she says, turning to him. She gives him a quick hug too. "Everyone is going crazy about you guys missing."

"How'd you know where to find us?" Derek asks.

"The witch."

"The witch?" Stiles asks, disbelieving. "We went to ask her the other day if she'd heard anything about Derek, and she wasn't around! Looked like she'd been out of her crappy apartment for days."

"Apparently she was in Salem for some sort of conference but came home early," Cora says. "When Scott talked to her today, she said she'd done some contract work for a new werewolf in town, putting some sort of spell on a room he was building. Didn't even know his name, but his description was perfectly matched to Peter." She pauses and looks at Derek. "It's -- it's not, is it?"

He nods grimly. "It is. He's trying to steal Scott's alpha power."

Her eyes go wide. "Crap. That's probably what -- Lydia woke up screaming. She said something about the warehouse where the last fight with the kanima was? I don't really get that part, but Scott and Allison are on their way there now. She said death is waiting there."

"Cheery," Stiles mutters. "That's our Lydia for you."

"That's probably where Peter's waiting for Scott," Derek says.

"Lying in wait like the slithering snake he is," Stiles says bitterly. "We need to get there. Now."

Cora pulls her phone out of her pocket. "Isaac's on the outside, trying to find a way in." She calls Isaac's number and they go over to the door, looking at the little keypad while they wait. When Isaac picks up, Cora says, "Yeah, I'm in. Stiles and Derek are here. Yes, Derek. Yes, *my brother* Derek." She rolls her eyes. "Just get us out of here, I don't think we're getting up to the vent again."

Derek twists his body to look back up at it. "I might be able to boost you two up. Cora first, then she can grab your arms--"

"We're not leaving without you," Stiles says. "Tell Isaac to hurry the hell up."

"He says shut the hell up or he's leaving you in here," Cora says, relaying the message. "Also, he's really glad you're both alive."

"Ditto, man."

It takes a few minutes, but then the door is sliding open and Isaac is waiting on the other side. His face lights up when he sees Derek and Stiles, and he clasps each of them on the shoulder.

"Dudes," he says.

"I know," Stiles says. "Now let's go save Scott."

Isaac looks significantly more worried by that.

They all hop into the Argent SUV, which they had borrowed from Allison since she and Scott took his dirt bike. They still need to locate the Jeep, but Stiles doesn't have the keys for it right now anyway. Derek plans on coming back to the cube room and the abandoned warehouse it's built in and examining everything down to the last nut and bolt anyway. Hopefully Peter has their keys and phones and who the hell knows what else stashed away there.

They're not that far from the warehouse they need to get to, and Stiles and Derek fill the others in while they're on the way. Isaac gets a call from Lydia, who was working another locator spell with Deaton once they had gotten the information from the witch, and confirms that Peter is in town, which they all already knew. Stiles gets on the phone and tells Deaton all about the ritual potion that Peter made him put together. After he hangs up, he seems very discouraged.

"They'll meet us," Stiles says, "but they're farther away. We need to hurry up and be the ones who get to Scott." Isaac puts the pedal to the medal, and the SUV zooms through the otherwise quiet industrial district.

They park beside the dirt bike about a block away from the where they think Peter is. As they approach closer and closer to the building, Derek can pick up on three heartbeats -- two very slow, and one fast, like it's excited.

Though Derek and Cora are reluctant to agree because they each want to be the ones who go and find their uncle, it's Isaac that does a quick tour around, familiar with the building, and he reports back within two minutes.

It seems as though Isaac had a tough enough time with it himself. "I barely stopped myself from rushing in and ripping his head off," Isaac spits out angrily. He tells them that Scott in the middle of a ritual circle, unconscious, with Allison nearby, also knocked out but alive.

"Peter has crazy eyes," Isaac says. "Like, he is seriously into trying to suck up Scott's life force. Dude was meant to be a vampire. He had to have known I was there, though. He didn't care. He was laughing in between his chants."

Derek flexes his fingers. "I think we should act now. We can't wait for Deaton and Lydia, or any other backup."

"Agreed," Cora says, nodding.

"We can't just rush in there all disorganized or whatever -- and, seriously, good on you for coming back for us, Isaac," Stiles says. He pulls the vial that he had threatened Peter with earlier out of his hoodie pocket. "I have a plan.

"Another Molotov cocktail?" Derek asks.

Stiles gives a half smile but shakes his head. "Nah, but if he inhales it, it'll make him weak. But it only lasts, like, ten seconds." Stiles shrugs when Derek raises his eyebrows. "Yeah, he didn't call me out on it before. Think he was too anxious to get his stuff and get out of there."

"I'll throw it," Isaac says, and points to the Hales. "You should be the ones who attack. Unless you don't want to."

"Not a problem," Derek says. Cora stays silent, but she doesn't disagree.

"Throw it near him, not right at him where he can deflect," Stiles says. "Make sure it breaks."

"How do we know he'll inhale it?"

"Don't worry," Stiles says, "I got that covered. Okay, let's do this."

The three werewolves shift into their beta forms, and it feels weird that Derek has no claws out. The others don't seem to notice, but Stiles does, and frowns. Derek squeezes Stiles' shoulder to let him know it's okay, and then they split up in teams to go save their alpha.

They try to approach with stealth, and for a moment it seems like it might work because Peter is so focused on the ritual, but the hope doesn't last long.

"You're too late!" Peter calls out, sounding crazed, pumped up with power. It makes Derek's heart sink, but he knows Scott isn't dead. He is lying on the ground, crude runes drawn with chalk surrounding him. Incense burns and there are candles lit.

Peter is standing over Scott, hand out, and exactly like Isaac said, it looks like he's trying to suck up Scott's life force. The air between them shimmers like a mirage on a clear day.

Cora makes the first move, launching towards Peter with a growl. He turns in her direction and lifts up a hand; there's a spark of purple on the air between him and Scott, and it's like there's an invisible shield on the air. Cora hits it hard and falls to the cement ground.

