**Divided**

by Vague Shad0ws

**Summary**

Stiles was just starting to face his DID...and then all hell broke loose.

How many times can he shatter before there's nothing left to piece back together?

**Notes**

Okay, folks, this really is the last part I'm going to add in before Delivered. (Although I reserve the write to expand Delivered once this is over)

Unending thanks to those of you who have been along for the whole ride AND to those who climbed aboard recently, your encouragement means the world as is a huge part of why I've continued on in this 'verse.

Okay now, got your chocolate? something fluffy to cuddle? inhaler?

Ready, set, go!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Isaac wakes in a bed that’s on fire, scrambling away from the heat as the sound of gunfire rings in his ears. His reflexes served him well; he’s relatively unscathed as he runs out into the hall, screaming the names of his family.

“Isaac!” Collin shrieks from upstairs. “Derek! Damon! Help!”

Isaac dashes up the stairs, a journey that seems to take eons, and practically rips the bedroom door off its hinges. He’s met by a wall of flames, but his son is coughing on the other side, and Isaac charges through without a second thought, emerging gratefully on the other side barely singed.

“What’s happening, Isaac? Who are they? What do they want?” Collin cries, rushing to clutch Isaac’s waist.

“I dunno, but we gotta get out of here, okay? Come on.”

He hoists Collin up like a toddler, and Collin clings tight as they rush back out through the flames.

“Isaac!” Collin yelps when they come out into the hall.

“I got it; I got it,” Isaac says, swatting at the flame on the shoulder of Collin’s pajamas. “You’re okay. I got it.”

“Everybody else. Where’s everybody else?!”

As if on queue, Derek’s voice reaches from downstairs. “Cora, move! We have to get out! Cora!”

“Go!” Damon replies. “Take Addie. I’ll bring her.”

But what’s outside?

What’s wrong with Cora?

What’s happening?

***********************************

Addie’s wailing at decibels Derek didn’t know were possible as he carries her toward the back door. Derek has no idea what they’ll find out there, but he can’t just sit in a burning house. They’ve got to get away. He fights back an endless stream of horrible memories as he runs.

Is this one my fault too?

I should have had some kind of plan for this.

I failed them.
I failed my family.

Again.

Derek bursts out the back, protecting Addie as much as he can against the barrage of arrows that meet them. He roars as she squeals in pain, pushing himself faster as he tries to gauge where the arrows are coming from and how many hunters they’re up against. It takes him longer than it should to realize that there’s more wrong with him than just the wounds of the arrows.

Poison?

His legs give out beneath him and he drops Cora—no, not Cora—Derek blinks against memory and poison cluttering his perceptions.—it’s Addie. Regardless, he has to protect her. They’re closing in; he can hear the hunters even as his vision blurs to only splotches of color. He tries to stand again, but can’t, and instead he pulls Addie under the weight of his own body, knowing it will shield her only for a few moments more before he loses consciousness, but he still has to try. He growls at their attackers as though he’s a threat, instinct to fight urging him to lash out, but paternal protectiveness refusing to leave Addie unprotected.

“That’s enough,” a voice calls, tone warped as the blackness closes in on Derek’s vision. “He’ll be out in a second; save your arrows.”

“Addie, when they move me, you have to run,” he whispers urgently. “Don’t look back, just run.”

*She won’t get far, but she has to try.*

“No, Derek,” she whimpers.

“Just run,” he repeats, words slurring as the world goes black.

Just before he loses all consciousness, he hears Addie beg, “Daddy, please don’t die!”

******************************************************************************************

Stiles wakes slowly to complete and utter darkness. Terror surges through him as the horrific events of past hours—days? *Fuck, I don’t even know*—swim to the surface of his brain. Every inch of him aches. He can tell the burns haven’t healed completely yet, Damon barely got Cora out before—

“Cora?” he calls; his voice is raspy and he coughs but keeps calling. “Cora?! Derek?! Isa—”

“They’re not here, dipshit,” a gravelly tone replies with two knocks on what sound like a wooden door somewhere above him. “Shut the fuck up.”

*Not here. They’re not here.*

*But they’re somewhere?*

*They’re alive; they have to be.*

*Oh God, please.*
Who the hell are these people? Where did they bring me? Where did they take the others? Are they together or alone? Isaac can’t be cramped in a place like this. Oh God, what if he’s with the children? The children! Were they hurt? Isaac had Collin. Derek had Addie. How far did they get? Maybe some of them got away.

He stops talking, listening instead for pulses, but there’s only the one above him. The damp smell of mold is assaulting his nose, making him sneeze.

Cellar or something?

He stretches out his arms in front of him, searching for clues. It’s a while before he finds the wall. He runs his hands along, feeling nothing but rough stucco walls until his fingertips cross over a switch. He flicks it, and some back portion of his mind almost expects to find himself in the Argent basement with Boyd and Erica. He shakes his head against the memory, focusing instead on assessing the room around him.

It’s seemingly just a typical, nondescript basement. There’s a chair in the corner with some seriously ominous chains bolted onto it. There’s a table beside it that bears a robust chest of some sort with a big padlock on the front. Stiles takes a step or two toward it, debating the risks of opening the box, hoping whoever’s attacked his pack was stupid enough to leave something here for him to use. Before he lays a hand on it, the sound of two more people entering the building—house?—upstairs, pulls his attention away.

“Anything from him?” a voice wonders; it’s familiar, incredibly familiar, but Stiles can’t immediately place it.

“He woke up about five minutes ago,” the gruff voice from before replies.

Footsteps cross the floor above him, stopping outside the door at the top of the stairs. For just a moment he thinks of tucking himself into a defensible position in the corner under the table, but in the next instant the fury rises up and pulls him toward the base of the stairs.

You bastards; you think you can attack my family? I’ll rip you the fuck apart, just give me half a chance and I will make ever last one of you wish you’d never even been born!

A growl rises from deep in his chest as the door swings open. He catches the first arrow, dodges the second, but falls under the third, fourth, and fifth. As he hits the concrete, he looks up to take in the hunter who’s dared orchestrate this unforgivable attack on the Hales.

She’s older than in the hazy memories that swim to the surface as their eyes meet. He face is scared and her eyes are cold and calculating as she smirks down at her victim.

“You?” he wonders in horrified disbelief

“Surprise,” she replies as her taunting smile grows wider.

What the fuck?

It can’t be.

******************************************************************************
“Derek? Come on, Derek; wake up,” Isaac’s voice urges.

He sounds so far away. Derek struggles to hone in on his words.

“Derek, please wake up. I need you to wake up. Come on!” Isaac persists, and now Derek can feel his still-healing body being shaken.

He manages at guttural groan that seems to encourage Isaac.

“Yeah, that’s it. Shake off this poison shit, Derek. Open your eyes! Wake up!”

When Derek finally manages to force his eyes open, Isaac’s worried, soot and tear-streaked face looms above him. He’s smiling though, relieved at Derek’s return to consciousness?

“Hey, sleeping beauty,” Isaac says, but his voice cracks over the joke, and the horrors of all that precluded Derek’s sedation hit him like a freight train.

“Kids? Isaac where are they? Where are we? What happened?”

“I don’t know. I woke up here a little while ago. I haven’t seen the hunters or whoever it was that attacked, but I’m guessing hunters. I don’t know where the kids are; I shouted, but there’s no answer. It’s just you and Cora. There’re two hunters outside the door I think. They’ve hardly spoken to each other, but the pulses are there, and it’s no one we know.”

“Stiles?”

“I don’t know.”

“But he got out of the house; you saw him get out of the house?”

“Yeah, he pulled Cora out, but I don’t know what happened after—she’s—she’s not exactly in a conversational mood,” Isaac answers, glancing behind him at Cora’s huddled form.

She’s got her back to the wall, knees pulled up in front of her chest, and her face buried in her arms. There are burns that haven’t healed yet all over the skin he can see. Her clothes are charred, and he wonders just how long she and Stiles were in the fire before they got out.

But he did get out. He did. He’s not dead; he’s just not here. Like the kids. Not dead, not dead, not dead. We’ll find them. We’ll get out of this. We’ll be okay.

We have to.

We can’t lose everything again; I can’t. I wouldn’t survive it. I wouldn’t want to.

“We’re stuck in here,” Isaac says, voice barely a whisper as his eyes dart around the room.

“There’s no way out, Derek. We—we—”

“Breathe,” Derek instructs. “You’re okay, Isaac; we’re okay for now. Just breathe.”

Isaac’s fingers interlock with Derek’s so tightly it hurts, but he doesn’t pull away. If Isaac loses his control they’re even more fucked than they already are.

No, we’re going to handle this; we’re going to be okay. We’re not fucked; we’ll survive whatever this is. We will; we have to.

Before the despair can take over anymore, Derek focuses instead on Cora, moving slowly to sit
beside her, pulling Isaac with him. He resists the urge to touch her lest he agitate a healing burn.

“Cora, are you okay?”

She doesn’t reply.

“Cora?”

“She hasn’t said a word so far,” Isaac says. “I think—she’s in shock maybe?”

“Cora, do you remember what happened to Stiles?” Derek presses.

“I tried that already,” Isaac informs.

“Well, what the fuck else do you want me to do?” Derek retorts. “Would you like me to not bother trying? Maybe if we sit here with our thumbs up our asses we can—” his voice breaks halfway through the outburst. “I didn’t—I don’t—fuck, Isaac.”

“It’s okay,” Isaac replies quietly.

But it’s not, because Isaac is trembling and barely holding it together and Derek’s temper isn’t going to help anything.

_I just don’t know what the hell we’re supposed to do here. They burned down the house, attacked and separated us. I know I’m supposed to know what to do, but I don’t; I have no fucking clue what to do._

“Did you hear them?” Cora whispers, interrupting the internal lamentation.

“What?”

“Did you hear them, Derek?” she repeats.

She doesn’t shift her gaze to her brother; she stares straight ahead as though watching a scene only she can see.

“Hear who?”

“Everyone,” she replies, and the word comes out as a sob. “All of them screaming and burning and—and dying, Derek! They were dying, and all I did was run. I could hear them, but I didn’t go to help. I just—I ran and I ran but it was echoing everywhere—and then—then it was all quiet—just the sirens and—and—I knew they were—”

The last of the sentence dissolves into gut-wrenching sobs as she breaks down in earnest, clutching to Derek though it must pain her. He holds back tightly, rocking the both of them gently.

“Shhhhh, shhhhh, it’s okay now. You’re okay.”

“I didn’t go back; I didn’t even try. I could hear them all—and—and mom’s growls turning into screams and—and—they were burning alive, Derek.”

_You heard all that the day of the fire? You heard them die? And it’s haunted you since you were twelve fucking years old?_

_And if you ever find out that it was all my fault, you’ll never forgive me._
And you shouldn’t.

God, I’m so fucking sorry, Cora. I’m so, so sorry.

“Nobody died this time,” Isaac soothes. “It’s okay; we just gotta—gotta figure out what we’re up against now.”

One claustrophobe, one head case, and one clueless Alpha.

Whatever we’re up against, the odds aren’t in our favor.

********************************************************************

Breathe.

Just breathe, Isaac. You can do this. Just breathe.


Gotta keep my shit together.

Oh, fuck, I can’t do this.

I have to do this. I have to. I can’t leave Derek to handle two breakdowns at once. I gotta keep it together.


********************************************************************

Stiles’ mind runs a mile a minute as he tries to connect all the pieces to explain how this could possibly be happening.

“Been a long time, Damon,” Julie says as she descends the stairs. “I wondered if you’d remember me.”

“My name is Stiles; you know that. I told you that.”

“Sure,” she replies. “Stiles, if you want; I don’t care. No matter what you call yourself we both know you’re nothing but a monster.”

“I helped you turn back to human. I took you home. I—”

“Left me with a family who shipped me off to a nuthouse when I couldn’t cope,” she snaps.

“I told you if you needed anything to—”

“To come crawling to the psycho who helped kidnap me in the first place?”
“That wasn’t me.”

She barks out a laugh at the statement.

“Of course not,” she mocks with a fake pout. “Poor little Damon. You couldn’t help it. You didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“I tried to make it right. I even offered to let you try our pack if—”

“I was human again,” she reminds. “Why in hell would I want to live with mongrels and monsters? I didn’t want you; I didn’t need you. I found my own pack.”

“Your own pack?”

“You think werewolves are the only ones who prefer groups?”

“Hunters? You—you became a hunter.”

_Oh my God; I ruined your life and sent you running to hunters. I thought I helped you. I thought I did the right thing for you._

“Exactly, and now no mutt like you is ever going to fuck with me again,” she confirms with a kick to Stiles’ gut that he doesn’t expect in time to block. “They took me away from the hellhole of a psych ward my parents dumped me in. They taught me how to protect myself; they told me the truth about freaks like you. They showed me something worth living and dying for.”

“Living and dying?”

“Let’s just say I’m taking care of some unfinished business from Oregon; the Grayson Emissary was kind enough to point us in the right direction after a little—persuasion.”

“You bitch, if you lay a finger on my children I will—”

Four more arrows rain down on Stiles from the hunters behind Julie, sending him back to the floor before he can fully rise. She flips him on his back with another kick—conditions? _Fuck_ —and brings her boot to rest over Stiles’ throat, pressing until he chokes.

“I won’t have to lay a finger on them,” she replies. “You’ll do it for me, Damon.”

“No,” he manages to gasp despite the excruciating pressure on his windpipe.

“You will train them to be excellent little attack dogs just like you were for that psychotic bitch who set you on me. I know you can do it; I’ve been your pupil, remember?”

“I won’t.”

“We can be very persuasive, Damon.”

“I’ll die first.”

“Oh, now I think we both know that monsters like you don’t deserve anything so easy as death.”

_You don’t deserve anything so sweet as death, beta._

_But death is better than capture._
The shame that being captured would bring to your pack is unforgiveable.

Death is better than capture.

He growls as he lashes out at the human’s leg, glorying in the feel of her flesh parting as his claws slice through. He pushes away the pain of the arrows as he rises to his feet, but he’s no match for three of them, not while he’s so injured. While he strikes at the nearest assailant, another jabs a needle into his neck. He lets out a roar of renewed fury, but he knows already it’s futile. His motions slow as the injection takes effect.

Let it be poison; let it kill me.

Please just let it kill me.

Why doesn’t it sting like wolfsbane?

No, no, it’s not poison; it won’t kill me.

No, no, no. Just kill me. You’re supposed to just kill me, please!

Death is better than capture.

Isaac bolts for the opening door before he can rein in the panicked response to any chance at freedom. It doesn’t register that there are four hunters between him and the door; all that encompasses his mind is the desperate need to get out. He doesn’t see the taser coming until it hits him; he hears Derek scream his name as he stumbles. He and Cora shift, roaring and surging forward only to be knocked back as bullets fire. When all three of them lie subdued at gunpoint, one hunter—a young girl clearly aged beyond her years—lets out a low chuckle.

“You couldn’t possibly think that was going to get you anywhere,” she says.

I wasn’t thinking at all. I lost control. I can’t afford to do that. You have my family. I have to keep it together.

Isaac tries his damnedest not to think of how long it will be before they shut the door again. There are more important things.

Kids. The kids. Stiles. where are they? What do these people want with us?

“That was almost as pathetic as your attempt to run from the fire,” she goes on, garnering snarls from Cora, “but I’m done playing around with the three of you. You’re an insurance policy, nothing more,” she says. “which makes every single one of you expendable.”

“Then why didn’t you just kill us?” Cora demands.

“I told you; you’re insurance. Leverage to make things easier, but nothing critical.”

Leverage for what?

“So I don’t have time for your idiotic attempts at escape, am I clear?”
“Sure,” Derek replies dryly. “We’ll just make ourselves at home in this little make-shift holding cell and—”

His sentence cuts short as the huntress tosses something to the floor in the middle of the three with a thud. Isaac takes in the sight of the blonde locks that hit the floor and a level of terror he didn’t know existed seizes him completely.

Addie’s Rapunzel braid.

Isaac’s terror may freeze him, but Derek’s fuels his rage. He struggles despite the gun in his face, getting in two slashes to the hunters before three bullets bering him back to the ground.

“I will kill you all,” he swears, “every last fucking one of you. If you hurt her—”

“Keep up the escape attempts and the fighting, and next time I’ll bring you her fingers,” the huntress swears darkly, pressing the tip of her pistol into Derek’s forehead so hard it’s sure to leave a mark. “That a risk you’re willing to take, Derek? You want me to tell your little princess that Daddy was bad and that’s why the mean hunter lady’s going to pull out those pretty painted fingernails of hers one at a time before I make a nice little bundle of pudgy fingers to drop at your feet.”

Derek snarls but makes no other sign of resistance. Isaac feels like he’s going to puke. Despite her other chilling threats, all Isaac can do is stare back at the braid on the concrete floor.

It’ll take forever for it to grow back. She’s going to be so upset.

Lydia will know where to take her to get the cut fixed. We’ll tell her it’s like Rapunzel getting her hair cut; we’ll figure out how to still style it “like a princess.” It’ll be okay. We can fix it.

We have to fix it.

How are we going to fix it?

How the fuck do we fix any of this?

They’ve got our kids; they can hurt our kids.

They’ve got all the leverage.

We can’t fight.

Oh, God, they’ve got our kids.

*************************************************

“Stiles, please wake up; please? You gotta wake up, and you gotta be you, okay, Stiles? Come on! Wake up!”

Stiles’ eyes fly open, and he’s on his feet in the next instant, scanning the room for what he hopes to God wasn’t just a dream.

“Stiles?”
“Oh thank God you’re both okay,” Stiles replies, gathering the kids into the tightest embrace he can. “You are okay, aren’t you? They haven’t done anything? They didn’t hurt you?”

“They cut off all my hair!” Addie wails, clutching at Stiles’ shirt and burying her face in his chest.

“We’re okay though,” Collin assures. “Stiles, who are they? What do they want?”

Revenge. And she’s going to take it out on my kids.

“Listen to me, Collin because I don’t know how long before they come back. I need you to step up for me. I know you can.”

“Yeah,” he answers, but the nervous crack in his voice betrays the terror underneath the attempt at bravado.

“They want—they want—” Stiles glances down at Addie, choosing his words carefully. “The hunter in charge, Julie, she wants us all to be like Wretch, to be good and obedient to the hunters like the bad alphas wanted me obedient to them, you understand?”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Stiles replies because even if he knew he had time to explain, he’s not sure he wants to explain. “What I need you to do is swear to me that if I—if I switch for some reason and I—if I try to hurt you or your sister, you fight back, you understand? Don’t stop for one second to worry how much you’re hurting me. Protect yourself and your sister. No matter what you have to do to me.”

“Why’s Wretch wanna hurt us?” Addie sniffs. “Does he still think I’m bad?”

“No, sweetie, nobody thinks you’re bad; he won’t—I won’t want to hurt you. I’m gonna try as hard as I possibly can not to hurt you, but—but they’re going to try and make me, I don’t know how yet, but just—just don’t let me hurt you. Whatever it takes to stop me, it’s okay.”

“Stiles, I don’t know if I can—”

“You can,” Stiles interrupts sharply. “I’m counting on you, Collin. I’m trusting you with this job. Don’t let me down. Don’t let Addie down.”

“Stiles, I—”

“And whatever they try,” Stiles goes on over Collin’s uncertainty, “try not to watch, okay? And make sure Addie doesn’t watch.”

“What’re they gonna do to you?” Collin wonders fearfully.

The door opens with a bang against the wall, and Julie’s grinning face leers down at them.

“Really the better question would be what aren’t we going to do to him,” she informs callously. “Sure you don’t want to take the easy way and cooperate?” she asks Stiles.

“Afraid not.”

“Good,” she answers as she descends the stairs with her lackeys. “The hard way is so much more fun.”
“We have to do something; we can’t just sit here!” Cora rages, tugging at her restraints. They aren’t just sitting anywhere. They’re standing—albeit on tiptoes—with their arms bound above them to shackles conducting the right voltage of electricity to keep any of them from shifting. It took absolutely every ounce of self-control Derek had not to fight when they tied the werewolves up, but he can’t risk the kids. He won’t.

“And what the fuck do you plan on doing?” Derek wonders, annoyed. “We don’t have a choice, Cora. They have the kids.”

“So we do nothing? How can you—”

“Because they have my kids!” Derek thunders. “What part of that is unclear to you? You think that psychotic bitch cares if she hurt them? She’ll probably hand us bloody body parts with a smile on her face. We’re stuck! We’re helpless! So shut the fuck up and pray that the rest of the pack manages to find the kids before whatever these hunters are planning really gets into full swing!”

Cora has no response for his words. Derek almost apologizes for the outburst, but he bites back the words. It’s true. There’s nothing they can do really, not without knowing more, not without risking harm to the kids. He feels completely and utterly helpless, maybe the most helpless he’s ever felt in his life.

Almost as bad as the warehouse with the alphas.

Maybe I don’t have to watch the damage happen this time, but I’ll never fucking forgive myself if they hurt those kids—or Stiles or Isaac or Cora or anyone.

I’m supposed to protect them; I’m their Alpha. I’m supposed to keep shit like this from happening.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Collin, make them stop!” Addie wails over her brother’s shoulder.

He’s holding her tight, one hand firmly on the back of her head to keep it turned away from Stiles, but she can still hear everything. She’s heard the taser and the baseball bat and the smack of skin on skin as the hunters repeatedly beat Stiles down at Julie’s instruction. She’s heard the yelps and grunts of pain that Stiles couldn’t quite bite back, the gurgling in his voice when he repeatedly refuses Julie’s request to make the children kneel for her.

“It’s okay, Addie,” Collin says through his own tears. “It’s not as bad as it sounds,” he lies. “Stiles is okay.”

“Yep,” Stiles confirms, though the rasp in his voice contradicts the statement.
Collin may have managed to obediently turn his sister’s face away, but he’s watched in horror himself, not closing his eyes or looking away as Stiles told him to. Stiles aches to comfort him, but all he can do is try his best to keep the extent of the pain from showing on his face.

*How long can we keep this up before the others find us? How much longer before things get worse?*

As though she heard Stiles’ internal questioning, Julie takes a few steps toward the kids. Collin’s hold on Addie tightens as he shrinks back from Julie’s approach.

“You want us to stop hurting him, Addie?” she wonders in a sickly sweet voice.

“Uh-huh.”

“You can help him. Just tell Collin to put you down so you can get on your knees on the floor. That’s all. If you do that, we won’t have to hit Stiles with the bat anymore.”

_This is your back-up plan, isn’t it, you sicko? If you couldn’t get me to break and train them, you’ll train them using me—and maybe the others too—as leverage._

*Over my dead body, bitch.*

“Collin—”

“Addie, no! They’re gonna hurt him no matter what we do. Don’t believe her.”

Julie swings a hand as if to smack Collin’s face, but he easily stops the blow, growling as his fangs elongate and his eyes glow golden. Stiles launches toward them though he knows he’ll be intercepted. In the chaos that ensues, Stiles enacts the idea that’s been forming in the back of his mind, going limp under their blows despite the fact he could easily continue fighting.

“Julie,” one hunter says gruffly, nudging Stiles’ still form with his boot. “Your little experiment’s out cold. What now?”

“Already?” she wonders with a swift kick to Stiles’ legs.

He stays limp, letting the blow shift his body and stifling the grunt of pain that would normally accompany it.

“Stiles!? STILES!” Collin shrieks, and the panic in his voice threatens to get a reaction much more than any physical blow.

*Stay still. Stay still. Gotta stay still.*

_Hold still, beta, Thomas bids. Move so much as a muscle, and I’ll flay every last inch of your miserable hide until you’re too hoarse to even scream anymore. You understand me?_

Stiles pushes the voice away, trying desperately to both employ the conditioning he’ll need and not lose himself to the memories.


The successive blows from the maple bat crack Stiles’ already wounded ribs. Julie digs the heel of her shoe into his left hand, twisting with all her weight on it, and there’s a small ‘pop’ as his thumb dislocates. Collin and Addie are both shouting again, but Stiles doesn’t let himself take in the words.
Can’t listen. I have to be still. I have to stay still. I can take it.

I know better than to pull away. I know how to be good.

No, no, not being good. Not being good. Resisting. It’s a plan.

Gotta stay still so I can make a move when they go to leave.

Plan, not conditioning.

I’m okay. I’m okay.

Just gotta stay still.

Don’t listen to Thomas. Don’t. Don’t. can’t lose myself.

But gotta stay still.

“Well, that’s disappointing,” Julie says, heaving a sigh as she removes her foot from Stiles’ crushed hand and the bat stops swinging. “He should heal soon though. We’ll give it another go once he’s conscious.”

Stiles hears her lead the way toward the stairs. She’s on the second one, and Stiles is readying to rise when she pauses.

“You two little shits better think long and hard while we’re gone,” she says. “A little cooperation might save you all a little bloodshed.”

“Go to hell,” Collin replies, and Stiles wonders if his voice shakes from anger or fear.

“Yeah!” Addie adds, sniffling after; Stiles resists the urge to smile proudly at their courage.

Don’t smile. Don’t smile. Gotta be still. Just a couple more seconds.


They start up the stairs again, and when all four sets of feet are on the stairs, Stiles rises, shifting as he runs, twisting the closets hunter’s wrist deftly as he fires a shot into Stiles’ abdomen. Stiles takes the gun as the hunter’s hold loosens, firing blindly and clawing everything in reach with his free hand as they struggle to fight him effectively on the stairs. It’s not long before they’re all a tumbling mass of limbs and bodies landing hard on the concrete floor.

Stiles lets the mantra work in his favor as he fights despite the pain. He can hear the reminder on a loop in his head.

Death is better than capture. Death is better than capture. Death is better than capture.

And the added, self-given mantra:

Death is better than failing the children. Death is better than failing the children. Death is better than failing the children.

Letting up is not an option, this is the best chance any of them have at battling their way out. Stiles fights reflexively, and the pain fades away underneath the need to win at any cost. He lets the instincts in, loses himself in the fight, and doesn’t let up until the last hunter falls beneath him. He struggles to draw breath, collapsing as the adrenaline starts to ebb.
Five heartbeats. There are two still alive. I have to finish it. I have to make sure the kids are safe. I can’t let them hurt the kids.

He rises from the floor with a growl, remaining on all fours because he knows he can’t stand on his own.

It’s okay. I’ll attack low. They’re wounded. I’m not going to lose.

As he braces for a renewed attack, he realizes neither of the living hunters make any move from their places on the floor. The only movement comes from the corner of his eye, and he growls involuntarily as he turns, though he knows his son poses no threat.

“Stiles?” Collin says quietly.

You look scared. Why do you look scared? They’re all down. I took them all down. Why are you scared?

“It’s—it’s okay now,” Collin continues. “D’you—you know where you are? You know—”

“I’m not Wretch,” Stiles assures, understanding the trepidation. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m fine.”

At the words Collin’s eyes widen. It’s not quite a look of alarm, but it’s something akin to it. As the adrenaline continues to fade, Stiles takes in the scene around him: The eviscerated bodies of hunters lie scattered amongst the blood pooling on the basement floor. Even the two surviving hunters won’t last much longer without some serious medical attention: Julie’s one of them, breathing in harsh, gurgling rasps that bring a twisted smile to Stiles’ lips.

The world begins to swim as Stiles’ body struggles to heal. His knees buckle beneath him, but Collin tries to break the fall by catching him under the arms.

“Fuck!” Stiles bites out. “Thanks, but I—I think my shoulder’s—”

“The least of our worries,” Collin interrupts, eyes sweeping over Stiles as he assesses the wounds.

Stiles agrees; there’s so many sources of pain he’s not entirely sure what’s wrong: broken bones, more bullets than he can count, and he’s pretty sure that’s wolfsbane he can feel leeching through his system.

“Stiles, Stiles! Hey, look at me!” Collin orders.

“Yeah?”

“Stay awake, you understand?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Hey, kiddo—uh—I think—I think we maybe need to get the bullets out; they’re—laced—with—something,” Stiles says, words slurring as his vision clouds.

“I—uh—I don’t know how to—what if I hurt you more?”

“Trust you,” Stiles murmurs as it becomes more and more apparent just how unable he is to heal himself; the wolfsbane only hinders the process more.

“Stiles, stay awake.”
“Phone,” Stiles mutters. “Deaton.”

“Yeah—yeah of course, of course! Deaton! I’ll find a phone, okay? Just—just stay awake.”

Stiles eyes are fluttering shut despite his best efforts. Collin shakes him.

“Stiles! I can’t leave and find a phone if you’re gonna—Addie, come here. Make Stiles stay awake okay?”

“Is he gonna die, Collin?”

“No! Don’t even think that! I’m gonna get help, okay? Be a big girl and keep him awake. Sing him a song or something. Make his sing with you.”

“Collin, I’m scared.”

“Make him sing, Addie!” Collin insists, voice moving away—looking for a phone? Find one fast, kiddo. I’m not feeling so great.

“Stiles, sing me the Rapunzel song,” Addie says. “Stiles?!”

He opens his eyes again, though he doesn’t remember letting them close. He tries to smile but he isn’t so sure if he’s succeeding.

“Fl—flower,” Stiles manages to get out before he starts coughing, bringing a new flood of pain to his battered body. “Gl—gle—am.”

“And glow,” Addie continues when he doesn’t, but he can’t find the breath to join her singing.

The melodic sound of her voice follows him down into the blackness.

* * * * *

“He’s moving!” Collin’s voice shouts. “Dr. Deaton, he’s moving! Stiles?! Stiles can you hear __”

“Shhhh,” Stiles interrupts with a groan, desperate for the shouting to stop ringing in his pounding head.

“You can hear me?” Collin demands, but more quietly.

“The whole block could hear you, kiddo,” Stiles grumbles, but he smiles, opening his eyes in time to see the relief wash over Collin’s face, eyes lighting up as he laughs.

“You’re okay?”

“Getting there,” Stiles replies. “You and Addie?”

“Yeah, yeah we’re totally fine, Stiles. Me and Addie both. We’re—Addie what’s wrong?” Collin worries.
Stiles lifts his aching head to look in the direction Collin is. Addie’s just a few feet away from the cot Stiles is on with tears welling up in her eyes.

“I tried to make you sing, Stiles,” she swears, “but you just kept falling asleep! I tried to make you sing, and I sang because you wouldn’t, but—but—”

She dissolves into earnest sobs and her brother rushes to comfort her as Stiles struggles to convince his aching body to sit up.

“It’s okay, Addie. You did your best. It’s okay.”

“Know what, munchkin?” Stiles asks.

“What?”

“It was okay I went to sleep, so I could heal. You didn’t do anything wrong; in fact, you were singing so pretty I only had good dreams once I fell asleep,” he fibs for her benefit.

“R-really?”

“Really. I had the best sleep so I could start healing up.”

“I thought you were gonna die,” she says, leaving Collin’s embrace to come over and stand in front of Stiles’.

“I’m okay now,” he assures. “I’ll be good as new before long.”

“Are Derek ‘n’ Isaac ‘n’ Aunt Cora gonna die?” she asks anxiously.

“I told you to stop asking that,” Collin chastises. “They’re gonna be fine once we find them.”

“You haven’t found them?” Stiles says, rising to his feet too quickly at the gut-wrenching news; his knees give out, but Collin’s quick to steady him. “How long has it been since the fire? How long have I been out?”

“Only—only a day and—and a half,” Collin says. “That’s not too long, right? I mean—they found you after four whole months, so a couple days is okay. We still have time, right, Stiles? Uncle Scott says we’ve got plenty of time to find them and they can be okay.”

_The didn’t find me after four months; I got dumped on them to be a distraction._

_That doesn’t matter. We’re not going to be worrying about all that. We’re going to find them one way or the other. We’re going to find them, and they’ll be fine. They have to be._

“Where’s Uncle Scott now?”

“Out searching,” Deaton provides, and Stiles jumps at the sound; he hadn’t noticed Deaton’s entrance. “Something I can help with?”

“Did any of the hunters live?”

“Just one.”

“Where is he?”
“Jackson had hoped he might be useful in locating the others, but he doesn’t seem to be willing to talk.”

“Well, I bet he’ll talk to me,” Stiles replies darkly.
Chapter 2

Derek comes slowly back to consciousness to find they’re still tied up at the mercy of the hunters. He can only hope that using the three of them as lab rats to train the two new hunters—this level of electricity keeps them from shifting, this one keeps them from healing, these are the best places for arrows, this is where to aim your bullets, this is how to swing your bat—is a distraction from harming the kids.

Please don’t put the kids through this shit too. Take it all out on us. Please.

“Well, look who’s awake just in time for round three.”

“Fuck off.”

“Aw, aren’t you an adorable little alpha,” the huntress—Callie they’ve called her—taunts. “Still trying to play tough guy. It’s like a pissed off kitten.”

Derek can’t help growling in frustration at her jeering, though he knows that’s what she wants. All three hunters cackle at the pathetic show of aggression, and it’s all Derek can do not to roar again. He’s sure he’s going to spontaneously combust with unspent rage any moment now.

“You’d think you dumbasses would’ve gotten the hang of it with two rounds of practice,” Cora grumbles.

Don’t, Cora. Don’t goad them. Watching them go after you and Isaac is so much worse than just letting them wail on me.

“I mean, seriously, how thick are you two? They must’ve been pretty desperate to get numbers if they recruited your pathetic—”

Her sentence chokes off as Callie shoves a knife in Cora’s gut, twisting viciously with an ever-widening grin.

“Pathetic?” she wonders.

“You heard me, bitch,” Cora answers, teeth gritted against the pain, but eyes steely and strong. “Pathetic, weak, little huntress; how tough would you be if we weren’t tied up? I would rip your sorry ass limb from limb and laugh.”

As proud as Derek may be that Cora stands up under pressure and capture, snarky and resilient despite the hellhole of a situation, there’s one fact he can’t ignore that absolutely breaks his heart: this isn’t the first time she’s been held by hunters.

Because she was out there on her own for years. Because of me. She nearly burned alive because she was too haunted by the fire I caused to get out of the present one. She came here to be safe with a new family, and I didn’t protect her—them. How much of the pack do they have by now? The McCalls? Jackson? Lydia? Melissa and John? For all I know half my pack is dead or about to be. What kind of Alpha am I? what kind of brother or husband or father? I’m supposed to keep them safe; they’re my responsibility.
The only hope is the same as always: that someone else finds a way to save us.

Because I can’t manage to look after my own pack.

**********************************************************************************************

It’s not hard to see that the hunter owes his life to Deaton. Stiles honestly wonders if the man could have gotten better treatment if they actually had taken him to the hospital. Nevertheless, he’s mostly immobile, even if he didn’t have restraints on his ankles, wrists, and chest to keep him down on the bed in the guest bedroom of Jackson’s lavish house; Stiles smiles to think of Jackson shoving the mattress off the bed before putting down the tarp and securing the hunter because they all know Lydia would never let him hear the end of it if her care in interior design was carelessly ruined. There’s something hilarious in the idea of such superficial niceties amidst the carnage of this whole ordeal, or maybe Stiles is just too close to hysterics; either way, he can’t quite hold back a chortle of laughter as he closes the bedroom door behind him.

“Hey there freak show,” the injured man greets with unwavering bravado. “Come to chat?”

Stiles nods just once. “I want to know where the others are.”

“Or what?” the hunter wonders with a sneer. “You’ll kill me? That’s not going to get you any closer to finding them.”

“Oh, I’ll kill you all right,” Stiles replies honestly, letting his claws extend and letting the nails clack along the top rail of the headboard. “That’s not up for discussion. What you control is how fast I kill you.”

He pulls his claw slowly down the man’s cheek, leaving a trail of scarlet dripping in his wake. Stiles whole body still aches from the fight yesterday, but a new spike of energy comes with the first drops of blood shed in this round.

You picked the wrong pack, you bastard. I’m gonna make you pay. Dearly.

He wishes it were Julie on the bed to be interrogated; she didn’t deserve the easier death of bleeding out before Deaton arrived. She deserved all the hell Stiles could bring on her for the unforgiveable choice to come after the people Stiles loves.

“I’m not telling you shit, you filthy mutt,” the hunter retorts. “You don’t scare me any more than that buddy of your who tried already—in fact, you might scare me a little less. Form the looks of it you’re still feeling that ass-whooping we rained down on you yesterday.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Stiles informs evenly. “Sure you want to risk it?”

“Give it your best shot,” the hunter goads.

“Gladly.”

Stiles smiles, eyes cold and calculating as he tries to decide what will work best for the pace he wants. He’s trying to account for all the damage that’s already been done. There’s a delicate balance to this—Alec used to call it an art—and Stiles loathes how intriguing he still finds it. He’s going to use it now though, employ the fucked up knowledge swimming around in his head for
something good for a change.

“You think you’re going to scare me with some threats and a creepy grin?” the hunter asks. “You’re from a fucking family pack. You don’t—”

Stiles silences him with a jab to the throat that leaves the man coughing and gasping for air.

“You have no fucking idea what I am capable of,” Stiles growls. “I’m something out of your nightmares even on a good day,” he goes on, “and this, you cocky bastard, is not a good day.”

“You’re bluffing you—”

Stiles isn’t repulsed in the least—though he knows at least part of him should be—by the deep satisfaction that envelops him as he elicits a scream to stifle the man’s swagger. He drags his claws slow and steady down the man’s arm, watching streams of scarlet gush up from the flesh as it parts for Stiles. Blood drips from his claws when he finally draws back, splashing down on the man’s bare chest.

“Bluffing?” he repeats.

“I’m not saying another goddamn word for you.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to settle for screams,” Stiles supposes.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, it registers that he’s heard the words before—from Alec. He’s pretty sure that fact should bother him more than it does right now, but he buries the last trace of worry and lets the memories that have haunted his dreams lead him toward the information he needs, praying that Derek, Isaac, and Cora are alive and relatively unharmed somewhere.

He carves, filets, strikes, and snaps with practiced precision, carefully gauging the hunter’s resolve with every new wound. He pauses occasionally, leeching just enough pain to keep the human conscious and allowing him a chance to provide the answers Stiles wants to hear. For a while the man’s only words are curses and bullshit locations; then he whimpers and babbles incoherently; and finally, finally he says the words Stiles wants to hear.

“Wynndom Drive,” the man rasps, words garbled with blood that sprays from his mouth as he speaks.

“Where on Wynndom?” Stiles demands, twisting his claws through the ruined flesh before him; the hunter screams again; Stiles smiles.

“Old drug store; back store room.”

“And how many hunters guarding them?”

“Three.”

“Now was that so difficult?” he wonders with a smirk, digging his claws in just a bit further before pulling them back.

Stiles chuckles, dark and low; despite the fact that the sound emanate from his own lips, it makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, and he shudders.

“ Fucking kill me,” the hunter pleads.

“Not yet.”
“You swore—”

“I’m not taking your word for it. You think I’m an idiot?”

Stiles pulls his phone from his pocket as the hunter continues to whimper. It looks like he might be slipping toward unconsciousness again, so Stiles reaches a hand out toward the hunter’s shoulder. He cringes and yelps at the movement, though all Stiles does is leech away enough of the pain to keep the man awake.

“Stiles?” Scott says when he answers on the other end. “We’ve still got nothing, man. Tell me you—”

“The out of business drug store on Wynndom,” Stiles interrupts. “Store room in the back. Three guards. Let me know when you have them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty damn sure,” Stiles tells him.

_We’ve been through four or five fake answers already. I think he’s really at the end of his rope this time._

“Okay.”

“Do you need me to help?”

“Nah, we’ve got enough. Me, Jackson, Lydia, two Argents and a really pissed sheriff. Should be good to go.”

“Look out for my dad.”

“Always, dude.”

“Call me when you find them.”

He ends the call and shoves the phone back in his pocket, leaving smears of scarlet on his jeans. He takes away the hand that’s been leeching the pain, planning the best deathblow to deal once Scott calls with the confirmation.

_Skull? Heart? Trachea?_

_Carotid? Femoral?_

_Decisions, decisions…_

“Please,” the hunter gasps, “Just—let me—die.”

But it’s not his gurgling rasp that delivers the plea, it’s Stiles’ own voice his own abused body on the table. He takes a step back in alarm, blinking against the impossible sight, only to have the sight of his own body replaced with Isaac’s, and then the boy with the grey eyes who cried for his mother, and then the woman with the auburn hair who screamed louder than he’d thought humans could, and then the pretty, pale young woman who Alec had enjoyed so much—for days and days—the girl he had called his favorite beta’s masterpiece…

_I taught you well, beta. You have done very well for me. You honor your pack and your alphas with your magnificent handiwork._
With every blink it seems a new body appears, rotating back through old ones, conjuring new ones. Stiles can’t remember, all shredded and bleeding out on the bed frame before him, pleading for death that he won’t give.

“You don’t deserve anything so sweet as death,” he whispers, words tumbling unbidden from his lips.

Good, beta. Very good.

You honor your pack.

You will be rewarded.

“No, no, I don’t want your approval; I don’t want your rewards. I don’t belong to you anymore.”

Don’t you?

“Hale; I’m a Hale. I belong here now.”

Look at your handiwork, look what you’ve learned, what you remember, what you’re willing—all too willing—to repeat. You’re no Hale; you’re a magnificent monster like the rest of us. You have no place in a pack with human sentiment. No place where there is love and peace and family. You’re a well-trained weapon; nothing more. You can never be anything else ever again. This is who you are now. This is the darkness in your soul.

You’ve tried to bury it, haven’t you? But here it is for you, beta, revealed at last. You’re every bit the monster you strive not to be. You belong in the darkness, surrounded by the animalistic bloodlust your lycanthropy thrives on; you crave the simplistic, instinctual existence you used to have, don’t you? Admit it.

Stop fighting it; stop pretending to love the light.

Embrace the darkness.

Embrace it, beta.

Embrace it, Stiles.

You’ll find your strength in the darkness.

He backs away from the dying hunter, attempting to will the malevolent thoughts away. He’s not sure how long he stands with his eyes shut tight, struggling just to breathe, before his phone finally rings in his hand. He jumps at the noise, nearly dropping it, but he lets out a sigh of relief at the distraction.

Still me. Still here. I can keep my shit together. I got this.

“Scott?” he answers, praying for good news.

“We got ‘em,” Scott says. “Right where you said. Good going, Stiles.”

He glances back to the hunter and wonders if Scott would still say that if he could see the carnage—probably. He’s a Dad and a husband same as Stiles; he understands the levels you’ll sink to in the name of protecting the people you love.

“Are they okay?” Stiles asks.
“They’re alive,” Scott replies dubiously. “Hunters kinda did a number on them though. We’re bringing them to Deaton’s now. Wanna meet us there—and uh—maybe intercept the kids, ‘cause—it’s not a pretty sight, dude. Tell Deaton he’s probably gonna have to give them a hand healing.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll see you there.”

_Hurt but alive._

_We can work with that._

*************************************************************************

Derek growls at the hands holding him, struggling as much as he can until a familiar voice breaks through the panic.

“Hey, you’re okay; you’re safe, Derek. It’s us,” Scott assures. “We’re just getting you into Deaton’s okay?”

“Issac? Cora? Where are Collin and—”

“Everyone’s okay. Stiles and the kids are safe. Issac and Cora are here too, just unconscious. Everything’s fine now.”

*But I want to see that they’re okay. I want to see with my own eyes that I didn’t lose anyone this time. Can that be possible? Can we be that lucky? I need to see.*

“We’re gonna carry you in, okay?” Scott says.

“Walk.”

“Like hell you can walk, Sourwolf,” Jackson retorts. “You look like shit; shut up and hold still.”

“Don’ callmetha’,” Derek mutters, but the words slur as unconsciousness threatens to consume him again.

The next instant he’s wide-awake because _everything_ hurts, every inch of his abused, still-healing body screams in protest at the movement. He struggles without meaning to and he can hear Scott’s apologetic tone but doesn’t take in the words, not really. Then a sharp pinch in his arm delivers some drug that renders him still and calm and the darkness swallows him up again.

*************************************************************************

“It’s been plenty of time,” Collin says impatiently, coming into the kitchen where Stiles is cooking; he’s claimed it’s so they’ll have something to take when they go back to Deaton’s, but it’s also a much needed distraction.

“Deaton said he’d let us know when to come back,” Stiles reminds. “We have to be patient.”

“They could be dying, Stiles, and we’re not there!”
“They are not dying,” Stiles counters firmly. “They will be fine.”

“Call Deaton!” Collin demands.

“Yes, Collin,” Stiles’ subconscious replies without consulting the rest of his mind; he does at least manage to freeze his hand halfway to retrieve the phone; he’s not going to act on the order, despite the insistent conditioning willing his fingers toward the phone.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Collin says hurriedly, face worried as he backs away from Stiles. “I—why did you—don’t switch, Stiles, please! Stay here! Stay you! Please!”

“Hey, hey, com’ere,” Stiles beckons, and Collin stops his retreat and accepts the embrace Stiles’ open arms offer. “I’m okay. It was just a little chink in the armor, but I’m gonna stay as long as I can; I promise.”

*That’s the best I can do for you; I’m sorry, kiddo. I hope to God I can stick around long enough for Derek and Isaac to be well enough to look out for you kids.*

“I thought that only worked on Damon; I mean—that I only had to be careful of it with Damon.”

Yeah, but you’re acting Alpha now. Technically at least, with our Alpha and Second temporarily out of commission. It gives you more pull at the moment, not that I’m going to point it out. You’ve got enough stress without thinking you need to impersonate Derek until things get back to normal.

“It’s just been rough for all of us,” Stiles says. “That’s all.”

“I just want to know if they’re okay.”

“Deaton and Lydia know their stuff,” Stiles assures. “I’ve seen the awesome work they can do. They’ll call when we can come without being a distraction, okay?”

“It’s already been forever. We could just wait out in the front maybe. That wouldn’t be in the way.”

“We’ll go when they call.”

“Stiles, Collin, look it!” Addie says running into the kitchen as Dad calls, “Wait a sec, kiddo!”

She comes around the corner with a violet scarf wrapped elegantly around her head and shoulders. It’s all Stiles can do to force a smile for her and push back the memory of Mom’s face staring back from under the same silky fabric.

“It’s like princess Jasmine!” Addie says. “And there’s all kinds of colors ’til my hair gets fixed! Pop has a whole box of Granma’s scarves.”

“That’s fantastic, baby!” Stiles says, voice hitching just a little.

“I meant to give you a little more heads up.” Dad murmurs as Addie goes back down the hall to the bathroom to admire herself in the mirror, “but she started crying when I brushed it and it was all short, and I couldn’t even give you a buzz cut without screwing it up, so I thought it’d be a decent fix until one of the girls can figure out how to cut it, y know?”
“It was a great idea, Dad; don’t apologize. Mom’d love it,” Stiles replies.

“I think so too,” Dad agrees. “I’m just glad the only thing she’s really got to cry about is her hair. I’m proud of you for getting them out of there—for finding where they had the others held too. I know it’s hard for you.”

“You know the weird thing? It kind of hasn’t been; I mean—sure it’s—there’s a little conditioning and the voices a few times, but I thought—I figured I’d be completely out of commission by now, ya know?”

_After all this shit, how can I be okay? It doesn’t make sense._

“Guess you just lucked out for once, kiddo.”

_I never luck out, Dad. I’ve learned to stop believing it’s possible._

“**You’re quiet,” Derek comments to Collin.**

He’s alone with the kids out front as Scott and Stiles keep vigil until Isaac wakes from his last round of sedatives, which should be sometime soon. Derek’s still half hoping the damage isn’t as extensive as Deaton’s initial examination led him to believe, but Derek’s also just grateful everyone made it through alive and the kids are fairly unscathed.

“You remember when you said I couldn’t give Isaac a half-assed apology?” Collin wonders.

“Swear jar! Swear jar!” Addie interjects triumphantly, looking up from the “get well” pictures she’s drawing for Isaac and Cora. “Ass is a bad word!”

“Shut up, Addie!”

“You shut up!”

“Mind your own—”

“Hey, hey, enough,” Derek chastises them both. “Keep coloring, Addie; those look great.”

She glares at her brother a minute or two before devoting herself back to what Derek thinks are butterflies and kittens.


“I—just—it’s—I didn’t do a good apology; not really. He—we kinda—just said ‘sorry’ and then Isaac said we’d talk later, but—but, then everything—everything—”

Collin’s words choke off as he gasps for air; Derek thinks it’s a panic attack before the boy just dissolves into sobs the next moment. He’s attempting to talk through the tears, but Derek can’t understand much. He just holds his son as the floodgates vent out what must be hours—if not days —of held back worry and fear. Addie puts down her markers and comes to stand near them, lower lips trembling like she’ll be bawling soon too.
“Did somebody die?” she asks. “You said nobody was gonna—”

“No, baby, nobody’s dead,” he promises as she clambers for lap space alongside her brother. “Everybody’s okay, and Isaac’s going to wake up soon, Collin. You’ll have all the time you want to talk to him, okay? We didn’t lose anybody. We’re all okay.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but we’re all okay.

