Safety in Silence

by Survivah

Summary

It's perfectly understandable. Even Derek wouldn't want to be Derek's soulmate.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

The laptop was picked up secondhand at a sketchy electronics store in Des Moines, from a shelf that also contained an old coffeemaker with a cracked pot and a tub full of old nokia flip phones. Derek and Laura bought it because everything else was gone, and spending the insurance money on some shiny, brand new number from a strip mall didn’t seem right. So their laptop’s hinge is wobbly, and barely has any memory, and every noise that comes out of the speakers is tinny, but the laptop—“Old Bess,” Laura calls, or called it—is functional, in the most technical sense of the word. When Derek numbly clicks on a “trending now” link, the laptop gamely takes him to some local news website and a video with two cheery newscasters. After some grinding noises from deep inside the hard drive, the video heaves into life.

“And on the lighter side of the news,” chirrups the impeccably styled blonde behind the news desk, “Erin Brown and George Thomasson of Redding weren’t expecting to find their soul mates when they each went with a group of their friends to a karaoke competition at the Alibi Bar on Chestnut, but as we all know, the soul mate bond can strike at unexpected times. Ari DeNiri has more.”

The footage switches to another woman excitedly clutching a microphone. “Thanks Jessica. Now I’m standing in front of the Alibi Bar, where Erin Brown and George Thomasson met. Like any of us, they had no idea that they had the trait for soul mate compatibility, they only knew that they were both scheduled for round three of the Alibi’s Wednesday night karaoke competition. But when they were both called onstage for their round, they both felt that classic ‘jolt to the heart’ and a scene right out of a romance novel ensued. Bystanders report that the two karaoke aficionados decided not to sing Don’t Stop Believing by Journey, but instead improvised a duet in which they described their love for each other—”

Derek closes the laptop, pinching the bridge of his nose. He can just hear Laura complaining, draped over the bean bag in their tiny New York apartment, saying things like “these stories are so corny!” and “they’re totally not being inclusive to people with soul mate dysfunctions. They act like these stories are the norm, and never give time to people whose soulmate just doesn’t feel ‘the jolt,’ or already married, or have three way bonds.” and “You never see werewolf stories on tv either. I’d say they’re being racist, but then again, I’ve told you the statistics—”

“Yes Laura, you have,”

“All entire 40%—40%!—of werewolves have soul bonds, which is four times the human percentage—”

“But half of them are classified as dysfunctional,” Derek would recite, rolling his eyes.

“But half of them are classified as dysfunctional, and when they’re human/werewolf soul bonds, the number gets even—”

“Gets even worse, I feel like we’ve talked about this before.”

Then Laura would throw a pillow at him and return to drinking in every detail of whatever soul mates related news story was playing.

A small smile plays over Derek’s face before he remembers that he’s sitting on the floor of his burnt out house, and he was supposed to be emailing his landlord that he and Laura won’t be coming back to New York.
Just... the way she’d let loose with grim numbers and percentages, then look at him and say “but don’t let that discourage you. There was always mom and dad.”

Derek would always shake his head. He doesn’t have a soul mate. People like him don’t get soul mates, and Derek could accept that, find comfort in the knowledge that he’d always be alone, but Laura never could.

“Don’t be so sure, Der-Der. Don’t be so sure.”

Derek shakes head fondly. He can almost see her patronizing little finger wave. She was always so sure of herself, even if- especially if she was wrong.

There’s nothing like that terrible feeling when a full grown man realizes his big sister was right all along.

It’s just that he’s \textit{perfect}.

Derek’s heart starts to beat faster and faster as he draws nearer and nearer to the two figures at the edge of the property. The one on the right. It’s the one on the right. The one on the right who screams nerdiness and whose hair is cut too short, the one that sent a jolt through Derek’s heart the second his eyes fell on him.

Nothing he’s ever seen on TV managed to fully describe this feeling coursing through him. There’s the sudden shock to his heart, but also utter terror at how, in one moment, a stranger marched into his life and filled in a space Derek didn’t even know existed. And exhilaration. Pure exhilaration that an adrenaline junkie could OD on. He’s standing, teetering, on a precipice, with his old life on one side, and an ocean of possibility on the other.

\textit{There was always mom and dad.}

He could have that. Right here, right now, Derek could find a piece of forever. A miracle sent to him in the wake of Laura’s- Laura’s.

She would be so happy right now. So happy. Derek found him. \textit{Derek found him} and it’s nothing like he thought it would be.

In the seconds he walks up to the pair of men, Derek falls in love with a dozen tiny things about his soul mate.

Derek’s soul mate shuffles his feet when meeting new people.

Derek’s soul mate has eyes that look almost yellow when the light hits them.

Derek’s soul mate has the tiniest patch of stubble underneath his jaw, like he was distracted this morning, half awake, toothpaste on his breath and sleep in his eyes, warm and relaxed, leaning against the sink with one hip, razor dangling from his fingers.

Does Soul Mate like what he sees? Derek shaved this morning too, but it was by the creek outside the house, and he knows he must have missed spots. Derek knows he’s conventionally attractive, but Soul Mate must see beyond that, and is what he sees good? Is he just as out of breath, as flustered, as ecstatic as Derek is?

\textit{This is Derek’s second chance.} He’s going to get this right.
Derek’s soul mate shuffles his feet again, then opens his mouth. He’s going to speak, and Derek’s going to hear what his soul mate’s voice sounds like, and neither of their lives are going to be the same after this moment.

“Hello, um, sir. We were just looking for my friend’s inhaler.” Those yellow-brown eyes flick up to Derek’s, then easily flick away again. “So, uh, have you seen an inhaler or anything? He lost it somewhere around here.”

His soul mate’s friend nods enthusiastically. “They’re like seventy bucks.”

“Uh-huh,” says Derek’s soul mate, wriggling his hands in his pockets and glancing behind him as though he’s looking for an exit route.

Well.

Derek allows himself one second. One second to close his eyes, breathe in, readjust, curse Laura for being so spot on with her numbers and thank her for preparing him for this. One second to remember how to act like a normal person. Today is a normal day. He is talking to two people—boys, really. Teenagers. Of course he’d be creepily too old for his soul mate—he is talking to two people who are strangers to him. He is going to control himself.

“This is private property,” Derek’s mouth says.

Soul mate’s eyebrows pull together and his friend cocks his head. Too harsh.

“I just mean, well, no, it’s fine,” Derek adds quickly. He has to at least leave his soul mate with a good impression of him. When they pass each other at the supermarket, or have pumps near each other at the gas station, (because if Derek wasn’t sure he’d stay in Beacon Hills before, he certainly is now,) they’ll be able to smile like acquaintances do. Derek will be able to catch a whiff of that smell—laundry and dust, something warm and reassuring—and carry on day by day, like he has since his world collapsed the first time.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and then almost smacks his head into a nearby tree out of frustration. The inhaler. The one he found last night and put in his pocket because he couldn’t just leave it lying on the forest floor. Derek pulls the inhaler out and awkwardly tosses it at his soul mate’s friend.

“I forgot I found it the other night, sorry,” Derek grinds out woodenly, doing his impression of the most awkward human being on the face of the planet.

The Friend catches the inhaler with no difficulty. “Thanks dude!” he chirps, any slight forgotten. “My mom would have killed me.”

“No problem.” Derek nods, his hands twisting in his pockets. They’re going to leave any minute. Derek’s usefulness has been used up.

His soul mate waves a hand, already turning around. “Well thanks. We’ll, uh, skedaddle. Then. Sorry for trespassing, I guess.”

“It’s fine!” Derek says quickly. “It was nice.”

They’re looking at him like he’s crazy. Probably because that was an incredibly creepy thing to say. He’s screwing this up. He should be able to control himself.

The Friend clears his throat. “Yup. Cool man.”
The two boys turn on their heels in unison, the way old friends do, with no need to speak. Derek thinks about those forums that always turn up online, where people share their “how I met my soul mate” stories. His will be two sentences long.

Leaves rustle overhead as the wind changes, and the two boys are suddenly upwind of Derek. What there. That smell. Derek knows that smell, and the werewolf in him isn’t allowed to leave it be.

Derek races towards their retreating backs. As the fates would have it, he’s going to make a fool out of himself again today, but damn it, he really needs to find out who The Friend’s alpha is.

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In the next five minutes, Derek learns nine facts:

1: His soul mate’s name is Stiles.
2: Stiles’ best friend’s name is Scott.
3: Scott never paid attention during the lycanthropy unit in Biology, and didn’t realize he was newly turned.
4: There’s a rogue Alpha running around Beacon Hills, biting unsuspecting teenagers.
5: His soul mate is sixteen years old, and his name is Stiles.
6: Laura.
7: Somebody needs to call in Supernatural Entity Enforcement Services for this rogue Alpha.
8: Scott has no idea how to control himself.
9: His soul mate is smart, and his name is Stiles.

Derek gives Scott his number and instructions to call him any time he needs information, (carefully ignoring the voice in the back of his head singing pack, pack, I want a pack) and enters it into Stiles’ phone as well, (ignoring the voice singing mate, mate, be my mate) since Stiles has made it clear that he’s going to have Scott’s back in this.

“I mean so what if he’ll get furry now?” Stiles had said, handing over his phone, “I don’t care, we’ll figure it out, right man?” he shot back at Scott, who still looks a little shell shocked.

10: His soul mate is a good friend, and his name is Stiles.

Derek nods. “That’s a good way to think about it.”

Stiles just shrugs, as though there aren’t thousands of families and friends across the country who reject people they’ve known their whole lives just because they start to grow claws and fangs. “Scott’s my bro. Right bro?” he tosses over his shoulder at Scott.

“Right,” Scott replies faintly.

Stiles is keeping Scott from panicking, Derek realizes. He’s being casual about it, but every offhand remark directed at Scott distracts him from freaking out about his new species designation. It’s clever.

Derek hands back Stiles’ phone, and Stiles fiddles with it for a second until Derek’s crappy plastic flip phone buzzes in his back pocket.

[Hi its Stiles] reads the screen. Derek punches in “Stiles” for the contact information. It surprises him, somehow, that it’s only six letters. Six letters glowing gently on the screen of his phone, and Derek’s life is changed forever.

“Is the ‘Derek’ for Derek Hale?” Stiles asks, glancing up from his phone.

“I remember you.” Stiles smiles ruefully. “My dad’s Sheriff Stilinski.”

Derek remembers that man’s kind eyes, warm and reassuring as he sat Derek and Laura down in plastic chairs at the Sheriff’s station. He’d radiated waves of “we’ll figure this out, everything will be fine.’ It doesn’t surprise Derek at all that Stiles is his son.

“He was kind. When, um- he was helpful.”

Stiles nods quickly. “It’s cool, you don’t have to talk about it. Just, uh, I know you. Small world. Alright,” he raises his voice, “come on Scott, I think it’s time for some CoD.”

Small world, Derek thinks, watching the two boys walk back towards the main road, Scott’s inhaler dangling loosely from his fingers. If he hadn’t been walking around the property at this time on this day, would he ever have known about Stiles? Would he ever have felt the this gut churning combination of hope and despair if he had just slept in today?

Derek rubs a thumb over the six letters lined up at the top of his phone screen. Whatever else could have happened, he’s glad to have met Stiles. It’s going to hurt, knowing him, but Derek would prefer this hurt to any other kind.

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It’s less than 24 hours later that Stiles calls. Derek waits until the third ring to pick up because he’s trying not to be creepy.

“Alright, so me and Scott are going to do some control exercises,” Stiles says as soon as Derek picks up, “and while google has been pretty helpful, I think we could use an actual werewolf’s help on this one.”

“I’m not sure how useful I’d be,” Derek warns, “I learned control so young, I’m not sure I could tell Scott how to do it.”

“Well then just be there so he feels better. Werewolves like other werewolves being around, right? Pack bonds and stuff,” Stiles explains matter of factly.

Derek clenches and unclenches his hands, casting around for an explanation. Stiles is a bit of a bulldozer, it seems, when he has an idea. “But I’m not in Scott’s pack. We barely know each other.”

“Yeeesss,” Stiles allows, “but Beacon Hills doesn’t have any other werewolves except for the crazy one running around the forest—I had my dad call in Supernatural Entity Enforcement Services on them, by the way—so you’ve gotta give Scott a helping hand here. Think of it as like dating.”

“Dating? Dating Scott?”

“Hey, no need to sound so affronted, Scott is a catch! I just mean like, pack dating. Dating the pack. Getting to know the pack, see if there’s room for more commitment. Scott’s a pack of one, you’re a pack of one, it’s perfect!”

“It sounds like you’re in Scott’s pack,” Derek points out. “Humans can be in packs too.”

There’s a pause on Stiles’ end of the line. “Huh. Yeah, I guess so. Fine, see if you want to be in our pack of three. Scott, you, and me.”
“Alright,” Derek says before he can think about it. No amount of deliberation would have really changed his answer anyway.

“Great!” Stiles crows. “Meet us at the BHHS lacrosse field.”

Derek meets them at the BHHS lacrosse field. He very quickly learns that Stiles’ idea of teaching control is a little... unorthodox.

“Come on Scott!” Stiles shouts, gleefully flinging another lacrosse ball at him. “Get mad! Shift! Shiiiiiiift!”

Derek winces as another ball thwacks against Scott’s shoulder. “Try to find your inner wolf,” he offers.

Stiles snorts at that and throws another ball, slight shoulder muscles rippling under his shirt, his whole body shifting with each movement.

“Pack date” number two doesn’t even involve Stiles.

Scott shifts from foot to foot. “So, mom, this is Derek, he’s also a werewolf.”

Mrs. McCall holds out a hand, and Derek takes it hesitantly. She’s a part of Scott’s pack too. He wonders if she and his mother would have gotten along.

Two cups of hot chocolate later, he decides they would have.

Pack date number three is complicated.

Derek isn’t... quite. The... he’s. It hurts. It hurts His arm is on fire. It’s on fire and it has to get off-out. He has to get it out of him. He can’t- it hurts.

The telltale black lines are inching up his arms like snakes, like worms under his skin, it hurts. He doesn’t want to die, he doesn’t, he doesn’t want to die alone.

He follows the smell of laundry and dust and warmth and reassurance for- a long way, it feels very long, but he can’t see much beyond the staggering of his feet and the radiating pain in his arm.

It hurts.

“Jesus, Derek! Are you oh- oh my god. Um, okay, werewolf emergency care for you, jeeesus.”

Derek sags against a plaid covered shoulder, rubbing his stubble against the soft fabric. He’s going to be okay. He isn’t going to die alone.

“What happened?”

“Got. Shot.”

“I can see that, wow, oh my god. Hang on, let me just call an ambulance-”

Derek shifts his head slightly on Stiles’ shoulder so he can poke his nose ever so slightly against Stiles’ neck, breathing in his scent. Whether Derek lives or not, he won’t have the chance to do this again, so he takes advantage of Stiles’ pity and concern, and stays resting against Stiles’ shoulder until the EMTs pull him away, set him on a gurney, and pop open their box of emergency wolfsbane.
He lives. He also has to explain more of his past than he wants to, and triggers an investigation into who shot him, which only adds to the number of unfamiliar people tramping through the woods, looking for rogue alphas and vigilante hunters.

But when the EMTs pronounce him stable, slap a bandage over the healing wound and let him stand on his own, Stiles pulls him into a reassuring hug. It’s brief, but Stiles wraps his arms around Derek’s shoulders and claps his broad hands against Derek’s shoulder blades. Derek bites the inside of his mouth to keep from saying something too emotional, something that would make Stiles pull back, look away awkwardly, deflect with a joke and run.

“Close one, man,” he says, and pulls away. Then he asks if Scott has to worry about wolfsbane bullets too, and they move on.

The fourth pack date is pizza. Derek hates it.

Not the pizza. Just-

Derek isn’t under any illusions concerning Stiles. Stiles is a straight teenage boy. He doesn’t think of Derek as anything other than Scott’s werewolf mentor. Derek didn’t need proof.

“Lydia. Martin.” Stiles pauses fully after each word, eyes closing and his hands reaching towards the ceiling as though he’s having a religious experience. “I can’t believe you’ve known me for this many weeks and haven’t heard me talk about Lydia Martin yet.”

“Here we go,” chuckles Scott, snagging the last slice of pepperoni.

“Goddess! Genius! Strawberry blonde enchantress of my dreams!” raves Stiles.

Derek thinks Stiles is perfect. Stiles thinks Lydia-period-Martin-period is perfect, and Derek now knows with 100% certainty that Stiles doesn’t think of him like that at all. Will never. Derek is nothing more than an acquaintance to Stiles. A friend of a friend, there because of Scott, and otherwise unremarkable. If Derek moved to the other side of the world today, Stiles wouldn’t be able to recall his name within a year.

“-and she does this thing with her hair, when you’ve really crossed her, where she sort of dismisses your whole existence by flicking her hair off of one shoulder,” Stiles sighs. “It’s magnificent.”

“So she’s your girlfriend?” Derek asks, trying to keep the numbness out of his voice.

Stiles laughs, one loud crack of mirth cutting through the room as he throws his head backs and honest-to-god slaps his knee. “No man. She thinks I’m a dork, and she’s dating the captain of the lacrosse team.”

Sudden fury rushes through Derek’s chest. This girl, this silly little high school girl with her makeup and her prom queen crown has no idea what she’s giving up, no idea of the gift she’s turning her nose up at. She might as well take a bat to a brand new mercedes or dump a $50 steak into a mud puddle in front of a starving child. If anyone could have the chance to be with Stiles and turns it down, they’re an idiot, no further questions.

So Derek says, “that’s stupid.”

And when Stiles says, “why?”

Derek says, “just. The lacrosse captain? It’s a cliche. It’s stupid.” And then Derek shuts his stupid mouth.
It feels like either a very long time or a very short time passes before Supernatural Entity Enforcement Services calls, Derek can’t figure out which. One minute he’s waiting for the next page of apartment listings to load on Old Bess’ screen, and the next he’s listening to someone named Agent Wilson ask, “is this Derek Hale speaking?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Hale, SEES was investigating reports of a rogue alpha in your area, were you aware of this?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. I’m calling to tell you that we have found and detained said alpha.”

Derek’s eyebrows furrow. “Alright. Why are you telling me this? I wasn’t the person who called in the complaint.”

A very dry half-chuckle comes down the line. “You’re getting ahead of me sir. I’m calling because we have a somewhat unusual situation here. The alpha we detained was identified as one Peter Hale.”

It takes a moment, two, three, before Derek’s throat starts working again. “Peter? He’s, no, he couldn’t possibly be-”

“It’s a complex situation, Mr. Hale. It would be best if you came down to the local sheriff’s station.”

One dazed drive later, Derek is standing on one side of a double reinforced cell with a trim, polished, government agent next to him, and the most twisted looking alpha he’s ever seen in front of him.

Agent Wilson is listing the casualties, deaths the town thought were from mountain lions but weren’t, definitely weren’t. We think he took down a hunting vigilante that was out there, he offers with a wan smile, like that will make Derek feel better. No more random wolfsbane bullets, isn’t that nice! Isn’t everything just dandy!

And then: has to be put down, he says, it’s the law. I don’t like it either, but there are rules for situations like this.

The judge signed the order, he says.

“I know it’s hard.” A hand, nails neatly trimmed, watch buckled on just so, lands on his shoulder at a perfectly impersonal angle. “You don’t have to be the one to do it, but it would save you and Mr. McCall a lot of trouble. You wouldn’t have to be registered as omegas.”

Agent Wilson gives Derek as much time as he needs to think it over.

Derek’s uncle is a murderer.

Derek’s uncle isn’t Derek’s uncle anymore.

Three hours later, Derek has signed the paperwork he’s supposed to, there are the requisite five witnesses, and P- the Alpha has been very carefully tied down.

This was never the way it was supposed to happen. Succession isn’t supposed to work this way, it’s supposed to be passed down at bedsides, or at least taken in the midst of righteous battle.
Instead, Derek pops the claws on his right hand and draws a line in red over his uncle’s throat. It’s too shallow at first, and they tell him he has to do it again, harder.

He does.

Peter makes... *noises*.

Afterwards, Derek has to sign more paperwork, and they put a blanket around him and a secretary hands him a cup of tea. Everyone in the station is perfectly polite and sympathetic and terrible.

Derek’s eyes won’t stop flickering red like a broken streetlight.

The sheriff rubs a warm hand over his shoulder, looks at him with worn, tired eyes.

“Where are you staying, kid?”

“A motel,” Derek lies.

The sheriff nods to himself. “Yeah, you’re staying with Stiles and I tonight. Scott too, I guess, seeing as how you’re probably pack now.”

Yesterday, Derek would have been thrilled. He probably will be again, but not today. Today is for Uncle Peter, who taught him to swear in Spanish and told him “keep your thumb outside of your fist when you throw a punch. I know you’re a badass, kid, but how about you not be a badass with a broken thumb?”

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It’s 2:30 in the morning, and Scott is asleep in an improbable position on one end of the couch, while Stiles, circles under his eyes, is propped up by the couch arm on Derek’s other side. The TV seems to be playing the same infomercial for a blender on a loop, but neither of them have the energy to grab the remote and turn it off.

“You should go to sleep,” Derek suggests, his voice hoarse from silence.

“So should you,” says Stiles, and doesn’t move.

“You have school.”

“Dad’ll let me skip tomorrow. Mental health day.”

“He’ll let you take a day off for my mental health?” The corner of Derek’s mouth twists up just a smidge at that.

Stiles shrugs. Rubs a hand under his nose. Watches the TV.

“My mom’s dead.”

Derek turns his tired, prickly eyes towards Stiles’ silhouette, illuminated by the blue light of the TV, wrapped around a pillow, one sock steadily sliding off of his left foot. “That- I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Lame, man,” Stiles mutters, eyebrows raising briefly. “You’ve gotta have something better to say than that.”

Derek hums in agreement. “You’d think that somebody somewhere would have come up with a
“Right? Like, hundreds of thousands of people must die every day, and nobody can come up with anything better than ‘I’m sorry for your loss?’” Stiles asks the ceiling. “Like really? No crowd sourcing could come up with anything better?”

“My whole family is dead and I’ve never figured out what the right thing to say is,” Derek blurts out.

Stiles turns to look at him. “Whoa, man.”

It’s so ridiculous Derek has to laugh. It’s scaring Stiles, whose heartbeat quickens as he twists around to look more closely at Derek, but Derek can’t stop.

“Sorry, sorry, I-” Derek wheezes between laughs.

“No it’s cool-”

“I just- my whole family is dead!” Derek exclaims, throwing his head back until it thunks against the back of the couch. “There used to be a dozen of us, and now I’m the only one left! The only one!”

“Are you-”

“In less than ten years! What are the odds! The statistics have got to be ridiculous on that one!”

“Der-Derek!”

“And they didn’t even all die in the same way! Three of us made it out, and then we all killed each other? What was that for? Why would we do that?” Derek pants, his smile finally starting to fall. “Why would we do that?”

“Hey,” murmurs Stiles, “hey, so you need some tissues or something?”

“What, why?”

“You’re crying,” Stiles says quietly, like the tears will stop falling if he’s stealthy about it. “You’re crying.”

“My...” Derek whispers. “They’re all dead.”

“Hey, heeeeeey...”

“They’re all... they...”

“Shh, shhh, it’s alright...”

“Sorry, I know you don’t want to be-”

“It’s fine, Derek, don’t worry about it. Here, hug the pillow, alright?”

“Alright.”

Derek gets an apartment. He’s an alpha now, he can’t keep sleeping in his car and in his wreck of a house. The apartment isn’t large, although he could have afforded that, could have afforded that massive, one room loft he saw a listing for. Derek just saw the wide bay windows and open living
Laura would have called it “cozy.” She called everything that was small “cozy.” The living room with soft gray couches that match the blinds is cozy, the red-tiled kitchen tucked away in the corner is “cozy,” the two bedrooms, one for Derek, one just in case, are “cosy,” with big beds and little windows nestled just above the headboards.

Stiles calls it “dinky,” but he says it fondly and calls it the pack clubhouse on the rare occasion that he and Scott come over. Derek isn’t sure why Stiles coined the name if he and Scott mostly just hang out at each other’s houses, but the name stays, scrawled on a ripped out sheet of binder paper and taped to the back of the front door.

The apartment smelled like new paint and pine-sol when Derek moved in, but as the weeks and months pass by, it starts to acquire new scents. There was the microwave pizza incident, which meant waves of burnt-cheese smell for days, then Scott and Stiles rolled in after lacrosse practice and the entryway started smelling permanently like sweaty lacrosse gear, and then once winter started rolling in, the smell of rain started wafting through the apartment, fresh and clear and new.

Stiles’ smell has soaked into the third cushion to the left on the couch. It’s his favorite spot, where he’ll flop down with a slice of pizza in his hand when they have “pack movie nights” now and then, where he sits waiting for Scott and Derek to finish going over control exercises (Scott’s getting better- almost to the point where he can change one claw at a time,) and where he sat one Saturday night, bemoaning how Scott’s girlfriend took up all of his time lately.

“And she’s from one of those old hunting families!” Stiles exclaimed, “I mean, she and her dad are for sure not into that, but it still a weird date choice, you know what I mean? Like why couldn’t Scott pick the girl who doesn’t have family heirloom wolfsbane bullets in her basement?”

“They’re teenagers,” Derek had assured Stiles, very thoroughly blocking out the voice singing in the back of his head: *He’s alone with you! He wanted to be with you on a Saturday night!* Derek can’t imagine how many of Stiles’ other friends must have been busy for him to wind up at Derek’s.

“They’re teenagers,” Stiles mocked. “That doesn’t mean anything, teenagers can be serious! I’m serious about Lydia.”

Derek inhaled deeply through his nose before replying, “they’re young. They don’t know about permanency.”

“I know what permanency means!” Stiles protested.

“Not in practice,” Derek countered, “but that’s fine. Permanency is hard. You’re all young, you should have a chance to be silly and romantic. I’m sure Scott and Allison think they’re star-crossed or something. It’s probably very exciting.”

“Oh,” Stiles rolled his eyes. “It is. Lemme tell you, he has not shut up about their sex life for weeks! And I’m his bro, but *bro*. There’s a limit to how much I wanna know about where he puts his love cucumber.”

“At least you don’t have to smell it.”

Stiles winced. “Yikes. Wait, could you...” his eyes flicked downwards towards his own crotch.

Yes, Derek could. The faint smell of Stiles’ come always floats around him, and Derek tries his hardest not to be creepy and imagine that scent in his bed, Stiles flushed, limbs akimbo, an elbow hooked around Derek’s pillow, a foot dangling off the bed, but Stiles too distracted to do anything
about it-

Stiles had looked at Derek oddly then, and Derek realized he was meant to reply. “Um, it’s polite to just ignore it.”

“Ah,” Stiles chuckled awkwardly. “Cool. No hard feelings then dude?”

Derek shook his head. “It’s fine. It’s all fine.”

“And don’t get me started on the dreams!” Laura used to say, “do you know what the ratio is between the amount of prophetic soul mate dreams you see on TV and the amount of people in real life who actually experience real chrono-dissontant dreams about their soul mates? It’s ridiculous, like a fraction of a fraction of people have real dreams about their future with their soul mate. Everything else is just random neural firings.”

The first dream about Stiles that Derek can remember came the first night Derek slept in a real bed in his apartment, Stiles’ smell ever so faintly in his nose from when he and Scott had come to take a look around that afternoon.

Stiles’ long hands are curved around the faint light of his phone, casting shadows on the sheets as he reads from it. “‘Out of lemon flowers/loosed/on the moonlight, love’s/lashed and insatiable/essences,/sodden with fragrance,/the lemon tree’s yellow/substrates,/the lemons/move down/from the tree’s planetarium.’ Sexy, Mr. Neruda, sexyyyy.” He looks up with a smirk, and his eyes are so full of mirth and so close, “I think I could write a better love poem than that.”

Derek laughs, and he’s never heard himself laugh like that before. He sounds like a giddy child, but he can’t make himself mind. “Let’s hear something.” Without hesitation, he brushes a hand through Stiles’ hair, which is longer, mussed from lying in bed.

Pressing himself further up against Derek’s side, Stiles hums in thought while he pulls another blanket over them. It’s winter, cold outside but warm in their bed. “There once was a man named Derek, who... was a were...ek?”

“You could do a haiku,” Derek suggests, raising his eyebrows.

“Fuck yeah I could do a haiku,” Stiles presses his lips together, and Derek can almost hear him counting syllables. “His eyes are blue-ish/or maybe green I don’t know...” Stiles trails off, tracing a finger slowly down Derek’s stomach. “‘Oh I love you so?’ I- oh my god, stop smiling like that, it’s so cheesy, I just wanted something that rhymed!”

It’s so purely Stiles that Derek wakes up with an ache between his legs and wetness on his cheeks. Derek wipes his face quickly, then gets up to make himself coffee. Black, one scoop of sugar, wipe the stray grounds off the counter afterwards, throw the filter in the compost, everything is going to be fine.

“Oh Alpha my alpha!” Stiles hammers on the door. “Open uuuuuuppppp!”

Derek swings the door open. “You could call,” he comments dryly, stepping aside to let Stiles into the apartment anyway.

“Stop by anytime,” Stiles mimics, drawing his eyebrows down and developing a scowl. “We’re
“I should have known I’d regret those words,” Derek says like he doesn’t always keep the living room clean of clutter in case Scott or Stiles visit and need a place to sit or eat or talk.

“Mmm...” Stiles rifles through his backpack. “You know what other words you’re going to regret?”

“Dare I ask?”

Stiles assumes his Derek imitation face again. “I was halfway through a History degree at NYU before I came back to Beacon Hills. If you ever need homework help—”

Derek holds out a hand. “Let me see.”

Stiles pulls out a binder and slaps it into his hand. “Midterm. Help meeeeeeereee.”

“With what?” Derek opens the binder and raises an eyebrow at the clutter inside.

“History. Just, you know, start with the first written records created by man and go on from there.” Stiles waves a hand vaguely as he throws a leg over the back of his couch and dangles a hand off of the other side.

Flipping to the back of the binder, Derek says, “how about we start with chapter one?”

Three hours later, Stiles looks up from the new set of notes he’s been writing. “Shit dude, how long have we been at this?”

Derek checks his watch. “It’s seven now—”

“Oh my god, why did you let me do that?” Stiles exclaims.

“SOR-”

“No,” Stiles shakes his head frenetically as he closes his binder, “I mean make you spend three hours on AP US History. I’m not a monster, you don’t have to spend all evening doing high school stuff all over again.”

Blinking, Derek asks, “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” Stiles tilts his head to the side and Derek realizes he’s said something stupid. “Nobody’s idea of a fun night is helping Stiles with his history homework.”

“Oh.” It hadn’t even occurred to him to pretend to be annoyed over helping Stiles. Last night, Derek watched two old episodes of *Friends* on his laptop while he ate a microwave chicken dinner and drank orange juice out of a mug. Tonight, Stiles’ long fingers dance over his couch cushions and his smell permeates the air. “This is fine. I like- I like history.”

Stiles eyes him skeptically.

“It keep me in practice,” Derek goes on. He has to justify, can’t be too creepy or he’ll push Stiles away. “You could, I could tutor you, even. If you wanted.”

“I think your mouth is writing checks that you can’t keep, or whatever that phrase is.”

“No, really. What are you learning about after your midterm?”
“Umm...” Stiles glances at the textbook. “The gilded age?”

“I love the gilded age,” Derek says quickly. Too quickly, but Stiles doesn’t seem to notice, because he says,

“I guess my dad would like it if I had some help with my grade in that class.”

The next thing Derek knows, Stiles is coming over to his apartment, all by himself, for two hours every Tuesday night.

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On the fifth Tuesday night, Stiles asks if he can bring a kid from his class who seems to be struggling.

The kid’s name is Isaac Lahey, and by the tenth Tuesday, the Hale pack has officially registered a new beta, and Derek—Derek!—has legal custody over a seventeen year old.

Derek wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to add in a new beta when the pack was still so young, but between Isaac’s nightmare of a father and Scott’s instant connection with him, Derek thinks it worked out alright.

Four weeks later, when a girl named Erica Reyes knocks on his door, hands jammed in her sweatshirt, and says “I, um, I’m really sick. I’d like to not be,” it’s a little harder for the boy’s club of a pack to adjust around her, but Derek has -had- sisters, and he knows that sometimes you’re supposed to sympathize when they complain instead of offer advice, and just because they’re on their period doesn’t mean that their brains melt into a boiling hormone soup. They adjust.

Pack dinners on Thursday nights are Erica’s idea.

“We’re doing a Werewolves and Society unit in AP Psych,” she explains from his couch as she sends out a group text, “and maybe you like pretending that it’s hunky dory how the pack barely ever spends time together, but I know it’s weird for the alpha to be alone as often as you are.” She presses send, and the discussion is over.

Derek’s phone buzzes a second later. It reads: [Hey losers pack dinner at Derek’s thursday bring food and wash behind your ears]

Scott brings a fancy casserole courtesy of Mrs. McCall, Erica brings dessert and drinks —“the easy stuff”— and Stiles shows up with... something.

“It’s Kapusta!” Stiles announces proudly, holding a pot of greenish yellow mash. “Grandma Stilinski’s old recipe.”

Erica’s nose wrinkles up. “How much cabbage is in there exactly?”

“Oh it’s all cabbage, really.” Stiles, unconcerned by Scott and Erica’s varying looks of horror, walks into the kitchen to set the dish down. “Where’s Isaac?”

“Napping,” Derek answers. “Thanks for reminding me, Stiles.” He pounds on Isaac’s door until a groan answers him.

“I’m up, I’m up!”

“Come bond with us!” Erica hollers. “Stiles made cabbage!”
“Kapusta,” Stiles corrects her, blithely stabbing a serving ladle into the...material. “Have I mentioned it’s my grandmother’s old recipe and near and dear to my heart?”

Derek tries to subtly shake his head at Erica, call her off, but she’s already flouncing to the dining table, bottles of soda in hand, paying no attention to him.

“I brought chips,” Isaac says, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and holding out a single rumpled bag of Doritos.

The spread on most of the pack members’ plates ends up being mostly casserole and Doritos, with a sliver of kapusta on the side. When the mostly full of bowl of kapusta gets passed to Derek, he serves himself three heaping ladles full. Across the table, Stiles mouths “thank you.”

The kapusta tastes like boiled shoe, but it’s worth it for the way Stiles’ shoulders are loose and relaxed when he stretches plastic wrap over the mostly empty bowl of kapusta at the end of the night.

Stiles companionably bumps his shoulder against Derek’s when he leaves, and Derek’s shoulder tingles until he falls asleep.

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Derek hears the smacking of feet against the forest floor, it would be a miracle if he didn’t, but he doesn’t turn around. The pounding feet draw nearer, and with a final crack of a snapping twig, 147 pounds of Stiles land on Derek’s back, and two long legs wrap around his waist.

“Found you!” Stiles croons into Derek’s ear.

Fighting a smile, Derek shifts his grip on Stiles’ thighs to hold him more securely. “It still took 30 minutes.”

Stiles snorts into Derek’s cheek. “30 minutes without werewolf senses. Trust me bro, it’s not easy. I almost thought I’d lost you, but then I found a snapped bit of juniper bush.” Stiles tsks in disapproval. “Shoddy work. Shoddy, shoddy work.”

“Maybe I couldn’t stand the idea of you never finding me,” Derek murmurs, twisting his neck so he can see Stiles’ face.

“Oh, cheeseball alert!” Stiles groans, digging the heels of his feet into Derek’s hips. “Did you soul also yearn for my loving presence? Did you pine, my love?”

Shifting one of his hands back to playfully squeeze Stiles’ ass, Derek replies, “it’s lonely in these woods. A man has needs.”

“Hmmmm” Stiles hums, his mouth drifting to Derek’s neck. “Elaborate?”

“Stiles, you know I’m terrible at-” Stiles presses a series of light kisses up the tendon on Derek’s neck, just enough for Derek to get a feel of Stiles’ lips, and then gone. “-nnn, dirty talk. You know I’m bad at-ah!” a bite to the base of his neck, “words. What are words.” Derek pants as Stiles sucks hickeys into his skin. “Mmm...”

“Subvocal in less than a minute,” Stiles comments, mouth pressed against the hinge of Derek’s jaw, “my timing’s good in one area at least.”

Hooking one hand around the back of Stiles’ neck, Derek turns to catch his mouth with his own, reveling in the feel of Stiles wrapped around him, warm and firm, heart beating against Derek’s
shoulder blades.

Stiles pulls back, eyes half lidded, to bump his nose against Derek’s and shouts, “BANG BANG BANG OPEN UUUUUUPPPP, I HAVE A QUIZ TOMORROW!”

Derek duly wakes up with an awkward grunt, sending the throw pillows Erica insisted on flying as he struggles up from the couch. He opens the door to Stiles’ knocking fists and gestures him inside.

“Sorry, I was napping.”

“Some nap,” Stiles upends his backpack over the coffee table, “didn’t you say that normally wolves are really light sleepers?”

“Normally yes, I was... I was having a really vivid dream.”

Stiles’ eyes flick downwards. “Oh yeah?”

Derek looks down as well, and swears, grabbing one of the stupid throw pillows and holding it over himself. “I. It’s-”

Snickering, Stiles directs his attention towards a textbook. “You don’t have to explain these things to me. I’m a teenage boy, it’s sort of my specialty.”

Thinking about Stiles’ “specialty” is not helping the bulge hiding behind the throw pillow. Derek is absurdly thankful that at least he fell asleep while still in his jeans, instead of stripping down into something looser.

“I’m just going to-” Derek gestures in the direction of his bathroom, his bedroom, the window leading to a three story drop onto a dumpster, whatever.

Stiles nods knowingly and flips pointedly to the next page of his textbook.

When Derek comes back, cheeks red and crotch in stinging pain from the cold water he splashed on it, Stiles has his phone out and is listing facts. He does this from time to time, and Derek is often astounded by the encyclopedia’s worth of knowledge stored away in Stiles’ huge brain.

“Did you know that you only dream about faces you see in real life?”

“Did you know that people who have been blind their whole life dream in sensations and sounds?”

“Did you know that you can try to count to ten in your dreams to figure out if you’re dreaming or not? If you can’t count to ten, you’re dreaming.”

That last one gets Derek’s attention. He’s had enough of waking up with emotional whiplash, deliriously happy for one shining second before he remembers he’s sleeping alone. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Stiles scrolls further down. “Apparently you can sort of pick anything, as long as it’s detail oriented. Dreams aren’t great with details.”

The precisely accurate pattern of Stiles’ moles in the dream Derek just woke up from would beg to differ, but Derek still files the information away for future use.

“The more you know,” Stiles muses. “Now,” he says, switching the phone off and twisting sideways on the couch to look Derek in the face, “to business. You’re old, right-”

“Not that old,” Derek objects. Only six years and three months older than you.
“-old enough to give advice. Right?” Stiles presses.

Derek shrugs. “Depends what it’s about.”

“Girls.” Before Derek can object that he’s not the person to ask, Stiles steamrolls on. When he wants to know something, he’s unstoppable. “Lydia, right? Girl of my dreams. I’m starting to think that my long-term plan to, you know, win her affections is sort of getting stalled. Thoughts?”

“Ah,” Derek flounders, “why do you think the plan is getting stalled?”

“She kind of acts like she hates me?” Stiles grimaces, tossing his phone from hand to hand. “Which, don’t get me wrong, is kind of hot, but I think she’s starting to actually mean it. Like, normally, she’s sort of... terrifying towards everyone, but I brought her flowers the other day- don’t give me that look, I know it was silly, it was supposed to be endearingly silly! Anyway, so she looked me right in the eyes, took the flowers, and tossed them in a trash can, then said, ‘don’t do that again, Stilinski,’ and then strutted off.” Stiles sags into the cushions, throat bared to the air as he tips his head back onto the headrest. “I don’t know what to do!”

“Stop trying to date her!” Derek does not understand Stiles’ taste in women. “Stiles, if she acts like this, you shouldn’t- you don’t need somebody stepping all over you. You find a nice girl who’s, I don’t know, nice to you?”

“I’m in love with her, though! I have been for like forever!” Stiles protests, young and naive, believing that true love prevails. Well, Derek thinks as he offers his soul mate girl advice, it doesn’t.

“Just,” Derek pinches the bridge of his nose. “You can’t hold out hope that she’ll magically change her mind about you. If you keep pursuing her even though she treats you like shit, she’ll treat you like shit. You- you don’t have to be her punching bag, Stiles. Take it from me.”

“What,” Stiles scoffs, “are you telling me you’ve been some girl’s punching bag? You, Abdominals McGee?”

“Maybe I am!” Derek is talking much louder than he should be. He can’t seem to stop.

Stiles shakes his head. “Sure Derek. Some girl played a little hard to get one time. I should’ve just asked Isaac or something. He seems like he would give good advice,” Stiles mutters, hunching defensively over his textbook.

“Stiles...” Derek sighs, “I’m not lying, alright? I, I’ve been there. It, well. It doesn’t end well.” Stiles’ story probably won’t end in him being responsible for the death of his entire family, but Derek can’t help but want to spare him from even a minuscule portion of the anguish Derek has gone through. Stiles should have all of the sweet, geeky girls of BHHS falling over themselves for him. He should have a good story.

“Didn’t end well,” Stiles repeats to himself. “But wasn’t it worth it at all? Even a little bit? You know, better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all?”

“No.”

“But-”

“No.”

“But-”
“No.”

“You have to give me more explanation than that, come on, I’m naturally curious.”

“Have you ever heard of Kate Argent, Stiles?” Derek bursts out, and then claps a hand over his mouth like he’s a bad actor in a sitcom.