Peter's so engrossed using his power against Cora's attack that he doesn't notice Isaac throwing the vial. He doesn't aim to hit Peter, but the ground near him, just like Stiles instructed.

Derek can hear Stiles nearby, yelling something in Latin, and then there's a gust of wind that makes the blue vapor waft up to Peter's face. He breathes it in then starts coughing hard, and

it looks like he's being suffocated. He falls to his hands and knees on the ground.

The candles flicker and then go out. The air around the ritual area shimmers and flickers with sparks, and then there's the sound of a large snap.

Scott's eyes fly open and his back arches, a loud howl erupting from him before his body goes slack and he falls back down, limp and unconscious again.

"No!" Peter gasps out between hiccupping breaths. His eyes flash an electric blue. "No!"

Peter's plan has failed.

Derek may not have his claws to use, but he has other weapons. He barrels into Peter and tears Peter's throat open with his teeth.

Peter's heart stops, and he's gone. Dead. Again. Finally.

The next few moments become a commotion. Isaac runs to check on Allison, shakes her shoulders to wake her up. She groans and starts to come to. Stiles immediately goes to Scott, murmuring, "Come on, buddy, come on." A car pulls up right outside the warehouse, and they can hear Lydia frantically calling out to them, her high-heeled shoes clicking on the cement.

Derek gets up off the ground but stays next to his uncle's body. Cora stands right beside him. They take each other's hand and look down at him, at the last of their family.

Derek shakes his head and tells himself not to think of it that way -- his Uncle Peter has been gone a long time. Instead, he's looking at the man who tried to attack and destroy the pack, threatened them and tried to kill them, all the while using and manipulating Derek to achieve his goal.

This time, with the help of Stiles and the rest of the pack, Derek wrenched control back into his own hands

The pack is safe. His friends and family are safe.

Everyone else goes to Scott, and he's surrounded by his pack when he wakes up, as it should be. Deaton tells him to flash his werewolf eyes. He does, and they're red, and that is a very good thing.

"Derek," Scott says, getting up to his feet. "You're alive."

"So are you," Derek says, nodding.

Scott clasps Derek on the shoulder, squeezing it, his silent way of letting Derek know that Derek isn't responsible for everything that Peter just did to them.

This time, Derek's willing to let himself believe it.

5. *The Prom Hotel Room*

The Nemeton has evolved to the point where its power took on a corporeal form. It's strong and real and a force to be reckoned with, a bark-brown oozing creature with deep red eyes that had started terrorizing the town a month before. It's been difficult to pin down and figure out how to get rid of.

Derek and Deaton have worked out how to make it vulnerable, easier to attack and destroy. Derek's reluctant to call the pack out of their prom to deal with it, but there isn't really any other choice.

They defeat it, but it's messy.

They're in the forest next to the Nemeton, and the once brown blob of a monster that had been standing on the tree stump has been popped like a water balloon, a combined attack of Derek and Scott's claws, Stiles' use of magic, and Lydia's screaming. The slimy insides are slowly trickling over the roots and down into the cellar below.

Derek looks around at the mess. He knows for a fact this is not what the pack had hoped for on this particular day. He really wishes it could've gone differently for them. They deserve it.

"No, seriously, just one normal day of high school," Stiles says grumpily. He flicks his hand to get some of the slime off, but just splatters more of it onto the already ruined tux he's wearing for prom. "Is that really too much to ask?"

"What?" Scott asks loudly. Stiles rolls his eyes and gestures to his ears, indicating that Scott should take the earplugs out, like Derek already had once Lydia was done doing her thing. Scott makes a face as he tries to do it without getting slime in his ears.

"I really loved these shoes," Lydia says, looking down at her feet. Her pink stilettos are covered with the brown gunk, but that was the worst that she got. She can do her kind of attacking from farther away.

Derek and Scott are covered from head to toe, as they were the closest ones to the ooze monster. Stiles got some of it, mostly in his hair and some on his tux jacket, but he's still a mess too.

"So is this it?" Scott asks, gesturing to the Nemeton and the ooze leaking back into it. "Is it de-powered? Should we clean it up to make sure it doesn't sink back in?"

"How? How do we clean *this* up?" Stiles asks sarcastically. "Call in Hazmat?" He holds his hand up to his face like a phone. "'Hi, hi, Hazmat? Can you come and clean up the magical essence of a tree? It's a pain in our ass and getting all over Lydia's shoes'."

Derek chuckles and Stiles looks pleased with himself. Lydia points a finger at Derek. "Don't encourage him," she says.

Scott rolls his eyes. "Well, I don't know what to do now, Stiles."

"I think it's powerless," Lydia says, her voice distant and floaty, like it gets sometimes. They've all learned to listen closely when she sounds like this. "Stiles, can you check for sure?"

Stiles huffs but doesn't hesitate to move toward the Nemeton. He makes a face when he steps in some of the slime. "This is so gross."

"At least it's not the black stuff you're always complaining about," Derek says.

"Still gross," Stiles reiterates. He leans down and places both his hands on an exposed part of the tree trunk. He closes his eyes, and his fingertips press down. The air around him shimmers a bit, but Derek thinks that's his own energy, not the Nemeton's.

Stiles stands up and backs away. "Yeah, no power in it. At least not now. I'll come back and check on it tomorrow."

Just then, Isaac bursts through the treeline in wolf form. His own suit is ripped and tattered in several places, as if by several little knives or swords. That's probably exactly what happened.

"The brownies have been taken care of," Isaac says. He and the Argents were on the lookout for anything the Nemeton creature might've called upon to help defend it. "Except that Chris is hurt, so Allison is going to take him to Deaton's." He looks at Scott. "I'm supposed to tell you that she'll take him home from there. And stay with him to make sure he's okay."

"Oh come on," Scott grouses, throwing his arms out to the side. "Seriously, we can't have one normal day of high school?"