Stiles sticks his head in the door and raises an eyebrow in question. Derek shakes his head to decline the help; it’s more important that Stiles help Scott when Isaac wakes. Besides, Derek may be comforting the kids, but he’s also relishing the calming effect that holding them tight in his arms brings after fearing he’d never hold them again for the past days. He keeps them close, shushing as he rocks just slightly.

“We’re all okay,” he repeats. “It’s all okay.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but we’re all okay.

Isaac’s ready to fight the moment his eyes snap open, but he can’t run. They hold him down though he struggles, and a horrible sense of foreboding grips him even though he realizes a few seconds later he’s safe in Deaton’s office.


“Was I moving my legs?” Isaac demands, lifting his head up as far as he can manage with them holding him on the table. “They’re not—they’re not moving; I can’t—why aren’t they—I can’t feel my legs, Scott! I can’t—I can’t—”

“Shh,” Stiles urges. “It shouldn’t be permanent, but the kids are out in the front, okay, so just—freak—quietly?” he requests hopefully.

“Quietly?!” Isaac demands incredulously.

I can’t move my goddamn legs!

“It’s—Deaton says sever trauma but it should heal with enough time. They didn’t sever the spinal cord,” Stiles goes on. “You just gotta lay still for now, and take it easy a while, and—and it should be fine.”

“Should be,” Isaac mutters, letting his head fall back to the table and closing his eyes against the feeling of panic threatening to manifest in a roar of terror and frustration.

Time. Time and it’ll be okay. It could be worse. I could be dead. We could—

“Derek?” he demands. “Cora? You said the kids were—”

“Everyone is safe; don’t worry. Cora’s still sedated. Derek’s out front with the kids.”

“The hunters?”
“Dead.”

“Good.”

_Just wish I could’ve done it myself._

Stiles looks like he might cry, and Isaac doesn’t understand why. He turns away, clearing his throat, and Isaac of course wonders, “Is something wrong?”

“We’ll—uh—talk about it later,” Stiles says with a nod toward the front where he’s said the kids are. “I’m fine for now.”

“I want to see the kids.”

“Sure, of course.”

“I’ll get them,” Scott offers.

“Stiles?” Isaac murmurs in the quiet that follows. “Is this—how sure is he that it’s temporary?”

“A human could recover from it,” Stiles replies, “but it’d take a lot longer. He doesn’t know how long for you, but eventually you’ll be fine. He’s confident, and you’re stubborn as hell,” Stiles says reassuringly.

He winces shaking his head, and Isaac recognizes the sign easily enough.

“Don’t listen,” Isaac tells him, reaching for his hand. “Stay with us; we could use you about now.”

Stiles nods, and the kids and Derek enter cutting off further conversation.

“Isaac!” Addie trills, skipping forward. “Can I hug you?”

“You better!” Isaac replies.

“No sitting up,” Stiles tells him. “Not yet—uh—maybe, a hug later, Addie.”

She pouts, but accepts the hand Isaac reaches toward her.

“I like your scarf,” Isaac tells her, earning a smile.

_God, I was so scared I’d never see that again._

“Pop got it for me,” she informs, but her smile wanes as she laments, “They cut off all my hair.”

“No sitting up,” Stiles tells him. “Not yet—uh—maybe, a hug later, Addie.”

She pouts, but accepts the hand Isaac reaches toward her.

“I like your scarf,” Isaac tells her, earning a smile.

_God, I was so scared I’d never see that again._

“Pop got it for me,” she informs, but her smile wanes as she laments, “They cut off all my hair.”

“Not all of it,” Derek soothes. “She’s just a short-hair Rapunzel now.”

He reaches down to scoop her up in his arms, and Isaac guesses from the slight grit of his teeth that Derek’s still healing too. He looks okay, just exhausted, and he smiles reassuringly at Isaac. In the small pause, Isaac realizes Collin hasn’t stepped up yet, he turns to assess his son, and worry erupts as he takes in the tears building in Collin’s eyes.

“Collin, what is it?”
“I’m sorry,” Collin blurts, almost a wail. “I’m sorry, Isaac for starting the fight and—”

“You apologized for that,” Isaac reminds. “It’s okay; we’re—”

“You said we’d talk later, and—and then we couldn’t talk because they took me and you and they—they—they could’ve killed you and I—I said all that about—I was just—I only meant to—”

“Come here, kiddo; it’s really okay.”

“I don’t wanna hurt you,” Collin says, hesitating when Isaac reaches out his hand.

“You won’t. I just want you to look me in the eyes a second, okay? Listen close.”

“Yeah?” Collin says, stepping forward.

“We were both wrong, but we’re gonna learn from it, okay? And even if we argued every day it would not change the fact that I love you. Got that?”

Collin nods, and it’s all Isaac can do to keep himself flat on the table and not sit up to hug the kid properly. Stiles steps up and puts a comforting hand on Collin’s shoulder, acting since Isaac can’t.

“Okay, who wants curly fries?” the sheriff’s voice calls from the front door. “Because seriously I have enough here to feed a small army of werewolves and law enforcement officers whose sons totally owe him a free pass for the day on the cholesterol count.”

The appearance of his smiling face in the back room effectively dissipates the somber mood into a much more enjoyable celebratory atmosphere.

“Be sure to save some for your Aunt Cora,” Derek advises, “because I’m sure not going to be the one to tell her there’s none left. You just think it’s bad when she finds out someone else had the last Oreo.”

***************

Dad’s phone rings as they’re devouring the food from Caroline’s. He excuses himself to take the call. Stiles doesn’t think much of it and doesn’t bother listening in, but when Dad returns looking white as a sheet and as though he might vomit any minute, Stiles wishes he had paid attention.

“Dad? What is it?”

“Stiles, after—after you finished,” he pauses, seemingly searching for the right words, “talking to that hunter,” he euphemizes. “What—uh—how’d you take care of him?”

“I haven’t yet. He’s still at Jackson’s.”

“You’re sure?”

“Well, unless he got up and waltzed out on his own.”

“You left him there, then?”
“Yes.”

“And then what?”

“I came here; to get the kids and ride back to your house with you.”

“But we beat you here.”

“Well, yeah, but Jackson’s is halfway across town. You didn’t have as far to go. I was walking.”

“You drove,” Collin interjects. “You pulled up in Jackson’s Yukon when we were getting in Pop’s truck.”

“I what?”

“It’s still out there,” Dad confirms.

“No,” Stiles says, though none of them have any reason to be anything short of truthful with him; dread threatens to drown him as he pushes past Dad to get out to the parking lot. “No, that’s—I didn’t—I—I—”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Dad says, “just—uh—little complication.”

“They found him?” Derek supposes.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“No,” Stiles repeats. “This can’t be—it can’t—shit!”

“How far along in the process are they?” Derek asks. “We need to make sure there’s nothing to tie Stiles to—”

“There’s not Alpha, nothing to lead them back to the pack, I swear, Alpha!” Stiles blurts, words coming from some corner of his mind he can’t control or access; he’s on his knees in the lot before he can stop the motion.

What the hell? How do I know that? What did I do? Why can’t I remember? What the fuck is happening?!

“Okay,” Derek says. “Okay, Stiles, I believe you. I—we—we’ll figure it out. It’s okay.”

But it’s not, because there’s a gap of time Stiles can’t account for, a horrifying, dark void in which he disposed of a body and drove himself all over town and could have done any number of horrible things.

What happened? Who was it? Was it wretch? Oh, God, is it a new one? Is it something they made? The weapon they trained? Who was I? who am I now? Am I as in control as I thought? I thought it was good that I’d kept control this long. I was so proud to have kept my shit together this well.

But I didn’t.

How could I not notice this? What else am I missing? I thought I was okay.

I really thought I was okay.
Fuck, I am so not okay.
Not okay at all.
Not okay.

*************************************************************************

Derek can see in Stiles’ eyes the moment the panic starts to really set in. Just when he’s preparing to coach Stiles through a full-blown panic attack, Stiles’ eye cloud and his face goes slack as he seems to shut down completely.

“Stiles?”
No answer.

“Stiles?” Derek tries again, kneeling in front of him. “Stiles, look at me.”

Stiles doesn’t flinch back from the approach, but neither does he obey the request.

“Stiles, come on; answer me,” Derek persists, grabbing his shoulders. “Look at me. What’s wrong?”

“Derek,” Collin whimpers fearfully. “What’s happening to him?”

“Dammit, Stiles, look at me!” Derek demands, employing the Alpha tone for the last three words, but Stiles shows no sign whatsoever that the command has been given. “Stiles?!”

“Morrell said this wasn’t possible,” John says worriedly, kneeling next to Derek and putting a hand up to frame his son’s face, forcing him to turn toward his father; Stiles doesn’t seem to notice.

“She said he isn’t capable of shutting down,” John reminds. “You said that’s what Wretch was—the closest he could get to shutting down. Did Deaton do brain scans?! Is it possible he’s—”

“Deaton checked everything. He said he was okay; Stiles said himself that he was okay—I don’t—I—he—the Alpha tone always works; I don’t know what else would—it should be the strongest pull. I don’t—know what else todo,” he admits, looking to the sheriff as if he’s got any more clue what to do.

What the hell do we do? Morrell I guess? And we do need to get someone to that body just in case there’s anything incriminating? And the kids need to get squared away somewhere they feel safe. Isaac can’t even fucking walk on his own.

Fuck. This is too much.

The thought has him looking back to Stiles’ blank face with a bit on envy.

Is your Dad right? Are you trying to shut down? Can you? I couldn’t blame you for trying after all this shit.

But what if it’s something worse?

What if your DID is getting worse, Stiles?
“Physically he’s fine,” Deaton assures as Stiles sits placidly on the exam room table where Derek placed him. “I think this is more a mental debacle. You called Holly?”

Some of the anxiety ebbs from Isaac at the words

“Yes, she’s going to come see him later, but she agrees there’s not much chance he’ll respond to her if the Alpha tone doesn’t get a reaction,” Isaac replies. “I’m guessing this is just another Stiles’ thing we have to wait out.”

“Most likely,” Deaton agrees. “I’ve got some appointments coming in this afternoon, and with Stiles perhaps a bit unstable it might be best if—”

“We’ll be out of here soon,” Isaac tells him. “I don’t know where yet, probably the sheriff’s but—”

“Don’t be a doofus,” Cora says from her cot. “Jackson’s got like a fucking mansion.”

“Six bedrooms is not a mansion,” Jackson argues, “but of course you’re coming there, dumbass. Addie and Collin sharing a room for an indefinite amount of time will only lead to bloodshed,” he exaggerates.

“They’ll be—”

“Plus the Stilinski place has that narrow hall and stairs and shit. You’re not exactly up for that yet; my floorplan’ll be fine. You and Derek can the kids can take the three downstairs rooms. Stiles and me upstairs. Simple.”

Nothing is ever simple.

“You don’t know what you’re in for,” Isaac hedges.

Jackson shrugs. “Whatever we’re in for, it’s not the worst we’ve handled. We’ll be fine, and that way the sheriff’s place stays open if you need it for Stiles or whatever. Besides, way easier to spoil the hell out of your kids if they’re in close range.”

Jackson speaks like the issue is settled, and though Isaac feels like they’re going to be imposing, Jackson’s house is the best option since they can’t say how long it’ll be before the house is ready to live in again—or before they’re ready to live in it.

Before Isaac can bring himself to half-heartedly protest further, Jackson rises from his spot on Cora’s cot and heads to Deaton’s office wondering loudly, “Who wants to vacation at Uncle Jackson’s?!”

“Me!” Addie cries.

“Dude, me too!” Collin agrees. “Can we watch movies on the giant TV?”

“Duh. What else would we do while we eat our weight in pizza and ice cream?”
“I want chocolate!” Addie informs, “and sprinkles.”

“We better get to the store for some supplies then. Last one to the car’s a rotten egg.” Jackson says, and Isaac has to smile at the sounds of their feet storming for the door.

“Wasn’t kidding about spoiling them,” Cora says with a grin. “God help us if he and Lydia ever have kids.”

“It’ll be good though; they need distraction,” Isaac adds.

“Think we all do,” Derek agrees walking in. “I’m gonna go with them to the store if you don’t—do you need help with—” Derek gestures vaguely toward Isaac and the wheelchair he now occupies.

“I’m fine,” Isaac says firmly. “I’ll figure it out.”

“I can help,” Cora offers, “not like I’m planning to be alone any time soon anyway, not after this shit.”

The pain that flashes across Derek’s face at the words sends a pang though Isaac as well.

*It wasn’t your fault that this happened. It’s not your fault you can’t protect everyone the way you want to. You’re a good brother, good husband, good father; don’t think you’ve failed somehow.*

Isaac makes a mental note to remind Derek of that the first moment he can steal, not that his words ever seem to do much good; still, he can try.

“Call if you need us,” Derek says, leaning down for a quick kiss that’s over much too soon in Isaac’s opinion. “We’ll try to be home soon,” he adds with a look back to Cora. “And I can ask Scott or Allison to come when they’re done checking up on the remains and—”

“We’ll be fine,” she replies. “Don’t worry.”

Derek hesitates when he straightens back up and looks to Stiles. In the end he leaves without any sign of affection beyond a general, “See ya soon,” to the room. Isaac stares uncertainly at Stiles too.

*I don’t know what to do with him either—except just pray this really is a sign of improvement on some level? If his mind needs a break and it’s finally able to get one, maybe it’ll be good? Please just let it be a good thing and over quickly because there’s not a whole hell of a lot we can do.*

*In case I wasn’t already feeling helpless enough,* Isaac thinks bitterly, glancing down at his legs in dread, regardless of how temporary Deaton swears the condition may be.

*Fuck, this is gonna be rough.*

---

Chapter End Notes

Allow me to gush about my unending love for Nicole and Michael and their exquisite
beta and friend skills :) thank them for encouraging me through a chapter that didn't come easily! :)

another shoutout to whomever that anon on tumblr has been who's lavished on praise that kept me writing despite uncertainties :) come introduce yourself sometime, dude :)

There's still more to be said regarding things/info that came to light this chapter; I just didn't want it to get too terribly long or keep you waiting too terribly long. Hope you enjoyed it! :D

and no, I wasn't even remotely kidding when I claimed this part would be an angst-fest :P sorry not sorry?
Stiles doesn’t react to Morrell’s presence any more than he’s responded to any other occurrences all evening. He sits unmoving in the recliner where Cora led him hours ago. He fails to answer any of Morrell’s inquiries. After ten minutes, she looks to Isaac.

“No response of any kind?” she wonders.

“Nope.”

“But he moves on his own?”

“As long as you lead him, he seems amiable enough to anything,” Isaac replies, “and he’s wandered around on his own a little.”

“Wandered where?”

“Around the house,” Isaac replies, “almost like a sleepwalker or something, but hey, at least he wanders to the bathroom every once in a while, and he fed himself dinner when we sat it in front of him.”

“So basic awareness,” she summarizes, “but no engagement with the world around him.”

“No, not really.”

“Interesting.”

“Confusing,” Isaac counters. “I mean—stupor and catatonia are more commonly associated with schizophrenia than DID, right? And he’s not entirely shut down, just—auto-pilot? I don’t know. Is it another personality?”

“That’s my guess,” she replies. “What do you think?”

“Same. I’m wondering—I mean it’s reported plenty of times that victims of trauma have trouble reconnecting and communicating afterwards. It’s a coping mechanism. I’m wondering if this—could be a good thing? That’s what Derek and I talked about earlier; we all guessed that Wretch might be the closest to stupor Stiles’ mind could get, so maybe this is the upgraded version of Wretch? Or something like that? I don’t know how else to say it.”

“Neither do I,” Morrell admits, “but I think you’re on the right track.”

“So this is—kind of—maybe a good thing? In a twisted way?”

“I like to look for the positive in the situation, yes,” she confirms.

“But it’s still a new personality, that’s—not exactly the direction we were going for.”

“No, but we’ll work with what we have; Stiles was able to make progress before; we have to hope he can do it again.”

Yeah but how many times can he try to piece himself back together before there’s too many
“How are you, Isaac?” Morrell wonders in the quiet. “I know it can’t be easy to—”

“I’m fine.”

She raises a skeptical eyebrow, but he doesn’t budge on the matter. He’s still got the grim feeling that if he really lets the seriousness of his situation sink in he won’t be able to stop the flood that will come. They don’t have time for Isaac to wallow in his own problems; there are more important things.

“Tomorrow will be better,” Morrell tells him, letting her skepticism fade away as a kind smile follows the familiar phrase. “Let me know if any of you need me, all right?”

“Yeah, we will; thanks for stopping by.”
“It’s okay, baby,” Derek soothes. “I don’t think he wants to hurt you; even if he tries, we’re all right here, okay? You’re safe. I got you.”

“But what if he goes back to the other Stiles?” Addie wonders, peeking back at Stiles.

“The other Stiles?” Derek repeats.

“Scary Stiles,” she clarifies, but Derek still isn’t sure what she means.

“The Stiles that’s confused? He’s just—”

“No,” Collin answers for her. “She means real Stiles—at least—I think it was him? But when he—to get us away from the hunters he—he fought them all four at once,” he reveals, “and Stiles won. I didn’t think a beta could fight like that and win.”

“Stiles was scary then,” Addie reasserts.

“He saved us,” Collin reminds proudly. “He killed them all so they couldn’t hurt us.”

“There was a whole bunch of blood,” Addie goes on, “because they hurt Stiles. He was hurt bad, Derek, but then he got up and he was mad and growling and scary and then Stiles hurt them and then the hunters were dead because Scary Stiles messed them up a lot. Is he gonna go back to being Scary Stiles? I don’t want him to be. I want nice Stiles or Damon to come back, Derek.”

“It wasn’t a different Stiles,” Collin argues. “It was him Addie; it was Stiles, normal Stiles, and he saved us. That’s not scary. That’s—he protected us like dads are supposed to.”

Even though Collin didn’t mean it as a jab at Derek, he can’t help the pang of guilt at the words anyway.

_You’re right; fathers are supposed to protect their children. I didn’t do a good enough job, but that’s going to change. They won’t ever catch us so off guard again._

“Was too scary, Collin,” Addie persists. “You were scared too! You cried!”

“The whole thing was scary,” Isaac agrees, “but I don’t think you’ll ever have to see Stiles be like that again.”

_I sure fucking hope not_, Derek agrees mentally.

“Good,” Addie says, seemingly content for the moment with that reply. “‘Cause I didn’t like him like that.”

“Can we just play now?” Collin wonders, pointedly changing the subject.

“Yeah, let’s just play,” Derek agrees, just as eager for a subject change.

_and then we’ll decide which of us talks to which of you because clearly we’ve got some things to talk out for both of you about the hell of the last couple days. For now, though, simple is good, and Twister is simple._

********************************************************************
Isaac helps Addie change into her new purple Tinkerbell pajamas and then they head to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She pauses when she looks at her reflection, reaching up to touch her short hair with a frown. Lydia’s taking her for a girls’ day tomorrow to get her fingernails painted and a new haircut and shopping; Isaac thinks it will help her a lot, but it’s only a treatment of a psychological wound they can’t erase.

“You wanna talk about it?” Isaac wonders.

“It’s just hair,” she replies quietly, but she turns to look at Isaac, “but they said they were gonna cut off my fingers next time,” she adds, sentence giving way to bawling as she comes to clamber up into Isaac’s lap.

“You’re safe now,” he soothes, holding her close.

She tucks her head under Isaac’s chin and continues, “Collin said he wasn’t gonna let them do that, but then they held him down and hit him and—and—how come they wanted to hurt us? We’re little! We’re not bad werewolves, so why do the hunters want to hurt us so much? I thought they were gonna kill this family too, and I don’t wanna have another new one!”

“They just—they don’t understand that we’re not so different from humans,” Isaac soothes. “Some hunters think we’re really dangerous, even little werewolves.”

“But we never hurt anybody!”

“I know, sweetheart, but they don’t take time to understand that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“So more are gonna come? Again and again?”

“I hope not, but we’ll—we’ll be more prepared next time, okay? Me and Derek and the others have already talked about it. We’re going to plan in case something like this happens again, so we can all try to stay together and safe. I promise we’re gonna do everything to keep you guys safe, Addie.”

“I don’t wanna sleep in my new room by myself. It smells all stuffy and the bed’s too big,” she tells him. “And I want Luna.”

“We haven’t had a chance to go look for her yet, baby,” Isaac reminds. “That’s why Uncle Jackson went ahead and got you a new buddy today.”

The new black stuffed wolf is waiting on the bed in “her” new room.

“I want Luna,” she insists.

“We’ll go look tomorrow, okay?”

“I want Luna!”

“Addie, we can’t—”

“I want Luna! I don’t want a new wolf buddy I want Luna! Right now!”

She shoves herself off Isaac’s lap and bolts from the bathroom. He curses his clumsiness as he tries to maneuver the chair to follow her, knowing he won’t really be able to catch up unless she wants
him too. Luckily it seems Jackson’s intercepted.

“Whoa, whoa, what’s this?” he wonders, though he’s surely heard the whole thing.

“Lemme go!”

“What’s the matter?”

“I want Luna!”

“Hey, shhh,” Jackson says urgently. “Don’t say that so loud,” he hisses.

“Huh?” Addie says, surprised out of her tantrum by the unexpected response.

“You don’t want to hurt his feelings do you? It’s his first night as a guard wolf! He’s nervous.”

“Is not.”

“Is too,” Jackson persists. Isaac rolls into Addie’s bedroom to see Jackson holding her in one arm and the new stuffed toy in the other. “He really wants you to like him. Aren’t you at least gonna give him a chance? You didn’t even name him yet.”

“I want Luna.”

“She’s a brave guard wolf; she’ll be okay until we get her tomorrow. It’ll be like a camping vacation for her, okay? So give this guy a shot; don’t hurt his feelings.”

She eyes the new wolf skeptically, still reluctant to give in. Jackson waggles the toy back and forth to make it dance in the air, earning a giggle.

“There ya go; so what’s his name?”

“I dunno.”

“Rupert? Thaddeus? Snoop dog?”

“What’s a snoop dog?”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s a lion or something now anyway.”

“Huh?”

“Stinky? Fido? Scooby Doo?” Jackson goes on, and Isaac’s glad to see Addie smiling steadily now with the distraction.

_We’re gonna need a replacement Luna pronto though. Maybe I should run out and—_

Isaac’s train of thought halts immediately as he looks down at his useless legs; he’s not going anywhere, not right now anyway.

_Haven’t we got enough to deal with without me being trapped in a fucking wheelchair? My family needs me. This is such fucking bullshit. I can’t do this for months; I can’t. Deaton has to be wrong. It won’t take that long. I’m a werewolf, right? I’m supposed to heal at the speed of light and shit. I can’t be stuck in this chair that long._

_How the hell am I going to keep from losing it?_
“Earth to Isaac,” Jackson cuts in, and he glances back up to see Addie looking at him expectantly.

“Sorry, what?”

“Can you tell us bedtime stories?” Addie wonders.

“Of course; what do you wanna hear?”

************************************

“Hey, kiddo,” Derek greets, knocking at Collin’s half-open bedroom door before entering. “About ready for bed?”

“I thought maybe I could share Addie’s room tonight,” he replies, “Ya know, so she feels safer and stuff.”

“I’m sure you’d both feel a little safer that way.”

“I just didn’t wanna listen to Cinderella for like the billionth time,” Collin explains, holding up his comic book. “I’ll go in a minute.”

“Before you do,” Derek says, “I was wondering if you—if maybe you want to talk about what happened? If you don’t that’s okay, but you know I’m happy to listen.”

Collin bites his lips and shrugs, which does nothing to answer the question. Then he looks back at Derek, eyes watering just slightly before he blinks back the tears and looks away.

“I didn’t know how to get us out of there,” he says finally, “and they said they were gonna hurt Addie to make you guys do what they wanted. I tried to stop them when they grabbed her, but—I wasn’t—I couldn’t—”

“You were scared and outnumbered; it wasn’t your fault you couldn’t stop them.”

“Stiles did,” Collin reminds. “He fought them all. Can he teach me to fight like that?”

“We’ve got a lot of plans for how to be ready if anything like this ever happens again; hopefully you’ll never need to—”

“But if I do need to, it’s better to be able to protect people. I want to learn to fight like that if he’ll teach me.”

“I don’t know that Stiles will be able to,” Derek tells him, “but we’re going to start training as a pack—basic combat, and how to get away from hunters and things like that.”

“Why wouldn’t he be able to? He learned it from the Alphas?”

Derek nods. “I guess so. He didn’t learn it with us, but some of it was instinct too, I’m sure; he wanted to keep you both safe.”

“That’s why he’s acting how he is? He messed himself up, didn’t he? He did something the alphas taught him or listened to the voices or—or had a flashback or something? Because the hunters were hurting him so bad?”

“I’m not really sure,” Derek answers honestly. “So much happened there’s no telling which part was the worst for him exactly. It was probably everything combining that overwhelmed him.
No matter what reasons were behind it though, that wasn’t your fault any more than what happened to Addie. The hunters are the ones to blame.”

“Did Stiles know them?” Collin wonders.

“The hunters?”

“Yeah, when they put us in the basement with him, he knew what they were going to do, and this one huntress, she kept calling him Damon, but I thought only the pack knew Damon. Did Stiles know them?”

“I’m not sure how he could,” Derek replies, “but I guess it’s possible. Something from the Alphas maybe? There’s a lot we still don’t know about that time.”

“Oh.” Collin’s quiet a moment or two more before he says, “I think I kinda get it now—what you said about him being strong against the alphas. He laid there and let them hurt him so he could get the right chance to attack, and he didn’t let up no matter what once he started fighting. I bet—I bet they—those alphas that took him before—they had to do a lot to make him do what they said.”

Derek purses his lips and nods affirmation.

“And you said they still never got him to give in?”

“Not until they took memories.”

“Derek, how’s he gonna ever get better after all that?

“He’s safe now. He’s got us,” Derek reminds. “He can fight just as hard in his head as he did against those hunters. Stiles is strong, kiddo. Believe that, okay?”

“And he’s gonna come back right? Like he comes back after Wretch and Damon?”

“He should, hopefully soon.”

“He promised he’d always come back,” Collin confides, “but—but that’s what Dad said before he left me and Addie that last time to go try to stop the hunters back then. Sometimes—sometimes promises aren’t enough to—to make things happen.”

“I know,” Derek answers, voice a little gruffer with emotion than he’d like it to be. “I’m sorry for that.”

Collin shrugs off the apology. “Nobody’s fault, right?” Collin says, repeating words they’ve all said a thousand times. “Nobody we can blame anyway. They’re all dead like they should be.”

Derek nods. He’s trying to think of what he should say next to comfort Collin further when Addie calls him from her room.

“Ready for bed yet, Collin?”

“Yeah, coming,” he calls back, looking ready for a distraction from the conversation; he hops off the bed, leaving his comic book behind and heading over to Addie’s room.

“We’ll be right in earshot if you need anything,” Isaac assures as Collin passes him.

“We’re fine,” Collin replies. “We’re safe now; I’m not worried.”
His voice wavers through the claim, but he shuts the bedroom door behind him anyway. Derek moves to push Isaac forward but he shakes his head.

“I got it, Derek.”

“Okay.”

Derek follows behind Isaac toward the room they’ll share, the room they’ll share—the room that is usually Jackson’s but he’s insisted they take the master suite; Derek’s grateful for Jackson’s thin “because you’re married and grownup and shit” reasoning to give them the bigger room, but they all know it’ll be the easiest for Isaac to maneuver the chair around the large bedroom and bathroom. Derek tries not to crowd too much though Isaac’s moving a bit slow; just as Derek decides he should maybe go ahead and walk around him, Isaac stops pushing himself with a huff of frustration.

“Fine, just push. I can’t go any faster than this.”

“I don’t mind taking—”

“Push the damn chair,” Isaac orders.

“Okay,” Derek agrees, wishing there was something to say to make this better. When he closes the bedroom door behind them, he hesitates before asking, “You want my help to get ready for bed and all, or—”

“It’ll take me forever otherwise,” Isaac replies bitterly. “So sure. Hand me a shirt.”

Derek grabs a t-shirt from the duffle bag of spare clothes the sheriff brought from his house. It’s infinitely better than the new clothes smell from the ones they bought today, but still not the same as the ones that smell like home. Isaac’s already stripped off his shirt from the day and tossed it to the floor by the time Derek hands him the sleep shirt.

“Be easier to get your jeans off on the bed, yeah?” Derek supposes, moving to pick Isaac up once his shirt’s on; he freezes at the sight of the tears on Isaac’s cheeks. “Isaac?”

“I’m fucking fine,” he replies. “Ignore it; it’s stupid to cry, I’m just—pissed beyond reason.”

“Understandable,” Derek replies, lifting him out of the chair and carrying him the four steps to the bed. “I would be too; it’s not fair.”

“That doesn’t mean I should cry like a two-year-old. What good’s that going to do?”

“You don’t have to be the strong one all the time, you know,” Derek reminds, lacing his fingers through Isaac’s as he sits next to him on the bed.

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious. You’re allowed to be pissed or scared or—”

“Jeez, did Morrell give you a fucking script?” Isaac wonders. “I thought it’s my job to annoy the shit out of you with the calm, supportive therapist talk,” he goes on.

There’s a tone of resentment beneath the attempt at lightheartedness that Isaac’s not masking completely. He huffs out a laugh, but it’s borderline hysterical, not genuine.

“Hey, I mean it,” Derek persists. “You take on too much shit anyway. Let this be a little
vacation or something. Focus on you and getting yourself better for a while. You spend too much
time worrying about everyone else; you’ve been on the back burner too long. Give yourself a break.”

“I’m fine, Derek.”

“*No you’re not. You almost lost your kids. We all got the hell beaten out of us. Your legs
won’t work again for months. One of your husbands is catatonic upstairs. Of course you’re not fine;
none of us are fine.*

“You don’t always have to be fine.”

“Can we stop talking about me now?”

“Says the man who tries to constantly pick my brain,” Derek teases, rolling his eyes, “One
more thing though.”

“What?”

“Bet I can think of a few scenarios where you won’t mind one bit that I’m the one taking
your pants off,” he says with a grin, leaning in for a kiss that Isaac meets gladly.

Derek’s wondering if tonight is really the night for any fooling around when a shriek from
the other side of the house sends ice through his veins as he sprints immediately for the bedroom
door.

“Addie!? Collin?!”

“We’re okay; we’re okay!” Collin calls back, but Derek sprints to their room nonetheless.
“Nightmare, that’s all!”

“Derek!” Addie wails meeting him at the door as he opens in and leaping up to be held.
“They came here and they found us and they looked all bloody and gross and they wanted to cut all
my fingers and toes and my nose off and——”

“Shh, it’s okay, baby; it was just a bad dream. That’s all. They can’t get you.”

“They got us at home! What if more hunters come here? They can get us here too!”

“You’re safe, sweetheart; I promise,” Derek swears, but her grip on his doesn’t loosen and
her tears don’t let up any.

“Come on,” Derek says, beckoning Collin to follow him. “When we used to get scared of
storms my Mom would build us an awesome blanket fort in the living room with mattresses on the
floor and everybody would sleep in there; I think it’s a blanket fort kind of night, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Collin agrees.

“Uh-huh,” Addie murmurs.

*Don’t know that blanket forts work as well against fear of kidnapping as they did against
thunder, but hey, it’s worth a shot, right? What else am I gonna do?*

“Come on, Collin; help me move the mattresses to the den while Derek and Addie get
blankets,” Jackson requests as he comes to join them.
Isaac’s pounding pulse slows as he overhears Derek soothing the kids.

*She just had a nightmare; they’re safe. They’re not in danger.*

He glares at the wheelchair that’s just out of his reach, debating a moment or two if it’s worth trying to grab it before Derek comes back.

*What am I? The damsel in distress? I can manage to get my own fucking chair. I’m a werewolf for Chrissake.*

He scoots to the edge of the bed, reaching as far as he can, but he’s still a few inches shy. He lunges, planning to catch his weight on the arms of the chair and just pull himself over, but the brakes aren’t on. The chair shoots away, but not before Isaac’s falling face slams into the arm of it. His nose spurts blood as he tumbles off the bed and the chair hits the wall now a good five feet away.

“Isaac?” Derek calls worriedly from the living room.


*I can get in that fucking chair. I’m going to do it, dammit. I am.*

He knows the wisest choice is to call Derek or Jackson to come help. He knows it’s a pointless “fight” to try and win. Yet he still can’t bring himself to just lay here and wait for someone else to come. He pushes himself up on his arms, dragging his useless legs behind him as he makes his way across the floor. Once the brakes are on he manages to pull himself clumsily up into the seat just in time to see Jackson appear in the doorway.

“I don’t need you to help me.”

“Right-o, Lieutenant Dan; got it,” Jackson replies.

“That’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny.”

“Fuck off.”

“Yes, sir!” he agrees with a sharp salute before disappearing down the hall.

Isaac wheels to the Master bathroom to clean up his face trying to ignore the too-short reflection staring back at him. Then he heads back to to tug the comforter and sheets off the bed, ball them up in his lap, and go out the den to help with the fort.

********************

He’s staring at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of movement downstairs. Without conscious guidance from his mind, his abs begin to contract until he sits up in bed. In the next moment his feet swing to the floor and he goes along with whatever drive is leading him downstairs toward the sound of giggles and music. He arrives to find them scattered across mattresses on the floor of the living room. He ducks under the blankets to join them.
She takes his hand and talks to him. Her speech is cheerful but the sounds are too garbled for him to process. When she smiles at him the muscles of his own face return the expression automatically, it gets more of the happy, squeaky sound from her, but that doesn’t process either. He takes a place on the edge of the group, lying on the mattresses with all of them. The dancing colors and flickering light of the screen hurt make his head hurt, so he relaxes his head back, staring up at the draped blanket hanging there as the noises all fade into the background and his mind quiets again.

*****************************************************************************

“Hey, he smiled at me! Isaac, Isaac, did you see?” Addie wonders excitedly.

“Yeah, that’s awesome.”

“That mean he’s better?”

“I think it’s a good sign,” Isaac agrees, hoping he’s right.

At least he clearly seems to feel he belongs up here with us. That’s pretty awesome.

“The fort really does work, Derek,” she adds excitedly.

She snuggles down between Isaac and Derek to continue watching the movie. Collin is tucked between Jackson and Derek.

It would be a great family night if everyone here wasn’t terrified to fall asleep on some level.

Isaac pushes the bitter thought away, storing the memory away as a good one despite the circumstances. It could be much worse. Today wasn’t so bad.

And tomorrow will be better.

*****************************************************************************

Stiles opens his eyes to the fuzzy form of Isaac Lahey’s face just inches away. He flails away, smacking his head on some piece of furniture behind him. It falls with a crash as blankets and cushions tumble down around him, Isaac, and the other people who he didn’t get a good look at.

“Stiles?”

“Who broke the fort?”

“What the hell’s going on?”

“Derek?”

“Swear jar!”

“Ow, that’s my face!”

“Everybody okay?”

Three voices Stiles recognizes: Derek Hale, Isaac Lahey, and Jackson Whittemore.

Two voices he doesn’t know, and they belong to two kids from the sound of it.

What the fuck? Where am I?
Stiles scrambles backwards away from the tangle of blankets and limbs. It’s not long before the others are free too, and though they all remain unnaturally still as they peer back at Stiles with creepily calm expressions and smiles.

“It’s okay, Stiles,” Isaac soothes. “You’re safe here.”

Yeah that’s not creepy as fuck at all.

“What?”

“You’re safe,” he repeats. “You know where you are? You remember what happened?” Isaac wonders.

“Um—gonna go with a big fat ‘no’ on that one,” Stiles replies with a nervous laugh. “I was about to meet Scott for burgers and—uh—then I’m here in blanket fort land, so uh, yeah, no friggin’ clue, man.”

“Meet Scott for burgers?” Derek repeats.

“Uncle Scott’s getting burgers?” the young girl asks brightly. “I want extra pickles!”

“No, he’s not. Stiles forgot stuff again,” the boy corrects sharply. “Shh.”

“Oh. You scared, Stiles?” she wonders next. “You don’t have to be anymore. All the bad alphas are dead and you killed all the hunters too,” she informs soberly.

“Okay, seriously what the hell is happening here?” Stiles demands as what little composure he maintained starts to unravel.

Who the hell are you kids? Scott’s your uncle? That’s not possible; unless—no I can’t have kids. That’s insane. I’m only seventeen years old.

Wait.

So are Jackson and Isaac, but—but they—Derek too—they’re older. And where the hell are we? Why’re we having a fucking camp out? Who are the bad alphas? What hunters did I kill? Did I really kill them? Oh, fuck, where’s Dad? And Scott? If these three are the ones I’m with then—fuck, what the hell happened? Did something happen to then? No, no way. Dad and Scott can’t be hurt or--fuck not dead. they can’t be dead. They can’t be. There’s—there’s a totally logical explanation for all this. One that doesn’t involve people being dead. Wait I killed hunters? The Argents? What the hell happened? I was with Scott and we were laughing two seconds ago and everything was fine. It’s a nightmare. It has to be. It can’t be happening. I’m gonna wake up at home with Dad yelling I’ll be late for school. Any minute now I’ll wake up. It’s got to be a dream, just a really weird, insanely vivid dream.

Fuck, I’m not waking up.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Lights dance across his vision as his breathing shallows to painful gasps. He sways as the world lurches around him; he sits down hard in an attempt to keep from falling outright. He can hear their voices but they’re far away, distorted beyond understanding. Hands frame his face and Derek Hale is suddenly inches away, and for one insane moment Stiles thinks Derek just might kiss him; Stiles isn’t sure what it says that he doesn’t think to pull away.
“Breathe with me, okay?” Derek says, grabbing one of Stiles hands and placing it on his own chest. “It’s a lot of new information, but it’s okay. You’ll catch up to what happened. You’re okay, Stiles. Breathe.”

I can’t.

How do you know how to help me through panic attacks? Why doesn’t anyone else seem to think this is fucking weird. What the hell is going on? Why aren’t I waking up?

“We’ll explain all of it,” Derek goes on. “Don’t worry, okay? We’ll call Scott to come help explain if you want,” he offers, and some of the tightness in Stiles chest eases just slightly.

Scott’s okay; that’s good. That’s awesome.

“My—dad?” he gasps out between breaths.

“Sure, we can call him too.”

Stiles closes his eyes as relief washes in at the words.

Maybe not as fucked up a situation as I thought. Scott’s okay. Dad’s okay. I’m confused as fuck, but I can figure out the rest.

He focuses as best he can on just bringing air into his starving lungs, trying to convince his mind to calm down now the two biggest questions have been answered.

“That’s it, Stiles,” Derek encourages. “Just breathe.”

He doesn’t have enough air to say that Derek’s nurturing reaction is just as unsettling as everything else.

I think I found the fucking Twilight Zone.

I can’t wait to hear how the hell we all wound up here. As friends. With kids.

Yeah, definitely Twilight Zone.

Chapter End Notes

HUGE thanks as always to my betas! :) and a hearty, enthusiastic welcome to spiffingbeansalad who’s our newest addition to the crew! :D STOKED to have you aboard, m’dear!

thanks, as always for reading! hope y’all enjoyed!
“So let me just—get this all straight again,” Stiles requests as Dad munches on one of the carrot sticks that came with his to-go veggie burger from Caroline’s.

_At least some things haven’t changed_, Stiles thinks as he uses a fry to draw idly in his ketchup while he talks.

They’re sitting in the kitchen at his house—well, it’s just Dad’s house now apparently, and it’s driving Stiles nuts that the house smells like pack now, and even weirder, Stiles knows it does because he’s got the werewolf mojo too. There are pictures of years Stiles can’t remember framed on the walls and artwork on the fridge from grandkids Stiles apparently provided but has barely met. Still, Stiles is mostly able to focus on Scott’s summation of the last six or so years despite all the distractions. Stiles is pretty sure he could never ask enough questions to really understand what the fuck has gone on all this time he’s supposedly missed. To say he’s having trouble letting it all sink in would be the grossest understatement of all time.

“I was kidnapped, tortured, stripped of my memories, turned into a werewolf, rescued, recovered some memories, married Derek Hale and Isaac Lahey—which is honestly the hardest part of the story to swallow—then developed seizures, presented multiple personalities, but still decided with my two husbands to adopt two kids and we were all attacked and almost died just as I was starting to make progress with the whole DID thing.”

“That’s—uh—pretty much the highlights, yeah,” Scott confirms.

“And you know about and have been involved with all of this,” Stiles says to Dad who nods. “And yet there you sit calmly crunching on a carrot stick like it’s a totally normal day.”

“I thought your morning was a bit too stressful to push for French fries,” Dad replies with a smirk.

“This is not amusing!” Stiles says indignantly. “This is insane, Dad! It’s friggin’ insane, and _—_”

“Now you know how I felt when Scott informed me you’d been running around with werewolves and lizard men and hunters for years without my noticing.”

“You noticed,” Scott protests. “You just didn’t quite guess the right reasons for it.”

“What reasons did you guess?” Stiles wonders.

“Drugs,” Scott supplies.

“You thought we were on drugs?” Stiles scoffs, slightly offended.

“Hey, you try to come up with an explanation that doesn’t involve huge fights between mythical creatures, and let me know how it goes,” Dad answers dryly.

“I just cannot believe how chill you are right now.”
“My son says it’s not good for my blood pressure to get too excited,” Dad quips back, rolling his eyes. “I think you’ve got bigger questions and issues to look at without worrying about me being too Zen, okay, kiddo?”

“Yeah, well, I don’t even know where the hell to start with all this,” Stiles admits.

He drums his fingers idly on the kitchen table. As his fingers move, light glints off the silver band on his ring finger. He twists the ring, fiddling with it for a moment or two before he slides it off.

“This is so fucking weird,” he mutters. “All of it.”

“Yeah,” Scott agrees, “but our lives were weird before, too.”

“You know somehow the ‘my best friend is a werewolf’ weird is much less intimidating than the ‘I’m now also a werewolf with two husbands, two kids, and more loose screws than Home Depot’ kind of weird.”

“Intimidating?” Dad questions.

“To say the least.”

_I don’t even know where to start. I don’t know what to do. Do I talk to them? Do I just avoid them like the plague until the other me comes back? Will the other me come back? What if this is just it now? What if my brain just said ‘fuck it’ and reset and now they’re stuck with this me whether they like it or not? Would they hope that’s what happened? Or did they like the other me who’s kind of losing his shit._

_Not that I can blame him—me—whatever. This shit is insane._

_And I thought the Jackson-is-a-giant-homicidal-lizard thing was bad._

_This is so f*cked up and complicated and just hearing it was absolutely exhausting. How the hell have I made it this long?_

_Then again, guess I didn’t really make it—kinda lost my mind along the way, huh? So weird. I don’t feel like I’m nuts. I don’t feel like there’s some other Stiles stuck in my head. I just feel—like me._

_God, it would be so great if this could just be a really bizarre dream._

_I could wake up any moment now._

“Stiles?” Dad says, breaking into his thoughts and for just _one_ second Stiles thinks his wish actually happened, but then Dad follows up with “You okay?” and not “You’re late for school.”

_Nope. Not that lucky._

_Shit._

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Stiles replies, sliding the ring back onto his finger. “So—uh—what happens next?”
“Hey, John, how’s he doing?” Derek wonders when he answers the phone.

“Pretty good all things considered. He’s going to hang out with Scott for a little while—drive around town, keep asking questions and get his bearings a little bit more before he comes back to you two and the kids.”

“Oh, okay.”

“But I actually—I—uh—need to talk to you boys about something. Are the kids still there?”

“Lydia and Cora have Addie,” Derek replies. “Jackson’s been talking about taking Collin to the store for some more new clothes and maybe rocket supplies.”

“If they could go soon, it would be really convenient,” the sheriff tells him.

“Sure.”

“See you in about fifteen minutes.”

“See you then.”

No sooner has Derek ended the call than Collin appears around the corner.

“What’s Pop want to talk to you about?”

“Since you were clearly eavesdropping, you know he hasn’t told me.”

“Probably Stiles, right? That body they found.”

“I don’t know, Collin.”

“Can I stay and hear?”

“No.”

“You said you were going to start letting me help.”

“I’ll give you a summary of the talk when you get home,” Derek replies, “if it’s something Isaac and I agree you should know.”

“Derek—”

“Don’t ask to be treated like an adult and whine like a toddler,” Derek chastises. “Go and ask Jackson if he can take you to the store now, please.”


“And I will seriously recap it for you,” Derek replies, “now go.”

He’s honestly a little surprised when Collin doesn’t protest further but leaves to find Jackson. Derek hopes it’s a sign that giving him a little taste of the bigger picture will be enough to keep Collin appeased and yet still removed from the worst of the problems they try to hide.

Derek goes his best to ignore the unease that accompanies parting with Collin ten minutes later. He had the same problem with Addie earlier. Honestly, a very large part of him would still like to lock
them up someplace safe and never let them out of his sight again, but that’s a little too Rapunzel, and Derek knows that his anxiety will only add to the kids’. He forces a smile as Jackson and Collin walk out the door.

“Have fun,” Isaac says.

“Call if you need anything,” Derek adds.

---------------------------------------------

Isaac stares down at the gruesome crime scene photos with a sickening sense of déjà vu.

“It’s the Alpha attacks all over again,” he mutters.

“No,” the sheriff counters grimly. “It’s worse.”

“What?”

“This is—there are things that don’t match the Alpha profiles,” he expounds. “They profiled the deaths during those months the alphas were here; it was an attempt to help differentiate what was animal attack and what was the work of a potential serial killer.”

“Since you couldn’t very well say they were both,” Derek supposes.

“Right, and you saw the same alerts I did—that there was a potential killer working with some kind of wild dogs—but the thing is there—there were markers for the three types: excessive burns, excessive bloodshed, and excessive torture. I’ve never asked Stiles which was which; it doesn’t matter anymore, but you could tell there were three people’s psychosis at play by noting the predominate type of injury.”

Isaac studies the grisly pictures again in an attempt to see this time what the sheriff meant by ‘worse.’

“This isn’t their work though,” Derek says. “It was a fight, and then Stiles—did what he had to.”

“Yes,” the sheriff agrees, “but this—the mutilation of the hands and lower arms, the—the dismemberment and—it’s—there are injuries here that we haven’t seen before. I really wanted this corpse to be a twin to any of the others, or a close match to the other profiles, but it’s not; it’s its own profile.”

“What are you trying to say?” Derek demands, though the panic in his voice tells that he clearly already knows.

“That this work—on some level—it’s Stiles’ own.”

“No,” Derek protests. “It’s not—he did what he had to. He saved us. He undid months of progress in the process. He isn’t a killer.”

“He is a killer,” the sheriff counters gruffly, voice hitching on the last word, “I’m not saying he enjoyed this; I’m not saying—I don’t know what I’m saying—I just know it scares the hell out of me.”

“Isaac?”
“I don’t know what to say. I have to—think.”

“Think about what? This profile stuff, it’s just—it was part of the old investigation right? Just matching and doing their part to see if those killers are back, which they’re not, and Stiles is okay, and those hunters are dead. As long as there’s nothing to link this to Stiles, the rest doesn’t matter. We can forget it ever happened. Stiles can tell Morrell if he wants—or talk to us, but—maybe he won’t even remember. Maybe this is something we don’t need to worry about.”

Isaac wants desperately to agree, but taking in the handiwork that has a new signature in it—Stiles’ signature—gives him the same sense of foreboding that seems to be plaguing the sheriff. He agrees that they may be able to avoid this issue with Stiles and defer to Morrell; he agrees that this was brought on by tremendous stress and isn’t likely to be a problem in everyday life, but the photos leave no doubt about one thing:

*There is some serious darkness lurking inside Stiles.*

************************

“So I’ll make us some lunch?” Derek suggests, heading for the kitchen.

“I can do it,” Isaac offers.

“I don’t mind.”

“There are tons of Stouffer’s meals in the freezer. I can—”

Isaac stops the chair as soon as they enter the kitchen, glaring at the freezer as he presumably realizes he won’t be able to reach it from his chair. Derek bites the inside of his cheek to keep his expression neutral. Isaac huffs impatiently and continues rolling.

“Hand me the box, and I’ll do the rest,” he instructs.

“I really don’t m—”


“Sure,” Derek agrees, crossing to open up the freezer and grab the first meal his hand lands on.

“Thanks,” Isaac replies tersely. “Go clean up the fort or whatever.”

“Okay,” Derek replies.

On his way out he pauses with the intent to press the buttons to preheat the oven.

“I’ll do it.”

“Isaac—”

“I said I’d do it!”

“You don’t have—”

“You don’t think I can?”
“I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to!”

“It’s easier if I--”

“Why should this be easy? Nothing else is easy! Just one more fucking obstacle to throw in with all the others, and hey this one’s not even that bad. It’ll be fun. It’ll be fucking great, character-building experience, so just get the fuck out of the kitchen and let me handle the damn spaghetti bake.”

Tears burn in Derek’s eyes as he takes Isaac’s outburst in silence. He should say something. He should do something to make this better, but he doesn’t know what to do.