Stiles’ eyebrows draw together in confusion, but he’s smart, he figures it out fast. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Silence falls in the living room while Derek watches Stiles’ cheeks turn redder and redder with mortification.

“Sorry,” Stiles mutters, eyes flicking towards Derek and back.

“It’s fine.”

“No, I shouldn’t,” Stiles rubs the back of his neck uncomfortably, “I shouldn’t have pressed.”

“You didn’t know.”

“Still, I’m sorry for bringing all of that... fire stuff up.” Stiles winces around the word ‘fire,’ as if he regrets saying it the moment it comes out of his mouth. He looks so guilty, all curled up on himself, eyes flicking towards the door every few seconds, that Derek, just, he has to fix it.

“It’s fine,” he presses again. “I’m always thinking about the fire, you didn’t remind me of it any more than I already do. It was my fault, of course I think about it, whether Kate comes up or not.”

Stiles... looks angry. Derek doesn’t know what he’s done wrong.

“What do you mean it was your fault?” Stiles asks incredulously. “What the fuck? Kate Argent was responsible for the Hale House fire, that’s what it says in the police report, in the Supernatural Entity Enforcement Services files, in the newspapers, in... I don’t know, other places! Don’t- oh no, of course you blame yourself! That explains so much!” Stiles clutches his head and rocks backwards as though he’s reaching an epiphany. “Oh my god. Derek. It wasn’t your fault.”

Stiles is such a good person. He really does deserve everything good to happen to him. Which, Derek reminds himself with a pang to the chest, doesn’t include Derek.

“It was my fault, Stiles.”

“That’s ridiculous. She lit the match!”

“I let her into our lives. I was the idiot that let her get too close,” Derek tells Stiles matter-of-factly. He accepted this long ago.

“It wasn’t your fault!” Stiles protests, hands gesturing emphatically. “You’ve just got to forgive yourself,” he says, voice so hopeful, like it’s that simple, like Derek didn’t ruin everything the day he said “yeah, sure I’ll show you around the house!”

Stiles sounds so wide-eyed and open hearted when he repeats, “it wasn’t your fault!”

“Stiles!” Derek snaps, “Do you think nobody’s told me this before? It was. That’s all there is to say about it.”
Stiles shakes his head determinedly. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Stop trying to Good Will Hunting me!” Derek explodes, standing up, the blanket in his lap falling to the floor.

“I just-”

“Don’t.” Derek sheepishly sits back down, picks up the blanket, and he’s so tired. He wants to pull Stiles into his arms, wrap them together in the blanket, apologize for yelling and fall asleep with Stiles breathing next to him, but any chance of that flew out the window when Derek killed his family, when Stiles fell in love with the haughty red-headed girl in his class, when whatever higher power in charge of this bullshit decided that 50% of werewolves with soul bonds wouldn’t get their other half. “Sorry,” he sighs.

“I’m sorry.” Stiles hugs the textbook to his chest.

The clock that Derek now regrets buying ticks obnoxiously loudly over the stove.

“I kinda wanna watch Good Will Hunting now?” Stiles ventures.

Derek grabs the remote.

“XXXXX

“This is Boyd.”

Derek blinks. “What.”

“This,” Erica pats the shoulders of the mammoth of a man standing next to her, “is Boyd.”

“Hello Boyd,” Derek says slowly. “What is Boyd doing here, Erica?”

“He’s going to be coming to pack dinners from now on,” Erica announces, striding past Derek and further into the apartment, dragging Boyd behind her.

Boyd catches Derek’s eye and shrugs. “Sorry man.”

“Just-” Derek looks beseechingly at Isaac, who holds his hands out, giving the universal signal of ‘I got nothing.’

“All pack dinners,” Erica calls from the dining room. “No arguments.”

“I used to be the Alpha once,” Derek grumbles under his breath. Isaac snickers and absolutely no one pays attention to his authority.

Boyd is quiet at dinner, focusing more on finishing his plate than chatting. Derek takes to him immediately.

Boyd is low maintenance; all he asks for is companionship, which the pack is happy to provide. Derek will come home and see Isaac and Boyd working on their homework, Boyd methodically solving pre-calc problem after pre-calc problem, Isaac twisting his curls around a finger as he taps away at an essay. Boyd is simple.

What is not simple is the call Derek gets a few weeks after Boyd has been assimilated into the pack. It’s a Wednesday evening, Isaac is over at Erica’s, and Derek is in his pajamas, making some of the tea that Scott’s mother recommended, when the jarring blare of the landline breaks the silence.
Derek frowns to himself. Nobody who knows him ever calls the landline. Prepared to rebuff whatever telemarketer has gotten ahold of his number, Derek picks up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Alpha Hale?” asks the stern, vaguely accented voice on the other end of the line.

“Yes.”

“This is Agent Cortez with the International Supernaturals Bureau. We’ve found your sister.”

The lights in this room are so bright, have they always been this bright?

“My sister is dead,” Derek replies dumbly, one hand nervously fidgeting with the drawstring on his pajamas.

“Not this sister, Alpha Hale,” Agent Cortez says perfunctorily, like he has another ten calls like this to make tonight. “Cora Hale, beta of the Hale Pack, presumed dead. She is very much alive, and in Bogota.”

Derek should be feeling something right now. Relief, maybe, joy, but all he can do is look at his mug sitting on the countertop and think, that water must be getting cold.

“What?”

“Cora Hale, sir. She is here in South America, underage, and in need of registration under an established pack,” Agent Cortez sounds like he’s reading off of a file, “if you could send a representative to the Bureau’s Colombian headquarters-”

“I’ll be there,” Derek says immediately.

Agent Cortez waffles about how an Alpha shouldn’t abandon their territory, and mentions something about increased unidentified magical activity in the preserve that should be carefully monitored, but Derek doesn’t care because Cora, baby Cora who tried to teach him yellow belt moves from her karate class is alive, her heart is beating and her body intact, and Derek’s entire family isn’t dead.

Derek is going to Bogota.

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“Stop hugging me, you’re being embarrassing,” she grumbles into his shoulder about five minutes after Derek collides into her in the lobby of the Colombian International Supernaturals Bureau building.

“I will not,” Derek whispers into her hair, hugging tighter. “You’re going to have to be embarrassed for a little longer.”

Cora slumps into him further. “Okay.”

Cora grew up to look so much like Laura. She’s seventeen, sharp edged and angry, with a biting sense of humor, and Derek is so happy to have her back.

She still smells like the her from before the fire, underneath the perfume and air fresheners in the room, underneath Colombia and all the years, it’s Cora. Heart beating, fingers clutching the back of his shirt, it’s his baby sister still alive.
It makes him jumpy, being away from his pack, but Cora has to wrap up her life in Bogota before she can come back with him to Beacon Hills. There are people to say goodbye to, people that have been part of Cora’s life but never Derek’s. Boxes to be packed up with clothes Derek has never seen her wear, books he didn’t know that she’d read. Pounds of paperwork to be signed at the ISB re-registering her as a beta under the Hale pack of Beacon Hills.

And then, “you can’t just go to Bogota without seeing Bogota,” Cora explains, rolling her eyes, so they have to go to restaurants, and she has to show him statues, and then there are souvenirs to be bought.

Derek tries to explain the new pack to her, and can only hope that she’ll like them. The novelty bracelet made out of tiny maaracas will go to Boyd, because he’s so quiet, Derek tells her. Erica gets a poster from the Botero Museum, because she loves art, but would never buy any for herself because she doesn’t think it fits with her new leather miniskirt personality. Scott gets a “genuine Colombian love charm” because he would actually believe it works, and from the sound of it, his roller coaster of a romance could use a little love magic. Meanwhile Isaac gets a cookbook of Colombian food because he’s the only one who ever tries to cook anything in their apartment- where will Cora live?

Cora twists her mouth to the side. “I dunno, bro, I’m kind of used to living on my own.”

Derek’s stomach plummets. “Cora-”

“I don’t wanna be far though,” she lays a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “I’ll just get the apartment across from you or something,” her eyes flick towards the dusty cobblestones at their feet. “We do have the money.”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees. They’re going to make it work.

He gets Stiles the most vividly colored, obnoxious sombrero he can find.

“They’re not even Colombian!” Cora protests.

“But Stiles will love it.”

“How are you going to fit that in your luggage?”

“Stiles is going to love it though.”

“Derek, it’s a $75 sombrero. That’s absurd.”

“Stiles will love it.”

Cora throws her hands up in the air. “Fine. Mom never spoiled us like this, just saying.”

Somehow, it ends up being two weeks before they can fly back to Beacon Hills. Derek is excited. Cora and Erica are going to get along famously, and she’ll love Stiles, of course. Derek passes the flight daydreaming about giving all of his betas their souvenirs. Erica will roll her eyes, but the poster will go on her wall; Boyd will never wear a rattling bracelet, but he will let loose one of his rare, thundering chuckles, while Isaac will wear the ink off of the pages of his cookbook as he ineptly yet enthusiastically tries his hand at colombian food.

Stiles’ face will split into one of his blinding grins, and he’ll jam the sombrero onto his head and try to salsa, or mamba, or tango. Some dance that he’ll stumble through, getting the footwork wrong but navigating the hip rolls perfectly.
Derek will probably even get to hug him. Just a quick hello, good to see you again, but then what if Stiles rested his cheek on Derek’s shoulder, his sweet little nose brushing just so against Derek’s neck, as though Stiles were scenting him. Then Stiles’ face would be right there, so it wouldn’t be too weird if Derek kissed him on the cheek really quickly. Stiles would smile, and Derek would kiss the dimple too, and then Stiles would whisper “I missed you,” and he’d lean in, sombrero dangling around his neck, forgotten-

“We are making our descent into SFO, please pull your seats in their full upright position and stow your belongings.”

Stiles will like the sombrero, is all. It’s good to be back home.

On the cab ride home, Derek switches his phone on for the first time in two weeks. It hadn’t been worth the roaming charges to keep it on in Colombia, so he just told the pack—the only people who ever call or text him—to email him if there was an emergency, while Derek kept his phone off.

Three new voicemails from an unknown number. Weird.

Cora raises an eyebrow when Derek holds his phone up to his ear, and Derek shrugs. He doesn’t know either.

“Hello Alpha Hale, this is Agent Wilson from your local Supernatural Entity Enforcement Services, I don’t know if you remember me, but I’m just calling to let you know that some of our on staff wiccans have been detecting odd power surges around the Beacon Hills preserve area, which falls within your territory, so if you learn about anything unusual, I encourage you to call me on my-

“Here we are,” the cabbie says pointedly as they pull up to the apartment building.

Derek pays the cabbie, and grabs the bags out of the back of the car. Cora scoffs at his insistence on carrying her bags too, but he isn’t going to make her haul her own bags, he’s going to be a good brother now that he has a second chance to be one.

“Fine,” Cora sighs. “Well hell, if you’re going to be all old-fashioned, I’m going to take a quick jog around. It’s been a long time.”

Derek nods. He was in her place just a few months ago. “Take all the time you need.”

As Cora disappears down the street, Derek skips to the next voicemail.

“Hello Alpha Hale, this is Agent Wilson from your local Supernatural Entity Enforcement Services, just calling to let you know that our department has identified the power source in the Beacon Hills Preserve as a nemeton. Long story short,” Agent Wilson sighs, static and stress, “it’s an evil tree. I know, what will they think of next. We have the druid who was messing with it in custody, but the tree is still unpredictable, so I’m obligated to inform you, as Alpha of this region, that entry into the preserve is not recommended at this time.”

Derek frowns at his phone as he hauls the luggage into the elevator. The pack is probably fine. The sheriff would know about any Supernatural Alerts in the region and make sure the pack stayed safe. Derek clicks on the last voicemail, dated from yesterday night, around midnight.

“Hello Alpha Hale, this is Agent Wilson from your local Supernatural Entity Enforcement Services, just calling to-” the man sighs shakily. “Well, listen, we have a hell of a situation happening in this town, and it would be best if you could come into the office so we could debrief you. At least send a
representative or something, because we’ve got—pardon my language, but—a clusterfuck on our hands and we’ve contacted the local school districts and sheriff stations, obviously, we aren’t idiots, but we’re required by law to communicate with local packs, and dammit Hale,” Agent Wilson’s voice cracks, “you’re making it hellishly difficult. Just come into the office, we have some shit to deal with,” the voicemail concludes as Derek pushes open the apartment door, dragging three suitcases and a sombrero inside with him.

Derek tosses his phone on the kitchen counter and stares at it for a moment, two. The empty apartment gives him no explanations. With a sudden twisting in his gut, Derek wonders where Isaac is. Whatever is going on, Derek should get ahold of his pack, make sure they’re alright. He’s- he should have been paying attention to the rest of the world. He’s an alpha now, he can’t just disappear to Colombia for weeks with no correspondence. His mother never would have stood for it.

Allowing himself one moment to draw in the silent air of the apartment, hold it, breathe it out into the quiet, Derek prepares to face whatever rising tide of crazy he’s about to wade into.

Then a body slams into his back.

It wraps wiry legs around his waist, and lithe arms around his shoulders, making Derek stagger back in shock. He heard nothing, he can’t even catch the scent of the stranger hanging onto his back- what is going on?

“Hey, it’s good to see you back, big guy,” a familiar voice exclaims into Derek’s ear. “Surprise! Welcome back!”

Derek’s supposed to be in love with that voice, but something is wrong with it. He shakes Stiles’ body off of his back and turns around.

“Woah,” Stiles’ body stumbles back a step, a perfect imitation of Stiles’ usual clumsiness, but it isn’t right. “Oh my god, you almost sent me flying there, sourwolf. Hey, you wanna go get some curly fries or something?” Stiles’ face smiles, muscles pulling his mouth wide and thin. “I love curly fries.”

Derek looks into what used to be Stiles’ eyes and his hands start to shake. That isn’t Stiles.

That isn’t Stiles.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long! It's a lot harder to write when you have school instead of spring break apparently. ;/
Hope you like it!

There’s a high, wheezing, terrified noise sounding through the room, and it takes Derek a moment to realize that it’s coming out of his chest as he staggers backwards, tips over the suitcases, sends the sombrero flying, slams into the door, digs his claws into the wood, stares in horror at this creature who took away the best thing in Derek’s life while he wasn’t watching.

Derek should have stayed. Then maybe he could have protected Stiles, guarded him the way he should have.

The wide, thin smile on Stiles’ mouth is gone, as well as the choreographed flailing.

“Looks like somebody is more of a people person than I expected.” It frowns pensively. “Now, how. Did. You. Know?” He punctuates every word with another step forward. This new thing moves slow, deliberate, like lava down a volcano. A hand raises, the fingers moving like they’re underwater, drifting back and forth in the air until they land lightly on Derek’s jaw.

His hands are too cold.

Stiles’ eyes blink slowly as the creature in him scans Derek’s face. “Ahhhh,” he drawls, I see. Poor wolf.” He rubs a palm across Derek’s cheek and Derek flinches away, but the creature grabs the other side of his face and holds him still, clamped between two hands like iron. “Nobody else noticed but you, did you know that?” He smirks. “I’ll bet you aren’t surprised. I can see it, you know.” The thing quirks an eyebrow. Aren’t I impressive. “The bond. I see a lot of things, but the hooks you’re sending out to my poor, oblivious boy...” he pouts in feigned sympathy. “Things like you and I aren’t bound for luck in that area, are we? The auras coming off of you that just bounce right off Stiles here.” The creature wraps its tongue around Stiles’ name with a relish that sends a shiver down Derek’s spine. “But!” He waves a jaunty finger. “This means I know how I’ll keep you quiet.” One of his floating hands descends to Derek’s belt.

Growling, Derek throws the creature off of him, sending him slamming into the opposite wall with a sickening crack. His skin crawls with the creature’s phantom touch.

“Aaaah,” Stiles groans, wincing, grabbing the back of his neck. “Jeeesus.”

Derek starts forward. “Stiles?”

A smirk flicks over his face. “No. But let’s not forget whose body this is.” The creature is lying on Derek’s floor, Derek standing over him with all of the strength in the world, but Derek has never felt so powerless.

The thing stands up, puts a feather light hand on Derek’s shoulder, steers him into a chair. It spreads Stiles’ legs, settles his body onto Derek’s lap.
“Mmmm,” he hums, wrapping his arms around Derek’s neck and resting against his chest. “Stiles doesn’t know what he’s missing. You’re very... huggable. Or, you know,” he presses in closer. “Fuckable.” He traces a finger over Derek’s jaw. “You know, you won’t ever have a chance like this again. I’m very willing.” The thing makes Stiles’ mouth pout, full and red and close.

Derek swallows. “Stop trying to manipulate me.”

“Who said anything about manipulating?” The creature chuckles into Derek’s neck, making Stiles’ wide, muscled shoulders shake. “That’ll come later. This would just be... hmmm... mutually beneficial.” Something dark flickers in his eyes. “You would be his first. He wouldn’t remember it, but you would be. Can you believe nobody’s touched him yet? It can’t be much longer, can it? He is growing into himself.” The thing stretches, settling itself in Stiles’ body. “But no girl could ever give him what you could-

Behind the almost-Stiles head, Derek sees the door, not quite closed, open silently.

Cora makes a face at him, splayed out on a chair with a lithe body in his lap, and takes a step back into the hallway.

Derek’s heart seizes with panic. The thing inside Stiles is mouthing at his neck, and he has two seconds to do something about it before the thing retaliates, hurts Stiles.

“Cora!” he roars, “ayúdame, agárralo!”

The creature tilts his head to the side. “Wh-

Cora tackles him before he can say anything else.

Derek loves having a sister again.

XXXXX

It’s tense in the waiting room, to say the least.

Scott shakes his head, slumping in the threadbare waiting room chair. “I just can’t believe we didn’t notice? I’m his best friend, how did I not notice?”

“You think you feel bad,” grumbles the sheriff, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I mean, I guess they kept telling us that something fishy was going on somewhere,” Isaac mutters, “but nothing seemed to be going wrong that we could see. Not enough to bother you in Colombia anyway.”

They sit in glum silence as the waiting room clock ticks on. Clocks in waiting rooms are louder than regular clocks.

“It’ll be fine,” the Sheriff says, assuring himself as much as the rest of the pack. “The SEES has the best exorcists in the country. They’ll get Stiles figured out.”

Scott nods rapidly, glancing towards the door. The tension in the room stretches out like a fine thread.

Cora chooses that moment to roll into the room, plunder from the vending machines in both hands. She stops, taking in their grim expressions. “For god’s sake, it’s going to be fine,” she huffs. “Me and big bro here defeated the evil monster with our amazing spanish skills, and the emissary will come
out any minute and say—"

The door opens, and Cora falls silent with a smug expression.

Dr. Deaton walks out, runes still hanging around his neck, with a girl dressed entirely in florals trailing after him. “Would you like to see him?”

They would.

Stiles is fast asleep, and there are dark circles underneath his eyes, but the monitors show no supernatural signs whatsoever, and when he snorts, grumbles “fish,” underneath his breath, and half falls off the bed, something settles in Derek’s chest. He’s safe. Derek hasn’t screwed everything up.

“The exorcism was an interesting process,” Dr. Deaton comments, checking off a few boxes on Stiles’ chart, “with a few unexpected turns. Were you aware your son is a spark, Sheriff?”

The sheriff blinks. “Really? He went through the testing in elementary school and nobody—”

“The spark can be tricky,” Deaton shrugs. “Sometimes it waits to manifest, but in Stiles’ case, I think his Adderall may have been interfering with the spark. But when the nogitsune possessed him, he stopped taking the medication. Isn’t it interesting how the wheel of fate turns?”

The girl in floral nods rapidly, bright green hair bouncing. “We had to set up like four different purification talismans, but once we did, he practically burned the nogitsune out by himself. It was really cool.”

Deaton nods. “Once he’s fully recovered,” he tells the sheriff, “I would like to ask him if he would like to be a trainee with Belinda.” He nods at the girl in florals. “I think he has some excellent potential.”

The sheriff unconsciously grips harder on Stiles’ ankle over the sheets. “I don’t know, he’s so busy with school, and—”

“Oh it’s not that hard or anything!” Belinda chirps, “I’ve only been a trainee for three months and I’ve learned all sorts of stuff! Like, did you know that mugwort is so powerful it can act like the engine for any spell? Or that some spells don’t need ingredients at all, just the right gesture and the right words at the same time?” Derek wonders if motor-mouthedness is a common trait among sparks, or if Stiles and Belinda are unique in this aspect.

She continues, “like, I could just go ‘de veritate!’” she gestures oddly at Derek, “and—”

“Belinda!” Deaton barks.

She squeaks, and covers her mouth with both hands. “I just did the thing, didn’t I?” she says through her hands, “god, I’m so sorry, sorryyy.”

“For what?” Derek asks. “I don’t feel anything, did you just cast a spell? That would explain the weird thing you did with your fingers. I’m not surprised that you would cast one accidentally, you seem like the type to do that. Stiles probably would too, if he became a trainee. But he’d get better,” Derek assures Deaton with an earnestness that strikes even himself as weird. Derek really, really wants Deaton to know that, “Stiles is really smart, and talented, so you don’t need to worry about that, and he would catch on really quick, and he has long fingers, so he’d have no trouble doing all of the” Derek twiddles his fingers in an approximate representation of whatever Belinda did when she cast the spell. He can’t seem to stop. And he needs to stop. He’s heading down a dangerous road. “I’m really concerned about all the things I’m saying right now, it’s like a direct line from my
brain to my mouth and I can’t filter anything out. It’s kind of like how Stiles does it, but worse,” Derek babbles as he backs towards the door, “because Stiles usually has something interesting in his brain, but I just,” he reaches the door and bolts through it.

Once he reaches the hallway and has no one to talk to, the spell apparently doesn’t require that he speak any further. Derek takes a moment to savor the silence.

Deaton opens the door to the room, “I’m sorry about this, I’m sure we can-”

“Oh no, now I have to talk again!” Derek blurts out, turning away. “I don’t want to keep talking because I’m sure I’ll say” run, run something about-”

He makes it out of range just in time to stop from saying “Stiles” within earshot of any of the people in the hospital room, and doesn’t stop running until he collapses into his apartment and locks the door behind him. He didn’t say anything that he couldn’t explain away with platonic concern and appreciation, but he can’t risk anything else coming out. Derek is going to stay in the apartment until he figures out a way to fix this. There isn’t much food in the apartment, just unopened suitcases and the lurid sombrero lying on the ground, overturned. Derek was so excited about it when he bought it, but now it just seems stupidly obvious.

His phone buzzes with a few text messages but Derek ignores it, terrified that the spell will work over the phone.

He just- he can’t stop thinking about Stiles, so the second anybody starts talking to him, he’ll start spewing out everything he knows about Stiles, how wonderful Stiles is, how he wishes Stiles cared about him the same way he cares about Stiles. Which is fine in his head, but Derek can’t help but picture Stiles, mouth taut, eyebrows pulled together, trying to be kind, (because Stiles is kind, even if he doesn’t always show it,) saying “Derek, I really don’t feel that way about you, I’m sorry,” apologizing even though it isn’t his fault, trying to act normal, but drifting away, not talking to Derek alone anymore. The tutoring nights would end once Stiles knew their real motivation, and even the casual touches that Stiles hands out so freely would be cut off.

No, Derek is too selfish to let Stiles know the truth. He wants to keep their moments, one sided though they may be, safe and to himself.

There are a few knocks on the door in the next hour, first Cora, then Isaac, then, a few hours later, Stiles. Derek shoves his fist in his mouth so he doesn’t try to talk through the door. Are you alright, he wants to ask, how much do you remember, are you okay, are you okay? But he can’t, because he can’t control himself, so he bites his knuckles and shreds his claws into one of Erica’s throw pillows until it bleeds feathers.

“Hey Derek?” Stiles asks through the door, hesitant, feet fumbling, the Stiles Derek hasn’t seen in weeks. “I’m pretty sure you’re in here, Cora said she heard your heartbeat earlier, but I guess you don’t want to talk because of the spell? What is our life, am I right?”

Derek is on his feet before he realizes he’s standing up. He bites down harder on his hand. He can’t talk. He will not.

“I mean, it’s not like I mind that you have, like, a babbling curse cast on you,” Stiles continues. “Because, that would be hypocritical of me, right?” Derek hears the soft thud of Stiles’ body hitting the door and sliding down to sit. Derek can picture his long legs crossing the entire hallway, Stiles reeling them in so passersby can reach their apartments. “Cora’s staying in her apartment down the hall—and by the way, way to spoil your little sister there—but yeah, and Isaac’s staying there too for the night. I dunno what they told you, but Belinda has to be the one to uncast the spell, so Deaton
Stiles chuckles. “Cora’s really mad at you for locking yourself in with all of her luggage inside your apartment, but I get the feeling she’s just kind of always like that.”

Derek’s pressed up against the dark wood of the door. How did that happen? He grips tighter onto the pillow so his hands don’t stray onto the door handle.

“She uh, she said that when she tackled me, the um. The thing inside me was giving you a hard time. She didn’t go into details, and I mean, I don’t remember anything, but I just wanted to say, you know, I’m sorry about whatever I did.”

It wasn’t your fault, Derek wants to say. I know you would never do anything like that. Derek’s hand is bleeding, he’s biting it so hard.

“Ugh, this is so weird,” Stiles sighs, “I wish I could just come in and like, see your face.”

I wish you could too, I want to see your face properly, Derek would say in another life. His hands inch towards the brass door handle.

“Tomorrow, I guess,” Stiles’ fingers rap a pattern against the floor. “And hey, I’ll get to hear all about Colombia!”

Derek’s shaking hands close on the doorknob.

“I’d better go, I told Scott I’d only hold us up for a second, and he’s waiting in the car. See ya, Derek!”

Stiles leaves, and Derek twists the doorknob just to hear it click open, just for a second of wavering relief, then he shoves his weight into the door, slamming it closed. He rests his head against the wood of the door. It still feels warm from Stiles’ back. Derek stands there until his hands stop shaking, until his jaw stops aching from the strain of being shut so tightly.

Then, because he’s alone and because he’s weak, he whispers into the door, “I love you.”

It doesn’t help, just hangs in the air, impotent, unanswered.

XXXXX

Derek is woken at six in the morning by a sharp knocking on his front door. It isn’t a very familiar smell, and a squint through the peephole confirms that it’s only Deaton and Belinda. He lets them in, wincing as the deluge begins.

“I’m sure glad you’re here, this has gotten old very quickly, and I can’t help but get nervous I’m going to say something I shouldn’t. It reminds me of an episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer that my sister watched once. She was the one who watched it religiously, but I watched more than I should have because I secretly sort of liked it.” Deaton nods with the neutrality of a true medical professional as he unclasps his case of supplies. “Buffy had a curse or something cast on her so that she could read minds, and whenever she told anybody she could read minds, they immediately thought about what they didn’t want her to know. It’s like that with me, now that I could say anything on my mind, the only things on my mind are the things I shouldn’t say.”

Belinda squeals. “I have an idea! Here!” she hands him a piece of paper out of her purse. “Think about this, this is probably safe.”

“Eggs, milk, celery,” Derek reads dutifully, grateful for the respite. “Orange juice- I used to drink
that by the gallon as a kid, my parents stocked up on that instead of soda- it’s Stiles, why is Stiles
here, I wasn’t expecting Stiles to be here!”

“Heyyyy Derek!” Stiles drawls, “I was parking the Emissarymobile. You’ve really gotta do
something about the parking around your building.”

“Stiles is going to see his first magical rite today,” Deaton explains as he pulls a funky smelling tub
of brown paste from his bag. “Day one of training.”

“Training is good, Stiles would probably like learning how to use his spark, he really likes learning.
You don’t even need my help in history,” Derek tells Stiles, “I’ll bet you could figure it out on your
own, no problem. And I don’t know why that chemistry teacher of yours hated you so much, if I
were your teacher, I’d love having you in the classroom.”

Stiles’ cheeks are turning faintly pink. “Well gee, Derek, do go on.”

“Oh I could,” Derek replies to his own horror, “I have a lot to-”

Belinda smears a thumb’s worth of the brown paste onto his forehead and shouts “esse volueris,
quod possit loqui!”

Derek almost collapses in relief. “Thank you.”

“I did it!” Belinda squeals, pulling a startled Deaton into a bone crushing hug.

Stiles grins widely. “Good to have you back, bro.”

Derek groans, rubbing a hand over his forehead. “Please don’t take anything I said seriously.”

“Too late!” Stiles crows. “You’re a big cuddly teddy bear under that exterior. I’m going to tell
everybody in the pack that you aren’t nearly as scary as you pretend to be. You’re fond of us betas,
admit it.”

“I- yes.” Derek takes the out for what it is. “All of you betas. I try to be gruff, but sometimes...” he
shrugs.

Stiles taps the side of his nose. “Your secret is safe with me. But...” he pulls out his phone and starts
rapidly texting. “They’re waiting downstairs, lemme get them up here.”

The pack parades in in a rush, talking and clattering, shedding jackets and lightly teasing Derek as
they all tramp in, bumping into furniture and spreading teenager scent everywhere. It’s such a fuss
that the shattering of glass almost goes unheard, until Stiles delicately asks, “sooo... what did I just
spill all over myself?”

They all go quiet and turn to see Stiles standing, frozen, in a cloud of sky blue, glittering powder,
with glass shards from a jar scattered around his feet.

Deaton lets out a sharp sigh of disappointment and Belinda goes “oh shit.”

“What Belinda is trying to say,” Deaton says, carefully enunciating each word, “is that you have
spilled a jar of what we call ‘cupid’s bow.’”

Stiles looks a little dazed, his eyes unfocused, staring vaguely in Derek’s direction.

“What does it do?” Cora whispers, as though if she’s quiet enough, the powder won’t take effect.

“What you’d think it would do,” Belinda whispers back, biting her lip.
Derek’s heart starts beating double time. Is Stiles looking at him? It seems like he is. Derek starts steeling himself preemptively. Whatever Stiles will say, whatever he will do, he won’t mean it. Derek has to remember that it’s all the powder. He clears his throat. “Stiles?”

Stiles blinks lethargically, a sappy smile drifting over his face. It’s making an expression Derek’s never seen before, which is no surprise. Stiles is in love. Stiles sighs contentedly, opens his mouth, and breathes “Isaac.”

Derek blinks, then looks over his shoulder. Sure enough, there’s Isaac, one eyebrow raised, looking extremely dubious as Stiles stumbles into him, wrapping his arms around Isaac’s waist and rubbing his face into Isaac’s neck.

Derek was wrong. This is worse. Much much worse. Cora and Erica are laughing while Scott looks on with a bemused expression, and Derek’s heart is grinding fitfully in his chest like it doesn’t know what to do with itself. It aches.

Boyd notices the irregularity in his heartbeat and shoots him an odd look. Derek shakes his head. He’ll make up some explanation about magic residue later. For now, they have to get the Cupid’s bow off of Stiles.

Isaac, hands hovering over Stiles’ back, beats Derek to the punch. “So, you got something in there to undo this? I don’t want to get to third base with Stilinski.”

Stiles pulls his face out of Isaac’s neck, looking affronted. “I don’t just want you for your body! Why would you think that? I love you.” He rests his head on Isaac’s shoulder and sighs happily. “I’d be good if you just let me be near you.”

Isaac widens his eyes meaningfully at Deaton and Belinda.

Belinda coughs. “So, funny story.”

“We will need to go to Paris to get the antidote,” Deaton cuts in crisply, snapping his bag of supplies shut and striding towards the door, Belinda in tow.

Scott’s eyebrows pull together. “Paris?”

“It’s the city of love,” Deaton explains matter-of-factly, before shutting the doors in their gaping faces.

Erica makes a skeptical noise. “Sounds fake. I think he just wants to visit Paris.”

Stiles traces a finger over Isaac’s chest. “That’s a lot of trouble to go through for nothing. No spell will ever change the way I feel about Isaac.”

Isaac winces. “Are you sure about that?”

“Of course!” Stiles’ face falls. “You look unhappy. Why are you sad? What can I do? Everything will be alright as long as we have each other, you can have my word on that.” He smiles, brilliant and free. “I love you, after all.”

“Oh good,” Isaac sighs, collapsing onto the couch.

Stiles collapses onto the couch with him, snuggling up against his back, wrapping both arms firmly around Isaac and tossing one of his own legs over Isaac’s. Isaac is wrapped up in a blanket of Stiles and looks inexplicably put out about it. Derek would give a lot to be in his place.
“We’re going to have to explain this to his dad,” Boyd points out.

Oh look. It got worse.

XXXXX

For the next week, Derek tries to avoid the living room like the plague.

The Sheriff, once he’d been assured that Isaac wouldn’t try to steal Stiles’ virtue, gave Stiles’ pleading doe eyes permission to stay in Derek and Isaac’s apartment until a cure was found, while Isaac, despite Stiles’ protestations that he was in love not lust, didn’t want to be alone in a room with Stiles and a bed, so the Isaac-and-Stiles-excruciating-lovefest takes place mostly in the apartment’s living room.

The problem is, Derek can’t stay holed up in his bedroom forever. He has to pass through the living room to visit Cora down the hall, or go grocery shopping, or make food in the kitchen, so once or twice a day, whether he wants it or not (he never wants it,) he’s subjected to the sight of Stiles curled up in Isaac’s lap while Isaac tries to watch TV, or do homework, or text, or whatever it is he does in his free time.

The cuddling isn’t too bad. Stiles is a touchy person to begin with. The worst part is when Stiles looks up, eyes wide and earnest, and says,

“Derek, isn’t Isaac just the most handsome man you’ve ever seen? He’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen.”

The worst part is when Derek softly asks Isaac while Stiles is in the bathroom, “how are you doing?” and Isaac replies, cheeks turning slightly pink, “it’s actually not too bad. I could get used to this.”

The worst part is when Stiles asks, “Derek, have you ever been in love? It’s fantastic, I’ve never felt so happy in my life. Nobody could ever make me feel the way Isaac does, isn’t that funny?”

The worst part is when Erica says, “you know, they would look really good together. Just think about all of those cheekbones in one place. And there’s such a cute height difference!”

The worst part is when the Sheriff comes to visit, later on, and pats Isaac on the head, jokingly calling him “my son’s boyfriend.” Derek’s starting to think it won’t stay a joke.

The worst part is when Stiles glances into the kitchen while Derek is hurriedly microwaving a pizza, and asks, casual as you please, “Yo, Derek, did you see that last game?”

“No, why?”

“They made this play, and it was- it was ridiculous, but the ref was blind, apparently, so—” there’s a noise from the living room and Stiles’ head whips around like Derek’s very existence has disappeared off the face of the earth. “Isaac, baby, are you okay? You just coughed, should I make you some chicken noodle soup?”

The worst part is that Derek has to make up excuses to spend his days in Cora’s apartment. Each day she presses further.

“Really, it’s not like they’re fucking in there. Isaac probably appreciates a little bit of sane company.”

“I’m trying to watch Girls, Derek, can’t you just go back home?”
“Why do you keep hovering? Do you not trust me or something?”

When Belinda knocks on the door with a tan and a handful of some kind of plant, Derek almost collapses in relief.

Stiles holds both of Isaac’s hands in his. “Moment of truth.” He gives a wry smile. “See you on the other side.”

“Alright bro,” Isaac allows a fond smile. “Now you eat those weird herb things.”

The spell comes off quickly: Stiles’ big, goofy, lovesick grin drifts away to be replaced by blushing cheeks and uncomfortable fidgeting.

“So, uh,” Stiles scratches the back of his head, looking at Isaac uncomfortably.

“It’s cool,” Isaac waves a hand, “you were really nice to me.”

“I, uh, yeah.” Stiles chuckles. “Are you really sure you wanna miss out on all of this jelly?” He gestures illustratively at his body as though it isn’t anything to speak of. (Derek still can’t believe that Stiles thinks he’s unattractive.)

“I’m going to take my ‘razor sharp cheekbones’ and ‘ice blue eyes’ elsewhere, yeah.”

Stiles rubs a hand over his face. “Oh god.”

Clapping a hand on Stiles’ shoulder, Isaac moves past him into his room. “I’m never going to let go of it.”

Stiles playfully gives Isaac the finger, then turns to Derek. “Sorry to have crashed at your place for like a week.”

“It was fine.”

Stiles snorts. “Alright dude, but don’t come complaining to me when you can’t get the hormone smell out of the couch cushions.”

Then he claps Derek’s shoulder, grabs his jacket, and walks out the door, leaving nothing behind but his scent and fingerprints on the brass doorknob.

Derek stares at the door for a minute, then goes to make toast. Stiles is fine, and nobody knows Derek’s secret. He wonders if this is how characters in a movie feel after the credits roll, like real life is very suddenly back again, and they have nothing to show for their adventures.

XXXXX

Or so Derek thinks until the next day, when Stiles rolls into the apartment, backpack in tow.

“Alright, so let’s talk roaring twenties,” Stiles dumps his backpack on the table. “Jazz, gangsters, bathtub gin, the charleston,” he demonstrates the dance move, “I’ve got a test next week and I’m going to ace it whether Ms. June likes it or not, because I think she sort of wants to flunk me just because I keep raising my hand all ‘my history major friend said that actually...’ but you know whatever, I can-”

“Stiles?”

“-make it through AP US History, I’m no Greenburg, and Ms. June is kidding herself is she’s going
to punish me for—"

“Stiles.”

“-having too much class participation. I just think that sometimes a student’s got to take a teacher down a peg, just let ‘em know that they can’t get away with whatever, you know?”

“Yes, Stiles, I understand you,” Derek cuts in, “but what are you doing here?”

Stiles gives Derek an obvious look and nods at the pile of history notes on his table.

“Yes, but it’s Monday. Not tutoring day.”

Scratching the back of his neck, Stiles looks away. “Well, you know, better safe than sorry, I wasn’t really on top of my work during love spell week, I just wanna be, like, proactive. Whatever.”

He shifts a few pages of notes around, and Derek knows he’s putting them out of order, Derek helped Stiles organize them himself. He’s still not looking at Derek.

“Are you alright?” Derek asks hesitantly. Scott is better than him at this, why didn’t Stiles go to him?

“What! Fine!” Stiles barks, wrinkling the sheet of paper in his hands.

“Stiles,” Derek sighs.

“Oh okay,” Stiles admits in a rush, “so maybe I’ve been feeling a little weird lately and I thought that maybe, you know, Wise Old Derek the Alpha would kind of help me out a little bit, but I’ll have you know I had a plan, I was casually going to mention sleeping, and then go on to mention that maybe I hadn’t, you know, been doing that, hypothetically, and then I’d go on—”

Derek pats the back of the couch. “How about you sit?”

It’s hilarious that anyone would think that Derek is the person to come to for advice, but Derek isn’t going to let his soulmate wander around feeling lost more than necessary. His mom always said that being an alpha was, first and foremost, about stepping up when you had to. She also said that the best thing for nerves was Earl Grey tea, which Derek is pretty sure he has lying around somewhere.

Stiles gets a red polka dotted mug of Earl Grey tea and the fluffiest blanket off of Derek’s bed.

Raising an eyebrow, Stiles asks flatly, “do you think I’m going to go into shock or something?”

“I just, I thought it’d be,” Derek sighs. Stiles really should have gone to Scott.

“Nah, it’s cool,” Stiles quickly replies, “it’s just, I mean, all it really is is that I’ve been having trouble sleeping.”

Settling himself carefully on the other end of the couch, Derek prompts, “okay...?” He thinks he read somewhere that half of a therapist’s job was just to get their client talking.

“It’s just,” Stiles fiddles with the end of the blanket, takes a sip of Earl Grey. “I think I’m afraid that if I fall asleep, the nogitsune or whatever will take me over again? Or maybe I’ll just be infatuated with Isaac all of a sudden? And you know, obviously that’s stupid, because the love spell thing wasn’t even on the same level of, you know, demonic possession. That’s like, horror movie vs romcom levels of genre switching there.”

“No, it makes sense,” Derek surprises himself by saying, “you weren’t in control of yourself either
time. They go together.” Derek sure as hell understands not feeling in control of your life. He didn’t even pick the throw pillows on the couch, for god’s sakes.

Stiles chuckles to himself. “And if anybody knows what that feels like, it’s you.”

Derek lightly kicks at Stiles’ knee.

“I’m just saying, bro, you didn’t even pick out the throw pillows on this couch!”

Derek squints at Stiles. “How did you...”

“What?”

“You just said what I was thinking.”

“Huh.” Stiles frowns thoughtfully into his tea. “I guess we’re just on the same wavelength.”

“I guess.”

“Oh, no wait! Surprise telepathy! Why didn’t I go with surprise telepathy!” Stiles widens his eyes, staring at Derek. Affecting a spooky voice, he intones, “I see into your soul, Derek Hale, I know what you hiiiiide.”

Derek’s laugh comes out a little strangled, but Stiles doesn’t seem to notice. Still, Derek changes the subject.

“I managed to get the hormone stink out of the couch.”

“That’s a real thing?” Stiles perks up in interest. He’s so eager to learn.

“Not really,” Derek allows, “I just thought it’d be funny.”

Stiles hums in disagreement. “Leave the jokes to me, big guy. Like, uh...” his eyebrows draw together in thought.

“Not so easy now, is it?” Derek counters.

“Shut up. Okay, um, wouldn’t it be funny if I’d seen you first when I broke the jar of Cupid’s Bow? Then you’d have been the one trapped in here with me. Oh my god, and you’d be all stoic while I’m basically throwing rose petals everywhere, all like,” Stiles lunges across the couch, arms bracketing Derek against the armrest, “‘Derek, love me Derek, love me my prince!’ There’s a joke for you. Boom. Funny.” He sits back and crosses his arms in satisfaction.