"Heh," Stiles says, smirking. "Looks like that hotel room is sitting empty tonight. I mean, you're not going to leave Allison to take care of her dad by herself, are you?"

"Of course I'm not," Scott says. "I'll go catch up with them. What're you all doing?"

Isaac says, "I think I'll go back to the school. See if I can find my date and try to explain. Without actually explaining." He looks at the Nemeton. "That... would be hard to do."

Stiles eyes him. "Looking like that? Really?"

"I've got jeans and a t-shirt in my locker," Isaac says with a shrug. "I'll sneak in and change first. It'll have to do."

"I have black flats in mine that'll go with this dress," Lydia says. "I am not missing my senior prom because the Nemeton decided to throw a fit."

"So, back to prom it is," Stiles says, swinging his arms. Some ooze flings off him as he does.

"Oh no, honey," Lydia says, staring at him. "You are not getting back into the limo like that. I'm not losing my damage deposit."

Stiles looks at her incredulously. "What the hell, Lydia? You're my date! You're not trying to get rid of me so you can go hit on the band's drummer, are you? You're totally trying to get to him first."

"As if I'd need to worry," Lydia says with a smirk. Isaac laughs and Stiles glares at him. She breaks into a smile and points at Stiles. "But, seriously, you don't honestly think that you can come back to prom like that, do you?"

"I don't have spare clothes at school," Stiles says, reverting back to grumpy. "And if I come home like this and my dad sees me, I'm pretty sure I'll never be allowed to leave the house ever again. He's still twitchy after that whole, you know--" He waves his hand absently, but they all know he means the kidnapping from a couple months ago. "This isn't going to help."

"Here," Scott says, digging in his pocket to pull out a white plastic hotel room swipe card. "We're already checked in, I've got extra clothes there."

"I'll drive you," Derek says. He gestures at his own jeans and Henley. "Not like I won't have to clean the car later either way." He wants the chance to talk to Stiles anyway. He's got something to tell him.

"Dude, the new Camaro," Stiles says, wincing. "But, thanks. I'll meet up with you guys later," he says to Lydia and Isaac as he takes the key from Scott.

"See you there," Lydia says, and she takes the elbow Isaac offers her to help her walk over the forest floor. They start going west, where the limo is parked at the side of the road and the driver is probably wondering how the hell he let them talk him into driving them out here in the first place. Scott takes off into the trees to catch up with the Argents.

"Come on, we're this way," Derek says, and starts heading east. Stiles joins at an easy pace beside him.

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"You okay?" Derek asks as they clear the trees and walk towards the Camaro just up the road. He pulls the keys out of his pocket and turns it on from the starter. The headlights add light to the dusky glow of sunset. He looks at Stiles. "You're walking a bit funny."

"Yeah," Stiles says with a wince, and puts his hand on his lower back. "I slipped on some slime during the fight, landed on my ass. I'm going to have a wicked bruise. But, really, I'm fine."

"Okay." Derek trusts Stiles will tell him if it's worse than it seems so he lets it go.

"What about you? Your hands okay?" Stiles asks. He makes grabby motions at Derek, but Derek's already stopped and turned to face him. Derek sighs and holds out his hands, like it's a hardship, but really it's not.

"Stop complaining, you big baby," Stiles says, carefully running pads of his fingers over Derek's fingertips, making sure they're healing okay.

He's done this a lot since the cube room, insisting at looking at Derek's hands whenever he uses his claws. Derek doesn't actually complain and lets him get away with it every time; it just seems like something Stiles needs to help him get past what they went through. Grounds him to make sure Derek's okay. Derek has no problem helping with that, and only puts on a show of being annoyed. He knows Stiles doesn't buy it.

Stiles' hands linger a little longer than they usually do, brushing along the underside of Derek's wrists. He realizes what he's doing and drops his arms, taking a step away and clearing his throat. "How do they feel?"

"Good," Derek says. Stiles raises his eyebrows. "No, really. It hurts a little when the claws come out, but they're stronger and sharper."

"I noticed. Think you squirted some ooze on me when you gave a good stab."

"Sorry," Derek says, not sounding sorry at all. He's happy to use his claws in a fight again. "Come on, I might have some spare gym clothes in my trunk."

They go to the car and Derek digs around. He does have a gym bag but there's only one spare set in it. He's done one work out in them and it stinks a little bit, but he's worse off with being covered in slime so he'll change anyway. He doesn't actually want to get that stuff all over his car if he can help it.

"At least take your jacket off. Pants if you're not commando," Derek says. Derek takes off his Henley and stuffs it in the now empty gym bag, and pulls on the grey muscle shirt.

"Oh my god," Stiles says. "Of course we're doing this at the side of the road. Why wouldn't we be?"

"Where else are we supposed to?" Derek asks. "This road isn't too busy, it's why I'm parked here."

"This would be exactly the time that someone like Deputy Parish drives by and reports it to my dad."

"Then he'll just assume you're enjoying your prom night," Derek says with a smirk. "You're eighteen and you graduate soon. Don't think he can do much about it. Plus, he likes me."

"You seem to think he does," Stiles says, but there's absolutely no heat behind it. He takes off his tux jacket and shoves it in the bag along with Derek's shirt. He sighs. "There goes *that* deposit."

"You might be able to get it out," Derek says. It's too bad, though; a tux suits Stiles, all cleaned up and pulled together. He looks really attractive in one.

Now he's standing on the roadside in nothing a white dress shirt with a couple of brown ooze splotches, black boxers with yellow Batman logos, and a pair of red flip-flops he dug up out of the trunk that Isaac left in there after a day trip to the coast. He's holding his wallet, phone,

keys and swipe card because he's got nowhere else to put them. In theory, he should look ridiculous, but in actuality he still looks really attractive.

This is not helping Derek's situation.

Derek looks away and busies himself with finishing changing, ending up in a pair of loose gym shorts and shoving his bare feet in his sneakers.