He at least knows that standing here looking sadly at Isaac isn’t going to help a damn thing, so he clears his throat and turns back toward the den with a gruff, “Okay.”

*********************************************************************************************************************************************

Stiles’ stomach is doing all kinds of backflips as he exits Scott’s Corolla—serious step up from the McCall’s old piece of shit car, even if it’s a total dad car—and he walks up the front steps to the massive house Jackson’s apparently lending them since Hale House Fire 2.0 went down.


“That is what I’m worried about,” Stiles mutters in reply.

Because they didn’t marry me; they married another me. Because all I can remember was trying to decide if Derek would claw my face off if I worked up the nerve to kiss him. And happily the answer is apparently ‘no, he doesn’t mind’, but that doesn’t mean I know anything about being married to him. and Isaac too? just--what the hell? This is so fucking weird. So, so very fucking weird.

Stiles’ stretches his hand out slowly to ring the doorbell. Scott’s smirking, presumably at Stiles’ anxiety, and he swings out a punch at Scott’s shoulder just before Derek opens the door.

“Oh—honey, I’m home?” Stiles says with a shrug, smiling through the awkwardness.

Derek huffs out a laugh, and it seems odd to Stiles how easily a smile settles on Derek’s face. It suits him though; that’s for sure. He looks just as gorgeous as ever, and Stiles has to tear his eyes away from Derek’s lips when he starts speaking.

“Yeah, come on in,” Derek says. “I guess Scott’s told you this is Jackson’s place, but it’s home for now anyway. Isaac’s in the kitchen working on lunch,” Derek says as they follow him further into the house. “It’s out of a box, though, so don’t worry,” he teases.

“Hey,” Isaac calls back. “Don’t ruin it Derek; he doesn’t know to be deathly afraid of my cooking skills yet.”
“Yeah, well, best for his survival we get the threats on the table from the start,” Derek answers as they come into the kitchen.

Isaac’s grinning at him, and Derek’s still smiling too. There’s stress behind the expressions, but they’re both clearly intent on keeping the tone light. There’s a familiarity to their banter than leaves no doubt that they’re used to little moments like this.

*You’ve done this before for me--maybe not this version--but you’re used to putting up the happy facade. Because of me? Or is it because you’re parents now? Mom and dad used to pull this shit when they got back from doctors visits with bad news.*

Then again, the show might be for Isaac’s sake. Maybe he wants to pretend he’s not stuck in that chair and everything is normal. Maybe it’s for both of them, or all three; regardless, the forced happiness puts Stiles on edge.

“So did you guys eat?” Isaac wonders. “The spaghetti bake is just about done, and I was going to throw in a loaf of garlic bread.”

“Sheriff got us to-go from Caroline’s,” Scott replies.

“But I am totally calling dibs on some of the garlic bread,” Stiles informs, not wanting to be a poor guest.

Am I a guest? I don’t know what I am. But if my mouth is stuffed with food I don’t have to talk which will probably be good.

“You know one whole half of the loaf doesn’t count as just one piece, right?” Isaac teases.

*What the hell? How do you know I do that?*

*Well, I guess I do that all the time. And you’re married to me, so of course you know I do that.*

*Weird.*

*So fucking weird.*

“Stiles? You okay?”

“Yeah, just--processing.”

“You mean it’s weird that I know your eating habits when I shouldn’t so much as know your real name as far as you can remember?”

“Something like that,” Stiles agrees.

“Fair enough,” he concedes

“Wait--you know my real name? Please tell me I didn’t use it when we got married and shit.”

“No,” Isaac assures. “We just keep it on the back burner for blackmail purposes.”

“Well, thank God for that.”

The silence that follows is almost painfully awkward; for once in his life Stiles really has no idea what to say.
“So tell us how you want to do this,” Isaac requests finally. “Your Dad and Scott gave you the overview right? You’ve got to have questions. You want our version? Or the picture and video tour of your life? Or you want to let the info you’ve got process while you veg out to a movie back at your Dad’s? Whatever helps you, let us know.”

“Wow, you’re like—really used to taking care of me, aren’t you?”

“We all take care of each other,” Isaac deflects.

“Right,” Stiles replies, “I just mean—I dunno what I mean.”

Stiles loathes the pitying look the statement gets from Derek.

“Kids, right? I guess they’re the biggest thing?”

“We can start with the kids if you want,” Derek says, and it’s unreasonably endearing how his face lights up at the prospect. “Come on,” he beckons, heading for the living room.

Stiles and Scott follow, leaving Isaac to take the food from the oven to cool. Stiles opens his mouth to offer to help, but Derek herds them out of the kitchen before he can try to decide if the offer would be welcome or not. Scott plops down on the couch as does Derek, and Stiles follows suit. It’s still bizarre to watch Derek be so comfortable with all of them. He looks up from the iPad in his hands and smirks at Stiles.

“You know you’re staring at me?” Derek wonders.

“Come on, dude; it’s weird.”

“I’m not weird,” Derek argues, rolling his eyes, and that is the Derek that sparks a little feeling of familiarity; Stiles can’t help smiling, but it gets Derek smiling back, which makes it odd again.

“He’s used to Sourwolf,” Scott reminds.

“Don’t call me that,” Derek grumbles.

“Wait, do I get to call you that all the time now?” Stiles wonders. “Have I taught the kids to call you that yet, because if not, I know exactly what just moved to number one on the to-do list.”

“How about you meet the kids before you jump immediately to being a bad influence.”

“I will be a great influence,” Stiles replies. “Five bucks says they can flawlessly burp the alphabet by tomorrow.”

“Beat you to it,” Scott interjects.

“Allison must be so proud,” Stiles quips back. “God, how is it even possible that you’re a dad?”

“So are you,” Scott reminds with a nod toward the television where Derek’s projecting the images off the iPad.

It’s a picture that belongs on a mantle someplace if it isn’t already. Stiles, Isaac, and Derek stand behind the kids in front of a pond somewhere. Everyone’s smiling in the sunshine, and Stiles doesn’t think he’s quite ready for Derek to move to the next picture until he realizes it’s actually a video shot just after the picture was taken.

“Last one in the water’s a rotten egg!” Dad’s voice challenges from behind the camera.
All five of them dart toward the water in an instant. Dad chuckles as he videos the chaotic scramble. Derek jokingly pushes at the boy--son, it’s his son; my son too; holy shit--and Stiles scoops up their daughter, slinging her over his shoulder as he launches off into the water. They surface moments later, and she’s giggleing gleefully when she calls, “Come on, Pop! You too!”

“Stiles?” Scott interrupts worriedly.

“Huh?” Stiles replies, unable to pull his eyes from the screen.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You’re--uh--kinda crying, dude.”

“No, I’m not,” Stiles protests, but even as he says it he realizes Scott’s right; he wipes at the few tears that have escaped. “I dunno why,” Stiles says honestly.

“We can wait,” Derek suggests.

“No, I want to see more,” Stiles counters. “Put up another video. I’m fine; I swear.”

“Okay,” Derek agrees, obliging with a video from Collin’s birthday; and then another of Dad and Stiles and Derek playing catch with Collin while Stiles pushes Addie on the swing; and then another that has only Stiles’ voice behind the camera as he bids Collin demonstrate his winning science fair project; and another clearly taken in stealth mode of Stiles dressed up in feather boas and a plastic crown while playing tea party with Princess Addie.

Derek pauses for a minute, looking at Stiles in hesitation.

“Maybe pictures now,” he suggests.

“No more videos?” Stiles wonders.

“Well--uh--not on here, and--uh, not of--you.”

“Food!” Isaac calls from the kitchen, and Derek takes the excuse to end the viewing party gladly, leaving Stiles and Scott in the den alone.

“I’m missing something,” Stiles says. “What is it?”

“Videos of--uh--a different you, ya know? Like--with the whole split personality thing.”

“Oh,” Stiles replies.

His curiosity takes over and he’s reaching for the discarded iPad before he really takes time to think better of it. He hits play on the next video, assuming it’s the one Derek paused over, and watches as he appears on the screen behind a birthday cake--except, it’s not Stiles. No way is it Stiles. The hairs on the back of his neck stand up as he takes in his doppelganger whose downcast eyes and nervous fidgeting are so contrary to Stiles’ usual directness and exuberant energy that it’s unsettling.

“Ready, Damon?” Derek wonders, stepping forward from the side of the frame; not-Stiles tenses just slightly at the movement, but relaxes again quickly.

“Yes, Derek,” not-Stiles replies respectfully with a shy smile.
“Okay, start singing on three,” Isaac instructs from behind the camera as Derek starts lighting the candles. “One, two, three.”

“Happy birthday to you,” the conglomeration starts singing. “Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Damon; happy birthday to you!”

“Make a wish, Damon,” Addie instructs excitedly.

“Damon?” Stiles questions, looking to Scott.

“That’s what he calls himself,” Scott explains, “and it kinda makes it easier that he’s got his own name since he’s, ya know, not exactly you.”

“He’s not me at all, Scott; he’s just got my face,” Stiles says firmly.

Except. He has to be me. If this whole fucked up situation works the way they say it does, he’s some twisted corner of my brain that comes out to play when the real me needs a break. But what’s the real me? I feel like the real me, but I can’t be, can I? There’s a me that doesn’t have this gap of time and stuff—the me that married Derek and Isaac and has kids and a family and a life.

Fuck, this is confusing; I’m giving myself a damn migraine.

“Stiles?”

“Just a headache; I’m fine.”

“Let’s give this a rest for a while? Stuff some food in our faces and then—maybe meet the kids again, if you want? Or I can drop you back at your Dad’s?” Scott offers.

“No, I want to see them; even if I’m still trying to wrap my head around all of this, they seem like pretty awesome rugrats, right?”

“Yeah, they are.”

And if they’ve met the messed up not-Stiles-Damon-personality, I can’t seem that bad, even if I’m not quite their dad. I can play tag and shit. We’ll put in the Lion King or play checkers or something. It’ll be fine. I can totally do this.

Well, I can try.

*******************************

“So the kids,” Stiles says as he picks at the garlic bread he claimed for his plate. “What’re they—ya know—like and stuff?”

Derek looks to Isaac, wondering where they even begin answering that question, and Isaac offers, “Well, they’re both—they’re resilient. They kind of have to be I guess. Addie does pretty well even though I worry what a childhood like this is going to do in the long run. Collin’s growing up too fast and there’s not a whole hell of a lot to be done to stop it. He takes his Alpha-Elect spot
seriously, but he’s also still an eleven-year-old kid.”

“He really wants to help you,” Derek adds in, “so if—he offers and there’s anything—even just little stuff or—something? I don’t know. Just—”

“He wants to feel needed,” Stiles interjects. “So he feels like he can control this shitstorm at least a little bit?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Isaac confirms.

“I get it; I used to drive Dad batshit crazy trying to help with Mom and all that. So—yeah—I’ll—try and figure something I guess maybe? Ask him questions while I’m filling in the pieces?”

“Perfect,” Derek says with a grateful smile.

*Because I think the stress of all this shit may settle down if he feels like he’s contributing.*

“Let’s see, what else?” Derek goes on. “Um—Collin’s really great with science stuff; he loves rockets and planes and space.”

“Future astronaut?” Stiles wonders.

“I think he’d make a great pilot,” Derek confides, “but he’s eleven; he’s got time.”

*And who knows if he’ll even have a shot at a normal career path; as much as I’d love to see it happen, I’m starting to think assuming I know anything at all about the future is pure idiocy.*

“Dude, yeah he would,” Scott agrees through a mouthful of spaghetti—despite claiming he wasn’t hungry, he’s doing a pretty good job of packing away a plateful.

“Glad to see your table manners have been improving,” Stiles tells him. “How does Allison even feed you?”

“That’s nothing; you should see Logan,” Isaac replies. “That kid can eat his weight in lasagna; God help them when he gets to be a teenager. They’ll eat the family out of house and home.”

“Wait, Logan is—your son right? Your oldest kid?”

“Right,” Scott says with a smile. “A year or so younger than Addie.”

“What’s Addie like?”

“She *loves* Rapunzel,” Isaac replies, “It’s by far her favorite story, but she’s a big fan of princesses in general. She’s pretty big into art; it started with the usual crayons and stuff, but she likes painting.”

“She likes making a mess,” Derek corrects with an exaggerated grimace.

“That too,” Isaac concedes with a smile.

“So we should get along well then?” Stiles jokes.

“Yeah, she doesn’t mind who you are so long as you’ll still play tea party and she can paint you pictures,” Isaac says.
Except Scary Stiles, Derek thinks grimly, but we really don’t know the whole story on that, and you can’t help us figure it out. Whoever he is—separate or Stiles—you aren’t him. You’re the old, fun-loving, unmarred Stiles that started getting under my skin in the first place. How is it possible that you don’t just act younger but you seem younger too? I can’t believe how much difference it makes to have all traces of that haunted look out of your eyes; I can’t believe I forgot this is how you used to be. Why didn’t I appreciate it back then?

“Okay, dude, enough with the longing gaze; you’re weirding me out,” Stiles says, shifting uncomfortably.

“It was not a ‘longing gaze,’” Derek protests, though he knows it probably was. “Glad to see you got an extra ego boost with your amnesia.”

“Hey, you can’t pretend you don’t like me anymore,” Stiles quips back with a cocky grin. “We’re married now.”

He holds up his left hand and wiggles his fingers.

“Which means I can stare all I want,” Derek replies, playing into the banter with a grin of his own.

“Well then, pardon me,” Stiles says rolling his eyes as he leans back in his chair and brings his hands up behind his head to sprawl a little. “By all means,” Stiles invites, “drool away, Mr. Hale.”

“Really?” Scott whines. “Can we not, guys?”

“You’re telling me after I adjusted at the speed of light to your need to talk incessantly about Allison that in six years of this you’re still not used to me flirting with my husband.”

Derek’s eyes flit over to Isaac as Stiles uses the singular of the noun; the moment could almost pass, they could almost write it off as intentional reference to Derek only and not that Stiles forgot Isaac, except Stiles grimaces and looks at Isaac apologetically.

“Husbands,” he corrects with excessive emphasis on the ‘s’. “Sorry, my bad.”

“It’s okay,” Isaac replies, though the look on his face indicates otherwise.

“Dude, totally not okay,” Stiles disagrees, “because I figured no way in hell could I convince either of you to put up with my pale, skinny ass, and I got both of you? More the merrier right? Just--uh--still a little new to the idea, so--uh--yeah, my bad.”

The sound of a car in the drive delivers them from the horribly awkward situation. Stiles all but flies from the table at the excuse to leave, and Scott’s right behind him. Isaac doesn’t move at all, just meets Derek’s eyes with a shrug and a forced, melancholy smile.

“I’m really fine,” he insists when Derek opens his mouth to speak. “Please don’t worry about it.”

No, you’re not fine. It’s not okay. But I don’t know what to do to make it okay. I don’t know if I let you keep pretending. I don’t know if I need to figure out how to make you talk about it. I don’t know what to do for you, Isaac; what do I do?
“Look-it, Isaac,” Addie calls as she skips in the front door ahead of the others. “My hair is pretty again and we got makeovers and my nails are blue with sparkles!”

“Well, Princess Addie, I’d say you’re all set then.”

“Yep!” she agrees, twirling where she starts so her skirt swirls out and swishing it back and forth. “It was the best girls’ day ever even Aunt Cora got her nails painted! She wanted to go home after, but she promised she’s come play Candyland later and bring ice cream to go with supper.”

She’s alight with energy, and Isaac drinks in her happiness gratefully. He’s had a hard time keeping his mood up lately, to say the least, and he’s banking on the kids to help him lean toward the silver linings—both through hopefully infectious cheer and through forcing Isaac’s happy face even if he doesn’t feel like it.

“Can I have macaroni for dinner?” she wonders.

“You can have it with supper,” Isaac replies. “You have to have some veggies too.”

“Stiles can put cheese on my broccoli,” she says. “Right, Stiles?”

“I—uh—yeah; sure,” Stiles agrees uncertainly.

“Oh yeah,” Addie says with a sigh. “I forgot you’re different. You feel better now? You don’t look scared anymore.”

“Yeah, I’m good,” he replies. “I got the whole story and everything so—uh—way less confused.”

“So are you a new Stiles?” she inquires.

“Maybe,” he says. “Probably, I guess?”

“Do you like playing house?” she asks seriously, and Isaac has to grin at her list of concerns for this ‘new Stiles.’

“Sure. I might be a little out of practice, but I’ll give it a shot.”

“What about Candyland?”

“Now that I’m sure I can play,” he assures, earning a nod of approval.

“What about Frozen?”

“Frozen what?” he wonders, and Isaac has to laugh out loud at that.

“It’s a movie, silly,” Addie informs with a giggle.

“Bet there’s a lot of movies I don’t remember. You might have to show me a bunch.”

“Okay!” she agrees excitedly. “I got bunches and bunches of—” her sentence halts, and she frowns as she looks at Derek. “Did all my movies burn up too?”

“We’ll get new ones,” Derek promises.
“And I’ll go check through some things to see which ones are still okay,” Scott offers.

“Can you find Luna?”

“I’ll try to.”

“I can come if you—” Derek offers.

“Nah, man, I got it. No worries.”

“You shouldn’t go on your own.”

“I’ll come too,” Lydia offers.

It’s an excellent excuse to keep Derek from a place that’s sure to be filled with horrible memories he’s not ready to face and Isaac’s grateful for it.

“Besides,” she adds, “You three have a fashion show to watch, don’t they Addie?”

“Yep! I got so many new clothes.”

“So you big strong weregentlemen give me a hand with the bags so we can get this show going,” Lydia instructs as she sets down the bag she’s holding and heads back out to the car.

Isaac tries not to be bothered by the fact that he can’t go out to help, busying himself instead with clearing plates off the table from lunch.

Just a few months of this shit: just a few months, and I’ll be one my feet again and headed toward fine. I’m okay. Addie’s happy and excited. I’m not going to be the one bringing down the mood. I’m okay.

And tomorrow is going to be better.

But is it going to be ‘better’ enough?

He shakes his head against the dark thoughts swarming, trying instead to relish the joyous chatter from Addie as she recounts to Derek how the sales lady said she thought Addie was a real live princess and how she found the prettiest purple dress ever and by the time Isaac rejoins the group he’s managed to plaster a smile on his face that seems to fool everyone in the room except for Derek.

See? I can do it. I’m okay.

I’ll be okay.

*********************************************************************************

Interacting with Addie comes easily enough. Stiles follows her lead as she informs him of his role as her knight while she plays a princess who’s trapped on every “tower” she can find—the bed, the back of the couch, the top of the railing—and she seems satisfied with his performance. He’s “galloping” on a broomstick to save her from the most recent debacle when the ringing of the doorbell interrupts the mission.
“It’s just us!” Jackson calls as they open the door before anyone meets them.

Addie scrambles down off the kitchen chair she’s been “captured’ in and hurries to show them her hair and dress and fingernails. Stiles props the broom against the wall and goes to meet his son with steadily increasing nerves.

“Hey, Stilinski,” Jackson greets when Stiles walks up. “Got your bearings yet?”

“Working on it,” Stiles replies. “You being nice is going to be the weirdest part.”

“Uncle Jackson’s the best,” Addie informs.

“I see you’ve brainwashed the kids.”

“It’s amazing how much love a trust fund can buy you,” Jackson replies.

Jackson may be playing along and pretending he’s his usual self, but Stiles can already tell the man in front of him is no longer the self-serving ass he used to be. It seems the changes that came after conquering the kanima have only continued; Stiles hopes the assumption is right, however bizarre it may seem to his current mindset.

“Collin, come play with me and Stiles,” Addie bids, tugging at her brother’s arm.

Collin’s been studying Stiles, and Stiles has resisted turning to meet the boy’s gaze until now. Addie notices her brother’s pause.

“It’s okay; you’ll like this Stiles; he’s not scary,” she assures.

Not scary? Am I scary sometimes? You’re afraid of me? I’m supposed to be your dad; you shouldn’t have to be afraid of me.

“He’s never scary,” Collin asserts, clearly perturbed. “I told you that. He just knows how to fight when he has to.”

Watching the two kids discuss him as though he’s not there—which, the personality they’re discussing isn’t—puts Stiles on edge.

“Well, this Stiles’ doesn’t fight, and I like him,” she declares.

“Well, I’m glad Stiles can fight!” Collin rebuffs; he looks quickly back to Stiles though and adds, “I’m not—you’re good too; I mean—I don’t know if you—I’m not trying to say that—”

“It’s okay,” Stiles replies with a forced smile. “I’m confused about the whole thing too.”

“I can help you and stuff,” Collin offers. “Until you get used to us again.”

“That’d be awesome,” Stiles answers, both truly grateful for the gesture and mindful of Derek’s request from earlier. “Thanks, Collin.”

“I don’t mind. We can—uh—do you like building models and stuff? We found a scale model of Apollo 13 to go with my Apollo 11, so I was thinking I’d work on that, but you could totally help. And you can ask questions maybe,” he proposes, unsure but hopeful.

“But Stiles was playing with me,” Addie whines.

Stiles looks to Derek, unsure which one kid he should appease.
“I’ll be knight for a while, Addie,” Derek offers. “Let Stiles and Collin get some time, okay?”

“You could both play.”

“I’m not gonna be your stupid knight,” Collin retorts. “Play with Derek.”

“You’re not the boss of me!”

“Hey, that’s enough, from both of you,” Derek chastises. “Addie, we’ll play for a while and give your brother a chance to spend some time with Stiles. You got your turn.”

“Derek—”

“Or maybe you don’t want to play at all,” he suggests in warning.

“No, let’s play,” she protests. “I wanna. We can ice skate on the royal pond!”

Derek chuckles. “Good idea; come on,” he tells her, holding out a hand.

“Ice skate?” Stiles questions, turning to Collin and Jackson. “Indoor ice rink is a little excessive, even for you, Jackson.”

“She’s just gonna slide down the hall in her socks,” Collin replies with an exasperated sigh; he rolls his eyes at the prospect, and for a minute he looks just like Derek to the point that Stiles can’t help wondering if they’re sure there’s no biological relation.

“Come on,” Collin beckons. “There’s 907 parts; we better get started so you have time for dinner and stuff if you—well, are you—d’you cook?”

“I can, yeah,” Stiles replies. “Do I usually?”

“Yeah, you like to—at least all the other yous did. It calms you down—it’s a coping mechanism, but I guess you’re already kinda calm, huh?”

“Pretty calm I guess, but I know a couple things I could make.”

*Coping mechanism? You’re eleven; how do you even know what that is?*

“Derek won’t make you if you don’t want to,” Collin assures earnestly, as though Stiles might really be worried he wouldn’t have a choice whether or not to cook. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m not.”

“Good,” he says with a smile. “You don’t have to worry about anything with us; you’re safe with us.”

“Thanks,” Stiles replies a little awkwardly, unsure what else to say. “So 907 pieces, huh? You’re right. We should get started.”

Collin’s incredibly focused and meticulous. Stiles can only imagine his younger self trying to stifle energy long enough to construct something like this; it would have been a disaster. Collin has a gift for it though, organizing the pieces out and kindly directing Stiles how to help out.

“So anything you want to know?” Collin wonders.
“I’m not sure I even know what questions to ask,” Stiles admits.

It’s not the complete truth, but Stiles isn’t sure that all his questions are ones Collin could—or should—answer.

“You gotta have some. I know a lot. Ask me whatever you want.”

“You know a lot, huh?” Stiles repeats. “Like what a ‘coping mechanism’ is?” he supposes, mouth running away with him before he’s sure this is a good line of questioning.

“Yeah,” Collin replies. “I know the whole list,” he adds, clearly assuming Stiles wanted to know more. “Cooking the biggest one, but so’s cleaning and when it gets really bad you use pain to —” Collin stops mid-sentence. “Stiles, what’s wrong?”

“There’s a list? And you know it?” he answers incredulously.

What the fuck?

“Isaac has the list for his paper, but they’re all things I knew calmed you down.”

“A list for his paper—right, his psychology he’s trying to figure out how to cure me or whatever.”

“Uh-huh, and I—uh—I wasn’t supposed to but I read some of the notes so I could help. Like now. See, if you start feeling nervous you could just do one of those things and it’d help you calm down, right? Get it?”

I get that I’m so fucked up one of the guys who married me is all but devoting his life to my medical condition; I get that an eleven-year-old is doing the same thing I did with Mom and sneaking to get information but I’m pretty sure this is shit a kid your age shouldn’t be reading. God only knows what was in those notes. I don’t even think I want to know what was in those notes.

There’s a lot of messed up stuff going on, and you’re way too calm about it. This is normal to you; talking to your Dad’s new personality like it’s the most normal bonding this in the world and it’s not okay; it’s not okay at all that you’re doing this, that you feel like you need to do this. You’re supposed to be a kid. I know Dad and Scott said you and Addie had nowhere else to go, but there had to be somewhere better than this fucking circus of psychosis. You don’t belong in this; you shouldn’t have to do this.

No one should have to worry this much about me, much less my kid. I’m the problem solver. I’m the research guy. I fix things. I help out. I’m not the one who needs all that. I don’t want to be the one who needs help.

But I don’t have much of a choice, do I?

This kid knows more about me than me.

No, fuck that; I’ll just be a new me. The rest doesn’t matter. It’ll be fine. I’ll go back to old me, and they’ll all be happy I’m—

Wait, will they? They’ve got a new me now; maybe they like the current version better than the old Stiles. Maybe that’s why Derek and Isaac wanted me around, because I changed. Maybe the high school me doesn’t belong with this pack. I damn sure don’t know how to be a dad yet.

But I’m supposed to be; I can’t just walk away from the kids even if I don’t really remember them.
They’re good kids; everyone says so. I have to figure out how to be a good dad. I have to figure out how to—

Oh, God, I have to figure out everything, and it starts with asking questions, which Collin wants to answer even though he shouldn’t be caught up in this and I just—how the hell do I go about all this?

“Stiles? Are you all right?”

He jumps at the intruding words from Collin, losing his grip on the piece of the shuttle he’s been holding; it clatters to the floor and breaks apart.

“Shit! Sorry, Collin. Totally my bad, but I think it—yeah looks like it just broke where the glue was still drying so we should be good to just glue it back or whatever though.” When he catches sight of Collin’s face, the kid is absolutely beaming at him; it would be really adorable if it wasn’t kind of creepy. “What?” Stiles asks. “Did you secretly hate that part of the shuttle or something?”

“No, just—you’re not scared of me at all, are you?”

“Should I be?” Stiles wonders. “You got some badass little werewolf powers hidden away I should know of?” he teases, unsure where this conversation is going now, but opting for humor regardless. “Wait, let me guess,” Stiles goes on. “You glow in the dark? Or have really bad breath on the full moon? Or—”

“No,” Collin interrupts with a little huff of laughter. “You just—sometimes you’re kinda worried ‘cause I’m gonna be Alpha day.”

“Well, this isn’t one of those times,” Stiles assures. “For now, we just get to have fun,” he adds with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! Thanks for reading!

Unending thanks to my betas! Particularly my newest, Strangeredlantern, who not only hit the ground running but can drag my butt along too when my brain turns to mush and my writing needs rescuing :) This story would've stalled out many times if not for you lot :)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 5

Watching the way Stiles integrates into the situation so seamlessly—the same way he took to the life of the supernatural when Scott was first turned—is nothing short of amazing, and it absolutely breaks Derek’s heart to watch who Stiles could have been if the alpha pack hadn’t come calling. Derek’s believed more than once that they were close to having “the old” Stiles back when his mind syphoned off some of the trauma to Damon and Wretch, but now that he sees this immeasurable vivacity as Stiles jokes and plays with the kids and the other pack members who drop by, he realizes just what a shadow of his former self Stiles has become.

God, I’d give anything to keep him this way.

The thing that’s killing Derek is that Stiles remaining this way might just be a possibility. They aren’t sure yet if he’s a new personality or if it could be permanent amnesia as a new way to cope. Logic would say that he’s a new personality, but Derek aches for the potential that Stiles could just continue to lock away all the horrible memories from years past and move forward with so much more freedom than he’s been able to have.

The credits roll for the episode of Neverland Pirates Addie’s been watching intently, and she stretches and yawns.

“I think it’s about time for bed,” Derek informs her. “Let’s go get you in your pajamas and Isaac can read you a story once he’s out of the shower, okay?”

“Nuh-uh!” she protestes. “I don’t wanna.”

“You had a busy day, munchkin. You gotta rest up.”

“I don’t wanna go to bed,” she whines, crawling over into Derek’s lap. “I’ll have scary dreams again.”

You and me both, kid.

“We could make a fort again,” Derek offers. “How about that?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, start getting blankets and sheets again. I’ll get some mattresses.”

“All right.”

**************************************************

“Here, lemme help,” Stiles offers, grabbing part of the full mattress from Collin’s room that Derek’s carrying on his own.

Stiles is still adjusting to the whole werewolf strength thing, but he’s loving the fact that he doesn’t have to start around grasping for baseball bats and feeling like a weakling anymore. It’s kind of cool too that he can distinctly hear the kids chattering with Isaac from their spot on the mattress already deposited in the den.
“Thanks,” Derek says with a smile.

“No problem.”

They put mattress down on the living room floor, and head upstairs to find a third. Stiles is about to start removing the mattress from the bed that’s technically his right now when Derek’s voice stops him.

“Hey,” he says, and Stiles turns back around to face him.

“Yeah?”

“You—uh—you know you don’t have to sleep down there with us if you don’t want to,” Derek says. “You can have this room to yourself if you want it. You’re welcome to it. We can even take you to your Dad’s for the night if you want.”

“Can I stay in the fort if I swear I won’t bring the whole thing crashing down on everyone again?” Stiles jokes. “Cause that was a one-time freak out, dude; no worries.”

Derek doesn’t return the smile, so Stiles lets his own drop as well.

“I mean it,” Derek replies. “Whatever you do is okay, you don’t—ya know—we don’t expect you to—you shouldn’t feel obligated—and you, if it puts you on edge it could—there are triggers that might—”

*I am a horrible person for finding amusement in his struggle for words.*

“Derek?” Stiles interjects.

“Yeah?” he replies, cutting off the rambling.

“I appreciate what you’re saying, but I’m seriously okay. I’m not feeling on edge or anything; it’s been kind of a pretty awesome day, I think, all things considered. I’m totally good with the whole fort thing. Bonding and all that, right?”

“Oh—good,” Derek replies. “As long as you—feel—ya know—comfortable with it and stuff.”

“I’m not scared of you, Sourwolf,” Stiles says simply. “If I don’t want to follow your lead on something, I’ll tell you so, and probably in a highly disrespectful manner, don’t you worry. Got it?”

“Yeah, got it,” Derek answers with a smile.

“Good. Now go grab the other side of this thing,” Stiles bids, turning back to the task at hand.

**********************************************************

Stiles feels incredibly at ease as he settles down for the night and drifts toward sleep with this newfound little family. It’s hard not to have the kids capture his heart; watching Derek be both the Sourwolf he’s always been but also a happy, loving father and husband is fucking wonderful on a hundred different levels; and Stiles has to admit that Isaac’s not the person he remembers ether. He’s still got that anger simmering just beneath the surface though. Derek’s not forcing smiles and happiness the way Isaac is. Maybe it’s just the werewolf mojo and the fact that I can sense it better now? God, I hope he’s not still the hothead he used to be. Surely he’s not though; if Derek
It's probably just frustration about the whole wheelchair deal; I hope that's it.

Stiles can't help the slight worry that it's not just the paralysis but instead it has something to do with Stiles' amnesia--or being a new personality or whatever is going on with him. Stiles has caught both Derek and Isaac watching him throughout the day, studying him it seems. Derek watches with an adorable smile playing at his lips; he looks so fucking enamored with Stiles that it's all Stiles can do not to jump Derek's bones every chance he's gotten. Isaac, though, Isaac looks haunted when he looks at Stiles--or maybe like he just got sucker punched. Regardless, it's not the kind of look Stiles really wants to see in someone who's supposedly in love with him, and who he's supposed to love back.

But I can't just like Derek; I'm supposed to like both of them.

I don't know how to figure this out. I mean, sure, he's been nice and all, but he's—well he's Isaac Lahey. I mean—fuck, I don't know what I mean. If I can't even get it straight how am I going to ask —

Wait forget how—who is the real question. Who am I going to ask? I mean this isn't really a dad-son talk I think I can handle yet—even if dad can. I can't really tell one husband I don't like the other. Scott will think he should ask Allison for advice. Fuck.

I'm such an idiot.

Lydia!

I can totally talk to Lydia; she's like the guru of shit like this, right? Yeah. Totally. It'll be fine, and I'll ask her what the fuck to do and what Isaac's deal is—maybe she'll know.

Stiles' contemplations are interrupted by Derek's troubled murmurs. He can't quite make out the words, but it's not hard to glance over and see Derek's in the throes of a nightmare. As Stiles reaches a hand out to shake Derek's shoulder, Derek sits bolt upright, screaming 'no' over and over again in such abject terror that Stiles doesn't hesitate to shift Addie to the side so he can wrap his arms around Derek, holding him close and trying to rein in his flailing limbs.

"Shh, Derek, wake up; you're okay. Bad dream is all; you're okay."

It's a few more minutes before Derek fully quiets; he relaxes in Stiles' arms for just a minute and holds his head in his hands, covering his face.

"Derek?" Addie says timidly.

"I'm okay, baby," he croaks. "Just a nightmare."

"You want Max?" Addie wonders, offering her plush wolf toy.

"I'm okay," Derek repeats.

"What was it?" Collin asks.

"Dunno; don't remember," Derek mutters distractedly. "I need some air for a sec; I'll be right back."

He's out of Stiles arms in the next instant, and Stiles looks to Isaac.

"Should I—"
He won’t go far; he’ll be back once his head’s a little clearer.”

Are you sure I—"

“It takes space sometimes with Derek,” Isaac interrupts, “just trust me, okay?” he adds curtly when Stiles opens his mouth to protest again. “If he’s not back in ten minutes or so, then go.”

But did you see him? He was screaming bloody murder; he was terrified. He shouldn’t be by himself—but he’s the one who left; maybe he does like being by himself? Derek always did, but—I dunno; the thing is, this Derek’s not the Derek he used to be; he’s not the Derek I know--knew?--he’s more—connected I guess? Are you sure he doesn’t need someone to go after him?

“He’s probably just gonna jog around the block or something,” Collin says. “He goes on runs all the time at home. Don’t worry, Stiles.”

“Yeah, okay; I just—” Stiles agrees after a beat of silence. “Okay.”

Derek’s feet pound against the pavement, trying to force his heart and breathing to more normal rates through the exertion. He’s still tense, watching the world through wary eyes as he circles Jackson’s property a few times; he feels a bit ashamed that he can’t quite bear to go farther than that though he could really use a full shift and good run right now. He’s not sure if it would be worse to know what horror got his mind racing this way or worse to have some unseen fear taking over his sleep; either way he can’t imagine managing to fall back asleep tonight.

By the time he goes back inside, he’s relatively calm. He heads to the bathroom to wash his face and change before rejoining the others in the fort that Addie now knows was total bullshit thanks to Derek’s nightmare. When he turns to leave the bedroom, Stiles stands in the doorway.

“Hey,” he says. “Didn’t mean to creep on you just—checking that—ya know—you’re—okay?”

“I’m fine."

“Yeah, you know; you and Isaac both keep saying that,” Stiles answers, “and I’m starting to think it’s way more bullshit than truth.”

“Don’t, Stiles,” Derek replies, annoyed. “Go back to bed.”

“Look I used to get night terrors all the time when—”

“I’m well aware of that. You still get night terrors, and when you ask us to leave you the hell alone after we do,” Derek retorts, regretting the words immediately though they’re true because Stiles’ face falls at the reminder of his amnesia.

“Oh.”

“I’m not—I don’t know why I said that just—it’s—nightmares are par for the course, okay? For all three of us—and after all the shit that—it’s the least of our things to worry about right now; so don’t. “

“Okay, fine. Have it your way.”
“Just go back to bed.”

“Right-o, Alpha,” Stiles quips back with a mock salute, and Derek cringes at the title.

“Don’t do that; don’t call me that; not ever, understand?”

“Whoa, dude, yeah, okay; got it.”

“Sometimes you can’t help it but now you, if you can control it, don’t say it. I hate it.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, attitude draining away with Derek’s outburst. “Sorry, dude.”

You don’t understand what that title’s come to mean, especially coming from you.

You don’t understand a lot of things.

But I still think it’s better this way.

Isn’t it?

Isaac wakes slowly in the early hours of the morning with the sun just starting to peek in under the blankets of the fort. Derek’s already awake—if he ever even went back to sleep—and he smiles at Isaac over the top of their son’s head. Isaac smiles back, though it seems to take an unreasonable amount of effort. Derek’s smile fades as he continues to study Isaac’s face.

“Tell me what to do,” he requests.

“I’m okay,” Isaac replies. “You don’t have to worry.”

“Worry ‘bout wut?” Collin murmurs, partially waking.

“Nothing, kiddo,” Isaac assures, with what he hopes is a more convincing smile than the last. “Go back to sleep.”

“Mmmmkay,” he agrees sleepily as his eyes flutter closed again.

Derek’s still staring at Isaac in silence; the look of helplessness on his face is the last thing Isaac wants to see.

I feel helpless enough for the both of us. Don’t you start too.

Derek clearly wants to pursue the situation, but must decide to shelve it for now. He still reaches one hand for Isaac’s, and Isaac takes the offer but turns so he’s on his back staring at the blankets above rather than at Derek.

I got this. Just a few months in the chair tops. I’ll be okay. He really doesn’t need to worry. Tomorrow will be better; I’ll be okay.

Derek was more than happy to accept John’s invitation to come spend the day at the Stilinski house to get the kids out and distracted. He watches for a while as the two play on the swing set John constructed for them in his backyard last month. It was mostly an attempt to curtail the tears and bloodshed of the two fighting endlessly over the tire swing, but it was a long overdue addition to
their grandfather’s home. It’s a nice reminder for all of them that the kids are here to stay and belong to a family again.

Derek excuses himself into the house for a minute, drawing his phone from his pocket when he shuts the back door behind him and heads toward the front of the house to get farther from earshot.

“Morrell,” she answers on the third ring, and Derek breathes a sigh of relief.

“It’s Derek,” he replies, though she’s surely seen the caller ID. “Can I—uh—ask a favor?”

“Yes, you can ask.”

“We agreed to get the kids out of the house today, to distract them, ya know? And I guess Isaac told you the update on Stiles by now.”

“He did. Stiles is essentially seventeen again, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“And I take it there are complications with that; it’s too be expect—”

“I’m not calling about that,” Derek interrupts. “I mean, yeah it’s complicated but honestly this is the easiest Stiles we’ve maybe ever had, for now anyway. What I’m worried about is Isaac?”

“What about Isaac?”

“He was totally on board with getting the kids out, and John invited us over here, so it was chill and familiar and Isaac said it would be great, but then Isaac bailed at the last minute. He stayed at Jackson’s alone because he says he needs space but with the chair and everything that’s happened and—I just—could you—there’s probably something you could use his help researching right? Something with Stiles or something? Anything?”

“You’re worried,” she comments.

“He’s stuck in a wheelchair after days of hell and now he asks to stay home alone; of course I’m worried.”

“Have you told him that?”

“I talked to him, okay? I’m not—fucking proud of the fact that I suck at this,” Derek hisses into the phone. “But—I don’t—if he doesn’t talk to me, how the hell am I supposed to know how to help him? I can’t—Stiles and the kids and now with Isaac’s kind of—it’s—it’s a lot but I can’t let him fall through the cracks. He says he’s fine, but he’s not. I know he hasn’t been really bad in a while, but this has all the makings of another low point, and I can’t handle—I just don’t want that to happen, okay? Just do your counselor mojo stuff and figure out what the hell we need to do; explain to me or Isaac or whoever else you think can help what we can do that will help him.”

“It’s not that simple, Derek.”

“Nothing’s ever simple; just—try, would ya?”

“We could do a little digging to try and predict if the amnesia is a personality or a lasting state.”

“Yes. Great. Perfect.”
“It’s not a guarantee.”

“Just try, okay? You suck at it less than me, and Stiles can’t help right now so—just—whatever you can do—and, uh—thank you—for this. I just needed to—just—thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I hope can help.”

*Me too; ‘cause I’m in over my head.*

“Goodbye, Derek.”

“Bye.”

**************************************************************************************

Isaac sits across from Morrell at Jackson’s too-formal mahogany dinner table. There are notes on Stiles spread out between them along with Isaac’s computer as they try to determine if this could be a miraculously timed onset of amnesia or if Stiles is splitting into new personalities.

*And God help me, I’m largely hoping it’s a personality,* Isaac laments with a sigh as he scrolls through endless search results for trauma-induced amnesia case studies—half of which shouldn’t appear under this search anyway.

It’s not that Isaac isn’t elated to watch Stiles function as though none of the horrible things happened to him; it’s just that those horrible things did happen. More importantly, some really great things happened too, like building the house and the wedding and the kids and countless other little moments that have molded this pack into a real family—molded Stiles into the man Isaac loves more than life itself—and without those memories, it’s just too different; there’s too much that’s happened that can’t be explained or conveyed to this version of Stiles.

*And I don’t know that he could fall in love with me twice.*

It’s the selfish worry that’s piled on top of all his other fears and frustrations that hinders his attempts to search for silver linings and things that are ‘better’ today.

“I don’t want you to think I’m giving up,” Morrell says, after no more than twenty minutes, “but I really think it may be best to wait and see how things go with Stiles.”

“We should be prepared either way,” Isaac counters, keeping his eyes on the screen before him.

“Isaac, you’re incredibly well-prepared.”

“I need to brush up. I need to—”

“You need to remember that the most important part of caring for Stiles is just to be there; you don’t have to have all the answers, but you should try to engage with—”

His eyes narrow as he looks up from the computer.

“This is why you really came, isn’t it? You want a therapy session.”

“I thought you might need someone to talk to after everything that’s happened.”
“I’m fine.”

“You’ve been through an incredibly difficult week, Isaac, one with lasting repercussions for you and the people you love; it’s not an easy situation to handle.”

“I said I was fine; Shit happens; that’s life. I’m dealing.”

“Isaac—”

“What makes you think I’m not?” She doesn’t answer immediately, and he guesses, “Derek?”

“Derek is worried about you,” she replies, affirming his assumption.

“Derek worries too much,” Isaac mutters, annoyed. “He told you to talk to me?”

“He voiced some concerns about you dealing with the paralysis,” she rephrases, “and your disposition in general lately.”

“So he told you to talk to me.”

_Because he can’t just take me at my word when I say that I’m fine. Really Derek?

“No, actually,” she replies. “He asked what he should be doing to help you.”

It’s not the answer Isaac expected, and some of the annoyance ebbs away.

“What?”

“He’s worried about you, and he doesn’t feel like talking to you did much. He wanted advice on how he should help.”

“Unless he’s got a miracle pill that’s going to heal things faster than werewolf speed, he can’t help.” The words sound bitter and angry and unreasonable, but honestly he doesn’t care. They’re true.

“So tell him that,” Morrell suggests.

If there’s anyone to vent to, it’s Morrell. God knows he’d never actually say that to Derek; he can imagine the guilty look it would get from him, and this isn’t Derek’s fault.

“No. There’s no point.”

“You, of all people, know that there is a point. It’s important to—”

“Do not lecture me with psychological bullshit!” Isaac commands as he slams a fist into the table. “I’m fine.”

“Clearly,” she replies disdainfully, staring pointedly at the now-dented wood.

He scowls at her across the table, and she meets the expression with an equally stubborn frown.

“I can’t make you talk to me, but we both know it won’t help anyone if you let yourself drown in your anger. You have to—”

“Talk it out?” Isaac interjects. “What do you want me to say exactly? That I’m pissed? Of course
I’m pissed!”

“Why?” she prods, and he actually roars in frustration.

“You fucking know that answer already.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“No! I’m not playing into this bullshit! Saying it out loud is only going to make it worse! I don’t need to wallow! I need to push past and—”

“So push past,” she challenges. “Face the words, say it out loud and make it worse and be pissed and angry and—”

“You don’t want to go there with me; not right now I—”

“I do want to go there; you need to talk to—”

“I am fine! How many times do I have to say it!??”

“Until we actually believe you,” she replies simply.

“Look, I’m not fucking suicidal again or anything, okay? Sure I’m down farther than I’ve been in a while but—I’m just—I’m okay.”

“For now,” she concedes, “but for how long?”

He doesn’t reply because he can’t answer the question.

“Do you want to know why I think Derek may be right to worry?” When Isaac says nothing, she goes on anyway. “Because this is your cycle, Isaac. You do an excellent job of convincing yourself that you don’t have time to be weak; you convince yourself to stay strong because everyone else needs you.”

They do. Because I’m the least broken. I can be the strong one. I can do it. I’m fine. I’ll be fine. Tomorrow will be better, and I will be abso-fucking-lutely fine. I have to be. I want to be. For them.

“And you’re right,” she continues.

“I know I am,” he asserts.

They do need me.

And I need to be needed.

“But” that means you cannot afford to let this cycle keep progressing; you can’t push yourself until you break, you have to vent the pressure sometimes. You have to be honest with Derek or with Stiles or with me—you know I’m happy to listen, Isaac—or with someone and tell them when you’re starting to feel like you’re drowning. That isn’t selfish or weak or wrong; it’s the same thing you’ve told both of them to do hundreds of times. Take your own advice, for your sake and for theirs.”

“I. am. fine.”

“One look tells me you’re not,” she answers; “Look at yourself. You’re exhausted, confined to a wheelchair, you have every right to be angry.”
Angry doesn’t even begin to cover it,” he spits, words out before he means them to be.


“There’s not a word for this! There are no fucking words for shit like this, okay? Our lives are not the case studies and the textbook cases that get pieced together!” he shouts, swiping his arms across the table to send everything within reach flying against the walls and china cabinet and to the floor; deep satisfaction surges through him at the din the mess creates.

“We are *fucked.* No matter what we try or what progress we make, we’re always just making our best guesses to keep our heads above water! We barely manage to hold our shit together on good days, but with hunters and other packs and God knows what else waiting out there for us, we don’t stand a fucking *chance* at happily ever after! Forgive me if I’m having a little trouble convincing myself that tomorrow’s going to be *any* fucking better when I’m stuck in this fucking chair feeling like a goddamn idiot!

All I can think about is how much of a burden I am while Derek tries to handle the kids and whatever’s going on with Stiles? And how *Stiles* it sounds for me to say I’m a burden, so I *don’t* say that because Derek would just lie to me and tell me how okay it is and how I’m not a burden. It would be the exact same thing we do for Stiles when we try to comfort him by saying he’s not a burden even though of *course* he’s a burden; it’s just that we don’t *mind* because we fucking love him more than we mind dealing with his disorders! And I’m a burden right now, and maybe they don’t mind dealing with my bullshit, but I *mind* that they have to; I don’t want them saddled with my problems on top of everything else! they’ve been through enough! More than enough! Too fucking much for anyone to handle, and I don’t know how we’re still going anymore.  I really don’t.”

Once the words start, there’s no stopping. Maybe Isaac should have known better than to take her bait.  Maybe he should have remembered that she knows him better than anyone besides Stiles and Derek, and she knows exactly what to say to get him spouting words like it’s nothing.

But maybe that’s what Isaac wanted to happen.

“And with me stuck in my own pathetic bog of negativity,” he goes on after a brief pause for breath.  “Just trying to figure out all this shit with the paralysis and everything, I can’t be there for Derek like I should be; I can see how stressed he feels and how he’s blaming himself for everything that happened and I want to help but I can’t because *every* damn time he looks at me all I see in his face is pity and helplessness and guilt and I can’t fucking *stand* that! It’s bad enough to be trapped in this chair and in my own head, but to feel like I’m trapping other people with me is worse! I don’t have time for this bullshit! I don’t have time to worry about when I get to walk again! I don’t have time to devote to rehab! I’ve got two husbands, two kids, a degree to finish, a house to help rebuild, training to help plan! I don’t have time to fall apart! So excuse the hell out of me if I don’t want to take the time to cry on anyone’s shoulder! I won’t! Understand me?”

Morrell watches him across the table silently for just a moment or two before wondering, “You *won’t* or you *can’t*?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Because if you want to devote yourself to the people you love as a way to get through the rough times, that’s great, Isaac, but it isn’t healthy to use that as a reason to avoid your own issues.”

“I don’t get the luxury of falling apart.  They need me.”

“And you need them; isn’t that the beauty of how family works?”
“I’ll manage.”

“No,” she counters somberly. “You won’t.”

“You don’t fucking get to say shit like—”

“You will break,” she goes on, unyielding in the declaration. “If you don’t find a way to cope or share all of this that’s building inside you, you are going to hit the breaking point. Again.”

“Fuck you! I can handle this!” he avows angrily.

But in the next instant the wall of fury comes crashing down around him as Isaac rises to storm out of the room—and realizes that only his arms can act on that impulse. He’s supported completely by his upper body leaning on the table as his legs hang limply below.