Derek clears his throat. Stiles was just three inches from his face. *Three inches from his face.*

“That’s... um...”

“What?” Stiles is already rooting through his binder distractedly, caught up in the tidal wave of his own distraction.

Derek blinks once, twice. “That’s not even a joke, that’s just a funny situation.”

“Fine, let me make the situational comedy,” Stiles laughs. “Oh, but you know, speaking of which, or like, not at all, but, I don’t think I’m in love with Lydia any more. Figured you’d like to know, considering how you were all concerned for my wellbeing and stuff.”
“Oh? What? Why, uh, why is that?” Derek busies himself with rearranging throw pillows.

Stiles shrugs. “The whole love spell thing... I don’t know, it was fake, but it kind of felt just as fake as anything I’d ever tried with Lydia. Like, looking back, I was just this creepy dude spouting out valentine’s day card sayings, and that’s, you know, creepy. Besides,” Stiles sets down the tea like a declaration. “I’m going into senior year, and some lucky lady is going to have to take my virginity, and it’s not worth wasting the time on Lydia anymore.”

Derek tries to nod thoughtfully. Right. Of course.

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“Alright, we can do this.” Stiles’ brow furrows in concentration. “I have full faith. We can do this. We. Can. Do. This.”

Derek rolls his eyes. “Well if you’d just stop putting your right foot forward on the downbeat-”

“There’s a downbeat? The beats go up and down? I thought they just went ‘five, six, seven, eight!’ Oh-dammit.” Stiles steps on Derek’s foot.

“Alriiiight!” the instructor calls out, clapping her hands together. “Everybody get in your starting positions, we’re taking it from the tops. And don’t forget to move those hips, this is the tango, not the waltz!”

Stiles smirks and hooks his hand lower around Derek’s waist, pulling their hips together. “You heard the lady.”

Wait.

The music starts, and Stiles thrusts forward, hips first.

“We are in public!” Derek hisses into Stiles’ ear.

“Yeah, and we’ll be in public when we do our first dance as a married couple, so get. Used. To. It.” Stiles punctuates each word with a pelvic thrust, completely off the beat.

Derek sighs, steering Stiles through the next sequence of steps. Derek’s not going to care how Stiles dances after their wedding anyway, just as long as they dance it with matching rings on their fingers.

Wait.

Spinning Stiles into a dip, Derek looks up at the other dancers in the class. He can’t make out their faces.

one, two, three,

“Do you think I’ll be able to hold a rose between my teeth when we do this?” Stiles asks eagerly as they work through some kind of box step, hips still pressed together.

three, three, ten, one, two, three

Derek pulls himself awake and it hurts, like dragging himself through molasses, but it’s better this way. Stiles is going to lose his virginity to some girl in his math class, marry a sophisticated girl with glasses he meets in college, drop by Beacon Hills to see his dad for the holidays.

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“So,” Stiles says when he comes back from the bathroom, “how have I never noticed that bright pink sombrero hanging in the hallway before?”

Derek shrugs, passing Isaac the guasca so he can stir it into the ajiaco. “I got it in Colombia. I just, um, thought it would make a good decoration.”

It had been sitting in the back of his closet for months after Colombia, Derek too embarrassed by its extravagance to give it to Stiles, but too fond of it to throw it out with the trash, before he realized he could use it for decoration.

“It’s really cool!” Stiles enthuses, “but like, not what I’d expect from Mr. I-Only-Wear-Neutral-Tones. What’s up with that?”

Derek shrugs. Twice in one minute, is that suspicious? “Cora picked it out.” She almost did, she was the one who saw it in the stall first, said “who the fuck would ever wear that?”

“Well it’s hella swag.” Stiles nods approvingly, then saunters over to the oven. “So when’s din-din done, Isaac?”

Isaac swats at Stiles as though he’s an annoying fly. “When I say it’s done. Go sit down and wait with everybody else.”

The sombrero stays hanging proudly in the hallway, even though everybody else in the pack and their parents think it looks ridiculous. It stays when Scott collapses into the apartment, then Isaac’s lap, crying about how he and Allison broke up, they’d been dating for years, he thought it was forever! It stays when Erica curls around a mug of Earl Grey (it’s Derek’s new secret weapon,) and says she just thought that Boyd would ask her to homecoming, they both like each other, why can’t they just do something about it? It stays when Isaac bursts into Derek’s room, holding aloft a laptop with his early admittance to Humboldt State emblazoned across the screen. It stays when Boyd strolls in, and with a broad grin, announces that he and Erica have a date for Friday. He’s taking her to bowling and then smoothies.

It stays when Stiles shows up at 3:30 on a Wednesday afternoon—earlier than even Isaac gets back to the apartment—and starts hooking up his laptop to the TV.

“What are you doing?”

“Hang on.” Stiles’ voice is muffled by the TV screen that he’s jammed himself behind. “I just need to figure out where to-here. Here we go. Do you see my desktop screen on the TV?”

Derek looks at the screen dubiously. “I see some kind of animal.”

“Is it a fennec fox?”

“Yes?”

“That’s my desktop. Okay. Good. Sit down.” Stiles emerges from behind the TV and picks up his laptop, navigating to powerpoint. “Okay. Fullscreen. Here we go.”

A slide pops up on the TV screen, bearing the pinecone embossed seal of Beacon Hills University and nothing else.

“College!” Stiles intones. He clicks on the laptop, and the slide flips to a group of diverse students laughing on a quad. “Coming this fall, Stiles Stilinski will be attending... college.”
“I know this,” Derek points out. “I’ve known this since April.”

“College!” Stiles carries on stubbornly. “Parties!” A picture of a party. “Frisbee on the quad!” A picture of people playing frisbee on the quad. “Dorms!” A picture of a classic dorm room, with two lofted beds and the elbow room of a four year old. “But wait!” A red X crosses through the picture of the dorm. “Stiles can Live At. Hoooome!” A picture of Stiles’ house clearly taken on Stiles’ cellphone. “Yes, the Sheriff of Beacon Hills, Stiles’ esteemed father, is going to keep his home open for his son for the next four years, so that Stiles can be that lame guy who still lives with his dad and sleeps in his childhood bed!”

Stiles taps at his laptop. “There’s supposed to be a sound effect here. Can I- no, that doesn’t work... okay, imagine like a ‘dun dun DUNNNN’ right now-”

“Just tell me what the point of this slideshow is.” Derek crosses his arms and tries out the “Alpha expression” he’s been working on.

“Okay, okay, fine.” Stiles puts down the laptop, shuffles his feet, runs a hand through his lengthening hair, then asks, “can I live here next year? Like, here, in your apartment?”

Stiles, live here?

At Derek’s blank stare, he lunges for the laptop, starting to babble. “I have reasons, hold on.” He skips forward a few slides to a picture of Isaac’s face, part of the photo obscured by Stiles’ thumb. “Isaac’s going to be going to Humboldt state, so there’ll be an empty bedroom-”

Stiles would be right down the hall. Derek would see him every day.

A picture of the Sheriff. “My dad, he’s great, he’s why I’m staying so close, but I’m supposed to be learning independence at least a little bit in college-”

“Of course you can live here.”

Stiles’ hand hovers over the keyboard. “What?”

“Of course,” Derek repeats. He would see Stiles every day. The first person Derek sees every day will be Stiles.

Closing the laptop with a broad grin, Stiles pronounces, “that’s what I wanna hear, roomie! Man, thank god you said yes now, all of my other reasons are really iffy. Also, I have to practice spells a lot, so I hope you’re cool with possible explosions.”

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The rest of the pack’s senior year finishes both faster and slower than Derek expected. It seems like it will be forever before Stiles takes over the spare bedroom and his scent is constantly in the apartment, but then Derek walks in on Isaac packing a suitcase and can’t believe Isaac’s already leaving, because god, Stiles is going to move in and there’s no way he won’t find out, not with Derek around all the time, trailing after him like a lovesick puppy. What was Derek thinking?

But when Stiles parks his jeep in its new ‘resident’ spot outside the complex, lugs the last of the boxes into his room, and collapses onto the couch, commanding Derek to “put in a movie, I’m not moving from this couch for at least two more hours,” Derek remembers what he was thinking. He wants Stiles falling asleep on the couch without having to rouse himself in an hour to drive back home. He wants to be able to brew Stiles a cup of coffee in the morning without it being weird, and for Stiles to think “I’m going home,” and walk into Derek’s apartment.
They end up watching Avatar because Derek’s TV is bigger than the one Stiles had at home. Stiles does fall asleep on the couch, and Derek just drapes the fluffiest blanket he can find over him and leaves him be.

It’s a learning experience, living with Stiles. Derek didn’t know that Stiles liked listening to Swedish electronica in his free time, or that he spent so many hours out of the day just studying, or that he could fall asleep in so many places so quickly.

Stiles really does fall asleep everywhere. Derek won’t just find Stiles draped over the couch or his own bed, but snoozing quietly in the armchairs by the TV, on and around the dinner table, on the bean bag by the window, and on one memorable morning, over the kitchen counter, one hand resting just next to the beeping coffee machine. It makes sense, Stiles doesn’t seem to do much sleeping at night anyway, Derek will drift awake in the middle of the night and hear Stiles tapping away at his computer, making fast work of some essay or another. Stiles is undeclared but seems to constantly have work.

That’s odd as well. Stiles and Derek can now go an hour or two without even speaking, Stiles at his laptop doing some kind of homework for class or for Deaton, and Derek reading his book. Stiles doesn’t just blow in for a few hours to wreak chaos before leaving anymore, so Derek sees more shades of Stiles. Stiles making his breakfast in the kitchen, murmuring his to-do list under his breath, Stiles meditating to reach “a prime spell casting mindset,” Stiles padding down the hallway in the middle of the night to grab a glass of water, Stiles dead tired, Stiles when he doesn’t have to put on a show for anyone, just looking out the window, TV playing quietly in the background.

It’s at the end of the first week with Stiles that Derek sees him naked.

Derek really should have prepared for this. Separate bedrooms notwithstanding, he and Isaac had gotten a few more glimpses of each other’s bodies than they really wanted when they lived together. He should have realized it was inevitable, but it wasn’t as though if Derek saw Stiles naked, Stiles would immediately fall in love with Derek, so the thought just hadn’t occurred to Derek.

Then Derek steps out into the hallway to see Stiles marching into the bathroom, casual as you please, body utterly bare, smooth, uninterrupted flesh from head to neck to shoulders to chest to stomach to groin to thighs to toes.

Stiles just nods at him. “Taking a shower. You don’t need the bathroom, do you?”

Dumbly shaking his head no, Derek stands frozen in the hallway until the bathroom door shuts behind Stiles’ naked body. Derek isn’t going to be weird about this. They’re just two guys who live together, and one of them happened to be naked. Stiles probably doesn’t care who sees him naked, that sort of wild abandon would fit him, and he certainly has something to show off, Derek thinks, swallowing. Unless of course Stiles had meant for Derek to see him, wanted Derek to see him. But that would be ridiculous. Just that afternoon, Stiles had been talking about the hot girl in his Intro to Sociology class.

So Derek just keeps his eyes above Stiles’ shoulders when he catches him naked, even though it starts to feel as though Stiles’ naked time is all the time.

It’s just that he showers every night.

And there’s no air conditioning in the apartment, so walks around shirtless every day.

And sometimes he scratches under the waistband of his jeans and Derek can see the curve of his hipbone.
It’s torture.

It’s torture, but not compared to when Stiles is- he- Derek can hear him.

Stiles is quiet about it, probably thinks he’s too quiet for Derek to notice, but Derek does: every bitten off moan or light smack of flesh against flesh, every rustle of sheets. With Isaac, Derek could just tune it out, play some music, let it drift into the background like the traffic on the street outside, but Derek can’t tune it out when it’s his soul mate on the other side of the wall and all he wants to know is if he could make Stiles get loud.

But Derek wouldn’t trade Stiles for any other roommate. For every time Derek has to avert his eyes and kick himself for looking at Stiles the way he does, Stiles will poke at the cover of Derek’s book and ask him to explain it. For every time Derek grips his laptop with white knuckles so his hands don’t drift underneath his sheets while Stiles’ hands do too, Stiles will show off some new spell that makes tiny rainbows sprout from Stiles’ fingers. For every time Stiles puts bread in the toaster and forgets to take them out, leaving two cold slices of toast for the next morning, there will be a night where Stiles and Derek sit back on the couch and watch a terrible movie, just the two of them while the night is held at bay outside.

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Derek walks into the apartment and is greeted with “and on chopper five, we have live footage of the chase!” and then Stiles and Cora’s voices yelling in tandem, “aaaAAaaaah!”

“Derek, get in here!” Cora barks.

“There’s a car chase!” Stiles hollers.

The TV is indeed showing a car chase, blurry chopper footage of a silver car racing up 101 with a tail of Highway Patrol cars careening after it.

“It almost hit a school bus a second ago,” Stiles hurriedly relays back to Derek. “They think the guy is going to try to get to Canada. Like he thinks Canada won’t expedite him right back?”

Derek rests his weight on the back of the couch. “What’s he in trouble for?”

Cora’s face twists in disapproval. “He- oh they’re going to recap the story again,” she observes as the news screen switches over to two excited anchors.

“For those of you just tuning in, California Highway Patrol officers are currently trying to apprehend this man,” a picture of a gawky, bespectacled looking twenty something year old. “Stanley Florentine. He was found in violation of a restraining order placed upon him by Geraldine Yu, of Redding, and when police came to his home to arrest him, he fled the scene. CHP tells us that they have been pursuing him for going on an hour.”

“Yu placed the restraining order on Florentine based on claims that he was stalking her,” continues the second anchor, “Florentine allegedly claimed that Yu was his soul mate, and he was therefore justified in his pursuit of her. But that unrequited love quickly turned to madness as he made increasingly threatening calls and visits to the house that Yu and her husband share. Today, it seems, this conflict has come to a head. Let’s go back to the live footage over Highway 101 North.”

Stiles whistles lowly. “Man. Talk about doing soul mates wrong.”

Cora and Derek hum in agreement.
Derek has seen these stories before, but it makes him fidget and feel sick to think that he’s now a part of that legion of dysfunctional soul mates, the ones that show up on the news like this every few months. He doesn’t want to believe that he would go crazy and attack Stiles like that, but then again, he also never thought he would be the sort of person who would sentence his whole family to death.

They all wince in unison as the runaway car narrowly avoids clipping a guardrail.

“I mean, like, if he loved her, why would he want to make her so freaked out?” Stiles comments, eyes narrowed in a scientific interest. “Now they’re both just all unhappy and stuff.”

“Maybe he thought he was going to make her happy somehow?” Cora hypothesizes. “Clearly the guy was nuts.”

Stiles shakes his head. “If I was him, I’d just get the hell out of dodge once I figured out she didn’t want me back. Like, why torture both of us?”

“Maybe he couldn’t leave,” Derek suggests as casually as he can.

“What, like he couldn’t sell his house?”

Derek shrugs. “His soul mate is in that town. It, uh, it could be hard for him to leave.”

“Well I guess none of us would know,” Cora points out.

“True enough,” Stiles chuckles and nods at the screen. “Thank god for that, man.”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees a beat too late.

Cora turns in the seat and stares at him, then at his chest. “That was a lie.” Her eyes narrow. “Wait, Derek, do you—”

Stiles spins in his seat so quickly that he must get some kind of whiplash. “What now? Derek? How do we not know this?”

Derek hopes his blank face disguises the turmoil seething under the surface. He always forgets that Cora can detect a lying heartbeat. He spends too much time with the lesser trained betas, enough to forget to be careful around his sister.

“I don’t, I,” Derek stammers, trying to find a sentence that straddles the truth and a lie. Stiles is staring at him with wide, eager eyes. Derek looks at Stiles, then Cora, then Stiles, then Cora, and decides to throw himself on the mercy of his sister.

“Her name was Paige,” he says carefully, catching Cora’s eyes and holding them, silently beseeching her to understand and keep quiet despite his bald faced lying. “We went to high school together, but she got in a car crash a few weeks after we met.” Derek silently hopes that he won’t go to hell for bringing poor Paige into this. They’d gone out for coffee once freshman year, and then there had been a drunk driver that smashed into her boyfriend’s car on the way back from prom. She doesn’t deserve to be pulled into his lie, but more than that, he doesn’t want Stiles to look at him the way he looked at Stanley Florentine on the TV.

To Stiles’ shocked face, Derek says, “I’d, uh, appreciate it if you didn’t bring it up in front of the others.” He retreats to his room, feeling like slime the whole way.

An hour later, he hears Cora leave the apartment. His phone buzzes with a text immediately afterwards.
Derek knows better than to keep her waiting, so he trudges the walk of a condemned man down the hall to her studio. She opens the scuffed door and pulls him in before he can knock.

She crosses her arms and waits for him to talk.

“I, um, I was lying earlier,” Derek admits needlessly.

Cora raises an eyebrow. No shit, it says.

“Are you really going to make me say it?” Derek pleads.

“I don’t know,” Cora snaps, “I thought we were re-getting to know each other pretty well, but apparently you’ve had a soul mate this whole time who you’ve been lying about. Do you not think you can-” she grits her teeth, then continues in a lower voice, “do you not think you can trust me?”

“I trust you!”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I just-”

“Yes, I-”

“Who is she?”

“He,” Derek corrects automatically.

“He,” Cora repeats. Then her eyebrows draw together and she sucks in a shocked breath. Derek can practically see the lightbulb flick on over her head. “Oh my god.”

“Please don’t tell him.”

“Oh my god. How did I not know?” Cora starts pacing across the room. “This is huge.”

“You can’t tell him,” Derek says quickly. “Please, Cora!”

“But how could I not? You live together, he needs to know!” She laughs almost hysterically. “This is ridiculous, it’s been years and I had no idea. How did you do it?”

Derek shrugs helplessly. He doesn’t really know either.

“No, stop shrugging, how did you keep this quiet?” Cora presses, the curious side of her personality taking over. “Why did you keep this quiet? I mean, he’s your soul mate!” she exclaims as though that’s all that matters, as though it’s that simple, and Derek’s just been being silly, forgetting that this whole time he could have just told Stiles that he loved him and everything would be hunky dory. “I thought you’d have-”

“He doesn’t love me back, Cora!” Derek explodes. “That’s why, that’s the reason for all of it right there. Does that answer your question?”

Cora’s monologue shuts off, and she looks tremendously guilty. Good, Derek thinks viciously.
“Shit,” she breathes.

“Yeah.”

“Shit!” Cora slaps the back of one of her chairs. “You love him!”

Derek raises his eyebrows at her. “Well it does go with the soul mates concept.”

“Well I guess I’m not going to tell,” Cora points out dryly.

Letting out a sighing, hysterical sort of laugh, Derek says, “thank you.”

“Well I’m not a sadist,” she reluctantly replies. “I know when I’d be doing more harm than good.”

Derek’s knees feel watery. “Yeah, you would’ve really thrown a wrench in,” he agrees.

“Are you... okay? You look a little...” Cora gestures unhelpfully at his face.

“It’s fine,” Derek breathes, clutching at his chest. It just. It hurts. He’s used to the feeling, he can usually power through it, but with Cora watching... “He doesn’t love me back, that’s all.”

“Um, you should sit,” Cora leads him to one of her stupid hammock chairs.

Derek shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it. Sometimes I just.” He inhales a great, wet, shuddery breath, feeling five years old. “He doesn’t love me back.”

“Heyyyy,” Cora pats the top of his head. “Heyyyy, heyyy it’s going to be alright, it’s going to be fine.”

“No it’s not,” Derek whispers, “my soul mate doesn’t love me. Stiles,” the word catches in his throat coming out. They hadn’t said his name yet. “Stiles is my soul mate and he doesn’t love me.”

Still patting the top of his head, Cora admits in a low voice, “I don’t really know what to do right now.”

That makes Derek laugh. She’s a true Hale. Through hell or high water, at least he has another Hale.

“Make some Earl Grey,” he instructs. “And then I’m going to talk to you about mushy stuff.”

Cora comically scrunches up her face. “Eeeeeewwww, grosss.”

Derek lightly kicks her in the direction of the kitchenette. She’ll make some tea, and in a few hours, Derek will be fine. He always is.

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When Derek re-enters the apartment, Stiles immediately pokes his head out of his bedroom door.

“Derek! Okay, so I feel kind of like an ass, for like, bringing up Paige, and all of that, so I’ve been reading up on all of these SMD -soul mate dysfunction- related forums online, and,” Stiles ducks back into his room and comes back out with his laptop, reading from the screen. “And besides being reminded of my eternal singleness, I want you to know that ‘I will always be a pillar of support in your life, and that I will always be a shoulder to cry on. If in these difficult times ahead, you need a friend, I will be that friend.’” Stiles looks up from his laptop screen solemnly.

Derek snorts. He can’t help it. Stiles just looks so earnest. “It’s really fine, Stiles.”
Stiles looks at Derek skeptically. “The forums said that you might try to deflect or rationalize your emotional pain.”

“Oh, well, it hurt,” Derek says carefully, trying to look sorrowful but not too sorrowful, and sending apologies up to Paige with every word, “and I don’t think that... her loss will ever stop hurting, but I’ve, um, I’m moving on with my life. It was a long time ago.”

Blinking, Stiles says, “that was... surprisingly emotionally intelligent. Did Cora replace you with a Derek-droid while you were gone?”

“I’m not that hopeless,” Derek points out, mildly offended.

(Apparently not,” Stiles says thoughtfully, tapping at the keys again. “Alright, you can go back about your business. I need to tell Lovers4Life84 that you’re alright.” He turns to walk back into his room, and Derek catches a glimpse of a webpage labelled My Life is SMD. It looks like there are a lot of entries.

Back in Derek’s room, Old Bess sits on his bed, closed but inviting. He pulls it open. Clicks on the bookmark labelled “google.” Types into the little white box, “my soul mate doesn’t love me.”

Presses hard on the delete key. Exits out of the browser. Closes the laptop.

It’s not like it would help.

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“Well,” Stiles announces, “the couch is definitely broken.”

“I’m not surprised.” Derek doesn’t care how happy the pack was to be reunited during thanksgiving break, they should have known that all six of them on the rickety ikea couch would be a problem

“Sorry,” Scott mumbles from underneath the pile of teenagers.

“You’d better be,” Stiles admonishes, crossing his arms and standing next to Derek. “Now Derek and I won’t be able to watch Transformers on the TV because the couch is broken.”

Then again. Derek leans down to grip Scott’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

Stiles makes an affronted noise somewhere between a snort and a scoff. “Lies. You cherish our time together.”

Which, well. Derek can’t say it, but it’s true. It’s why when that night, Stiles pokes his head into Derek’s room with a laptop ready to play the worst movie known to man, Derek doesn’t kick him out onto the street.

Stiles laughs maniacally. “You thought you were free. You thought you could escape!” He throws himself onto Derek’s bed, then moans in delight.

Derek swallows and thinks about baseball.

“How have I never laid on here?” Stiles asks, making snow angels in Derek’s dark purple comforter. “Is this memory foam? You’ve been holding out on me!”

“This is my bed,” Derek points out. “I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t want you in my bed.” He scratches his cheek, then remembers that humans take face touching as a sign for lying.

Stiles doesn’t seem to notice, too busy bringing the movie into fullscreen. “Now,” he says, propping
himself up on one of Derek’s spare pillows and pressing play, “prepare yourself.”

Derek wakes up with Stiles’ face mashed into his chest, breathing slow, hot breaths into Derek’s skin. He was not prepared. He wishes there were some place to look for guidance, but there’s only the black screen of Stiles’ laptop and the dark, quiet room.

Stiles’ fingers twitch, tugging on Derek’s shirt. “Mnnpotatoes,” he mumbles into the cloth of the henley.

Laughing softly, Derek pats Stiles’ back lightly. One of his hands had migrated onto Stiles’ back while they were sleeping, and he can’t really bear to pull away. “What’s up, Stiles?” he whispers.

“Can’t... nnn, under,” Stiles replies, eyelashes still dusting his cheeks.

The quiet tugs on Derek’s eyelids, and the pillow is so soft under his head. His limbs are heavy with Stiles’ weight, pushing him back into sleep.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that,” Derek murmurs back.

When Stiles is sleeping, his heart beats slower than Derek’s ever heard it. “Derek,” he mumbles, sounding mildly exasperated with him even in sleep. But the corner of Stiles’ mouth twitches up, and his fingers tighten in Derek’s shirt.

It’s enough to lull Derek back to sleep.

He dreams that Stiles is coming back from a long trip, rolling into their bedroom in the wee hours of the morning, half-wearing a rumpled suit and tie, smelling like airplane and stale coffee.

Stiles steps lightly into their bedroom, sheds his shoes and slacks quietly, but he’s a fool if he thinks Derek is sleeping soundly on the night Stiles is supposed to arrive back after two weeks. When he sits on the bed to unbutton his dress shirt, Derek gives up pretense and sits up to help Stiles with the buttons.

“Hey.” Stiles rubs his thumbs along Derek’s wrists as Derek works through the buttons, methodically nudging plastic through starched cloth, shucking the clamor of the day off of Stiles’ shoulders.

Leaning forward, Stiles presses their foreheads together. “I missed you.”

Derek brings their mouths together softly, just relishing the feel of Stiles warming their bed again, tired and pliant, refreshing his scent—tainted by the smell of strangers as it is—in the room.

He pushes Stiles’ shirt off of his shoulders, tosses it into the pile of business casual on the other side of the room. Stiles melts into him, made liquid from exhaustion, bending into Derek’s chest and counting on Derek to hold him up.

Derek does. Derek holds Stiles up while he pulls off his own T-shirt, then carefully brings it down over Stiles’ head.

Stiles chuckles sleepily as they work together to maneuver Stiles’ arms through Derek’s shirt. “Thanks cuddlebear.”

Derek can’t muster enough much ire when he sighs into Stiles’ hair, “you’ll pay for that in the
morning.”

“Mmmm.” They lower their entangled bodies into a horizontal position, limbs interlocking tightly, but neither of them willing to move. “I... some kind of... sex joke here,” Stiles mumbles into Derek’s armpit.

It’s morning when Derek wakes up again, and it takes him longer than normal to distinguish dreams from reality, because Stiles is here, in his arms, and it takes him a minute to grasp that Stiles is still wearing jeans and his own shirt.

Stiles yawns obnoxiously, stretching so outrageously that he almost falls off the bed. “Whoa,” he scrubs a hand through his ruffled hair and looks around. “I guess we didn’t make it to the end of Transformers.”

“What a shame.” Derek grins.

Scowling at him, Stiles sneaks a hand down to the arch of Derek’s foot and gives it a vicious tickle. Derek swears, arching off the bed while Stiles races out of the room, cackling, “I call first shower!”

Derek sighs, falling back into his sheets, which will reek of Stiles for the next week. He could get used to this.

Two weeks later, Derek comes home to Stiles shamelessly napping on Derek’s superior mattress. He could get used to this indeed.

XXXXX

Stiles rolls in at one in the morning Friday night, which is pretty normal. The way he violently slams the front door shut, levels unwavering eyes at Derek and demands, “kiss me,” is not.

Who told him.

Derek shakily dog ears his page and sets it on the ground in front of his armchair. “What was that?” He’s glad Stiles can’t hear his heart rate.

“Kiss me!” Stiles insists, shedding his bag and jacket in a pile at the front door. He fingers the edge of his shirt and for a wild second Derek thinks he’s going to take that off too, but Stiles just adjusts the hem before continuing, “I just need some practice, okay?”

Ah. Swallowing, Derek asks carefully, “is this another one of your sociology experiments?”

“No.” Stiles rolls his eyes. “Just, ugh, I was at my friend Max’s dorm, and he was having this party, and I swear to god every single other person in the room was hooking up but me. It’s frustrating!” he kicks his shoes off so hard that they bounce off of the front door. “I have gotten zero action this year. Ever,” he corrects himself, “zero action ever.”

That fact has always confounded Derek, but, “you want to get your rocks off... with me?” he asks skeptically.

Stiles is straight. Stiles is definitely straight. Is he frustrated enough to be willing to close his eyes and let Derek-

Derek would do it. All Stiles would have to do is ask, and he would.

“No, no, no, oh my god,” Stiles waves his hands in wild criss-crossing motions. “Just kiss me. I
thought I established this.” He points at himself in that jaunty way he does when he’s pretending not to be self conscious. “Me. Stiles. Never been kissed. In need of some teaching.” Stiles points at Derek. “You. Derek. Most definitely have been kissed. Could be a good teacher.” He waggles his eyebrows. “Huh? Huh?”

Rarely in life is Derek absolutely certain of something. His life has been a series of bad decisions since he was sixteen, which has made him wary of his ability to make good choices. He deliberates, he weighs options and almost always picks the wrong one. But right now, with Stiles’ cocky grin and slightly beer-tinged breathe facing him down from the other side of the room, he knows that he shouldn’t say yes. Stiles just wants training for the string of girls that will fall at his feet once he grows into himself. Stiles thinks this is just a game between friends. If Derek says yes now, he’ll know what it’s like to kiss Stiles, and know what it’s like to never kiss Stiles again. He is certain that it is a bad idea to kiss Stiles.

He is also certain that he isn’t going to let anybody else have Stiles’ first kiss.

Derek stands and walks across the room.

Stiles’ eyebrows shoot up. “Hey, you’re in? Sweet, thanks bud-” Derek cuts him off with his mouth. Fuck it.

Making a mild approving noise, Stiles sets a hand on Derek’s shoulder. It’s the kind of noise somebody makes after a pleasant bite of tiramisu. It isn’t the kind of noise Derek wants Stiles making. He hooks a hand around the back of Stiles’ neck and holds him in place while he scrapes Stiles’ cheeks with his stubble, inhales his scent, explores every inch of Stiles’ mouth with his own. Stiles wants a first kiss, he can have one he’ll remember.

Stiles pulls back, panting, “feedback?”

“What?” Derek pants back.

“Feedback. Kissing lessons are useless without feedback, Derek, how am I supposed to repeat these results without feedback?”

He can’t just let Derek pretend for a second. Derek’s eyes flick down to Stiles’ reddened lips, then back up to his eyes. “Don’t be afraid to kiss back,” he advises flatly, “it’s a conversation, not a lecture.”

“Ooh, good metaphor, I-” Derek watches Stiles’ eyes flutter shut in satisfaction as he bites Stiles’ lower lip. Stiles flicks his tongue at Derek in retaliation, and Derek takes the opportunity to open Stiles’ mouth, delve in, hold Stiles’ face between his palms and hold it at the perfect angle to take.

One, two, three, four, five

Stiles reciprocates as good as he gets. Derek wouldn’t expect anything less. Somehow it’s worse because Stiles kisses just the way Derek always imagined he would. But because Stiles refuses to ever disappoint Derek, because he came to Derek for this, because Stiles is perfect, Derek kisses Stiles with everything he has, wrapping his arms around Stiles’ slim, toned waist and pulling him in, pressing their stomachs together, kissing him until Stiles forgets everyone else, kissing him until this won’t just be the one time, kissing him until he loves Derek back. When Derek pulls away, Stiles is going to love Derek back.

Stiles yelps, flinching but not backing away fully.

six, seven, eight, nine, ten.
“What?” Derek breathes against Stiles’ mouth.

“You, um,” Stiles’ lips brush against Derek’s as he talks. It’s more intimate than the kissing somehow. “That last bite was a little hard.”

Pulling back, Derek sees red marks in the shape of his teeth around Stiles’ lower lip, blood swelling under the surface, bright against Stiles’ pale skin.

Derek hurt him.

He gingerly runs a thumb over the marks. “I’m sorry,” he sighs. Stiles looks at him with wide, young eyes that are huge in his still-growing face, and Derek withdraws his hand. He isn’t going to do this again. He can’t.

Stiles prods his bottom lip with his tongue, and Derek has to clench his hands at his sides to keep from pouncing again.

Withdrawing his tongue, Stiles assures Derek, “I’m fine. What I want to know,” he adds with a cocky eyebrow, “is what you thought.”

Derek’s blood is still rushing underneath his skin, and he would be reaching for a pillow to hide himself if Stiles weren’t sporting a similar situation. He’s going to remember these last three minutes on his deathbed.

“It was perfect.”


“You, uh, you did pretty well,” Derek says, searching around for a criticism. Honestly, Stiles could have kissed like a dog and Derek would have said it were perfect. “Practice makes perfect though.”

Stiles nods to himself. “Fuck yeah I’m going to practice.” He spins an excited circle on the heel of his foot. “Look out world, Stiles Stilinski is going to be making his mark!” He raises his hand for a high five, and Derek obediently high fives. Then he swoops in to peck Derek’s cheek and Derek obediently stands stock still like a dumbstruck chicken.

Then the night goes on like usual: Stiles drags his bag back into his bedroom, Derek pulls on his pajamas, Stiles takes a shower and Derek pretends he doesn’t hear Stiles jerking off.

The phantom of Stiles’ lips are still pressing against Derek’s when he goes to sleep. He’ll manage.

XXXXX

Over the next week, Stiles seems more distracted than usual. But not in his usual way, with wild tangents and uncontrollable fidgeting. Stiles will zone out, staring into space, lost somewhere in a maze of his own thought. It isn’t enough for Derek to call him out on it, but Stiles is mulling something over. It’s useless to try to pry it out of him, so Derek is counting on Stiles’ inability to keep anything to himself for long.

Sure enough, it’s a Friday evening and Stiles is still in the apartment when Stiles makes a proposal. Normally he would be at one of his friend’s dorms back at UBH, getting “readay to partay,” but not tonight.

“Hypothetically,” Stiles drawls from his position on the couch—they just bought it and Stiles declared it to be his new best friend the moment he tried out the cushions— “what would you think
about going to The Jungle tonight?”

Derek slowly looks up from the sandwich he’s making and gives Stiles a skeptical look over the counter. “The gay club Jungle?”

Stiles shrugs. “Rhetorically speaking, yes.”

Snorting, Derek goes back to chopping a tomato for his sandwich. “Since when are you rhetorically gay?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a week or two.”

Derek slices his finger open. Swearing, he lunges for the sink.

“Hypothetically!” Stiles yelps from the living room. “I forgot to add that, calm down, it’s all hypothetical!”

“No it’s not!” Derek retorts, running water over the wound until it closes. “That was definitely not a hypothetical!”

“Theoretically, maybe it’s not,” Stiles allows as he wanders into the kitchen, “although even if it weren’t, I don’t think I’m hypothetically all the way gay. Just you know, halfsies.”

The cut closes. “Alright,” Derek says slowly, even as his heart beats faster. “Well you know I would hypothetically support you, right?” Would he ever.

“Aww,” Stiles puts a hand over his heart. “Hypothetical thanks, man.”

“I mean,” Derek adds, because this changes everything, this could, this could mean... “you know, I’m... not straight... either, right? That isn’t a hypothetical.”

“Huh.” Stiles looks speculative. “I guess that means Lydia wins.”

“What?”

“She was guessing bi, I was guessing asexual—besides Paige of course— and Erica thought straight, but I think that’s just because she was determined to prove her ‘all the good ones besides Boyd are gay or taken’ hypothesis wrong.”

Derek raises an eyebrow. “You thought asexual.”

“It’s a thing!” Stiles protests, “I’ve read about it! I thought there had to be a reason you didn’t date!”

Well Stiles was right, if still way off base.

“Wait, this is perfect,” Stiles continues, hands moving as his mind whirs ahead. “Now you don’t just have to go to be my moral support, you can try to get some action too!”

Derek’s glad he isn’t still holding the knife. “You... want to get ‘some action?’ Tonight? Isn’t that a little fast?”

“Eh,” Stiles says dismissively, “it’s the best way to figure out if I’m bi or whatever or not. A little field testing? Besides, college, experimentation, you know.” He leans in and waggles his eyebrows, “come onnnn. Come with meee.”

Once again, Derek is certain that the right answer here is no. There’s no way that Derek will enjoy
tonight if he has to watch Stiles wade enthusiastically into a pile of horny men who will no doubt devour him alive.

But he’s also absolutely certain that he isn’t going to let Stiles go to a seedy gay club alone. Stiles’ safety takes priority over Derek’s feelings.

Derek dries his hands. “Yeah, alright.”

“Sweet!” Stiles crows, “I’m gonna go try to figure out what to wear to a club.”

Stiles decides that the best thing to wear to a club is his skinniest pair of jeans, an undershirt, and a leather cuff around one wrist that Derek has no idea how he got. It’s the right clothes to wear to a club. It’s also the right clothes for Derek to barricade the front door, push Stiles onto the couch, wrap a quilt around him and make him watch cartoons and eat cookies.

He’s done something to his hair that makes him look like he just rolled out of bed and somebody else was intent on convincing him to stay. Jesus.

Spreading his arms wide and spinning in a circle, Stiles asks, “so what do you think? Should I wear the sombrero?”

Derek has to clear his throat before he can speak. Stiles has a mole on one of his shoulder blades that Derek never noticed before. “I think you’re good.”

Stiles gives a thumbs up with one hand and scratches under his tank top with the other, exposing a line of hair leading up his stomach.

Choking out, “I’ll go get dressed too,” Derek flees to his room. He’s seen Stiles naked, he should be able to keep it in his pants at the sight of Stiles’ bare arms.

When Derek comes out of his room, dressed, Stiles bursts into laughter.

“I know we’re going together, that doesn’t mean you have to match!”

Derek looks down at his own tank top and jeans. “These are the only, uh, ‘sexy’ clothes I have.”

Stiles waves a hand dismissively. “Like you couldn’t pull off a clown suit if you had to. Come on, just grab your leather jacket and lets go.”

They go.

The Jungle is just like Derek remembers from his few youthful excursions to it back in the day. Loud, dark, pungent. Crowds of men and alcohol, music pumping over them in a technicolor wave, a crowded bar churning out vibrant drinks. The mass of people grinds together with each beat, bodies on bodies, hypnotized by the pounding base line. It’s sweat and vodka and glitter and hands on hips, hands in the air when Katy Perry commands them.

Stiles dives into the music like he’s been missing this his whole life, teeth glowing in the ultraviolet light as he grins and bites his lower lip, bobbing his head back and forth at twice the speed of the song. He elbows Derek and everybody else within arm’s reach as he dances, but Derek doesn’t mind, glad that Stiles is sticking close. The dancers around Stiles also don’t seem to mind, sending Stiles appreciative glances as he unashamedly shakes it.

“Come on!” he shouts over the music. “You have to actually dance!” Then he grabs Derek’s hips and starts forcibly pushing and pulling them back and forth.
Derek reluctantly starts moving his shoulders to the beat, and Stiles smiles encouragingly, executing some ridiculous kind of shimmy and a half ironic disco move.

The music stutters, skips a beat, a record scratches, and the song slips from a upbeat party song to something smooth, seductive. The singer croons about skin and the night, flames and embers, and Stiles sends Derek a grin and a shrug, crowds in closer, loops his arms around Derek’s neck, throws his head back, exposing his long neck and letting the multicolored lights dance over the smooth lines of his skin.

Looking around, Derek realizes that most of the dancers have paired up, bar a few polyamorous couples who don’t seem concerned with the music at all. A few pairs of eyes look at he and Stiles hungrily from the darkness.

Derek slips his arms around Stiles’ waist. For the next three minutes, he isn’t going to let The Jungle take Stiles away from him. Stiles rests his chin on Derek’s shoulder and they lift up and down with the swells of the music, knees knocking together and hands gathering sweat in the humidity of the room. Stiles’ chin is pointed and cuts into Derek’s trapezius, and people keep bumping into them, shaking them off balance, but it’s alright. Derek can feel the slim, firm shape of Stiles’ stomach pressed up against his, the play of Stiles’ shoulder blades under his palm.

The final note of the song thunders through the club, and the DJ puts on something faster paced. Stiles slips further away and returns to his breakneck dancing, waggling his arms over his head and mouthing the lyrics to the song.

Then, between one drumbeat and the next, an arm appears around Stiles’ waist, pulling him up against the chest of some boy around Stiles’ age, with artfully shaved sections of hair and a stud in his left nostril.

Stiles glances back at the boy, shoots Derek an excited grin and enthusiastically grinds back on Nose Ring.

“I’m going to get some water,” Derek mouths over the thumping of the music. Stiles is allowed to grind on whoever he wants, and Nose Ring doesn’t smell like a predator, but Derek still doesn’t want to watch Stiles fall prey.

The line at the bar is long and disorganized, it will take Derek forever to even get a cup of water. Good.

By the time Derek reaches the counter, he can see that Stiles has flipped around to loop his arm around Nose Ring’s neck, just like he was doing with Derek not half an hour ago. He orders something stronger. The alcohol won’t have much of an effect on him, but the burn of the whisky feels more appropriate. Derek sets up camp on one of the uncomfortable bar stools and spends the next hour rebuffing advances and making sure that Stiles is safe.

He looks happy. After so many years of pining after Lydia, Stiles must enjoy having someone as obviously into him as Nose Ring is. Derek wishes he could be happy for him, but his heart still stops when Stiles makes eye contact with him over the crowd, and holds up his phone, pointing at it.

Derek obediently checks his own phone.

[So the guy’s name is David, and we’re going back to his place. He goes to UBH too!!!]

It takes Derek three tries to type out, [Do you want to go? You know you don’t have to, right?]

A new song starts, and Stiles doesn’t respond until its end, too busy dancing.
Derek stares numbly at his phone. “Stiles” it says at the top of the screen. Just six letters.

Ok. text me so i know youre alright.

Yup

Derek follows Stiles and Nose Ring out of the club at a distance, just to make sure Nose Ring doesn’t drag Stiles into an alley or something, but they just walk in the direction of UBH, both looking perfectly capable and willing to walk the few blocks to UBH’s campus. It looks like they’re in for a nice night.