"Let's go," Derek says, looking away and closing the trunk after he shoves the gym bag full of oozed-up clothes into it.

"Onward, good sir!" Stiles says, brandishing a finger in the air like a sword. He slips into his normal voice as he opens up the Camaro passenger door. "Dude, I'm really excited to shower."

"Yeah," Derek says, getting behind the wheel. He scratches some flakes of drying slime off his arm and sighs. "I think this stuff is decomposing. It starting to stink."

"Ugh," Stiles says, making a face. "Really, just one normal night, that's all I ask."

"Working on it," Derek says, and he puts the car in drive, heading towards the hotel.

**

After Stiles texts Scott to get the exact room number and then looking up the hotel floor plans online, Derek and Stiles sneak in through a back entrance, using the key to get into the building. They make their way up to the room, undetected by staff. As far as anyone is concerned, they're supposed to be there.

"Holy crap," Stiles says, letting out a big laugh when they walk in. The room is large and fancy, and definitely set up for a romantic evening. "Scott really went all out. No wonder he's pissed."

"He'll get over it," Derek says, slipping off his shoes near the door and walking in further. He tries not to really touch anything, in case he gets some lingering ooze somewhere. "Knowing him, he'll just get it again next weekend or for a birthday or something."

"This bathroom is awesome! First dibs!" Stiles calls from where he's wandered into it. He pokes his head out the door. "Cool?"

Derek nods. "Go for it."

While Stiles is in the shower, Derek makes a quick call down to room service, and then stands in the middle of the room with the remote control and flips through the television channels until he finds something he can watch. He can hear Stiles' low humming mixed in with the sound of the shower. About twenty minutes later, Stiles makes his way out of the bathroom in a waft of humid air that smells like mint.

"What're you watching?" Stiles asks.

"A movie Lucy put on last week," Derek says, distracted by the police chase on the television screen. He had missed the end because Scott had called to let him know there was another blob monster attack, and he'd gone out to help them. Luckily, it's on one of those movie channels that replays the same thing over and over.

"You're taking movie recommendations from your pet ghost?"

Derek turns to face Stiles to make a retort, but when he catches sight of him, his mouth goes dry and no words come to him.

Stiles is wearing a huge, fluffy white bathrobe, wrapped tight and secured at the waist. It still gapes at the neck and shows his sharp collarbones, still a bit damp and shining in the light. His wet hair lies flat to his head and a bead of water rolls down his temple.

Stiles smirks, like maybe he's the one who can smell arousal and attraction. He uses the towel he's holding to start scrubbing at his hair.

This is really, really not helping Derek's situation.

"Lucy is not a pet," Derek finally says, rolling his eyes and getting his footing on ground he's used to. He walks past and thumps the remote against Stiles' chest so that he takes it. "I'm going to shower. I know you probably want to get going, but some food will be here in a couple minutes."

"Food? You're not listening to my stomach, or reading my mind, are you? I was just thinking about that. I'm starving."

Derek pauses and glances over his shoulder. Stiles looks a little thrown off. Derek shrugs. "You're always hungry after you work some magic."

"I -- yeah." Stiles' mouth softens into a smile. "Thanks."

"No problem." Derek smirks. "It's going on the room bill. Happy prom night, courtesy of Scott."

Derek plans on paying Scott back anyway, but he smiles as Stiles' laughter follows him into the bathroom. As soon as he closes the door, he scrubs his hand over his face then braces his palms against the counter. He looks himself in the mirror and sighs.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Derek asks himself.

He's asked himself that a lot over the last couple years. He still doesn't have any answers, so like always he avoids looking anymore, and strips down and gets into the shower.

He hears a knock on the hotel door and Stiles answers it, happily greeting the staff that's brought up the food. Derek finishes up and turns off the water. He towels himself off and puts on his boxer-briefs. When he picks up the gym shorts, he catches the faint smell of stale B.O. He eyes the second bathrobe hanging on the back of the door and shrugs, putting it on.

"Food's here," Stiles says unnecessarily when Derek comes out of the bathroom. He's still in the robe, sitting cross-legged on the bed, eating his hamburger and his eyes are glued to the TV. "Also, your ghost has good taste."

"She's all right," Derek says, picking up the second plate with hamburger and fries. He sits cross-legged on the other side of the bed because the view of the TV is better than the table that's off to the side of the room.

"Yeah, she is," Stiles says absently. He glances over at Derek quickly, double takes, eyes going up and down quickly, and then coughs. He looks back to the TV but his cheeks are a little bit pink.

It makes Derek grin a little, but then it makes him realize that he really needs to get out what he needs to get out. He needs to clear the air between them before they go in the direction he thinks they might be headed. Hopes they are, anyway, but he needs a bit of time, and hopes it's not too much to ask.

"Hey," he says. "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure," Stiles says, turning to him again. He frowns a little when he sees Derek's serious face. "What's up?"

It takes Derek a moment to say it, but he feels he has to. That he owes Stiles some sort of explanation, as best he can.

"I've been seeing a doctor," Derek says. "I mean, sessions with a therapist."

"A -- oh. *Oh*," Stiles says, setting the burger down on the plate. He looks thoughtful for a moment, and when he notices Derek roll his shoulders uncomfortably, he quickly speaks. "That's good! I mean, that's good, right?"

"Apparently so," Derek says. Stiles opens his mouth but quickly shuts it again. "It's okay," Derek says, "say what you want."

"No, no, it's just -- I mean, I want to know stuff, like how it's going and how long you've been doing it, but I know you're private about that sort of stuff so I don't want to push." Stiles tilts his head to the side, assessing Derek carefully. "But you did bring it up. So, I mean, I guess *why*?"

Derek looks at the television, because it's really hard looking at Stiles right now. "I think that's pretty obvious."

"Come on, man, you know I didn't mean it like that," Stiles says, but gently. Just a soft prod to get Derek talking.