No, no, no, no, no.

He lets himself fall back into the chair, 
*hating* the tears that spring from his eyes at the crushing sense of defeat. Once the floodgates open, he loses it completely, and it seems every ounce of frustration and fear and fury in pouring into the sobs he can’t choke back even once he buries his face in his hands.

*Stop crying. Stop crying. Stop crying.*

*Crying won’t fix anything; it’s not going to make my legs work or bring Stiles back or rebuild the house. Crying won’t help.*

*Nothing is going to help.*

*Nothing at all.*

“Isaac,” Morrell says gently.

He missed the moment when she came around the table to stand beside him, but he shoves her hand away when she lays it supportively on his shoulder.

“Get out,” he orders, livid that the hostile words come out in a croak.

“Isaac, it’s good for you to—”

“Get out!” he repeats.

“Please, we can—”

“I said get out!” he thunders, last two words coming in a growl as his fangs descend; she takes a step back, but only one.

“When you’re ready to talk—”

He growls again and lunges at her, intent on scaring her out if that’s what it takes. He miscalculates the force of the lunge, and the chair topples sideways, dumping him into the floor. The hard landing doesn’t hurt his body nearly as much as his pride; Morrell doesn’t step forward to help, but she’s staring sadly when he looks up at her.

“Just go, Holly,” he bids, defeated. “Please?”
“I’m calling Derek.”

“No,” he protests. “I just--”

“It will take at least ten minutes for him to get here. It’s enough time for you to compose yourself, and I’ll suggest he leave the kids with the sheriff to give you some time alone. You don’t have to tell him everything you told me, but let him help you, Isaac. He wants to, and if you don’t feel like talking, we both know Derek’s always preferred silent healing anyway. Just let him help, and call if-when you’re ready to talk.”

“Don’t call him, just--”

“You need him.”

“He shouldn’t have to--”

“But he wants to.”

Isaac can run through a million more protests, but in the end Isaac’s knows that she’s right.

_Derek wants to help._

_I don’t think he can._

_But I still kind of want to let him try._

*****************************************************************************

“But Derek, I think you should come back to Jackson’s,” Morrell suggests when he answers the phone. Panic grips Derek, and he demands, “What happened? Is he okay?”

“I think he’s ready to talk to you,” she replies. “I think he needs to, and I think the kids and Stiles should stay behind so you two can have some time alone to hopefully sort through a few things.”


“You know him better than I do, Derek,” she replies. “Trust yourself.”

“But I--”

“Call if you need anything else.”

“Morrell--”

He curses under his breath as the line goes dead.

“Five bucks says half the money in the swear jar comes from you,” Stiles’ voice supposes, and Derek turns to find he’s been listening in.

“No,” Derek protests. “Cora mostly.”

“Ah, so the surly Hale attitude is genetic; noted.”
“Did you need something?”

“No, just--nosey as fuck, you know me,” he replies with an unapologetic shrug. “I didn’t mean to at first, but the whole super hearing thing doesn’t make it very easy to mind my own business. Is Isaac okay?”

“What do you think?”

“Probably not.”

“*Of course* not.”

“So you should go then, right? Like she said. We’ll be fine here.”

“I’ll call Cora to come by,” Derek replies. “Hopefully I won’t be long.”

“Dude, we’ll be *fine*.”

“You don’t know that,” Derek replies tersely. “Collin?” he calls a little louder, and getting a “Yeah, Derek?” from the back yard.

“Come here a second,” he bids. “Stiles, will you go help distract Addie from the general conversation?”

“What am I missing?”

“Don’t worry; just--trust me? please?”

Stiles narrows his eyes in suspicion, and Derek doubts he’ll refrain from eavesdropping himself even if he does succeed in distracting Addie. Collin comes in the back door as Stiles leaves through it.

“Yeah, Derek?” he repeats.

“I need a favor from you.”

“Okay.”

“Your Aunt Cora should be on her way here, but in the meantime, you’re going to stay with Pop, and Addie and Stiles while I go check on Isaac.”

“Is Isaac okay?”

“Yeah, he’s okay; we just need to talk about some stuff with his rehab for his legs and everything,” Derek euphemizes.

“So what’s the favor?”

“I want you to watch Stiles for signs of a switch, okay? The headaches or the freezes from flashbacks that happen before Damon and Wretch come sometimes.”

“And get Addie and Pop away from him if he’s switching,” Collin guesses.

“Yes.”

“I thought you said maybe he wouldn’t switch? That maybe he’ll stay okay this time and we’ll just
have to tell him what he missed.”

“Maybe,” Derek concedes, “but we can’t be sure yet. Damon will be fine if he comes, but Wretch won’t know what to do with a human and a lower beta. He’ll listen to you. Just tell him to go in a room away from them, and call me to come back, okay?”

“Y-yeah.”

“But Cora should be here soon. Ten maybe fifteen minutes tops, okay?”

“Okay,” Collin replies. He takes a deep breath before adding. “I can do it, Derek; you can trust me with it.”

Derek smiles and pulls his son in for a hug. “I’m sorry to ask you,” he says, “but I’m proud of you for stepping up, kiddo.”

“I don’t mind; I want to help,” Collin answers. “Besides, Stiles will probably be fine, right? Fifteen minutes; that’s all.”

Yeah, that’s all, but God knows a lot can happen in fifteen minutes. that’s what scares me. “Right,” he replies aloud.

“I got this,” Collin repeats more confidently. “Go see Isaac.”

“Be back soon as I can,” Derek tells him with a quick kiss to Collin’s temple that gets a grimace from the boy.

“Derek,” he whines with a roll of his eyes. “I’m eleven.”

*****************************************************************************

I want you to watch Stiles for signs of a switch….get Addie and Pop away from him if he’s switching….Damon will be fine if he comes, but Wretch won’t know what to do with a human and a lower beta. He’ll listen to you...

“Stiles? What’s with the frown?” Dad asks as Stiles and Addie land at the bottom of the slide.

“Nothing,” he replies. “Actually, yeah, something, Dad, have I ever hurt you?”

“What? of course not.”

“Do I hurt people, when I’m the other personalities?”

“Only when the scared one of you is here and if you think we’re bein’ bad,” Addie supplies simply hopping up from Stiles’ lap to climb the slide again.

“Have I hurt you, Addie?”

She hesitates at the base of the slide, coming back toward them a step or two before she nods.

“Oh my God,” Stiles bemoans.
What the fuck is wrong with me?

“But just a little bit; you weren’t as mean as Collin and Derek were to you,” she adds, frowning even more deeply as she continues, “They--”

“It was a misunderstanding,” Dad interjects. “You thought you needed to protect your alpha and--”

“And I attacked my kid? What the hell did those alphas turn me into? I thought--you and Scott said the other personalities were functioning! Not dangerous! What else aren’t you--”

“Stiles, please don’t be mad,” Addie begs, rushing over and hugging his legs. “Please, please, don’t get scary again! I like you when you’re happy; don’t get scary again!”

“I’m not; I won’t hurt anyone. I’m not going to hurt anyone or anything or--”

“Stiles, are you okay?” Collin wonders from the back porch.

“I’m fine; totally fine; not going to hurt anyone; don’t need anyone to worry about me; totally, totally fine,” Stiles insists.

“Sure, you are, kiddo,” Dad agrees earnestly, with a reassuring hand on Stiles’ shoulder. “It’s just a lot to take in and understand. We’ll give you the full story, later, okay? Right now I personally prefer a little more play and a lot less talk?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Stiles agrees, using the welcome pressure from Dad’s hand to ground himself a bit.

Can’t lose my shit right now. Deep breaths. Gotta hold it together.

“Hide and seek now?” Addie requests, and Stiles is happy to oblige in the distraction.

******************************************************************************

“Isaac?” Derek calls through the house as he closes the front door behind him.

There’s a moment or two of terrifying silence before Isaac finally calls back, “In here.”

Derek follows the voice toward the dining room. The room is in complete disarray, papers, books, and coffee cups thrown everywhere. Isaac’s chair is toppled over, and he’s sitting with his back against the wall staring off into space. There are tear streaks down his face, but he has his jaw set now like he’s determined to keep his emotions in check.

You blew up, didn’t you? You weren’t fine; of course you weren’t, and you finally had to admit it. But why to her? Why couldn’t you just tell me?

Now’s not the time for questions like that, but Derek’s not entirely sure what questions he should be asking right now.

“Hey,” he says eventually, just to break the silence.
Isaac huffs out a mirthless laugh at that and answers, “Hey yourself.”

“So--uh--how’d research go?” Derek wonders as if the destroyed room doesn’t speak for itself.

“Cut the shit, Derek; we both know that’s not why she came.”

“Okay, so then--how did not-research go?”

“How does it fucking look like it went?!” Isaac demands. “I lost my shit! Is that what you want to hear? Is that what you wanted?”

“No, Isaac,” Derek answers, voice hitching even in the simple reply, but the sound of it has Isaac looking up at him instead of continuing to stare at the wall. “I just--didn’t know what else to do for you.”

“There’s nothing to do for me,” Isaac replies, “except wait a week or so until I can move my feet a little and then start working accelerated rehab with Deaton.”

“But it’s--it’s more than that, isn’t it? If it was just your legs--you could--I know how strong you are but--there’s too much for you and--and I dunno what to--you wouldn’t talk, and--and I just--I didn’t know what to do for you,” Derek admits again.

“C’m’ere,” Isaac requests, gesturing to the empty floor space beside him, and Derek obliges immediately. “You wanna know what to do?” he asks, taking Derek’s hand and lacing their fingers together.

“Of course; whatever helps you, Isaac. I just want to--”

“Tell me how you do it,” Isaac interrupts.

“Do it?” Derek repeats dumbly. “Do what?”

“This,” Isaac answers vaguely.

“I don’t--”

“You’ve been taking punches since you were sixteen years old,” Isaac expounds, “and you still just keep rebuilding everything, and I don’t think I can keep doing this. I really don’t.”

“Well, first off,” Derek says, “There was about a decade of very unhealthy coping thrown in there; you just came in on the tail end of it. You know what I was like when I first got back here. I wasn’t anywhere near as great then as you are now at supporting the people around me. You’re the one who convinced me this was a family worth rebuilding, remember?”

The words that seem a lifetime ago echo in Derek’s memory.

This pack isn’t a family....It’s my family, in case you forgot, you guys are pretty much the only thing I’ve got...Look, I know we all fight. We all suck at communication. We can annoy the piss out of one another. We butt heads and fight. We’re dysfunctional as hell on several different levels, I get that we’re not even remotely perfect, but we don’t have to be the Waltons to be a decent family. We’ve been to hell and back a couple times now, and we survive because we’re together....Yeah. Yeah, guess we are...So use that, you dumbass.

And Derek did use it, everyday from then on.
“Want to know how I keep doing it? Okay, I’ll tell you,” he agrees. “I keep rebuilding because at least there’s still something to rebuild. I’m not any stronger than you, Isaac, and yeah I’ve been dealing with shit for a long time, but after the first fire—after Kate—I had Laura, and we made due, but I was too fucked up from my guilt to let her get close; then she was gone too, and I was really alone. So as shitty as all this is, it’s not the worst I’ve been, ya know? The nightmare life I used to muddle through makes this look a lot better,” he says honestly. “I mean it’s no fucking walk in the park, but it’s—manageable.”

“Manageable,” Isaac repeats.

“Yeah,” Derek affirms. “Like what you say, tomorrow gets better, right? We just gotta, ya know, keep going.”

The words don’t seem like enough, but it must help on some level because Isaac leans over against Derek, head on Derek’s shoulder like he wants to fall asleep.

“I know the whole wheelchair thing is frustrating,” Derek goes on.

“Understatement,” Isaac mutters, and Derek doesn’t need to see his face to know he’s glaring at the overturned chair.

“But we’ve got options and stuff with it,” Derek reminds. “I mean there’s the hand controls for cars so you can still drive, and once you’re doing rehab we’ll get whatever braces or crutches or hell if you want a little battery powered Barbie car like Addie’s to drive around instead of the chair we can do that too, okay? You’ve got options,” he repeats.

Isaac chuckles quietly. “I want a battery powered bat mobile,” he answers, and relief floods through Derek at the sign of a lifting of the melancholy.

“Done,” Derek accepts. “I’ll get right on it.”

“Not right on it,” Isaac protests, “Stay here for a while,” he requests. “Just—a little more quiet before we get back to the chaos?”

“As long as you need,” Derek agrees, planting a kiss atop Isaac’s head.

********************************************************************

Stiles’ head has been throbbing for a little while now—ever since they started hide and seek—but he’s trying hard to ignore it and not ruin the fun.

_Not like Tylenol works on werewolves anyway. It’ll go away in a minute. It’s not so bad._

“Ready or not, here I come!” he calls as he gets up from the allotted “counting spot” at the kitchen table.

As he stands the world lurches around him, and he has to grab at the table to keep from falling.

_What the hell?_

He stands up straight again, but the pain in his temple is spreading now, blinding him as
lights dance across his vision.

_Oh, fuck._

“Hey, uh--Cora?” he calls. “I think--uh--my head’s kind of pounding and maybe--maybe you should call Derek.”

“Stiles?” Collin calls worriedly, the first of the other four to appear in the kitchen. “It’s okay, just--uh--you usually get on the floor or the bed or something. ‘Cause you’re--uh--gonna probably fall and jerk around and stuff.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

“Come on, Stiles; he’s right,” Dad says putting arms under Stiles’ armpits to help guide him down to the floor.

The movement makes his head pound even more, and he growls at Dad before he can stop it.

“No, Pop!” Collin shouts. “Stay away from him!”

“Don’t get scary again, Stiles, please,” Addie implores.

“Sheriff, take Addie and go to your room,” Cora orders. “Collin can help; I’ll call Derek.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Stiles murmurs, shutting his eyes tight against the pain and wishing fervently that he knew how to stop whatever the hell is about to happen.

“It’s okay, Stiles,” Cora assures. “You might switch, but it’s okay. You’re okay.”

_No I’m not_, he thinks just as the first convulsion of the seizure comes. _Not okay._

Chapter End Notes

_for the record, I thought about ending without a cliffhanger, buuuuuut the betas voted unanimously to keep going, and I lean toward evil things anyway :P sooooo yeah. sorry not sorry? as usual?_

_speaking of betas, mine fucking ROCK and I’d be lost without them because they're AWESOME. and an extra shoutout for Strangeredlantern for reading even though she's on vacation in paradise :)_

_Hope you enjoyed the chapter; thanks for reading!_
Stiles takes in the sight of the living room light fixture above him, squinting against the glare a moment before closing his eyes again and trying to focus on anything but the throbbing sensation in his head.

“I don’t know who he is, yet, Derek; he just stopped two seconds ago, give me a fucking minute!” Cora’s voice snaps.

“Stiles?” Collin says timidly, and the way his voice shakes has Stiles opening his eyes despite the pain; Collin shouldn’t have to be scared. “Hey, Stiles, you—you know where you are? You know what happened?”

“Yes, Collin,” Stiles replies without thought, unable to stop the formal answer.

“Oh—uh—sorry, Damon.”

“No, Collin.”

“Huh?”

“Stiles, I am Stiles.”

The words are too foreign on his lips, but the responses come out before he can filter to a more normal answer. Recognition dawns on Collin’s face, but once he speaks Stiles realizes his son has guessed the personality incorrectly once again.

“Yeah, that’s right; that’s really good that you remember that, Stiles,” Collin says in a patronizing tone that makes Stiles want to puke, a tone no doubt meant for Wretch. “Look—uh—d’you—how much do you remember? You remember the list? Derek—the Alpha—he’ll be here soon so just—just don’t hurt anyone until—”

“I won’t, Collin; please don’t worry. I’m okay; I’m me. I just—can’t quite—the conditioning’s so strong—the words are out before—I can’t say anything right—I don’t know—I’m so sorry, Collin.”

“What?” Collin replies, confused. “Don’t be sorry though; I mean you didn’t—everything’s okay so you don’t have to be sorry or scared ‘cause you’re—you’re safe here just—I don’t—Aunt Cora?”

“Fine for now, Derek,” she says and Stiles turns to her for the first time, taking in the sight of the phone in her hand; he understands now that she must have Derek on the other line. “We’ll sort it out and see you soon, okay?”
You called Derek? That’s right you did. I heard you say you would.

In fact, I told you to. My head was hurting and I didn’t know—oh, there’s another one now; who is he? Stiles wonders, closing his eyes again as the events of the past two days settle in among his first-hand recollections.

Fuck. We wanted less, not more.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

As Stiles sifts through the memories he doesn’t remember making, he realizes the high school version of himself seems to have done a fantastic job of fitting in with his family. He’s not sure if he wants to celebrate or cry at the realization.

“Hey, Stiles,” Cora says more sharply. “Look at me.”

“I’m me,” he tells her, grateful that talking to the lower beta comes with much more ease. “Really me,” he emphasizes. “Swear.”

“So you’re really you? Like remember things you? You know who we are and everything?” Collin says hopefully.

“Yes, Collin,” Stiles conditioning replies for him, and Collin’s face falls again. “I’m sorry, Collin; I’m trying to stop it, but the words just come out and—”

“Damon?” Addie calls from down the hall. “Collin, did Damon come? I wanna come out and see him!”

“One sec, okay? Stay in there with Pop. He’s not Damon,” Cora calls back.

“I won’t hurt them,” Stiles swears to her, “not either of them; I’m okay, but I can’t—the conditioning is faster than me. It’s like—like when Damon started showing through but worse. I can’t stop it.”

It’s like the earliest days when I came back the very first time. Like the days when I didn’t know which motivations came from me and which were so ingrained I couldn’t fight it. Fuck, I’m not ready to be him again—not that Stiles. I don’t—this is—

This should be Damon who can’t stop the words, not me.

Unless Damon’s gone now? Or am I the new Damon? Oh, my God, I don’t want to be the new Damon. Please, please, please. I have to push the conditioning away. I have to push past it. I don’t want to be Damon.

“What was the name of our peewee soccer team?” Cora asks, pulling Stiles from his mental lamentations.

“Uh—the Raiders? Wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she confirms. “Just a little—background check there.”

“Ask me whatever you want, I’m me; I remember everything.”

“Everything? No gaps at all?”

“I don’t think so, but—wait—there’s—a few maybe? I don’t know; it’s kind of jumbled.”
I think I’m missing a day or two—somewhere—and what about that whole thing with the body? I still don’t remember moving the corpse anywhere? Did it happen again? Am I blacking out? Who the hell comes that I can’t see them? Wretch? Or is it another new one? Fuck, what if it is new? That one, and then the high school me and—and—oh, God, we thought three was to many, and now....

“Breathe, Stiles,” Cora urges, resting her hands on his shoulders. “You’re okay; don’t panic, just breathe. We can sort through it all later; you don’t have to process everything right this minute.”

“Yeah,” Collin agrees. “We’ll call Miss Holly, or Isaac can help, right? You’re okay though; you’re you again, so that’s—that’s good right? Everything’s good? You’re all right?”

“Yes, Col—Yes,” Stiles repeats firmly. “Yes. Yeah. I’m good.”

It takes too much effort to get out the simple response, but the small smile it gets from Collin is well worth it.

“Thank you for keeping an eye on me and being ready to help, Cora,” Stiles pushes past the intense impulse to stay quiet drilled in his mind. “I’m really proud of you, C—col—k—kiddo.”

“You’re welcome,” Collin says, taking a step toward Stiles before freezing in his tracks and asking, “Can I hug you?”

“Of course,” Stiles says smiling and opening his arms, though he’s honestly glad for the warning because half of him wants desperately to shy away from the advance. Collin holds the embrace long enough to have Stiles wondering, “Are you okay, Collin?”

“Uh-huh,” he replies, but the boy’s voice cracks, and he pulls back from Stiles to wipe hurriedly at his eyes.

“Tell me how to help, Collin, please?” Stiles requests. “I want to help. I—mean—” he falters as he tries desperately to sound like Collin’s father and not his subordinate. “Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

“I’m okay I just thought—I was scared that—you messed yourself up when you saved us and—and I thought—I thought maybe you weren’t coming back or maybe you’d really reset and forgot all about us and—and I didn’t know—but you’re back now,” Collin finishes with a smile. “So it’s—I was just being dumb.”

“No, Collin—no—nah. You weren’t being dumb, but I’m—I’m okay. I just—Holly and Isaac will help; it’s okay.”

“I’m sorry you had to save us; if you’ll teach me how to fight like that, then I could be the one who—”

“It wasn’t your fault, Collin; it was mine. I’m sorry. I didn’t know she—”

Stiles clamps his hands over his mouth to stop the guilty confessions.

“Wasn’t your fault either, dude,” Cora cuts in, but by the way she’s studying Stiles she knows there’s more to what he was saying. “Just psycho hunters, but we made it. We’ll get back on our feet quick enough.”

“Can I come see Stiles now?” Addie whines down the hall.

“Yeah, come on, kiddo,” Cora calls back. “I think he could use a good bear hug,” she adds with
a strained smile to Stiles.

The sheriff meets them in the driveway before Derek’s even out of the car. He looks concerned, but not panicked, and that calms Isaac just a little. Derek rolls down the passenger window as the sheriff comes up to the SUV.

*It can’t be anything too bad if the sheriff’s this collected. He’s mostly okay; they’re mostly okay,* Isaac assumes, using the logic to calm himself further.

“He’s back to himself, but—the conditioning’s giving him a hard time,” the sheriff informs.

*Oh, thank God,* Isaac mentally celebrates. He almost smiles before he realizes before berating himself. *It is so incredibly not okay for me to be glad that he’s having a hard time.*

*I’m not though; I’m not happy it’s hard, I’m just happy it’s Stiles. I’m happy we didn’t lose him.*

“A hard time?” Derek repeats.

“Practically Damon—early days Damon,” the sheriff expounds.

“But he’s Stiles though—with the most memories and all? Real Stiles?” Isaac asks.

*Whatever “real Stiles” means anymore.*

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s something, right? That’s good. We can help him with the conditioning. We know how to handle it.”

“Right,” Derek agrees automatically, and guilt continues to turn Isaac’s stomach as he takes in the worry and disappointment apparent in Derek’s face. *“Kids okay?”*

“Fine; Collin stepped up to help Cora just in case. Everyone’s okay.”

*Fuck, Derek should have been here. He left them behind to come help me; the kids should come first.*

“They’re fine, Isaac,” the sheriff repeats, and Isaac lifts his gaze to meet his father-in-law’s. *“Are you?”*

Isaac nods, not trusting his voice with the whirlwind of emotions and thoughts running rampant in his mind as he processes the situation and what it means that High School Stiles was another new personality.

*He was so close to merging—at least it seemed like it—and now there are even more?*

*And this is what I wanted; how could I possibly want this for him? What the fuck is wrong with me?*

*No, I didn’t want this exactly I just—I didn’t want him to lose all the good that’s happened since*
“Isaac?” Derek says, and from the tone it’s not the first time he’s called his husband’s name.

“Sorry, what?” Isaac replies.

Derek opens his mouth as though to speak, but then closes it again. He reaches for Isaac’s hand across the console, rubbing his thumb gently back and forth to soothe.

“Do you need a minute before we—” Derek doesn’t finish the sentence, just looks up toward the house.

_You’re itching to get in there and assess the damage; you need to see he’s okay. I know; I get it._

“I’m good. You go on ahead; I’m right behind you.”

“I can help you—”

“Pop will if I need it; I’m fine.”

_I’m fine. Not great, but fine. Go see about Stiles._

“Kay,” Derek says before leaving the car a bit hesitantly.

Derek honestly doesn’t know what to expect when he enters the house, but he can’t say he’s surprised to hear Stiles’ voice coming from the kitchen.

“Yeah, you can put some extra M&Ms in your batter,” he permits.

“Mine are gonna be the best cookies,” Addie’s voice replies, and Derek smiles at the sound, grateful as ever for the brightness she always seems to bring even to Stiles’ bad days.

“They look delicious already.”

“Can I lick the spoon once I’m done?”

“If I don’t beat you to it.”

“Stiles.”

“Hey, Derek,” Collin greets from the couch, and Derek tries to ignore the sound of a spoon clattering to the floor in the kitchen at the words.

“Hey, kiddo, whatcha watching?”

“Some baseball movie Aunt Cora likes,” Collin replies.

“Hey, Field of Dream is classic, you little twerp.”

Field of Dreams was also Dad’s go-to movie for Movie Night when they were kids, but Derek doesn’t mention that.
“Wanna watch?” Collin wonders.

“In a minute,” Derek says as he moves on toward the kitchen.

“Derek, look-it, we’re makin’ cookies,” Addie says when Derek comes around the corner.

“Yes, Derek, if that’s okay,” Stiles adds quickly, grimacing immediately after like he’s fighting the urge to vomit.

“Yeah, of course it is; it’s great.”

“I got lotsa M&Ms in mine,” Addie goes on.

“Really? That sounds good,” Derek compliments distractedly.

His attention is of course drawn to Stiles, who stands much too still and seems to be struggling to keep his head upright. He’s clutching the bowl and spoon in his hands so hard his knuckles are white. It’s such a contrast to the bubbling ball of energy he’s been the past two days that Derek longs to bolt out the back door and run as far from this tortured soul he can get until someone tells him this is all just a horrible, vivid nightmare that keeps building on itself.

*Where’s the button to go back? Back just a few days even, that’s all we need. We were doing okay; he was making progress.*

*This isn’t fucking fair.*

Derek’s searching for words when Stiles speaks again.

“I’m okay,” he says determinedly. “Just—you’re a little harder than Collin was, but I’m—I’m okay. Don’t worry.”

“Derek’s nice, Damon, remember? You don’t have to be scared,” Addie assures.

Wait. What?

“Damon?” Derek repeats. “Sorry, I—”

“He’s not Damon, Addie,” Collin’s voice cuts in sharply from behind Derek, making Stiles jump. “I told you to quit calling him that.”

“I forgot again; stop being mean!”

“Addie, don’t,” Stiles pleads, feet moving seemingly of their own accord as he puts himself between her and the Alpha and Elect.

“I’m not gonna hurt her, Stiles,” Collin says with a weariness Derek understands all too well.

“I know, C—Kiddo; just reflex,” Stiles replies with a forced smile.

“Collin, maybe—uh—you and Derek come back and watch the movie?” Cora suggests gently.

“No,” Stiles contradicts. “No, I’m fine; I’m—I’m fine,” he persists though his hands shake so badly with the words that he has to retreat to put the mixing bowl of batter down on the counter.

Derek doesn’t know what to do; he doesn’t want to stay if it will put too much stress on Stiles, but he doesn’t want to go and make it seem like he doesn’t believe Stiles can handle himself.
“Stay, S—so—sourwolf,” Stiles insists with a forced smile that Derek manages to return.

“You got it,” he agrees. “How about me and Collin get the cookie sheets out and stuff?”


Not exactly square one; it’s okay; he’s okay; we can work with this. It’ll be okay.

Isaac manages to keep his mood up through cookies and milk and the end of Field of Dreams. He even manages to keep the tone light when he has to ask Derek to help him take a place on the back porch swing to watch the game of kickball. Scott and Logan drop by to join in the fun, but with their added numbers Stiles leaves the game early, bidding Scott take his place for the rest of the game, and he wanders up to the porch to take a seat beside Isaac.

“Don’t cut the game short on my account,” Isaac says.

“Dude, I’m not,” Stiles replies. “My head’s still kinda achey.”

“Achey?” Isaac says worriedly. “Should we—”

“Just like migraine achey,” Stiles interrupts. “Nothing major; I’ll say something if it keeps up.”

He reaches tentatively to take Isaac’s hand, and as much as Isaac wants to smile at the contact, guilt overwhelms the moment and he can’t.

“What’s the matter, Isaac?” Stiles wonders. “I know—I didn’t quite know how to—with just high school memories—but it doesn’t mean—I—”

“You weren’t you,” Isaac replies. “I know that; that’s what—I mean I was glad to see you so carefree and everything, ya know? I really was, but—it wasn’t you, and—and I missed you.”

Stiles smiles, “Sure you don’t want to trade the damaged new model for the shiny, happy old one?” he teases.

His tone may be light, but there’s an insecurity there that Isaac wants to banish as quickly as possible,

“Not a chance,” Isaac answers earnestly. “I love you, Stiles.”

“Thank—I love you, too,” Stiles answers, the almost-perfect moment marred with the aborted conditioned response.

Isaac struggles to keep his face neutral, and Stiles grits his teeth in apparent frustration.

“I’ll get the hang of it again,” he declares. “I’m just rusty. I’ll be insulting you left and right again before you know it,” he adds.

“Good,” Isaac answers, “because there’s the whole world of wheelchair-related humor to be tapped.”
“And I better get to it quick because you’ll be walking again before you know it.”

“Right,” Isaac agrees, though there’s no conviction behind the statement.

Stiles doesn’t call him on the dejected response, but he does tighten his grip on Isaac’s hand a bit and settle in a bit closer beside him. Isaac knows the struggle against conditioning such action takes, but he’s too grateful for the palliative effect of the contact to move away. They sit together, watching as the game devolves into something more akin to football. Isaac drinks in the moment, filing it away with the other memories that remind him there are still bits of normality to be found in the wreckage their lives may seem to be from afar.

********************************************************

Derek’s proud of how long he manages to keep collected. He makes it through two games of kickball, dinner at the sheriff’s, and a few rounds of Mario Kart back at Jackson’s before he finally ducks out for a run while Isaac, Jackson, and Stiles tuck the kids in for the night. He widens his circle around the property a bit more, but still stays within earshot. It’s only a matter of time before he’ll have to leave for a thorough run though, especially now that the conditioning is back. Two days break wasn’t enough and yet it was too much; he’d forgotten how great it was to go more than twelve hours without hearing the word “Alpha” spoken in one degree of fear or another. He’d forgotten how often Stiles used to laugh. Then again, Isaac’s visibly better with Stiles back, so it’s not as though the return is a horrible turn of events. Derek’s glad to have Stiles back too…mostly.

I just wish there was a happier medium we could get to. I wish he could be his old self and still know us. I miss the way he used to be, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love him the way he is now. I want the good and not the bad, and that’s a totally normal thing to want.

But you can’t always get what you want.

He smiles through the melancholy as bittersweet memories of Laura singing that song whenever Derek would whine about something. He used to hate the sound, but now he relishes the fact that he can still remember what her voice sounded like—a bit squeaky and off-key, and an uncanny ability to set her condescending tone into the music.

Derek winds up his run earlier than he’d like, but it’s enough of a fix for now. He’s glad to see there’s no fort in the living room, which means the kids wanted to try sleeping on their own again. He just hopes they can avoid the nightmares without the security of the pack pile. He can hear Isaac reading the kids a story, and it sounds like Jackson and Stiles are chatting in the kitchen. He doesn’t think he can handle the immediate tension that’s sure to hit Stiles with Derek’s arrival, so he heads for their bedroom instead of announcing himself.

Derek stays in the shower until the water runs cold, but he still stands under the stream, trying to let the world wash away for just another minute or two. He’s got half a mind to go for another run even though he just got back, regretting now that he didn’t stay out longer. Still, he knows now more than ever that he can’t run from everything like he used to. This isn’t like the first time they dealt with Stiles’ conditioning; they’ve got kids now, and Isaac’s got too much on his plate already. Derek’s
got to face things head on this time around—as much as he can manage anyway. It’s his time to be the strongest.

Derek’s resolve and confidence all but evaporate when he walks out of the bathroom to see Stiles kneeling in his boxers at the end of the bed. Stiles doesn’t react to Derek’s entrance. He doesn’t look scared or apprehensive; he almost looks like he’s just another inanimate object filling the room, staring at the wall with unfocused eyes.

“Stiles, no,” Derek says woefully, unable to keep his voice neutral.

“Huh?” Stiles replies, turning to look at him. “What?”

“Don’t—I’m not—we’re not—I don’t want—you don’t owe me anything; you know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Then—what’re you doing?”

Stiles looks down at himself almost as though he’s confused. Then he looks back to Derek with an apologetic smile as he rises to his feet.


“Don’t be sorry, just—just as long as you don’t think I’d make you—”

“Of course not, Derek,” Stiles assures, and Derek grits his teeth in an attempt to keep a neutral face at the conditioned address. “Shit,” Stiles mutters. “I know you don’t want sex right now though, for real. I just came in here to get ready for bed, and—I guess I got distracted.”

Derek tries hard not to think about how this is Stiles’ conditioned way to carry out “get ready for bed” and all the acts that likely followed after.

“So you’re—okay?” Derek asks.

“Yes, Derek.”

“Good,” he replies huskily; he swears the quick, submissive response gets worse every time he hears it.

He turns away from Stiles and busies himself with getting clean clothes from the dresser. “Stiles, you know if—I don’t mind sleeping someplace else if you’d—”

Stiles shushes the offer and moves up behind Derek, hands circling his waist tentatively as he tucks his chin over Derek’s shoulder. Derek can’t help but relax into the touch.

“I know how much you hate it,” Stiles murmurs. “The responses are just so automatic not even my motor mouth can beat the conditioning sometimes.”

“It’s okay; I know you’re doing your best, Stiles; I just know how much you hate it too.”

“Remember when you used to give me fake orders?” Stiles wonders. “Trying to reset what was ‘second nature’ for me?”

“Yeah.”
“Worked pretty well the first time.”

Derek sighs. He knows Stiles has a perfectly good point and it’s a sound plan; it doesn’t detract from the pain of realizing they’re almost back to square one with him.

“Watch the latest episode of Dora the Explorer ten times,” Derek requests.

Stiles huffs in laughter, his breath tickling at Derek’s neck.

“Nope; gonna watch the inside of my eyelids,” Stiles answers. “I’m exhausted.”

“Yeah, you should get some sleep.”

“Now, that’s a order I can get behind.”

“No; Not an order,” Derek corrects, maybe a little too sharply because Stiles shrinks back a bit. “Suggestion. Just—just an idea.”

“Yes, Der—Yes. Just Yes. Yeah, I mean. Yeah. Suggestion,” Stiles agrees, managing to push past the conditioning this time.

Small victories, Derek reminds himself. Take what you can get. They’re all alive. We’re all together. Stiles is still here, and ready to keep fighting the conditioning.

It’s not perfect, but at least there’s something to build back.

Stiles settles under the covers next to Derek. He loathes the way Derek’s so careful not to touch Stiles or crowd his space. He appreciates the gesture of consideration, but he’d much rather drift off to sleep under the comforting weight of Derek’s arm across his back. He finds Derek’s hand and laces their fingers together tightly.

“Sorry you have to walk on eggshells again,” Stiles murmurs.

“You don’t have to keep apologizing; it isn’t your fault.”

“I just—”

“Please, stop apologizing,” Derek interrupts. “When you can’t help it, it’s fine, but—”

“Yes, Derek.”

“Shit, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay; I get it,” Stiles assures.

You hate the way I grovel; you hate hearing my apologies and being called Alpha and the way I tense up when you’re around. You can’t stand watching me when I’m conditioned; you’ve never been able to stand it. I know what a downer I must be after two days of unblemished high school snarky Stiles. I wish I could get back to that place, but I think he only exists in my dysfunctional, hyper-compartmentalized mind now. I know you miss him, but he’s not coming back—not
I'm sorry for that too.

At least Isaac seems glad to have me back, he thinks, consoling himself with the bitter thought before the guilt rushes in after it.

It’s not Derek’s fault he’s disappointed, Stiles reminds himself. It’s not like he really expects me to magically get back there. He wants me carefree for my sake more than for his sake just—fuck—this is all so—none of it’s fair for any of us.

As if on cue to remind Stiles just how horribly unfair everything always seems to be, Isaac wheels into the bedroom.

He declines Stiles and Derek’s offers to help him into bed, managing well enough on his own though Stiles still hates to see him struggle at all. Stiles needs a moment or two to gather the gumption to toss one arm over Isaac in his usual manner.

“G’night,” Isaac murmurs.

“Night,” Stiles and Derek echo in unison.

Stiles drifts off to sleep more easily than he expected, falling into dreamless slumber that Isaac’s voice interrupts in the early morning hours.

“Ugh, Stiles, quit it; you’re stabbing me with your fucking toenails,” he grumbles sleepily, the all-too-familiar annoyed voice waking Stiles only slightly. “Haven’t you ever heard of—”

Stiles wakes fully in the next instant as Isaac sits bolt upright, flinging the bedcovers aside desperately and bursting into near-manic laughter.

“Derek, turn on the lamp!” he orders. “Tell me I’m not fucking dreaming here because I can totally wiggle my toes! Look!” he shouts triumphantly. “Oh my God, I can move my foot!”

Okay, first off, I have to give the biggest appreciation post ever to Strangeredlantern for helping me as I tried to coax out this chapter.

I know this is the longest I’ve ever gone without posting, and it’s not just me being a flake I swear.

Because the explanation is a bit lengthy, and also because some of you just want the explanation that no I’m definitely NOT abandoning the sequel I’ll just direct those of you who may want more to the version of it I put up on tumblr.

As always, my loves, thank you for reading!!! sorry this chapter was a bit short, and I'll do my best not to be quite this long between all new posts.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thanks for being patient with me, y’all! :) Hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Isaac expects to wake up any moment now and find this was just a fantastic, teasing dream. Deaton told him it could be months before he could move. He advised against getting his hopes up too high. “It’s mostly theoretical diagnoses,” he’d reminded, as always.

But I can wiggle my toes.

It’s not going to be six months stuck in that chair.

I can already wiggle my toes.

He’s laughing—giggling like a little kid really—as Derek flicks on the lamp and he watches the little contractions of his toes in giddy disbelief.

“Dude! That is awesome!” Stiles exclaims. “You are totally not dreaming; you are wiggling those toes like a pro!”

“A pro toe wiggler?” Isaac repeats. “Is that a thing now?”

“Shut up, I’m excited.”

“What’s going on?” Collin wonders, entering the bedroom with his sister hot on his heels. “It’s good yelling, right?!”

“Very good yelling,” Derek confirms with a smile. “Isaac can move his feet.”

“Just a little,” Isaac amends because he’s not quite ready to hear either kid wonder if he can walk, “but it’s something.”

Isaac’s straining a bit in hopes he can tilt his whole foot, he half-succeeds, flopping his left ankle onto its side. It’s miniscule, but he’ll damn sure take it.

“So do we like—call Deaton? Or something?” Stiles wonders. “Not really used to calling him for good news.”

“Don’t wake him,” Isaac replies. “We’ll tell him tomorrow.”

Maybe there’s something I can do to help it along. Even if there’s not, this is a good sign. A really fucking great sign.

The sense of elation is almost overwhelming, damn Isaac really needed something good to happen to overshadow some of the shit they’re trying to sort through.

Tomorrow actually is going to be better.
Stiles wakes long before Derek or Isaac. He does his best to fall back asleep—he’s still pretty exhausted after all—but the insatiable drive to be useful won’t let him relax. He rises slowly, trying not to jostle Derek, Isaac, or the kids—who clambered into bed with them after all the excitement last night.

“Stiles?” Derek murmurs.

“Nothing to worry about,” he answers. “Sleep.”

“Mmmmkay,” Derek replies, though he opens his eyes blearily for just a moment to check.

The smile Stiles manages must be convincing enough because Derek closes his eyes to go back to sleep. Stiles makes his way out to the kitchen, exploring the options of the pantry and fridge for breakfast. He settles on making biscuits and breakfast casserole; he figures the longer cook-time should allow the others time to sleep in a little longer before food starts getting cold.

And it’s easily reheated if the Alpha wants—no, Derek, he’s Derek, not just Alpha, and he doesn’t give a shit if I let breakfast get cold. He’ll just stick the stupid stuff in the microwave. It doesn’t matter if it gets cold.

Yes, it does; of course it matters. Derek’s such a good Alpha; good, patient, kind Alpha who deserves all the best things even if I’m not afraid he’ll hurt me. I still need to be loyal; I still need to make sure he feels appreciated. I want him to know I’m grateful.

He does know that; doesn’t he?

I should do more; I could do more.

No, dammit! I’m not proving anything. Derek knows I’m glad I’m here with them. He knows I love him; I fucking married him, didn’t I?

The pledge of a weak, broken thing like you? Alec questions. What could that possibly be worth?

“It’s worth a lot, you fucker; leave me alone,” Stiles mutters as he continues gathering ingredients for breakfast.

It’s worth nothing, Alec insists. It’s a pathetic attempt to try and convince him you were worth keeping around. If he’d known just how broken you were, he’d never have even bothered pretend to return the vows.

“He knew; he doesn’t care that I’m fucked in the head; he loves me anyway; they both do. You’re lying, Alph—Alec.”

He doesn’t care? You sure about that? You saw how thrilled he was to see the new personality with no trauma. You saw the way your Alpha looked at him. It was nothing like the pitying, disappointed looks he gives you. You know which of the two he’d prefer.

And it’s not you, is it, beta?

Of course it isn’t you.

You can’t blame him, not really. It’s nothing short of a miracle he’s put up with your worthless ass
as long as he has.

“He loves me.”

*He tolerates you,* Alec corrects.

“He loves me!”

_Maybe he used to love you, but how could he love the wretch you’ve become? There’s no way any alpha could love a damaged thing like you._

“Shut up! You’re lying! Shut the hell up, and get out of my head!”

**********************************************************************************

Stiles’ raised voice has Derek up and out of bed before he’s even fully awake. He hurries toward the kitchen though he doesn’t hear anything else from Stiles.

_Maybe he’s fine; maybe he calmed himself down._

Derek’s hopeful mood plummets as he rounds the corner to find Stiles standing motionless by the kitchen cabinet with a completely blank expression Derek hoped he wasn’t ever going to see again.

“Stiles?”

No reply.

“Stiles, what happened? Can you talk to me?”

Nothing. Not so much as a shift in Stiles’ gaze.

Derek sighs heavily, running his fingers back through his hair as he decides his next steps.

“Come on, Stiles,” he says, reaching out and taking Stiles’ hand in his. “You can come sit on the couch, okay?”

Stiles follows easily with glazed eyes and shuffling feet. Derek tries to remind himself that this could be a “twisted kind of progress” as Isaac phrased it. Stiles can shut down when he needs to now; he doesn’t have to be Wretch.

**But he’s still not Stiles, and he’s not okay. This isn’t okay.**

Derek puts hands on Stiles’ shoulders to guide him down to sitting on the couch. Stiles’ eyes never focus on Derek, not even when Derek plants a quick kiss on his temple and soothes quietly, “It’s okay, Stiles; take as much time as you need.”

He turns to go back in the kitchen and finish whatever meal Stiles had begun. Collin is standing in the doorway of the den watching worriedly.

“He’s okay, right?” Collin asks. “He did this before. Miss Holly says it means he’s processing, and processing is good, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, processing is good,” Derek confirms, hoping fervently that it’s the truth. “Don’t worry, kiddo; go back to bed. Give Isaac an update on Stiles, and tell him I’ll have breakfast done whenever you three get up.”
“You want me to help or something?”

“I’ll wake you up if I need you,” Derek replies. “You’re still behind on sleep from everything, and you’ve got school again starting tomorrow.”

“Oh, you wake me up if I can help or something.”

“I will,” Derek promises. “Thanks, Collin.”

Isaac listens in on Derek and Collin’s conversation, confirming that Stiles is catatonic again and there’s no immediate need for Isaac to try and help—though he’s not going to be drifting back to sleep anytime soon. He is still elated with excitement, wiggling his toes under the covers now just because he can and because—thankfully—he didn’t wake to find last night had been just another desperate dream.

“Stiles is okay,” Collin reports as he returns. “He’s—uh—like zoned out, ya know?”

“Yeah.”

Addie mumbles grumpily in her sleep and snuggles in closer to Isaac’s side. He smiles down at the sleeping toddler, one of the few things that could keep him here in bed though he longs to get up and start researching all the options he has for rehab and talk to Deaton about the new timeline to walking since Isaac regained some feeling and movement this fast.

“Think you can get a little more sleep in before breakfast?” Isaac wonders.

“I’m not tired,” Collin replies, “not really.”

“Just rest then,” Isaac bids. “Derek’s right, you have school tomorrow.”

“School is so dumb,” Collin complains. “What’s the point? Knowing my multiplication tables won’t do shit to keep me alive. I could be doing important stuff.”

“Language,” Isaac chastises automatically, ignoring for the moment that his son has a bit of a point, “and school does matter, Collin. We can train and things after school, but your education—”

“Is pointless,” Collin persists. “Who cares about the capitals of the states or how to spell “necessary” or “where the red fern grows”? Nobody. Especially not me.”

“Collin—”

“Can I just be home-schooled?”

Isaac pauses a moment before answering the question, wondering if this is just stemming from genuine frustration or if it’s a mask for burgeoning separation anxiety issues in the aftermath of the attack and kidnapping.

“You still have to learn the basics of every subject even if you’re homeschooled,” Isaac replies. “Still capitals and reading lists and times tables.”

“Yeah, but like, just the stuff I have to. Plus you know the real story when crap happens to us. I don’t have to give you some lame story. You really know that I’ve got way bigger stuff on my mind tomorrow than dumb fractions.”
“I can see your point,” Isaac allows. “But leaving school would be a serious step.”

And while we could probably handle the education part, you need the social aspects; you need to be in the company of other kids. You need to learn how to blend in with humans.

“Plus we can rephrase everything so the dumb stuff at least seems like it matters,” Collin adds with a smirk. “If there are three hunters and they all have four guns, how many guns are—”

“That’s not funny, Collin,” Isaac interrupts sharply.


Isaac doesn’t need his psych degree to know there’s much more going on with his son than frustration with school. He can’t say he’s surprised. It’s not the first time Collin’s world has been turned upside down—and sadly enough, it might not be the last.

“I’m not so sure school is the real problem here, kiddo,” Isaac says.

“It’s not,” Collin agrees.

“So you want to tell me—”

“I did already,” Collin interrupts tersely. “The problem is that school isn’t going to do anything that’ll help when it really matters, and I don’t want to pretend there’s a point to it anymore. I don’t want to pretend that I care about who wins the stupid Science Fair or which girl David has a crush on or what grade I got on my spelling test. I don’t care; I just want to get it out of the way and help with real stuff. Like you and Derek and Stiles and Addie, and training stuff, and maybe with the house when we make a new one, and important stuff.”

“You don’t have to worry about all that, Collin; it’s not your responsibility to—”

“Yeah, yeah; I know. Be a kid,” Collin mutters, rolling back out of bed and slamming his feet to the floor. “I knew you’d say something like that.”

“Hey, I—”

“I don’t wanna talk about it anymore. Can I go running?”

“We can talk about it later,” Isaac offers. “We’ll consider the options if you’re serious.”

Of course I’ll mostly be considering options for who you’ll talk to so you can work through whatever this is.


“Stay close.”

“Duh,” Collin replies, rolling his eyes as he leaves the bedroom, slamming the door just a bit too hard on his way out and making his sister stir in her sleep.

“Isaac? Wassit?” Addie murmurs sleepily.

“Nothing, sweetheart,” he soothes. “Sleep.”

*******************************
Derek’s phone rings on the counter as he pulls the batch of biscuits from the oven and sets the pan on the stovetop to cool. He’s trying not to worry too much over Collin’s retreat for a run, so he’s pleased to see Deaton’s name on the caller ID when he moves to answer. It’ll be a nice highlight of the good things going on today.

“You got my text?” Derek assumes in greeting.

He sent a message not only to Deaton but to the rest of the pack to update them and encourage cautious celebration.

“I did,” Deaton confirms. “It’s sure nice to see happy news on the screen for a change. Any more progress?”

“I don’t think so. He’s not up yet though. I thought maybe we could come over to the office later?”

“It’s not essential, but I’d like to see the progress first-hand myself. How’s Stiles today? Well enough to get out?”

“Actually, he’s—uh—it’s the catatonic thing again it seems like.”

“I’ll come to you then,” Deaton offers. “I have some time after ten.”

“Sounds great. See you then.”

“Looking forward to it,” Deaton says with more cheer in his voice than Derek’s used to hearing.

Positive doctor visits; damn I hope this is going to get more common.

**********************************************************************

Isaac’s got his research laid out across the massive dining room table, and he’s ready to launch into conversation the second Deaton steps through the front door. Deaton’s in no real rush though it seems, greeting the kids and Derek before finally turning to Isaac.

“Well, I hear you’ve got something to show me,” Deaton says.

“He can wiggle his toeses!” Addie says as Isaac demonstrates. “Look-it, Doc!”

“Isaac, that is fantastic,” Deaton says with a wide grin. “There’s a lot of work to do, but it’s a phenomenal starting place.”

“The sources I found say that the sooner signs of healing present in a patient then the more likely it is the patient fully recovers,” Isaac shares. “You said I’d recover for sure, but—this means probably quicker than we originally thought right? Probably not a whole six months?”

“Hopefully not,” Deaton hedges, “but there’s a lot to talk about.”