Tearing his eyes away, Derek reaches in his pocket for the keys and walks to the car. It’s Stiles’ jeep, since Stiles knew the way better than Derek. Derek will be driving Stiles’ car home tonight.

He opens the driver’s side door, tosses his jacket on the passenger seat. Turns the keys in the ignition. Backs out of the parking lot. Turns onto the street. Almost slams into another car when merging. Stops at the stoplight. The driver of the other car is swearing at him but Derek doesn’t really notice. The light turns green, he presses on the gas.

Beacon Hills looks different at night. Larger, like something lurking and massive exists beyond the black spaces between buildings.

Derek parks Stiles’ car in his spot in the parking lot. Space 58. He grabs his jacket and leaves, taking one last whiff of the scent pervading the car before climbing the stairs to their apartment.

He misses the keyhole the first two tries, but manages to open the door on the third. The apartment stands before him, quiet and unassuming, just like they left it. One of Stiles’ stray shoes is in the kitchen for some reason, and a plate he left out is on the coffee table. The pink sombrero hangs in the hallway undisturbed.

Derek’s limbs don’t feel quite attached to his body.

His shoes go in the row by the front door, keys on the hook nearby, his jacket in his closet. He splashes water on his face.

He can’t tell what the temperature of the water is. It’s like he’s being spread very thin, flattened until no sensation has meaning and he doesn’t really have a body anymore.

Earl Grey. He needs some Earl Grey. Stumbling into the kitchen, Derek combs through the cabinets until he finds a red polka dotted mug. There are only two packets of Earl Grey left—too many crises to be calmed—and Derek pulls it out with shaking hands, ripping the packet open and ripping the filmy bag inside with it. Tea leaves scatter across the counter, dark and shriveled.

It’s fine. Derek just has to make his tea and he’ll be fine. Stiles will walk back through the door with a funny story, smelling like nobody but himself.

Two tries later, he has the second packet open, and is delicately pulling the tea bag out by its string. Derek carefully positions it in the mug, then pours water into the cheap water heater that always sits on the counter. Stiles bought it.

The heater bubbles and gurgles, and Derek watches a single drop of water that missed the container slide down the plastic side of the heater, dribbling in fits and starts, indecisive, until it finally gives in and drops to the counter, puddling there.
With a beep, the water is ready. Derek pours the boiling water into the mug and over his hand, wincing as his skin burns and heals, but continuing to pour the water. He just needs some Earl Gray. Mom always said it would make everything better.

Water dribbles onto the floor, and Derek’s grip slips.

The crash when the mug hits the floor should be loud, but it just sounds like a muffled thud on carpet to Derek’s ears. A stray shard of ceramic cuts his foot, and blood mixes with the lake of weak tea spreading over the tiles.

With a jolt, Derek recognizes the red polka dot pattern. It’s Stiles’ mug. He broke Stiles’ mug. He has to fix it before Stiles gets back, he has to make it better.

The tea seeps through Derek’s jeans where his knees hit the floor, but he’s too busy gathering up pieces of the mug to care. He gets the larger chunks, but half of the mug has disintegrated almost into powder that sticks to his wet fingers. His hands can’t stop shaking, and he drops the handful of shards he’s already collected. They break again, into smaller pieces this time, a constellation of white and red across the floor, with Derek at the center.

His chest aches, and he grabs at it with a wet hand, smearing tiny flecks of ceramic onto his shirt.

He isn’t going to be able to fix this in time. Stiles will come back and Derek will have broken his mug, because he can’t stop fucking everything up.

From his back pocket, Derek’s phone beeps. He doesn’t want to answer, but he has to be there in case Stiles needs help.

When he pulls out his phone, he loses balance, lands ass first in the puddle of tea and shattered fragments and blood.

The screen reads [don’t worry but won’t be back till morning ;)]

Derek breathes in, out, in. His chest aches from a wound that isn’t there, his jeans are soaked and his hands won’t stop shaking, but he stands up. He has to get a broom, he can’t fix the mug, he may as well clean it up.

He can’t fix it.
Consider this to be chapter three part one. Between finals and the fact that chapter three was looking like it would be like 25,000 words, I figured I should post something now, take the edge off that cliffhanger.

Derek falls asleep—with the trash can holding the remnants of the red polka-dotted mug within his line of sight—on the living room couch. He only realizes this when he’s woken up by Stiles jumping on all fours onto the couch, and in turn, Derek.

“Good morning!” Stiles sings, bouncing up and down on his knees.

It takes Derek a second to remember why the sight of Stiles bouncing up and down, straddled over Derek’s stomach, doesn’t have him as excited as it normally would. Then he catches the reek of somebody else’s semen all over Stiles’ body and he wants to go throw up.

“When, you got pale,” Stiles observes, “that’s what you get for sleeping on the couch.” He gasps in delight. “Were you waiting up for me? You know all of the dog jokes are just jokes, right? You don’t actually have to wait by the door for me?”

Derek flicks Stiles’ knee, still clothed in the skin tight club jeans, in retribution. Stiles retaliates by letting his weight fall onto Derek’s stomach, leg splayed, knees on either side of Derek’s chest.

Did he do this last night too?

“Oh man,” Stiles exclaims, emphasizing his statement with another bounce. “I am in such a good mood. Ask me why I’m in such a good mood, Derek. Derek, ask me why I’m in such a good mood.”

“Why are you in such a good mood.”

“I just had seee-eex!” Stiles sings to the tune of one of the internet videos he’s shown Derek, “and it fee-eelt so goood! Girl let me put my penis- no...”

“Oh,” Derek cuts Stiles off before he learns even more details he never wanted to know, “good for you, that’s nice.”

“Nice,” Stiles scoffs, “nice. A whole new world has opened up to me, you wanna just call that nice?”

“Plenty of people have sex everyday,” Derek points out. Plenty of people have sex every day, and he would have liked if Nose Ring had picked someone else to have it with.

“But I don’t!” Stiles exclaims, leaning back on his hands and smiling like Cora used to when she got ice cream after dinner, guileless and unashamedly happy. “And it wasn’t disastrous or anything! I don’t know, I’m in a good mood!” His foot taps out a scattered pattern as something runs through his brain. “You wanna have a picnic today?” Stiles asks suddenly.
Derek’s face must look ridiculous, because Stiles breaks out in laughter.

“No really! It’s almost lunch, it’s beautiful outside, the birds are singing, the sun is shining, Beacon Park is like ten minutes away... we’ll invite Cora and pack a bag and get tan!”

Stiles slaps both of his hands onto Derek’s chest for emphasis, and Derek loses words for long enough that Stiles launches himself into the kitchen, hollering, “I’ll make sandwiches, you get Cora out of her den!”

So they go to the park, swinging by Stiles’ house along the way to pick up an honest-to-god red checkered picnic blanket. When Stiles is in the mood for a good time, he will not be stopped, the Sheriff explains to them with an indulgent expression as he passes the blanket over.

With a flourish, Stiles spreads the red blanket over their portion of the green grass field that makes up most of Beacon Park.

“Oh, pin the blanket down!” he exclaims, kicking off his shoes and using them to tack down two corners. Derek dutifully pins down the other two. “I’m going to go fill up my water bottle!” Stiles continues, then bounds off in the direction of the water fountains as though he’s filled with helium.

“Jesus, did he get laid or something?” Cora grumbles, digging in the picnic basket for the cookies.

At Derek’s conspicuous silence, she looks up suspiciously, a sleeve of thin mints dangling from one hand. “Did you two- no, I’d have known, you’d be walking on the moon right now. Instead you’re all-” her eyes widen in horror, and she whips around to look at Stiles, who’s humming “I’m Walking on Sunshine” as he wanders back to their blanket. “Are you going to have a breakdown? Do I need to make excuses?”

“No, it’s fine,” Derek says quickly as Stiles draws nearer, “I can’t, he’s so happy, I can’t-”

“I have returned!” Stiles announces before flopping onto the blanket face first. “What were you guys talking about?”


“Mmm,” Stiles flips onto his back and squints happily into the sun, skin illuminated by the light. “It’s niice. Today is a great day.” He smiles so broadly that Derek can’t help but smile back a bit.

“Food?”

They eat. Stiles made them all BLTs with enthusiasm, if not skill, but Derek gladly eats every last bite of the lopsided, slightly soggy sandwich.

As they pile up the dirty wrappers to take to the trash, Stiles asks, “do you remember that time you ate basically all of my Grandma’s kapusta at that pack dinner?”

“Vividly.” Derek sticks out his tongue jokingly.

“I should have known better, I’d tried to subject Scott to Grandma’s kapusta before,” Stiles recalls. “It didn’t go well.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Derek protests. He’d liked making Stiles happy.

Cora grabs the trash and stands up. “Well I’ll just take this over to the bins if you two are going to
reminisce about pack stuff I never experienced."

Derek and Stiles both open their mouths with apologies, and Cora waves them off. “I need to stretch my legs.” She catches Derek’s eye. “I might be a while, you two chat on without me.”

It’s sweet that Cora wants to be his wingman, even though it isn’t going to come to anything. Derek glances over at Stiles, who’s glowing in the sunlight, head bobbing to the song playing in his head, radiating satisfaction.

“Hey, thanks for coming with me last night,” Stiles mentions out of the blue.

“It was nothing,” Derek replies quickly, pretending to search for something in the picnic basket.

“Hey now, you clearly are not the type for clubbang,” Stiles points out, smiling, “so thanks for letting me drag you along anyway.” He pats Derek’s knee. “I really appreciate it, man.” Derek meets Stiles’ eyes for a moment, and there’s warmth there, in Stiles’ eyes, in his smiling face, in his body, healthy and whole and sated, reclining on the grass in the sun.

“It was nothing,” Derek repeats, smiling back.

“Awww,” Stiles croons. “Aren’t we just a great big happy pile of mushy feelings.”

“Shut up,” Derek grumbles around his smile.

“Nnnnope!” Stiles chirps, swooping in to press a dramatic kiss to Derek’s cheek. “Mwah!” He slithers back down to the ground and rests his head on Derek’s leg. “You’re going to have to be my pillow for a little bit, the grass really isn’t giving me the lumbar support I need.”

The weight of Stiles’ head is warm and soothing and here. Derek likes having Stiles here, right within arm’s reach, easy to protect.

“He said we should hang out again sometime, actually get dinner before,” Stiles mentions offhandedly, although Derek knows that nothing Stiles says is ever offhand.

Derek’s chest twinges again, even though he shouldn’t be surprised. Nobody in their right mind should let Stiles just walk away after spending a night with him, near him, around him. Nose Ring is just the first.

“Are you going to go?”

Stiles shrugs, his shoulders bumping up against Derek’s legs. “He seemed nice, and he goes to UBH too, which is good. I don’t really know him, though.” He worries his bottom lip with his teeth in thought. “What do you think?”

Oh, if only Stiles hadn’t asked. If he hadn’t, Derek could have let Stiles’ inexplicably low self-esteem and inexplicably high self-doubt persuade Stiles to turn Nose Ring down, dump him in a pre-emptive strike. If he hadn’t, maybe Derek would have mustered up the courage to just tell Stiles and let the chips fall where they may. (Now is the perfect opportunity to come clean and admit everything.) But Stiles asked. Stiles asked, and Derek can’t- Stiles was singing today, smiling like a child, gravity is pulling on him lighter than it has in months. Derek can’t deny his soul mate the chance to feel like that for a little longer.

So Derek says, “give it a shot,” and, “you’re young, you should try dating,” and “but don’t let him do anything you don’t want him to.”
And Stiles says, “you think?” and “I guess so,” and “thanks mom.”

And every word is like another shovel full of dirt onto Derek’s grave, but Stiles is so excited that he can’t help but let himself be buried.

Stiles falls asleep on Derek’s lap by the time Cora comes back, one hand clenched in the denim of Derek’s jeans.

Stiles struts back into their apartment late Friday night of the next week, smelling like Nose Ring and pumping his fist. “Third date for Wednesday! I have game!” Then he strips his clothes off on the way to the shower.

Tuesday morning, Stiles is dancing between the toaster and the refrigerator, putting together a three course breakfast for the two of them “because I don’t have class until 2:00PM, and I’m going to enjoy it for once!” David, Stiles says, is really smart. They just had dinner, “not even any hanky-panky afterwards, because he has 8:00AMs all week.” They talked, and Stiles liked it. David’s a biotech major. He has four dogs back home and this really sweet apartment right near campus. David really has potential, Stiles says, contemplatively flipping a pancake, this bisexual thing is working out surprisingly well.

Listening to Stiles, Derek can already see the day when Stiles won’t be spinning around the kitchen, tapping the spatula against the counter to the beat of the song playing on the radio. If it’s not David, it will be somebody else who can charm Stiles away from Derek’s apartment with their senses of humor that can match Stiles’, with their normal lives and happy pasts. A telephone book’s worth of people, none of whom will be Derek.

Derek’s hands clench around the jug of orange juice that Stiles made him hold. It won’t be him. It’s never going to be him who makes Stiles act like this. Derek has never been able to be what anybody needed, and Stiles is no exception.

The fight was lost when it began, Derek realizes as Stiles wafts past him to drop breakfast on the table. He was never going to win Stiles then, and he isn’t going to win him over now.

“He just has this really funny, dry sense of humor, you know?” Stiles continues, reaching for the butter.

Derek pushes the butter dish closer to Stiles, smiles, and says, “that’s great.”

“I think I’m seeing him again later this week, too!”

The ache in Derek’s chest rustles, and Derek privately nods to it in acknowledgement. They’re going to be roommates for quite a while longer.

“I’m happy for you.” He is. Happy for Stiles, sad for himself, but happy nonetheless.

That said, when finals roll around two weeks later, Derek is not very impressed with David. Granted, he probably has his own finals, but he’s supposed to be making Stiles grin from ear to ear and play music constantly. Instead, Stiles and David haven’t seen each other in a week and a half, and all Derek sees is Stiles rubbing his temples, hunched over piles of work, barely sleeping, coming back late at night after hours spent in UBH’s 24 hour library. What is the point of David if he can’t make Stiles happy? What does David think he’s doing, having Stiles at his beck and call but not doing anything to earn it?
Stiles is barely sleeping and living entirely on coffee, and *David* isn’t doing anything about it, so Derek steps in.

He sits next to Stiles midway through his fourth hour of studying this afternoon. “I think it’s time for a study break.”

Stiles looks up from his textbook with black-ringed eyes. “I think it’s time to study more. I have a final tomorrow, and I don’t know how the hell I’m supposed to- the professor-”

“Will five minutes either way make a difference?” Derek counters. Stiles is swaying slightly back and forth, and he doesn’t think that Stiles has noticed. “Take five minutes to clear your head.”

Sighing in acceptance, Stiles drops his textbook onto the coffee table, where it lands with a deadly-sounding thunk. Rubbing distractedly at one of his shoulders, he asks Derek, “what do you suggest I do-” he hisses in pain as he hits a sore spot at the base of his neck.

Derek’s fingers are soothing the sore spot before he can consciously tell them to keep to themselves, unsolicited back rubs are creepy, Stiles has someone else for this now.

Moaning in approval, Stiles leans into the touch. “Good ideaaaa.” His eyelids flutter over tired, coffee-fueled eyes. “I should sue the textbook people for the damage they’re doing to my back.” Shifting so that more of his back is available to Derek’s hands, Stiles hums again when Derek presses one of his thumbs into a knot just above Stiles’ hands, Stiles hums again when Derek presses one of his thumbs into a knot just above Stiles’ right shoulder blade.

Stiles is the one getting a massage, but watching Stiles gradually relax, the tense spaces in his back loosening, the skin under his shirt warming with Derek’s touch- it’s soothing. Derek’s breaths start to match Stiles’: slow and measured, lungs filling totally before he exhales again. He skates his knuckles down either side of Stiles’ spine, and can feel his own back relax in turn. Working into a rhythm, Derek presses into the knotted up muscles: deltoids, latissimus dorsi, serratus anteriors, and Stiles rocks back and forth with Derek’s hands, neck lolling to one side, exposed. Sterno cleido mastoid.

“How about your neck too?” Derek asks softly.

“Do whatever,” Stiles sighs, eyes still closed.

Carefully, Derek reaches for Stiles’ neck. Stiles doesn’t know what this means for wolves (or maybe he does, with the research he does,) but that Stiles would just let Derek wrap his hands around either side of Stiles’ throat, let his pulse run underneath Derek’s palms... it’s trust. Stiles hums and lets his head fall backwards, so Derek’s fingers close right over Stiles’ throat, the soft place under his chin.

Maybe it’s trust for humans too.

When Derek is done with Stiles’ neck, he slides his hands back down Stiles’ torso, and Stiles groans and slumps forward so that he’s belly-down on the couch.

Chuckling softly, Derek asks, “done?”

Stiles make a noise of disagreement. “No sir! Just easier access this way.” He awkwardly flops a hand around to point at his lower back. “Get there-ish, it’s killing me.”

Derek surveys both of their positions on the couch. “I, um, I’ll have to straddle you to really get there.”

“Whatever, man, you’re just Derek.” Stiles wiggles into a more comfortable spot on the couch, ass
waving back and forth before settling down again. “I know you’re not going to ravage me.” There’s a note of laughter in his voice, but he’s right.

Walking forward on his knees, Derek stops when he’s hovering just over Stiles’ ass. He doesn’t put his weight down, he doesn’t want to make Stiles uncomfortable, so he plants a foot on the floor for leverage, braces the heels of his hands against the base of Stiles’ spine and rocks forward.

“Mmmm.” Stiles’ hands tighten in the cushions.

Rocks into him again, pressing his hands into the dimples above Stiles’ waistband, swinging his weight forward using his hips.

Stiles grunts and presses his face into the fabric of the cushion.

Again.

“Ah!”

Again.

“Ah!” Stiles’ head arches to the side, smooth, pale, skin, exposed and gorgeous.

Derek takes in a sharp breath through his nose. “It’s been more than five minutes.”

Stiles lets out a long sigh, then mutters, “alright, let’s finish this review guide.”

Derek pulls off of Stiles’ body, wishes Stiles luck as he makes his escape. He’ll stick to offering decaf tea when next he has to get Stiles to relax. He- that wasn’t his place.

Surprising nobody but himself, Stiles aces his finals. It’s fantastic to see him in a good mood again, getting ready to go out with David on Saturday, anticipating the rest of the pack coming home from college for summer break.

Derek had been concerned about summer break. For all that it would be nice to have Isaac around again, not being able to hear Stiles’ heart beating on the other side of the wall would have made it hard to sleep for those three months. But Stiles and Isaac had worked something out where Isaac would stay in Cora’s apartment for the summer, so that Stiles wouldn’t have to move one mile across town into his dad’s house, just to move right back in once Stiles went back to Humboldt State.

That said, Derek’s a bit suspicious of Isaac’s readiness to move into the living room of Cora’s dinky one bedroom apartment. He’s instructed Cora to demonstrate her martial arts skills in a very practical way if Isaac ever gets too friendly.

It takes about a week for the whole pack to come back to town, but when they do, they take up half of the tables at Alfredo’s Pizza and stay until the waitstaff starts eyeing them angrily. Erica and Boyd have gotten tremendously tanner, all credit to San Diego State, Scott met a new girl to go gaga over at UC Merced, and Stiles happily tells all about David, who the pack want full details on. The thorough text messages Stiles had been sending them apparently weren’t enough. Cora complains about her classes at the community college, and Derek reminds her that she needs her GED to be able to do anything in America, so she’s just going to have to suck it up.

“And what have you been up to, Derek?” Erica asks eagerly.

“I-” Derek falters for a moment. What has he been doing, where have the last eight months gone? “I’ve been reading. I hike around the woods sometimes. Work out.”
“Sleep,” Stiles teases.

“Enjoy having some peace and quiet for once.” Derek corrects.

“Peace and quiet?!” Erica exclaims, “peace and quiet?!” she repeats, taking the conversation by the reins and pulling it elsewhere, much to Derek’s relief.

He needs to get a hobby.

XXXXX

Derek’s search for a hobby goes over a few bumps in the road before he finds anything he likes.

He tries volunteering at the library, but the single moms and the girls who wander out of the YA section never leave him alone to clean the books, and he apparently “does not have good customer service skills.”

He tries gardening, but once he puts out the three potted plants that will fit in the planter outside their second story window and waters them, Derek realizes there isn’t much else to it.

He tries woodworking. He doesn’t want to talk about it, but Stiles puts the hunk of oak that’s supposed to be a wolf with the rest of their knickknacks on the side table in the living room.

Then he opens the door of the apartment in the second week of summer and hears “aaah, hold on, Derek’s back, put that away!”

Derek blinks. It’s Nose Ring-David. Sitting on their couch. Next to a very red faced Stiles. Derek had sort of forgotten that David was a living, breathing person who could sit on a couch and have just a touch of acne.

“Um, this is my roommate Derek,” Stiles explains hurriedly, “Derek, this is, you know, David.”

“Right.” Derek nods at David. David seems uncomfortable making eye contact with him for some reason.

“You told your roommate about me?” David asks Stiles incredulously.

“Right.” Derek nods at David. David seems uncomfortable making eye contact with him for some reason.

“You told your roommate about me?” David asks Stiles incredulously.

“Well yeah,” Stiles explains as though it’s obvious.

“Yeah, yeah,” David replies, distracted, scratching his face and looking away. His heart is pounding. He’s nervous. Derek doesn’t like him at all.

But Stiles does, so Derek tells them, “I’m just going to go get some coffee for a few hours,” and leaves.

It’s at the coffee shop, nursing his second Americano, that Derek sees a girl across the shop talking animatedly to her friend, a ball of yarn and two needles in her lap. She’s blathering about something to do with the theater program at UBH, but her fingers never stop moving around the knitting, looping stitch after stitch onto the needles, fabric growing under her hands, small step by small step.

It looks soothing. It looks useful. Derek wants that.

When he comes back to the apartment and a deeply apologetic Stiles that evening, Derek has a bag from Michaels with two balls of yarn, two bright green aluminum needles, and Knitting for Dummies inside of it.
“What’s that?” Stiles asks, grabbing for the bag. He opens it, then looks up at Derek, mouth twitching.

“Don’t make fun,” Derek warns.

“Who said I was making fun?” Stiles protests, “Did I say anything?”

Derek snatches the bag back. “You were saying it with your eyes.”

“If I was saying anything with my eyes,” Stiles retorts, “it was that you’d better make me some fancy mittens.”

“It, uh, it said I should start with a scarf, because that’s easiest, I’ll make you some mittens if I can make a scarf, I just don’t want to make you lopsided mittens that you wouldn’t even wear-”

Stiles laughs, “it’s chill dude. And hey, if it all crashes and burns, the knitted whatever can live on the side table with Sourwolf.”

“Fine.” Derek rolls his eyes, and drops the plastic bag on the couch. It lands, crinkling in protest and sending up a cloud of scent from the cushions. Derek’s nose wrinkles up. “Um, Stiles-”

“Ah shit, I thought I’d febreezed it enough,” Stiles rushes to the couch and starts patting at it as though the smell will leave if he smacks the cushions and throw pillows enough.

“It smells like Febreeze,” Derek allows, “it smells like Febreeze and sex.”

“Sorryyy, I know you don’t wanna be smelling that in your living room, it’s just that his roommate was actually around, for once, and I was thinking that I’d never showed him where I live, and you know, I probably should at some point if I want him to meet everybody, but then he said we should watch a movie, and I should have known better because when anybody says they want to watch a movie, they never actually mean lets watch a movie, you know, so-”

“I really don’t need to know the details.”

“Okay cool.” Stiles locks his hands behind his back. Sways back and forth. “I’ll just clean this up-”

“I’ll put the knitting away,” Derek agrees, and retreats.

He closes the door, opens the book, and tries to learn how to knit. But the noises coming from the living room keep distracting him. It sounds like Stiles is trying to air out each cushion individually. It’s very like him, he never lets a task go half done.

Also, the pictures in the book make no sense, he has no idea how to get from step one to step two.

Old Bess blinks at him temptingly from the edge of the bed. He could probably find a how-to video or two, right?

He opens the laptop. Clicks on the internet explorer icon. Presses the bookmark that reads “Google.” Stiles does something in the living room that causes a loud thud, and Derek, like a person tripping down the stairs, past the point of rescue, types in “my soulmate is dating someone else.” Taps the “enter” key.

The list of results is long, but the first link takes him to a page titled: “My Life is SMD.” There’s an entire tag for posts about people whose soul mates are already married, dating other people, in polyamorous relationships with two people, neither of whom are the unlucky soul mate
dysfunctional. It’s a sea of other people’s troubles, and Derek isn’t even sure what answers he’s looking for. He just wants somebody to tell him how to fix the sick feeling he got in his stomach when he smelled Stiles and David on the couch.

The first semi-related post Derek comes across is written by someone whose soulmate is in an abusive relationship. Thankfully, not applicable. The next is about someone whose soulmate broke up with them and started dating their brother. Derek winces. The third...

_I have a NRSMD_,

Derek opens a new window. NRSMD apparently stands for “non-requited soul mate dysfunction.” Laura probably knew all of these terms like the back of her hand.

_I have a NRSMD, and haven’t told my soulmate (it would just be awk,) but lately my soulmate has started dating somebody and I don’t know how to deal with it. I’ve been having trouble sleeping, I can’t do my work, it’s really a problem. Advice?_  
- _Jumping_4_joy08

The first response—most popular, Derek realizes, going by the number of stars next to the poster’s name—reads:

_Hi Jumping. First of all, you aren’t alone. It goes without saying here on MLISMD, but I think I should say it. Lots of other people have had to deal with situations like this and have survived. The key, like with most SMDs, is coping. You’ve probably heard some of this before, they may be oldies, but they’re goodies: first, you have to support your soul mate in what they want to do, (as long as nobody’s getting hurt, ofc.) That’s just part of being a good, kind person. Second, you have to accept your situation as it is. Picturing theoretical, perfect futures just gets your hopes up for something that’s unlikely to happen. Third, you wanna be happy, or at least content, with the situation your in. You’ve met your soul mate! They’re awesome! They’re alive and healthy! Look on the bright side, enjoy what you have, not what you don’t. Good luck!_  
_Lovers4Life84_

Derek gives the post another star, and lies back against the pillows for a minute to just listen to Stiles being alive and healthy through the wall.

XXXXX

“What are your thoughts on outdoor pools?”

“Extravagant.”

“Hmm, that’s not bad, necessarily...”

“You’re making me nervous.”

“It’s just research, it’s harmless!”

“That’s what you said last time.”

“You- well- yes, okay, but it’s house hunting, I know to not go crazy and put an offer down at first glance, I’ve been watching a lot of HGTV lately, you know. Hmm... victorians?”

“Maintenance costs?”

“Spoilsport. Oh wow, okay, here’s modern for you.”
Derek leans over Stiles’ shoulder to look at the picture on the listing. “That’s just a glass box. That’s an apple store pretending to be somebody’s house.”

Stiles tsks, and holds up his laptop. “Would you like to try and find something? Beacon Hills doesn’t have unlimited real estate, you know. Especially not real estate with enough space for the pack to visit every weekend.”

“No, no,” Derek turns his head to kiss Stiles’ temple. “I trust you to find something good, you always do.”

“Damn straight,” Stiles mutters, opening another link. “This look acceptable?”

“On face value. Put it in the maybe pile,” Derek bends over further to rest his weight on the back of Stiles’ chair. Then, well, Stiles’ hair is right in his face, so he might as well bury his nose in it, breathe in the comforting scent of their shared shampoo, the detergent they wash their pillowcases with, a touch of Derek’s own scent mixed into Stiles’ hair.

To refresh the scent a little more, Derek combs a hand through the brown tangle on Stiles’ head, letting the strands slowly slip through his fingers.

“You’re being very distracting,” Stiles warns, but Derek can hear the smile in his voice.

Hugging Stiles’ shoulders from behind, Derek whispers gleefully into his ear, “we’re buying a house. I’m buying a house with you.”

Stiles smiles contentedly and leans his head back against Derek’s shoulder, his hand coming up to hold Derek’s, the ring on it pressing gently into the back of Derek’s hand. “Hard to believe we’re here, huh?”

“Mmm,” Derek cranes his neck so that he can kiss the corner of Stiles’ mouth.

Stiles turns to meet him, kiss him, whisper into Derek’s skin, “you make me so happy.”

Kissing Stiles again, just because he can, Derek lets his hands drift lower.

Laughing into Derek’s mouth, Stiles protests, “we can’t just have ‘we’re buying a house’ sex every time we start to look at houses!”

Derek lowers Stiles onto the floor. “Says who?”

Then Derek wakes up.

It’s been a while since he’s had one of the dreams. Derek listens to Stiles’ heartbeat on the other side of the wall, in his separate bed, and exhales. Today, Derek will make breakfast, have lunch with Isaac, work on his scarf, and Stiles will live his own life. A dream is just a dream.

XXXXX

That afternoon, Stiles asks Derek to be his human —“or werewolf, whatever”—guinea pig.

“It isn’t anything permanent,” Stiles reassures Derek as he pushes the furniture in the living room up against the walls.

“Somehow that doesn’t reassure me,” Derek replies, crossing his arms as he watches Stiles roll the throw rug out of the way.
Stiles pulls some kind of chalk out of the oaken chest he’d pulled out of his room, and starts drawing a circular design on the floor. “I’ve done stuff like this before, but since it’s summer and I have time now, Deaton’s just making me do it on a larger scale. Sit on this pentacle, would you?”

Gingerly lowering himself onto the sigil on the floor, Derek asks, “and what, exactly, is this spell?”

“Carmine translationem,” Stiles intones dramatically as he sprinkles a vial of clear liquid that smells like lavender over a bundle of sage. “A transference spell. I take on a trait of yours while we’re both inside the spell casting circle,” he waves a hand at the chalk circle penning them both in, “then I break the spell, you get it right back, and I get an A on my homework assignment.”

“What trait of mine are you...adopting?”

Stiles flicks on his lighter, setting the bundle of sage smoldering. The orange glow illuminates his face as he smirks and asks, “what do you think?”

“You couldn’t handle being a werewolf,” Derek retorts.

“Watch me,” Stiles shoots back, waving the bundle of sage around the room. “Puritas, fortitudo, vis. Puritas, fortitudo, vis. Puritas, fortitudo, vis.” Stiles’ voice sounds different when he casts a spell: deeper, sure and confident. Derek was right: Stiles really does take to magic like a duck to water.

Stiles finishes his round and settles onto the ground, cross-legged, just across from Derek, his movements graceful and slow. “Pone, quod habes,” he recited, snuffing out the sage against the stone plate he’d placed at the center of the circle. “Et dabo illud,” he rubs a thumb through the ash, “amicitiam fraternitatis amore.” He swipes the thumb down the ridge of Derek’s nose, then his own.

Derek sneezes, prompting a giggle from Stiles.

“Okay sneezy.” Stiles leans forward, placing one hand on either side of Derek’s face, cradling it between his palms. “Ready?”

Derek nods, and Stiles’ hands move with him.

Straightening himself up to his full sitting height, Stiles whispers, “ut fiat semper.”

He feels an odd pulling sensation, like someone is pulling a bandaid very carefully off of his body, tugging and tugging until he’s just raw and exposed.

Stiles blinks once, twice, then his eyes open again, glowing red. “Whoa.”

“Whoa,” Derek echoes back.

Smiling around sharpening teeth, Stiles says, “you feel like this all the time? This is so cool!”

“What’s it like?” Derek’s never met an alpha who wasn’t born into it.

Stiles’ crimson eyes flit over the room, Derek’s face. “You... I’m just gonna...” he falls forward, nose first, into Derek’s shoulder. Inhaling heavily, he notes, “this is really soothing. How are you not doing this all the time?”

“Self control?” Derek chuckles. The beta form sideburns are growing in on Stiles’ cheeks, tickling Derek’s neck.

“Some self control,” Stiles rubs up against Derek’s neck, subconsciously scent marking. “You smell really good. Is that you, or a pack thing?”
“I don’t know,” Derek answers truthfully. “Come up here, I want to see your beta face.”

Grumbling, Stiles withdraws from the joining of Derek’s neck and his shoulder. His hands are still on Derek’s face, probably a requirement for the spell.

Derek can’t help but let out a laugh at seeing Stiles’ beta form.

“What? What?”

“You can’t make fun of me for losing my eyebrows anymore.”

“Oh no.” The outcroppings of flesh over Stiles’ eyes pull together. “I lose the eyebrows too? Laaaame.”

“Less grooming,” Derek corrects.

“These muttonchops make up for it.” Stiles puffs his cheeks out. “They tickle though. And I can’t itch them because I have to hang onto your face.” His eyes flick up to Derek, and he pouts.

“Fine.” Derek combs three fingers through either sideburn, grooming like his mother used to when he was too little to care how out of sorts his fur got. “There, now you can impress all the ladies. And gentlemen.”

Stiles laughs. “Damn straight. Or, well, not.”

“What?”

“It’s a pun! On account of how I’m not straight.”

Derek rolls his eyes and Stiles laughs raucously, nudging the plate of ash and sending a cloud of sage-scented dust into the air. Stiles must inhale some of it, because he sneezes. Or rather, he starts to sneeze, and the sneeze startles a growl out of him, resulting in the oddest combination of noises Derek has ever heard.

He isn’t going to laugh. He isn’t going to descend to Stiles’ level.

But Stiles looked so startled.

“Shut up,” Stiles protests as Derek starts to snicker. “Come on, like you’ve never had a sneeze growl. Snrowl. Greeze.”

“I really haven’t,” Derek chokes out between what can only be called giggles. “What was that?”

Stiles tightens his hands around Derek’s face, trying to get him to stop shaking with laughter. “Come on, it was a noble call of the... wild. Or something.”

“Alright.”

“Right!”

“Sure.”

“I’m sensing some sarcasm.” Stiles raises an eyebrow. “Whatever. You can have your wolfiness back, clearly it isn’t working for me.”

“No, I’m being an ass,” Derek allows, still smiling, “you can keep the look for as long as you want.”
“Ehhh,” Stiles hedges, glancing at the clock on the wall. “I should probably take it off. The longer the spell lasts, the harder it is to take off.”

“What? That’s not what you said-”

“Veniam ad te, et munera vestra,” Stiles says quickly, and releases his hands from around Derek’s face.

Derek’s cheeks feel cold, but an experimental flick of his claws reveals that the spell went off without a hitch. He points one clawed finger at Stiles. “You’re lucky that worked.”

Stiles scoffs. “Luck has nothing to do with it. Pure skill, my friend.”

XXXXX

“I just can’t take you seriously.” Isaac shakes his head.

“At least he has a hobby,” Cora notes dryly as she flicks through channel after channel in disinterest.

Isaac holds out both palms plaintively. “He’s knitting! Our alpha is knitting a scarf, it’s very unintimidating.”

“I like it.” Derek finishes the last three stitches in his row. “I’m making something useful, I like keeping my hands busy, and the yarn is soft.”

Making a skeptical noise, Isaac grabs the ball of yarn. “What, is it-” he pauses, digs his fingers into the skein, caressing a thumb over the criss-crossing strands of yarn. “Is this alpaca?”

Shrugging, Derek answers, “I just grabbed whatever was softest.”

Lost in thought, Isaac mutters under his breath, “and in heather gray, too...” He looks up at Derek. “I call dibs.”

“What!” Cora protests. “I was going to call dibs! I’m his sister, automatic dibs were already set!”

“Doesn’t count,” Isaac replies, eyes still fixed on the yarn he’s fondling. “It’s mine.”

“I’ll fight you for it.”

Isaac smirks. “Is that so?” he asks Cora, smiling.

Cora gets out of her chair, cracking her neck playfully. “You wanna go?”

“Oh I can go,” Isaac smiles wolfishly at Derek’s baby sister and pounces.

They fall to the floor immediately, grappling ferociously but inflicting no damage on each other whatsoever. Fighting. Derek wonders how much “fighting” they’ve been doing when they’re all alone here in their little love nest.

“Hey now.” He pokes a hesitant foot into the fray. “Stop that. Stop. I’m still here!”

Cora groans, but smacks Isaac’s shoulder to get him off of her. “Fine. We’ll take this up later.”

Isaac stands up, pulling his shirt back down from where it got lodged up around his armpits. “Yeah, we’ll see how-” he catches sight of Derek’s face and makes a beeline for the kitchen. “I’m just going to go get the thing in the... I’m going to go to the kitchen now.”
From her position lounging on the living room floor, Cora sends Derek a scathing look. “Der-Der.”

“What?” Derek busies himself with his knitting. He’s about halfway done, he can get it finished by next week if he works at it.

“You know I’m like, a legal adult, right?”

“Yes,” Derek hedges.

“And that I can make my own decisions?”

“Yes...”

“Then stop *messing up my game*” Cora hisses. “Isaac’s hot, and I like him!”

A crash resounds from the kitchen.

“I think he heard you,” Derek points out unnecessarily.

Cora smiles mischievously. “Oh I know he did. Get out Derek,” she adds as Isaac scrambles out of the kitchen into the room, eyes shocked and full of hope.

“You- I-” Isaac stutters out.

“Duh,” Cora replies, rolling her eyes. “Get *out* Derek,” she urges again, and Derek takes her advice this time.

If it had to be anybody, he supposes, at least it’s Isaac. Out of all the scummy teenage boys lusting after Derek’s little sister, Isaac’s the most trustworthy.

And Stiles will be amused by the story, so there’s that, at least. Stiles enjoys gossip a lot more than he’ll admit.

XXXXX

The sun is blinding in the way it only is in summer, in California, on the beach. It reflects in brilliant waves off of the sand and water, and its one of the rare occasions where Derek can wear sunglasses without Cora accusing him of looking like a tool.

So he wears sunglasses, and sinks into the sand, and lets the sun tan his skin, lighten his hair, lets his eyes fall closed to the shouts of the pack as they run around in the surf, throwing the beach balls and frisbees, getting dunked into the pacific, squealing over shells and crabs and jetsam.

“Give it back!” Erica hollers.

“I’m gonna get you for that!” Cora hollers in turn.

“Guys, look, I think this is one of those buoys that floats over from Japan!” Isaac’s excited voice cries out over the crash of waves.

“Scott, I love you man, but I really don’t think the speedo was necessary,” Stiles drawls somewhere to Derek’s left.

Then all conversation collapses into giggles and indecipherable yelling again. Derek’s eyes drift closed underneath his sunglasses. The pack can bicker all they want, but they don’t mean anything by it. Today is a beach day, as Stiles explained when he herded them into Boyd’s minivan. Today is
It is relaxing. A part of Derek that had been vibrating with anxiety for the whole school year while his betas were separated is settled now, as he listens to them all clatter around each other and stumble through the sand. There isn’t much that is simpler than a day at the beach. It’s a good day.

Stiles is wearing his swimsuit. That also makes it a good day. It doesn’t make much sense, but Derek doesn’t feel as creepy about ogling Stiles when he’s in his swimsuit. Maybe it’s because Stiles is parading around in it voluntarily, or maybe it’s just the environment of the beach, but Derek can eye the cling of the sopping wet fabric plastered to Stiles’ ass guilt free, and he does. And he watches Stiles’ darkening, mole speckled back twist and ripple as he leaps for the frisbee, and he gladly rubs it down with sunscreen when Stiles presents the bottle to him. And Derek enjoys it.

“Oh no, it is no problem,” a strangely accented voice assures one of the pack, interrupting Derek’s rest. “The frisbee did not damage anything. I only ask why I have not met any of your pack before.”

“What?” Scott asks in his perpetually confused voice.

“At any of the supernatural entity gatherings around the area,” the voice clarifies. “We fae may not be in wide attendance, but I had thought weee knew most of the packs around the area.”

Derek sighs and opens his eyes. This sounds like Alpha business if ever he’s heard it.

Scott’s scratching his head and looking perplexed at Isaac for backup, while a tall, thin woman who looks folded out of paper stands primly across from them. “I dunno, we’re kind of new, informal. I don’t think we, like, get the newsletter?”

The woman looks up at Derek’s approach. “Ah, Alpha.” A smile crinkles across her face. “I am Minnow, from the Great Sequoia Fae Tribe. Weeee were just discussing why your pack hasn’t been seen at any of the Northern California SEGs. Weeee’re always glad to see new Supernatural Entities in the area.”

“Like Scott said, we’re just starting out,” Derek tells her. It had never occurred to him to looks for the conferences and retreats his mother and Peter would occasionally disappear to. “We haven’t been, um, focusing on networking yet.” That sounds professional, right?

Minnow makes a disapproving noise. “Well you should, there aren’t nearly as many packs around here as there used to be, and werewolves are always fun at parties.” One of her narrow hands dips into a pocket on her sundress—which seems to be made out of finely woven leaves—and pulls out a cellphone. She taps the screen a few times, and then holds out an empty contact page. “Give me your email, we’ll put you on the mailing list for our Summer Solstice Gathering.”

Derek remembers the stories his mother and Peter would come back with when they went to Supernatural Entity Gatherings. Spirits from the other side of the world, talks on cross-species interaction and relations, tote bags with corny puns on them. He takes the phone. Maybe it’s about time the pack ventured out into the world.

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It’s very late at night when Stiles comes home from David’s. Derek only barely wakes up when he hears the front door open and close, which says something, because usually he can’t really fall asleep until he knows Stiles is home safe.

Stiles sounds restless despite the late hour, his footsteps padding throughout the apartment for much
longer than it normally takes him to get into bed. Living room, kitchen, bathroom for a quick shower, Stiles’ room, kitchen again, down the hallway. His heart is beating faster than it should.