Derek scrubs a hand over his face, but looks down at his plate and nods. "Cora asked me too, after Peter. She was worried."

"Yeah, that whole thing super sucked," Stiles agrees. "And for a little while you were kinda..."

"Distant, I know," Derek says. "I just... needed space."

"We tried to give it to you," Stiles says. "Without letting you push us too far away."

"It was good. It was what I needed." He had made sure to tell them all he appreciated it, once he'd gotten over the initial shock of what had happened, digested all it meant and how it was going to fuck up his head some more. He'd thrown himself into his coursework for school, and watched a lot of movies with Lucy hovering nearby. He just chilled out, rather than overreacting like he used to.

The pack had checked in on him a lot, especially Stiles, who'd needed as much help moving on as Derek had. But none of it was overbearing. It was manageable. A tangible line to the world to remind him that it went on, and it wasn't all bad.

And now Derek is trying to do more than just go through the motions. He hopes it works. He'd like things in his life to even out, even more so since rejoining the pack. He'd like to have a semblance of a normal life again, and he knows that has a lot to do with checking himself; his guilt, his mistrust, his anger. He doesn't want to be consumed anymore, not by those sorts of things.

Stiles says, "Cora thought you needed more?"

"I do need more, Stiles," Derek says bluntly.

"O-kay," Stiles says slowly. "I get that. I do. Whatever's good for you. So I'm glad you're getting help. But, uh" -- he scratches the back of his head, damp hair with no product drying a little fluffy -- "who exactly are you talking to? I mean, it's good that you are, but a normal shrink would probably have anyone of us locked up in a microsecond if we talked about what *really* went down. And I know you wouldn't trust Morrell with something like that."

"There's a psychiatrist in Cora's pack that I know."

"Really? A werewolf therapist?" Stiles asks. Then realization dawns. "Oh, wait, the one that teaches at her college, right? So, isn't he in Iowa?"

Derek nods. "Yeah. On Mondays and Wednesday I only have morning classes, and he does too so it works out. We usually Skype for half an hour in the afternoon or whatever we can fit in. It's not ideal, but it's working."

"I thought you didn't really like her pack? Or they didn't like you, or whatever."

"Mostly, yes, but he's a professional, so. It's fine. Just a doctor-patient thing. It's better that we're not in the same pack, actually."

"Huh," Stiles says. There's another pause in conversation, with only the sounds of cops shooting in the movie filling their awkward silence. Stiles reaches for the remote and turns it down, and eats another fry. When Derek doesn't say anything -- not because he doesn't want to, exactly, but because he's still working out in his head what he should approach next, Stiles

asks another question. "Are you doing this for Cora, or for you? I mean, is it something that you want and are committed to, or whatever?"

"It is, yeah. I am." Derek sighs and sets aside his plate. Nerves have made him lose his appetite. "It wasn't an easy decision to make, but I think it's the right one."

"If you think that, then it is," Stiles says, nodding. "Thank you for telling me. I mean, you didn't have to, but... thanks."

Derek nods. "I thought it would make the next part easier to explain." He meets Stiles' eyes. "Stiles, I'm going away for a while."

Stiles goes completely still, in a way that he rarely does. His eyes flutter shut for a second, but then open and he frowns. He sounds disappointed when he says, "You're leaving again."

"No," Derek says firmly. "Not like before. I'm not cutting out on the pack, and I'm not disappearing again. But I do need to go away for a little while, and I hope you understand why."

Stiles seems a little more placated by Derek's determined tone. "To Iowa, I'm guessing?"

"Yes. Both Cora and I are done with school for the semester and we want to spend time together. I'm going to go to her so that I can also have some sessions with Dr. Johnson too."

"Do you know for how long?"

"We're making time to come back for your graduation. You invited us, and we want to be here for it. We wouldn't miss it for anything."

"But you're not staying in Beacon Hills after that."

"No," Derek says, shaking his head. "Cora and I are going to go on a road trip. Just the two of us. No one from her pack, no one from mine."

"That... actually sounds fair," Stiles says, relaxing even more. "Sibling bonding time."

"Yes. That's really important to me, and I don't see her as much as I'd like to. But I'll be back before the new semester. I'm registered for the fall, just like you."

"That's, like, in almost four months."

"I know. But I *will* be back. The pack is here. And this is my home. But I just can't be here for a little while."

He doesn't know what else to say. He doesn't know what else he can offer. He doesn't think there is anything else; and he certainly isn't expecting anything back in return. That's not fair.

Stiles takes another bite of his hamburger and chews thoughtfully. Patiently. He's in that state where his mind is moving and he's coming to a conclusion, or a decision. He's often rash and

flies off the handle, but he has his moments when he's considering something serious, or important. It makes Derek nervous, but not in a bad way.

Derek wants Stiles to *understand*. Or, at least, understand as best he can with what Derek has to offer. Which may not be a lot, but hopefully it's enough.

"The thing is -- it's just..." Derek trails off for a second, frowning, trying to put the words together. Stiles doesn't interrupt this time, remains patient while Derek figures it out. Finally, Derek says, "It's time for some good things to start happening. They already are, I think. I just need to stop being so blinded by my past that I don't see them. I want to be ready. I know I need to work for it, and I will. This is one way I have to that. For me."

Derek meets Stiles' eyes, and is unsurprised by the intensity that stares back. The way he's watching Derek carefully, slowly licking his lips as he thinks about his next words. "So, tell me," Stiles says, raising his eyebrows, "how long do you think it'll be before you're ready? For whatever good things that might come your way."

"It'll probably take forever," Derek says right away. "Or maybe it'll take just a little while." There's a ghost of a grin on Stiles' lips, probably remembering the same past exchanges as Derek. It's encouraging. "But I hope it counts that I'm trying."

"Of course it does," Stiles says right away. "Derek, it does."

"Okay. I just..." He trails off and shrugs.