They settle Addie in with a movie in the den. They move Stiles up to his room for a while. Collin’s still holed up in his bedroom buried in comic books and declining any attempts at conversation. Isaac knows that he should be up there insisting they work out whatever’s weighing on Collin, but he’s not sure he can focus on anything else right now.

Derek and Stiles and I really need to talk together anyway before we can give him enough of an answer to his home-school questions. We need to present a united front on whatever decision
“Isaac?” Deaton prompts, calling to Isaac’s attention the fact that he’s zoned out for a moment rather than delving into the discussion when they entered the dining room.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said it seems like you’ve done a lot of research.”

“Yeah, well…” Isaac answers with a shrug. “You’re the doctor though; what do you think?”

“Well, the use of electric stimulation seems like a promising avenue to me; the tricky part will be gauging the voltage properly for your enhanced resistance, but I think as long as we handle it carefully it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“How long before I can try to walk? I mean—I know I can’t like hop out of the chair by tomorrow or anything, but I’m good with crutches or braces or anything except this chair really, and—a little toe wiggling isn’t much but it’s something, isn’t it?”

“It’s excellent,” Deaton confirms, “but I can’t give you a definite timeline on this healing any more than I could at the initial. With your enhanced healing, this could be the first step in an accelerated, snowball of progress, or it could be weeks before there’s more improvement.”

“Weeks?!?”

“Could be weeks, Isaac,” Derek soothes. “Could be.”

“Yeah, but—improvement this early should mean quicker healing. It—”

“It’s not a definite science,” Deaton reminds. “I’m just trying to make sure we set realistic expectations here.”

His tone is so calm and collected and patient that it makes Isaac fume.

Sure, you can stand there on your own fucking legs. Why shouldn’t you be calm? Isaac broods.

“You’re gonna walk, Isaac,” Derek says firmly, “half the battle is mental, and you’re determined as hell. It’s just a lot of work, like he said.”

“So we’ll try the electric therapy stuff, but what else? What do I do in the meantime? At home and stuff,” Isaac asks, latching onto the idea of a game plan.

If I’m following the plan at least I can feel like I’m doing something. I won’t just be sitting here anymore.

“There’s some exercises I can show you,” Deaton offers, “and continue attempting to move more of your legs.”

And I’ll look up even more exercises than the ones Deaton’s got. I can totally supplement the treatment now that I’ve got some progress to use as a marker. And I’m going ahead and getting some fucking crutches—I bet if I get braces with the crutches that go around my wrist I could totally manage getting around with mostly upper body strength until my legs catch up.

Fuck this chair.

I wanna walk.
It seems Stiles is transported from the kitchen to the upstairs bedroom in the blink of an eye. It’s as unsettling as ever, but it’s made much worse by the fact that Stiles can no longer assume voids in his memory belong to Wretch.

*Catatonia again? Wretch? Or the one who hid the body? Why am I up here?*

He hears Isaac, Derek, and Deaton’s voices down on the first floor.

*Deaton?! Did I hurt someone? Oh, God, what did I—*

“Just don’t push yourself too hard, Isaac,” Deaton advises, “but, no, I don’t think it’s too soon to get some crutches and things that may help you be a little more mobile. You’ll need them at some point.”

*Oh, right, Isaac can move his legs. So Deaton’s not here because of me, right? Nothing wrong, just talking about Isaac’s treatment. Guess I didn’t miss too much time? Wonder how long I was out?*

“Derek, we are so going out for lunch and making a supply run,” Isaac says eagerly.

“Well, I do still owe you a Bat Mobile,” Derek teases.

*I guess I missed that joke?* Stiles wonders, failing to ignore the sense of estrangement the realization brings.

“Shut up,” Isaac says, sounding mildly annoyed. “But, yes, you do actually.”

*Okay, so the movement thing wasn’t a fluke. Isaac’s getting better. That’s the thing to focus on right now. They’re not talking about me, so I probably didn’t fuck anything up, right? It was probably just the catatonic one; nothing dangerous.*

Stiles rises from the bed and heads for the bedroom door. When he starts down the stairs Derek calls his name with just a hint of underlying concern.

“Yes, Alpha,” Stiles answers automatically as Derek emerges from the study followed by Deaton and then Isaac.

“Damon?” Addie calls eagerly from the den, running to greet Stiles—no, running to greet Damon. She wants to see Damon.

“No,” he says. “I’m Stiles, sweetheart, just—still a little conditioned still.”

“Oh,” she replies, confusion wrinkling her brow as she frowns in what certainly seems to be disappointment. “Hey, Stiles,” she adds as though it’s an afterthought.

“Feeling okay?” Derek asks.

“Yes, Alph—Derek—I mean—uh—yeah, good, fine, I’m okay—just—okay enough or whatever, so, uh, what’d I miss?”

“Less than four hours,” Derek replies with a smile. “You didn’t even miss lunch,” he adds, clearly happy to share it.

The information makes Stiles uneasy though, and it plants a seed of worry in his mind.
Less than four hours? I never switch that fast anymore; I haven’t in a long time. Then again, I guess the way I was before isn’t really an applicable indicator anymore. There’s new personalities now, so who knows how the “rules” work anymore? We spent years with the original two and we still couldn’t predict everything, so God only knows what the fuck will happen with me this time.

*Dammit.*

“Stiles? You sure you’re okay?”

He snaps to attention at the sound of Derek’s voice. “Yes, Alpha. I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to be distracted. I—”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Derek soothes, holding his hands up in a sign of peace.

“Are you Damon now?” Addie asks, “because you sound like—”

“No, I’m not!” Stiles growls before he can think better of it, and Addie’s lip pouts out at the harsh tone.

*No! No! What was I thinking?! I can’t upset the little one! He’ll rip me apart if I make her cry! Oh, God; I’m so fucking stupid!!*

************************************************************

Derek fights back bile as Stiles dissolves into a cowering mess and throws himself to the floor at Derek’s feet.

“Please, Derek, *please*, I didn’t mean to upset her!”

“It’s okay, Stiles; you—”

“I’d never upset her on purpose! I’d *never*!”

“Stiles—”

“I don’t need to be taught, Derek; I don’t! I understand; *please!* I wasn’t going to—”

“Stiles, stop it!” Derek interrupts in the alpha tone, desperate to quell the terrified supplications.

*You don’t need to be taught? Do you remember being hurt when you struck Addie? You’re not supposed to remember that. That was Wretch.*

*But Wretch might not even exist anymore.*

*Fuck. What else might you know now, Stiles? What else consolidated?*

*Fuck.*

Stiles has choked his pleas off into whimpers though he continues toquake uncontrollably.

“I’m not gonna hurt you, Stiles; I’m never, *ever* gonna hurt you,” Derek swears.

“Th—thank you, Derek,” Stiles answers, almost sobbing the words. “I’m sorry.”
“It’s okay; Addie’s fine, Stiles. You—”

“No—for—for being—I don’t mean to be afraid; I just can’t—it’s not my words, Derek; I just can’t make the conditioning stop,” Stiles laments.

Stiles leans forward with a sigh that speaks of exhaustion, letting his head rest on Derek’s leg. Derek moves immediately to meet Stiles on his level, guiding his head to rest on Derek’s shoulder instead, and Stiles finds Derek’s hand with his own though he’s still shaking. He looks to Isaac and Deaton as though they have some answer for how to help, and Derek tries not to dwell on Addie’s frightened face staring at the scene from the spot of solace she sought in Isaac’s lap.

“It’s still me in here,” Stiles mutters, words half muffled into Derek’s shirt. “I just can’t act like it.”

“Tell us how to help,” Isaac bids.

“I don’t know,” Stiles replies miserably. “I’m sorry, Addie. I didn’t mean to snap at you,” he adds. “I just don’t like acting like Damon.”

“Damon’s nice though,” Addie reminds quietly. “It’s not bad to be like Damon; I didn’t mean it was bad.”

“I know.”

“Is Damon ever comin’ back?” she wonders sadly, looking from Derek and Stiles back to Isaac, and Derek flinches slightly at the question before he can keep his expression in check.

“We’ll talk about it later, okay?” Isaac says. “Right now Stiles is here, and I bet he’d like you to help him pick out what we should all make for lunch.”

**********************************************************************************************************

Stiles pushes back from the warm body he’s leaning into on reflex, scrambling up to his feet as he takes in the scene.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, Stiles; I’m not going to hurt you,” Derek assures from his place kneeling on the floor.

“Oh,” Stiles says as the pieces connect. “I—uh—guess things—did I? Huh—this is—” As he fumbles to form coherent sentences, he looks around at the worried faces of Derek, Isaac, Deaton, and Addie—fuck, the kid shouldn’t have to look all sad and shit like that. This thing is so fucked up. “This is really weird,” he says finally.

*Wow, Stiles, way to state the obvious,* he mentally berates.

“Stiles?” Derek says.

“Yeah, me, Stiles, but—uh—not the one you were probably talking to ten seconds ago,” he answers. “I’m—uh—the high school reset version. Stiles 1.0 or whatever you named me.”

“You don’t need a different name; you’re always Stiles,” Derek replies firmly.

“Well that’s gonna get confusing. I definitely vote I get a cool alias. Let’s see. Just call me Batman,” he declares.
Because God knows it’s gonna take some superhero mind powers to figure all this shit out.

Chapter End Notes

HUGE thanks as always to Strangergedlantern and her exquisite, meticulous, and supportive betaing talents. Endless love to Nicole as well, and THRILLED to have Michael back in the ranks this round :) 

and thank all of YOU for reading! :D 

PS. Less than a month before I'm moving, sooooo I'll really try to update, but if it's another super long pause, apologies :/
Chapter 8

Isaac feels and odd pang—some weird mix of relief and dread—as Stiles announces which personality is presenting now. He’d like to claim the disappoint at the switch is only because this rapid rotation could be a lot for Stiles and the kids—and everyone really—to handle. In reality, Isaac’s sulking internally at the idea that they’re back to the Stiles who doesn’t really know how to act around Isaac.

“Miss anything good?” Stiles wonders into the awkward silence that followed his attempt at humor. “You get that model finished up, kiddo?” he wonders, and it’s only then that Isaac turns to see Collin has joined the scene on the fringes.

“Yep,” he confirms without missing a beat. “Wanna see?” he offers, jerking his head back toward his room where the model sits proudly on his dresser beside the one he’s currently tinkering with.

“Yeah, yeah, definitely,” Stiles says, clearly thrilled to latch onto anything except the current confusion in the den. “Lead the way, dude.”

He disappears down the hall and Stiles follows. Deaton seems too intrigued not to observe this personality now he’s got a chance; Derek joins him in his pursuit, too, leaving Isaac to tackle Addie’s statement, “So he’s still not Damon, huh?”

“No.”

“But Damon’s gonna be back sometime right?” she wonders. “I drew him all those new pictures upstairs, and he hasn’t got to see them yet, and he’s gonna like all the new princess stuff Aunt Lydia got me.”

“I’m not sure when Damon’s coming back, honey,” Isaac answers honestly. “But you remember we talked about how he might go away when Stiles’ brain gets better?”

“Yeah, but Stiles’ brain’s not getting better.”

The simple assertion comes like a slap to the face. She’s absolutely right, and something about hearing the words in such innocent yet matter-of-fact delivery makes them all the more difficult to hear.

“So when’s Damon comin’ back?” Addie persists.

“I don’t know,” Isaac answers honestly, and she pouts at the nonspecific answer. “It’s complicated.”

“I don’t like it being complicated.”

“Me neither.”
Stiles did his best to just go with the flow when he found himself suddenly transported two days into the future, but even if he can go through motions, this still doesn’t feel like his life. Derek may claim he’s “always Stiles” but he doesn’t feel like it’s true; he’s certainly not their Stiles. Not really. He can’t help feeling like an intruder here, as though he’s stealing something precious from a guy who deserves the happiness way more.

I mean yeah some shit stuff has happened to me, but nothing like what happened to him—older me—fuck, I really gotta get some code names going.

“So, Isaac—uh—you have like notes and all about me—us—whatever, right?” Stiles asks over the dino nuggets and macaroni they’re having for lunch.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Could I maybe take a look or something? I kinda got the basics last time, but—I just—”

“Can’t resist the urge to research?” Isaac finishes for him with a smile. “Yeah, you can see the notes if you want.”

“It’s shouldn’t like—mess anything up with—right?” he wonders with a vague gesture to his own head.

“If it starts freaking you out, don’t worry about it, but as long as you’re interested you’re welcome to take a look at what we’ve got.”

“Cool. I just kinda wanna get a better picture of everything, you know?”

“Can I look at them too?” Collin wants to know.

“No,” Derek replies immediately.

“Derek—”

“It’s not up for discussion.”

“So I can watch hunters beat Stiles half to death, but I’m not old or mature enough to read stuff about his DID. Yeah, that makes total sense.”

“That’s enough.”

You watched hunters beat me half to death? When? Shit. You’re not even out of elementary school, kid.

“Whatever,” Collin growls, shoving back from the table and rising so quickly that his chair topples to the floor behind him. “I’m going for a run.”

“Cool—can I—uh—come?” Stiles replies.

“I can take care of myself, Stiles.”

“Bet you can, but I—uh—always kinda had a little too much nervous energy for my own good. I just thought if you didn’t mind the company then I wouldn’t have to go by myself.”

Collin’s anger retracts just slightly with the last words, which is precisely the reaction Stiles
“Yeah, okay, you can run with me if you want,” Collin allows, “but we’re not talking about anything. I don’t wanna talk.”

“Sure you’re not Derek’s biological kid?” Stiles wonders.

“Not funny,” Derek mutters moodily, and Stiles can’t help that he grins; Derek’s frustration is just a never-ending source of adorable-angry-kitten faces.

“If we’re going, let’s go,” Collin says, heading for the door.

“Right behind you, dude,” Stiles says, grabbing a dino nugget as he moves to follow.

***********************************************************************

“How come Collin’s all mad all the time now?” Addie wonders into the silence following her brother’s absence.

“He’s not really mad, baby; he’s frustrated,” Isaac explains. “He’s stressed.”

_Incredibly, constantly frustrated_, Derek adds silently. _So furious at the unfairness in the way our lives are that he could fight the whole world and not get all the aggression out. God only knows how hard life is for him; it’s hard enough for me and I’m a grown ass Alpha. I just don’t know how to make it easier. We’re doing the best we can, but it’s not enough._

He hadn’t given Isaac’s mention of the home-schooling debate much thought. Collin needs social interaction; he needs to be a kid. He shouldn’t have to give up anything “normal” that he has the option to experience. But the long-past words of Lydia Martin have Derek reminding himself, _“We don’t need normal; we need whatever works.”_

_And maybe, for a little while at least, that means letting Collin make his own choices about how he wants to engage in his education and social interactions. Isaac says most of this comes back to hating how powerless he is to stop the bad stuff going on in his life; if he gets a little control over something big like this, maybe it’ll help something._

_Because Addie’s right, he is pretty much constantly angry to one extent or another. It’s a state of being that Derek’s all too familiar with, and his son is much too young to be this way._

***********************************************************************

“Dude, how big is Jackson’s property?” Stiles asks as they run.

“I dunno,” Collin answers shortly. “Big enough.”

Stiles is guessing it’s about ten acres—enough that the gargantuan house can be surrounded by a sizable yard but also buffered by a forested border.

“How does he afford it? His parents?”

“I dunno,” Collin answers again. “Uncle Jackson can just afford everything.”

“Yeah, that part of him I’m familiar enough with.”
Though in fairness, now he seems to spend at least part of his money doting on kids and being generally nice instead of just flaunting it.

“So you’re gonna look at all the notes,” Collin says, breaching the very subject he supposedly came to run from. He slows the pace until they’re barely jogging; Stiles hopes it means this is turning into the conversation he was hoping for.

“Yeah, I am. I kinda wanna clear some things up, get a better idea what’s going on.”

“But you won’t tell me what’s in the notes,” he supposes—correctly really, since Stiles can’t imagine that it’s any kind of content appropriate for a child Collin’s age.

“I thought you told me last time that you’d seen the notes,” Stiles deflects. “Isn’t that where you got the coping mechanisms and things like that?”

“Yes, but—I mean I just read some of the notes. Isaac has a lot.”

“I’m betting you weren’t supposed to be reading them either, huh?”

Collin doesn’t reply, but the silence speaks for itself.

“I get it,” Stiles concedes. “I used to sneak my mom’s charts off the folder at the end of the door and try to figure out what they said.”

*It’s how I knew she was dying before anyone actually told me.*

“Does that mean you would tell me what the notes say?”

“Maybe,” Stiles hedges. “We’ll see.”

“That’s just the Dad-speak for saying ‘no’,” Collin informs grumpily.

“Why do you want to read them?” Stiles asks, diverting the question a bit to pursue his own curiosity.

“My Grandad used to say this thing all the time,” Collin answers, “‘Hope for the best; prepare for the worst.’ Ya know?”

“Not bad advice. How does it apply to the notes?”

“D’you know what the version of you that they call Wretch is like? Isaac explained him, right?”

“Yeah.”

“They didn’t tell us about him, and Stiles—you—switched to him when he—I mean, you—were out with me and Addie. It wasn’t—I mean everything was okay—until later anyway, but—but I didn’t know—Damon is different than Wretch. Wretch shows how bad those alphas really were to Stiles—you.”

“You don’t have to call me Stiles if it’s weird for you,” Stiles offers in hopes of facilitating the conversation—and further ones if needed. “I know I’m not really him or whatever—or the version of me that’s your Dad—or, well, not your Dad, but—”

“No, he’s my dad,” Collin interjects firmly. “I mean, yeah there was my real dad, and I don’t call Derek or Isaac or Stiles ‘dad’ but—but it’s how it works, and—this’s my family now, and I
know you’re—Derek’s right, you’re always Stiles, but—"

“I’m not always the same Stiles.”

“No,” Collin agrees in a clearly apologetic tone.

“I can understand that.”

“You did vote for Batman,” Collin says with a small smirk, “but that’s kinda weird.”

“Batman is not weird,” Stiles offers. “It’s the most awesome name ever.”

“Yeah, but—like—”

“How about just Stilinski?” Stiles suggests. “That’s pretty much what half the people I knew in high school called me anyway. It’s in the ballpark of Stiles, but maybe a little easier for keeping track?”

Collin hesitates a moment before saying, “Well, I bet it’d kinda help Addie if there’s a different name; kinda like with Damon.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Stilinski,” Collin says, trying out the name.

“Think it might help?”

“Yeah, but—but you’re always Stiles, like Derek said just—”

“Thanks, kiddo,” Stiles says, reaching out to tousle the kid’s hair obnoxiously and breaking the gait of the jog—that’s really devolved now into a brisk walk. Collin rolls his eyes. “So,” Stiles goes on. “They didn’t tell you about Wretch, and you wish they had.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I mean, they told us that Stiles got hurt by some alphas who kidnapped him, but they didn’t say how bad really. I know they probably think that if they told me everything it would just scare me, and they think I’m just a little kid, but it just makes it worse not knowing. I want to prepare for the worst because that’s what usually happens.”

“I don’t know about that,” Stiles counters. “I mean—”

“Hunters burned our house down and kidnapped us.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Stiles was supposed to be getting better and going back into just one, and now there’s even more versions coming out.”

“Collin—”

“There’s no way Addie’s going to go back to daycare after all this. It’ll be square one with her too; then there’s Isaac’s whole—”

“Nobody died,” Stiles interjects. “It’s not the worst. It’s bad, sure, but it’s not the worst.”

“Close enough.”
“You are the most pessimistic eleven-year-old I’ve ever met.”

“How many orphaned, Alpha-Elect eleven-year-old werewolves have you met?” Collin wonders.

“Guess you’ve got good reason not to get your hopes too high, huh?”

Collin shrugs off the question in a mini-Derek way that makes Stiles want to smile even though the realization makes his heart ache for the kid.

“Did you really see—that thing you said back there about watching hunters—”

“Stiles only let them hurt him because he was protecting us,” Collin asserts. “Once they let their guard down he fought all of them off—all four of them, even though he was hurt. He saved all of us. He even made the last hunter say where Derek and Isaac and Aunt Cora were. He saved everybody.”

“That’s some pretty badass stuff,” Stiles says. “Didn’t know I had it in me.”

“Derek says Stiles is the strongest person I’m ever gonna meet.”


“I used to think Derek was just saying that so that I wouldn’t think he—you were all fragile, but—not anymore. He really meant it, ya know? I get it now.”

“Wanna explain it to me?”

“I dunno—just—even though he’s got all this stuff that’s hurt him for a long time, he still worries about everybody else more than he worries about himself.”

“I sure hope so, he’s got a pretty awesome family; we’ve got a pretty awesome family. That’s what family does, worries more about everyone else, right? Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

“Yeah, I guess, and I need to. I’m gonna have to be Alpha one day and everything and—” Collin cuts his sentence off and finishes instead with, “I just want to prepare for the worst.”

“The worst, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Like having to be Alpha sometime soon instead of just one day?” Stiles guesses.

Collin nods in reply, and Stiles stops in his tracks so he can look the kid in the face. Collin averts his gaze to anything but Stiles.

“Look, it’s not a big deal,” Collin says finally, but the strain of his voice gives away what a big deal it is. “I just wanna be ready for whatever—”

“Hope for the best; prepare for the worst,” Stiles interrupts. “I get it.”

“You get it?” Collin asks in disbelief. “You’re not gonna tell me not to worry or—”

“I don’t like that you’re worried about it, but that doesn’t change the fact that you are worried. You know why your Pop eats so healthy?”
“Because you make him,” Collin says with a grin, and Stiles nods affirmation.

“My mom died when I was about your age, and I didn’t—didn’t wanna lose him too, so I did all this research, tons and tons of research for all the things that I could do or make him do to keep him as healthy and safe as I could. Everybody said I was too young to worry about it, and that I should just be a kid, but you can’t just shut off worry like that.”

“Nope.”

“So you prepare for the worst.”

“Because even if it’s not the worst it could be, bad stuff happens; I’m guessing it’s not gonna stop anytime soon, but I’m okay I just—if I could see some of it coming—see anything coming instead of just—trying to figure it out and seeing all the adults freak out but then give me some watered down version of—it’s just—it sucks! It’s not fair!”

“No,” Stiles agrees, “but it also wouldn’t be fair to put too much in your head that you don’t need. You don’t need to see the details of Isaac’s notes to get the big picture. Maybe—maybe we can talk, me and you and Isaac and Derek. We can come up with a version of what’s going on with everything that helps you feel prepared.”

“Sure you will,” Collin mutters.

“Hey, dude, you want us to trust you with info you gotta trust us a little bit, too. You gotta talk about crap like this. You can’t just go for a run every time.”

“Running’s easier than talking. And it’s weird talking to Miss Holly. I feel like she’s dissecting my brain.”

“We’ll work on it; more talkin’ all around, ‘kay?”

“Yeah, okay I guess. Couple more laps before we go back though?”

“Fine by me.”

“Thanks, Stiles-inski,” Collin says, converting the name at the last minute and then repeating more confidently, “Thanks, Stilinski.”

“Anytime, kiddo.”

Isaac can’t help but study Stiles—“Stilinski” as he’s dubbed himself now—across the dining room table. He’s alternating between chewing at the end of the pen in his hand and tapping it rapidly against the table. He drums his fingers, bounces his leg, sticks his tongue out a little when he really starts concentrating on something and for the first time Isaac realizes that so many of these habits in Stiles didn’t die away because the bite cured his ADHD.

They conditioned him to be still, and it’s stuck even all this time after.

“What?” Stiles—Stilinski—asks, looking up to find Isaac’s eyes on him. “Is this your favorite pen or something?”

“Huh?”
“Am I eating your favorite pen or something?”

“What?”

“Come on; you look like you’re about to cry, man; trying to make a joke here,” Stilinski expounds.

“No, I—uh—sorry, just—I forget sometimes exactly how you were before…”

“Oh.”

“It’s nothing,” Isaac says, though he scribbles the observation out to the side in the notebook he’s holding.

“Come on, dude, sharing is caring,” Stilinski pushes. “What is it?”

“The bite cures most human medical conditions,” Isaac replies, “like your ADHD.”

“Yeah.”

“But you still have all this nervous energy that—”

“I’m a teenager again; that’s probably it. It’s different than the hyperactivity. It’s just—”

“I think they taught you to coop up the energy.”

“They? The Alphas?” Stilinski asks, processing the suggestion. “Yeah, bet they did. I mean, be good, be quiet, be still. All the personalities repeat that, don’t they? Bet none of the alphas would’ve been too chill about me clicking my pen like a madman until the spring breaks.”

“No.”

“Does Stiles do anything? I mean, I can’t imagine they actually got me to be completely still.”

“Stiles has occasional nervous habits, but nothing like you. I should’ve noticed it before.”

But I was a little distracted with my own pity party before.

“Huh,” Stilinski answers, studying his fingers a minute or two before drumming them against the table again muttering, “weird.”

********************************************************************************

Stilinski shouldn’t be surprised that these psychos could get rid of all Stiles’ annoying habits. There are a million other things they taught him to do and be, refraining from a little finger drumming seems such a small effect. And yet there’s something really fucking sad in the fact that six years after the fact even the personality that was supposed to be “real” and “normal” because it siphoned off the trauma into Damon and Wretch was showing symptoms of conditioning without even realizing it.

Trained to be too scared to drum my fingers or pop my knuckles or show any manifestation of my incessant restlessness.

They really did pretty much rip everything apart and rewire me however they wanted, didn’t they? Beta-bot Stiles, build from the ground up. The spawn of sadistic, psychopathic assholes.

And I thought Jackson’s lot as homicidal lizard puppet was bad…
Stilinski shakes his head sharply to jar himself back to the task at hand. He’s reading through transcripts of Morrell’s sessions with Stiles when he first started consolidating. He’s glad he doesn’t have to listen to the recordings; Stilinski hates the idea that Isaac must have in order to write up these files.

At the thought of Isaac, Stilinski’s eyes rise from the paper to watch him across the table again. Isaac’s got his attention back down to the notebook in his hand, kind enough to highlight key points so Stilinski can give himself the spark notes versions. Isaac’s working on some notes about Wretch now, and he looks so wrecked as he reads though, so invested, just so—

In love?

Guess so; I mean, he’s practically devoted his life to helping Stiles. There’s enough information here to bury the best researcher, but he tries to track it and put it together anyway. He’s got to know the odds on finding a real solution to DID. He’s got to know it’s next to impossible to get a full grasp on the disease when every case is so different—much less when you throw in some supernatural chaos into the mix. Doesn’t seem like he’s ever let the shitty odds stop him. He keeps on trying, doesn’t he? He’s going to keep studying, maybe even get his Master’s in this. It’s not just a degree to him; it’s not just satisfying his curiosity. He’d be doing this regardless of the academic benefits or personal satisfaction; he’s doing it because he must fucking love Stiles like crazy—loves this family like crazy.

“You know, now you’re the one who’s staring,” Isaac points out when he glances up from his book.

“Let’s go on a date,” Stilinski blurts, mouth running away with him.

“Huh?” Isaac asks, clearly dumbfounded, and Stiles can feel the blush rise in his cheeks at the accusation.

“I just mean—maybe ‘date’ isn’t the right word but, you’re—you aren’t the guy I remember, and I just—being married to Derek I kind of get, but you—you’re still kind of an enigma ‘cause I never—I didn’t—we weren’t—I’d just like to get to know this Isaac Lahey.”

“Hale,” Isaac corrects with a smile. “And okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool,” Stilinski says. “You—uh—should probably come up with the plans or something; wait, is this even—Derek won’t—how does the whole three people thing work? Is like—this allowed or whatever?”

Isaac chuckles at Stilinski’s babbling; he’d be a little wounded at the reaction if Isaac’s eyes didn’t light up so beautifully when he laughs.

“We’ll ask Derek about it,” Isaac says. “Maybe invite him too if he’d feel better that way, but I don’t think it’ll be a problem. We take turns on dates sometimes, letting the third help Pop with the kids.”

“Awesome; so, yeah, great.”

“Great,” Isaac agrees with a small, amused smirk that’s infuriatingly adorable.

I’m so going to make a fool of myself with this.
“Yeah?” Cora barks tersely over the intercom when Addie presses the buzzer.

“It’s us Aunt Coral” Addie announces happily. “Do the buzzy door thingy.”

“Sure, munchkin,” she agrees, obliging.

She sounds exhausted, Derek thinks as Collin opens the door and they head through the lobby of the building toward the elevator. _Bet she isn’t sleeping. Dammit, I told her to stay with us if she was still on edge. I should have made her stay when she declined it._

_Who am I kidding? Since when have I ever been able to make Cora do anything she didn’t want to?

_But I still should have tried harder._

He feels even more guilty for neglecting Cora when she opens the door to let them in. There are dark circles under her eyes that even werewolf healing hasn’t taken care of. She’s got a smile on her face, but it looks so forced that it seems painful. She scoops Addie up without meeting Derek’s eyes and leads the way into the apartment.

“We got your favorite pizza,” Addie says. “The one with all the peppers and mushrooms on it.”

“Let me guess, just cheese on yours?” Cora asks.

“Extra cheese on mine,” she confirms.

“There’s a sausage one too,” Collin offers. “If you want some of it.”

“Thanks, Collin.” He shrugs off her gratitude and she moves on to wondering, “so what’s the occasion?”

“We came to town to pick up a few things,” Derek replies. “Figured since we were in the neighborhood we might—”

“Check up on me?” she interjects. “I might be your little sister, but I don’t need a babysitter, Derek.”

“I didn’t say you needed a babysitter; I just thought you might want some company. Since when do you turn down a shot at free food, anyway?”

“I’m fine.”

“You look sad,” Addie informs her.

“Well, I’m not, so no one has anything to worry about,” she grumbles, clearly holding back curses she’d like to shout at Derek for bringing the kids to filter the confrontation.

“Can we watch cartoons while we eat?” Collin asks.

“Heck yeah you can,” she affirms. “You know the rules at Aunt Cora’s house are the best.”
“I wanna watch Princess Sofia!” Addie says.

“No way; we’re watching Teen Titans.”

“Collin—”

“Find something you both like, Collin,” Derek instructs as he hands over the two pizzas not meant for Cora. “Maybe a movie or something.”

“Yeah, okay, fine,” he concedes, taking the food and heading down the short hall to the spacious living room.

“Hey, Collin,” Cora calls after him.

“Yeah?”

“There’s Mountain Dews in my fridge. You and Addie have as many as you want,” she tells him with a devious grin at Derek.

“One each!” Derek amends. “That’s plenty.”

“Oh, come on, Sourwolf. Their little werewolf metabolisms will barely spike at the caffeine in one.”

“They’ll spike plenty.”

They stand in silence a moment or two before Cora speaks again, “I sure hope you didn’t come expecting some touching heart-to-heart or something. I’m just fine, Derek.”

“We were two blocks away; Isaac wanted crutches.”

“Crutches already? Your text to the pack said he was just moving toes?”

“Yeah, but—he’s excited. I don’t wanna shoot him down. He knows it could be a while before he gets to use them.”

“And how’s—uh—Stiles?” Cora wonders. “Well, Stilinski, right now, huh?”

“Yeah, he says it’ll help everyone keep the switches straight.”

“And you hate it ‘cause he’s pretty much right.”

“He’s fine; home with Isaac looking through notes,” Derek says, ignoring a direct answer to her supposition. “I think he thinks he can figure everything out if he manages to get enough information or something. He was kind of like this when Scott first got turned—and with Jackson’s whole kanima deal. He likes to know as much as he can.”

_I just hope it doesn’t blow up in his face._

“Knowledge is power,” Cora says in a mocking, deep voice.

Derek shrugs. He’s still not so sure it’s a great idea to expose Stilinski to tons of information that could trigger any number of flashbacks or switches or nightmares.

“Enough about him for now,” Derek says. “I’m worried about you.”
“Why?”

“One minute you’re telling me that you don’t plan to be on your own again anytime soon; the next minute you’re holed up here and barely talking to anybody. What’s up with you?”

“I’m fine, Der; seriously,” she persists.

“None of us are fine; it’s been less than a week since the whole ordeal ended, and it’s not like life can get back to normal right away. You don’t have to deal with shit like this on your own anymore.”

“Yeah, well, maybe alone is easier.”

“Maybe,” he concedes. “If it’s really helping you, but judging by the way you look—”

“Check a mirror, bro; you don’t look so great yourself. We’re all tired and stressed as fuck.”

“Cora—”

“What would you like me to do exactly? You want me to come camp out at Jackson’s too? He’s spending more time at his downtown loft, right? Need a free babysitter who’ll—”

“Cora, that’s not fair; you know—”

“Leave me alone,” she orders sharply. “Just let it go, okay? Let the kids finish their pizza, and then go home and help Isaac and Stilinski and just fuck off for a little while okay? I’m fine.”

“You’re not.”

“I will be.”

“I want to help.”

“Then fuck off,” she repeats stubbornly.

“I just think maybe you’d feel a little more at ease with some pack around. You don’t have to stay with us. I’m sure Scott and Allison or John would be happy to—”

“You’re wrong, okay? Being alone works better.”

“But—”

“You want to know what my nightmares are?” she demands, voice low and resentful. “There’s another fire or another attack or some combination of the two, but the part that really fucks with me is that I can hear all of you screaming; You, Mom, Dad, the whole fucking family, dead and living. Collin and Addie are the worst and the loudest. That is what I deal with every fucking time I close my eyes, okay? Some horrific scene with all of you dying and me just standing there. I can’t move. I can’t help. I just have to listen to all of you—terrified and in pain and dying. Over, and over, and over again.”

“So how the hell does being alone—”

“Because at least I know I won’t have to hear the rest of you if something happens!”

“What?”
“If it’s me, just me here, then there’s no one else to worry about, and I can worry about myself. I can handle it; I eliminate the chance of at least part of the nightmares happening, and it’s about the only thing I can really control so until you get whatever fortress of a house you have planned for the pack built, I feel better alone, and you gotta respect that and back off.”

“You need something better than whatever you’re—”

“If the nightmares aren’t gone in another week or so I’ll chat up Holly or something, okay?”

“Cora—”

“Derek, I learned a long time ago how to shovel through my own shit. I appreciate that you care and all, but just—trust me to take care of myself sometimes.”

Derek fucking hates the idea of her dealing alone. But he can also respect her desire to process alone and her attempt to control the fodder for the nightmares. He may not like her choice of action, but he can understand where she’s coming from.

“Just as long as you know we’ve got your back if—”

“Yeah, I know.”

“We’re just a phone call away; anyone in the pack if—”

“I know.”

“Okay.”

“Great, okay, we’re on the same page, and you’re leaving me the hell alone. Excellent. Good talk, bro; now gimme the pizza and let’s go veg out to some cartoons with the munchkins.”

“Uh-huh,” Derek agrees dumbly as she swipes the pizza box from his grasp and heads toward the sounds of Tom and Jerry coming from the den.

Isaac seizes his chance to talk to Derek when Stilinski excuses himself to go shower and change into pajamas. Derek’s in the kitchen searching for a snack by the look of it.

“Hey, we need to talk a second,” Isaac says as he rolls in.

“Something wrong?”

“I don’t think so; just—complicated.”

“So the usual,” Derek says with a grin. “What’s up?”

“Stilinski kind of—asked me out?”

“Asked you out?”

“Yeah.”

“He knows he’s already married to you, right?” Derek asks with a chuckle.

“Well, that’s the thing I guess. He says he understands why he would’ve married you, but
“Anyone would be lucky to have you for a husband, Isaac. You—”

“I’m not offended or anything; I think—I think it could be a good thing. Because the two of you had a little bit of like chemistry and stuff going on before he was kidnapped, right? But my relationship with Stiles never even would have started if—”

“Don’t say that; he doesn’t only love you because you were there when he was getting better.”

“I know,” Isaac replies, but his doubt must show because Derek frowns.

“Isaac, he did not marry you because of some Nightingale Syndrome shit. Stiles loves you.”

“Yeah, well, Stilinski doesn’t,” Isaac retorts, more bitterly than intended. “Not yet,” he amends so it’s clear he hasn’t given up on the possibility just yet.

“So are you asking my permission here? Is that what’s happening?”

“Not your permission. I just wanted to know what you think of the idea. How you feel about the whole thing. I don’t want it to be some weird—”

“It won’t be weird. It’ll be good for you two, so it’s good for all of us.”

“What do you think about—I mean with Damon, he can’t really understand so sex isn’t really an option, but—” Derek starts to laugh and Isaac reminds tersely, “This is not funny, Derek. He’s a teenager, and he’s Stiles, but he’s not, and I mean, come on, sex is bound to come up eventually, so when it does—”

“Sexing him up on the first date?” Derek interjects. “Damn, Isaac, keep it in your pants for a minute. Be a gentleman.”

“Stop it, Derek; I’m not kidding,” Isaac rants.

“Okay, okay, serious,” Derek agrees, giving in to Isaac’s frustration. “I kinda mean it though; it’s not like you’re going to really do anything if he’s still trying to figure you out, right?”

“But we’ll probably do something, and I don’t—how the fuck does that even work? Because he’s clearly made himself distinct from Stiles. He gave himself a separate name; he keeps the two distinct when he takes notes. How distinct are we going to make it?”

“You mean, is it cheating on Stiles to kiss Stilinski?”

“Yeah.”

“Good fucking question,” Derek says, stating the obvious.

“I feel like we should be erring on the side of caution on this one,” Isaac says. “I just—I don’t want to shoot him down either exactly. I don’t know where we stand on this one.”

“So we talk to Stiles next time he’s back,” Derek suggests. “Tell Stilinski that if he pushes the subject. Just focus on letting him get to know you.”

The pipes groan as the shower turns off down on the Master bath end of the house, effectively announcing the temporary end to the conversation.
“Yeah,” Isaac agrees in closing. “Good plan.”

Stilinski doesn’t know why the hell he even pretended he was going to be able to sleep. Processing all the information on the various personalities is more than enough to handle, but, oddly enough, it’s the prospect of tomorrow’s date with Isaac that’s got him more on edge. He sits up in bed and flicks on the light.

Derek had looked just a tad disappointed when Stilinski told them he thought he might use the upstairs room this time. He hadn’t minded sleeping with them when it was the whole fort thing, but now that it’d be just the three of them in bed, he can’t help but feel like he’s not quite ready to tackle that level of awkward.

*Maybe after tomorrow.*

Assuming I don’t make a total fucking fool of myself or something. What was I thinking anyway? Who asks their husband on a date? Even worse who asks only one of their husbands out to a date? Of course, it’s not like many people have the whole two-husbands dilemma. Not that it’s a dilemma; I mean, they’re great. I’m like super lucky and all, but it’s just weird. Okay weird sounds bad and it’s not bad it’s just—different. Really fucking different and I don’t really think I was equipped to handle normal dating much less waking up into this chaos and trying to date.

What the hell am I doing? What do you do on a date with your husband anyway? What am I going to say? Maybe Isaac doesn’t even wanna go. Maybe he’s just humoring me. I mean, he’s like—grown up and shit and I’m—well, I’m me, Stilinski, not Stiles, he totally did not marry this version of me—did he? I don’t know what I was like at that point. Maybe there was more “old” me before all the other stressors that have happened since. What was I like when they married me? I don’t know how different I am if I don’t have some base point to go off of. Fuck. I don’t know much of anything—not for the date anyway. Reading clinical transcripts all afternoon did not prepare me for this.

He’s got his phone in his hand, opening a text before he even fully decides to do it. He types out “Can you talk?” and sends it to Lydia.

Less than ten seconds later his phone lights up with her smiling face on the Caller ID picture.

“Shit, I—”

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?”


“Um, Stilinski, and, uh, nothing happened. I just—kinda had a question.”

“A question,” she repeats incredulously. “I’m assuming a very important, urgent question?”

“Not really, I just—I didn’t mean talk to you, I meant like—I was just going to text you some stuff with—”

“Not really an important question?”

“No.”
“Then why the hell did you just give me a heart attack at four in the morning?!”

“It’s barely past one!”

“I’m in Boston, Stilinski!”

Despite the annoyance and wrath in her voice, there is something fantastically familiar at having Lydia hiss his name in exasperation.

“Oh. Shit. Sorry.”

“So can this wait?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Dammit,” she mutters. “Now I’m going to wonder about it until we talk, so just—let’s have it. What did you want to talk about?”

“Why are you in Boston?”

“Business; I’m helping them interview for the new east coast financial advisor since I’m the one who will have to deal with this person ninety percent of the time and I tend to make incompetent hires cry.”

Riiiiiight, you’re like the big statistician, financial, mathy, numbers type person for the west coast designer of something or other with high end fashion something.

I really should have paid more attention when Jackson tried to explain it.

Of course, I don’t think he really understands what you do either. Other than be really smart and scary and awesome at an impressive job.

“So they figure it saves time if you make them cry in the interviews?” Stiles asks. “Narrows the pool more effectively?”

“Something like that. You didn’t text me to ask why I was in Boston. What do you want, Stilinski?”

“How do you know to call me that? You’re not even—”

“It’s called a text message. Derek and Isaac keep the pack updated.”

“Oh.”

“So what did you want to talk about?”

“I’ll—uh—I can’t really talk about it. Can I—I’ll text you, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You’re the best Lydia.”

“It’s been said,” she agrees. “Get to typing, Stilinski.”


“Bye.”
He hesitates a moment or two before deciding what to type into the initial message. He finally settles on what’s more or less the truth:

“So, I think maybe I fucked up…”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! I'm sorry (that I'm not sorry) for teasing you with the date and then not following through (yet); hopefully you'll see why I stalled next chapter :D

Unending thanks as always to my excellent betas!
Stiles wakes to the first few rays of dawn seeping in through the blinds. It’s a few moments more before he sits up, sifting through Stilinski’s experiences the past—

*Only a day? Hell, not even a whole day. Like—18 hours or something. Shit. We’re switching too fast. This is going to get confusing as fuck for everyone.*

He rises from the bed, knowing that the conditioning that’s willing him toward the kitchen won’t be ignored. He might as well do something useful. It’s way too early for breakfast, so he decides to clean instead. The fact that the dishwasher hasn’t been unloaded makes him smile. He envies Stilinski’s ability to be lazy with such things and not worry, and Stiles is suddenly glad that Damon never had to see how much easier everything was for Stiles.

Still, there’s something about having the moment Stilinski walked past the washer full of clean dishes and decided not to react that makes it possible for Stiles to relax just a bit too. He still puts the dishes away, but he takes his time, not letting himself worry about trying to be done before someone comes. It’s a small help, but he’ll take it. He hopes that the scenes of Stilinski interacting so easily with Derek, Isaac, and Collin will help Stiles to follow suit.

*I don’t want to be this cowering mess. I don’t want to be the new Damon. I want to be me.*

After he finishes with the dishes, Stiles moves on to mopping.

*It needs to be done; it’s not just the conditioning. I’m just contributing to the family; not earning my place. Just lending a hand. The floor needs mopping. Just lending a hand, not earning my place.*

Addie’s the first one awake, and Stiles smiles at the sound of her small feet pattering down the hall toward the kitchen.

*We’ll make banana pancakes. With blueberries and bacon to make a smiley face on top.*

“Damon?” Addie says as she comes around the corner. “I smelled the moppin’ stuff, so I brought your pictures but there’s more in my room too ‘cause—”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I’m not Damon; I’m Stiles,” he says, outwardly apologetic despite his inward resentment.

“But Damon always mops.”

“I know he usually—”

“No! No! Damon does the cleaning jobs because he *likes* ‘em and you’re *taking* all his jobs, Stiles! Stop it!”
“Addie—”

“If you do all the stuff Damon does he won’t think we need him!”

“Baby, I’m just—”

“And we do need him! He’s gotta come play tea party and—and help us put a swing at the new house and, and make the bestest cookies with the extra pink sprinkles and—”

“I can’t make him come back, Addie. I don’t—”

“I want Damon!” she wails, and Stiles steps forward to try and comfort her, but she swats his hands away. “No, not you! I want Damon! Damon, Damon, DAMON!”

“Addie?! What’s wrong?” Derek asks as he rushes in. “Are you okay?”

Stiles hits his knees without a second thought, but manages to quell the terror this time.  

_He’s not gonna hurt me. It’s Derek. He came to help. It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m okay. Can’t panic. Just breathe. I’m okay._

“No! There’s bunches of new ones but not Damon and now he’s Stiles again and I wanted him to be Damon this time and he’s not!” she rants, running over to Derek and letting him hold her though she denied Stiles.

“I wish I could control it, Addie; I’m sorry,” Stiles says.

“It’s not Stiles fault that he isn’t Damon, baby,” Derek reminds, reaching out a hand to help Stiles back up to his feet. “You gotta be patient, okay?”

“I don’t wanna be patient! I want Damon!” she retorts angrily. “Let go!” she orders Derek, pushing back from him now, and he releases his hold on her. She collects the pictures she threw to the floor in her fit and stomps back toward her bedroom announcing, “I’m gonna go make more pictures for Damon because he’s coming back soon!”

Derek and Stiles stare after her retreating form, and Stiles doesn’t even know where to begin reacting to this conversation. He mostly just feels like he just took a dagger to the heart from his daughter, but he can’t even blame her for it.

“She just doesn’t understand,” Derek reminds Stiles, gripping the hand he’s still holding even tighter. “She’s glad to see you too, but Damon’s her friend, ya know? She just misses him, but she’ll be fine until—”

“What if Damon’s gone, Derek?” Stiles interjects, voicing the fear that’s been weighing on his mind.

“Damon’s not gone. You’re still presenting with DID. He’s just—”

“I keep doing everything that Damon used to; that’s why she keeps thinking I’m him. The conditioning gets so strong it brings on full-on panic attacks. I’m acting more like Damon than Stiles, and we all know it.”

“You are not Damon,” Derek insists.

The gruff tone has Stiles automatically agreeing, “Yes, Der—Yes. Yeah. Uh-huh,” he manages at the end, but the way Derek’s face falls at the reaction clearly reveals his realization that Stiles just might have a point here. “But I’m pretty damn close,” Stiles adds forlornly.
Dammit, I don’t want to be Damon.

Derek moves to close the gap between them, and Stiles flinches before he can stop himself. He sees the look of sorrow and pity on Derek’s face at Stiles’ reaction, and it makes him feel sick.

I can’t stand getting that look from you; we went so long without needing it.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Derek assures. “It’s totally okay that she’s upset—I mean, not okay but it’s not your fault that—”

“Thanks, Derek; I’m okay,” Stiles replies tiredly, managing to relax enough to pull Derek’s hand up for a quick kiss to the back of the Alpha’s palm. “I’m gonna get back to breakfast. You should go check on her.”

“Yeah, Derek agrees. Thanks in advance for breakfast,” he adds with a tender smile. “Glad to have you back.”

“Me too.”

I think?

The minute Derek vacates the room, Stiles closes his eyes for a moment or two and lets the few silent tears that have been building fall. He braces himself against the countertop, gripping so hard his knuckles go white as the onslaught of alpha insults flood in just as expected.

Maybe you all want to pretend that she’s too young to understand, but she’s the most honest one, isn’t she? She doesn’t want you here—you own daughter can’t stand you. She screams and cries for someone else; not you.

And you hate her for it, don’t you? Rachel adds to Thomas’ assertions. So furious you could strangle her to make the words stop, ready to wound your child rather than let her remind you how out of place you are in this family.

Something is broken in you, beta, Alec says. You’re the kind of monster only suited for alphas like us.

The statement stirs something deep in Stiles’ soul, but he cringes away from whatever the words waken.

I belong here; they’re my family. They love me, and I love them, he argues, grateful for the small triumph of doing so silently.

You’re too twisted and damaged and wrecked to belong anywhere but with us. They don’t know what you really are, beta, but they’ll see it soon enough. You don’t belong here. You never will.

“Hey—uh—Stiles, I’m gonna—I’m gonna come over there, okay? Don’t be—like scared or anything,” Collin says, breaking in over the alphas’ taunts.

Stiles knees go automatically weak, ready to kneel at the Elect’s presence, but he manages to keep himself up thanks to his grasp on the counter. Collin approaches slowly, and Stiles is both resentful and grateful at the care being shown by his son.

“I’m okay,” he manages to get out when Collin comes to a stop beside him.

“I know,” Collin replies easily, “but I wanna do something to help you so—so what can I—I can
help you make breakfast, yeah? You said you were gonna show me how to do that monkey bread stuff. Can we do it now? We’ve got time before I have school, right?”

“Yes, C—yes. Yeah. That’d be awesome, Collin.”

“Cool,” Collin says with a smile.

“The Stiles is back, are you really gonna talk about the homeschool thing?” Collin asks as he and Derek pull out of the driveway at Jackson’s and head toward Beacon Hills Elementary.

“We’ll try to discuss it,” Derek confirms.

“Soon, right? Because he’s been switching quick lately, ya know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Hey, Derek?”

“Yeah?”

“Should we be worried that he’s switching so quick?”

“No, I don’t think we need to worry exactly, but it’s something new, so we’re always cautious about deciding what it means.”

“It might be good, right? I mean—they switch so much ‘cause they’re closer to being one Stiles instead of being like he was before with Damon and Wretch and having three really different ones that stay for long times?”