Derek is steeling himself to get out of bed and see if Stiles needs help when Stiles appears in Derek’s doorway, a dark silhouette with askew hair and slumped shoulders, blue and black with the night.

“Hey,” Stiles murmurs, “are you awake?”

“Yeah,” Derek tries to coax his tired limbs into a sitting position until Stiles saves him the trouble and sits on the edge of Derek’s bed. “What is it? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine- no I’m not, I don’t know why I said that.” Stiles clears his throat. “We, uh, we broke up. Or, you know,” he chuckles darkly, “he broke up with me.”

Derek sits up. “What.”

“Hey, you don’t have to be so surprised,” Stiles retorts dully, “breakups happen all the time, one was bound to happen to me.”

“He’s an idiot,” Derek points out. Motherfucking Nose Ring, winning the jackpot and tossing it away like trash.

Smiling halfheartedly, Stiles nudges Derek with his knee. “Thanks man.”

They sit in silence for a moment, and Derek doesn’t want to ask, so Stiles does him the kindness of answering his unspoken question.

“He said,” Stiles admits, his face hidden in shadow, “that I was too clingy.”

Remembering Nose Ring’s shiftiness at being introduced to Stiles’ roommate, Derek growls lowly under his breath. “He was using you?”

“No- I mean- I don’t know.” Stiles’ shoulders slump. “Apparently he didn’t want to be my boyfriend. I mean,” he sighs, slumping back against Derek’s pillows, “the sex was good, I liked that... I just thought he was going to be my college boyfriend, you know? We got along...” Stiles trails off, twisting his hands in Derek’s comforter.

Derek places a reassuring hand on Stiles’ wrist. “Nose R- David’s an idiot,” he repeats.

Stiles eyes Derek speculatively. “Did you- did you just call him Nose Ring?”

“I called him David.”

“But you definitely called him Nose Ring first. Have you been calling him Nose Ring in your head this whole time?” Stiles’ eyes widen in excitement.

“I, not the whole time,” hedges Derek.

Cackling, Stiles claps his hands together. “The nose ring really is douchey. He thinks it makes him look edgy, but he’s not actually an edgy person, so it’s kind of just pretentious. And, and,” he adds, flipping onto his side so that he can face Derek and point at his nose, “he was totally giving me mixed messages! First he was all, ‘let’s get dinner, I wanna get to know you, baby, let me woo you,’ and then he’s all ‘why do we need to meet each other’s friends? I don’t think we’re there yet’ but I just lapped it all up because he’s the first person who’s ever found me attractive, and I figured, you know, no need to be picky,
it’s not like anybody else is lusting after The Stilinator, and I just wanted somebody to like me, I think, and it seemed like David liked me, I guess I just liked him back too much, because he’d had enough.” Stiles scrubs a hand through his hair and gazes somewhere past Derek’s ear as he continues, “It’s just, there’s Erica and Boyd, and Isaac and Cora, and Scott and Allison, and then once they broke up, Scott and this Kira girl are already adorable-"

He’s getting worked up, spiraling into some kind of cycle of self-loathing. Derek can’t watch him do that to himself. “Hey, hey,” Derek interrupts. “You’ll get there, alright?” Stiles looks so forlorn and small, curled into Derek’s softest pillow, that Derek can’t help but reach out and hook an arm around Stiles’ middle. Just to remind him that he isn’t alone. “Not everybody meets their one and only in high school or college. You don’t see me with my high school sweetheart.”

“That’s because she died, Derek. That’s a terrible example,” protests Stiles, before wincing, “sorry, that was blunt, I didn’t mean to talk about your soul mate like that. I, um, I respect your pain, and-”

“It’s fine, Stiles. Besides, my point still stands, not everybody has a loving, functional relationship at your age.” Blonde hair and a wicked, disappearing smile. “Definitely not everybody.”

Stiles reluctantly allows: “maybe, yeah.”

This just doesn’t make any sense. Of all the people in the world that could feel unworthy, why Stiles? Stiles is smart and funny and handsome and kind, he has everything going for him, why is he here, leaning into Derek’s chest like a deflated balloon? Stiles deserves so much, what is he doing curling up against Derek of all people, heartbroken and disappointed?

“And there are lots of people who would be lucky to have you,” Derek adds. It’s cliche, but he knows firsthand that it’s very true.

Chuckling, softly, little exhalations of breath, Stiles thuds his forehead into Derek’s collarbone. “Thanks man. At least somebody loves me.”

A bolt of shock runs through Derek’s body at first, a how did he know? that fills his stomach with fear. He could admit to it, just tell Stiles now, have it out in the open.

But then he remembers Stiles telling Scott, “love you man,” and Stiles on the phone: “alright, love you dad.” Stiles inviting the pack over for a movie and “some pack lovin’.” That’s the type of love Stiles means. And, fresh off of Nose Ring, Derek thinks, watching over the level of slump in Stiles’ shoulders, it’s the kind of love Stiles needs.

And, well. Derek can give him that. Derek will give Stiles anything he needs.

So he wraps his arms around Stiles right back and squeezes, whispering softly, “yeah, I do.” It feels good to say it, like fresh, cool, spring water running over him.

Stiles sighs, sending warm air through Derek’s shirt onto his chest. “Would you mind if I slept here tonight? I’ll feel less pathetic.”

“So of course,” Derek says quickly. Stiles hasn’t slept on Derek’s bed since Nose Ring, and Derek knows his bed is more comfortable than Stiles’. He would switch their mattresses, but Stiles would know, and wouldn’t let Derek get away with it. “I’ll take the couch, you sleep-"

“What? No,” Stiles grabs the front of Derek’s shirt when Derek tries to pull away. “That wasn’t the point at all, you have to stay. I, um, I don’t want to be alone right now.”

Derek settles back into the bed, letting Stiles gleefully take however much of Derek’s shoulder as a
pillow that he wants. Stiles wants him to stay, Derek will stay, comfort, hold, reassure, whatever needs to be done until Stiles is happy again.

He presses a brief kiss to Stiles’ forehead and Stiles smiles, already dozing off.

And Derek’s chest doesn’t hurt.
The brightly colored email from events@greatsequoia.sp that announced “Summer Solstice Celebration!” hadn’t been terribly clear about the location, Derek thinks, disgruntled, as he and the pack drive through the Sequoia National Park, looking for “The Grand Clearing.”

“Okay,” Stiles says from the passenger seat, twisting the dark green park services map around in his hands, “I think we’re going the right way. Unless it’s this thing marked “Great Clearing” instead, because then we’re way off.”

Cora, who is paying no attention whatsoever, comments, “so these are the biggest trees in the world? I was expecting something more.”

“They’re at least 150 feet tall each,” Boyd points out.

Cora just makes a dismissive noise as they drive past another towering behemoth of a tree. “Too much hype.”

Stiles’ hand shoots out and he points at something on the other side of the windshield excitedly. “Lanterns! There! That has to be it!”

It’s still late afternoon, but the massive trees throw enough shade that the lanterns glow brightly through the gloom, casting warm light down a path leading through the trees. They park, grab their food and picnic blankets, and follow the glowing path through a maze of broad-trunked, red-barked trees, over fallen logs and mossy undergrowth, towards the growing clamor of voices in the distance.

“How much further is it?” Erica asks just as the path opens onto a, well, a “grand clearing.”

The email wasn’t exaggerating. The clearing is vast and circular, filled with long, flattened, summer-yellow grass that extends a football field’s length in every direction from the massive grand sequoia in the center of the clearing. Lanterns hang on cables stretched over the grass, each lantern a different color, casting red and orange and yellow and green light over the masses of celebrants.

_Masses_ of celebrants, filling what seems to be every square inch of the clearing with their blankets and food and dancing.

“We should have gotten here earlier,” Cora comments as they search around for a spot to put down a blanket among the fae and nymphs and wolves and singular yeti.

“This is crazy,” Scott marvels, “how many people are here? This is so cool.”
“Do you hear that music?” Stiles bobs his head up and down to the lilting beat coming from the small stage set up in front of the central tree. “It’s so weird, like you put a bunch of metal things in a bag and shook it, but it sounds good.”

“It’s called kstren,” a green-haired man sitting nearby tells them. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help but overhear you.”

“Kstren?” Stiles asks. “What is that?”

The green haired man hums and tips his head to one side. “It’s a kind of fae music. They are the ones throwing the party after all. I don’t really know how it works, not a fae,” he gestures at his hair, and Derek blinks, thinking he sees a glimmer of scales on the back of the man’s hand. “But it has some kind of power to it,” the green haired man continues, “different songs can do different things. Right now the music is just for entertainment though.”

A plump woman with matching green hair looped up into a braid walks up to the man, a jug of water in hand. “Are you playing tour guide again?” she lightly admonishes. Nodding at the pack, she says, “Sorry about Timon here, he’ll explain to you the entire history of solstice celebrations if you let him.”

Stiles perks up. “You would?”

Timon smiles smugly at the woman. “I would. Why don’t you set up camp next to us, I’ll tell you all about it.”

The woman rolls her eyes. “He’s going to regret that.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Derek tells her, watching Stiles scramble to throw down a blanket next to Timon. “Stiles is a curious guy.”

She shrugs. “More power to him then. I’m Opha, by the way. We’re from Monterey Bay.” She shakes his hands and Derek sees another glimmer of scales.

“The city of Monterey or the bay itself?” he asks dryly.

Opha giggles. “Caught me.” She wiggles her fingers, examining them. “It’s our first time using a glamour, I guess little bits were bound to shine through. We need the glamour though, to walk on two legs and come out here, so I suppose you deal with the hand you’ve been given.”

“And I thought it was hard getting here from Beacon Hills,” Derek remarks.

Opha lights up. “Beacon Hills! You aren’t the Hale Pack, are you? I’d heard you all were up and running again. I met your mother a few times I think. I thought you looked familiar.”

“I, um,” Derek stutters, not wanting to explain the greek tragedy of the last decade, “we-”

“Hey now,” she settles to the ground, cross legged. “No need to get into it. Word has spread, we’re a gossipy lot. Have you ever had a seaweed sandwich? It’s better than you think.”

The merfolk turn out to be surprisingly good company, even if Derek does prefer proper red meat to the endless seafood they keep pulling out of their cooler. By the time dusk falls and a Fae takes to the stage to read the summer blessing, the pack is pleasantly relaxed, sprawled over their little camp, stomachs distended, and in Stiles’ case, mind edified.

Idly crunching on a strip of seaweed, Derek listens to the fae onstage gesture with bangle-draped
hands as she blesses the crowd, the forest, and the earth, and wishes them well for this solstice and
the next.

“And now,” she leans closer to the microphone conspiratorially, “the blessing has been said, night is
falling, everybody under eighteen has left...it’s time for everyone’s favorite kstren!” she hollers, and
the crowd cheers raucously, stamping their feet and roaring. The yeti climbs a nearby tree in
excitement. “Brought to you by our lovely band, GreenWood Stalkers!” she yells over the crowd,
before escaping offstage.

“Stiles,” Derek hisses, “did Timon explain anything about this?”

Stiles chuckles like somebody with a secret. “Yeah, and he’s going to regret picking right now to go
to the bathroom, this is supposed to be quite the ride.”

“Ride?” Derek asks urgently as the band members pick up their instruments onstage. “Ride?”

“Yeah, ride,” Stiles replies unhelpfully. “As Timon put it, ‘it’s like a roller coaster: some people hate
it, most people love it, but either way, you won’t forget it quick.’”

Sighing in exasperation, Derek pokes Stiles’ arm. “But what—”

Then the music starts.

It’s a bright, deep, cerulean blue, emanating out in waves that ripple as Derek watches them, loops
and swirls of music climbing over and around the people in the crowd, who hold out their hands to
catch the notes. Derek’s hands are outstretched too, and Isaac’s, next to him, and Erica’s, and
Boyd’s, and Cora’s, and Stiles’. The music tingles like glass when it touches his skin.

A low note resounds, vibrating through the earth, rumbling through Derek’s bones, like he’s a part of
the earth and the earth is a part of him, and there’s an earthquake and it’s called music. They are all
of them chords being strummed with the turning of the planet, Derek thinks, one massive instrument
all together.

Stiles, sitting in front of him, flops his head back to stare at Derek. It’s upside down. His head is
upside down, and Derek laughs. It’s funny. It’s all very funny.

“Derekkkk,” his upside down mouth croons, “do you hear this?” Stiles tries to point at his ears,
forgetting that he’s resting his weight on his hands, so he falls backward, lying on the blanket,
laughing in great purple gasps. “Does everything look pink to you?”

Shaking his head and feeling the world swish around like laundry in a bucket when he does, Derek
says, “blue. It’s all blue.”

“Hmmmmm,” Stiles hums, squeezing his eyes shut and stretching like a cat. “I like it.”

Somewhere off to the side, Isaac is saying he sees butterflies. But Derek doesn’t care, Stiles’
eyelashes are like tiny little fans, so he brushes a pinky through them. Each tiny lash thunders against
his skin, a storm in between every one of them.

Someone is singing. Maybe they’re on the stage, maybe they’re in the audience, maybe they are
Derek himself, vocalizing in broad vowels that aren’t words, ululating to the trees. Stiles tries to
imitate the noise, but the sound catches up with giggles in his throat, and he coughs and laughs and
his eyes fly open so Derek can’t pet his eyelashes any more.

“Wait,” Stiles cries, reaching for Derek’s wrist. “Keep with the petting. It feels like a storm, I like it.”
Derek obliges, because he loves Stiles, he really really does, and it’s so nice to pet him, wander down to the ground and press his cheek against Stiles’ while the drumbeats roll on, brushing a finger through Stiles’ eyelashes, over his cheekbones.

“You’re beautiful,” he tells Stiles.

Stiles grins a beautiful grin with beautiful teeth and beautiful dimples. “Awww, you’re beautiful. Everything is beautiful!” he screams at the sky.

“Whooo!” somebody hollers back in response. Derek agrees with them. Everything is wonderful and floaty, blurry at the edges like a marker drawing dipped in water.

Stiles’ smiling lips blur pink through the air as he says, “do you see the rainbows?”

Derek shakes his head, and the clearing melts together further, greens and browns and dark purples.

“Nooo, you gotta see!” Stiles reaches out his lovely hands and presses them over Derek’s eyes. “Ecce ego video!”

Then Derek is seeing through Stiles’ eyes, looking back at his own face, set against a background of rainbows like the kind you see on the skin of bubbles, something slippery and colorful, ready to flee at any moment. He laughs, and he watches himself laugh. It’s laugh-ception, layers of amusement, Derek’s and Stiles, Derek watching Stiles watch Derek, and they’re both laughing.

Stiles gives him his sight back, and Derek smiles at seeing Stiles’ face across from him again. He clutches it in his hands, and it feels warm and soft and smooth, like his leather jacket but better.

“I feel like flying,” Stiles chuckles, trying to spread his arms despite being flat on his side the ground. “I bet I could learn a spell for that.”

“Don’t go,” Derek whines over an echoing chord emanating from one of the gourd shaped string instruments onstage. “I don’t want you to fly away.”

Pouting sympathetically, Stiles rubs his face into Derek’s hands. “Okay, I won’t.”

“Good,” Derek sighs. “You’re my best friend.”

“Really?” Stiles exclaims, knocking over a water bottle in excitement, but that’s alright, Derek can’t really feel the water seeping into his shirt, everything is too warm for that. “That’s like, that’s like when Deaton was babysitting these griffin kits and I got to cuddle them and they were all warm and feathery and sweet and they, you know, they felt like warm little loaves of bread in my hand.”

Nodding seriously, Derek breathes, “yeah.”

Stiles’ eyes are like chocolate.

Do you know your eyes are like chocolate, Derek asks, and Stiles says they’re brown like this dirt, and Derek laughs, because they aren’t like that at all, they’re warm and safe and Stiles, and Derek wants to fall right into them.

Really? Stiles says, come here then, and he comes closer and closer until its like the two of them are one of them, two souls in one body, and the music swells, and Derek has never felt like this, the lines of his arms are blurring into Stiles’, they are one and the same with each other and the music. Stiles laughs in delight, and Derek does too, and it feels so good.
They are drops of water on a window, alone at first, wandering downwards, wet and slow until now, until they meet and join, get bigger and stronger, speed down the window and leap free, transcend the place they were before.

You’re my best friend.

You’re mine too.

I don’t wanna go back.

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Derek comes to with a body that aches. Not ready to open his eyes yet, he lets the sunlight warm his tensed up muscles. He’s clutching something to him so tightly that his bones ache, which he realizes must be the source of the tension.

The something breathes, and Derek opens his eyes to the blinding light of day, and to Stiles’ face, relaxed in sleep. Derek is laid out flat on top of him, their arms and legs stubbornly intertwined. He tries to ease off of Stiles so he isn’t crushing him with his weight, but his movements just make Stiles stir and tighten his arms around Derek’s back.

“Wh-no, blanket.”

“Can you even breathe?” Derek whispers, mindful of the approximately two thirds of the clearing who are still asleep.

“I prefer warm to breathing, actually.” Stiles lazily pets Derek’s hair. “Stay.”

Derek stubbornly shifts to the side just enough that some of his weight is resting on his side instead of Stiles’ chest, which Stiles allows, with a grumpy huff. “Let’s go back to sleep.”

The thud of Stiles’ heart already has Derek halfway there.

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Stiles has curled himself around Derek as the big spoon the second time they wake up, which Derek wouldn’t mind but for the fact that the rest of the pack is waking up as well.

Then again, Stiles is soft and warm and has one of his legs threaded between Derek’s, so Derek doesn’t really care enough to move.

“Oooohhh shit,” Isaac groans from somewhere behind them. “My head is killing me.”

“Where did my shirt go?” Boyd asks.

Scott makes some kind of unintelligible mix of a groan and a scream.

“Ssshhh,” Cora hisses, “shut up, everybody shut up. Oh my god.”

Gingerly, Derek pats Stiles’ shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

“Hmm?” Stiles asks, stretching.

“Do you have a... magic hangover too?”

Stiles’ forehead scrunches up as he takes a mental inventory. “No. No, I’m pretty sure I’m all in one
piece. How about you? How’s the ol’ wolfy noggin?”

Derek shrugs. “Fine.” It hadn’t even occurred to him, he was so warm and rested.

Raising his eyebrows, Stiles holds out his palm. “High five for best, uh, magical drug trip.”

They high five.

Derek’s non-hungover state turns out to be handy for more than one reason. Namely, he gets the dubious honor of also driving the entire grouchy pack back from Grand Sequoia National Park to each of their individual homes. By the time he and Stiles roll into their apartment just past noon, Derek is exhausted, but Stiles is still humming with energy.

“We haven’t had breakfast yet, I’m going to make breakfast. How do you feel about french toast?”

Brain still hypnotized from hours of highway, Derek stands up straighter and tries to concentrate on Stiles’ rapid speech.

“I. It’s 12:45 in the afternoon.” They may have gotten more rest than the rest of the pack, but Derek still didn’t get more than five hours of sleep. “I’m going to take a nap.”

“Ah.” Stiles nods, accepting Derek’s explanation with surprisingly little protest. Normally he puts up more of a fuss when Derek is being a killjoy. “Yeah, alright, go sleep.”

Derek duly goes to sleep, still wearing his clothes that reek of Stiles, because it would be a waste to throw them in the wash immediately. He falls asleep quickly.

He’s woken up quickly too, by Stiles blowing a cool stream of air onto his forehead. The reason for which seems to be that both of his hands are full with a tray of breakfast food.

“Ohhh-kay!” he announces, setting the tray in Derek’s lap with a flourish. “Breakfast in bed.”

Derek blinks down at the tray of french toast, bacon, and orange juice in bewilderment. “This was. Not what I was expecting. Also I can’t eat this much.”

“It’s not all for you,” Stiles points out blithely, reaching over Derek to grab one of the two forks on the tray, then spearing a piece of bacon. “I mean, come on, teenage boy.”

“And why breakfast in bed?” Derek asks, giving in and picking up a slice of french toast, steadying the tray when Stiles haphazardly joins him on the bed.

Stiles shrugs, and says around his mouthful of bacon, “I didn’t wanna eat alone.” He swallows, then puts on a doe-eyed face and clasps his hands over his chest. “Not when we shared something so special last night,” he breathes, like a romance heroine in a bad Nicholas Sparks movie.

It stings to hear Stiles minimize it like that. Derek had really felt like they were connected, even if it sounds cheesy and even if it was all just because of the Fae music. But Derek plays along, snorting, “Special? Weren’t we just... high?”

With a scathing look, Stiles socks Derek’s shoulder. “High or not, we declared ourselves best friends, man! That’s a big deal! Formal and shit!”

“It’s not like it’s that big a deal,” Derek points out, “you’re best friends with Scott, too.”

Stiles heaves a sigh, and Derek gets the sneaking sense that he’s opened a can of worms far too big for him. “Yeah, man. I mean, me and Scott are brothers. You know? Like we’re never gonna not be
friends. But like...” he twists the fork between his fingers. “we haven’t been talking as much since we went to different schools. He has his college friends now, and we’re always gonna be friends, and pack,” he adds, like it’s obvious, like it doesn’t make Derek feel warm to have Stiles, gloriously human, talk about pack like it’s a necessity. “It’s just that you’re my number one guy to like, hang out with now. And like,” he adds with a grimace, “cry on your shoulder and stuff. So if you’re the one I go to first,” he concludes, “best friend. And besides, the power of our friendship saved us from magical hangovers. So.”

He reaches over Derek again for more food, and Derek slides the tray closer to Stiles so he doesn’t have to strain himself. “You’re my best friend too,” Derek tells Stiles, as though it isn’t blindingly obvious already.

“Awww,” Stiles coos. “We’ll get a handshake and a secret club and everything. Go us. Now eat up bucko, or else I’ll beat you to it.” He lunges for the last piece of bacon, which Derek realizes Stiles has been sneakily stealing throughout their whole conversation.

He plucks the bacon just out of Stiles’ grasp. “I’ll take that.”

“Oh come on,” Stiles protests, “you get plenty of protein, and look at me! I’m made of skin and bone.”

Stiles’ sleeves are rolled up to expose lean forearms that ripple every time Stiles wiggles his fingers; powerful, understated strength that Stiles likes to conveniently forget about.

“You are not made of skin and bone.”

“Please! I’m wasting away! You’re a wolf, you don’t have to take the lion’s share!”

“I need more meat for the energy that shifting takes.”

“Oh, like you shift for more than using your claws to open things. That’s just a slice of french toast energy expenditure thing right there, no need for the last piece of bacon.”

“Oh, you mean the bacon I’m going to eat right now?” Derek takes a smug bite.

Howling dramatically, Stiles snaps his teeth at the rest of the bacon. “Come on, Alpha, you’re supposed to provide for me, aren’t you?”

The thing is.

The thing is. Derek has been controlling his wolf ever since he was born. He knows how to override his wolf instincts like he knows how to brush his teeth. Stiles’ words really shouldn’t get to him. Derek is an adult who can control himself.

Except, it seems, when his soulmate is lying next to him in bed, a cocky smirk on his perfect face, calling him Alpha, asking him to provide, like Stiles is his mate, properly, curled up in Derek’s den. Stiles smells like Derek. Their sock covered feet are bumping up against each other, and Derek feels a sudden surge of want, and his thumb is brushing Stiles’ soft bottom lip as he feeds the bacon directly into Stiles’ mouth.

Stiles looks at Derek with wide eyes. Slowly chews the strip of bacon. Swallows. Pauses, then asks, “so how much can I get away with if I use that phrase? Would you give me your car?”

Derek rolls his eyes. “No.”
“Dude, your eyes are still glowing red.”

Embarrassed, Derek has to concentrate for a moment to force them back to normal. He casts around for an excuse.

Derek could just tell Stiles. Right now, it’s the perfect opportunity. Tell him that there’s a different reason that he was so eager to care for Stiles. Tell Stiles that he loves him.

Then Stiles just. Chuckles. His shoulders shake against Derek’s headboard, his eyes scrunch up in delight, awkwardness forgotten.

This, Derek realizes, is what best friends do. They laugh at awkward situations together, and it isn’t mean, or weird, they just laugh at the absurdity. Derek doesn’t feel judged, he feels free.

He laughs too, and shoves a slice of french toast at Stiles, who shrieks and flails backwards, then hangs half off the bed giggling as he recovers from the “unwarranted attack, Derek!”

Then when they finish their food, and Stiles tucks himself under Derek’s blankets (“a nap actually sounds like a good idea. I have a food baby to digest,”) it isn’t weird. When Derek slips under the sheets too, and Stiles scoots closer so their sides are touching (“you’re a great big teddy bear, Derek, don’t even front,”) it isn’t weird either.

They’re friends, Derek thinks as Stiles dozes off, brown hair tickling Derek’s shoulder, and Derek likes them that way. He isn’t going go around messing it up.

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Derek finishes the scarf. It’s easily 75 degrees out when he gives it to Isaac, but Isaac delightedly wraps it around his neck anyway. Derek buys more yarn and looks up patterns for those mittens Stiles wanted.

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“Oh my god,” Stiles groans.

Sweat trickles down Derek’s forehead. All he can manage is a low moan.

“It’s too much,” Stiles pants, “too much.”

Derek’s entire body feels hot, like he’s being consumed with flames from the inside out.

“There is no way that I can pack in this heat!” Stiles exclaims, falling away from his suitcase to land on the floor with a thud. “It’s like 95 and we don’t have air conditioning, I can’t possibly be expected to move, let alone pack for a trip to Seattle!”

Derek, sitting on Stiles’ bed, kicks Stiles’ side lightly with his bare foot. “And if you’d packed yesterday like you should have, you wouldn’t have this problem. It was better yesterday.”

“But yesterday I wasn’t flying out to Seattle until tomorrow, and-”

“And CoD with Scott waits for no man,” Derek finishes, smiling indulgently at the ceiling so Stiles can’t see.

“And CoD with Scott waits for no man.” Stiles nods and throws another pair of underwear into his suitcase. “You know, you could still come, probably.”
“Family’s important.” Derek kicks Stiles again, which prompts Stiles to tickle the hollow of Derek’s foot until he pulls it back sharply. “You and your dad are going to go to Seattle and have father-son bonding. And, I guess, also go to a law enforcement convention thing.”

“I mean, yeah,” Stiles grumbles, “I’m still looking forward to it, but for god’s sakes, it was my dad who invited you! He said he wanted to get to know you better and everything! You totally could have come, and now I’ll just be kicking around Seattle on my own all week from 1-4PM while my dad is in seminars and shit.”

“Yeah, but,” Derek makes a face at the ceiling as he remembers the Sheriff’s determined face when he knocked on Derek’s door last month with the proposition. *Stiles is important to me, it’s important that I get to know his... ah, his... loved ones.* “He kind of...sounded... like...” He doesn’t let a lot of people close to him, and you two are clearly... close, so I want to get to know you better. “Does your dad think we’re, um...”

“Kiiinda, yeah?” Stiles grimaces guiltily, twisting a pair of socks between his hands. “Don’t worry, I’ve told him we aren’t together, but I think he wasn’t really convinced? I dunno, when I came out to him, he was immediately like, ‘so you and Derek...?'” Stiles wags his eyebrows illustratively. “And I told him we aren’t together,” Stiles assures him again, “but he didn’t believe me! He says I talk about you all the time, and okay, maybe I do, but that doesn’t mean I’m in love with you or something crazy, I know that!” Stiles holds his hands out palm up, as though Derek is about to inflict some kind of retribution.

Really, Derek knows very well that they aren’t romantically involved. Stiles doesn’t have to make it so abundantly clear so repeatedly like this.

“But yeah, Dad’s convinced we’re like, star-crossed lovers and I have absolutely, positively, no idea what he’s talking about,” Stiles repeats quickly, busying himself with folding socks that don’t really need to be folded.

Derek feels bad, this conversation is clearly making Stiles uncomfortable. Derek doesn’t mind just being friends with Stiles, and Stiles very clearly wants to be just friends, they don’t need to get awkward about this if they’re in agreement. He opens his mouth to say something that will break the ice.

It would have been witty and excellently constructed, had Stiles not beaten him to the punch by standing up suddenly, face redder than it was before -probably because of the awkward “your Dad thinks we’re dating” talk, Derek notes guiltily- and observing “God damn it is hot in here,” words coming out at a machine gun pace. “I’m just- I should- hang on.”

Derek watches in bewilderment as Stiles escapes down the hall, and then returns holding the brittle old ice cube tray from their freezer.

Holding the tray gently between both hands, Stiles recites, “Utinam frigidus esset!” then purses his over-bitten lips and blows a stream of air over the ice cube tray.

A wave of cool air rushes over Derek, and he closes his eyes in relief. Now here is a useful spell, he’s starting to feel- quite cold actually.

Stiles makes an inquisitive noise and turns the ice tray over in his hands while Derek starts to shiver. “This doesn’t seem to be working, I thought-” Derek’s teeth start to chatter, prompting Stiles to look up. “Oh shit,” he breathes, rushing over. Holding a palm up to Derek’s forehead, he babbles, “I must not have been concentrating properly, and all of the cold went to you instead of the whole room. It was supposed to- are you still getting colder?”
Derek’s hands are starting to get stiff, hard to move, so he supposes yes. He nods, and Stiles swears again, tugging at the blankets on his bed until they’re pulled up to Derek’s paling chin. “Okay, warm up,” he instructs Derek, “I’m going to get those heating pad things.”

Snuggling deeper into the blankets, Derek lets out a shuddering, chattering, breath. The next one comes more easily, then the next. The blankets really are helping. Plus they smell nice.

Flying back into the room, Stiles brandishes two of the rice heating pads that they use when either of them strains a muscle. “Okay, these go on your extremities,” he explains quickly as he wraps Derek’s hands around the first pad, then tucks the second underneath the blankets, in between Derek’s toes. “You have to tell me if you’ve stopped shivering, because that’s a sign of hypothermia.”

Derek has stopped shivering, but he’s fairly certain it’s just because he’s warm. He knows a thing or two about magical logic by now, and it’s possible that the cold will wear off at the same rate an ice cube would melt when put under blankets with heating pads. Honestly, he isn’t too concerned. Stiles, however....

Stiles strips off his shirt, then his shorts, then starts crawling onto the bed.

“What are you doing?”

“Body heat,” Stiles pants, slipping underneath the down comforter. Derek winces in sympathy. For someone who isn’t experiencing a magical chill, that must be like climbing into an oven. “Best way to warm somebody back up again.”

“I know, but Stiles-”

“It’s okay, you’re going to be alright,” Stiles assures Derek unnecessarily, hooking a leg over Derek’s hips and rubbing the tips of Derek’s ears. “I’m so sorry, you’ll-”

“Oh.” Stiles blinks, the looks down at his own bare chest. “I should probably put on some clothes then.”

He’s blushing, so Derek elbows him softly in the ribs and teases, “I know how excited you were to get naked with me, but you’re going to have to keep it to yourself for now.”

Stiles laughs, one sharp, abrupt noise that sounds like it must cut at the inside of his throat one the way out. Then he climbs out of the bed, reaching for his shorts again. “Yeah, I’ll withhold the impulse.” He grins, and it seems at least mostly normal, and Derek figures he can settle for that.

The apartment feels empty without Stiles, as though it grew twice in size but the temperature dropped in half, so Derek ends up spending most of his time down the hall third wheeling with Isaac and Cora. It’s better than pacing through the apartment, constantly feeling like he’s forgotten something.
“You need to get out of this building,” Cora tells him frankly. “You need some fresh air and me and Isaac wanna have sex.”

Feeling Isaac’s eyes burning a hole into the back of his neck, Derek takes a hike.

Literally, it turns out. There isn’t a lot to do in Beacon Hills, but the Preserve has a great set of hiking trails. Derek ends up lightly jogging down Eucalyptus Trail, remembering his mother always complaining as they walked down it that there were no eucalyptus trees along the trail, so the name made no sense, surely park rangers name these things, couldn’t they get their taxonomy correct? Her diatribe would go so long that by the time she was done, they would be turning the corner to get...

Right. This trail leads right past the Hale Property. Derek inhales slowly, carefully. Exhales. The scent of ash still floats around the house. Not as pungent as it used to be, but nevertheless there. The charred shell of the house calls him forward, hypnotizing him. When he steps onto the porch, the wooden boards creak ominously, exhaling small clouds of dust and grit. Derek peers inside, at the ivy covered stairs, the moldering, charred rug that still lies in the entry area.

A pack house was never meant to look like this. A pack house is supposed to be bright, happy, filled with wolves and humans all living together like a family.

When Derek gets back home, he calls a construction company.

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Whatever weirdness may have gone down on the day of Stiles’ departure is forgotten by the day he and his father arrive home, a week later. The pack surprises the Stilinskis at the arrivals gate, hooting and hollering when Stiles and his dad roll themselves and their suitcases out of the restricted area.

Such a beautiful wide smile splits Stiles’ face when he sees the pack that Derek has to file it away for safekeeping, along with the reunion hug that follows. (Scott got his hug first, but Derek’s was longer and had a kiss to the cheek attached, reads the smug mental note next to the file.) Brothers get hugs, but best friends get cheek kisses.

Stiles comes back with a collection of stories to tell over pack dinner, amusing anecdotes about interactions with hipsters, getting caught without an umbrella, strange facts learned from the conference.

“It was informative,” the Sheriff nods in agreement. “I got a lot of good ideas about changes to make to the department.”

Erica, whose thumbs probably atrophy if they don’t tap away at her phone at least every half hour, looks up from the screen and asks, “speaking of conferences, did everybody else get this email?” She holds up the phone, which reads: “SNECon: Supernatural Entities in California Convention. Featuring talks by Graham Yevnikotz, Linda Mannary, Kiana Chee, and many more!”

“It’s in LA,” Isaac observes in a very unsubtle tone of voice. “I’ve never been to LA.”

Stiles gasps, reading off of his own phone now. Apparently everybody signed up for the supernatural email list at the summer solstice. “They’re gonna have a talk about SE portrayals in comic books!” His eyes make contact with Derek’s, and they’re pleading in a way that brooks no argument.

Derek scratches the back of his neck, stalling for time so at least he’ll look abit like an Alpha who doesn’t just roll over for whatever his pack wants. “All right, if none of you have school things you
have to be doing instead, I’ll look at the convention thing.”

While the pack celebrates in their individual ways, the sheriff catches Derek’s eye knowingly from across the table. Derek is damn lucky that Stiles thinks his dad is deluded, because the sheriff sees right through him.

The conference is in a month, and the pack are surprisingly dedicated to helping with getting their travel plans together. Then Derek realizes that Erica and Cora, when making hotel reservations, conveniently each got themselves and their boyfriends single rooms with king-sized beds, leaving Derek, Stiles, and Scott in a standard room with two queens. Derek is caught between wanting to applaud their initiative, and wanting to chaperone them so hard that their heads spin, but eventually decides on a don’t ask, don’t tell policy. He’s going to pretend they aren’t all having sex, and if they mention it on their own, there will be a reckoning.

Stiles is just unabashedly, uncomplicatedly excited.

“It’ll be the tres amigos!” he crows to Derek and Scott. “Would it be weird if I brought boardgames? I want to know how you two would do against each other in Settlers of Catan.”

Derek, who has played Settlers of Catan with Stiles before, and is fairly certain he still has the scars, may or may not surreptitiously sneak the game out of Stiles’ bag just before they all pile into the car. Stiles doesn’t realize until they’re well past Santa Barbara, so Derek counts it as a win.

While Derek may have saved all three of them from potential Settlers of Catan related battle scars, what Derek doesn’t count on were the other ways that it might get awkward. For example: when they get to the hotel the night before the conference is supposed to start, Derek takes a shower. Because Stiles and Derek’s nighttime rituals fall around the same time, five minutes later, Stiles strolls into the bathroom too, toothbrush in hand.

Stiles, a fleshy shape blurred by the rippled glass of the shower door, leans over the sink, mumbling around a mouthful of suds: “hey Derek.”

Derek massages shampoo through his hair (unscented, for the supernatural entities with delicate noses attending the convention.) “Hey.”

“Going to bed soon?”

“Yeah.”

“Kay cool me too. Check in is at like 8AM tomorrow. Uck.”

A line of soap trails down Derek’s chest. As he runs a hand over his left pectoral to scoop it up, he asks, “shouldn’t you be brushing your teeth?”

Stiles makes an affronted noise, but the noises of a brush scrubbing over teeth follow. They both finish at the same time, so Derek asks Stiles to pass him one of the big towels on the shelf, since the one on the rod next to him fell into a puddle on the tiles.

“Sure thing.” Stiles slides open the shower door the six or so inches to give Derek the towel, then takes his leave.

As Derek dries off, he hears Scott ask through the door, “whaaat the fuck was that?”

“What?”
“The, the, teeth brushing thing?”

“Do you not brush your teeth Scott? Because let me tell you, tooth rot is a major issue among canines everywhere—”

“You know what I mean, dude.”

“I’m really actually not sure.”

“Dude, Derek was naked in there.”

Derek scowls slightly at the mirror, which reflects back an image of a well-toned torso and muscled arms. Is him being naked really that terrible?

“I should hope he was naked, Scott, he was taking a shower.”

“Stiles,” Scott huffs. “You know what I mean, since when do you just wander into a bathroom where a dude is showering naked and just, like, casually chat and brush your teeth? And did you give him his towel at the end? Did I hear that right?”

“I mean yeah, that’s what happened,” Stiles admits, “but it’s not like I saw him, really, the door was closed.”

“You mean the glass shower door?”

“Oh my god, Scott, what is the big deal?”

“Nothing man, I’m just pulling your leg. I think it’s funny that you guys have written your own revised edition of the bro code though,” Scott comments while Derek pulls on the pajamas he stored on the toilet lid.

Stiles whistles. “Snappy comeback man!” he enthuses, “what have they been teaching you in college?”

Scott chuckles, and Derek figures that’s the best moment to come out of the bathroom.

“Yo Derek,” Scott greets him, casual as you please. Turned wolves. They always forget that other wolves can hear just as well as they do.

From his position sprawled across one of the uncomfortable red hotel armchairs, Stiles nods at him. “Long time no see.”

Shaking his head at Stiles’ sad attempt at humor, Derek settles into the bed that Scott isn’t in. Stiles, almost as though he had been waiting for Derek, hops up to join him. When Stiles lifts up the floral patterned comforter, Scott makes a perplexed noise from the other bed.

“What’s up?”

“Uh, nothing, I just figured we were going to for for our usual sleepover setup.” Scott waves a hand at the empty space beside him.

“Oh.” Stiles flips over to look at Scott, leaving Derek with a view of the back of Stiles’ head. “Um, I just—”

“Oh. Oohhh. Gotcha man.” Scott nods in understanding. “We’re gonna talk about this later, though. Sweet dreams.”
Derek just plumps up his pillow, bemused. Scott and Stiles really are brothers; they practically speak their own language. Derek sure doesn’t understand a word of it.

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In true hotel fashion, their alarm clock goes off an hour before it was supposed to, and it takes all three of them working together for twenty minutes before they can figure out how to turn it off.

On the bright side, it means that they’re up early enough for the line for check-in to be short: only a handful of other convention goers are waiting in the lobby for three harried looking volunteers to sort through name tags.

Stiles puts a hand between Derek’s shoulder blades and leans in, whispering into Derek’s ear, “okay, convention long game of Supernatural Entity Bingo, what do you say? I’ll bet all those volunteers are Fae, it’s something around the eyes.”

“This sounds like a terrible idea,” Derek whispers back. “You can’t just guess somebody’s species, you’ll offend the whole convention.”

Stiles’ next words are drowned out by one of the volunteers holding up a pair of name tags and exclaiming, “found you! Mr. and Mrs. Tarlaem?”

A spectacularly beautiful couple with a spectacularly bored looking teenager trailing after them glide up to the folding table. “That would be us,” the woman confirms, smoothing her ruby red hair with a manicured hand.

“O-kay,” the volunteer stutters, flustered. “So these are for you. And is this...” she combs through the pile of name tags again. “Edwin Tarlaem? Your son?”

The teenager, also violently red haired, grumbles something in affirmation. The volunteer hands over his name tag, which he stuffs into the pocket of his painted on jeans. Objectively, the kid -Edwin- is as attractive as his parents, but Derek is both in love with Stiles, and finds the kid’s attitude extremely irritating.

“If that’s all-” the teenager’s father asks, smiling falsely through brilliantly white teeth.

“Uhm, actually, if I could just have you all sign this-” the volunteer holds up an official looking form. “Sorry Mr. Tarlaem, it’s protocol for when we have underaged incubi in attendance. Our records are correct when they say that you and your family are incubi and succubi, right?”

Mr. Tarlaem’s lip curls up. “Yes. Although we are perfectly in control of ourselves, we won’t be sucking the energy out of anybody we don’t mean to.”

“I’m sure you won’t, sir, but we have had previous incidents of younger incubi, not as firmly in control of their powers,” the volunteer babbles, shifting from foot to foot, “who have taken on the image of whoever their victims find most attractive, and seducing them just enough to get a shot of energy, no deaths of course, um, I’m sure you know you aren’t powerful enough to kill anybody yet,” the volunteer says to Edwin, who looks offended at the insinuation that he couldn’t commit murder. “But, um, anyway, now you, um, young man, have to sign this waiver saying you, not SNECon, are responsible for any damages you may incur while at this convention.”

“Yeah, fine whatever,” the kid grumbles, holding his hand out for a pen. He signs the waiver without reading it, then tosses the pen back. His parents follow suit, showing just as little deference to the legal paperwork as their son did.
“Alright thank you!” the volunteer calls after their retreating backs. “Enjoy the convention!”