"Need time. And that's okay. I'm totally on board with the idea of that," Stiles says. It comes out neutrally but there is no lie there. Derek can't help but wonder what depths are behind it, but Stiles aren't putting those out there yet. And that's fair, because that's basically what Derek needs. There's no pressure, and that's a relief.

Stiles adds, "But, does that mean you need space? Like before? I mean, you're going away, but you're still going to text us and call and stuff, right? And, hey, apparently you Skype now too."

"I definitely want to do that." He does, and he will. He's way better at all that now because being apart from Cora has made him adapt to it. He can do it with the pack too. He can no longer imagine what it'd be like without them playing some part in his life; he no longer wants to, won't even consider it.

"Cool," Stiles says, and pops the end of his burger in his mouth. His eyes drift back to the screen, and the credits are rolling. Derek's missed the end of the movie again. Once he's swallows, he says, "You gonna finish eating?"

"No. We should go," Derek says, getting off the bed. "You shouldn't miss your prom."

That hard rock of tension in his chest has come loose, and everything feels easier now that he's said what he's had to. That it doesn't feel he has to worry. Maybe they're in a weird limbo state, because Derek's put them there, but now he's confident they'll move on from it, one way or another.

"You know what," Derek adds, "I'll call Scott and Allison. I could always go stay with Chris if he really needs, or if he isn't too bad. They should be there with you guys too."

"Yeah, okay, that sounds like a plan."

Derek starts heading to the bathroom so he can change back into his gym clothes. "Let's get you back and maybe you can beat Lydia to the drummer." He means it like a joke. Stiles doesn't laugh.

"Derek." Stiles sounds serious, and it's enough to get Derek to pause and turn around. Stiles' face is open and confident. And all he says is, "You know I wouldn't even try."

Derek's hands curl into balls at his side, a reflex for when he's feeling too much, not sure how to handle it. But he's not mad or upset or anything. Cautious, maybe. Curious.

But Stiles gets up off the bed with ease, as if there were nothing wrong. As if he didn't leave Derek's mind reeling, as if he hasn't been for months. He just goes and opens up one of the duffle bags in the corner. "Nope!" he says, closing it quickly. "That one is Allison's. Definitely not what I'm looking for."

Derek chuckles, and he lets the tension bleed out of him. "Would make for a memorable prom if you showed up in that, though."

"It's already been really memorable," Stiles says absently, crouching down and opening the other duffle bag. He pulls out a pair of jeans. "Success!"

Derek can't help but smile, and goes into the bathroom to change. True to his habit, he leans on the counter and looks at himself in the mirror.

He finds he's still smiling, and doesn't bother asking himself anything at all.

Success. He's on the way there.

+1. Derek's New Dining Room

"Come in!" Derek calls out from where he is in the dining room of his new house. Stiles pulls the front door open, then Derek hears the light smack of his flip-flops -- probably the red ones he refuses to give back to Isaac -- on the hardwood floor as he makes his way through the house. "In here!"

"Hey, man," Stiles says as he pokes his head into the dining room.

"Hey," Derek says, sparing him a glance, but then goes back to making measurements on the wall.

"What're you up to?" Stiles leans against the doorjamb, arms crossed, looking on with interest.

"Hanging Melissa's housewarming gift." It's a framed photo of the pack on their graduation day, Derek and Cora included. He's glad she captured that moment, when they're all laughing and smiling, but he would've never thought himself to even ask for a copy. She seemed really pleased at how surprised and appreciative he'd been when she'd given it to him.

"It's a good picture," Stiles says, nodding at where it's lying on the dinner table. It had been one of the criteria for Derek when he was looking online at the house specs -- that it has a room large enough to fit a huge table. He could have the rest of the pack, their parents, and his sister over to sit down in one place, if he really wanted. It reminds him of his childhood home and the family dinners they used to have. Hopefully this pack does it from time to time too.

"It is," Derek says, marking the spot on the wall where he's going to hang it. The place is mostly sparsely furnished, and still needs more added to it to really feel like home. But this is a good start. He lightly bangs a short finishing nail into the wall.

"I see you have the place cleaned up from the housewarming party."

"That was two days ago," Derek says, picking up the frame and dusting it off with a clean rag. "And it wasn't that big."

"It was a good crowd."

It had been, actually. The pack and some of their friends from school who were still around for the summer. Some of Derek's classmates from college that he'd kept up with stopped by. Stiles' friends from Jungle, who are always an interesting bunch, even for a backyard barbeque. It had been an unusual mix, but it went well.

"Cora helped clean up yesterday," Derek says. He puts the frame on the wall, carefully catching the hook on the nail.

"She gone?"

"Dropped her off at the bus depot this morning." He'd purchased the house when they'd come back to Beacon Hills in June, but they cut their road trip a bit short for his possession date, and she'd stuck around to help him move and get settled. She's on her way back to Iowa to spend the last couple weeks of summer with her pack.

That's been the most excitement for his summer. The Nemeton doesn't act up anymore, and although strange and unusual things still happen across Beacon Hills, it's not with the same urgency. The pack have been enjoying a relatively quiet post-high school summer, they're all getting ready for college, and Derek's bought a house. Life is pretty simple now, and he likes it.

Stiles is quiet for a moment while Derek shifts the picture frame around and makes sure it's not crooked. And then Stiles asks, "How's your head today?"

It's Stiles' way of asking how Derek's feeling, how all his emotions and pain and happiness mixed up in his mind are. His way of testing the mood and double checking with Derek

before he pushes on with something more serious.

Some days it isn't good -- especially the ones where Derek has been talking to his doctor, or somehow bad memories are brought up to the surface, or even if he wakes up on the wrong side of the bed and is in a grumpy mood for no reason at all. Those days, he can't handle serious conversations very well, even if sometimes he has to have them.

The intensity in those moments is greater now, ever since he decided to face his issues head-on, but it also diffuses quicker. And they seem much fewer and farther between.