“We can’t be sure one way or the other what all of it means.”

“But it could be good,” Collin persists.

“It could be,” Derek concedes.

There’s a beat or two of silence and Derek asks. “Feel okay about the version of what happened that—”

“Yeah, I know. The house burned down while we were camping on the preserve. Isaac fell and hurt his back and that’s why we were gone longer than we expected.”

“Right.”

“Nobody’s gonna ask anyway,” Collin mutters. “Everybody just talks about it ‘cause they think I can’t hear it, but nobody wants to talk to me about it. I don’t care though. I don’t wanna have to lie to their faces anyway.”

“Collin, I’m sorry that—”

“Just promise you’ll talk about the homeschool thing, okay?”

“We will, but—”
“It’s a big decision,” Collin interrupts. “I know; I know.”

“What do the kids say?” Derek wonders, morbidly curious and also concerned about the intent behind the whispers.

*Just gossip? Or are they talking shit about us? what do you have to hear from the kids at school?*


“If you ever hear anyone say anything you wanna talk ab—”

“I don’t. It’s fine. Forget I said anything.”

*Yeah, like that’ll happen.*

Derek has a pretty good guess about the kinds of things his son hears. After all, he’s heard their parents’ versions at Collin’s baseball games plenty of times:

_The Hales are just…different…_

_It’s a shame those kids didn’t have more stable relatives to go to…_

_Three fathers but no mother? Those poor kids must feel like something’s missing…_

_I’m just glad they don’t bring Stiles to many of the games; I still say he’s not well enough to be out in public. If you want to risk your own children, fine, but the rest of us shouldn’t have to worry…_

_It’s a cult thing; it’s got to be. How else do you explain how so many unrelated people and families getting so close—hell, I hear they all live together at that big house Derek Hale rebuilt. The other properties are just fronts to seem normal…as if they could ever pass for normal…_

The comments make Derek’s blood boil, but he’s gotten used to the whispers after years of having them be the white noise of public outings. He hates the idea that Collin might be enduring anything even remotely similar at school.

*Why didn’t you say something before? How do I help you talk more when I’m the poster boy for bottled up emotions?*

“Did you keep going to school after the fire?” Collin wonders.

“I was older than you,” Derek deflects, “and the circumstances were different.”

“But you didn’t go back to school.”

“We didn’t have that option; we had to run.”

“Aunt Cora didn’t go either, even when she found a pack. She said the pack taught her stuff.”

“You talked to Cora about this?”

Collin shrugs but doesn’t answer directly.

“It’s okay if you did; I’m glad you talk to someone about it.”
I’m less glad that she didn’t feel the need to give us a heads up.

“It was forever ago,” Collin says, “but she says her pack did a shitty job.”

“Language.”

“But that’s what she said.”

“That doesn’t mean you get to say it that way.”


“Thanks, kiddo, but if and that’s a very big ‘if’, we would find tutors for you.”

Thank you, trust fund, Derek thinks; though there’s much more to life than money, Derek can’t deny that it’s excellent to have more than stable finances when the rest of their lives are so chaotic; one less thing to worry about.

“Aw, come on!” Collin whines.

“That’s not negotiable,” Derek says firmly, “so keep that in mind when you consider how serious you are about preferring homeschooling.”

“Homeschool’ll still be way better,” Collin declares firmly. “I wanna know what you guys decide as soon as you do, okay?”

“Okay.”

But I’m not sure our decision is one you’re going to want to hear.

With Addie off on a play date with Logan, MiMi, and Uncle Scott, the house is oddly quiet. It puts Isaac on edge, but, then again, that might just be the impending conversation.

“So just to—ah—facilitate things,” Derek says. “Everybody be honest; speak your mind. It’s okay if we disagree, just so long as we’re honest.”

The statement is for Stiles, and they all know it. He’s gotten better as the day has gone on, trembling less, catching his automatic responses before they’re out. He hasn’t knelt since breakfast. It doesn’t change the fact that Derek and Isaac still have a bit too much authority over Stiles at the moment.

“Okay, right down to it,” Isaac says once he’s transferred himself to the couch and gotten comfortable. “Homeschooling. Yes? No? Maybe?”

“I think maybe it’s an option to look at,” Stiles says tentatively, though his eyes stay down and he’s gripping the throw pillow in his hands like his life depends on it.

“Same,” Derek agrees.

“What about his social interaction?”

“I’m not so sure he’s getting great interaction at school anyway,” Derek says. “He hasn’t been talking about friends much; he hasn’t been invited over anywhere since his first couple months
in school. Some of the stuff he’s said lately, I get the feeling that he’s learning to blend, but he’s not actually making friends.”

“Then is taking him out of the arena altogether really helping? He’s got to learn to make friends,” Isaac counters. “I’m not trying to sound against this,” he clarifies because Stiles is starting to shake just slightly, and he’s not sure if it’s due to potential for conflict between his Alpha and Second or just general nerves. “I just want to make sure we’re looking at every angle,” he clarifies.

“He played ball,” Stiles reminds. “He loved it. Maybe school is too much to add onto his plate. Maybe sports is a better option for interacting with outsiders than school,” Stiles suggest before quickly adding, “Not that—not that I think I know better than—”

“I know,” Derek interjects, stopping Stiles’ submissive statement.

Stiles breaths deep, settling himself before saying, “Thanks. I—uh—I was going to say something else—oh, yeah—so maybe school is too much to add. Like since he’s got a lot more secrets to keep than the average eleven-year-old, what if surrounding him with normal kids just makes him feel isolated?” Stiles wonders.

“You’ve got a point for sure,” Derek agrees, “but if it’s the keeping up the act and lying and everything that he hates so much, he’s still going to have to do that with whatever tutors we hire to help with the homeschooling.”

“You don’t think we could homeschool him?” Isaac wonders.

“His education is important whether he thinks so or not,” Derek says firmly. “He’s so damn convinced that he’s got to learn to survive. The thing is, if we can ever get things settled down, the plan is for him to be as close to normal and as relaxed as possible for the next three or four decades before he’s got to lead a pack. I just think he should have teachers that can focus on just teaching. We’re pretty distracted trying to get everything figured out.”

“And that’s not gonna change anytime soon,” Stiles mutters. “I mean—” he counters, clearly intent to apologize.

“We’ll get there,” Derek insists, gentle but firm. “But in the meantime, what do we do? Keep him at school or not?”

“I say we—proceed with caution?” Isaac says. “Talk to his teacher, the counselor maybe; we’ll start looking for potential tutors, and he has to stay in rec league sports if he’s not going to get interaction from school.”

“So a tentative ‘yes’?” Stiles says.

“Yes, tentative,” Isaac confirms.

“I think it could be good to let him decide this move,” Stiles chimes in. “The conversation he had with Stilinski—it just seems like he’s gonna lose it if he doesn’t feel like he can control something and soon.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that feeling too,” Derek agrees, and Isaac nods, remembering Addie’s heart-wrenching ‘why is Collin mad all the time’ inquiry just yesterday.

There’s a pregnant pause that Stiles breaks with, “Speaking of Stilinski and all that, um—we should—I mean he asked Isaac out so—how’re we handling that one? You two down to fool around with teenage me? Or…?”
The open-ended question has Isaac fumbling for the right response.

“How do you feel about it?”

Stiles shrugs. “I don’t want you two to feel uncomfortable or whatever, but I mean—he’s me, right?”

“Technically, yes,” Isaac agrees, “but—at the same time…”

“It’s complicated,” Derek finishes for him.

“If you guys won’t feel to weird, I kinda want you to go with whatever Stilinski opts for,” Stiles says, staring intently anywhere but at the two of them. “I mean—he’s like—trigger-free more or less, right? You could—”

“Stiles if we do anything with him, it’s because he’s you on some level,” Derek says. “You’re the guy we married; we love you.”

“I know,” he answers, but Isaac’s not so convinced.

“Stiles, even if the three of us have to be careful, it doesn’t mean that takes away from the intimacy; if anything we all know each other better because we take our time and pay attention instead of—”

“Totally losing your minds to lust like you’re supposed to get to?” Stiles wonders bitterly, but, yet again, automatically moves to atone for the assertion. “I mean, I’m grateful for the opportunity to—” he begins to blurt before he slams his hand over his lips to stop the words.

“Stiles—” Isaac starts, but he holds up his other hand to silence Isaac.

It takes Stiles a moment or two before he brings his hand from his mouth and tries again, “Look, I’m not saying anything is wrong with the way things are now; I fucking love every time we’ve all been together; it’s just—that—I can barely—it seems like it’s been forever since I’ve felt stable enough to—and we’re overdue for—and he could be so much more normal than me; he could handle it even better than I could when I was pushing stuff off into Damon. I mean, look at me. Conversations are difficult, much less…”

He lets the sentence trail off but Derek immediately persists, “That’s not the point. You shouldn’t—”

“Isaac, do you remember our first kiss?” Stiles interjects speaking so fast the question is nearly one word; no doubt trying to get out his thoughts before conditioning interrupts, and the thought breaks Isaac’s heart for the millionth time. “I hadn’t gotten all the memories back yet, but I had some of my parents and stuff.”

“Yeah, of course I remember it.”

“I told you to kiss me and you weren’t sure it was the best choice, so why did you?”

Isaac pauses, reliving the moment like it was yesterday, before answering, “Because you wanted it for your own sake, because you wanted something good to counter the memories of what the Alphas did to you.”

“Exactly,” Stiles agrees, “and Stilinski is a blank slate! He doesn’t know to worry about triggers; he’s not gonna worry about being smothered by nightmarish memories; he’s just going to bliss out and enjoy the hell out of sex with you two damn fine weregentlemen,” Stiles asserts,
smirking a little as he tries to keep the tone light. “There’s no other way I’d ever be able to experience that,” he goes on more somberly. “It’s a definite silver lining in all this, if you two are up for it. Like I said, I’m not trying to push too hard if it’s too weird for you, but don’t for one second think that you should keep from fooling around with him on account of me.”

“We’ll—uh—let’s see how—how the date goes?” Isaac says, noncommittal. “I mean, he’s still figuring everything out, so—we let Stilinski call the shots, but we’ll try to keep it kinda slow?”

“Derek?” Stiles wonders.

“I think you’ve got a point,” he tells Stiles, “and I think Isaac’s plan sounds good. We’ll play it by ear and see how things go.”

*Please let this be something good for us; let it be a silver lining to the DID and not another obstacle to push past.*

*Please. Please. Please, don’t let this fuck us up.*

Derek drops Stiles by Morrell’s office on his way to pick up Collin from school. Stiles says he wants to leave a video for Stilinski before the date. Though Stiles claims it’s just a pep talk, Derek gets the feeling that there’s something else Stiles needs to say—either to Stilinski or Morrell. He thinks of prying, but in the end decides that Stiles deserves his privacy if he wants it—as much as they can manage to give him anyway.

“Good day at school?” Derek wonders when Collin gets in.

“No,” Collin answers. “It was school. Did you guys talk about it?”

“We did.”

“And?”

“We’re going to look into it. There’s still a lot of steps.”

“But you’re not saying ‘no’?” Collin asks excitedly, “Seriously? You’re going to maybe let me?”

“We’re going to talk to some people at your school, and we’re going to look at the options for tutors, but, we’re not ruling it out,” Derek confirms.

It’s impossible not to let Collin’s ecstatic reaction affirm that this could be a good change for everyone. Derek’s just starting to smile back at his son when his phone rings from it’s place on the console.

“It’s Miss Holly,” Collin informs, picking up the phone to answer it. “Hey,” he greets when he answers, but any further statement is cut off by, “Tell Derek to get here now. Stiles is seizing.”

*Beta opens his eyes against the blinding pain, squinting against the light fixture above him and praying the punishment is over.*
My skull is splitting open. I can’t take any more, Alpha, please.

He chokes back the plea into just a whimper. A face he’s never seen before comes into view, blocking the light for a moment.

But you aren’t my Alpha. Where are they? Where am I? What happened?

But the dark-haired wolf, however unfamiliar he may be, is undoubtedly his Alpha; the bond of recognition is undeniable.

They left me, didn’t they? They threatened so many times, but I never thought I could be bad enough for them to give up teaching me. What did I do?

He wracks his brain for memories.

Alpha Alec was so angry; Alpha Thomas was dead. I offered anything to help; I wanted to avenge my alpha’s death, but—but he said there was nothing to be done except—except to deliver a message, and that—that it was my last task as his—

Tears of shame well in Beta’s eyes at the memory. He struggles to recall what happened next.

Who did I deliver the message to? Alpha Hale, they told me, but who is that? Is this him? Did he allow me into his pack? But we fought his pack; why would he keep me? The Hale Pack shames the reputation of the werewolf; why would I stay?

He knows the answer to the last question at least, and the fear of being Omega floods in to drown out any other thought.

Nothing matters but the pack, and any pack is better than none.

I need to apologize; I need to make right whatever I did poorly for the Alpha. I need to convince him I’m worth making better.

But what did I do wrong?

Like unfocused snapshots the moments flash through his mind—a man, a hunter? lying dead before Beta, and Alpha Alec’s voice urging him to dispose of the carcass before any trouble came to the pack because of its discovery.

But Alpha Alec wasn’t really there. It must have been this Alpha who needed the body removed. I thought I did well; I didn’t think it would come back to the pack. Oh, God, did it? Did I dispose of it poorly? Or perhaps he wasn’t done with it yet? I moved on an absent alpha’s orders, not his, is that it? Disloyalty? Dissatisfaction? Both?

I don’t understand what I did wrong, but I’ll be better if you’ll please just make the pain stop.

With that thought he realizes that the punishment already has stopped, the throbbing in his skull is merely residual. The delivery of pain is ended, and the Alpha is talking to him.

“I’m sorry, Alpha!” he blurts immediately. “I was weak; I was unfocused. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” the Alpha replies, voice impossibly kind and sincere. “It was a seizure, not a punishment. You’re not in any trouble. You weren’t bad.”
A seizure? What kind of pathetic werewolf body has seizures? Is that why they left me behind? They saw this coming? They could sense my weakness? They would never allow such a pathetic liability as an epileptic werewolf to remain in their pack.

That’s why Alpha Alec sent me to the Hale Pack. Only a pack already disgraced would allow a broken thing like me to join.

“I’ll make up for being so weak, Alpha,” Beta promises scrambling to get off his back and into a kneeling position. “I will; I can make it up to you,” he swears, tugging desperately at the button on his jeans. “Please let me make it up to you; I can—”

“Stop it; don’t take off your clothes,” Alpha orders.

But they’ll be ruined if you—oh, oh maybe you’ll be satisfied to just fucking my mouth? Maybe just that? Not beating or claiming right now? Perhaps you don’t have time to teach so thoroughly now—later, I can do more later, but for now I can certainly—

“I am not going to hurt you in any way,” Alpha says. “You don’t have to make anything up to me. That’s not necessary.”

Not even good enough to be beaten and taught, Alpha Thomas’ voice hisses in his ear, sending a child down Beta’s spine. Disgraceful.

“Please, Alpha! Please, teach me! Please. I want to be good for you! I don’t want to be Omega, Alpha, please! I can be good enough to teach; I can! I can learn. I can—”

**************************************************

Wretch devolves into a desperate, groveling mess at Derek’s feet, but less than five minutes after he woke and started sobbing apologies, Wretch stops mid-sentence. His eyes glaze and he all but freezes where he kneels.

“Stiles?” he tries, not truly expecting a response. “Beta?” he tries instead but still gets no response.

Derek guides Stiles up to standing, grateful beyond words that Stiles mind managed to calm itself in the onset of the panic.

That’s a good thing right? Being able to take a step back from the trauma.

“Derek?!” Collin calls worriedly from the other side of the door where he was ordered to wait. “What happened?! Derek!”

“It’s okay; you can both come in. It’s okay. He’s--uh--just out of it now; I think Wretch just got a little too overwhelmed?”

The door to the office swings outward. Holly watches warily, studying Stiles so intently that Derek can only imagine the unending notes she’ll compile the moment they’ve gone. She steps forward into the room breaking the line of mountain ash she closed the moment Derek rushed in to Stiles. He feels more than a little guilty that this was one of Stiles’ longer lasting episodes; it gave him time to get here--not that Derek’s presence seemed to do Wretch much good.

So much for hoping Wretch was gone I guess, Derek thinks, weary at the mere thought of adding Wretch back to the mix.
“We’ll manage. We always do,” he reassures himself.

“Come on, kiddo,” Derek says with a nod to Collin. “Let’s get Stiles home.”

Isaac is grateful that the later part of the day passes pleasantly enough. Stiles is catatonic, but calm at least, and with the rate of change he’s had lately it shouldn’t last long. Collin’s in a fantastic mood after hearing they’ll explore the homeschooling option. Isaac’s own success has him feeling pretty elated himself, though it’s not much: he can’t quite lift his feet, but he can manage a flopping kind of tap that he’s declaring a triumph. It didn’t hurt that Derek celebrated the movement as if Isaac had just finished a marathon.

Addie actually requests to stay the night at the McCall’s, and Isaac likes to think it’s a very good sign that she’s not too weighed down by the kidnapping. Though the news that she won’t come home tonight clearly puts her brother on edge, Collin manages fine; Isaac listens to his son’s breathing to make sure he really does drift off to sleep okay before settling in for a night of solid rest himself. It takes longer than usual to drift to sleep, the space usually occupied by Stiles seems to wide to Isaac; he longs to close it and fall asleep with the heat of Derek’s presence at his back, but neither of them ever seem able to close the gap when Stiles is gone. They never have, and Isaac doubts they ever will.

Scott and Logan stay for a while when he comes to drop Addie home the next morning, bearing biscuits from McDonald’s for everyone, though Derek and Collin have to eat theirs on the way out to door for school. Stiles takes the food handed to him and munches on it silently at the table with the other. More than once Isaac catches Scott looking at his best friend sadly, and he understands the ache. This catatonic Stiles is a bittersweet presence—at peace but still not himself.

Logan and Addie run outside the moment they’re done eating, starting a game of tag in the backyard, uncaring that there are only two of them. Scott lounges on the porch with Isaac, going on about Melanie’s latest achievements; he’s showing off pictures as though Isaac’s never seen the infant, as opposed to the mere week it’s been since she was showing off her new-found ability to crawl and pull up in the Pack House living room.

Stiles wanders out on the porch after a while, standing motionless for a moment or two before meandering over to the swing on the end of the porch opposite Isaac and Scott.

“It really seemed like he was making some progress with everything, before, ya know…” Scott says gloomily. “Sucks that he kinda backtracked.” Isaac nods agreement. “But hey, at least he can kinda chill sometimes, right?”

“I like to think it’s good for him,” Isaac says, “as long as it passes.”

“He still sleeps like a three-year-old,” Scott laughs as Stiles lies down on the swing, sprawled in a way that couldn’t be comfortable to anyone but Stiles.

He starts snoring softly after just a few minutes, and Isaac is pretty sure Stiles is drooling just a bit. He can’t stop the huff of laughter that escapes, and Scott is sure to snap a shot for teasing later.
For the first few moments of semi-consciousness, Stilinski thinks he’s on a boat.

_When did we get a boat? Where the hell would we take a boat? Why’m I on a boat?_

He moves to sit up, but the world sways wildly as he opens his eyes; he flails, and lands with a hard thud on—

_Oooohhhh, back porch swing. Got it. Taking a nap? We can’t use a bed like a normal person? ‘Course, we’ve never been too normal, huh?_

“Stiles,” Scott’s voice cuts in sharply, and he realizes his best friend is standing over him looking worried. “Are you hurt?”

“Stilinski,” he corrects, “And just my pride—if I had any—which come on, let’s be real, my clutzy ass gave up on coming off graceful a long time ago. You’d really think the werewolf thing would help, but maybe that’s too much to ask in my case.”

Scott smiles at the words, offering a hand to help Stilinski up to his feet.

“Miss much?” Stilinski wonders.

“Just today,” Isaac supplies. “You went to bed Stilinski and woke up Stiles.”

“Quick switch.”

“And there were a couple of them,” Isaac informs.

“Interesting.”

“That’s one word for it.”

“So I didn’t stand you up on the date thing though, that’s cool,” Stilinski puts in, getting a serious eyebrow raise from Scott. “ shut up,” he says when Scott opens his mouth to speak, elbowing him in the side a little harder than strictly necessary. “I’m allowed to date my husband, dude; married people totally do dates. It’s a thing. You take Allison on dates, don’t you? ‘Cause you should.”

“Yes, I take her on dates,” Scott answers defensively.

“‘Course you do, you romantic sap,” Stilinski teases fondly.

Scott’s phone rings, interrupting the moment; it’s Allison, and he steps away to take the call, leaving Stilinski with Isaac.

He recalls Lydia’s advice following his freak out:

“You didn’t fuck up, dumbass; he’s married to you. I’d say it’s a pretty safe bet that he doesn’t mind going on a date with you.”

“Yeah, but what if I like totally make a fool of myself?”

“It’s what you do best, isn’t it?”

“What? Make a fool of myself?”

“Generally, particularly if you’re high school age these days.”
“It’s not my fault you all decided to grow up.”

“Okay, Peter Pan, you want my advice or not?”

“Yes. I’ve got like absolutely no fucking clue what to do here.”

“So don’t worry about it; Isaac already knows you and like 99% of your odd little quirks that make you awesome. Derek too. And yet they’re still around and married to you, so nothing you can do on this date is going to change that. Just calm the fuck down and enjoy yourself. Okay? It’ll be great. You’ll see.”

“So--think I’m gonna be around long enough to fit the date in this time?” Stilinski wonders. “Or--uh--ya know we don’t have to. I just thought--I dunno. D’you still wanna?”

“Of course I want to,” Isaac replies. “And even if there’s a switch before then we can raincheck as many times as we need to.”

“Cool,” Stiles says, rubbing the back of his neck and trying desperately to find words in the awkward silence that follows.

Isaac’s smirking at him from across the porch, and Stiles isn’t sure if he’d rather punch that smirk or kiss it. Before he can think on it much, Isaac breaks the silence with, “So did you have anything in mind?”

“I dunno--nothing like fancy--I mean, unless you wanna do fancy; I’m not saying that we can’t do fancy. I just--”

“Caroline’s?” Isaac suggests mercifully.


“Smooth, Stilinski; super smooth,” Scott teases, as he rejoins the conversation.

“Shut up,” he mutters, shoving at Scott again. “You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“As if you didn’t constantly give me shit for Allison.”

“Well, you were a lovesick werepuppy; you deserved it,” Stiles insists.

“I cannot even tell you how many times I’ve vomited rainbows because of you three,” Scott counters. “Don’t start with me. You’ll lose.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Stilinski answers, mildly annoyed. “I don’t remember any of mine; you could totally make up whatever the hell you want.”

“Swear jar!” Addie interjects as she and Logan come up the back steps, apparently worn out for the moment.

Scott’s shit-eating grin is so reminiscent of their high-school days that Stilinski almost forgets for a moment that they’re supposed to be all grown up now, but then Scott turns away to speak to his son.

“Come on, bud; Mom called and she’s got a last minute business meetup to get to. We gotta go home and watch Mel.”
The date is at eight, and Stilinski was nervous enough before he was informed that Ms. Morrell had a video from Stiles he needed to see beforehand.

But they said he’s chill with it. Maybe it’s advice. I could do with advice. That’d be legit.

Stilinski plugs the USB into the laptop as Morrell instructed. He glances up to see that she’s still engrossed in whatever music she’s playing in the ear buds she’s cranked too loud to hear Stiles’ message; it’s some sort of instrumental music that Stiles should really ask her about later because it’s awesome.

Okay, time to focus, he reminds himself. Whatever he’s got to share must be important to him. Let’s find out what it is.

He clicks the video to open it, and Stiles stares back at him from the computer. It’s as odd as ever to recognize just how different the two of them are despite the fact that they’re theoretically the same guy. Stiles looks nervous and—sad? Dejected? But there’s a set to his jaw and a determination in his eyes that clearly conveys he’s going to say what he wants to no matter what. It takes him a few deep breaths before he actually starts talking.

“So—uh—hi, I guess?” Stiles says. “Sorry if I freaked you out with this, or if this is weird, but I—I need you to help me—help us with something, okay?”

Stilinski nods agreement before he remembers that this is a recording, not a fucking live time-travel Skype conversation.

“I know that you asked Isaac for a date, and I just want to say thank you so fucking much for doing that. I know that it confuses the shit out of you because you’re kinda one-track mind with Derek, but—but Isaac is the bridge that we needed, and it just—I don’t know that it could have worked any other way. So just—I really appreciate that you want to know him because he’s just fantastic in so many ways, and you deserve to see that—and see it in Derek too—but just—you’re going the extra mile on the Isaac front and I appreciate that you’re trying to keep the whole “all three equal” thing relevant to you too and not just me.”

Stiles pauses, running his fingers back through his hair in the all-too-familiar sign of stress.

“But okay, back to the favor thing. You’re—you’re going to go out with Isaac, and you’re going to keep getting to know Derek too, and—and eventually, you’re going to want to take things to a physical level because not only are our husbands fucking awesome people they are also fucking gorgeous specimens of men. You know?”

Stilinski does of course. He’s entertained more than one fantasy about the two—especially Derek.

“And—and Derek, Isaac, and I—we talked about how—how this marriage thing works with us being the same person but different people and just—they wondered how I’d feel about it, ya know? Because they’re awesome, and they always worry about me too much. I told them, like I’m gonna tell you now, that I don’t mind at all what you three do while it’s you running the show, Stilinski, because—” Stiles voice breaks on the word and his eyes drop from where they’ve been intently staring into the camera. “Because,” he continues finally. “This is—this is pretty much my best shot—our best shot at—at getting the kind of virgin experience at everything that people are
supposed to get.”

The words sink in as Stiles continues to try and compose himself and keep talking. He manages to get his gaze back up to the camera, though tears flow freely down his face.

“I don’t want you to think I’m saying that you have to go home right now and hop in bed with them. They wouldn’t want that, and I know you don’t, not really, not yet. Take your time, okay? Take all the time you want or need because Derek and Isaac will be patient, so, so patient for you, and they’ll wait until you’re sure that you’re ready for whatever steps you three choose to take. Your first time will be on your terms, and I want you to get that, but more than that—I—I wanna see that, okay? That’s why I’m saying this because—because my first—I just—none of it was the way it was supposed to be for me. I got one moment with Derek before they took me, and then—then everything after, even as awesome as it gets with Derek and Isaac now—it’s all tainted to one extent or another because of what those bastards did after they got me.

So just, do everything you want with them; enjoy the hell out of it. Don’t try to be perfect; perfect doesn’t matter. You’re not supposed to know every trick down to a science like a fucking sex machine; all the things you want to try are things that you’re supposed to learn with people you care about, and yeah maybe you have a few awkward moments because it’s your first time, but that’s how it’s meant to be. It’s meant to be awkward sometimes and awesome most of the time and just—the total and complete opposite of the hell that I got.

And I’m gonna fucking play those scenes over and over in my head to drown out the memories of the alphas and every time with Derek and Isaac that my flashbacks ruined and just—I need for some part of me to experience them without all the baggage that gets in the way. I need you to love them and just bliss out with them, and—and be good to them, okay? They deserve to have some experiences that aren’t overshadowed by concern for my conditioning. Just do that for me, okay? Please?”

Stilinski nods again, and even though he knows damn well there’s no need to say it aloud he manages to croak out, “Yeah.”

***************************************

It’s the only option with Isaac’s paralysis and Stiles’ seizures, but Isaac would be lying if he said having the Sheriff drop them at the diner didn’t make him feel like an awkward teenager again. He almost laughs as the thought registers because Stilinski is essentially an awkward teenager, so maybe it’s not the worst tone to set for the night.

Caroline’s isn’t incredibly busy, but that’s to be expected on a Tuesday night. Lucy spots them before they’re even seated, greeting them in her usual fashion.

“Hey, boys, good to see you out and about!” she says brightly. “So sorry to hear about your accident, Isaac,” she adds more somberly. “Feeling a little better though, I suppose?”

“Yeah, got a little movement back; hopefully on my feet before long.”

“Oh, you’ll bounce back, hun; you wait and see. I bet you’ll be good as new before you know it.”

“Hope so,” Isaac agrees.
“Derek’s turn to babysit?” she supposes.

“Yep.”

“Well, you three bring those kids in here soon, now. It’s been too long and they’re growin’ too fast to be takin’ long breaks between visits.”

“We will,” Isaac promises. “You can sugar them up on whipped cream and we’ll send them to their Pop’s.”

She trills out a laugh, but gets a bit more somber as she notices Stilinski is half-heartedly joining in.

“Stiles, honey, if you two would rather me fix up a table in the back so it’s a little quieter, I can--”

“Nah, Luce, I’m good,” he assures, “I’m just--it’s kinda--still--uh--getting my bearings after--ya know--everything,” Stilinski says.

Isaac respects Stilinski’s choice not to delve into the fact that he’s a new personality.

“Julie’ll be over in a minute to get your orders, but I’ll go ahead and grab your drinks,” Lucy offers.

“Chocolate milkshakes and ice waters?”

“You know us too well,” Isaac says with a nod and smile. “Thanks.”

“So how much does she know?” Stilinski wonders as Lucy retreats.

“The bare minimum,” Isaac replies. “She knows the same stories the general public does, but she likes to help. You and your Dad’ve been coming here so long that she knows you; you feel comfortable here. There’ve been a lot of firsts.”

“A lot of firsts?”

“Well, this was one of the first places you came in public after…”

As Isaac regales him with story after story of the little moments dotted through the past six years, Stilinski starts to understand how they’ve made it through all the crap that he’s read about in Isaac’s notes. These are the things that formed them into a family—trips to the pond, movie nights, pack dinners—and Stilinski wishes for the first time that he had part of the time that’s missing from his mind.

_I mean, I knew it wasn’t all shit, but the way he’s smiling, that gleam in his eye when he talks about everything, there are some really awesome things going on here once you shift through some of the shit._

As much as Stilinski’s enjoyed hearing pack stories, that’s not the reason he not-so-intentionally asked Isaac out, so at the next lull he decides to direct the conversation toward his more specific curiosity.

“So—uh—how’d this whole—I mean three people—it’s not really—”

“Normal?” Isaac supplies. “No,” he agrees, “but a wise woman once reminded us that we don’t need normal; we need what works.”
A wise woman?

“Wait? Lydia?”

Isaac’s smile widens at the guess, and he nods.

“You—uh—you kissed Derek before you were taken,” Isaac expounds. “But neither of you mentioned it. When we got you back, you didn’t remember—well, not at first, and by the time you did remember…”

“Talk about awkward.”

“I honestly thought it was going to ruin everything,” Isaac admits. “It had been me and you and Derek for what seemed like forever at that point, even though it had only been a few months, and it was—” He looks away from Stilinski and seems almost embarrassed as he continues, “It was the first time in a long, _long_ fucking time that I’d felt like part of a family,” he finishes, and the earnestness in his voice and gaze put a weird ache in Stilinski’s chest; he moves his hand forward across the table to grab Isaac’s before he can second guess himself.

Isaac smiles at the gesture, and a flutter of excitement runs through Stilinski at the sight of it.

“But Lydia managed to stop the implosion before it really even happened,” Isaac says, “A few words of advice, some semi-awkward conversations, a near-death experience and then next thing you know the three of us were engaged—then married—now parents.”

“Pretty nuts,” Stiles comments, but when Isaac’s face falls just a bit he clarifies quickly, “Like—good kinda nuts—wow, pretty sure there’s a innuendo joke there, but I wasn’t—dammit, I should just stop talking.”

“No,” Isaac disagrees with a fond smile.

“No? Not tired of the awkward teenage rambling yet?”

“You always ramble,” Isaac replies. “Someone’s got to make up for Derek’s quiet.”

“Guess so.”

“Next question?” Isaac prompts. “I know you’ve got a million.”

“I dunno—I mean—let’s see. Lemme think of a good one…”

--------------------

“Well, that was excruciatingly awkward,” Stilinski says as his father’s tail lights disappear down the driveway.

John had only teased the minimum, compared to what he might have done. Stilinski didn’t refrain from holding Isaac’s hand in the backseat, at least, but he kept the conversation solidly on baseball and demanding his Dad update him on everything the Mets have done in the past six seasons.

“It was _not_ that bad,” Isaac soothes. “You don’t actually have to impress me, remember? I’m kinda already hooked.”

“Think that makes two of us,” Stilinski admits, just a bit bashful, and _God_ what Isaac wouldn’t give to rise out of this chair and kiss that shy smile on Stilinski’s face.
As though he’s reading Isaac’s mind, Stilinski bends down; he moves quickly at first, hesitating for just a moment before surging forward again to bring their lips together. After barely a second, Stilinski pulls away, eyes meeting Isaac’s in question as he bites his lip in what Isaac guesses is uncertainty. Isaac smiles, and apparently that’s all the encouragement Stiles needs to move in again, just the slightest bit more confident, deepening the kiss after a moment and really going for it until he pulls away gasping.

The first kiss with Isaac was exhilarating, to say the least; the second was even better, and then the third, and the fourth, and now they’re both breathing heavy, and Stilinski’s mind is entirely engulfed with the logistics of how to keep this going.

“Scale of one to ten,” he says between quick kisses, “how pissed are you gonna be if I pick you up so we can—”

“Negative five,” Isaac interrupts. “Fuck the chair.”

“Rather fuck you,” Stiles counters, smiling into the kiss and lifting Isaac from the chair so the kisses don’t need to halt as they go inside.

Stilinski feels a bit kiss-drunk as the cross the threshold, and his left toe catches the door frame. They topple forward, and Stilinski ends up sinking to the floor with Isaac still in his arms.

“You really would think the werewolf reflexes would help,” Stilinski says, repeating his sentiment from earlier this afternoon as he laughs.

“Shh” Isaac hisses out, trying to quiet his own laughter, and Stilinski figures it’s probably because the kids are already down for the night.

Which totally means we can do adulty-married-type-sexytimes things, right? Please let that be the plan—or some version of that be the plan.

Because kissing Isaac is fucking is awesome! And Isaac seems to completely agree that the kissing is awesome, if the fingers skimming under the hem of Stilinski’s shirt are anything to go by. Stilinski feels goosebumps rise along his skin where Isaac touches him, a small smile curving his lips as he reluctantly breaks the kiss to stand with Isaac, shut the door, and get them moving towards their bedroom again.

“Hey,” Isaac says softly, and Stilinski pauses in their trek.

“Yeah?”

“I had a really good time tonight,” he says earnestly.

“Does that mean we’re like—calling it a night?” Stilinski wonders, woeful at the thought, but trying to avoid looking down at Isaac with puppydog eyes.

“Tonight lasts as long and goes as far as you want it to,” Isaac replies with a smile.

“C’mere,” he adds, sliding gentle fingers behind Stilinski’s neck to guide him down as Isaac tilts his head up to meet Stilinski’s lips. He lets his tongue slide across Stilinski’s bottom lip smoothly before he slowly pushes the kiss into a more heated direction, almost as though daring Stiles to catch up; damn is he more than happy to join in this race.
But…

“I—Is—Isaac,” Stilinski all but moans, his arms tightening around Isaac as his knees honest-to-god start to go weak. “Let’s get somewhere more comfortable, okay? Cuz I don’t really wanna stop what we’re doing, y’know? But like—bed—and stuff—”

“Bed and stuff,” Isaac agrees, grinning as he places a couple more soft kisses to Stilinski’s mouth before he and lets out a soft chuckle. “Let’s go”

*********************************************************

Derek’s in bed with the newspaper, vaguely interested in the mundane goings on of Beacon Hills, but he hears Isaac and Stilinski the moment they get home. He can hear every soft little giggle and all the wet sounds of kissing. A smile curves on his lips as he listens to the two of them, thrilled that the date undoubtedly went well and that they’re happy in that moment.

“We’re seriously overdue for a good night.

When he hears them approaching the room, Derek settles further into his spot on the bed and watches the door, not bothering to put up a pretense that he’s still reading.

He watches the two of them stop in their tracks, ISaac looks like a blushing bride who’s being carried toward the honeymoon suite by an eager groom. when they enter the room to see him sitting on the bed, with an immovable smirk. Both of their cheeks are flushed a warm shade of pink, their lips kiss-swollen, and some of the deep-seated anxiety in Derek fades for the moment at the sight of the men he loves most looking so happy.

He watches as the two of them look at each other then back at Derek before he lets out a soft chuckle and looks over at them, “Late night, huh?”

*********************************************************

Stilinski’s mouth drops open at the gentle mocking tease that comes from Derek’s lips. He looks so comfortable sitting on that big bed in his soft pajamas with his newspaper.

All he needs is like a pipe; then we could make this a fucking post card instead of the scary tale of mythical beasts. Seriously. So weird, but awesome weird.

“Well, you didn’t have to wait up, old man,” Stilinski quips in reply, banter coming as easily as ever, and he really, really hopes that the fact Derek is awake adds to the kind of evening he and Isaac started on the way in rather than brings it to a halt. Stilinski grins crookedly, and Derek’s smile widens; the sight makes Stilinski’s stomach flop in anticipation.

That is Derek Hale, in bed—a bed that’s mine too—smiling at me like I’m the most precious thing in the whole damn world.

“Put me on the bed,” Isaac bids, and when Stilinski obliges he says, “Delivery for Mr. Hale.”

Derek chuckles at the words, before wondering, “Which Mr. Hale exactly?”

“Both?” Isaac replies. “Assuming Stilinski wants to keep things up?”

“Oh hell yes,” Stilinski agrees, perhaps a bit too exuberantly, but who can blame him really?

“I take it you two had fun, then?” Derek asks, and Stilinski knows it’s just a sort of formality because
he’s pretty sure Derek knows how much fun they had given their appearances when they came through the bedroom door.

Stilinski doesn’t award him with a real answer, just leans over the bed a bit and brushes his lips against Derek’s quickly before a hot flush spreads across his cheeks, and he stands straight again. He bites nervously at his lip, waiting for Derek’s reaction, but Derek’s grinning like a maniac.

Stiles strips off his shirt then, discarding it on the floor as he climbs onto the bed between them. He’s trying not to be self-conscious, just because his husbands are *hella* attractive, alright? And he’s just a lanky, teenage—but he’s *not* that anymore. He’s still lithe, sure, but it seems he’s filled out nicely in adulthood. He’s still not so sure he rivals Isaac or Derek, but he holds his own at least. Nothing to be too embarrassed about. Time to enjoy the hell outa some awesome hot husband make-out, fool around, whatever they’re gonna do.

*****************************************

Isaac shifts around on the bed a bit, getting comfortable, and closing the space between him and Stilinski a bit more. He holds back a chuckle when Stilinski barely misses a beat before he’s leaning over and resuming what they started on the way in. It’s a little wet and bit more heated that Isaac would expect from someone as jittery with nerves as Stilinski is, but Isaac can’t scent anything bad coming off of him, and he’s careful to try and let Stilinski take his time leading in whatever direction he’d like.

Isaac feels Stilinski’s hands sliding under his t-shirt, feeling along his abdomen with slow, almost reverent, movements and Isaac realizes that he’s mapping out Isaac’s body, learning it as if for the first time because it is Stilinski’s first time. It makes his chest both tighten and warm at the same time, and Isaac kisses Stilinski even more deeply.

Stilinski lets out a moan into Isaac’s mouth, and Isaac opens his eyes to see Stilinski’s wide in surprise. Derek’s grinning against the skin of his neck where he no doubt just started sucking or planting kisses. Isaac suspects that Derek’s own fingers are mapping out Stilinski’s body; it’s the move Isaac was about to make himself.

“Good?” Derek checks, though the moan seems to speak for itself.

“Uh—uh-huh,” Stilinski affirms breathlessly, moving back toward Isaac and picking up where they left off.

Isaac makes good on his thought to get his hands on Stilinski, letting his fingertips trail over the smooth skin of his stomach. He grins against his semi-gaping mouth when his fingers graze across his nipples, causing a soft gasp to leave Stilinski’s lips.

“D-do that again,” Stilinski requests, his voice breathy enough to go straight to heating Isaac’s blood. Isaac does as he asks, though, letting his fingertips skim over Stilinski’s nipples again.

Stilinski’s got his head tipped back so Derek can mouth freely along his neck, but Derek takes this moment of recess between the other two to pull Isaac in for a deep, lingering kiss.

**************************

“Omigod, that-“ Stilinski pants, “That has to be the single hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

He ends the comment with a groan, going limp and letting himself fall onto his back with his two
gorgeous husbands looming over him.

*fuck, seriously? Holy fucking shit. This is actually happening.*

“Don’t stop on my account,” he adds with a grin, mind running rampant with fantasies now he’s got this new fuel for the fire.

His mind is pulled from the immediate sexy daydreams thoughts by Derek’s move to join him in lying down. His stubble tickles against Stilinski’s neck before their lips meet in a kiss. Isaac lies down on Stilinski’s other side, so he’s deliciously engulfed with the contact of a husband on either side of him. Derek’s tongue ravages his mouth a moment or two more before Derek breaks their contact to murmur, “Tonight’s about you.”

The words go straight to Stilinski’s dick, and he’s immediately got more fantastic ideas than he could ever manage to act on.

“Mmm,” Isaac agrees, taking Derek’s previous position at Stilinski’s neck, “Whatever you wanna do. If you just wanted to watch we could—”

“No, no,” Stilinski interrupts; “I mean, I would be like *totally* good with that, but if—I’m more of a hands on kinda guy,” he answers with a nervous laugh.

“’Kay.”

At the words, Isaac guides Stilinski’s hands toward the hem of his shirt in invitation, it’s all the encouragement he needs to tug up at the shirt until Isaac has to break away from mouthing at Stilinski to get it over his head. He hates to break the contact, but it’s worth it, so fucking worth it to feel Isaac’s heated skin against his own now.

“You too, Sourwolf,” he instructs them with only a hint of the nerves that he feels coming through his voice.

“And you’re still sure about all this?” Derek asks, his hand sliding over Stilinski’s stomach gently enough to cause chills to erupt along his skin.

“Of course, I’m sure.” Stilinski nods, smiling softly at Derek before he moves his hands to tug on both of their shirts. “Off. I wanna feel you two.”

Derek nods, moving to tug his shirt over his head. When he’s sandwiched between them again, skin-on-skin, he can’t help the small groan that escapes him.

“See? Isn’t that better? Totally already like doubly as awesome as the previous awesome that was—”

“Yeah, uh-huh,” Derek agrees quickly before silencing the rambling with another kiss.

Derek’s enjoying the skin-on-skin contact, letting Isaac takeover occupying Stilinski’s mouth while Derek sucks marks into his shoulder and watches them disappear. Stilinski is both languid and urgent as he moves, the perfect blend of tensed and relaxed, and it’s so obviously natural that it continues to reassure Derek that this was a good choice; Stilinski wants this now, and Stiles will want these memories.

“Okay, so—so like,” Stilinski says huskily, breaking away from Isaac for a moment, “If—ah—we keep going on with this and the whole—the way you two are—just, if this keeps up I’m gonna
maybe get a little carried away so—so—what’re we—where’s this going? Before I get my poor teenage virgin hopes up.”

The evident lust in Stilinski’s tone and words gets Derek’s blood rushing, and it doesn’t help much when Isaac, voice as wrecked as Derek’s starting to feel, replies, “You can get carried away if you want.”

“Tonight’s about you,” Derek repeats. “S’up to you what happens here, Stilinski,” Derek murmurs into Stilinski’s skin, his palm skating down Stilinski’s sides. “What d’you want?”

“Wow. That’s a—uh—super loaded question,” Stilinski pants out, with a bit of a nervous-but-excited sounded laugh that is downright adorable. “Not that this isn’t like—ya know—insanely awesome and you guys are—yeah, also awesome, just—maybe—I don’t think we should—y’know—do it—right this second—or like—at all tonight. But totally eventually and stuff.”

“Sounds good,” Isaac agrees, and Derek’s honestly relieved they’re not going to rush into anything anyone might regret; so far he hasn’t noticed a single hitch in Stilinski, none of the moments of freezing or closing eyes or gritted teeth that so often plague Stiles. It’s a relief and a heartbreak at the same time that this version of Stiles can be so carefree in bed.

*You should always get to be this way. I’m so sorry it’s not like this for you all the time, Stiles.*

“But—uh—I am like—kinda just really, like, embarrassingly hard, so I can—can—or how do—could we—or should I—”

Derek grins into Stilinski’s shoulder before assuring, “We can take care of that for you, if you want. Without the ‘all the way’.”

Stilinski’s heart races in his chest at Derek’s words. “You’d—you’d really be cool with that?”

The idea of what Derek’s offering is exhilarating, and Stilinski is definitely down for that. If making out with the two of them has been this glorious, he can’t imagine what having one of their hands on him is going to feel like. He knows without a doubt that it’s going to completely shatter any teenage fantasies he might’ve dreamed up to get himself off all through high school.

“Of course we would,” Isaac answers.

Derek moves his lips up so his words will tickle at Stilinki’s ear and wonders, “Would you rather have my hand or my mouth?”

The question sends a full body shudder through Stilinski, and he doesn’t hold in a groan at the mere suggestion of having Derek’s mouth stretched wide around his aching erection. Stilinski turns to look at Derek with wide eyes, sure he just imagined those words.

“Are you fucking serious right now? Because I swear to God, Derek Hale this is not the fucking time for your—” Derek answers in actions, and begins to kiss his way down Stilinski’s abdomen as he moves himself down the bed to a better position for— “Holy shit, you really mean it? You would give me a blowjob?”

Derek laughs softly, sound conveying fondness better than any words, and he plants another kiss just above the waistline of his jeans. He brings his eyes up to lock their gazes. “If that’s something you want.”
“Hell yeah I want!” Stilinski affirms exuberantly, uncaring just how horny and over-excited he may or may not sound because Derek fucking Hale is totally about to suck me off. Oh my God!

Isaac and Derek both chuckle at the reaction, and Isaac leans in to recapture his lips in a kiss that borders on raunchy.

****************************

As Derek uses his hands to unfasten Stilinski’s jeans and slide down his boxers he leaves a trail of wet, open mouthed-sucking kisses around Stilinski’s abdomen. He can hear Stilinski’s half-worded moans being muffled by Isaac’s lips, can see how Isaac’s half draped himself over Stilinski, and how Stilinski’s hands skimming over Isaac’s bare skin; it’s a sight for sore eyes, to watch Stiles—Stilinski—so encompassed with bliss; it’s been too long since he’s been able to let go like this—and in reality he’s never been able to let go quite like this.

Now that Derek’s got Stilinski’s clothes out of the way, he moves to tease kisses along the cut of Stilinski’s hip. No sooner has he planted the first kiss than Stilinski goes completely rigid, squirming at the contact, as though he longs to get away but can’t. Derek and Isaac freeze as one and the move quickly to draw back and give Stilinski space. Derek heart drops to his toes, and he feels like he’s been doused in ice water, assuming the worst.

We pushed too far; we moved too fast; how could we be so stupid?

“Stilinski? You okay?” Isaac asks gently, and Derek can hear the trace of fear in his tone.

He can’t bear to look at Stilinski and see the too-familiar fear behind his eyes, so Derek keeps his gaze averted.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Stilinski answers so believably that Derek’s eyes snap up to see if his eyes are equally as earnest and the are. “Why did you guys—” Stilinski looks confused for all of two seconds before the look vanishes and he waves his hands a little frantically, “Oh! Oh! No! I’m fine, it was awesome; it just—uh—” He flushes a deep shade of crimson. “It tickled,” he admits bashfully.

Derek stares at him for a moment before he stifles a full belly laugh into his fist, before muttering, “Ticklish. Jeez.” Derek sighs out, barely managing not to fall on the bed, limp with relief.

“Yeah, just ticklish,” Stilinski confirms with a shy grin. “Sorry, I, uh, didn’t mean to like bring the fun to a grinding halt; I’m like so very totally still good with this plan, so uh—carry on?!” he finishes hopefully.

Derek’s pretty sure that if it were possible to die from adorable, he’d be a goner right now. It’s so perfect, so Stiles, and everything Stiles should have had for his first time that it makes Derek want to laugh—and cry. But the only thing that really matters now is doing the best they can to make sure Stiles gets some great, fun awkward first time memories to throw in the mix—and Derek’s grateful Stilinski can—and wants—to be the conduit for that.

Derek hears the relieved sigh that escapes Isaac as he moves back in to close the space between the two of them. “Carrying on,” he agrees, “but if anything bothers you just let us know and—”

“Dude I appreciate the hell outa the fact that you guys are letting me sit in the driver’s seat here, but—uh—I’m gonna spontaneously combust if we don’t—”

Stilinski’s sentence cuts off into a wanton moan as Derek takes the opportunity to skip right to taking his cock in hand, stroking slow and steady. He watches as Stilinski’s eyes roll a bit before he closes his eyes and tips his head back into the pillow. “Oh. my. god.”
“Just wait. His hand is nothing compared to that mouth,” Isaac informs in a husky tone against Stilinski’s ear.