“Whoa man,” Stiles comments, watching them leave. “They think they’re the shit. Have people really been, uh, attacked by incubi here before?” he asks the volunteer.

“What?” the volunteer asks with a start, twisting her hands together. “Oh. Yes. But don’t worry! The only incubi who would ever do that are young, and young incubi can really only manage taking on someone else’s shape, then kissing their victim until they suck out enough life force for the victim to fall asleep. Nobody is in physical danger, per se. That’s still not cool, though,” she hurries to add, “which is why that kid had to, uh, sign the waiver.”

Stiles looks skeptically in the direction of where the incubus family walked off to. “Not that they took it very seriously.”

“No...” the volunteer admits, voice wavering, “but I’m just supposed to get them to sign the thing, there’s not much else that I can do.”

Derek doesn’t like the sound of that one bit, and resolves to look into incubi defenses while they’re here.

“We’re uh, also here to check in,” Scott pipes up.

“Oh! Yeah! Sorry, so sorry,” the volunteer’s hands flutter over the mess of name tags. “Name?”

“McCall.”

“M... M...” the volunteer searches over the table twice, eventually finds the name tag reading “Scott McCall: Beta, Hale Pack, Beacon Hills,” and gives it to Scott, who hangs it around his neck proudly. “And you two?” she asks Stiles and Derek.

“Hale.”

“H...H...” she pulls out a name tag reading “Derek Hale, Alpha, Hale Pack, Beacon Hills, which Derek takes. He wonders if his mother wore a tag just like this on one of her trips.

“And I’m Stilinski,” Stiles offers.

“Okay...” she scans the name tags, then turns a little pale. “Um, I’m so sorry, but, um, I think something got mixed up in our system, uh, we can probably find a way to change it...” she tentatively pushes the tag over the table to Stiles, who looks at it in confusion.

“Stiles Stilinski, Beta, Hale Pack, Beacon Hills?” he reads aloud.

She winces. “Normally we have special tags for Alpha mates, we at SPECon recognize the importance of that bond in werewolf packs, I want to assure you that we didn’t intend to minimize the value of your role in the pack, one of the directors of the conference is an Alpha mate, no disrespect was meant, probably something just got switched up in the google spreadsheet-”

“Whoa, whoa, it’s okay,” Stiles assures her. “Oh my god, take a breath, Jesus. Why did you think I’m Derek’s... mate?”

She shrinks in on herself. “I didn’t mean to be creepy, but you guys smell... like... and you were all over each other earlier, in line, and I, I just thought...”

Derek turns his name tag over in his hands. “We’re not mates,” he says shortly, grabbing the tag out...
of her hands. She thought that it could be simple like that. She was wrong. Whatever he and Stiles have, it’s complicated, and it can hurt, and it’s not just two people meet and like each other then fall in love forever in a field of flowers and rainbows. That’s not what happens with Derek. “Do we need to fill out any extra paperwork?”

“Uhm, no…”

“Then we’re done here.” Derek starts walking towards where the booths are set up, Scott and Stiles trailing after him.

“You guys are ridiculous,” Scott grumbles.

“Shut up man,” Stiles shoots back. He looks put out. He’s probably mad at Derek for being mean to the poor volunteer. She looked like she was made of nerves to begin with, he probably was too harsh.

Handing Stiles his name tag, Derek says lowly: “sorry about that.”

“What?” Stiles asks, looping the tag around his neck, “no man, I’m sorry that you had to hear ‘mate’ thrown around like that.”

Derek cocks his head in confusion until he remembers Paige. “Right. Well, I still should have been more polite. It wasn’t that volunteer’s fault.”

Stiles pats Derek sympathetically on the shoulder. “It was nobody’s fault, man. Not Paige’s, not the volunteer’s, and not yours.”

“Thanks,” Derek sighs. He really wishes he could straighten the whole Paige thing out with Stiles. It’s turning out to be a bigger lie than Derek can handle, and he only has room for one long term deception in his life.

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“So we’re looking for room 058…” Stiles mutters, shuffling through all of the pamphlets and maps they’ve been given. “That’s interspecies pack relations, right? 058? Yes, okay, but wait, is that in building C? Aw shit, we’re so lost.”

Derek sighs and looks around at the other convention goers, all of whom seem to know exactly where they’re going. “We should ask for directions. Also, what happened to Scott?”

“Scott?” Stiles asks, still distracted by the papers. “Oh, I sent him with Cora and Isaac.”

“I thought you two were gonna be attached at the hip,” Derek muses.

“Well, I, uh,” Stiles scratches the back of his head in that way he does when he’s trying to exude casualness. “I thought that, uh, you’d like it if he were there to chaperone Cora and Isaac a bit. Like, stop ‘em from sneaking off and, uh, you know.”

Derek looks at Stiles in confusion. “They slept in their own private hotel room last night. Together. I’m not naive.”

Unfolding the map again, Stiles exclaims, “oh, room 508. We should find an elevator. Do you know where an elevator is?” he asks over his shoulder, already speed walking away.

A faint frown growing on his lips, Derek trails after Stiles. He hopes that Scott and Stiles are doing
alright. Stiles ordered Scott away for some reason, and it sure wasn’t because of Cora and Isaac. Derek knows Stiles well enough to know that.

Then they reach room 508: Interspecies Pack Relations, and Derek sets the issue aside for later.

The room is fairly big, pleasantly earth toned in the way that hotel rooms generally are, with a small stage and mic set up at the other side of the room. There are no chairs. All of the room’s other occupants are standing in small clumps, looking just as confused as Derek and Stiles are.

Then an improbably tall woman in neon pink sneakers struts onto the stage. “Okay!” she chirps into the mic, “hello everybody! Welcome to Interspecies Pack Relations, we’re going to be exploring packs, werewolf or otherwise, who are composed of more than just one species.” Her eyes fly open, wide and startlingly round, and she orders with the pep of a kindergarten teacher: “now everybody stand in pairs with your pack members, ideally a pack member of a different species. This is going to be hands on, people!” She claps her hands right in front of the microphone and it screams in protest.

Stiles, as though he’s a kindergartener himself, grabs Derek’s hand and shuffles closer to mark Derek as his partner.

“This was not what I was expecting,” Derek admits.

“Well, uh,” Stiles muses as they watch the other seminar goers shuffle around each other, “we’re probably going to have a better story at lunch about our seminar than whatever the others had to sit through. I bet we’re going to do some weird ass trust exercises.”

“I don’t see how trust exercises—”

“I see everybody is paired up!” sings the instructor. “Now get ready, because we’re going to do some trust exercises!”

Stiles grins like a cat that got the cream.

It’s all pretty typical stuff that Derek remembers from bonding trips for basketball in high school: trust falls, leading your partner around the room blindfolded, silly tasks that don’t have a goddamn thing to do with whether the other person would be there for you in the middle of the night, if they would grip your shoulder and say, “if you wanna talk, you can talk to me.” He and Stiles do fine, even if Stiles stumbles a little when Derek’s weight falls into him the first time.

“Ooof, somebody needs to be a bit less muscle,” he grumbles, readjusting his arms so they’re clasped around Derek’s chest more firmly.

The last exercise though, is... tricky.

“Partners! Now we’re going to do something a little more unconventional!” the instructor hollers. “This one is tailored for the werewolves in attendance, but it’s useful for everybody in a pack mosaic. I’m going to set a timer for 60 seconds, and I want you and your partner to hold your teeth or fangs to the other’s jugular, hold still, then switch for the next sixty seconds. Needless to say, do not bite down.” The instructor’s announcement sets off a wave of murmuring in the room, and she holds out placating hands. “I understand I’m asking for a lot, and if you do not feel safe or do not think you can control yourself, do stop. Safety is our number one priority.”

Derek turns to ask Stiles if he’s alright with this, but Stiles is already leaning his head back, exposing his long, mole speckled neck, no rapid fire anxiety in his heartbeat, just Stiles, neck bared and waiting.
Derek really, really hopes that his eyes aren’t glowing red again.

He can hear the nervous giggling and the shuffling of feet from the other occupants of the room, but his eyes fall only on Stiles, waiting patiently for Derek to put his neck between his teeth. So Derek does. Rests the points of his teeth against the thick vein pulsing slowly down Stiles’ neck. His tongue itches to flick out and lick, and he wants to latch on and suck, not just delicately press enamel against skin.

“Dude, everybody else is having a shit ton of trouble with this,” Stiles’ voice rumbles through Derek’s teeth. “Don’t know why they can’t just calm the fuck down, it’s not like pack is ever gonna hurt you.”

Derek remembers Peter, and is immeasurably grateful that Stiles has never known pain at the hands of his own pack, that Stiles can have a werewolf at his neck without fearing for a second.

“Aaaaand switch!” the instructor hollers.

Stiles’ teeth are cool on Derek’s neck, but his breath is hot as it rushes over Derek’s skin. Is this what it felt like for Stiles, too? It couldn’t have been, Derek would have smelled the arousal.

When the instructor calls time, Stiles withdraws his teeth, but playfully licks a line up Derek’s neck, which means that Derek has to take a second to grit his teeth and think firmly about the very unsexy septic tank the construction people are currently replacing as part of the house’s renovations. It works: he can contain himself when Stiles pulls back, laughing, eyes warm and liquid, he can lean in and scrape his scruff over Stiles’ neck in return and just be grateful that they’re close enough that he can do this, mark Stiles with the only consequence being a snort and a slap on the shoulder.

The rest of the seminar goes by in a blur, as the instructor lists off the various ways in which the trust exercises are metaphors for pack life, blah blah blah, the next thing Derek knows, they’re sitting with the pack around a long table in the hotel’s restaurant, sharing stories from their mornings, then after that, he and Stiles are trekking around the second floor, looking for the Oak Ballroom: Supernatural Entities and Soulmates: Exploring the Disconnect. Derek doesn’t think that there will be anything that he hasn’t already read and bookmarked on his My Life is SMD account, but Stiles saw it on the program and looked so excited.

"I'm actually really curious about this," Stiles confides as they pick two of the bland padded chairs near the center of the audience. "It's just, uh, it's interesting how, like, werewolves have more trouble with it. Like, did you know that half of werewolves have soul bond dysfunctions? It's surprising, because you'd think that werewolves would be ideal soulmates, all, uh," Stiles coughs, "you know, just, fit, good providers, whatever."

Derek folds, unfolds, refolds the program in his hands. "I couldn't tell you."

"Yeah..." Stiles muses, then perks up as a man in a suit and a handful of wiccan medallions around his neck takes to the stage. "Well, okay, I guess hopefully this guy will know."

Maybe he does, but the guy—Dr. Vesuvine—spends the first hour talking about soulmate culture in every other conceivable supernatural society, so Derek is half asleep and his butt is verging on numbness by the time the doctor finishes explaining how merfolk reject the notion of soulmates entirely, since their culture verges on universally polyamorous.

"Contrastingly," he says, holding up a finger, "werewolves, known for being extremely monogamous even when not in pair bonds with their actual soul mates, actually have a much higher incidence of soul mate dysfunction." Dr. Vesuvine goes on to outline the statistics from Laura that
Derek has heard so many times, then concludes unhelpfully, “the causes of which are largely unknown.”

Derek sighs quietly in his seat. It wasn't as though he was expecting the guy to pull out a miracle cure or anything, but it certainly isn't heartening to hear that a doctor of supernatural entity studies is just as clueless as Derek is.

"However," Dr. Vesuvine continues, "that is not to say that all hope is lost for those with soul mate dysfunctions, werewolf or not. There have been many cases found wherein the dysfunctional person and their soul mate enter into a romantic relationship nevertheless, or in which the dysfunctional finds an alternative person with whom they may spend their life; if not in the bliss of a soul mate bond, then at least with a modicum of contentment." He spreads his arms to either side of the podium. "Many people with soul mate dysfunctions can learn to cope, love other people, if in different ways."

That's nice for other people, Derek thinks, watching Stiles lean forward in his seat, so eager to learn, sharp eyebrows quirked up in interest. He smiles to himself as he sees Stiles' feet start to tap frenetically. So fidgety, a whirlwind inside of a human body.

"On that note, I'll end my presentation, and I hope all of you have a great evening. Again, my book, *Supernatural Soulmates*, is on sale in the lobby."

"I want to talk to him," Stiles says quickly, standing up and threading his way through the crowd to join the small throng gathering around Dr. Vesuvine at the base of the stage.

Shaking his head, Derek gathers up Stiles' jacket and the paperwork he'd left on the chair in his rush. Stiles is probably getting set off on one of his research kicks. A shock of concern shivers through Derek's heart. If Stiles starts looking too deeply into soulmates, into werewolves and soulmates in particular... there's no way he won't find out. Derek isn't a master of subtlety, he's just been lucky so far in that Stiles doesn't know what it means when Derek's eyes turn red and he feeds food straight into Stiles' mouth, what it means when Derek occasionally steals Stiles' hoodies and wears them himself, what it means when Derek lets Stiles into his bed, even though Alphas shouldn't trust anyone but their mate being nearby while they sleep.

Derek stands up and walks over to join Stiles in the crowd around Dr. Vesuvine. It seems to be too late, because Stiles is thanking the doctor already, shaking his hand with a wide grin on his face.

"Are you, uh," Derek hands Stiles his belongings. "You left these behind."

"Hey, thanks man." Stiles slips on the hoodie, stuffs the pamphlets and handouts into the pocket. "Dr. Vesuvine's a smart dude."

Derek muses, "uh, yeah, probably, while anxiously glancing back at the professor, who is confidently explaining something about incubi to a concerned looking middle aged woman. "Hang on." He stops to listen.

"So you don't think there's anything to be concerned about?" the woman asks.

"No, most likely not. If incubi weren't able to control themselves, we would be living in quite a different world," Dr. Vesuvine assures her with a straight-toothed smile. "But if you're still concerned, I believe there's a wicca booth downstairs that's selling charms that will repel an incubus if they come too close to you. You just have to press it to their skin. Be careful, of course," he winks at her, "it's not the sort of thing to be overzealous about."

Derek makes a note of that, then distractedly pushes Stiles out of the room, babbling something
about, "we should um, we should meet the pack downstairs, they'll be waiting for us," before Stiles thinks of any more questions for the professor.

Stiles is in a good mood for the rest of the afternoon and evening, happily exchanging notes with the pack about what seminars, talks, demos they went to, the wicca seminar he wants to go to tomorrow to learn more about earth magic, the social tonight being held in the ballroom.

"Are you going, Derek?" Stiles asks.

"To the social thing?" Derek raises an eyebrow. Stiles knows him better than that.

"Okay, I know they aren't really your thing-"

"Especially since this sounds more like a high school dance than a 'social'," Cora observes, reading over the schedule for the weekend. "'Featuring DJ Smooth Grooves?' she reads dubiously.

"I'm not going," Derek states unnecessarily.

Stiles scrunches his face up at Derek disapprovingly but allows, "yeah, if you didn't like The Jungle, you probably won't like this. Open bar, jesus."

While Derek is thinking, horrified, about the combination of Cora — anyone in the pack really — and an open bar, Erica asks, "wait, you guys went to The Jungle together?"

"Are we surprised?" Boyd asks flatly. Derek wonders what he means by that.

Isaac snickers, and Derek gets an idea.

"Hey guys, it wasn't like that."

"No," Stiles adds, playing with the straw of his drink, "it wasn't. Um, anyway, the social. That's what I'm doing tonight. Is everybody else in?"

They are, which leaves Derek alone for the evening once the pack pours themselves downstairs to go to the party. He hopes that they don't get in too much trouble, placing his trust in Scott and Boyd to prevent anything too crazy going down.

With no teenagers to wrangle and most of the convention goers in the hotel ballroom, Derek finds himself distractedly flipping through channels, then restlessly wandering the hallways, climbing upstairs then back down, peeking hopefully into the hotel gym, then remembering that he didn't bring any workout clothes, then wandering through the lobby, where a collection of booths selling anything and everything a supernatural entity could want are packing up fo, stowing merchandise in plastic bins and folding up the plastic tables. Derek catches a glimpse of a banner with a pentacle on it, and remembers Dr. Vesuvine's advice for the woman at the seminar.

He jogs over just as one of the women behind the table start rolling up the banner.

"Um, excuse me," he rushes out, "do you have, um, charms? For incubi?"

The woman with at least five piercings in each ear rolls her eyes. "All day we've been getting this. For one dinky incubus!"

"He's a little ass, though," the other wiccan comments dryly as she shuffles through one of their bins. "Cheeky."
"That's no reason for the entire convention to get twitchy," Piercings grumbles. "I swear, one incubus and everybody thinks its another SPECon of 2003."

"Just," Derek interrupts, "do you have them?"

"Do we ever," the non-pierced woman grumbles, opening one of the boxes and digging around in it before she pulls out a ziplock bag filled with a rat's nest of string and silvery metal. "How many?"

"Uh," Derek counts up the pack in his head. "Seven. Thanks." Even if the incubus only kisses his victims, Derek would prefer that none of the pack have to deal with that.

The woman slaps down seven ramshackle bracelets, and charges him an exorbitant fee, but Derek still feels better when he walks back up to the room, purchases in hand.

It takes three tries for the keycard to work in the door, but once it does, Derek finds Stiles already fast asleep in their bed, although Scott still seems to be downstairs at the social. The early wakeup must have really gotten to Stiles, as he doesn’t stir even as Derek walks around the darkened room, doesn’t stir when Derek accidentally knocks over his suitcase, doesn’t stir when Derek stumbles into the bathroom and turns on the light, the bathroom fan blaring for the entire time Derek brushes his teeth, doesn’t stir when Derek comes back into the bedroom to jostle the mattress as he scoots under the covers.

“Night,” Derek whispers to Stiles’ slumbering form, amused.

XXXXX

"Ah," Stiles drawls, spreading out further on the blanket they've spread on the grass of the backyard. "The prodigal werewolf returns."

"I don't think you're using that phrase right," Derek retorts dryly as he walks closer. "And it isn't my fault that the flashlights were impossible to find."

Stiles waves a hand. "They were in the junk drawer! Were they not in the junk drawer? I totally told you they were in the junk drawer, right?"

Lightly bopping Stiles on the head with the rubbery handle of one of the flashlights, Derek points out, "you didn't tell me that they were inside of a box in the junk drawer, underneath a mountain of rubber bands, behind the screwdriver set."

"Details," Stiles grumbles, flicking his flashlight on and off. The sun hasn't quite set yet, so the flashlight just casts faint yellow light over the grass, into the trees beyond. "You found the flashlights, the fireworks should start going off in like fifteen minutes, and Rusty is..." he whistles, then hollers, "Rusty? Where's my Rusty?"

Rusty howls from the treeline and Stiles pats his thigh. "Come on boy, it's not patriotic to avoid the Fourth of July fireworks!"

Making the odd snorting noise he always does, Rusty drags his pudgy, dirt smudged corgi body out of the Preserve, stuffing his head underneath Stiles' hand for a scratch.

"Hey buddy," Stiles chuckles, "how's my boy? How's my boy?"

"Count yourself lucky," Derek tells Rusty, "he didn't even ask me how my day at work today was."

Stiles rolls his eyes. "How was work, dear?"
"Same as always. The park is still there, campers still try to set fires where they shouldn't."

"See this is why I don't ask." Stiles frees up a hand to scratch behind Derek's ears. "I can give you a belly rub though, if that's what you're after."

Derek smirks lewdly. "Save it for tonight."

Stiles snorts, "Oh my god," "that wasn't even sexy, that was just..."

"I try," Derek protests.

"I appreciate it, I do," Stiles admits, taking a swig of one of the beer bottles in the picnic basket. "But you're plenty sexy without the bad double entendres, don't worry."

Leaning in close, Derek whispers, "apology kiss?"

Making an amused sound, Stiles nudges his mouth up, giving in. "Mmm," he murmurs when they pull away, "that wasn't even a fight though."

"Ehhh." Derek presses in for another kiss. "S'Alright."

"Mmm."

The boom of the first firework going off interrupts them, and they both look up to watch red and orange and yellow and blue and green flowers crash and bloom in the sky. Rusty whines at the noise and they both press a reassuring hand to his back.

"You wanna talk about double entendre?" Stiles nods at the fireworks. "You know how many old movies would use these as a metaphor for the old horizontal mamba?"

Derek leans in for another kiss, and it may not be the horizontal mamba, but it's still fireworks worthy.

When Derek wakes up, it's lucky that Stiles is still dead to the world, because if he were awake, he would probably be making some comments about Derek’s waddle for the bathroom and a cold shower.

Scott stirs in the other bed as Derek opens the door to go downstairs.

“D’rek?"

“I'm going to a talk about leadership,” Derek says quietly so as not to wake Stiles. “You two sleep.”

Rolling over and pulling the covers up, Scott mutters, “Kay.”

Shaking his head fondly, Derek walks downstairs to the oak conference room: Matrons, Alphas, and Fae Royals—Where Magic and Leadership Intersect. He hopes the pack isn't too hungover from whatever wolfsbane liquor they had at the social. Well, he hopes they didn't have any at all, but Derek isn't naive. At the very least, he hopes they won't outdo themselves at whatever party is going down tonight. Whoever organized SPECon was determined that the alcohol flow freely.

Derek sits through a faintly enlightening hour and a half, then leaves the room and checks his phone, which he keeps on silent when he's watching something. His mother raised him to be polite.

[Where are you.]
It's from Stiles. Derek's brow furrows as he remembers Cora telling him that a period at the end of a text is a bad sign. ("It's just punctuation, Cora." "It's tone, there's a different tone when you add a period!")

Glancing to his side, Derek texts back, [By the fountain with all the pillars in it]

He leaves out the period. It seems like a good idea.

[Stay there.]

Derek sits on the edge of the fountain. Hopefully Stiles didn't do something terrible at the social last night that Derek will have to clean up, or one of the pack is having a nervous breakdown. His feet tap out an anxious pattern against the dark gray stones making up the courtyard.

Stiles appears in one of the doors leading into the courtyard, zeroing in on Derek and striding towards him. He's worked up about something, moving quickly, shoulders hunched.

"Hey."

"Hey," Derek greets him in return.

Stiles raises his eyebrows expectantly.

"Good morning?"

Stiles chuckles without humor and looks anywhere but at Derek. "I mean, that's one phrase to use. Is it accurate, I don't know, I feel like there are better ways to say good morning, like, I don't know, staying until I woke up?" He shoots Derek an accusing stare. Leaving a note at least? I mean come on, Derek, I didn't know what to do."

Derek blinks. Blinks again. "Um, sorry?"

"Yeah."

"I, uh, I thought you and Scott would be fine together, and I had a talk to go to," Derek continues, feeling his way like a blind man on thin ice. "I just told him that you two should sleep in as much as you want, and I thought you two would be able to figure out what to do with your time. But!" he adds in response to Stiles' darkening expression, "I'm, um, sorry. That I left. I didn't know that we were supposed to be going to all of the events together, I guess."

Stiles just looks angrier. Derek isn't sure that he's ever seen Stiles look so flat out mad. Jesus, had he really screwed up that badly? Maybe it's an unspoken rule that you stick around until your friend wakes up after a night out. That's probably it, what if Stiles had been passed out from alcohol poisoning and Derek had just skipped off to Matrons, Alphas, and Fae Royals-Where Magic and Leadership Intersect? Friends are supposed to watch out for each other's safety, after all.

"And," he goes on, "I guess you had a lot to drink, so I should have made sure you were alright."

Stiles' jaw twitches. "Okay," he says flatly. "Is this how we're doing it? Fine. I just. I'm just an idiot, I guess," he hovers for a moment of indecision, then whirls around to leave.

"Wait!" Derek calls, chasing after him and grabbing his arm. "Stiles, I just, I really don't understand why you're so upset."
With wide eyes, Stiles stares at Derek. "Okay," he says faintly, "okay, no, message received."

"Stiles-"

Stiles jerks his arm free of Derek's grasp and keeps moving. "Don't touch me. And don't follow me!" he adds with a chastising finger as Derek steps forward again.

So Derek stands, rooted to the ground, as Stiles leaves the courtyard like a thunderstorm. Scrubbing a hand through his hair, Derek exhales heavily. He has to fix this, but chasing after Stiles won’t do him any good, so all he can think to do is give Stiles some space to cool off.

He begs off when Erica texts him about meeting the rest of the pack for lunch, takes refuge in some terribly dry conference room where a gnome drones on about supernatural land disputes in the midwest, avoids their hotel room like the plague and goes on a walk through the city instead.

The odd thing is, Derek used to spend every hour of his day alone, he used to revel in solitude, because the sound of other people's voices grated on him, and he couldn't muster up the energy to deal with conversation. But now it's been barely seven hours alone, and he's getting twitchy. He's gone this long without Stiles before, but now he isn't allowed to search him out to tell him the story about the family of brownies who took up the entire back two rows of the land dispute seminar, or ask him if they should go find thai or mexican food, and it tugs at him, chafes on his nerves, winds up his muscles and makes him see Stiles in every brown haired young man that walks by. He misses his best friend, and there's no way that he'll be able to do this for the rest of the convention, let alone once they get home. Derek has to fix this before they have to split an apartment three ways: between the two of them and the elephant in the room.

Still, he doesn't want to corner Stiles in the hotel room, knows it will make him confrontational and defensive, so Derek makes up his mind to find Stiles at the "Music, Drinking, Dancing!" event in the ballroom tonight. It's easy enough to find the ballroom and the masses of convention attendees streaming in, less easy to find the pack, let alone Stiles, especially considering that the room has been dressed up to look like a club: dim lights, loud music and abundant neon. It's a nightmare for at least four different types of Supernatural Entity, including werewolves, but that didn't seem to stop the party planners.

Derek ends up wandering around the entire room twice, gaze slipping over face after face, none of which are the face that he wants. He fiddles with the anti-incubus charm around his wrist nervously. Stiles wouldn't just go up to the room, would he? Are they going to have to fight it out upstairs, with no possible exit, no dignified way to leave without gathering up a suitcase first?

God, he just wants everything to be okay. He wants Stiles leaning on him, dozing off as they try to navigate the unfamiliar channels of the hotel TV, searching for The Simpsons, but finding the local news and giving up there. He wants Stiles to tell him what color the living room of the pack house should be painted, he wants Stiles to promise he won't leave.

Then, as if Derek's wonderings had called Stiles to him, Stiles appears out of the crowd, on a beeline towards Derek. A smile spread over his face.

"Stiles!" Derek shouts over the music. "I'm sorry, can we just talk?!"

Stiles smiles again, broadly. He nods, hooks a firm hand around Derek's shoulder and leads him out of the ballroom, deftly maneuvering them through the crowd. Or maybe, Derek wonders briefly as the other dancers step out of the way, the crowd is maneuvering around them.

Stiles leads Derek to the ballroom entranceway: still crowded, but not so mind-numbingly loud that
it's impossible to talk.

"Stiles," Derek beings with a sigh, "I know that I'm not always the best at... people, but I want you to know that I feel terrible, and I just want to make things better. We're- you're my best friend."

"Shhhh," Stiles coos, reaching out a hand to caress Derek's hair. "It's alright. It was stupid. I'm sorry too. Shhh."

Confused, Derek stares at Stiles while his hand continues to stroke through his hair. "Really? Because you were pissed off this morning, I didn't think you would forgive me so easily."

"How could I not forgive you?" Stiles smiles sweetly, drawing nearer. "With that face?" His thumb drops to brush across Derek's lower lip.

This has happened before, Derek knows what this is.

Stiles' head tilts to the side, and he sways close, gazing at Derek flirtatiously from beneath lowered lashes in a way Derek knows the real Stiles would never do.

The incubus' lips just scrape against Derek's when Derek jams the anti-incubus charm against his neck. It hisses when it touches the incubus' skin, and the incubus jolts and shudders as though he's being tazed, Stiles' soft brown hair flickering in and out of existence to be replaced by fire red locks.

"Oh my goodness," exclaims a woman who can only be a harpy, judging by the wings on her back. "That's him! The incubus! With his glamour flickering on and off!"

"I knew they were going to be a problem!" another harpy chimes in, crowding closer to the incubus' jerking body with a hand pressed to her heart. "I didn't care what they said, it's SPECon 2003 all over again-"

"Did you use one of those nice wicca charms? Oh let me see that-"

"Where are this kid's parents?" a disgusted gnome asks, nudging the flame-haired teenager's shoulder with his foot.

"Fuckin' hell," the incubus growls from the floor, appearance now firmly locked on Edwin Tarlaem. "I can't even try to enjoy myself at this boring ass conference thing?"

The hoard of fae that have gathered around the scene all huff in outrage, devolving into rapid, incoherent fae-chant, though their expressions reveal the topic of their conversation.

"Ugh, I've always said, don't leave an underage incubus wandering around on their own, they're bound to cause trouble."

"Who's calling a safety officer? Wasn't Marleen getting a safety officer?"

"Oh that's her over there, Marleen!"

Derek just stands, disoriented, over the incubus, being pushed and prodded by the growing crowd until some dude in a T-shirt that reads "SAFETY" approaches him. "Young man, did you apprehend the suspect?" he asks with the dead seriousness of someone who's been waiting to ask those words for years.

"I, I guess, yeah." Derek rubs a hand down the side of his face. Where's the real Stiles? He didn't mean for any of this to happen, all he wants to do is make up with Stiles and fall asleep with Stiles
kicking his shins, he doesn't want to be involved in whatever interspecies politics or low budget crime drama is happening right now. Everything is loud, and smells weird, and somebody is very determinedly pushing through the crowd to come closer, eliciting annoyed chatter and the occasional "watch it!" Derek wants to leave.

"What happened? Did he approach you?" the safety officer asks eagerly. "Tell me the details of the story as you remember it."

"He found me in the ballroom, we came out here, he tried to kiss me, I- I- Stiles?"

"Dude!" Stiles breathes, having just emerged like a safari explorer from the crushing jungle of people gathered around the scene. "What the fuck is going on? Scott, get over here!" he calls over his shoulder.

"We've got a case of unsolicited incubi action," the officer cuts in. "Hold on just a sec to talk to your friend, young man, he's giving a statement."

Shifting from foot to foot, Derek repeats for Stiles' benefit, "The incubus found me in the ballroom, we came out here, he tried to kiss me, I used this charm I got from the wiccan booth in the lobby, now he's on the floor" Derek snaps, slapping the charm into the officer's hand. He isn't going to need it anymore. "Open and shut."

"And was he using a glamour?"

"Of course he was using a glamour."

"Of...?" the officer prompts. He's pulled out an honest to god notepad and pen.

Derek crosses his arms, not looking at Stiles at all. "Of someone I find attractive."

"But not attractive enough to kiss?"

"I don't see how that's relevant."

"Well generally people succumb to incubi pretty quickly," a beanpole of a man pipes up from somewhere in the crowd, "they, uh, they instinctively take the form of whatever person is irresistibly attractive to the victim. I'm actually writing a dissertation on it-"

"Not now Georgio," someone hushes him.

The officer raps his pen against his notepad. "So was he or was he not using a glamour?"

"He was," Derek sighs. "I just knew that the actual person would never do that, alright?"

The officer's eyes widen in sympathy, and Derek hates him for it. Derek would be coping just fine if the world would stop throwing him into these situations. "Ohhh. Rough, dude. Okay, well, let's take this guy to the office, track down his parents, I think Juvenile Supernatural Entity Enforcement may have to get involved."

"What?" Edwin asks sharply. "Come on, really? So what, I made out with like two dudes, that's just a regular weekend!"

"Tell it to the judge, kid," the safety officer reprimands gleefully, hauling the incubus up by his elbows.

Derek lets out an internal sigh of relief, which is quickly interrupted by Scott.
“Duuude, we leave you alone for a day and this happens? Whaaat the fuck?”

“Apparently everybody wants a piece of Derek Hale,” Stiles comments coldly. Derek tries to suppress a wince.

Scott shoots Stiles a chill, man look and continues, “since when do you have an incubus zapping charm anyway?”

Derek digs in his pocket for the tangle of bracelets he’d been meaning to give to the pack before he’d had to send himself into exile. “I bought them while all of you were at last night’s social. I should have given them to all of you, but when I got back to the room, Stiles was asleep, and you were out, then in the morning you were both asleep, and today—” he dares a glance at Stiles who looks... pale. “Today I was busy,” Derek concludes vaguely.

Chuckling good naturedly, Scott picks up one of the bracelets. “I wasn’t accusing you of anything man, it’s just a handy coincidence. Man,” he comments to Stiles, “that could have gone a lot worse, huh.”

Stiles tears his gaze away from where the officer is leading the incubus through the crowd.

"Yeah," he agrees distractedly, "it's good you weren't at the social. You never stopped by or anything?"

"Um, no?" Derek replies. He'd have thought Stiles would have more questions about the incubus than what Derek did with his time last night, but apparently not. "This is the first time I've been in the ballroom all weekend. Probably the last, too,” he adds as a grumbly afterthought.

Stiles nods, then nods again, faster, confirming something to himself. "Okay. Okay. That's-" he lets loose a peal of laughter. "Of course, yeah." He laughs again, shoulders shaking with mirth over something that Derek and Scott don't understand at all.

Scott socks Stiles lightly on the shoulder. "Where's the joke, bro?"

Shaking his head, Stiles replies, "it's nothing, not even funny. Just... just an inside joke with myself." He smiles wryly, and Derek just- just-

"I still need to talk to you," Derek bursts out. "If... Scott, could you give us some privacy?"

Scott taps the side of his nose. "Gotcha man. I've gotta go find the rest of the pack anyway." He slips between two harpies and disappears.

Turning to Stiles, Derek starts, "so, I think I have an apology to make-"

"No!" Stiles rushes out, "no, you don't. You uh, you really really don't. God."

Derek waits a beat, just to see if Stiles is going to change his tune again in the next few seconds. "I feel like I'm getting some mixed messages here."

Pinching the bridge of his nose and squeezing his eyes shut, Stiles shakes his head. "No, uh, no. I was the one who- I just..." he looks up at Derek apologetically. "This morning I was under the impression that you'd done something you didn't, I was wrong, obviously, uh, and now I'm not mad, since, you know, it's not you who I have to be made at. Like, I've got some anger all up in here, but I'm not going to take it out on you, because that would just be like blaming the victim, or, I dunno, beating a dead horse? I don't know what the phrase is. The point is!" Stiles concludes with a wild motion of his hands, "I'm sorry for yelling at you please be my friend again and hang out with me.
tomorrow so I don't have to hear another day's worth of details about this Kira chick."

"Yes! Yes." Derek knows to take an out when he gets one. "Yes, I'll be your friend." Stiles' face
looks so forlorn and embarrassed that Derek can't help but add, "come on, I never wasn't."

"Sap."

"It's been a dramatic evening."

"Tell me about it." Stiles exhales, shoulders sagging under his striped T-shirt. "Can we just go watch
stupid reality TV or something?"

Derek breathes a sigh of relief. "Sounds good to me."

The hotel TV is still impossible to navigate, but Derek will take Britain's version of Supernanny any
day if it means that Stiles is propped up on the dozens of pillows next to him, their socks bumping
lightly together.

The house comes together faster than Derek expected.

By the time the pack comes back from the conference, the unsalvageable portions of the house have
been torn down and replaced with fresh new plaster. By the next month, the foreman is asking Derek
about where he wants the wiring for the outlets, and the trenches for replacement plumbing are
refilled.

"Will we all get our own bedrooms?" Erica asks eagerly, and Derek rolls his eyes because that's the
whole point.

"Will I get my own private floor?" Cora asks, and Derek rolls his eyes again, for an entirely different
reason.

They all have ideas for their rooms, excited even though most of them won't be moving in until after
they finish college. Stiles doesn't have many opinions about his own bedroom, but does elbow Derek
and ask if he's going to have a memory foam mattress again, maybe a bigger one this time.

School starts up again, and most of the pack treks out of Beacon Hills again. Cora surprises Derek by
calling Isaac in Humboldt every night. He'd just assumed... but apparently not, she really does seem
gloomier with Isaac gone. He and Stiles try to make up for it by inviting her over for dinner every
night and distracting her by spinning dreams about the granite countertops that will be in the pack
kitchen, the island table and the big bay windows.

By the time Derek finally finishes Stiles' mittens, the dream comes to fruition, and Derek, Stiles and
Cora stand in the growing house, inspecting the new kitchen in awe.

When Halloween rolls around, (and with it, Stiles desperately trying to figure out how to work the
pink sombrero into a non-racist costume,) the second floor is well underway, and Derek has to drag
Stiles away from the skeleton of the stairwell before he falls through and breaks a leg.

Stiles throws himself into planning out the house with as much enthusiasm as Derek does, so by the
time the construction guys are sorting out the roof, Stiles and Derek are spending hours every
afternoon flipping through the ridiculous pile of home decorating magazines Stiles subscribed them
to, picking out furniture that would suit Erica versus Boyd, couches sturdy enough to hold the whole
pack at once, and in Stiles' case, as much wolf-themed decor as possible. Derek tries to shut him
down, but when he isn't looking, Stiles adds the wolves back onto their pinterest board.

They have a Pinterest account now. Derek isn't proud, but on the other hand, they've actually collected a fair amount of followers, or subscribers, or whatever they're called, which he can't help but be quietly proud about.

His and Stiles' relationship has never been better. They run like fellow gears in a clock, fitting around each other in the apartment, finishing each other's sentences often enough that Cora makes fun of them, spending almost every other night in each other's rooms, watching some crappy movie or knitting. Derek's been teaching Stiles how to knit, which Stiles takes on at a rapid fire pace, his frenetic energy going straight into the yarn. Derek has never been happier. They're closer than Derek had ever dreamed they would be. He wishes he could go back in time and reassure his past self that while Stiles will never want him romantically, they make fantastic friends. They live together, they eat together, they sleep in the same bed more often than not.

If only... well.

Derek can't quite put his finger on it, but sometimes when Stiles is alone, he seems... glum. The darkness that first reared its head around the convention, still emerges now and then, like a lake monster coming out of black water. Derek is the last to claim that he's good with people, but there's something about the way that Stiles will slump over on the couch, staring blankly at the TV, until Derek makes his presence known and Stiles sits up straight again, all cheerfulness and frenetic energy, that makes Derek think that something must be bothering Stiles. Something about the way that Derek will sometimes wake in the middle of the night to an empty bed, and the sound of footsteps pacing back and forth in the hallway outside. Something about the way that Stiles will go on long walks alone sometimes, an hour or two wandering around the neighborhood, his car still in its parking spot. He comes back sopping wet one November night, and Derek asks,

"What happened to you?"

"Forgot my umbrella," Stiles grimaces.

Derek glances out the window. It's been raining for nigh on two hours. There's no way that Stiles couldn't have come back from his walk earlier to get dry.

It isn't much. But it's enough to make Derek pull up the My Life is SMD page when Stiles is in classes. Derek clicks the "create new post" button.

*Hey guys, I was hoping somebody would be able to help me with this. My soulmate (non-requited, but we get along pretty well) has been feeling gloomy lately, I think, and I don't know why. Advice?* - Wolfmannoitoxy

Posted.

Stiles comes back from classes with a spring in his step. "Hey." He leans in for his usual welcome home hug. "Guess who got a 96% on their Sociology quiz? This guy!" He punches the air.

"So you're not flunking out of college after all?" Derek asks in mock surprise.

"No I am not!" Stiles crows, ignoring Derek's sarcasm completely. "I'm ordering victory Thai, are you getting your usual?"

"Yeah, course."

"Cool."
Stiles calls the Thai place, feet twitching happily on the coffee table all the while.

This is the problem: just when Derek thinks that's it, there's no way something isn’t bothering Stiles, he'll come home with a broad grin on his face and excitement in his eyes, uncomplicatedly happy.

Derek pulls up his My Life is SMD account on his phone. He finally invested in a fancy smartphone, and this is possibly the second time he’s actually used one of the features besides texting and calling.

There's a response.

*Hi wolfmannottboy, I think the best advice is the simplest. Ask him if something has been bothering him. it's not a magical cure, but its better than just guessing what the problem might be. Yay open communication!* -youcancaillmejuliet

Derek’s thumb strokes thoughtfully over the screen. Fair enough. He should have guessed.

Since sooner is always better than later, he brings it up over dinner that night.

"So this might be nothing..."

"Mmm?" Stiles looks up from his side of the couch, mouth filled with Pad Thai.

Stabbing his food with the chopsticks thoughtfully, Derek says casually, "you've, um. I just wanted to know if something was bothering you. Sometimes you just seem a little... just. If you wanted to talk to somebody?" Derek holds his arms out to either side. "I'm. Um. Here. If something's been bothering you."

"It's that obvious?" Stiles asks urgently. His feet twitch where they're pressed against Derek's in the middle of the couch.

Derek swallows his mouthful of food quickly. "Not *that* obvious, just sometimes it seems like something is bothering you." Is he giving himself away? Is it weird that he pays this much attention to Stiles?

"Um." Stiles stirs his noodles with his chopsticks, stalling. Derek feels terrible. "I guess... um." He pauses, mulling over his words. "I just... am getting a little bummed about being single." It seems too simple for whatever thundercloud had settled over Stiles in the past few months, but his heart beats steadily: it isn't a lie.

"Oh. Alright." That's understandable, Stiles is young and filled with hormones, and Nose Ring was months ago. He needs somebody to fill that void, and he didn't take any of the pack with him to The Jungle over summer break, so he probably isn't comfortable going with them. Between that, Derek's discomfort over the club environment, and Stiles being smart enough to not go looking for a hookup alone, of course Stiles is feeling a little frustrated. "You know, I'd go with you to The Jungle if that's what you want."

"No, that's not what I want," Stiles mutters, tone suddenly acidic.

"Or not," Derek acquiesces, holding his hands up in surrender. "But if you want to find somebody, go out and find somebody. There are lots of people out there who would be thrilled to date you."