Sometimes Stiles pushes on anyway, not willing to leave Derek alone in his misery. It's blown up in their faces before, left scratches on what they're trying to build, and it takes even more effort to fix it. They always seem to, though.

And some days -- a lot of days, most days now, even -- he faces the world with cautious optimism. It seems a lot less bleak and miserable than it used to. He's not blind and he's not stupid; he gives Stiles and the rest of the pack a lot of credit for that. But he's taking some credit himself for it too.

"My head is good," Derek says. He straightens the picture one more time and turns to Stiles. "How's yours?"

"Good, it's good," Stiles says. He pushes himself off the doorframe but otherwise stays rooted in spot. "But, there's been something on my mind. It's time for us to talk. Like, *talk*. About us."

Derek nods. He's been expecting this. They've been skirting around it for months, ever since that evening in the hotel room. All their texting and the few phone conversations they've had while he was gone, it had all been about them being pack, being friends. Staying in touch, and getting closer. It had been pretty easy for Derek that way, actually, eliminating the discomfort of being face-to-face. But it's time for it now. He knows that.

Stiles takes a deep breath, but pauses before he says anything. He drags his thumb across his forehead. Derek knows that this means he's finding it difficult to get started, that he's trying to find the right words. Derek waits patiently. It's the least he can do; Stiles has been doing it for months.

"The thing is, Derek," Stiles says, meeting Derek's eyes. Not letting either of them look away. "I can be a good thing for you."

"Stiles," Derek says, because he can't help it. He can't let Stiles think otherwise. "You already are."

"I know, no really, I know. This whole pack is good for each other. But I mean in a way that goes beyond that. More than pack, or even being friends. We finally have got that part *down*. I want it to be more. I can be that good thing for you, Derek, and you for me."

Derek nods. Because he agrees. It's been a long time building, a long time coming, but it's like what Sheriff Stilinski said at Christmas -- even in finding that right person, maybe it just

takes a while to get to the place where it's right.

Things have finally started feeling right.

Stiles continues. "I'm putting this out there so it isn't something the either of us miss. Even if we need more time, or we go slow, I'm not going to let it be something that passes us by without at least acknowledging that it is a thing that can actually happen. Okay?"

"Okay." Derek doesn't say more than that, because Stiles is on a roll and Derek doesn't want to mess it up. He knows Stiles will say everything that needs to be said. He's really good at that.

"Okay." Stiles takes another deep breath. "And just to be one-hundred percent clear here, I'm talking about dating. Being in a relationship. You know. Boyfriends."

The corner of Derek's mouth tugs up. "I know what you mean, Stiles."

"Good. But, I need to be honest here," Stiles says, a little cautiously, but then he plows on through. "Okay, so my experience in relationships is limited. I have some, but not a lot, and it was -- well, it was just about teenage hormones and sex, really. The actual dating was a disaster -- I mean, they were both good people, but the relationships did not work. And a lot of that had to do with me. Most of it. So, really, I kind of have no clue what the hell I'm doing when it comes to this stuff."

"I'd say you're off to a good start," Derek says, because it's true. Stiles is already way ahead of every adult relationship Derek's had because he's being so open and honest about it.

Stiles gives a small self-satisfied grin. "Well, thanks. But, I mean, I'm going to try, I really am, but it's pretty much uncharted waters for me here."

"Well, given my past relationships, I would never hold that against you," Derek says bluntly.

"Yeah, that's -- I wanted to bring that up without, like, offending you." Stiles wrings his hands in front of himself, then splays them to the side. "I know I have before, but I've learned, Derek. I know better now. I will *not* use it against you. I will *not* throw it in your face. I have *no* intention of manipulating you or using you or any of those things, okay?"

Derek swallows hard. He knows Stiles cannot promise those sorts of things, not really, but he also knows Stiles is going to be earnest in this. That he's going to *try* -- that he already is, and in that Derek finally believes. He answers, "I know. I -- thank you for saying that."

Stiles smiles, though it's small. His heartbeat skips nervously. "And, also, so -- we should not have sex for a while."

Derek's eyebrows immediately raise up. "What?"

Stiles grins, but he puts up his hands defensively. "No, seriously, that's -- it's this thing. I want to focus on the *relationship*, not the physical stuff."

Derek appreciates the gesture, but to be honest, it sort of makes him want to laugh. Not meanly, but a bit in disbelief. "Stiles, neither of us are blushing virgins anymore."

"Don't get me wrong," Stiles says quickly. "It's not that I don't want to. I cannot freaking wait to get it on with you. We are going to be so good together that way, holy crap, I know we are. And if we're not, we will practice and practice and practice. A lot. A whole lot of fucking is going to be going on until we are great. And then we'll just keep going until we're perfect."

"There is no such thing as perfection."

"Well, we'll just have to do a lot of trying to achieve it, won't we?"

"I think that can be arranged," Derek says, because the way Stiles is putting it, Derek really wants to try. He wants Stiles too, of that he has no doubt. "My forever-celibacy is going to go on a hiatus."

Stiles' face turns serious. "That's the thing, Derek. I know you really well now, because you've *let* me know you, and I just think this will be a good start to us being *us*. Just -- putting that stuff on hold until we build a good foundation." He moves his hands horizontally through the air. "Then we'll add that layer to it."

"I think we already have a good foundation," Derek points out. "That's how we even got here. Which is a lot more than I would've thought a year ago when I was thinking of coming back. But, okay. We can do it this way."

"Only if you're good with it," Stiles says immediately. "I mean, I don't want you doing something just because you think it'll make me happy--"

--Stiles," Derek interrupts, and smiles softly. "You've made excellent points. Thank you for that consideration."

"Oh. Well, you're welcome," Stiles says, pleased. "I'm not saying we're going to have to wait very long because, man, I want you. Want to *be* with you." Just the words, and Stiles' enthusiasm in it, makes Derek smile, a warm feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. Stiles adds, "Having a little bit of time to get used to being in each others' lives like this, in each others' space -- that's not a bad thing, Derek. We're going to be really good together."