“Oh, fu—”

Derek doesn’t give Stilinski time to finish the word before he’s leaning down and swallowing Stiles all the way down, his soft curls tickling his nose. Derek can feel the head of Stilinski’s cock hit the back of his throat when Stilinski’s hips spasm as Derek engulfs him. Derek’s grateful Isaac’s waiting to swallow Stilinski’s moans with kisses because damn he’s pretty sure that’s a string of blissful cursing that would be escaping Stilinski otherwise. One of his hands works its way into Derek’s hair and grips tight; the sensation has Derek letting out a deep moan around Stilinski’s cock before he can even think to hold it in. Stilinski’s hips buck up at the vibration, and he breaks his kiss with Isaac with a sloppy wet sound to pant, “Oh, god, this-this isn’t gonna last very l-long, dude, you may wanna—”

His suggestion tapers off into another groan, and Derek doesn’t care if it is a short lived moment, as long as Stilinski is this completely blissed out on pleasure. So, he just hollows his cheeks and sucks as he pulls his head back, relishing the continuing groans and muffled cursing of encouragement. Derek he swirls his tongue around the head before dropping his jaw open and moving down Stilinski’s shaft again. As he moves, he keeps his eyes locked on Stilinski’s face—the glimpses he gets past Isaac anyway, reveling in the sight of him coming undone under his mouth.

***********************************

Stilinski isn’t sure what the hell happened for him to deserve the two devastatingly hot men all over him at the moment, but he is endingly grateful as Derek’s warm, wet mouth works his cock. Stilinski knows he was right when he said this wasn’t gonna take long. He’s holding back as best he can, but he doesn’t really stand a chance with all the glorious stimulation that’s drowning his senses in the most exquisite way imaginable.

He attempts to warn Derek’s that he’s really on the edge now, pushing half-heartedly at Derek as he attempts to convey the warning through gaze since coherent thoughts are impossible with Derek making every effort to suck his brain through his dick. Derek seems to get the message but he doesn’t move, just smiles, lips pulled tight around Stilinski’s cock as he takes him in deep again. Stilinski’s gone in that instant, head tipping back, the cry of ecstasy catching in his throat as he spills down Derek’s.

He feels like he may be trying to get words out, but all that’s coming out are little aborted sounds. Isaac laughs softly at Stilinski’s expense, murmuring, “I told you his mouth was amazing.”

“I can officially the luckiest son of a bitch alive.

And we haven’t even had actual sex yet.

“Holy. Fucking. Shit.”

***********************************

Isaac’s on Derek the moment Stilinski’s lying sated and spent on the mattress; there’s none of the tender, careful movements they used on Stilinski; this is fueled by the urgent need for friction and release that’s apparently built just as excruciatingly in Derek as in Isaac. It registers vaguely that
Stilinski’s letting out a string of admiring curses as Derek relieves Isaac of his pants so he can wrap his hand around his erection and guide it next to Derek; they may not be teenagers anymore, but after the erotic triumph with Stilinski, Isaac’s been on the edge for longer than he’d care to admit.

Besides, Derek’s known for a long time now just where to suck on Isaac’s collarbone, just how hard to nip at his lip, just how tightly to grip him, to get him gasping and moaning and coming his brains out in practically no time flat, and Derek’s release comes right behind Isaac’s. They fall back on the bed on either side of Stilinski, who, judging by the look on his face, would be hard and ready for round two if it was physically possible.

“I’m gonna be really fucking pissed if this was a dream, and I wake up in detention with Harris or some shit,” Stilinski mutters. “No way is this really happening.”

“That felt *fake* to you?” Derek wonders in mock offense.

“No, just--didn’t know it was fucking possible to feel this awesome.”

“Wanna know the best part?” Isaac wonders.

“What?”

“You’ve got dibbs on us for the rest of your life,” he reminds with a grin.

---

Chapter End Notes

UNENDING thanks to my betas, particularly Nicole and Strangeredlantern to whom you owe the moral and writing support that gets you kids any sexytimes to speak of :P

Thank you all for reading! I hope you enjoyed it! :D
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stiles wakes slowly, still nestled snugly between his husbands, and the euphoria of Stilinski’s memories flood in and overwhelm Stiles with a sense of love and pleasure and triumph that the memory that he’s craved for so long finally has a place in his mind; it’s priceless ammunition against the terrible darkness swirling inside him, and he swears he just might be glowing with happiness right now.

Derek stirs besides him, eyes opening into Stiles’.

“Morning,” Derek mumbles. “Y’okay?”

“Perfect,” Stiles answers, “Derek, it was absolutely perfect,” he declares earnestly, using this moment that the blissful memories overshadow all conditioning to move in for a kiss.

Derek kisses back, slow and gentle, hand sliding to find Stiles’ under the covers. Stiles pulls away long before he’d like to, terrified that something will trigger and ruin the rapture.

Derek smiles at him as they part, and says, “Glad to have you back.”

The fact that he knows it’s Stiles again without needing declaration; the fact that he’s so sincere in being glad Stiles is with him again; and the fact that there is more love Derek’s gaze than Stiles could ever hope to earn combine to nearly overwhelm him. He can feel the tears gathering in his eyes, but he doesn’t bother to stop them; when Derek reaches to wipe the tears away, Stiles doesn’t have to work so hard not to flinch. He smiles.

“Glad to be back,” Stiles says. “Thank you, so fucking much for—it was everything I was hoping to get and just—thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank us for anything,” Isaac murmurs from Stiles’ other side. “It’s something we’d wanted for a long time too; it’s a memory we’ve always wished we could give you, you know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Stiles answers, voice raspy with emotion.

There’s so much he still wants to say to try and make sure that they understand just how much this means, and how precious the memory is, and how he loves them so much he thinks he might burst with it. But the words stick in his throat, so instead he just finds Isaac’s hand on his other side, and grasps it firmly. And as though they already know everything Stiles would have said if he could manage it, Derek and Isaac settle in just a bit closer to him, the comfortable tangle of limbs that serves as a physical reminder of the unseen bonds.

Perfect moments are still possible for us. I’m the luckiest man alive right now.

Isaac’s not entirely sure if Stiles is actually doing better against the conditioning or if that’s just what Isaac wants to see this morning. In the end, he decides last night surely helped on some level, because Stiles smiles at both Derek and Isaac almost incessantly, manages a tease over breakfast without stuttering, and doesn’t flinch in the slightest when Derek moves forward to kiss
him goodbye on the way out the door with Collin. Addie leaves the breakfast table to go get dressed on her own, declaring she’s a “big girl” and doesn’t want help. Isaac takes heart in the independence, and vows not to laugh no matter what outfit she puts together for herself.

“So, you want to just tell me what’s wrong?” Stiles asks as he starts to wash up dishes from breakfast; Isaac stands by to dry.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Isaac replies. “Is it?”

“You’ve been looking at me like—I dunno—just that look you get sometimes, when things going on with me are bugging you; when you’re more worried about me than you should be.”

“I’m okay if you’re okay.”

“I’m awesome; last night was awesome; but something’s bothering you and I wish you’d just tell me.” When Isaac doesn’t immediately answer, Stiles continues, “It was too weird doing stuff with Stilinski? We don’t have to do it again if—”

“No, it’s not that exactly; I mean, I can tell it did you some good.”

“Understatement, dude, but if you aren’t cool with it, that’s okay.”

“I’m cool with it; it’s fine; don’t worry about it, Stiles.”

“Yes, Isa—” Stiles starts, apparently at the end of this conditioning grace period. “I mean—no. No, I am worrying about it.”

The fork in Stiles’ hands snaps under his tightening grip, and Isaac gives up trying to avoid this topic; it’s not worth Stiles’ stress to pretend nothing’s on his mind.

“Okay, you’re right,” he admits. “I’m sorry; you’re right. I just—it’s—I feel like I’m missing too much with you.”

“I don’t get it. Missing what?”

“You’re ticklish,” Isaac says.

“Yeah, of course I am; where have you been for the last hundred tickle wars we waged with the kids?”

“You know what I’m talking about; last night when Derek—”

“It was nothing; teenagers have no control; of course I’m more collected now I’m—”

“Stiles you were a teenager when we got you back,” Isaac reminds, “and you’ve never shown any sign before.”

“I know how to be good,” Stiles explains mechanically before his eyes go wide in surprise, and he looks like he might be sick as he amends, “I mean—that’s not what I meant; I just—it’s not a big deal; I’m not—it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters a lot, and it’s not the only thing; when you’re Stilinski, you fidget and—”

Stiles hits his knees in the next instant, trembling visibly as he assures, “I’ll be better, Isaac; I will; I can be still; I can be good; I’m sorry; I—”
“Stiles, no, that’s not what I—”

“Look at my dress I pickeded out!” Addie trills, skipping in from down the hall to interrupt. “And shoes too, can I—”

All three of them freeze, and Isaac’s chest tightens as a worried frown takes the place of his daughter’s bright smile.

“Wha’s’a matter?” she wonders. “Damon?” she adds hopefully with a look to Stiles that shatters Isaac’s heart.

_No, no, no, Addie; you don’t know what that does to him; you don’t mean to hurt him but—_  

“Hi, Addie,” Stiles says quietly, ducking his head in the all-too-familiar mannerism.

For a moment Isaac can’t be sure this isn’t Damon, but then he sees the tears Stiles is blinking back and knows the truth.

_You’re pretending for her._

_Dammit, Stiles._

“Damon!” Addie cries happily, rushing forward to him. “Don’ be scared, Damon; Isaac’s not gonna hurt you, not ever,” she reminds earnestly.

“I know; Isaac’s very good,” Damon—Stiles says, getting slowly to his feet but keeping his gaze downcast; Isaac can’t believe how well he manages to make himself seem small though he’s towering over Isaac as he sits in the chair. “I was confused. I’m sorry,” he adds sincerely.

The impression is so flawless that Isaac thinks he just might vomit. This isn’t what Stiles is supposed to do when he doesn’t have to. This isn’t the role he should ever have to play again. It’s—_it’s so fucking messed up._

“I made you pictures, Damon; lots an’ lots an’ lots,” Addie shares. “I’ll help with dishes so you can come see; they’re in my room. I got a new room now, and it’s ugly boring colors, but Aunt Lydia says we’re gonna make my new room at the new house pretty and pink and…”

As Addie trills on, Stiles brings his eyes up to meet Isaac’s; the silent plea for Isaac to play along is as clear as if the words were spoken.

_No, Stiles, don’t do this. You shouldn’t have to do this._

_I don’t know what it’ll do to you._

_But you want to make her happy…_  

_And I guess that’s your choice to make?_  

_I don’t fucking know._

“Can you, Isaac?” Addie wonders, pulling him from his internal debate.

“Sorry, sweetie, can I what?” he asks.

“Can you finish dishes so I can go ahead and show Damon—”
“No, Addie; I don’t mind. I’m happy to finish,” Stiles starts to protest, perfectly in character as he moves to grab the next plate.

“The rest can just go in the dishwasher,” Isaac says. “Don’t worry about it. You two have fun.”

“Thanks, Isaac; come on, Damon,” Addie replies.

“Thank you, Isaac,” Stiles says, bringing his eyes to Isaac’s for just a moment again to make sure the double entendre is received.

Stiles is being ripped apart more and more with each moment of this impersonation. It takes everything he can muster to keep an expression of relaxed contentment on his face rather than allowing the pain to show, but Addie’s excitement as she shares her drawings and rambles on about all the fun little bits that have happened since the fire—assuring Damon more than once that all the bad hunters are dead ‘cause “Scary Stiles killed ‘em” and they’re gonna be safe now and have a big safe new house soon too—is enough to remind him why this needs to be done.

Maybe Damon’s not coming back, but that’s not her fault.

If I can give her a goodbye, it’s the least I can do really; after everything else I’ve put in to complicate her life if this can simplify something, even a little, it’s worth it. It’s okay. I’m okay.

Stiles does his best to quiet his mind, but it’s not easy; Tea party and dress up have never been exactly riveting activities.

“You feel okay, Damon? You look kinda sick,” Addie informs.

“Just a headache, Addie; I’m okay.”

“You don’t need medicine do you?” she asks, clearly disappointed at the thought of losing Damon to sedation, but she still assures, “I can get Isaac.”

“No, don’t; it’s okay. I’m okay.”

But for how long?

“Good. You wanna play Candy Land now?”

“Yes, Addie; Candy Land is good.”

They set up the game in relative silence, and Stiles can feel the twinges of pain in his head grow more and more persistent; it may be nothing, but it could be signaling a switch—especially since lately he seems to be alternating personalities at the drop of a hat. He’s not sure how long he’s got to be “Damon,” and he’s not sure that he’ll be able to bring himself to play this part twice.

“Hey, Addie?”

“Yeah?”

“There’s something—I need to explain something for you.”

“Okay.”
“I’m not sure how long—I don’t know if—this might be the last time I get to play with you.”

“What?” she asks, lower lip starting to tremble, “No, Damon, don’t go yet!”

“I’m sorry, Addie, but I can’t control who comes after me, and—”

“But you can come back later.”

“I don’t know that I will.”

“Why not? Don’t you wanna? Are you mad at me?”

“No, Addie, no of course I’m not mad at you. I love spending time with you. It’s my favorite thing to do.”

“Then how come this’s the last time? I don’t want it to be.”

“Me—me neither, Addie, but it—I’m—I’m getting better, and that means—that means you get to have me and Stiles at the same time. We’ll be like—like the same person now.”

“No,” she whines. “I don’t wanna; I wanna have you and Stiles different.”

“It’ll be better this way, Addie; you’ll see,” he assures, not even sure he believes the words himself.

“Then why’re you crying?” she demands. “Did Stiles tell you that you couldn’t come anymore? Because you don’t have to listen to him,” she asserts. “I’ll tell him how I want you to keep comin’. I love you, Damon, and—and—it’s not fair if you have to be Stiles.”

“Addie, it’s very complicated. I know that it seems like—it seems unfair but—but I like it when me and Stiles are the same.”

“Why?”

“Because he helps me not be so scared all the time.”

“You can keep Max if you stay. He’s my new guard wolf. He’ll—”

“Thank you, Addie, but it’s—it’s not that simple. It’s more than—than Max can fix.”

“Miss Holly can help you feel better I bet.”

“But sharing Stiles’ head helps even more. I’ve already—we’re sharing already, that’s why you think he’s me sometimes. I just wanted to—to come one more time and make sure you knew that—” Stiles draws a shuddering breath, struggling not to just start sobbing and give up the ploy. “That I’m not going because of anything you did or because—because I don’t love you because I do, Addie, very, very much; you’re my best friend, but I—I wanna get better and Stiles can help me get better, you see?”

“No! I don’t want you to go, Damon! Please don’t,” she begs.

“I’m not really leaving you, not ever, Addie; I promise. I’ll be there whenever Stiles is. We’ll both be looking out for you and loving you and—”

“But it won’t be the same! I don’t want to share you with Stiles like that! I want you to be you, Damon!”
With the declaration she clambers up into his lap and wraps her arms tightly around him, and starts to cry in earnest. He hugs her back just as tightly, wishing more than anything that there was a simple answer to this that wouldn’t hurt her so much.

She’ll understand better when she’s older. This will have to do for now. Maybe it’ll be enough.

He knows he’s not going to hold himself together much longer, but he tries to calm himself somehow in hopes of staving off the migraine that’s now bringing spots to his tear-blurred vision. When the voices start, he’s already much too strained to be any kind of match.

See how happy she was with Damon? See how she begs him to stay? Rachel taunts. Look how much more she loves his company than yours.

Addie loves Damon best—Cora too. Derek and Isaac got a perfect night with Stilinski; Collin talks to Stilinski like a friend, but treats you like the fragile little freak you are, Alec chimes in.

No one wants the real you Stiles; no one loves you, Thomas finishes. How could they?

No, no, you’re wrong; you’re wrong; you’re wrong.

We’re not, and that’s what kills you; you know we’re exactly right. You’re a burden to everyone near you; you’re not loved; you’re tolerated.

No! They love me; they do. They do. I belong here. I always have a place here. Loved and useful and kept. I’m loved and useful and kept.

“Damon, don’ listen,” Addie implores, her voice breaking through the melee in Stiles’ head. “They’re just bein’ mean; don’t listen. I love you lots and lots.”

But only because she thinks you’re Damon right now, Alec’s sure to remind.

“Addie, I can’t—they’re too loud. I need—go get Isaac and—”

“Here,” Isaac replies from the doorway. “But lately it hasn’t been working as—”

“It’s okay, Isaac; I still want it,” he replies, barely keeping the words from being a desperate demand.

Shut me up before our daughter has to listen to anymore crying and arguing with the dead alphas screaming in my fucked up head. Shut me up, make me still, help me be better.

“You’re sure?” Isaac asks as he rolls over.

Stiles nods, biting back retorts to the voices echoing through his mind. He tries to pull Addie back from her hold on him.

“Addie, look at me; please?” he requests and she does.

“I love you; do you know that? Thank you so much for being my friend.”

“I love you too, Damon; don’t go.”

“He needs the medicine, sweetheart,” Isaac soothes. “It’ll help him.”

“But I don’t want him to go.”
“You want him to get better, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Sometimes, it’s not about what we want but about what helps the people we care about.”

With the statement, he pierces Stiles’ arm with the needle, and the world begins to fade away almost instantly. He soothes himself on the journey to tormented darkness with the knowledge that Isaac will take this time to explain better than Stiles could why Damon is gone.

*Please let this have helped somehow; don’t let it be completely pointless…*

******************************

“Have a seat, Mr. Hale,” Kathy Young, the Beacon Hills Elementary Guidance Counselor, bids.

“Derek is fine,” he says as he sits in the chair opposite her at her desk. “Thanks for meeting on short notice. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem,” she assures with a kind smile. “I know your family has had some rather serious setbacks recently. Is there something worrying you with Collin?”

“He’s—uh—he’s asked us several times now about being homeschooled.”

“I see.”

“At first we figured it was just because he thought it’d be easier or something—maybe less homework or not having to wake up early or things like that—but even once we explained that he’d have to see tutors and cover all the same material and still take tests and things, he still says he’d rather do that. I just—is there anything in particular going on that—could be fixed? Anything the teacher’s mentioned or maybe trouble with a particular kid or something?”

“Nothing that’s been shared with me,” Ms. Young replies, “but I can talk to Ms. Miller and see if there’s anything recent that may be causing the problem. I know she would have sat in on this meeting with us if she were available, but with the standardized testing next week she’s—”

“I understand; I’d appreciate that. We just want to make sure we understand the whole situation as much as we can before we make any drastic decisions for Collin.”

“I think that’s an excellent thing, to try and fully understand,” she says, “but you are prepared that there may not be a clear solution that would make Collin content here; it’s possible that home school may be a very good option for Collin right now.”

Derek’s genuinely surprised at the answer, and it must show because she supposes, “Not something you expected me to say?”

“Well, you do work for the school; I thought you might—”

“Mr. Hale—Derek, the school might pay my salary, but I work for the children,” she corrects, “and I firmly believe that finding the right environment is critical to a child’s education. It’s not unusual at all for a child with a complicated home life to feel estranged when surrounded by peers who haven’t yet been forced to mature to the same level. It doesn’t make you a bad parent; it just
means that you have to search for what works for what’s right for your son, which you’re clearly doing, which makes you a good parent.”

Derek doesn’t know how to reply to that, so he doesn’t, and the silence grows until she continues, “And I don’t mean to sound patronizing here, and perhaps I’m overstepping the bounds of what you meant to discuss in this meeting, but I would just like to say that, considering all of the struggles your family faces on a daily basis, it is fantastic that you still remain so attentive to the needs of your son. He’s a remarkable, resilient young man, and I’m happy he has the support of his parents.”

“Thank you,” Derek says, unsure how else to answer, and also incredibly thrown by how relived he feels to hear the words; he’s never really thought they were being bad parents per se, but it’s crossed his mind more than once that maybe they weren’t the best option for the kids. “I—uh—we just want whatever’s best for him,” he adds.

“Ms. Miller and I feel the same,” she assures. “I’ll speak with her after school today and let you know what she says? You’re welcome to sit in on the conversation if you can make it.”

“We’re actually hoping to see Isaac’s doctor this afternoon for some treatment options for the paralysis, so I’m not sure exactly what time any of us could—”

“No problem at all. I’ll give you a call in the morning.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

A knock at the door interrupts them, and Ms. Young bids, “Come in.”

“I’m so sorry to interrupt,” the young receptionist says, “but the principal needs you up front as soon as you can; there was a fight in the gym and—”

“I’ll be right there,” Ms. Young assures. “We were just finishing up.” She rises as the receptionist retreats. “Sorry to rush out,” she apologizes.

“No problem. I appreciate your time.”

And the fact that you genuinely don’t seem to think we’re shitty parents for exposing our kid to maybe the most complicated home life ever. This town could do with a few more people like you.

"Isaac, I really don’t think he’s okay,” Addie says mournfully as a particularly loud whimper drifts down from Stiles bedroom upstairs. “He’s no ‘supposed to have bad dreams with his medicine.”

“I know sweetheart, but—he’s resting so—so that’s good,” Isaac says, failing to hide his own worry.

“Should we call the doctor?”

“If he’s not better in a little while, we will, okay? How about we go out in the yard and play a little ‘til Derek gets home?”

Not that I can really play with you in the grass, but I’ll sit at least. It’ll get you farther from Stiles’ nightmares."
“I don’t feel like playing,” she replies, laying down on the couch with her face down in the crook of her arm.

Isaac wheels over to rub her back as he soothes, “Baby, I know that it was really sad for you to hear Damon say—”

“Is Damon really gone forever ‘n’ ever?” she demands, turning her tear-streaked face toward Isaac.

“Maybe so.”

“How come he has to be the one to go? It’s not his fault he wasn’t here first!”

“Because—because Damon is a part of Stiles, not the other way around.”

“I don’ know what that means; I want Damon back.” she persists.

“It’s like—like—” Isaac struggles, as always, for analogies that can even remotely touch on the complicated situation she’s a part of. “Like your jungle puzzle,” he finishes as his eyes land on the half-finished giant puzzle on the floor.

“Huh?”

“Which one is your favorite piece?” he wonders.

She hesitates, studying Isaac for a moment before turning her gaze to the puzzle and deciding, “The one with the tiger on it.”

“Good choice,” he says with a smile. “So you took that piece and you put it in the big puzzle, right?”

“Yeah.”

“But you can still see it, even though it’s connected with the other pieces now.”

“Uh-huh.”

“That piece is like Damon,” Isaac tells her, “but Stiles is the whole puzzle. There’s little pieces, but once the whole thing comes together it’s Stiles.”

“Pieces ‘cause his mind is broken, and he’s supposed to get better and be just one Stiles.”

“That’s right, but even when he’s one Stiles, you’ll still be able to see things that remind you of Damon—like how much he enjoys playing with you, and how he likes when you guys add extra sprinkles to the cookies.”

“But why does Damon have to be back in the big puzzle brain for Stiles when the other ones get to stay out of the puzzle? Stilinski doesn’t have to go in yet.”

“No, but you know Damon; you know how helpful he likes to be and how kind he can be and how much he wants everyone he loves to be happy.”

“Yeah, that’s how come he’s my favoritest.”

“So he wants to help Stiles finish the puzzle because he wants to be nice to Stiles?”
“Exactly,” Isaac affirms, because it’s the best logic he can provide her; she needs a why and she’s not quite old enough yet to understand that “why” is a question that doesn’t always have a specific answer.

“Like he’s the first one to wanna do dishes so everybody else can play,” Addie goes on, young mind clearly working to process and resolve the explanation she’s been given. “He doesn’t mind so much, so he volunteers an’ we don’t have to.”

“Yeah, he’s brave enough and kind enough to be first to go back in the big puzzle, but remember, you can still see him; he has a different name, but he’s still Stiles. Stiles loves you every bit as much as Damon.”

“I still wish they could both stay.”

“I know, honey; I’m sorry it’s all so confusing.”

“How long before Stiles’ brain puzzle gets done?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Soon?”

“Maybe.”

Hopefully, because these quick switches have got me more than a little worried that we’re headed for more and more chaos, and because you kids should get your Dad back and as whole as we can manage as soon as possible, and because you should get to experience what the full, whole Stiles is like. It’s overdue. For all of us.

Did you see that poor child, you monstrous thing? Making your daughter—more importantly the daughter of your Alpha and Second—cry and wail? They’ll rip you apart, wait and see.

You’ll be punished for sure; you deserve it; you need it. Pain is the greatest teacher, and you have many, many lessons still to learn.

Be grateful they’re still bothering to fool with you at all; you’re not worth it. You’ll never make up for the countless burdens you heap on your pack. They’ll never be happy with you.

They love the others better, Stilinski. Damon, even the quiet one—at least he’s not any trouble; you’re the pathetic, useless leftovers now the best bits have been put into the others—one independent, one obedient, one perfectly pliant—and what are you? Nothing but a groveling mess of partial training and horrifying disappointment.

You’ve seen the way they look at you; see the disgust on their faces every time you hit your knees.

They don’t want you here; don’t want you to interact, don’t want you to serve, don’t even want you to fuck—they’ve got a better one for that now.

Even the child can understand it, she knows you’re worthless this way; and yet you keep going back, keep forcing yourself on them. Burdening their every waking moment until some
version of you manages to find a way to be partially useful.

So how are you going to make this right? You can’t make it up to them with your body—they don’t want it. You’re mind is your only chance, but what scarred, dark corner of this mind could be worth anything?

You can’t make it better; you tucked her friend away into your insanity; you made her cry; your son is too stressed to be a normal child; you’re destroying your pack as they try to manage your mangled mind.

You’re not worth all this trouble; you never will be.

Hopeless.

Hopeless.

Derek checks his phone for what seems the millionth time since they left Jackson’s. Cora and Jackson both promised to call or text if anything changed, but Derek nevertheless had trouble walking out the front door with Stiles upstairs still whimpering aloud from time to time in his troubled sedation. Only the fear of Isaac’s reaction if this treatment doesn’t go well had kept him headed for the car.

“You know I’m the one who’s gonna get shocked, right?” Isaac teases, looking up at Derek from his place on the table in Deaton’s back room.

Derek doesn’t reply to the joke; he doesn’t answer at all, just continues to study the nodes Deaton is placing along Isaac’s legs with an increasing sense of foreboding.

Are we sure this is a road we want to take? There’s got to be something less drastic that might work too.

“I’ve done my homework, Derek,” Deaton assures as though he can hear Derek’s thoughts. “I wouldn’t pursue this option unless I felt it was very promising.”

“But you don’t know the voltage,” Derek reminds. “You’re guessing.”

“Educated guessing,” Isaac amends. “It’s not just a shot in the dark; we’ve got research and case studies; he’s starting just slightly above human levels and gradually going up from there.” He reaches to grab Derek’s hand and reminds, “We talked about all this.”

“It was easier to talk about when we weren’t about to electrocute you,” Derek mutters.

“It’s not electrocution; it’s—”

“Close enough,” Derek persists.

“Derek, it could help me walk; what’s a little shock compared to that?”

“Risky.”

“Derek.”

“I just—” he cuts off the confession of worry and fixes Deaton with a glare, “and you’re sure it can’t make it worse.”
“As sure as we can be.”

“That wasn’t a yes.”

“Derek, that’s enough, okay? It’s my body, my legs; we’ve researched; we’ve discussed; now we’re doing exactly what we discussed. I know you’re worried but just—trust a little.”

_Easier said than done._

“Please?” Isaac goes on, squeezing Derek’s hand a little tighter. “Just relax.”

“Okay, Isaac, I think we’re ready,” Deaton informs. “Derek, you’ll need to let go.”

It takes more effort than it should to let Isaac’s fingers slip from his; they’ve been through plenty worse, but it still doesn’t make it any easier.

“It’s very low voltage,” Deaton assures again, “we just want enough to stimulate the muscles you haven’t been able to use; they don’t even need to be shocked enough to contract at this point.”

“I’m not worried,” Isaac replies. “Go for it.”

Derek’s senses react automatically to the sense of electric buzz in the room. He tenses and shuts his eyes where he stands by the table, and for just a second he swears he can hear Kate laughing quietly and he can’t breathe or think or move until Isaac’s giving a half-hearted laugh that drowns out the imaginary one.

“It kinda tickled,” he informs them. “I think maybe at least a little more?”

They work their way up, though Deaton reminds Isaac repeated that this is more for the muscle recuperation than the spinal cord; it could still take time.

“One more time, at least,” Isaac says. “The muscles haven’t even contracted yet. It doesn’t hurt. It’s—”

“Don’t push,” Derek argues. “It’s only been a couple weeks, Isaac.”

“Only?!” Isaac repeats incredulously. “Don’t fucking say that to me while you’re standing there on your own two legs; there is no ‘only’ to how long I’ve been in that goddamn chair!”

The outburst reveals just how completely Isaac’s banking on this stimulation garnering some kind of result.

“One more level,” Deaton agrees, “but I’m with, Derek; we shouldn’t push too far too fast.”

“Just do it,” Isaac demands, irritated.

None of them are quite prepared for Isaac’s legs to completely contract and raise his knees up off the table. The elation on Isaac’s face at seeing his legs moving brings Derek’s heart to his throat.

*It was the electricity, not you. Don’t get too excited yet. Wait. Wait and see. You might have to work on it a while longer.*

But then Isaac picks his right foot up off the table just an inch or two before his leg flops back down flat. It’s clear he’s trying to lift it back up, but he only partly succeeds and his leg instead goes off the table.
“Now the left,” Deaton urges. “Any improved movement there?”

Isaac doesn’t manage to get it off the table like his right, but after it falls flat to the table he inches it to the side just slightly.

“Holy fucking shit,” Isaac says, laughing through the words. “Derek, do you see this!?”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Derek says.

“Crutches, hand me those crutches, Derek.”

“I think you’d be a bit more steady on the walker,” Deaton advises.

********************

Maybe it’s petty or vain, but Isaac absolutely refuses the idea of the walker; somehow it still seems like a prison of it’s own. In the end, they make a combo of the braces that hold Isaac’s legs straight and crutches. Isaac falls more than once trying to keep balance and carry weight with his upper body while his legs succeed in their small, pitiful-yet-phenomenal movements, but every time he falls, Derek catches him. By the end of the hour—or two?—that seems like an eternity, Isaac makes it from one side of the room to the other.

“That is absolutely astounding, Isaac,” Deaton says, grinning every bit as wide as the other two. “I wasn’t sure we’d get a reaction at all much less—”

“That I could fucking walk!?” he interjects excitedly, but stumbles a little as he says the words. “Well, close enough to walking anyway,” he amends.

*Close enough to walking; far enough from needing that damn chair.*

*It’s a hell of a victory for the day, and I’m gonna take it.*

*I’m walking.*

**********************

Stiles stares up at the ceiling above him for a little while before he realizes it’s not his ceiling.

*So where am I?*

He looks around confusedly, trying to remember how he got here. But he’s never seen this room before. When he sits, his head pounds, and he can hear blood rushing in his ears. He thinks for a second or two that he’s gonna throw up, but he cradles his head in his hands and the feeling goes away after a little while.

“Scott?” he calls, softly hoping maybe his usual partner in crime might be nearby to explain what the heck is going on.

No one answers, so Stiles gets slowly to his feet, mindful of his aching head.

*How did I get here? Did someone bring me? Did something happen?*
He thinks back, trying to remember the events that led up to this one. The last thing he can remember is being in the grocery store.

We were grocery shopping. I said I wanted the Reese’s Puffs instead of the Lucky Charms. I put them in the cart. How did I—how did I get here?

Suddenly every warning Mom and Dad ever gave him about strangers seems to play through his mind.

Is that what happened? Did somebody take me? Did I go with somebody? How come I don’t remember it?

Crap. I’m gonna be in so much trouble when I get home.

If I get home.

No. No! Even if I am kidnapped or something, Dad’ll find me. He’s the best deputy ever. He’ll find me.

Stiles crosses to the window, blinking against the bright light from outside, and peeks through the blinds. He’s on the second floor of this house, and this house is in the middle of a really big yard, and then there are woods. It’s no place Stiles knows, and it only adds to the idea that maybe somebody brought him here. If he can just figure out a way to get down from here then he can run toward the woods maybe. He go find the road and walk until he gets back to something he recognizes. Maybe even Dad or one of the other deputies will pass by if they’re out looking.

I bet Dad made all the other deputies help him look for me.

Crap. I’m in so much trouble.

He moves to open the window, and realizes just how huge his hands are. They’re as big as Dad’s, and there’s hair all down his arms. He examines himself further and realizes how big his feet are, how long his legs look, how tall he is.

What happened to me?

I look grown up.

Why do I look so grown up?

What’s going on?

He’s distracted from all other thoughts by the sound of a little girls shrieking somewhere downstairs. He runs for the door, clumsy with his legs and arms so long, and heads toward the sound, realizing too late that he has no idea what the heck he’ll do when he gets wherever he’s headed.

The fear stops just as quickly as it started when he finds himself at the foot of the stairs taking in the sight of a little girl tickling a lady who’s overdramatically demanding, “No more! No more! You win the tickle war, okay, munchkin?”

He turns to follow the little girl’s gaze, and she sees Stiles where he’s frozen. He can’t decide if he should run or not, but he kind of figures if this little kid is okay here than maybe things aren’t as bad as he originally thought. They’re still not good, but they’re not bad.
“Stiles?” the little girl wonders.

He nods, trying to figure out how she knows his name. Maybe she goes to his school or something.

“Stiles? Are you okay?” the lady asks.

He studies her face as he nods again. There’s something familiar about her, but he can’t quite figure it out.

“You sure?” she says.

“Yeah.”

“And your name is Stiles?”

“Yeah.”

“What was the name of our pee wee soccer team?”

It seems like a weird question, but he answers anyway—at least he thinks it’s the answer she wants.

“I play on the Raiders.” With the reply recognition finally dawns on him, “Oh, you’re Laura, right?! You’re Cora’s big sister?!”

“I—uh—I’m—Stiles, how old are you?”

“Nine ‘n’ a half, why?”

“No, you’re not; you’re old,” the little girl informs.

“I just look old; I don’t know why or what happened, but—but I’m nine and—and I was at the grocery store with—”

“Breathe, Stiles, breathe; it’s okay,” Laura soothes. “Nobody’s going to hurt you; you’re safe here; you’re just confused, but we can answer your questions, okay?”

“I wanna call my Mom,” he tells her, and her face crumples at the words.

“You can’t do that, but—”

“Why not?” he demands, suspicion rising again despite the fact he’s identified her.

“Just—just—okay, um—look this is kind of—complicated, so—but you can call your Dad. How about that?”

“Yeah.”

He ignores her previous forbiddance when he warily takes the phone she offers; the phone rings five times before going to voicemail.

“This is Jo Stilinski,” Mom’s voice says. “I’m sorry I missed your call. Please leave your name and number and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

“Hey, Mom, it’s me,” Stiles says. “It’s Stiles,” he adds because his voice has changed along with the rest of him. “I—uh—I don’t know what happened at the grocery store, but, but now I’m at
Cora’s house with her big sister and—and I just thought maybe you could come get me. I’ll call Dad though, don’t worry, just—sorry for wandering off or whatever I did. Don’t kill me, okay? Love you.”

He hangs up and turns back toward Laura, who’s staring at him with tears welling in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he wonders.

“Nothing,” she says, wiping at her eyes, “I just—uh—some dust or something—why don’t you—you should just try your Dad’s number now.”

He of course follows the suggestion because it’s the next logical step. Dad picks up on the third ring.

“John Stilinski,” Dad answers, and Stiles’ knees almost give out in relief at the familiar voice.

“Dad?”

“Hey, Stiles,” his father greets. “I was just about to call you three and see—”

“Daddy, come get me,” Stiles pleads, all pride and bravery melting with the promise of Dad coming to take care of whatever’s going on.

_I don’t know how I got here. I don’t know what happened. Please don’t be mad. Please just come get me._

“Stiles, what happened? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I was at the store with you and Mom and—and then I was here and—if I got lost I didn’t mean to, so please don’t be too mad because—”

“It’s okay, Stiles; don’t cry. I’m not mad at all, and you’re safe where you are. I promise. Who’s there with you?”

“Um—L—Laura Hale and—I don’t—”

“Laura?”

“Uh-huh; Cora’s sister; from my soccer team. Remember she—”

“Can you give her the phone for a minute?”

“Yeah,” Stiles agrees, though he hates giving up the link to Dad.

“Hey, Pop,” Cora says when she takes the phone from Stiles. “What’s the plan?”

_Pop? That’s a really weird thing for you to call my Dad._

“That’s a very good question,” Dad replies, and Stiles can’t believe how clearly he can understand the other end of the line.

_This is how they always catch me doing stuff. You get like super hearing or something when you grow up?_

“Grilled cheese and cartoons until you get here?” Cora offers, and Stiles’ tummy rumbles at
the thought. He doesn’t think he’s eaten in a little while.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Dad agrees. “I’ll be there soon as I can.”

“I want to talk to him again,” Stiles says, panicking and grabbing for the phone now that it sounds like Dad may be close to hanging up; Laura gives it back to him easily enough.

“Dad?”

“Hey, kiddo, Co—Laura’s going to take care of you until I get there, okay?”

“I wanna go home, Dad. Can’t she just bring me—”

“There’s stuff that—there’s a lot to talk about so, just hang out for a little while; can you do that for me? I promise you’ll be fine until I get there.”

“You’re coming quick though, right?”

“Yeah, quick as I can. I’m already out the door.”

“Okay.”

“It’s all okay, Stiles. I promise.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s going to make you a grilled cheese for some dinner; you’ll love it. he makes them even better than me.”

“No way,” Stiles scoffs. “Yours are the best, Dad.”

“Give hers a shot, okay?”

“Hey Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“I—I look all grown up.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“Yeah, Stiles, you—you had an accident, and sometimes you forget things.”

I thought that kinda stuff only happened in movies.

He studies his too-big left hand as he adds, “I think I probably forgot a lot of things.”

“That’s okay. I’ll catch you up as soon as I get there.”

“Kinda hurry, okay, Dad?”

“I am. I’ll be there before you know it, but I’m gonna hang up now so I can call—I’ve got some friends who can probably come help us with everything.”

“Don’t hang up,” Stiles pleads.
“I need to, kiddo; I’m sorry, but it’s all gonna be okay, Stiles. I promise, but I need you to let me hang up and you go eat your grilled cheese and I’ll be there in just a little while.”

“Okay,” Stiles agrees reluctantly.

“I love you, Stiles.”

“‘Kay. Love you too, Dad.”

“Bye for now.”

Chapter End Notes

Much, much love and thanks as always to my wonderful, wonderful betas!

A reminder that all things medical and mental in this 'verse are much more plot-serving than attempts at realism :)
Chapter 11

Stiles stares at the phone in his hands, trying and failing to process the situation here.

*Dad’ll be here soon. He promised. He’ll explain everything.*

*But I wanna know right now.*

He looks up at Laura and sets his jaw determinedly; he’s not gonna cry or freak out; he’s gonna investigate.

“My Dad said I had an accident,” he says to her. “What kind?”

“Bad Alphas hurt you,” the little girl replies.

“Addie, let me, okay?” Laura requests.

“Well, they *did*. The bad alphas hurt Stiles and—”

“What’s an alpha?” Stiles interrupts. “Is that like a code name?”

*Maybe I grew up and was like an awesome secret agent man and got zapped in the head and now my memories are like all gone. It’s like a movie!*

“No, it’s—complicated,” Laura replies.

“I’m smart,” Stiles asserts. “Explain it.”

“You know—uh—maybe your Dad should be the one to talk to you.”

“Come on. I wanna know. What does ‘alpha’ mean?”

“Do you know anything about wolves—or dogs in general I guess?” Laura wonders. “Like have you heard anyone ever say “alpha dog”?”

“We learned about it in Ms. Langley’s class last year. That dogs are from wolves and wolves live in packs and hunt together and stuff. The alpha means leader, right? It’s the wolf in charge.”

“Right, and that’s what Addie kinda meant.”

“Bad wolves hurt me?” he wonders skeptically, and Addie confirms solemnly, “Uh-huh. They hurt you real bad.”
“Wolves haven’t been in California in like a really long time; they went extinct here because—well, I don’t remember it all, but there aren’t wolves here anymore.”

“No regular wolves, silly, *werewolves,*” Addie explains.

He laughs at the answer for a moment before he realizes they’re not laughing with him.

“Werewolves aren’t real.”

“Are too,” Addie argues. “Look it!”

“Addie, don’t,” Laura orders, but in the next instant the little girl before him is sprouting hair on her face and claws from her fingers and Stiles takes steps back but really he’s not so scared just really curious now and has like a *million billion* new questions but the first one that his mouth decides to blurt out is, “Whoa, where’d your eyebrows go?!”

*****************************************************************************

“Stiles? Cora? Anybody home?” Dad’s voice calls through the house as the front door opens.

Stiles knocks his chair over as he bolts from the table, mouth still half full of grilled cheese, to meet his Dad. He trips over his own feet more than once on the way, and just barely remembers in time that he’s too big to jump up for Dad to catch. He almost knocks Dad back out the door despite his attempt to slow down, and he hears Dad give a slight ‘umph’ at the impact. He’s laughing in the next instant though, hugging Stiles tight, and now Stiles knows everything’s really okay.

“Hey, kiddo,” Dad greets. “Got here quick as I could.”

“It’s okay. Cora made grilled cheese,” Stiles says, swallowing the bite still in his mouth and pulling back from the embrace reluctantly.

“So then, you know she’s Cora?” Dad asks.

“Yeah, and I’m all grown up and a werewolf—which isn’t the same as super powers but it’s still kinda cool, right?”


“She quit answering questions and told Addie she was grounded if she answered any for me.”

Dad chuckles. “I’m sure she just wanted to make sure you didn’t get too much information at once.”

“Yeah, but I wanna know stuff! Like *everything!* Please?”

“I’ll catch you up on things. For now why don’t you finish eating?”

“I’m full.”

“You’re never full, kiddo; can’t fool me.”
“Okay, not full but not hungry,” Stiles amends. “Tell me more about the werewolf stuff.”

“Stiles--”

“Cora says you’re not one.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Is Mom?”

“No,” Dad replies, but his voice goes squeaky when he says it, and it occurs to Stiles that that is the same question that led Cora to her “no more questions” rule.

“Is Mom gonna come here too? Are you gonna wait and explain together?”

You guys like talking about big stuff together; like when I wanted to get a hamster and why I couldn’t go to Space camp and how much trouble I was in for ruining Grandma’s ugly purple purse and--

Stiles train of thought comes to a halt when he takes in the sight of Dad’s face. He kinda looks like he’s gonna cry, but that can’t be right because Dad doesn’t ever cry, not unless it’s really bad, and nothing’s that bad is it?

He told me everything was okay. He promised.

“Dad?”

“I--uh--no, kiddo; Mom’s not coming.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, when we get home--”

“Stiles, Mom is--your Mom is--she’s not coming because--she just can’t right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because she can’t.”

“I left her a voicemail; she might get it and--”

“She can’t,” Dad snaps, startling Stiles to silence before immediately apologizing. “I didn’t mean to--I’m sorry, son; I just don’t know what to say that--it’s not--”

Dad always knows what to say. Dad doesn’t get this sad for no reason. Dad never, ever turns away from Stiles like he’s doing now, and it’s all more scary than anything Dad could say to him, surely.

“Dad, you’re scarin’ me,” Stiles tells him quietly. “What is it?”

Dad moves his mouth like he’s gonna talk, but the words must get stuck because no sound comes out. It’s Cora’s voice that breaks the silence.

“Your mom passed away a while ago, Stiles,” she says from behind them.

“No,” Stiles protests immediately, turning to face Cora. “No, no way; you’re wrong. Mom’s not--she can’t be dead. Dad, tell her that Mom’s not--” The request chokes off somewhere in the back of his throat when he turns back to his dad because the truth is in Dad’s watery eyes. “But--but I called her phone and--I heard her talking, right? She’s--she’s--Mom can’t be dead.”
“It’s just a recording, Stiles; I never--I couldn’t shut the line off, but it’s--just--she’s--she’s gone, kiddo, and I’m so sorry that--”

“No!” Stiles protests, pushing past Dad. “No, it’s not possible. I saw her like an hour ago at the grocery store and she was fine and happy and she was gonna let me pick out which cereal I wanted and--”

Stiles doesn’t finish the sentence. His words cut off as his body takes over, running for the door before he can think about where he’s even going. There’s a car pulling in the driveway, but he doesn’t pay it any attention, just runs past and on toward the road, tripping in the driveway but still fast.

*I’m gonna get home, and she’ll be there; I bet she’ll make taco casserole for dinner if I ask. I’ll help her. We can make cookies. It’ll be good; it’ll be okay.*

*She’s not dead. She can’t be dead.*

*My Mom can’t be dead.*

“Stiles, stop running!”

He obeys the shouted command from a young voice without really meaning too, turning toward whoever shouted because it seems like too much effort to ignore the words and keep going.

*What was that?*

A boy and man are sprinting over to him, followed by Dad and Cora at a slower pace.

“How’d you do that?” Stiles demands. “What are you?”

“Um--it worked?”

“Kind of,” Stiles answers, taking a step back to prove that he *could* ignore the boy if he *really* wanted to. “What are you?” he repeats.

“Alpha-Elect,” Collin answers. “I don’t wanna like--boss you just--it’s not safe for you to run of by yourself when you’re not--wait, who *are* you?”

“Stiles, you know that; you said my name.”

“Yeah, but--”

“He’s nine,” Cora calls across the yard as she and Dad continue to close distance.

*And a half,* Stiles corrects mentally.

“What? Really?” the man wonders.

“I had an accident; I forget things sometimes,” Stiles replies as though he actually understands what’s happened to him in the time he can’t recall.

“Right,” the boy agrees, “but--uh--there’s nothing to be scared of with us; you’re safe here; you don’t need to run from anything.”

“I’m not running *from* anybody; I’m running *to* my Mom. I gotta get home and--”
“She’s not there, Stiles,” the man says.

“She has to be.”

“Jackson’s right,” the kid confirms. “She’s--she--”

“My mom is not dead!” Stiles shouts, turning to run again, but small hands grab his arm to stop him.

“I wish it wasn’t true, Stiles, but--you know we wouldn’t lie to you; Pop--I mean your Dad, he wouldn’t either; not about something like this. You can’t go home; she’s not there anyway. You gotta stay here where it’s safer.”

“Safer from what?”

“Just--safer,” Collin replies.

Dad wouldn’t lie about this. It’s too mean to be a dumb trick or something. They all believe it. Are they all wrong? They must be. Mom can’t be dead; maybe I look all grown up, but you totally still need a mom until you’re like a hundred or something, right? So mine can’t be dead. I need her.

But Dad wouldn’t lie to me…

The terrible, overwhelming truth finally starts to sink in, and Stiles can feel the tears burning in his eyes and the crushing pressure in his chest and he wants to say something to Dad but his throat’s all closed up now and the only thing that comes out is a sob. Dad’s there in the next instant though, holding him tightly like a reminder that even if Mom’s dead, he isn’t; he’s still here. But Mom’s not and the thought hurts like somebody keeps punching him in the stomach, and Stiles thinks maybe he might really throw up any second, if he could stop crying.

He hides his face against Dad’s chest, a little embarrassed that he’s being a baby in front of all these people he doesn’t know, but it doesn’t really matter because Mom is dead.

No, no, no, no, no.

It’s gotta be a bad dream right? A really, really weird, bad dream?

But Stiles doesn’t wake up, not when Dad guides him back to the house, not when they retreat back to the bedroom Stiles woke up in, not even when he tries to clamber in Dad’s lap even though he’s too big now. Dad holds him as best he can anyway, rocking him and shushing him and promising over and over that it’ll be okay. And when Stiles is all out of tears, he’s still hoping it’s a nightmare.

But it’s not

And that means Mom is dead.

*****************************************************************************

Isaac isn’t sure what he expected to find when they got home to Stiles being “reset to nine years old again” as Cora informed them via text, but it wasn’t to be able to hear him bawling when they put the car in park in the driveway. Isaac should have seen this coming though. If Stiles is nine
then he woke up asking for his parents, and didn’t know yet that she’s gone. He was maybe a little naïve in hoping they wouldn’t have to face this problem just yet.

“Okay, so why would he split so that he has to deal with this again?” Derek wonders. “He’s clearly not relaxed by being reset to an age where he has to relive and relearn things like his mom dying. How the fuck does this help him cope?”

Isaac’s wondering the same, but he shrugs for now, pondering the situation a moment or two longer before realizing, “Maybe it’s not about him.”

“Who else would benefit from—” Derek cuts off the question to answer it himself. “The kids?”

“Maybe,” Isaac agrees. “He was trying to make it up to Addie that Damon wasn’t back—then trapped in his head with the voices—what the fuck was I thinking giving him that sedative? I should’ve known better than—”

“Hey, he went with the plan, too; neither of you had any way of knowing this would be the result; we don’t even know that this is because of all that. It’s all theories.”