Stiles shifts uncomfortably on the couch. "I don't want to find the 'lots of people out there.' That's just... dealing with new people is exhausting, and they don't generally like me anyway."

"That's ridiculous," Derek protests. "You're smart and funny and handsome, what's not to like?"
"Plenty, apparently," Stiles snorts.

"What, just because one guy who was an idiot rejected you-"

"It's not just one guy!"

"What?" Derek doesn't remember Stiles having any other hookups, dates, boyfriends, anything, since Nose Ring, and he would know, they share a wall, for god's sake. More than that, Stiles tells him everything. “Who else has there been?”

Stiles stuffs the last mouthful of his pad thai into his mouth and says through it, “nobody. That’s just the problem.” He swallows. “Hey Derek, I’m, uh, going to go for a walk.” He stands.

“Listen, I didn’t mean to-” Derek is cut off by Stiles’ arm stifling his mouth as Stiles hugs Derek’s neck.

Stiles presses his face against the top of Derek’s head, and murmurs into his hair, “it’s cool man. I’ve just gotta deal with this myself.”

Fair enough. He’s not Stiles’ keeper. Squeezing Stiles’ wrist, Derek says, “okay,” and lets Stiles go.

Just after Stiles’ fall semester finals end — he aces them, of course — the house is finished. Derek was expecting more fanfare somehow, but what he gets is a call from the foreman on a Wednesday afternoon asking him to come down, take a look, make sure everything is as he wanted it to be before they move out.

The significance of it all doesn't crash down until he, Stiles, and Cora get out of the car, and there it is, their childhood home, standing tall again. Derek doesn't realize he's shaking until Stiles grabs his hand to stop it from fluttering like a leaf.

"Let's take a look, huh? Check out the new digs."

Stiles jerks his head at the building, and they walk in.

After a thorough look around: both floors, the four bathrooms, the massive kitchen, the bedrooms for anyone in the pack who wants one, the office, the living room that Stiles insists on calling "the den," the foreman asks, "look good?"

"Yeah," Derek replies. "Yeah it looks good."

It isn't quite his childhood home, even if the floor plans are practically identical. There's no furniture for one thing, and no Hale family for another. But an exact replica isn't what Derek wanted. He wanted this: this space full of potential, where the pack can settle and grow and live, where they can paint the walls stupid colors and burn food in the kitchen and haphazardly plant tomatoes in the backyard.

He and Stiles are the only ones who are going to move in right away; everyone else has to finish up at their faraway schools, and Cora refuses to deal with the house until it has furniture, so it's just the two of them setting up their own little clubhouse for a few days.

Which requires packing, much to both of their chagrin.

"I swear to god, where did I even get all of this stuff from?" Stiles looks in horror at the wide collection of boxes filling up their living room. "Didn't I move in with like two suitcases?"

"Stuff multiplies in the closet while you aren't looking." As Derek's mom used to say.
"Tell me about it. What's even happening here? Why do we have three eggbeaters? We do not make that many omelets, you get your protein from like, rare steak."

"Wasn't there a talk at that conference about using jokes that rely on specist stereotypes?"

"That's not a stereotype, that's a fact," Stiles retorts.

"Just give me the heaviest boxes, I'll put them in the Uhaul."

"I'd object to that if it weren't totally true that you're the only one who can carry them," Stiles grumbles as he leads Derek to a massive cardboard box with all of his electronics in it. "There you go big guy, be chivalrous."

Derek rolls his eyes, but still takes most of Stiles' boxes down to the truck without him noticing.

Moving also requires unpacking, much to both of their chagrin. Odds and ends need to find their places, clothes need to be hung and folded, sheets washed, TVs plugged in, cutlery sorted and put away, rugs rolled out, lightbulbs screwed in, curtains hung, toilet paper put on its roll in each of the four bathrooms, Stiles' collection of Avengers figurines placed carefully on the shelf above his window, the pink sombrero hung in a place of honor.

It takes two days straight, and that's not even including the furniture.

God, the furniture. They manage to manhandle every last piece of mismatched furniture from the apartment (placeholders until they drive out to the Ikea in Redding to assemble their dream home,) except. For. The. Couch.

"We'll just leave it. We can deal without a couch for a few weeks."

"Where will we eat, Derek? Where will we watch TV? Where will you knit that granny sweater thing?"

"It's a cardigan, and it's a perfectly legitimate piece of clothing for a man."

"Oh my god Derek, just grab that end of the couch and we'll try again. It has to fit through this doorway somehow, we got it into the apartment, didn't we?"

Sighing in exasperation, Derek picks up his end of the couch again. "Let's try it at a 45 degree angle this time."

"Yeah, okay, that might," Stiles shuffles forward, couch held at a 45 degree angle, and still gets trapped against the front door frame. "Dammit! Okay, no, you know what I'll do? Here, I'm practically a grown up emissary, I'll just-" he slaps a hand against the door frame and pushes. "Movit se de loco in locum!"

The doorframe moves out of their way as surely as if it were made of putty. Stiles laughs in delight as they inch forward with the couch. "Look at that, easy as-"

It’s funny, how quickly a day can be ruined. One minute, it’s sunshine, camaraderie, a hopeful future, and the next, it’s the section of roof that the doorframe was holding up groaning and collapsing in a cascade of wooden beams and roofing tile.

The next, it’s Stiles going down like a sack of potatoes, silent but for a soft crack from somewhere within his body.
For a horrified, draining second, Derek can't even bring himself to move. It just doesn't seem possible, that Stiles could be silenced so quickly, just one falling beam, and there he is, flat on the ground, eyes shut, mouth closed.

Then the second passes, and Derek leaps forward, one hand going for Stiles' motionless head, the other going for his phone. "Stiles, Stiles," he breathes, "Stiles, baby, wake up, come on, it was just a bump." He dials for Scott. "Scott, wh- shut up, shut up! It's an emergency. I don't have Deaton's number, you have to call him and tell him to the house- my house, the Hale House, he'll know. Tell him Stiles is hurt, he has to fix him. I know, I know Scott, he's- he should be fine. He. Just call him Scott." Derek's voice cracks on the last word, and he ends the call.

Brushing a hand over Stiles' hair, Derek listens for Stiles' heartbeat. It's thready, but there. Derek clings to it with a shaking hand over Stiles' heart. This isn't how it ends, not like this, not with a random act of calamity, not with a falling beam of wood, for god's sakes. That isn't how Stiles goes, Stiles goes when he's old, on a bed with his wife or husband nearby, a brood of cheeky-grinning kids hopping around. Maybe, maybe Derek would be there then, but he doesn't want to be here now, with Stiles' body so limp, more like a doll than a man.

"Come on, Stiles, come on," he whispers uselessly, ears peeled for the sound of a car coming up the street. "Come on, come back to me, we didn't even get the couch inside yet. Stiles."

He wishes he could gather Stiles into his arms, rock him back and forth, but you don't move a body that might have a spinal injury, so all he can do is hover over Stiles' body like an ineffective shield against anything that could hurt Stiles.

Derek is having trouble breathing, he's never had trouble breathing before. He bows his head down to Stiles' neck, bent in supplication, and breathes in Stiles' scent, trying to calm down. It works, despite the faint tinge of blood, until the thought I could never smell this again pops up in his head.

No, he won't let it, this won't be the last time he breathes in Stiles' scent. Stiles' last words to him won't be "look at that, easy as." The last time they touch won't be the brush of their fingers as Stiles passed him a chair.

But he's already picturing it. If Stiles' heartbeat stops before Deaton arrives. Derek will have to explain to Deaton what happened, then the paramedics, Stiles' father, the pack. It was all for a couch, he'll say, and then he'll hole up in his giant empty house that will be nothing, nothing without Stiles in it, because pipes and plaster aren't what make up a home, Stiles is. Stiles is his home and Stiles is dying. Stiles will die and Derek will live all alone in the house, even when Cora and the rest of the pack move in, he'll be all alone, because who else will watch movies with him late into the night, who else seems to know exactly what Derek is thinking?

And Derek is going to dwell. He knows already. He spent years wondering what he could have done to save his family. He still wonders. Now Stiles is going to die and Derek is always going to wonder if he could have moved faster, held up the beam before it hit Stiles, if he could have argued harder that they didn't need the couch, if he'd only just kissed Stiles before he died, taken that chance.

A high, canine whine rises from his throat, and he pushes his nose into Stiles' neck. There's still a heartbeat. Derek can't hold up the beam, or convince Stiles that they don't need the couch, but he can still kiss Stiles. Derek's hands clench and he silently begs Deaton to hurry, because he couldn't now, not while Stiles is unconscious, but Derek has to know if Stiles would let him kiss him. Really kiss him. Stiles is so breakable, so terrifyingly killable, Derek has to try once. If all it could take is a falling beam or a distracted driving or a rainy night and some slippery pavement, Derek has to try.

"Please," he begs the fading thump of Stiles' heart. "Please, Stiles. Come back, just come back, I, we
haven't even moved in all the way yet. Weren't we going to get all of those bookshelves for you? And that stupid wolf statue, I'll get you that wolf statue, I'll give you anything, please, please, please."

Why didn't he tell Stiles when he had the chance?

He hears wheels squeal down the street outside, tires spinning too fast over soft dirt. Derek doesn't look up from Stiles' pale, blood streaked face.

"What happened?" an authoritative female voice that certainly isn't Deaton asks.

"He moved a wall, a beam fell on him, he's unconscious," Derek rattles out. Stiles' heart is still beating, but it's uneven. "Where's Deaton?"

"Coming. But I'm the expert on healing spells." The woman crouches down on Stiles' other side, and Derek is startled to see Belinda, green hair pulled back into a smart bun, expertly pulling crystals out of her bag. "He moved the wall with magic?"

"Yeah, something in latin."

"No side effects from that then," she assures him confidently. "Sometimes we have to worry about magical spillover, but not in this case."

Blood starts trickling from Stiles' nose, and Derek snaps, "I really don't care. Just fix him."

Belinda shoots him a nasty look, but sets up the rest of the spellworking paraphernalia swiftly and competently. "I can't guarantee anything."

"But the chances get worse the longer you wait, right?" Derek snarls. "Fix him!"

She exhales a sharp, quick breath of disapproval, then begins chanting lowly in an unknown language, one hand planted on Stiles' forehead, the other on his stomach, avoiding Derek where he's curled around Stiles' body.

Deaton rushes onto the scene a moment later, but leaves Belinda's spell be.

"Wouldn't you be better at this?" Derek snaps.

Shaking his head, Deaton replies, "Belinda has a gift. Stiles is in her more capable hands."

Remembering the truth spell catastrophe, Derek is suspicious.

Deaton rests a hand that's meant to be reassuring on Derek's shoulder. "We are worried about him too. He's a talented spark and a good man."

"You don't have to tell me that."

Stiles' eyes are still closed, ringed with bruises, but he looks slightly less pale now. Belinda chants on.

He can't die now, not now that help has arrived. That would be too much dramatic irony for one day, wouldn't it? Stiles has to be alright, he has to be fine, any second now he'll blink open his eyes, groggy like he is in the mornings, slur out a non sequiter, and stand back up.

Any second.
Belinda chants on.

Derek rubs his thumbs over the backs of Stiles' hands. He's been taking Stiles for granted. What has he been doing, making Stiles carry furniture and do grunt work, trying to send Stiles to The Jungle, fooling himself into believing that he could settle for being Stiles' friend for the rest of his life, and never trying for more? When this whole time, Stiles was just a thin plate of bone away from death?

Stiles' heart picks up, sounding out steadier and stronger with each beat.

Belinda chants on, and a soft groan echoes from Stiles' throat.

Derek collapses into relieved sobs, company be damned. Stiles is alive, he scraped out of it, his heart is beating, his eyes are sliding open, he’s jolting back into consciousness with a gasp and a, “wow, that didn’t go well at all.”

What comes out of Derek's mouth is some horribly embarrassing combination of a laugh and a sob, but Stiles pets his hair anyway. "It's cool, man, I'm good, I'm fine. I'm fine, right?" he asks Belinda.

She smiles cockily and tosses one of the crystals in the air. “Of course you're fine." She catches the crystal, files it away in her bag.

"See, look at that! Bit of a headache though, you couldn't have taken care of the bruising, too?"

"That's your punishment," Deaton chimes in sharply. "You know better than to toss around magic without looking, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that moving is stressful and I wanted to get it over with," Stiles sighs.

"And hopefully you've learned the error of your ways there. Redire ad principium," Deaton snaps, and the doorframe levitates back into place. "You had better not be doing anything like this again."

Stiles holds up his hands. "Fine, fine!"

"Really, Stiles," Derek asks lowly, "please don't."

"Fine," Stiles repeats. "We'll toss out the couch and I'll look both ways before I cross the... magic."

"Good." Derek squeezes Stiles' shoulder. "I really... I really thought you were going to die, Stiles."

"Hey now, I wouldn't do that to you!" Stiles protests, grinning cockily, white teeth flashing, beautiful brown eyes winking with mischief.

God, Derek needs to tell him.

He needs to tell him when Belinda and Deaton leave, and Stiles lets Derek hug him for five minutes straight.

He needs to tell him when they walk into their shared house, and Stiles says "I guess we could try squeezing two grown men onto the single armchair to watch the TV."

He needs to tell him when they make dinner that night, and Stiles throws a strand of spaghetti on the ceiling to see if it will stick, and it does, and Derek needs to go find a ladder.

He needs to tell him when Stiles holds up a cardboard box the size of a backpack and says "my last one!"
He needs to tell him when they do try to squeeze two grown men onto the single armchair to watch TV, but end up with Derek sitting on a pillow by Stiles’ feet.

He needs to tell him when Stiles picks *When Harry Met Sally*, because he knows Derek likes it, even though Derek would never admit it.

He needs to tell him, but the words catch in Derek’s throat, and his heart fills with fear, and he tries to remind himself that any day could be their last, that he can’t afford to stall, that he has to try, but the small, scared part of him that shriveled up on the day of him and Stiles’ first, underwhelming meeting, insists that today isn’t the day, now isn’t the time, don’t throw rocks at the glass castle you’ve built.

Just say “I’m in love with you,” that’s it.

Stiles’ knee shifts underneath his polka-dotted pajama pants.

“I love that you get cold when it’s seventy-one degrees out,” Harry confesses on screen, all heartfelt pixels.

Don’t, you can’t, it will all fall down around your shoulders.

Five words: I’m in love with you.

Stiles laughs softly as Harry says, “I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich.”

Derek can smell the soft scent of his shampoo.

People do it on TV all the time.

He’ll run. He’ll leave. He doesn’t want you, wouldn’t he have done something by now if he did?

Stiles absentmindedly tries to braid the short strands of Derek’s hair.

Won’t it be so good to stop lying to him?

Derek clears his throat.

Turns his body away from the TV screen.

Looks Stiles in the eye.

“I’m in love with you,” he says, as sincerely and heartfelt as he can.

Stiles stares down at Derek.

His eyes are wide.

His heartbeat speeds up.

“Fuck. You.”

Stiles’ words are heartfelt too.

Chapter End Notes
SPOILERS AND WARNINGS:
There's an incubus in this chapter, and it is implied that he makes out with Stiles while under the guise of being another person, and he also tries to seduce Derek, but Derek stops it before anything happens. Comment and let me know if you need to know anything else before proceeding.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

IT IS DONE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fuck. You.

Fuck. You.

Fuck. You.

"Stiles, wait-"

“I can’t believe this.” Stiles exhales a long, disappointed breath that doesn’t sound like second chances and escapes upstairs, stepping over Derek on the floor and practically running up the steps.

Derek just sits, stuck dumb, at the base of the armchair, his ass going numb from the floor, his mind echoing with Stiles’ words. He's ruined everything. He should have just listened to the voice in his head urging caution, he shouldn’t have rocked the boat, they had a good thing going, and Derek wrecked it for what? For the chance to kiss Stiles on the lips? For sex?

Well, no. For the guilt that grows in Derek every time he calls up another white lie, faking platonic love, pretending that he doesn't ache for Stiles’ presence every night they sleep in separate rooms. For the slight chance that Stiles might feel the same, and stay.

But he doesn’t. He just. Doesn't. Stiles absolutely, 100%, is not in love with Derek. The way he fled from the room with a face like stone is clue enough.

He should have known it would end like this, that of course Stiles wouldn't want him, Stiles is meant for someone who can be happy and carefree, someone who can keep up with his sense of humor, someone who hasn't lurked in the shadow of his life for years, gobbling up whatever affection Stiles sends his way like a greedy bridge troll.

Gingerly, because his bones feel as though they're made of clay, Derek levers himself into the armchair and rests his head in his hands, bends double over his knees. How will they ever get back to normal after this? Stiles must be disgusted by how long Derek has been lying to him, horrified by the idea of Derek, soot-stained, moody Derek, daring to think of Stiles like that. Derek kneads at his eyes. Stiles is perfect, how could Derek have ever thought that Stiles would feel the same way about someone like him?

Footsteps sound on the stairs behind him, and Derek's head jerks up. He'd thought that Stiles would sequester himself upstairs for at least the rest of the night, but maybe now he can apologize, tell Stiles that it's alright, he'll crush it, he'll crush the feelings down, he has been for years anyway, they can go right back to the way they were before.

Stiles appears on the stairs, and Derek opens his mouth to speak.

Then closes it abruptly.
Stiles is carrying a box.

He was all unpacked, he’d moved in, what’s he doing carrying a box that’s clearly heavy with contents outside to his car?

Derek knows why, but he wants to pretend that he hasn’t a clue know why Stiles, stone-faced and silent, is carrying a box back out to his car.

He remembers a red polka dotted mug smashed across the kitchen floor, the certainty that he couldn’t fix it, that it was beyond repair, no going back. Derek had just thrown the mug away then, but this is much worse than a mug, this is his soulmate packing up boxes and walking out the door.

The second box that Stiles takes outside is bigger, one of the ones that Derek had carried for him on the way to the house. He staggers under the weight, but Derek knows his help wouldn’t be welcome, so he lets Stiles shoulder his way awkwardly out the front door, kick it closed with so much force that the sombrero hanging over it swings from the nail it hangs from.

Derek wonders if Stiles will take the sombrero with him. He probably will, he loves the thing and all of its vivid pinkness. For all of Derek's faults, he does know how to buy Stiles a present. Even if he chickened out and never presented it to Stiles officially.

After Stiles storms back upstairs, (for another box, but Derek doesn't want to think about that,) Derek delicately unhooks the sombrero from the wall and cradles it between his hands. He remembers the occasions when Stiles would take it down himself and parade around the apartment with it, dancing an inept but endearing cha-cha; flipping it into the air and trying to land it on his head again; shaking invisible maracas.

At the very least, bar everything else, Derek got that much right. He was good to Stiles. He’d like to think that Stiles was happy before Derek screwed it all up. After all, they did have fun: Stiles' innumerable fits of laughter and smiles over the years couldn't all have faked for politeness's sake. All those movies watched, conversations had, nights slept in the same blankets, hugs shared, that was something. They had that.

Derek's thumb drifts over the brim of the hat. They had that. Stiles hadn't hated him before today. Stiles was his best friend before five words messed it all up. He lets himself revel in that small light of comfort before one niggling question tunnels in through his skull and invades his brain:

If he and Stiles are such good friends, then why was Stiles’ reaction to Derek’s confession so... vehement? Derek isn’t surprised that Stiles doesn’t feel the same flooding love that took over Derek’s life five years ago, but he is surprised that instead of letting Derek down gently, Stiles reacted as though Derek had peed on his father. Trying not to let panic over Stiles packing boxes upstairs overtake him, Derek reviews the facts:

Derek is good at being friends with Stiles.

Derek is good at taking care of Stiles.

Derek is good at being kind to Stiles.

Derek is bad at is talking with Stiles about feelings.

And if there had just been a miscommunication... breathing in shakily, Derek allows himself to imagine the impossible for just a moment, just a second. Would it be so absurd for Stiles to care about him at least a little? Maybe he, Derek, isn’t actually the worst possible match for Stiles.
No, Derek thinks as his train of thought speeds off the rails, he isn’t the worst possible option. There’s a reason that Stiles’ father thinks that he and Stiles are dating. There’s a reason that all strangers think that he and Stiles are dating. Derek isn’t young and unbroken like all the eligible boys at The Jungle, or the girls in the dorms at UBH, but he does whatever he can to make Stiles’ life better; it’s not madness to think that Stiles might care back.

Stiles picks that moment to trample down the stairs with box number three. He’s been crying, and Derek can’t stand it.

“I bought this for you,” he blurts, holding out the sombrero. It is absolutely the most unhelpful thing he can say in this situation, but there it is.

Adjusting the box in his arms, Stiles looks dubiously at the hat. “That’s been here for years,” he points out. It’s almost like his normal argumentative self, if it weren’t for the defeated slackness in his voice. He takes another step towards the door and Derek darts forward, following Stiles as he walks out to the car.

“No, I mean, I saw it in a shop in Colombia and I knew you would love it, so I bought it even though it was expensive and so pink. Then I thought it was too big of a gesture and never gave it to you officially. I always felt bad about that, because I gave souvenirs to the rest of the pack.”

Dropping the box heavily into the jeep’s trunk, Stiles breathes out, not looking at Derek, “I appreciate it, Derek, but you really, really aren’t helping.”

Seeing bait, Derek leaps at it. “Not helping with what?”

“This!” Stiles explodes, gesturing wildly at the jeep’s growing stock of boxes. “It’s better for both of us if I just go, you don’t need to make it harder.”

“I want to make it harder!” Derek winces internally at the phrasing. “Stiles, I don’t want you to leave, I don’t understand why you’re leaving and I- I-” acting on impulse, he steps in front of the jeep’s open trunk, arms stretched out wide, blocking entry. “I won’t let you go until you tell me why you’re going.”

Stiles glares at him through red tinged eyes. “Don’t make me say it.”

Derek throws his arms up in exasperation. “Say what?”

“You know!”

“No I don’t!” Derek replies emphatically.

Stiles heaves in a jagged breath, meets Derek’s gaze with eyes that carry a pain that Derek can pinpoint exactly- he knows what it feels like. Stiles begins, hands clenched at his sides, “I-”

“Love me,” Derek finishes for him, astounded. How long has this been going on? How long has Stiles been feeling the pain that’s displayed so openly on his face now?

Derek knows that anguished look because he’s felt it himself on many an occasion. But now, now he can make it go away. “Stiles-”

“Just don’t, Derek!” Stiles cuts him off, rearranging stuff in the boxes that don’t have to be rearranged. “I don’t need you to- to say it again.”

“But-” Derek reaches a hand out for Stiles’ shoulder, and Stiles flinches away, “but I don’t see where
the problem is. I love you” it feels like a weight off his shoulders to say it, “and if you, somehow-”

Stiles groans in frustration, pushing his palms into his temples like he wants to squish his brain into a different shape. “Derek, you’re my best friend, so I can’t let you do this to yourself, okay, you’re the best person I know besides my dad, and I know you’re trying to help, but I can’t- I can’t let you settle, okay?”

“What?” Derek asks in genuine confusion. If anybody would be settling, it would be Stiles.

“Let me finish! You want me to talk, I’ll talk, okay? Okay. Oh my god,” Stiles bounces up and down, “I can’t believe- okay. Oh my god,” Stiles bounces up and down, “I can’t believe- okay. So I know you care about me, but trying to make me feel better about being, just, grossly in love with you by just saying you’re in love with me doesn’t help anybody. I can’t handle you acting like your feelings aren’t important too, and I really can’t handle the idea of you, what, faking your way through a relationship with me just because you feel bad that I got hurt this afternoon. That’s just- nobody is happy there, Derek, and I don’t like that you think that I could be. So I’m going to go back to my dad’s for a while.” Stiles rubs a thumb over the rim of one of the boxes. “That would probably be better.”

“Stiles, I-” Derek reaches for Stiles’ shoulder again, and doesn’t let himself be rebuffed by Stiles’ squirming. “No, come here, please, Stiles, please.” He leans their foreheads together. Stiles’ eyes dart away from his, but Derek needs to at least have him close, so he can correct Stiles’ stupid, stupid idea. “I do love you. I really do. I’m not just saying that, I didn’t know you felt this way until just now.”

“I don’t think you get it Derek,” Stiles snaps, “when we were at that convention, the incubus came to me too. Did you know that? And the one person, the one ‘irresistibly attractive person’ he showed up disguised as was you. This isn’t just a crush because I think you’re nice.”

Derek laughs. He can’t help it. “I don’t think you get it, Stiles. You, you’re my,” say it, you can finally say it, that one word that’s been brewing in you for years, “my soulmate.”

“Bullshit.”

“Stiles.”

“No!” Stiles pulls back, staggers awkwardly to the jeep where he can sit on the bumper. “Paige is your soulmate, I know that, do you think I forget everything?”

“I made her up!” Derek finally admits, half laughing with the relief of it. “Well, not her, but she was never my soulmate Stiles. I pretended she was so that you wouldn’t get suspicious.”

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Stiles gulps. Shifts in his seat. Glances up at Derek then back to his own feet. “Really.”

“Yes, really.”

“Like, if I grabbed this bundle of sage right now,” Stiles asks, fumbling a hand around in one of the boxes, all hard edged stubbornness, “and put a mind meld spell on us, your brain would tell me that Paige was never your soulmate.”

“Yes!” Derek falls to his ass in front of Stiles, gripping Stiles’ knees. They’re so close, they almost have it figured out, if only Stiles would believe him. “Stiles Stilinski,” he enunciates carefully, “I have been in love with you since I saw you in the woods and my heart gave me a jolt.”

And finally, finally, Stiles believes him. He lets out a noise somewhere between a sob and a laugh, and sinks off of the jeep’s bumper into Derek’s lap. Derek wraps his arms around Stiles’ back and
revels in being allowed to pull Stiles’ lithe body flush against his chest and tuck his nose into Stiles’ hair without pretending he’s only doing it because they’re friends. Stiles sniffs wetly against Derek’s shoulder, which calls Derek’s attention to the fact that his eyes are wet too, and making little dark circles appear on the fabric of Stiles’ shirt. Taking his cue from Stiles, Derek buries his face in Stiles’ shoulder, smothering the tears and breathing in Stiles’ scent. Stiles reacts by wrapping his legs around Derek’s waist, prompting a battle of escalation wherein each of them tries to curl closer to the other. It’s the best battle Derek has ever fought in.

“I can’t believe we’re here,” Stiles mumbles into Derek’s neck, tightening his arms around Derek’s ribs. “I can’t believe ‘here’ is on the driveway next to my car.”

Derek laughs into Stiles’ shoulder. He can hardly believe they’re here either, pressed together, Stiles loving him more than Derek had thought possible even in his most far-fetched daydreams.

“Wait!” Stiles exclaims, head jerking up from its love drunk stupor. “I can kiss you now! Is that cool, can I kiss you, could I just, um,” he barely has to turn his head for their lips to meet, warm and reassuring.

Their faces are still humid from crying, but Derek couldn’t care less, because up until an hour ago, he had been certain he would never kiss Stiles again, and now here Stiles is, shifting in Derek’s lap, pulling Derek’s lower lip into his mouth, pulling back to breathe against Derek’s cheek before eagerly moving back in again. These are the single most glorious moments of Derek’s life so far.

Eventually, the kissing fades out and they’re just holding each other again. Derek doesn’t want to move, and from the way Stiles is leaning against him, neither does Stiles.

Then, quite unexpectedly, Stiles giggles, vibrating in Derek's hold.

Derek makes an inquiring noise and strokes his thumb over Stiles' back.

"I just wish that the me of like, last year could see me now. Like, I would be lording it over him so much. Or maybe just be giving him words of encouragement. I dunno. Really, time travel is scientifically impossible, so it isn't relevant. I'm just glad to be here."

"I'm glad you're here too." Derek kisses the top of Stiles' head and shivers at the thrill of excitement it sends through him. It feels different from the times he's kissed Stiles' hair before, probably because Stiles hums against him and tips his face up for a kiss full on the mouth. "I'm glad I'm here."

Stiles grins, kisses him again. "I love you. Can I just keep saying it? I'm going to keep saying it, oh my god, it's so nice to just say 'I love you!' and not freak out. I love you I love you I love you."

"I love you too." one two three four five six seven eight nine ten

"Can I sleep in your bed tonight?" Stiles blurts out. "Uh, I mean, we don't have to have sex or anything if you don't want to move so fast, I just want to be near you, you know, if that's cool."

Derek kisses Stiles again. It stops Stiles' talking, if not his worrying. "It's cool."

"Okay. Good. I don't want you to feel like there's pressure or something now that we've, that we're..." Stiles gestures between the two of them. "Whatever. Like, I don't want to be clingy or anything."

"Stiles." Derek opens his mouth, but can't think of any way to say be as clingy as you want, I'll cling right back other than, "is the offer of that... 'mindmeld spell' still open?"
Stiles raises an eyebrow. "I guess, yeah."

"Then do it," Derek instructs him. "I don't want a misunderstanding getting between us again. I need you to know."

"Are you sure? It's kind of invasive," Stiles hedges. "There might be things you want to keep to yourself."

Derek looks at his soulmate, perched in his lap and still not certain of how dear he is to Derek, and says, "yes."

Swallowing, Stiles answers, "okay. Okay. If we're doing this, we gotta do it both ways. For fairness' sake."

"You don't have to-"

"Yeah I think I do." Stiles gets up, starts rummaging around in the trunk for sage. "I wanna do this right." He slams the trunk closed, bundle of sage in hand. "I think we could be something really great if we do this right."

Derek presses in for another kiss before Stiles lights the sage and his lips start moving around latin words.

XXXXX

You can’t believe that Scott didn’t figure out that he’d been bitten by a werewolf. Really, you’re told for years in Health class what the signs are, what authorities to turn to, how to manage your new abilities, and Scott just thinks that those vitamins he was taking were more effective than he thought. Some random hot guy in the woods has to figure it out, and even then, Scott needs some convincing.

You don’t know what to do with him sometimes, you really don’t. At least werewolf dude—Derek, his name is Derek Hale, you remember, from the night your dad came home and didn’t sleep the whole night, was still sitting at the kitchen table when you came down for cheerios the next morning—has an idea of what it’s like being a werewolf, even if he gives Scott unhelpful, born werewolf type advice like “try to find your inner wolf.”

Still, you hope he sticks around. You and Scott sure as hell don’t know what you’re doing. Then again, you think that Derek might not know what he’s doing either, but in more of a “doesn’t know what he’s doing with his life” way rather than a “doesn’t know how being a werewolf works” sort of way.

Speaking of doesn’t know what he’s doing with his life, apparently Derek is the sort of guy who just gets shot and shows up in a school parking lot instead of calling an ambulance like a regular person. He seems pretty delirious, but delirium is no excuse for giving you a heart attack after seventh period. You realize Derek is not on top of his shit in like seven different ways. He shudders in your arms when you give him a “good thing you aren’t dead” hug like it’s the first time anybody has touched him nicely in years. He has a breakdown on your couch after he had to kill the last living member of his family.

The leather jacket and stubble shtick isn’t as intimidating any more. You wonder if maybe Derek is just as insecure as you are. Sure, he doesn’t wonder about next week’s Chemistry test or whether Lydia Martin really meant it when she said that you were a mosquito that just buzzes around and feeds off of her energy, but you must both wonder about the future. You must both wonder if you can become the person you want to be.
You and Scott play video games and hang out and go to the movies like always, but after a while you start to feel guilty for leaving Derek out. It’s stopped feeling like its Youandscott, and started feeling like Youandscottandderek. You feel like you’re deliberately excluding him when you just hang out with Scott.

Besides, Derek’s apartment is cool. It’s small, but Derek owns it. Like he’s a real adult with a real apartment and everything. You and Scott can come over and eat pizza late into the night without Mrs. McCall poking her head in and saying food so close to bedtime will make it impossible to sleep. She’s right, but you gobble down the pizza anyway. You hang out at Derek’s now; that’s a thing you do. You feel infinitely cool when you can say in front of Jackson: oh we’re just going to hang out at our friend’s apartment tonight. It’s a pretty cool bachelor pad type place.

Scott doesn’t always come with you to Derek’s. Mostly because he has a girlfriend now, but also because he doesn’t see why Derek needs their company. Scott has never seen Derek cry on the couch in his living room. It’s alright. You and Derek aren’t as awkward together as you should be. Derek, loathe as you are to admit it, is like Batman: quiet, solitary, a little mysterious, and wearing all black, of course. You are like the sidekick on a late night talk show: loud, clamoring for attention, backed by a loud brass band. But you two do alright. You think it’s probably because you remind him of a little brother. Sometimes you feel like it. Naive in the face of everything he’s seen, young compared to Derek’s real life adulthood, filled with a weird need to impress him even though you never try to impress anybody.

Sometimes you worry about Scott. More to the point, you worry about your relationship with Scott. For so long, it was just the two of you, and that was all the two of you ever needed. Now he spends every waking moment either with Allison or talking about her, like she’s an oxygen tank that Scott needs constant connection to. You used to be that oxygen tank, and now you aren’t. It’ll probably blow over, you tell yourself, high school relationships don’t last, you tell yourself, but you’re still alone every night with nobody to text or Skype with, no matter how much you try to reassure yourself.

So you go to Derek’s more. He never complains, which you figure is his weird way of saying he likes you coming over. He’s lonely, you’re lonely, it’s a match made in heaven. So you ask him to tutor you. You even sort of need it, considering how Ms. June has it out for you. Derek agrees to it too quickly. You wonder if he spends every hour of every week alone in that apartment.

Your history grade goes up, Scott is still dating Allison, you play World of Warcraft, you dogsit for some of the deputies, and Lydia still thinks you’re the scummiest piece of excrement to ever sprout legs and walk the earth. Life goes on. You get closer to graduation every day.

You realize that Isaac Lahey has a few more problems in his life than hormones and homework. Once you finally put your finger on it, you go to your dad, of course, who gets up from the dinner table the minute you tell him and starts putting on his uniform. Your dad is the best man you know. Dad gets the legal stuff started right away, but you worry about Isaac. Where’s he going to go? The foster system?

Then it’s Tuesday again, and Derek is oh so gently taking the textbook from you and explaining that no, ‘muckraker’ was initially a derogatory term for journalists looking to expose corruption, but then the journalists took the term back. It’s actually a common theme throughout american history, no, no, there’s no way you could have known that. You’re doing well, let’s go back to political machines and Boss Tweed, and you get an idea. Because Derek’s just that kind of guy. He would rather do something unthinkable like talk about his feelings than admit it, but he’s a softie at heart.

He’s the kind of guy who will bring an abused teenager he barely knows into the fold without a
second thought, then do it again two more times for Erica and Boyd. He’s the kind of guy who will tell you that if a girl treats you like shit, don’t keep trying to impress her, you’re better than that. He’s the kind of guy who has been beaten down and abused more than Stiles can even fathom, but still greets you with a smile and asks if you want some earl gray maybe. He’s the kind of guy who will eat your terrible Polish cabbage dish because nobody else will. He’s the kind of guy who has a mint in life insurance money but still uses a laptop from the 90s because he bought it with his sister.

You think that everybody could do well by being a little more like Derek.

You tell Scott this, but he just looks at you, confused, and says that Derek is the grumpiest guy he knows.

You think that if the Lydia Plan doesn’t work out, you could do well by finding a girl like Derek.

You don’t tell Scott this.

Derek’s sister is alive. You wonder if she’s anything like Derek. If Derek would find it weird if you dated his little sister. It probably wouldn’t be a good idea. You know Derek would be crazy protective of her. He must think of her as nothing short of a miracle, and friends don’t go around dating friends’ miracles.

After Derek flies off to exotic South America, you and the pack have dinner at Scott’s house instead of Derek’s apartment. You all wonder what she’ll be like, how Derek will be different. Erica makes a comment about it hopefully cheering Derek up a bit, and you don’t know what she’s talking about. Derek’s plenty cheerful.

Then you just.

You.

You burn the nogitsune out.


This is your body, there was only meant to be one person in it.

Apparently you’re a spark. It explains some things. Deaton and Belinda explain it to you, and you like the idea. You like the idea of being able to protect yourself. For your own sake, and for the sake of the expression on your dad’s face, on the pack’s faces —Derek must not be back yet— when you wake up. You agree to training with Deaton and Belinda, and then you say you want to go home.

Dad gets called out for some emergency, so Scott drives you home. He apologizes for not noticing earlier that something was wrong, thank god Derek did, and you ask, wait, Derek is back? Scott does some explaining. You make him swing by Derek’s on the way home.
Cora, a stone wall of a girl, meets you in the hallway. She’s not like Derek at all, from the softness of her jawline to the firm way she tells you to not make Derek talk if he doesn’t want to, and that she hopes you aren’t anything like the nogitsune. The nogitsune wasn’t kind to Derek, she says, and your stomach twists with guilt again.

You talk at Derek through his apartment door, and you feel weird about not seeing him. It’s been two weeks since you’ve seen the guy, and you realize that’s the longest stretch of time you’ve gone without seeing him in months. So when Deaton calls and offers you a chance to observe your first spell reversal the next morning, you leap at the chance for more than one reason.

Then... well... you sort of fall in love with Isaac. Everybody keeps telling you that it's just because of a spell, but you can't believe that. Spell or not, Isaac is the most amazing person you've ever met or will ever meet. He's gorgeous, and perfect for you, you know it. Everything he says is hilarious, and you don't know how you ever missed the fact that he has no flaws.

Then... well... you sort of fall out of love with Isaac. You feel weird about it, and at first you think it’s just because it's an awkward situation for anybody, but then you have trouble sleeping, and you keep spacing out in class, remembering that it's been weeks since you've been in control of your own body, how much longer until you lose it again? And you can't bring it up with Scott, or your dad, because you've tried, and they just start apologizing about not realizing you were possessed, then the whole conversation gets off track.

It makes a lot of sense to just go to Derek. He's your alpha, after all, an older brother figure—no, that sounds weird— he's a trusted adult? He's your friend. He's your friend, and if anybody knows what it's like to have your life spin out of your control, it's Derek. God, you haven't dealt with anything compared to what Derek's been through.

He doesn't act like it, though. He reassures you, doesn't make you feel like an idiot for complaining about something that wasn't your fault, for complaining about what should be a comedic story about the miscasting of a spell. He lets you feel bad, tells you it isn't weird to feel bad. Then he changes the subject. It's just what you needed.

You wonder what would have happened if you'd seen him first when the love spell was cast. Sometimes you swear you have sense memory of sitting in his lap, but you don't know where that would have come from, besides the- you don’t dwell on that.

You never freaked out about the spell making you fall in love with a guy, and that’s food for thought, especially considering that Lydia- well, you aren't so sure that Lydia is a good idea anymore. When people ask you why you love her, you never produce anything better than the reasons you loved Isaac. And those weren’t reasons at all.

Which doesn't mean you've given up on love. It's senior year, that's when people always find The One in movies. Maybe your life isn't a movie, but you figure that you're due for a little John Hughes/coming of age story action by now. There are plenty of girls in your classes who wouldn't be bad at all.

You don't ask any of them out. You can never work up the nerve, and even if you could, you don't know any girls well enough to ask out besides Erica and Cora, who are terrifying and untouchable. You decide that college will be the time you find somebody. People always find The One in college. Your parents met in college.

College dominates your life in general, because that's what it does senior year of high school. You've always known you were going to go to UBH, you're a Beacon Hills boy down to the bone, and you can't leave Dad, but College Drama surges around you for months. People needing somebody to
read their personal essay, charts comparing average gpas accepted, facebook groups where
students post where they'll be going, counselors hounding you about letters of rec, transcripts to
send, college sweatshirts crowding the hallways as May approaches.

You’re excited about UBH. College was the best years of everybody’s life, apparently. You just aren’t
sure about living on campus. It’s expensive, and you have a house a half an hour away for god’s
sakes. And the roommate horror stories you’ve read online have gotten to you. But you can’t live at
your Dad’s house all through college, come on now.

The solution is standing right in front of you, you realize, when you overhear Isaac talking about
moving out of Derek’s and up north. You picture hanging out with Derek, late nights and popcorn,
Derek semi-ironically calling you "roomie" and it’s decided.

Living at Derek’s is fantastic. Okay, there’s more pressure to do your own dishes, and you have to
chip in for rent (although you know for a fact that Derek is grossly undercharging you,) but
otherwise it’s fantastic. It’s a bro-pad. Sometimes you guys just chill, and sometimes you play Settlers
of Catan or whatever, but either way, it’s nice. You definitely wouldn’t feel as comfortable in a dorm.
You wouldn't be able to just say "fuck it" and walk naked to the shower in a dorm either.

One thing you do notice, and it isn’t a big deal really, it's not like it's a problem... It’s just that Derek
is actually that improbably attractive at all times of the day. Like, you aren’t blind, you can admit
that he's a hot dude, he could model if he didn’t have Moral Issues with the modeling industry, but
you always figured that Derek was good at picking clothes, that once he took his morning shower
and coiffed his hair, he achieved model status. After all, even you can look good with the right
amount of prep and lighting. But the thing about Derek is that he looks like a grecian statue when
he’s just rolled out of bed, in a gross T-shirt and pajama pants with a coffee stain down the front, or
when he’s been awake for like nineteen hours and should have crazy circles under his eyes but he
doesn't. You've never met anybody as inconsistent about shaving as Derek is, but it doesn't seem to
matter because Derek pulls off any length of facial hair.