"Yeah. Yeah, we are."

In just a mere few minutes, Stiles has laid it all out there. He's smart and brilliant and determined, going after what he wants but openly. Honestly. And what he wants is Derek -- which is probably more than Derek deserves, but he's ready to let himself accept that it's okay to have. That it's okay to want it back. And he does.

"Let's sit," Derek says, nodding towards the table and chairs. They're still standing on opposite sides of the room from each other, Derek not moving or startling Stiles while he was talking. But Stiles is quick to take a seat now, and Derek takes the one right beside him. They turn their chairs to face each other.

"Let me see your hands," Stiles says. He takes Derek by under the wrist like he's done so many times before, pads of his thumbs running over the tips of Derek's fingers. It's not necessary anymore; he hasn't been using his claws, but even if he had they're completely healed now.

"You don't have to ask to hold my hand, you know."

Stiles rolls his eyes. "I know," he says. "Old habits." He links the fingers of one of his hands with one of Derek's. He uses the other elbow to prop his head up on the tabletop and he looks at Derek. This is definitely new, but it feels good.

They're quiet for a moment, but then Stiles says, "Tell me what you think about all this."

"I have been," Derek says. He leans back against the chair, but keeps his and Stiles' hands on his knee.

"I know, but this is one of those times where, I don't know," Stiles says, shrugging. "I'd just like to know more of what you're thinking. How's your head?"

"My head is still good," Derek says patiently. "Really good." But he knows what Stiles means -- yes, they had a conversation, but Stiles was leading it. Derek needs to contribute something. Something new, something reassuring.

He takes a minute to pick out the right words, but then leans forward and puts his other hand on Stiles' knee. "I trust you with my life. Literally. And often." He quirks up one side of his mouth, and squeezes Stiles' hand. "I trust you with this too."

Stiles freezes for a moment, and then a smile begins to blossom over his face. "Holy crap," he breathes out, "I need to kiss you, like, right now."

"Yes," Derek says, "definitely do that."

Stiles laughs, bright and joyful. He lets go of Derek's hand and then reaches out, cupping Derek's face between both his hands. He doesn't lean forward, though, just stops and *looks*. His eyes flit to little details he must see on Derek's face, and his thumbs rub absently over Derek's stubble.

Derek looks back. He's seen Stiles a hundred times, often up this close but that was always when they were in a fight or trying to get in each others' face to piss each other off, or when they were in a life threatening situation. Or sitting on a hotel bed, wearing white fluffy bathrobes while eating burgers and fries, wanting more but knowing they shouldn't have it yet.

Now, they just look at each other, and it doesn't feel like anything but an interest to *see*. And, Derek finds, it feels entirely comfortable.

Derek's hands slide down off Stiles' knees to grip the underside of his chair, and he jerks it forward just a little. Stiles is jostled, laughing and not letting go of Derek's face. But then his own face softens, and he licks his lips in anticipation, his heart thumping an excited beat.

Stiles leans forward and presses their lips together. It's simple and soft, and Derek feels it right down to his toes. He tilts his head a little so that their mouths slot together beyond something chaste. It's warm and wet and slow, and Stiles pulls away just a little to laugh happily again. If that's what Derek gets to hear just for a kiss, he wants to do it as often as he can. He wants to anyway.

Stiles places soft, open-mouthed kisses against Derek's lips, his hands moving down to rub absently over Derek's neck and shoulders. It's almost lazy and sweet, aside from the fact it's too new to feel completely relaxed. They're too interested in discovering each other. Derek likes Stiles' mouth against his, the light smacks of their lips parting and the feel of them sliding back together. Derek inches forward on his chair, reaching for Stiles, his hands coming to rest lightly on Stiles' sides.

Derek gets lost in time, isn't sure how long they've sat at his dining room table sharing kisses, when the two of them get rudely interrupted.

It's just as Derek is licking at Stiles' mouth when, suddenly, the surround sound system blares the theme-song to that stupid summer dancing show.

Stiles flinches away from Derek, almost cowering against the deafening sounds. He says loudly, "*What the hell?*"

"Lucy," Derek says, looking over Stiles' shoulder into the living room. The television is on. "Turn it down, please."

"Seriously?" Stiles asks as the volume goes down to a manageable level. "Did your pet ghost really follow you to your new house? And did she really just cockblock us?"

"She is not a pet," Derek says. "And I thought we weren't cocking right now."

"Oh my god, you just said that," Stiles says gleefully. "And it was the best thing. Ever. Never talk again, you just outdid yourself."

Derek raises his eyebrows.

"Okay, nope, I take that back," Stiles says, laughing again. He presses his nose into Derek's cheek, and then kisses his jaw. "Please talk to me."

"Want to go watch TV with Lucy? It's her favorite show, so it'd be on regardless if we were here or what we were doing anyway."

"You know," Stiles says, standing and taking Derek's hand in his, tugging him up, "a couple years ago, if someone would have told me it was in my future that Derek Hale was a werewolf and he was going to be my boyfriend, and I would end up sitting in his house watching So You Think You Can Dance with his ghost roommate, I would have laughed in their face. A lot."

"Your life is weird," Derek agrees, grinning and following him to the living room.

"Nah." Stiles plops down on the couch. "My life has been weird since the day I met you. I'd say this is pretty much normal by now."

Derek sits down on the couch next to him, and then leans over and presses a kiss behind his ear. Stiles grunts and pushes him away, complaining that Derek's distracting him from the show, but Stiles is smiling and then moves even closer to Derek.

Derek throws his arm over Stiles' shoulders and they get comfortable on the couch together. The house settles in around them. Lucy hovers in a chilly patch nearby. Derek feels, finally, for the first time in years, like he's *home*.

"I think I'm going to like normal," Derek says, and Stiles presses a kiss into his shoulder.

~ end

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