It’s just frustrating. Because Derek could have any girl he wants, but never bothers, and you have
trooped out with the freshman hoards every friday night since school started, and never once has
there been a girl at a party who’s wanted to make out with you. Not even a little. It’s a waste, is all.
Then you find out why Derek never goes after any girls and you get it with blistering clarity. As if
Derek hasn’t had a tragic enough life as it is, apparently the universe saw fit to take his soulmate
away from him. You don’t think there’s anybody in this world who could use the support of a
soulmate more than Derek. It’s tragically unfair, and you worry about him, thinking about the news
stories about people driven mad with grief by the death of their soulmate. Concern leads you to do
research, but none of the advice you get helps; Derek is determined to be fine.

You wonder what Paige was like. What the person most suited for Derek in the world was like.
Probably quiet, thoughtful, kind, to match Derek. Pretty, to match Derek. A subtle sense of humor
that would complement Derek’s dry wit. You’re sure they must have been lovely together.

In a weird way, you’re jealous. You know you shouldn’t be jealous of Derek’s tragic love life, but,
you think resentfully, at least he’s had one. It seems like everybody has found somebody but you.

The morning after you and Derek watch Transformers, you wake up with your face mashed into his
chest, cuddled up against him, hypnotized by the beat of breath under his ribs. You aren’t a
werewolf, but he smells good even to you; like laundry, tea, something indescribably masculine. This
is what you want, you think as you drift back to sleep. You just want to find somebody warm and
comforting and muscular to wake up with.
It isn’t until you’re showering, hours later, that you realize you were picturing your future Someone with Derek’s muscular, flat chest.

Pending sexuality crisis aside, you chase the feeling you had when Derek’s heartbeat was under your ear, cuddling up to your friends at school, flirting with girls at parties—you think you’re flirting, you’re probably flirting, right? All the flirting advice online is written for girls—harder than ever. Sometimes you come home feeling disheartened and rejected, and you just nap in Derek’s bed, faintly hoping that he’ll curl up next to you. You’re a tactile guy is all. You want a warm body to hug.

However, there’s only so much tacit rejection a guy can take before he loses patience. You’re in Max’s dorm, and Max himself has disappeared upstairs with Marly, while Anders and Kiana are definitely hooking up somewhere else in the building, leaving you third wheeling with Juliana and Patrice, who are giggling and leaning in closer to each other with every minute that passes. Juliana’s hand lands on Patrice’s thigh, and you give up.

On the drive home, you wonder what you would have even done if the group at Max’s had paired off differently, if Kiana or somebody had pulled you upstairs to one of the girl’s floors. You don’t even know how to kiss. Sure, you’ve googled it, checked out the WikiHow, but there’s no way she wouldn’t notice that you have no practical experience. But kissing is like trying to get a job: you need experience to get experience, so the only way to get your first job is through knowing somebody.

You pull into your parking space in front of the apartment complex and realize that you know somebody. Derek’s been your surrogate cuddle buddy, surely he could be your surrogate kissing buddy too? Really, you reason as you climb the stairs, it would be good for both of you: you get kissing practice, and Derek would get to kiss somebody, no strings attached. You know Derek doesn’t go around kissing random people, he’s so cautious around strangers, so surely he’d appreciate a chance to let some steam off without attached complications.

Judging from the way Derek kisses you, you were right.

And kissing is fantastic.

You’ve heard conflicting reports on what kissing is like. There are the romance novel versions, of course, that wax poetic about lightning coursing through your body and violins playing in the background and the clouds parting to send a single beam of sunlight down upon your lover, but there are also the actual stories, the testimonials you’ve researched, the feedback from the pack, that say don’t listen to the romance novels. First kisses are awkward and sloppy, and at first you won’t see what the appeal is at all.

In your case, at least, there’s lightning. You feel almost dizzy, but Derek’s arms—which are really strong—hold you up as he kisses the daylights out of you. Suddenly you understand why people like mashing their tongues against each other’s, and why biting is apparently a good thing when it comes to kissing. His stubble rubs against your face, and objectively, it feels like sandpaper, but subjectively, it feels amazing. And he still smells really good.

The appeal of kissing, you realize, isn’t really the sensation of lips brushing together, but the thrill of knowing somebody likes you enough to put their face on your face. The closeness. You feel detached and alone in your body when the kissing ends.

Derek says you did pretty well. You figure it would be weird to return the compliment.

Later, in the shower, you can’t help but think about stubble rubbing over your cheeks, what if would
feel like to have somebody’s stubble rubbing elsewhere, muscular arms looping around your back, your thighs-

You shut off the water, and figure that as sexuality crises go, that was pretty simple.

You and Derek go to The Jungle the next week. He’s really cool about you not being straight, because apparently, neither is he. And doesn’t that come as a surprise. Assuming makes an ass out of you and me, but you’d always figured he was straight, his type was supermodel, then after Paige, his type was nobody. It’s hard to wrap your mind around the fact that he isn’t. That instead of being part of some high-caliber, inaccessible dating world that you live galaxies away from, Derek is probably interested in the same people you are. (A little older, maybe.)

There’s no way to explain that, so you make something up about having a bet with the pack that he was asexual, and escape to go change.

You like The Jungle. You like the anonymity, the thumping beat of the music that makes you feel sexy, you like the outrageousness of the drag queens and the shirtlessness of the dancers.

You shake and shimmy to the music, and you’re pretty sure you get a few appreciative looks, which is an ego boost, but first priority is making sure that Derek has a good time. He’s hardly moving, just standing next to you like a bodyguard, so you grab his hips and encourage him to dance. He gets with the program just in time for the music to slow down from a “party in da club” song to a “makin’ love all niitght” song. But that’s fine, you roll with it like you roll your hips, loop your arms around him and sway like a wave. The men around you probably think you’re a couple, which gives you a swell of satisfaction (fuck yeah I could bag this) before you realize that looking taken would get in the way of your goal for tonight.

You back up and right into David.

David is a hipster who says he isn’t a hipster but secretly wants you to think he’s a hipster. David has shaved sections of hair and a nose ring and sometimes wears glasses that have a fake handlebar mustache dangling from them on two thin chains. However, David is a biotech major at UBH, which makes him easy access.

Sometimes you wonder if you would go through the trouble of dating him if he didn’t go to UBH. Just sometimes he kisses you and you wonder if this is what all of the fuss is about. You lose your virginity, which is nice to finally get rid of, and you come, sure, but you can do that on your own without somebody dripping sweat all over you and making weird noises. He’s somebody to have dinner with, and that’s nice, but you can have dinner with Derek any old time, and you don’t feel like you have to spend every minute impressing Derek.

Not that it’s relevant, because he does go to UBH, lives near where you take classes, can be paraded around in front of your college friends, is easy to track down at one of the frat houses on a friday night, can pair off with you after get-togethers in Max’s dorm room. You can say “my boyfriend” when you talk about him, which makes you feel good, wanted, (even if you aren’t sure if you’re allowed to say it in front of David yet,) you can trade stories equally with Scott for once, instead of talking in hypotheticals on your side. It’s nice to have a boyfriend, and you would like to keep ahold of him, thank you very much.

You come out to your dad. He’s really supportive, not surprised at all, and too old to not be awkward about it. Dad claps you on the back and advises you to always wear a rubber. You tell him you’ve been seeing a guy, and Dad perks up, says he’s glad that you and Derek have figured things out. You tell him the guy isn’t Derek, and Dad tells you to keep your chin up, he’ll come around. Parents, man.
Well, okay, it’s probably because most of the stories you tell Dad nowadays involve Derek. But wedding bells don’t have to be ringing for you to talk about Derek. You live with Derek, Derek’s your best friend still living in Beacon Hills.

Like, you go home, see Derek knitting on the couch, and are struck with a vision of the two of you as old men: canes, glasses, suspenders, swinging back and forth on a porch swing while Derek knits and you squabble about The Grandkids or something. You want that future.

Like, you try out a spell and turn into a werewolf for like ten minutes, and Derek's scent is literally the best thing you've ever smelled. You just associate his smell with comfort and happiness, so once it gets magnified like a million times, you go a little crazy. The scent of tea and male are familiar, but underneath it are also carnations, pine, pavement after rain, a new bundle of sage. It's a damn good smell.

Like, David breaks up with you, so the first thing you do is crawl into Derek's bed and sob like a child. The breakup shouldn't have been a surprise. In hindsight, you see how noncommittal he was, how he played the "who can be the most casual" game with his texts, you realize that you never met any of his friends, and that he only came over to your apartment once. But it's just so exhausting, knowing that now you have to go through the same cycle again: having to explain the breakup to everybody (everybody you told. You and David were never facebook official, of course.) Then searching around for someone, dating at them, sex, trying to sneak your real personality in slowly enough that they don’t notice and run, then rinse and repeat.

So you bury your nose into Derek's bicep and breathe in his scent. (You miss the werewolf nose.) Nobody holds a gun to Derek’s head and tells him to comfort Stiles while he cries, but he does. Nobody threatens to burn his fancy alpaca yarn if he doesn’t tell Stiles that David is a pretentious douchebag, but he does. Nobody blackmails Derek with his embarrassingly romcom heavy Netflix history so that he kisses Stiles’ forehead and says he loves him. But Derek does.

So yeah, you talk about Derek a lot. The two of you are close. For god’s sakes, when you get high on crazy fairy music, all you could focus on were the rainbow bubbles, and grabbing onto Derek’s hands so he didn’t float off of the earth. Maybe you can see where Dad would get the wrong idea.

Next time, you'll find somebody more like Derek. Derek would be clear with you about defining the relationship. Derek wouldn't send passive aggressive texts, he would just bluntly tell you what he's feeling. Derek wouldn't mind that you're a cuddler, even if it's a hot night. Yeah, you've got to find somebody more like Derek. Would it be weird if you took him along on dates with you to vet people? Probably. But you’re on the right track: when you go around telling everybody the breakup news, (cringe) Cora says that Derek would never have treated you like that. You ask why she mentions Derek, wondering if she's developed mind reading powers somehow. She just shrugs. He's the only other guy who likes guys that I know, she explains casually.

Officially labeling the two of you best friends makes it easier to slip into Derek's bed half the nights of the week, bring Derek breakfast in bed, joke about how "married" you two are, make Derek help you pack for Seattle. It's easier when you can just point to the glaring sign above your head saying "best friend" to say it's alright, we can do this. What are boundaries when you're best friends. You and Scott barely have any boundaries.

But... well... you have to admit it's different than it was with Scott. If you accidentally cast a freezing spell on Scott, your first instinct wouldn't be to strip down naked and climb into bed with him. You'd stick to the heat packs and take off your clothes as a last resort. With Derek, you can't suppress the surge of disappointment when he says he's fine, he really doesn't need you cuddling up to him like a homoerotic arctic explorer.
How are you supposed to deal with that?

And you miss him so much when you and Dad go to Seattle. There’s so much time to wander around alone in Seattle, and for most of that time, you hold imaginary conversations with Derek. Why do you think they call it the needle if it isn’t shaped like a needle? Why don’t they call it the UFO on a toothpick? Well they built it for the World’s Fair, and they needed a catchier phrase than that. Shut up Derek.

Your hotel bed feels too big and too cold. You want to text Derek about it, but it's hard to justify a platonic [I want you in my bed] text.

It would have to be platonic, is the thing. Derek hasn't touched anybody like that since Paige, you're pretty sure. His type is nobody. He definitely hasn't loved anybody (romantically anyway) since Paige either. Even if he did, Derek would date in a league far beyond yours. He would find people his age who also have the statistically improbable combination of a great body, brain, and personality.

And he's your best friend. You aren't going to be that cliche.

The text goes unsent, and you just hug Derek extra long when the pack meets you at the airport.

Now that the idea has verged upon your mind, you can't stop thinking about how easy it would be to just fall into domestic bliss with Derek. Erica and Cora book you and Derek (and Scott) into the same room, no hesitation. You're a package, and everyone knows it. When you pack for the conference, you ask Derek where half of your things are in the apartment, and he knows where they are. Then he carries your suitcase down to the car while you aren't looking. You don't even realize it was weird to walk into the bathroom to brush your teeth while Derek was showering until Scott points it out. It's default to climb into bed with Derek (you on the right side, while he takes the left) even when there are other options. You get mistaken for his mate by a total stranger. You have the perfect template for a relationship, all you need to do is throw in a little kissing, and you’re set.

Forget finding a guy who’s like Derek, you’ve already found Derek.

Probably somewhere in the multiverse, there’s a universe where Paige never existed and Derek was just a bit less inaccessibly perfect. You and Derek are doing fantastically in that universe, and you wish them well. You just also wish that their universe were your universe.

It doesn’t help when Derek approaches you on the first night’s social, rubs your arms, says he couldn’t stay away. Kisses you before you can say a word.

You assume you were wrong. Wasn’t Dr. Vesuvine just saying earlier today that even people with SMDs can move on with their life and find somebody else? You’ve been underestimating Derek. If anybody would have the determination to move on with his life, it would be him. He kisses you and kisses you. You shouldn’t have just assumed he’d given up on love entirely, you aren’t a mind reader. The two of you can hardly speak for kissing. He follows you up to the room. He’s lost his key card, but you open the door with shaking hands. All of that angst for nothing. Derek presses you into the bed, kisses you again and again, cradling your head in his hands. It’s better than you imagined it would be.

You tell him that you love him. It slips out like the most natural thing in the world between breaths and kisses, floats in the warm air between your mouths. You panic for a second before you realize it’s true. Then Derek says he loves you too, and you smile into the next flurry of kisses. This could be what it’s like for the rest of your life, you think as you drift off in Derek’s arms. This is the end of the movie, fade to black. For once, things are going exactly like you want them to.
The next morning, you wake up to an empty bed. When you finally track Derek down, he's apparently decided to pretend either like nothing happened, or that you were too drunk (one beer!) to remember. You can't believe that you were so wrong, that your judgement was so off. Since when does Derek say I love you when he doesn't mean it? Since when is he this callous? Were you that blinded by his pretty face and his ability to string together reassuring sentences? You're an idiot, you should have realized that Derek-of-the-strict-boundaries would want to sit you down first and talk about it if he actually took the kissing seriously.

It's betrayal on the highest scale. Scott's sympathetic, says that he wouldn't have seen it coming from Derek either, maybe he's just scared. You know better. Derek's out of your league and you're an idiot for thinking otherwise, however briefly.

That night, you walk into the next drink-and-get-drunk fest with an upper lip of steel and a determination to get the next interested person you see into bed. If they're a werewolf, all the better.

You get distracted by a commotion outside, and if anything has ever attracted you to a scene, it's a commotion.

Derek is standing in the middle of the crowd with that incubus kid at his feet, talking to some security guy, looking incredibly uncomfortable. It's no surprise that the incubus went for Derek, apparently nobody can keep their hands off of him. You feel a guilty twinge of satisfaction. Karmic payback is what this is.

Then Derek says that he was buying an anti-incubus charm last night, that he was never anywhere near the social. For a second, you want to call him out on the lie—why would he even lie about what time exactly he legally bought a charm off of some wiccans?—but then the incubus—who takes on the image of whoever the victim finds most attractive—stirs, and a tarry black mass of horror settles in your stomach.

The worst part is that you never had a clue that he wasn't Derek. You call yourself his best friend, but you couldn't tell that he was acting strange, never got suspicious that he was so out of character. Your first instincts were correct from the beginning: you aren't right for him. Of course Derek would never touch you like that, what were you thinking?

That night, he slings his arm around you while you watch bad reality TV from on top of the ugly floral hotel bedspread. He missed you, you can tell that much, but he'll never want more than this: somebody comforting to hug, somebody who will be there for him. Not after Paige, not after- A dark voice inside of you whispers about Kate Argent, the woman Derek’s only talked about once, but about whom you’ve gathered enough know that she took advantage of him, took a fragile Derek and shattered him further. Derek needs a companion who doesn’t demand anything from him. Derek’s had enough taken from him without you expecting his love, too.

You brush your sock covered toes against his. You could be his companion. What else are best friends for?

You dedicate yourself to the role of Derek Hale’s best friend, cuddle buddy, platonic life partner. Most of the time you manage to forget that you want more. It’s still pretty great to come home to Derek knitting while the TV drones on in the background and just flop your head into his lap and complain about your day. He bops you on the head with his knitting whenever you mention doing something stupid. Which is often, but being bopped with knitting feels more like affection than punishment.

It's nice to walk into Derek's bedroom in the evening and curl up against him without needing an excuse. He's a tactile wolfman and you like a warm bed, that's all.
It’s nice to peck him on the cheek here and there, knowing he’s okay with it. He doesn’t reciprocate often, but sometimes the situation calls for it, and your cheek burns for the rest of the day.

It’s nice to pull on the mittens he made you when the weather is still a bit too warm for them, and feel like Derek’s holding your hand when the wool settles around your fingers.

It’s nice to share toothpaste and shampoo with Derek, to hear him pick up the phone and call the Chinese food place, adding in your usual order without a question, to toss his jeans in with yours when you trek downstairs to the laundry room.

Now and then, when Derek isn’t around to distract you, you remember. Your eyes glaze over and the living room wall blurs as you wonder if you’ll ever get over him and find somebody else. You don’t want to. Who else could you find who makes you happy like Derek does? Who else is that crazy level of selfless and kind? Who else would throw themselves in front of a train if it would keep their pack safe, stay up all night when you have the flu to get you water and kleenex, knit you a complicated pair of mittens with cabling on the back, just because you asked?

You ponder a future where you just live like a symbiotic fungus on Derek's life; moving wherever he moves; soothing him on anniversaries of events that have to be remembered, but still hurt; making his favorite foods on nights that he doesn’t make yours. Doing it until one of you dies. Would he mind? You hope he won’t, because you sure don’t want anything else.

It gets to be too much now and then, and you just have to get out of the apartment, go for a walk, breathe in the air and remind yourself that just because he won’t love you back doesn’t mean the world is ending. Distract yourself with thoughts of homework and Max’s major-switching crisis.

Some nights you swing in the opposite direction, imagining in immense detail that alternate universe in which you and Derek get together. You two probably have bubble baths together after long weeks, and you have a closet filled with Derek's knitting, and you get a porch swing installed ahead of time for when you get old. Your rings have inside jokes engraved on the interiors. You sit in his lap after pack dinners, and persuade him to sit in yours before your legs fall asleep and you have to kick him off. He’s made of muscle, he’d probably be heavy in your lap, but that gets you thinking about rewarding each sit-up with a kiss. Speaking of kisses: sleepy morning kisses and passionate night time kisses, I’ll see you after work kisses and welcome home kisses. Reading sappy poetry to him in bed.

The only point where reality follows with fantasy is the Hale House. No dreams can replace the comfortingly warm feeling you get after a house planning session with Derek. The Pack House. Our House, you think of it fondly. You make extra certain to help Derek pick out the mattress. The biggest and softest you can find, a great reason to spend all of your nights in Derek’s room, not just half. When Scott inevitably has his brood of adorable children, they’ll call you UncleStilesandDerek, because how can you not be a unit when you share the master bedroom?

Derek confronts you. Says he’s noticed that you’ve been moody about something, and he wants to know if he can help. You want to sob, because he’s both the best and worst person to help with this. And for the love of god, he can hear lies. So you say something vague about feeling alone. He suggests that you go to The Jungle, find somebody, and you want to scream I’ve already found him! You’re so mad at him for believing that it’s that simple, and you would be fine with just any dude at a club, that you snap at him more than you want to, spit out passive aggressive statements through Thai food.

You’re being so obvious, but you can’t stop. You’re being too touchy about being single, the kind of touchy that means you must be interested in someone. Derek’s smart, you can see him putting the pieces together as you speak: if Stiles is interested in anybody, he would be interested in Derek,
whose life he clings to, whose bed he keeps sliding into like some pathetic, impotent attempt at seduction.

On the other side of the couch, Derek’s eyebrows pull together in concern.

You can’t stay to watch Derek figure it out, to listen to him let you down gently, to see him lock his bedroom door tonight. Hugging him one last time before you go, just in case he won’t let you when you come back, you leave.

Your feet slap against the pavement outside, and you start running. It feels better, the jolting pain of thin sneakers against concrete grounds you. He’s going to hate you for feigning friendship when you wanted more, for pretending that you didn’t mean anything by the touches, by the “friendly” flirting, when really, you were getting a sick thrill every time he innocently let you kiss his cheek.

Dad lets you brood in your old bedroom for a few hours while you get your shit together, muster up the courage to go home. He can tell something is wrong, gives you a Dad Hug before you leave. You’re glad. Especially since Derek might kick you out when you come home. It’s good to know you’ll always be welcome here.

When you come back to the apartment, Derek’s left a light on for you in the kitchen. You toe off your shoes, are tiptoeing down the hallway to your bedroom when Derek’s voice sleepily calls out for you from his room. You hover in his doorway while he asks if you feel better. You say you do, no reason to make Derek upset. He nods, and you’re expecting more, but he just holds open the covers for you.

Your heart breaks a little bit. Derek’s too self-sacrificing for his own good. You should have known he wouldn’t want to hurt your feelings by pushing you away, even if he doesn’t feel the same. You half want to shake him into sanity—make a decision for yourself, not other people for once!—but the half of you who wants to climb under the covers and make a home between Derek’s shoulder blades wins out. The both of you say goodnight to each other, then nothing else. It’s for the best. You’re both so bad at talking about feelings that you’re safer staying silent.

Derek gets more upset about your little run-in with a piece of falling roof than you do. You wake up to his gorgeous face streaked with tear tracks, and it takes you a moment to understand what even has him so upset. He hovers over you gingerly for the rest of the day until you start worrying he’s going to do something drastic, like carry you up all stairs so you don’t trip, or wrap your entire body in kneepads.

Once you start playing one of his romcoms, he calms down a little, head lolling against your leg. (He still insisted that you sit in the chair while he made do with a cushion on the floor, the martyr.) You figure he’s not going to go crazy anytime soon, and all the better for it. It’s amazing, the stuff he does for you; you don’t want to force him to do more by accidentally almost dying.

Then he says, I’m in love with you, and all of your hopes go flying out the window. You find yourself upstairs, packing furiously. Does Derek think that he can just fake being in love with you like that will make everything okay? It’s unfair to him, and you can’t believe that he thinks you would be happy with that. You aren’t a monster who would trap a reluctant Derek into a relationship with you. You want all of Derek or none of him, and now as you pack your boxes back up, it seems that it’s going to be none of him. Your hands shake as you wrap a stack of comic books back in their bubblewrap. You had thought that you two would be able to walk the tightrope: Derek knowing you’re in love with him but being cool about it, you being in love with him but not overwhelming him.

You fell off the tightrope.
Tears are streaming down your face by the time you trample down the stairs with box number three. You don’t want to go, you want to stay with Derek and play house in your mansion of denial for a little longer. You want Derek to actually love you.

Then Derek races out of the house after you.

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Derek resurfaces in his own mind like a drowning man lunging out of the ocean. He has to- where’s Stiles, where is he-

He’s curled up on his side, half tucked under the shadow of his jeep, sobbing like a lost child. Derek’s first instinct is that something with the spell backfired, and Stiles is once again suffering at the hands of his own magic, but when he reaches his hand forward to touch Stiles’ shoulder, Stiles’ own hand shoots up to grab his.

“I didn’t know,” he gasps out between sobs, “I didn’t- I didn’t- I saw it all and Derek baby if I’d known I would’ve, I would’ve, I love you, okay, I love you, I’ve loved you for a really long time, I- you can’t go around thinking I don’t anymore, okay, I think you’re perfect-”

“Stiles,” Derek breathes, tugging on his hand until Stiles achingly crawls out from underneath the jeep. “It’s okay, come here, it’s okay, I should’ve- I should have told you sooner,” he can’t believe Stiles was so sad for so long, this is just what he wanted to avoid. Derek pulls on Stiles’ hand until Stiles’ body is pressed up against his again.

“I dated other people!” Stiles recalls in horror, tightening his hands in Derek’s shirt. “Why did I do that?”

“I should have spoken up before you left The Jungle.”

“You said you loved me and I just,” Stiles sniffs explosively, “I just assumed you meant it in a friendly, older brotherly way maybe.”

“I was too scared to admit anything else.” Derek cups the back of Stiles’ head and rocks them back and forth. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Stiles chokes out against Derek’s neck. “And you love me, and everything is gonna be really good once I just, okay, once I just calm down a bit, okay.” He sniffs again and extracts his face from Derek’s shoulder to wipe at his eyes, then brush a thumb across Derek’s cheeks to collect tears Derek hadn’t even realized were falling. “And I think I’m going to be kind of, um, uncharacteristically sappy for a bit, as I, um-”

“Me too,” Derek finishes. He still feels the memory of Stiles waking up alone in the hotel room, betrayal resounding through him. “That was a lot of emotion.” He kisses the part of Stiles’ face that he can reach, and Stiles turns his head so that they can kiss properly. They haven’t kissed without tears on their faces yet, but that’s alright. There’s time.

A breeze whistles through them, and Stiles shivers.

“It’s late,” Derek agrees, “let’s go inside.”

Neither of them wants to let go of the other while they make the hike upstairs, which leads to some awkward squeezing through doorways, but Stiles just presses closer to compensate, which Derek doesn’t mind.
They end up standing on either side of the California king sized bed with pajamas and a choice in their hands.

“Should I...” Stiles trails off, looking down at his handful of Batman pajama pants. “Should I, um, bother?”

Derek swallows. “What, uh, what do you want to do?”

Stiles lets out a small, hysterical, laugh. “You pick.”

“Stiles-”

“No, you pick,” Stiles insists. “I’m fine either way, but you, uh, you should pick.”

Derek smiles. Stiles is being a gentleman. He knows Derek has more hangups about sex than Stiles does. The choice really is up to Derek. He eyes Stiles’ broad shoulders, lowering and rising under his T-shirt with each breath.

“No pajamas,” Derek says carefully. “But I’d rather we didn’t- tonight. Enough has happened tonight already.”

Stiles flings his pajama pants dramatically over his shoulder. “Now there’s a middle ground I can get behind!” His shirt follows. Then his jeans. Then Stiles hooks both thumbs in his purple underwear and meets Derek’s eyes. “Here we go?”

Derek dazedly starts unbuttoning his shirt. He’s seen Stiles naked before, but never like this. “Here we go.”

Climbing into bed together is nothing new for them. It’s a familiar comfort that Derek grounds himself in when he reaches out over the brink and touches the thrilling new landscape of Stiles’ skin. Stiles hums deep in his throat and shuffles closer, pulling the down covers they picked out together up to their necks. Their legs tangle together and their erections brush against each other, ignored in favor of Stiles nudging his nose up against Derek and asking, “Can we kiss though?”

Derek answers with lips rather than words, capturing Stiles’ face between his hands and angling it for the best access to his mouth. He hears his first Stiles Sex Noise. It’s low, resounding in his chest as he hooks an arm around Derek’s lower back to yank him closer.

Oh God, Derek thinks, staring at the ceiling as Stiles mouths across his jaw. For so long, Derek hadn’t allowed himself to think of Stiles in a sexual way. Now he can, and it’s overwhelming. Stiles’ hands are huge, and they’re sure and strong where they’re splayed over Derek’s back. Running his hands over the muscles in Stiles’ arms and back that he’s been forcing himself to ignore, Derek sends a sharp reprimand down to between his legs. They aren’t supposed to have sex tonight.

Stiles lowers his mouth to Derek’s neck and does something that make Derek moan and press a thumb against Stiles’ jaw to feel the sharp line of it moving as he showers attention onto the lines of Derek’s tendons. Stiles pauses to take a breath, inhaling and exhaling into Derek’s skin. Then he’s just inhaling, a hand cupping Derek’s neck so that Derek holds still while Stiles smells him, like a wolf scenting their mate—oh god—Clutching at Stiles’ ass, Derek rolls them over so that Stiles is underneath him. Stiles makes another devastating noise and hooks his legs around Derek’s waist. They gasp in startled unison as their erections brush together again, and this time, Derek can’t ignore it, pressing his hips downwards. One of his hands grips one of Stiles’ hips, narrow and strong in his hands. Stiles makes a noise in the back of his throat and arches up, lean stomach muscles stretching.
“Derek, I- we’ve gotta take a break, I’m about- nnn-” Stiles bites down hard on his lower lip.

“That’s fine, I don’t care, forget what I said,” Derek pulls Stiles’ lip from between his teeth so that he can bite it instead. “What I said was stupid”

“You sure?” Stiles murmurs against Derek’s mouth.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, yeah.”

“Yeah”

Stiles affects a pornographic moan. “Ohhhhh yeaaaaahhh!”

Derek grinds his hips down harder, pressing Stiles into the mattress. He’s going to get Stiles to make those noises for real if it’s the last thing he does.

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After, Stiles runs his hands through Derek’s hair and comments, “the first time we both got into this bed, we had sex in it. I think that’s a good start.”

Derek presses a soft kiss into Stiles’ chest.

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Derek wakes up alone in the bed. He stretches out languorously until his toes poke out from underneath the covers. Stiles is probably in the bathroom or something. His arm bumps against a piece of paper placed on the pillow next to his.

The post-it reads: Don’t panic! I would have loved to wake up with you with cuddles and kisses and stuff, but I’m starving and you’re fast asleep, so I’m making breakfast.

The note spills out onto a second post-it: and hopefully you’ll just sleep through me making breakfast and I can sneak back into bed and get rid of these post-its altogether

The third post-it: but I’m covering all my bases. Sweet dreams.

The fourth: also I love you.

When Derek gets up to join Stiles downstairs, he finds copies of the four post-its stuck to the door just above the handle. He’s willing to bet he’ll find another four on the bathroom mirror.

Stiles is making scrambled eggs—they’re the only eggs I don’t mess up!—in the kitchen. He turns around smiling when he hears Derek’s footsteps on the carpet.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“I got your note.”

Stiles holds up his hands defensively. “Communication is an important part of relationships! I’ve had to watch a lot of romcoms because of you, and there’s always that moment where somebody wakes up alone in bed and are like ‘they hate me!’ and that is not going to happen, thank you very much, so
I was thorough!"

The eggs are burning behind Stiles’ back, so Derek grabs the spatula and prods them around the skillet. “I didn’t think you’d leave me,” he informs Stiles, “I thought you’d gone to the bathroom or something.”

“Well,” Stiles muses, leaning his head against Derek’s shoulder, “then what if you’d peeked in the bathroom and I wasn’t there? Where would you be then? Thankful that I’d left notes on the bathroom mirror, that’s what.”

“Pass me a plate?”

Stiles does, and Derek shovels the eggs onto it.

“Hey,” Stiles slowly turns the plate in his hands. “So I’ve had like actual fantasies about morning kisses, just like, you know, kissing. In the morning. Which really isn’t much different from normal kisses, but like, there’s a sort of domestic feel to them, or at least I think there is, it’s not like I’ve had the experience.”

“I have morning breath,” Derek warns him.

Stiles sets the plate on the counter, says, “I don’t care.”

The eggs have to be reheated by the time they’re done.

There are still boxes here and there around the house to be unpacked, but they elect to spend the day doing absolutely nothing instead. After breakfast, there’s lounging and kissing to be done, and the same goes for after lunch.

(“We’re making out like teenagers,” Stiles observes gleefully. “I never got to do this when I was a teenager!”)

In the evening, Derek takes Stiles on a walk through one of the trails leading through the woods. It’s more overgrown than it was when he was young, but that’s alright, it’s going to be walked through more now. They hold hands, exchanging giddy smiles like they’re sharing a secret. Derek memorizes the way Stiles’ thumb unconsciously rubs across the back of Derek’s hand.

Cora texts [are you done w the heavy things? can i move in yet?] which Derek shows to Stiles.

“How do I respond without her making fun of me?”

Stiles takes Derek’s phone and taps away at it thoughtfully. Then he abruptly kisses Derek’s cheek while holding up the phone.

“What are you-” Derek hears the camera sound effect and rolls his eyes. “You aren’t texting that to her.”

“Think again!” Stiles exclaims, furiously typing. “I’m unstoppable.”

Derek dives for the phone but Stiles lunges out of the way, falling lengthwise across the couch. By the time Derek crawls up Stiles’ body to grab the phone, the text is sent.

It’s futile, but Derek takes back the phone hoping there can be some damage control. Stiles sent a picture of himself kissing Derek’s cheek, with the caption, [back off, the sex parade has begun]

Hastily, Derek adds, [that was stiles]
but actually, a few days alone would be nice

please

In the next hour, Derek receives the texts:

[lol stiles]

[wait but hes joking though right]

[wait derek is he????]

[derekkkkk]

[are you having sex right now]

[is stiles trolling me]

[derek]

[derekkkk]

Derek doesn’t answer them until the next morning. Stiles had never received a blowjob (reason #48 that Nose Ring was a terrible boyfriend) and that had to be remedied.

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However, they can’t stay alone in their little love den forever, especially since the pack all comes home for their winter breaks right around the time Cora insists she should be allowed to move in already.

The night before everybody except Isaac (Humboldt State is a week behind) arrive back in Beacon Hills, Derek and Stiles decide that when the pack thunders into the house tomorrow morning, they’re going to wait until everybody is gathered around the dining table with their waffles, then announce their relationship.

(“I’m glad Cora didn’t spill to everybody, and I guess it’s like, good that we can tell them ourselves, but it really feels like we’re making a press release, it’s kind of formal,” Stiles confesses.

“I think it’s odd too, but you know if we tell people one at a time, Erica is going to want to know why Scott knew first—”

“And Boyd will know before we even tell him, and Cora will be all smug about having the gossip before everybody else,” Stiles rolls his eyes. “Press release it is.”)

They have a plan.

The plan fails in favor of oversleeping. Derek is woken up by Scott opening their bedroom door to see Derek and Stiles woven around each other in bed, naked down to the sheets draped around their waists.

“Um,” says Scott.

“We, uh,” says Derek, lifting his head off of Stiles’ sleeping chest.

“It’s cool,” says Scott, “I know you guys like your privacy. I’ll just-” he leaves.
That was less dramatic than Derek expected. He braces himself for the parade of pack members trampling upstairs with questions and snarky comments, but they don’t come. He hears Scott tell the pack “Derek and Stiles are still sleeping,” and Boyd saying, “we can figure out how to make waffles ourselves.”

Famous last words. Derek wipes the sleep from his eyes, then tries to kiss Stiles awake. It’s harder than it looks in movies; Stiles just sighs and settles further into his pillow.

“So do you put the waffle iron on the stovetop? How does this work?”

Sighing, Derek grabs Stiles’ shoulder and shakes.

"Wh- morning, baby," Stiles smiles, syrupy slow. "Sup?"

"The pack's here."

"No, we’re waking up before them," Stiles corrects him, before blinking himself further awake. "Oh. We slept in."

"Yeah. And, uh, Scott knows."

Stiles makes a distressed noise. "Scott knows? How does he know? He's going to give me so much shit for not telling him first."

"He seemed calm," Derek reassures, "he just walked in on us like this," he gestures at their naked bodies entwined under and around the sheets, "said he'd give us privacy, and left."

"Hmm," Stiles runs his hands through his hair, trying to coax it out of its bedhead-y state. "Yeah, that's anticlimactic. Maybe he's waiting until I'm awake." Heaving himself upright, Stiles sighs, "might as well face the music."

When they come downstairs, Boyd is carefully reading out the waffle recipe from their singular cookbook while Erica measures. Nothing is burning.

Stiles clears his throat. "Um, good morning everybody." He gives a small, sheepish wave.

"Morning, bro!" Scott swoops in for a hug. "Good to be back." He pats Stiles casually on the back, then goes back to looking for eggs.

Stiles looks at Derek, who shrugs. Maybe last semester just really mellowed Scott out. "So, uh, I don't know what Scott told you guys, but, uh, me and Derek were, yeah, in bed together this morning."

Erica chuckles, rolling her eyes. "Oh my god, the scandal."

"This could affect the pack," Derek points out, "it's important that you all know this, and what affect we," he gestures between himself and Stiles, "might have on the group dynamic."

Boyd looks up from the cookbook, puzzled. "What do you mean? Has something changed?"

"Well," Derek looks at Stiles, who weaves his fingers through Derek’s, then holds their joined hands up in display for the pack.

"Me and Derek are, um, in a relationship! Riding the long-term train, no longer 'single' on facebook, locked into the old ball and chain." Nobody seems to be reacting, which Derek guesses is why Stiles keeps rambling on. "I've got Derek's letterman jacket, he's my old lady, I can delete my OKCupid
"Ohhh," Boyd snaps his fingers. "They're not being private about it anymore."

The rest of the pack nods in understanding.

Erica smirks. "It's sweet of you guys to tell us, but I've known since SPECon at least."

Scott elbows Erica. "But we knew privacy was important for you guys, and we didn't want to make it weird in case you two broke up."


"So we thought we'd let you guys, uh, 'come out' when you were ready," Scott finishes pointedly.

Cora just leans against the counter grinning the entire time.

Stiles laughs, and even Derek can't contain a small smile. It seems everybody else knew but them.

"Uh, guys, I appreciate the sad attempt at detective work," Stiles says around a smirk, "but me and Derek have only been together since last week."

The pack explodes in exclamations of "what" and "but you said-" and "no way," all bar Cora, who crosses her arms, leans further into the counter, and with a crocodile's grin, announces, "you all owe me money."

Derek takes over mixing the waffle batter while everybody else argues over whether the bet was really a bet, and does it count if they didn’t have it in writing.

The waffles turn out great, even if Scott does try to toast “the happy couple” by holding up an entire waffle on his fork, which promptly falls onto the table in a tragic spill of syrup and whipped cream.

Once he’s done eating, Stiles walks over to Derek and sits in his lap. The chair isn’t really made for two people, but Derek’s been inside Stiles’ head, he knows not to push Stiles off.

Stiles, meanwhile, nuzzles his head into Derek’s neck, marveling that “you ever thought I would be subtle about a relationship with Derek, Scott, oh my god. Look at my man.”

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"The tub isn’t really that big."

"Come on, Derek, tell me that we don’t have the biggest tub you’ve ever seen."

"It’s big for a bathtub," Derek allows, "but still not big enough for two full grown men inside it."

"We’ll cuddle up then," Stiles wheedles, tugging Derek into the bathroom, where a tub full of warm, very bubbly water awaits. “Besides, I can think of at least one part of myself that I can store inside of you. Save some space.”

He winks, and Derek can feel his cheeks turning a brighter red than the tub’s hot water would ever make them. “That’s terrible.”

“Terribly sexy.”

“No, terribly that-makes-me-sound-like-a-Uhaul-storage-unit.”
“I’m going to master sexy talk one of these days days, you just wait,” Stiles declares, dropping his towel and stepping into the tub, “you will be powerless against my wiles.”

Between the view of Stiles’ ass as he bends to fit inside of the tub, and Stiles’ rapid learning curve in everything, Derek suspects that yes, he will be.

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It’s late when Stiles head butts Derek’s shoulder and says, “hey, since we’re fulfilling all of Stiles’ cheesy fantasies today apparently, is it cool if I, uh, I wanna read you like poetry and shit?”

Derek brushes through Stiles’ wet hair so it lays flat against the pillow. “You can read me all the poetry and shit you like. Do you have a book somewhere?”

Stiles snorts. “Please.” He pulls out his phone. “Googling love poems now.”

Rolling his eyes, Derek lays back in the bed. If Stiles thinks that epic love is made from people wanting to read love poetry to each other, well, Derek’s suffered worse punishments. Besides, there’s something comfortably familiar about Stiles lying next to him, looking through poems on his phone that Derek can’t put his finger on.

“Okay here’s one.” Stiles’ long hands are curved around the faint light of his phone, casting shadows on the sheets as he reads from it. “‘Out of lemon flowers/loosed/on the moonlight, love's/lashed and insatiable/essences,/sodden with fragrance,/the lemon tree's yellow/emerges,/the lemons/move down/from the tree's planetarium.’ Sexy, Mr. Neruda, sexyyy.” He looks up with a smirk, and his eyes are so full of mirth and so close, “I think I could write a better love poem than that.”

Derek laughs. “Let’s hear something.”

Pressing himself further up against Derek’s side, Stiles hums in thought while he pulls another blanket over them. “There once was a man named Derek, who... was a were...ek?”

The halfhearted excuse for a poem strums a chord of recognition in Derek’s brain, but he can’t figure out what he’s being reminded of. “You could do a haiku,” Derek suggests, raising his eyebrows.

“Fuck yeah I could do a haiku,” Stiles presses his lips together, and Derek can almost hear him counting syllables. “His eyes are blue-ish/or maybe green I don’t know...” Stiles trails off, tracing a finger slowly down Derek’s stomach. “‘Oh I love you so?’ I- oh my god, stop smiling like that, it’s so cheesy, I just wanted something that rhymed!”

Derek can’t stop smiling. He’s figured out why the poems are familiar. He kisses Stiles fervently, and when Stiles makes a questioning sound against Derek’s lips, Derek asks, “did you see any of my dreams when you were in your head?”

Stiles tilts his head to the side, thinking. Then his eyes shoot open. “That explains the deja vu. Fuck, man.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re awesome.”

Snaking his arm under Stiles’ back, Derek pulls Stiles closer until his head is resting right over Derek’s heart. The very same one that gave Derek a jolt the first time he set eyes on Stiles, years ago.

Most werewolves don’t even have soulmates.
Most that do are dysfunctional.

The fraction of wolves who get dreams about the future with their soulmate are even smaller.

Only one werewolf in the entire world gets Stiles as a soulmate.

Laura would be proud.

Into the top of Stiles’ head, Derek agrees, “we’re awesome.”

Chapter End Notes

Much thanks to everybody who read, commented, subscribed, bookmarked, and were just encouraging in general. There’s no way I would have powered through this without all of your support.

End Notes

You can follow me on tumblr if you're into fic updates and basically nothing else.

NOW with some lovely fanart by hitoriMaron on tumblr!

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!