“It always is, but—”

“Come on; let’s get inside and give them a little good news, okay? Stiles had a setback, and we’re going to handle that the best we can, but it doesn’t overshadow the fact that you walked today, Isaac,” Derek says, and Isaac can’t help but smile.

“Yeah, pretty awesome, huh?”

“Incredibly awesome.”

He gets out of the car and comes around to help Isaac out. The best part is that, while Isaac is grateful for the safety net of Derek’s presence, Isaac can get out of the car on his own; he walks toward the door, slowly, but hey, it’s still walking. He’s more than a little exhausted but still grinning like an idiot even before Collin bursts out onto the porch crying, “Holy crap, Isaac! You’re really for real walking!”

“Well, close enough,” Isaac replies with a chuckle, not bothering to correct Collin’s language this time.

“Good for you, man,” Jackson says, coming to the door behind Collin. “That’s awesome.”

“Thanks,” Isaac says, trying hard not to be bothered that he’s still barely halfway to the front door.

Stiles’ crying upstairs—mostly sniffling with the occasional outbursts—is even more audible in here. Collin shouldn’t be listening to this.

“Hey, maybe—uh—let’s go to the back yard?”

“Addie’s out there with Cora so she can’t hear it,” Collin says, already guessing his father’s motivation. “But Pop’s up there with him and Stiles could shift again and be one that doesn’t know. I wanna stay close.”

“Kid really stepped up til you guys got home,” Jackson informs. “You should be proud of him.”
“Always,” Isaac confirms automatically, “but—”

“My Alpha voice works,” Collin interjects, changing the subject just slightly and succeeding in taking attention from the idea of relocation for a moment.

“What?” Derek asks.

“We came home from the store and Stiles was running away from the house and I told him to stop and it worked—like Alpha tone kind of worked—mostly. It didn’t scare him or anything, so that was good; and he could ignore me if he wanted I think but, but everybody else was shouting it too, and mine was different and it worked.”

“Collin, that’s—that is really great,” Derek says with a proud smile that Isaac thinks might be just a little too pleased at the news that their eleven year old is carrying enough maturity to command his Elect position.

*Deaton said this wouldn’t happen until his late teens. This isn’t the kind of progress we should want—not yet. It means he’s growing up too fast—not that we didn’t know that already but—dammit, Derek stop looking so delighted!*

“Yeah,” Collin agrees, grinning ear to ear. “It was pretty cool.”

“It was very cool,” Jackson affirms, “and it kept us from having to tackle Stiles or something which could’ve gotten a way worse reaction.”

“This does not mean you can use it all the time,” Derek tells him. “Emergencies only, okay? And maybe we’ll practice sometimes, but—”

“No using it on Addie and Logan?” Collin guesses; he’s been given the just-because-you’re-elect-doesn’t-mean-you’re-the-boss-of-them speech more than once. It’s not a stretch to guess where the rule was headed. “Yeah, yeah, I know; I won’t; swear.”

“Good.”

“So—um—what do we do now? I mean, with this Stiles?” Collin says. “He’s just kind of crying now, but is he gonna wanna stay with us if he doesn’t remember us?”

“We’ll talk to him about everything when he’s up to it,” Isaac replies. “He might decide to go to Pop’s or Pop might stay here with us for a while.”

“I can like totally be the one that watches him and stuff,” Collin offers. “I’m not that much older than he thinks he is, so if he goes to Pop’s then I can go to and be there to like help with the werewolf kinda stuff or if he shifts or something.”

“We’ll see,” Derek says. “There’s a lot of things to figure out, but that’ll come later, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

*****************************************************************************

Kickball isn’t the best distraction ever—*nothing’s* really gonna overshadow the fact that Mom’s gone—but it’s better than sitting in the quiet upstairs with Dad any longer, thinking non-stop
about all the things Stiles is gonna miss. They divide up into teams: Cora, Collin, and Jackson up
against Derek, Stiles, and Addie; Isaac is referee since he can’t get around very good with his
crutches and stuff yet. Dad says he’s scorekeeper, but mostly he just looks too tired for anything,
and it makes him look old. It worries Stiles more than a little, but he’s trying not to think about it too
much.

Busy day at work I bet; that’s probably it. He’s sheriff now; I bet that means he’s extra
super busy.

They play outside a long time—kickball and soccer and redlight-greenlight and even ring
around the rosie because it’s Addie’s favorite and she begs everybody—until the sun starts setting
and the bugs get too annoying. Stiles hasn’t spoken much the whole time ‘cause he’s got this feeling
that he might start crying again if he starts to talk or think too much. Now they’re back inside
though, sucking on popsicles until their lips turn red and blue and green and purple, and all the
questions he hasn’t asked yet are nagging him.

“Stiles, what’s’a matter?” Addie asks. “You wan’ another popsicle?” she wonders, hopping
up and apparently ready to fetch him one.

“No.”

“Don’t cry again,” she pleads. “Please.”

“Addie,” Isaac scolds. “Stiles has had a really hard day; it’s okay if he feels—”

“I’m done cryin’,” Stiles asserts firmly. “I’m just thinkin’ is all.”

“About what, kiddo?” Dad wonders.

“Stuff,” he replies with a shrug because he doesn’t even know what question he would ask if
he were to start.

How come I got a wedding ring on like Dad’s?

How come nobody seems like it’s so weird that I lost all my memories?

Why doesn’t Dad want to be a werewolf too? Does he think something’s wrong with it? Was
he mad I turned into be one?

Where’s Scott? Is he a Dad now? I heard Addie say ‘Uncle Scott’ about something. Was it
about him?

How long before I get more memories back?

How do I keep from getting claws and stuff and hurting Dad on accident?

Where’s Laura and Mrs. Hale and Mr. Hale and Cora’s Uncle Peter and—what was the
other kid’s name? Cora had a little brother who wanted to play on our team all the time but he
wasn’t big enough? What happened to them? Why doesn’t anybody talk about them?

What kind of accident was so bad that they don’t even wanna tell me about it? Did those
‘bad alphas’ beat me up really bad? Those guys who tried to rob the bank beat up Daddy’s friend
Deputy Eason real bad and it made him go in a coma for a long time. Was it like that?

“You can ask questions if you want,” Dad tells him. “It’s okay to be curious.”
But what if there’s more bad answers? I don’t want more answers about people being dead or things being bad or anything. The truth about Mom was bad enough.

Stiles just shakes his head to decline Dad’s offer.

“Yeah, Addie, let’s go get another popsicle,” he says instead.

Derek’s trying to figure out what they’re going to do when Stiles gets tired enough to fall asleep. He’s almost certain to have nightmares of some sort; even if there weren’t horrible things lurking in his subconscious, the kid wouldn’t sleep well after the terrible news he got today. Still, the sheriff would be too easily hurt if Stiles switches in his sleep or has a nightmare; it’s too risky. It’s too weird to have Derek or Isaac offer to sleep with Stiles—as far as this personality is concerned, he’s seen them around a few times and known them less than twenty-four hours.

We’ll probably just have to put him to bed alone and keep an ear out for trouble.

Half an hour later, Stiles and Addie have both fallen asleep to Toy Story; John’s in between them, with Stiles’ head in his lap and Addie curled into his other side. It’s clear Stiles is actually sleeping soundly—thanks to the active evening outside and the proximity to his dad?—and Derek hates the thought of waking them. When the credits start to roll, John speaks before Derek gets the chance.

“I know what you’re gonna say, and I’ll take my chances.”

“John—”

“He is nine and I am not putting him in a bed by himself in a strange house on the day he found out his mother is dead,” John answers bluntly. “I will take my chances.”

Derek can’t argue with the statement, especially not as one father to another. He scoops Addie up and away, carrying her toward her room.

“What ‘bout Stiles?” she mumbles sleepily.

“He’s with Pop; he’s fine.”

“Mmmkay.”

“Night, Addie,” Derek says as he tucks her into bed. “Sweet dreams.”

The sentiment makes her eyes snap open, momentarily wide-awake. “Does Stiles need Max? He was sad a lot today?”

“He’s got Pop; I don’t think he’ll mind if you keep Max.”

You had a pretty intense day yourself, munchkin.

Derek opts to sleep in the den with Stiles and John, hoping that if the worst should happen the Alpha tone or Derek’s direct intervention will be enough to quell any outbursts. He’s just on the edge of sleep when the patter of little feet wakes him, and he sees Addie attempting to sneak in the
living room.

What in the world?

He shuts his eyes quickly when she glances over, curious to see what she’s up to. She approaches the couch where Stiles and John are both snoring lightly, and Derek tenses in the recliner.

Shit. Shit. Don’t wake up; Don’t hurt her; keep sleeping, Stiles. Don’t switch.

She reaches out toward Stiles, and Derek sees the silhouette of the stuffed wolf in her grasp. She tucks it into the crook of his elbow, and Derek’s breath catches in his throat as Stiles stirs at the contact.

“Whassssit?” he slurs sleepily.

“It’s Max; now you won’t have no bad dreams, ‘kay?”

“Mmmhmmmm,” Stiles agrees sleepily, not really waking.

“Nightie Night, Stiles. Sweet Dreams.”

“Nigh’, Addie.”

She retreats back down the hall to her room, and Derek honestly has to blink back tears at the exchange he’s just witnessed. It takes him a moment to realize John’s eyes are open now too. The older man smiles at him in the dim light.

“Pretty great kid, huh?” he says quietly.

“Yeah,” Derek agrees.

“Enjoy it,” John advises. “They grow up too quick,” he adds, looking back down at his son.

But they never really grow up in their parents’ eyes, do they? Part of Stiles is always going to be nine years old to you.

And I’m always going to look at Collin and see the lost child Alpha I met in Deaton's office; And Addie’s always going to be the little girl hoping she can have the pretty room with the princess seat…

Stiles wakes in a puddle of drool on Dad’s leg with a stuffed wolf clutched to his chest. It takes a moment or two more for the events of yesterday to flood back in, and it still doesn’t seem real that he’s missing like fifteen whole years of his life—or that he’s missing his Mom.

He needs a distraction from that train of thought, and his throat’s really super dry, so he moves to get up and get water. He’s trying not to wake Dad up, but Dad and Derek both react immediately to his moment.

“Stiles? You okay?” Derek asks.

“Thirsty,” he answers. “Can I go get orange juice?”
“Yeah, of course,” Dad says. “I could use a little coffee myself. Maybe we’ll call in a to-go order to Caroline’s for breakfast; what’d’ya think, kiddo?”

“Extra sprinkles on my waffle?” Stiles hopes, and Dad smiles.

“You bet.”

“Yes! Best Dad ever!” he declares, and Dad laughs as Stiles as he disappears into the kitchen.

Dad and Derek talk about boring stuff like the weather while they start coffee—which Stiles doesn’t bother to ask for. He doesn’t feel like fighting with dad, and besides, there’s like all kinds of good stuff in this kitchen.

“Hey, can I have some of this?” he wonders, pulling out a bowl of what he’s hoping is chocolate pudding with Oreos on top.

“Sure,” Derek allows just as Dad says, “not before breakfast.” Dad’s answer has Derek backtracking immediately. “Your Dad’s right; maybe after breakfast,” Derek amends.

Stiles sighs heavily and shoves the bowl back into the packed refrigerator.

**************************

One second Stiles is replacing the pudding bowl to its place in the fridge, the next there’s a cacophony of breaking glass as he dislodges more dishes than he can catch before they shatter on the tile around his feet.

“I didn’t mean to!” Stiles says, backing up from the mess immediately and then hissing in pain as the glass on the tile pieces his bare feet and stumbling back to land hard on the kitchen floor.

“It’s okay, Stiles; you’re just stronger than you think,” Derek assures, moving toward him and ignore the stab of glass in his own feet. “You’re not in trouble. We’ll get it cleaned up no problem. Nothing to worry about.”

“O—okay,” Stiles replies, but Derek can already see the tremors starting.

“It’s really okay, Stiles,” Derek repeats. “You’re not in trouble; not one bit, okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

But he doesn’t—or can’t?—believe Derek’s words because Stiles’ heart is pounding in his chest as the shaking worsens.

“I didn’t mean to,” Stiles repeats.

“I know; it’s okay; you’re not in trouble.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I know; you just—”

“I didn’t mean to, Derek; I didn’t mean to; I didn’t mean to; I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Derek,” Stiles goes on, talking over Derek’s words, eyes going wide in fear, and Derek’s not sure if it’s a fear
of Derek or fear at the fact that Stiles probably can’t control his speech right now. “I didn’t mean to, Derek; I’m sorry; I’m sorry, Alpha, please I didn’t mean to; please, I didn’t mean to; I’m sorry. I’ll clean it up; I’m sorry; I’ll make it up to you; please, Alpha, I’ll make it up to you; I can be better! I’ll be good; I will be. I’ll cook it all for you again, I promise! I promise I can. I didn’t mean to! I’ll make it up to you! Please let me! Please!”

“Be quiet; listen to me,” the Alpha commands, and Beta of course obeys, embarrassed and horrified that he kept speaking over the Alpha in the first place.

But he doesn’t remember coming to this place, he only remembers the office before, and that must mean he’s had another seizure; he’s lost more time; he’s made a mess of the Alpha’s kitchen; and no Alpha could possibly tolerate such worthlessness, and terror surges through him when the Alpha says, “You don’t need to make it up to me, okay? It was just an accident. I’m not going to hurt you at all. I’m just going to pick you up and take you to the table so we can get some of this glass out. I’ll explain all of it for you; don’t worry.”

“Thank you, Alpha.”

“Call me Derek, okay? And we call you Stiles.”

A name? I don’t need a name; I don’t want one. My pack is my identity. I’m a good beta. I know where I belong and what I’m good for. I’m a very good beta.

I just don’t know how to stop the seizures; that’s all.

Maybe you’re testing me? To see if I know how to be good?

“Yes, Alpha,” he answers aloud, pliant and still as he’s lifted from the floor and carried toward the oak chair at the breakfast table.

“Do you remember anything?”

“There—there was an office, Alpha, but only—only for a moment and then—I must have—my mind was weak; I don’t know—”

“It’s okay if that’s all you remember; something is better than nothing. Do you remember anything before the office?”

You’re worried I remember my old pack more than yours?

“I’m loyal to you now, Alpha,” he assures. “I’ll obey you. Whatever you want from me.”

“Stiles, please call me Derek,” Alpha requests.

“Yes, Alph—Yes, Derek; I’m sorry. I—”

“It’s okay; just something to work on,” Alpha tells him.

You really want me to address you like some human? Why? What Alpha could possibly prefer that?

“Yes, Derek, I’m a fast learner.”

“I know; you’ve been with us for a while now, Stiles. You’re a very good beta.”
A while?

So the other pack has really given me up.

It makes sense; burdens are cut loose, and if my mind is so broken…

But this Alpha thinks I’m a ‘very good beta’. That’s good; that means I have a chance to stay if I make up for all the weaknesses. He must enjoy my training. Maybe I help him with the others. The Hale pack is rebuilding—that’s what the others said. Maybe I’m helping with that?

But then what happens when he has enough betas stronger than me?

As Beta struggles to deduce how this pack functions and what his role is, the Alpha assures him over and over again that he’s not in any trouble. He tells Beta not to hurt anyone, including himself—not even the humans.

You mean without permission?

Or maybe you enjoy inflicting the pain yourself?

Alpha provides a list of tasks for Beta to complete, but he says he wants only one done at a time, and three total for the day. Beta stares down at the list of measly contributions and recognizes the information for what it is: a test. No beta with this small a contribution would really be kept. The Alpha’s checking if he’s as weak as seizures might indicate. He’s not worried, not yet, he can complete the list easily by sundown and offer himself up for more—for the uses he’s best at fulfilling.

*****************************************************************

Derek finished the usual explanation speech by being sure to tell Wretch to be careful cleaning up and not cut himself on the glass.

“I appreciate you wanting to help out, Stiles,” Derek tells him.

“Of course, Derek; anything,” Wretch answers.

Guess I was right about the episode at Morrell’s the other day. Looks like we’re not quite rid of Wretch yet.

While Wretch starts on the mess in the kitchen, assuring over and over that he doesn’t need help to set things back in order, Derek goes into the den where John’s retreated. He’s on the couch, head down in his hands, beside Isaac, who must’ve woken to the ruckus and come out to the den. Derek can’t even begin to imagine the pain the last few changes have brought on the older man. Isaac’s got one arm thrown over John’s shoulders in comfort, but it’s about all he can do; there’s not much to be said really; there’s no making this better with words.

“John, would you mind if—”

“Of course you can use the house,” John interjects. “All the overnight stuff is still there, but with the rate he’s switching you might not even need it.”

“Hopefully not,” Isaac agrees. “Maybe you’ll only be gone a few hours.”

“Take care of him, Derek,” John requests tiredly.

“Always.”
Derek heads to the sheriff’s with Wretch, but as the morning wears on, Derek begins to wonder if this is actually the same Wretch they’ve dealt with before. While the personality accepts the list as easily as he ever does, but he works with a desperate, concentrated fervor that puts Derek on edge. He ignores the instruction that only three things on the list need be done today; then again, it’s not the first time he’s tried to do more tasks than told. Still, there’s something just different—and not just the fact that Wretch retained the memory of the office episode.

There are none of the smiles that generally accompany the assurances of no punishment and a simple task list. Wretch looks at some of the pictures they offer as evidence of the fun, familial feel the pack is going for without any of the usual awe or curiosity or even skepticism. He’s unnervingly robotic and focused, and it’s got Derek on edge, which gets Stiles of edge, and he can practically feel the tension in the air that’s threatening to suffocate both of them.

So when Cora’s text of, “Hey, doof. How is he? You want some company?” come in, Derek takes her up on the offer, hoping it’ll calm both him and Wretch down to have someone else around.

“Hey, Stiles?”

He turns as the Alpha calls his name, ducking his head though he’d rather get a good look at the beta next to the Alpha.

*Best not to risk the eye contact. Remember your place.*

“No, Derek? Can I do something for you?”

*Are you done testing me? Do I get more challenging tasks now? I can prove that I’m worth more than you seem to think; if you’ll let me.*

“This is Cora,” he introduces. “She’s going to be around for a little while, okay?”

“Yes, Derek.”

“I’ll--uh--help you with dinner,” she offers. “Okay?”

“The laundry needs folding,” he counters.

*Leave me alone. find your own way to be useful.*

“I kinda hate folding laundry,” she says, huffing a laugh.

*You think I want to cook food I won’t even get to eat? It doesn’t matter what you want. You exist to serve your pack, you idiot.*

“I was hoping you could teach me to be a better cook?” she goes on.

“If you don’t mind,” Derek adds. “You don’t have to if you’d rather have the kitchen to yourself.”

Beta would naturally prefer to be left to himself, especially if there’s a risk this beta will ruin the meal, but he hopes this is the next level of service he was hoping for. The Alpha wants him to teach; maybe he has more faith in Beta than the original list of tasks indicated.
“I can teach, Derek.”

“Thank you, Stiles.”

“Anything, Derek.”

Alpha’s sharp intake of breath at the words, followed by the deliberately slow exhale sends panic shooting through Beta.

Angry. You’re upset; why? I’m doing what you wanted. I’m even going to teach her. I’m willing to do whatever you want; how is that unsatisfactory?

“It’s okay, Stiles,” he soothes, no doubt sensing his beta’s pulse spiking as he struggles to remain on his feet as Derek prefers. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Thank you, Derek.”

“Stiles, I’m gonna take a run--just around the block a few times. I’ll stay completely in earshot; I promise; don’t worry, okay?”

“I can find a human for you, Derek; I’d be happy to--”

“No!” Derek says sharply. “That’s not what I mean; I’m not--we don’t hunt humans here; we don’t even hurt them--unless it’s self-defense, understand?”

“Yes, Derek; I misunderstood; forgive me, I--”

“It’s okay.”

But it’s not okay, the distress in the Alpha practically sings through the air, it’s been building ever since they left the main house for this one. Stiles longs to kneel and beg to be told how to make it up to the Alpha, but Derek doesn’t allow that behavior. Stiles is on his own to figure out how to make himself invaluable to this pack.

And I will. I’ll figure it out. I’ll make you see I’m worth keeping, Alpha. I will.

“Okay, I’m gonna--gonna head out--just--yell for me if you need anything; I’ll be close, and I’ll come back soon; don’t worry.”

“Yes, Derek.”

********************************************************************

Cora said she didn’t mind. I just need to chill out for a second, Derek reasons, feet pounding on the pavement as he starts his first lap. It’ll help him if I can calm down; I gotta calm down a little bit. Just a few laps--ten. I’ll give myself ten laps. That’s not too long.

Ten laps and I’m good. Deep breaths. Clearing my head. Calming down for Stiles. I’m in earshot. They’ll be fine.

It’s a speech he’s given himself countless times before on the many, many breaks he’s taken to collect himself on bad days. It settles into his bones as he repeats the world, timing his breathing
to the pace of the jog. The tension leeches away slowly. By lap nine he thinks he really is gonna be fine by the time he gets back.

But then Cora shrieks his name…

The sauce to top the chicken is spilled all over the stovetop, and there’s no possible way to salvage it as the smell of it charring on the burners of the stove assaults Beta’s senses. He moves without thinking, slamming her against the wall by her throat, remembering just in time that he’s been told not to hurt anyone.

“Derek!” she screams; her voice is hoarse from the pressure on her throat, but it’s still of ample volume for the Alpha to have heard.

“Shut up!” he commands, tightening his grip to choke of the second cry.

She lashes out, claws sinking into his arm as she kicks him away from her. He stumbles back, thrown by her retaliation. He knew these betas were poorly trained, but he never expected this kind of insubordination.

“How dare you strike at a higher beta?!” he thunders, rushing at her.

She’s more than ready, deflecting his attempts to subdue her, though she draws no more blood from him. He hopes perhaps it means that some level of her is willing to submit to the punishment and lesson that must follow her transgressions.

“Stiles, stop it! Stop! Derek, told you not to hurt anyone!” she pleads, “You’re not allowed to—”

“You have to be taught or no Alpha will want you! Hold still! Stop resisting! Learn something, godammit!” he insists, cutting off her attempts to get away and out of the kitchen with a well-landed backhand that dazes her enough to have her staggering back against the cabinet. “Be grateful that someone bothers to teach you! Learn to be good!” he persists, claws slicing down the arm she brings up to cover her face.

She’s weakening under the assault, cowering against the counter until she loses her grip and falls to her knees in front of him. He pins her to the floor, sinking his claws into her right shoulder to ensure she stays down.

“Oh, okay! I’ll—learn or whatever, but wait!” she beseeches. “Let Derek tell you what to do. Wait for Derek, Stiles, please, okay?”

“I already know how to train good betas,” he answers jerking her jeans and underwear down with a vicious tug.

In the next instant, Beta crashes to the side, skull thudding hard against the kitchen tile. He blinks against the stars in his vision and his eyes finally focus again only to see the Alpha’s blood red eyes inches from his own. Beta feels the Alpha trembling with wrath above him. He closes his eyes, bracing for whatever comes next. He doesn’t think he could speak even if he dared.

She was being bad, not me. It was her. I was being useful. I was being good. She ruined the meal; she struck a higher beta. I was going to teach her how to be better for you. Why are you so
angry with me? Did you want to teach her yourself? Was she right? I should have waited for you? Oh, God, you wanted to teach her yourself, and I would’ve taken the pleasure away from you so now you’ll want us both. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

“I’m not going to hurt you. It’s okay,” Derek says, voice strained as he slowly releases his hold on his beta and rises to his feet. “Get up; sit at the table. Don’t touch Cora.”

“Yes, Derek, thank you,” he croaks, moving immediately to obey as the Alpha moves to the other beta.

She’s got her jeans back up now, and she’s on her feet. She’s shaking visibly but she still assures, “It’s no so bad, Derek; I’m okay.”

Alpha rests a hand tenderly on her wounded shoulder, black tendrils spreading up his arm as he leeches her pain.

“No, you aren’t,” he counters. “I’m sorry I wasn’t--”

“Just a little shaken up, and nothing that won’t heal,” she says. “I just didn’t want to hurt him,” she says as Derek examines her wounds.

Alpha’s only response is a low rumble in the back of his throat, almost a growl, and Beta quakes in the chair, yearning to get on the floor where he belongs and beg for mercy.

*Please not a punishment, Alpha. I wasn’t deliberately disobeying. I misunderstood. I just a lesson; that’s all. I can take it, and I’ll learn. I won’t make the same mistake again. I swear. Just help me understand how it was wrong to try and make her better.*

*I was trying to do what you’d want; all I did was anger you more.*

*fuck, fuck, fuck.*

He replays the moment over and over as the Alpha continues to leech Cora’s pain as she heals. He tries to understand what it was that angered the Alpha so. He still hasn’t quite figured it out by the time the Alpha comes over to him, but no matter; he’ll be taught now, surely.

*Is she your favorite? Is that it? You’re so careful with her; you didn’t even ask what she did to deserve a punishment. Does she have different rules? I didn’t know; I couldn’t know, could I? Did you explain all this to me and I forgot? I’ll never touch her again, not ever. Oh, fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.*

He focuses on keeping his breathing even; he wants to show that he can take whatever comes and learn from it.

“I’m not like your old Alphas,” Derek says. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

*But I need you to teach me.*

It’s another test for weakness, and Stiles is ready for it. He responds readily by leaving the chair to fall to his knees.

“Please, Derek, I want to learn.”

“I’m not going to—”

“Please, Derek, I want to be better; I do. Please teach me. Whatever it takes, I’m strong
enough. I can—"

“It is not about strength or weakness.”

*Everything is about strength and weakness.*

“I don’t punish betas with violence. I don’t teach lessons with beatings. That is why you are not allowed to hurt anyone either. You don’t have to worry.”

*Then how do you keep us in line? How can these betas possibly function? What kind of Alpha are you?*

*A weak one,* his old Alpha mutters, voice startling in its clarity; he barely manages not to look around for the source of the voice.

Derek approaches slowly and kneels down in front of Stiles. Stiles tucks his head further down, resisting the urge to shy away.

*I can take it. Stop lying to test me. Just teach! I want to be better! I want to be the best! If I’m already weak having seizures, then I need to be the best beta you could possibly want or you’ll leave me like the others did. I can do or be whatever you want if you’ll just teach me what to do.*

“Please, Alpha,” he dares whisper. “Please make me better.”

******************************************************************************************

“No,” Derek replies to the pathetic plea from Wretch.

“Alpha, I want to be taught! I *need* to be taught! I *promise* I’ll be worth your time to—”

“I may be angry, but I am not going to *beat* you, Stiles; I—”

“You can fuck me if it’s better to teach me—”

“No, Stiles!” Derek all but shouts.

*I am not going to fucking rape you on the kitchen floor for misunderstanding how to behave in this pack. Even though apparently with the alphas that was a run of the mill punishment for burning something at dinner?*

*Jesus fucking Christ. Just when I think I’ve grasped the level of hell they put you through...*

“Anything, Derek, *anything* you’ll do to teach me what you want; I *can* learn. Even if my brain is defective from the seizures I can—”

“Please stop talking,” Derek entreats. “You aren’t *ever* going to be beaten or raped or kicked out of this pack, not ever. I will *explain* whatever you need to know with *words* until you understand but just *please* stop begging like that.”

Stiles nods his understanding, but he’s choking back sobs, clearly completely unaware of how to process what’s happening or how this pack *truly* functions. Derek doesn’t know how to explain it better—usually Wretch has found a way to understand by this point.

Derek briefly considers the sedative, but that’s potentially what got them into the situation with nine-year-old Stiles. God only knows what kind of split *this* poor, tortured soul in front of him might spawn. He barely represses a shudder at the thought. Wretch still needs some sort of occupation
though or he’s going to completely lose his mind and start babbling lamentations again.

“Stiles, would you mind going to fold the laundry for me?” Derek wonders.

He scrambles to his feet in an instant. “Of course, Derek; I’ll take care of the laundry; all of it, and then anything else you’ll let me do Derek. I’ll make it all up to you.”

“You’re useful just by existing,” Derek replies. “You don’t have to worry; thank you for your eagerness.”

“Thank you, Derek. Thank you.”

He disappears down the hall and Derek turns his attention back to his sister. She’s healing well, but he gets a rag from the kitchen to help wipe away some of the blood around the lacerations. Her gaze meets his for a moment, and she rolls her eyes.

“Would you stop with the sad puppy face?” she mutters.

“I should have been here,” Derek replies. “I know better than to—”

“I volunteered,” she reminds, “and I’ve had way worse. I will be good as fucking new in like fifteen minutes tops. No worries, Der.”

“I’m so sorry, Cora; if I had thought—”

“Wait? You didn’t plan to let your mentally unstable husband maul your little sister? I assumed you’d been orchestrating it for months,” she interrupts in mock surprise.

“Shut up. It’s not funny.”

“It was. Not. Your. Fault.”

“Would you just accept the goddamn apology?”

“Only if you’ll stop beating yourself up over it; you were here in like two seconds flat.”

“I never should have left in the first place; what kind of idiot Alpha leaves—”

“Hey,” she cuts in sharply. “I’ve had worse, Derek, and I’m not kidding. I don’t give a fuck that you weren’t here holding my hand when shit hit the fan. I just care that you came when I yelled for help. That’s the part you could control, and you did a helluva good job—especially since this shows you’ve got a shit ton more control than with the whole Addie thing last time. Live. Learn. Move on. Okay?”

“Fine, but you should have Deaton—”

“Tis but a flesh wound,” she informs in her best English accent. “Come help me clean up the kitchen and try to salvage some of dinner,” she suggests, and Derek obliges the request.

*******************************************************************************

Stiles comes back to the moment with his hands under the bathroom faucet in his father’s
guest bathroom. The water running off his hands is tinged pink with

Blood?!

“Derek?! Isaac?! What the hell happened? What—”

“Whoa, whoa calm down; everything’s okay,” Derek assures meeting him as he runs down the hall, leaving Stiles no choice but to skid to a halt.

There aren’t any full memories, same as usual after Wretch; what’s worse is that Stiles doesn’t have the typical suspicion that something bad may have happened while Wretch was running the show; Stiles knows something horrible happened. Deep in the pit of his stomach he can feel how fucked something is, and he drop to his knees before he can stop himself.

“Stiles, don’t,” Derek pleads.

“What did he do?” Stiles asks, managing to lift his face to Derek’s as Derek reaches slowly to help Stiles to his feet. “What did I do, Derek? What happened? I can feel it so just tell me—”

“Wretch had a spat with Cora,” Derek replies. “I went for a jog and left you two—but it didn’t—nothing too serious. She’s fine.”

“See? Nothing to freak over,” Cora adds, coming around the corner.

There’s a cut on her left cheek that hasn’t quite finished healing over; the yellowish green around her eyes gives away the bruises that were likely there just moments ago. The slashes in her shirt reveal a bit more of what happened, and Stiles’ stomach churns as he wonders how many other signs of the attack have already healed.

“Cora—”

“Don’t,” she says firmly. “I mean it; I don’t want to hear apologies; I want to pretend it didn’t happen.”

“What else did I do?” Stiles wonders miserably.

“What?” Derek repeats dumbly.

“There’s something else; something worse; what was it?” Stiles expounds, not sure he really wants to hear the answer if the horrible guilt consuming some part of his consciousness he can’t quite reach is any indicator.

I really think I’m gonna puke. What the fuck is worse than attacking Cora? Oh fuck. Not the kids. Did I hurt the kids? Dad? What?

“Just Cora,” Derek replies. “The rest was just run of the mill stuff.”

“Don’t—don’t lie to protect me. I have a right to know if—”

“Stiles, I swear on our kids’ lives there is nothing to tell you. You’ve only been Wretch a few hours—since the morning, so like—eight? You growled at your Dad a bit before we left the house. It was all the usual steps to isolate Wretch. Cora offered to come help out, and I went for a jog and you tried to teach her a lesson for making a mess of dinner. That’s all; I promise you. I’m not hiding anything.”

“Oh—well—good.”
But it isn’t good. Because there’s something else wrong; there has to be; Stiles can feel it in his bones; he just can’t figure out what is so awfully wrong.

“You okay?” Derek asks.

“Yeah, sure, just—I don’t like the ones I can’t remember.”

“I know, but, hey, at least it’s less time lose than usual, right?” Derek asks hopefully; Stiles doesn’t have the heart to remind that the frequent shifts aren’t necessarily a good sign.

“Right,” Stiles agrees instead. “Let’s get home, huh? Getting my mind of the new void of time will help.”

******************************

Chapter End Notes

UNENDING thanks to my lovely triumvirate of betas :D
Cora is pretty quick to excuse herself to head home. Derek reminds her of pack breakfast tomorrow morning, and the mention gets Stiles thinking about the timeline of latest events.

*Pack breakfast means it’s Sunday?*

*But I was only Wretch for seven or eight hours?*

*So what the hell happened during the other twelve—or more?*

“Hey, Derek?” Stiles says as they head toward the front door. “What happened after Isaac sedated me?”

Derek stops mid-step and Stiles almost runs into the back of him. He turns to face Stiles, and the worried look on his face has Stiles’ stomach twisting into knots almost immediately.

“What? What was it?”

“Nothing bad, but—you don’t remember?”

“No; I was pretending I was Damon, and then I asked Isaac for the sedative—and then I was here. What happened between sedation and Wretch?” The answer clicks in his mind before Derek can even reply, “Fuck is there another one?”

“Yes.”

“What the fuck?!”

“We think—maybe the stress of faking Damon and then the sedative trapping you with the voices—it could have brought on another split.”

“Godammit!”

*Another one? And another one I don’t remember at that?*

“What’s the new one?”

“He’s you at nine,” Derek replies. “Not entirely different from the point you set yourself back to when the memories first started returning.”

“Oh great, you guys get to add a third kid to the mix. That’s not confusing as fuck at all—especially not for Collin who’s already probably got plenty of issues with the fact that one of his fathers is partially hard-wired to be subordinate and—”

“Both kids did really well with it actually,” Derek interjects. “Collin was really proud of himself for being able to help you, and I think if anything it’s less weird to him; being subordinate because you feel younger is an entirely different ballgame than subordinate because you’re afraid of him. Addie was good too; she lent you Max.”

The mental picture makes Stiles want to vomit; though it’s of course endearing and an
excellent reminder of just how fantastic his children are, he still doesn’t want to think of them seeing
him so vulnerable and—

“Does he know about Mom?”

“He does now.”

“Bet that was fun,” Stiles huffs, running a hand down his face. “How was Dad?”

“As good as could be expected. He stayed with you.”

“Of course he did. I’m gonna run him into an early grave with all this—”

“Hey,” Derek cuts in sharply. “Don’t talk like that; your Dad is glad he can help you
through this. He wants to.”

“Yes, Derek.”

“Shit, I—”

“Fine. I’m fine. And no he doesn’t want—”

“You’re a Dad now, Stiles; you don’t get to pretend you wouldn’t do the exact same things if
it was one of our kids. John is shouldering it fine, and you are not to blame for the stress on him.
You’re doing everything you can to hold it together and figure out—”

“Yeah, okay, can we just—skip the pep talk.”

“No,” Derek replies stubbornly. “Because you have to believe that you aren’t some problem
we’re trying to solve. You’re a part of this family no matter what state you’re in, and we love you.”

“Even when I try to shred your little sister and—”

“You want to play this game?” Derek demands. “You want to start listing the ways we’ve
fucked up? I turned teenagers because I was too scared to be by myself even though I knew damn
well I wasn’t prepared to lead a pack; I left a tortured amnesiac with my psychotic uncle because I
—”

“It’s not the same thing; I—”

“You will never, ever do anything so awful that I will stop loving you, Stiles,” Derek
reminds earnestly, “and you know that Isaac feels exactly the same way.”

Stiles opens his mouth to keep arguing, but the words stick in his throat. There’s no way
Derek should be standing here staring at him like he’d lasso the moon right now if Stiles asked it, not
after all the shit that Stiles has dragged Derek and Isaac through time and time and time again. But
Derek is standing there with love in his eyes and a sweet smile on his face, and Stiles wants to
believe the sentiment so badly that he lets his arguments die. He all but collapses against Derek’s
chest, and Derek holds onto him tightly.

“I’m just so fucking tired of this, Derek,” Stiles admits quietly.

_So very, very fucking tired._

******************************************************************************
The chaotic din echoing through Jackson’s house puts Derek wonderfully at ease. *This* is what pack should be like, and he’s missed the usual breakfasts even though it’s only been a few weeks since the last one; it seems like the attack was a lifetime ago, and he’s glad that he’s here tonight when they start taking first steps toward rebuilding what was lost.

“Okay,” Derek says as they lay out several plans across the large mahogany table in the formal dining room. “These are the three we start with last time; do we want something completely new? Do we want to merge them into one like before?”

“I liked the old layout,” Scott says with a shrug. “It worked.”

“But don’t make it *exactly* the same,” Cora adds. “It’d be way too creepy.”

“Yeah,” Stiles and Isaac agree as one.

“Can I have a tower room?” Addie wonders, pointing to the spire in one of the illustrations at the corner of a floor plan sheet. “Derek, that would be the coolest *ever!* Please, please, please, please, please!!!!”

“We’ll see,” he tells her. “If it works with the other plans, we’ll try to make it happen.”

_Honestly, as long as I think we can fortify it so you’re not too exposed or isolated, I would love to give you a tower room, munchkin._

They spend a few more minutes hashing out the details of the rooms—how they can group family spaces together, pairing Scott and Allison to a room connected to one for Logan and Mel by a bathroom. Jackson and Lydia get a mirroring setup across the hall, despite their lack of definite plans for marriage, much less kids.

“Well then you two can just have your own joined rooms until things change,” Derek points out.

Lydia travels for work; she stands on her own two feet financially even though Jackson has enough to support the both of them; she has her own apartment downtown—albeit in the same building as Jackson’s loft. It’s important to her that she’s her own person and not Mrs. Whittemore—at least that’s what Stiles says, and Derek sees the confirmation in the way Lydia lives her life.

“Okay. That works.”

“Hey, if we wanted to go for the tower thing, this could be my room,” Cora says, point to the tower that mirrors the one Addie indicated earlier. “Little bit of space even in the house, ya know? And Munchkin gets to be a princess.”

“Yay!” Addie trills.

Cora adds, “Unless you want the other tower, Collin?”

“No,” Collin replies. “You can put my room by Logan and Mel’s,” he says, indicating the spot on the floor. “And then the extra room for Pop or Stiles can be across the hall. See? It all works out.”

“Seems like it does,” Derek agrees. “So now safety precautions,” he moves on. “I think it’s time to go overboard. We talked ourselves out of a lot of safeguards last time for the sake of getting
"I shouldn’t have let my guard down last time; I’m the Alpha. I knew better. I knew how important the pack house is—how it’s your home but it can be your tomb, too. But I was just thinking we had to watch out for more like Kate; I never imagined a blitz attack on our own territory; I kept out the secret entrances and exits and kept an eye on who we let close to the pack members; I thought it was enough.

I was wrong.

We could have died.

Worse, I could have been the only one left. What if we hadn’t gotten out? What if they’d gone for the kill instead of just wanting to drive us out of the house?

I could have lost everything all over again just because I was impatient and had the stupid, sentimental notion of how great it would be to have Christmas in the new house.

What the fuck kind of priority is that? What was wrong with me? How could I have been so fucking stupid?

“Earth to Derek,” Isaac’s voice interrupts. “What the heck are you scowling at? Scott was kidding about the bowling lanes in the basement.”

Did he seriously suggest that? I wasn’t listening.

“Kind of kidding,” Scott corrects with a good natured grin; “It would be pretty awesome.”

“Bouncy house in the basement, Daddy!” Logan counters. “That’d be even awesomer.”

“Good point, buddy, but I think Uncle Derek’s got some other things in mind,” Scott says, ruffling his son’s hair.

“I don’t care what goes in the basement,” Derek replies, “but bowling’s too loud without some kind of soundproofing,” he points out, trying to pretend that’s what he was concerned about.

“We’ll figure out the basement later,” Cora says. “Safety precautions,” she reminds. “I think you’re right; we need more shit in place.”

“Swear jar,” Collin says with a grin, elbowing her in the side a bit. “That bumps me up to the night rocket with the glow-in-the-dark stuff in the gunpowder.”

“You better be glad you’re cute or I would smack that smug little grin right off your—”

She cuts off her sentence as a low growl escapes Stiles. Everyone in the room tenses, and Cora takes a step back from Collin as Stiles takes a step forward.

“Just kidding, Stiles; no worries,” she says, voice amazingly calm given last night’s fiasco with her brother-in-law. “My bad.”

Stiles shakes his head like he can physically shake off the conditioning.

“Caught me off guard, that’s all. I’m fine,” he assures. “I think we need a sprinkler system in place, no just the alarm.”

“Seconded,” Isaac puts in. “And a panic room of some sort maybe? Or an escape option that
isn’t obvious?”

“Both,” Allison suggests. “Cover all the bases this time.”

“Full zombie apocalypse survivalist mode,” Scott agrees with a smile that’s a little too forced but does succeed in lightening the mood just a bit.

“Yeah,” Stiles agrees. “We can stock the room so we could last for a while—storm proof, fireproof, all that jazz.”

“Just don’t forget the wi-fi,” Lydia adds. “And I think we need a more comprehensive security system in place. We’ve talked about it before; there’s just too much land out there to really monitor manually.”

“Cameras? Motion detectors?”

“Dude, the more high tech spy gear stuff the better,” Collin says. “Can we have like a command room with a whole bunch of display screens and stuff?”

“It’s not a bad idea at all,” Derek agrees. “We’ll definitely start looking at the different options, see what serves our purposes the best.”

*And the pack’s going to have the safest fucking place I can manage to give by the time we’re done…*

*********************************************************

When Derek takes the plans and retreats into the study, Isaac’s got no doubt that he’s in there trying to imagine every horrible situation that he could potentially prevent happening by building the perfect house. Isaac doesn’t have the heart to remind him that there’s no way to completely ensure that the house won’t have a weakness. The left out escape options the first time because that’s what Kate used to get in—turns out it could have been their saving grace during the last attack, so they’re putting them into the plans this time—but now they’re open to another kate-style attack, so there’s really no possible way to prepare or expect everything that might come to f**k with them. Still, Derek’s determined to be thorough this time, and Isaac can’t argue that they may as well try to prepare for the worst.

Instead he heads out to the backyard with everyone else, taking a seat on the swing; with this many people over, they decide to start a mini game of soccer. Logan may be young, but he’s already got excellent command and confidence with the ball. He’s quick too, which will come in handy when these skills start being honed more for self-preservation than amusement. Addie’s trying her best to keep up with her cousin, but kickball is much more her game.

A clatter from the kitchen draws Isaac’s attention away from the game, “Stiles? You okay?” he calls, hurrying as best he can to find his feet though Scott is already heading for the house to assist too.

“Stilinski,” he calls back, “and--uh--yeah, I’m fine. So’s the toast pan. No worries.”

“You don’t have to bother with the dishes then, dude,” Scott says. “Come play! We’ll clean up the kitchen later.”

Stilinski obliges, bursting out the door a few moments later and jogging out with Scott to join in the
game. Isaac can’t help but enjoy the sight of Stiles so contently participating; what worries him is that Stiles hasn’t stuck to one personality for more than twelve hours or so in—a while now. It worries him more that the version of himself that can act as though there’s no mental scarring is the one what comes right after they’re planning out a major part of the pack’s future.

*Let it be a coincidence. Please tell me his subconscious isn’t trying to push this version to the front because it’s “better” for the pack.*

**********************************

It’s pretty fucking awesome to be able to play soccer with the pack for hours and not get all that tired. Sure, he’s winded and ready for a rest by the time they head back inside, but it’s nothing like being human.

*Definite silver lining.*

He realizes later than he should that Isaac isn’t inside with them yet. He didn’t stop to help Isaac get out of the swing and back in the house, and that’s total shitty husband etiquette or whatever. As he heads to go check on him, Isaac comes walking through the back door.

“Dude, look at you!” he says happily, hurrying to close the space between them so he’s right by Isaac—who doesn’t look totally stable even if he’s on his feet. “Fuck the chair!”

“Thought I was gonna go crazy if I didn’t get up on and moving without it,” Isaac says with a grin. “Tried the first treatment and it worked like a charm pretty much—better than any of us thought.”

“That’s freaking fantastic, man; seriously,” Stilinski congratulates, and before he really thinks about what he’s doing, he moves in to kiss Isaac’s fucking adorable smile. “Sorry,” he says when he pulls back a moment later. “I—”

“Don’t be,” Isaac replies, initiating the second kiss. “Good to see you.”

The sentiment has a giddy warmth spreading in Stilinski’s chest, though he knows he should probably feel bad for Stiles.

*Don’t hate me for this, dude.* He thinks, wondering if Stiles can even tell what goes through Stilinski’s head. *I’m just getting the both of us some awesome memories, right? That should be totally cool and everything. I hope?*

**********************************

“I’m fine,” Derek says automatically when the study door opens.

He looking at the aerials of the property, trying to decide the best places for surveillance cameras or motion detectors. There are the obvious routes that would be easiest for group of attackers, but he’s trying to think how scouts or small hunting groups might be likely to approach.

“Uh—cool,” Stiles says—*no, not Stiles.*

“Stilinski?”
“Guilty as charged.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just—uh—not exactly enraptured with the Scooby-Doo marathon happening in the den. Though I’d take a look at Isaac’s files on me?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Derek says. “Remember where the key is at?”

“Yeah,” Stilinski replies, reaching for the copy of *The Prince* that hides it.

Derek knows damn well that Collin could find that key if he wanted to, but he likes to think the fact that they bother to hide it is deterrent enough. Their son’s been better with the whole situation now they’re trying to give him minimal, censored updates on Stiles’ condition. Stilinski sifts through the bottom drawer of the cabinet a while before selecting a file.

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” Stilinski says when Derek starts sliding maps and papers to make room on the oak desk. “I’ll sprawl ‘em out on the floor.”

“You sure?”

“Yup—Isaac said you were working on house plans?”

“Yeah.”

“I kinda wondered if you wouldn’t just end up staying here.”

“Jackson’s been awesome about the invasion, but I’m not so sure he’d want it permanently.”

“Yeah, but I mean—never mind.”

“What?” Derek wonders.

“Nothing; stupid thing to think.”

“What?” Derek persists, both annoyed and intrigued.

“I mean, just—are we really going to give the Hale land another shot? It’s kinda got a running reputation of bad mojo, dude.”

“We’re not cutting corners this time,” Derek says firmly. “That land is going to be the best monitored, most secure acreage in Beacon Hills by the time we move in.”

“Well that’s both reassuring and mildly creepy,” Stiles replies. “God help the kids when they start dating. No free passes sneaking in or out.”

“No,” Derek agrees firmly—maybe a little too harshly judging by the curious look on Stilinski’s face. “They shouldn’t need to sneak in or out anyway.”

*I’m not going to be my parents; I don’t want them hiding shit from me because they’re worried about my reaction; I want to know what’s going on with them and recognize what kind of parenting they need and—*

*And that’s probably exactly what my parents said about me…*

*Fuck…*
“Forget I said anything,” Stilinski says. “It’s dumb; I wasn’t trying to like—rain on your parade or whatever. I bet the new house is gonna be the shit,” he adds with a smile. “I vote for a pool with a giant waterslide.”

“We have a pond already.”

“Dude, for real?! Sweet! All you need is the slide then.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say Collin put you up to that.”

“Great minds think alike,” Stilinski supposes with a grin.

He turns his attention from the conversation with Derek back to the folder he pulled from the cabinet. Derek can read the label “co-morbidity” written with sharpie in Isaac’s neat, all-capital handwriting. The two of them work in silence for a good fifteen or twenty minutes—well, relative silence besides Stilinski ruffing papers and drumming his fingers and popping his knuckles. Derek glances over at Stilinski, debating whether or not it would make him an awful person to ask him to please for the love of God stop clicking his pen, but the request goes from his mind at the slightly distraught look on Stilinski’s face.

“Everything okay?” Derek wonders.

“Yeah, just—uh—there’s a lot of other fucked up things in our head besides the DID,” Stilinski replies glumly. “It’s a pretty intense file, ya know?”

“Yeah, but don’t let it overwhelm you. There are a lot of things in there that Isaac—well, that all of us—looked into that are just speculation.”

“Maybe so,” Stilinski allows, “but some of these are pretty aligned with our symptoms.” He gestures vaguely to different stacks of paper and starts listing, “PTSD, OCD, paranoia, schizophrenic auditory hallucinations, anxiety, depression—”

“I know the list,” Derek interjects. “I was there when we made the list.”

“Yeah, sorry—just—there’s no way to treat any of these? I mean if I was human I’d be on enough meds to support a whole pharmacy, wouldn’t I?”

“Maybe,” Derek replies, “but werewolf metabolism makes it next to impossible to maintain an effective dose even if it wouldn’t strain the hell out of your liver and kidneys to constantly repair the damage from that kind of volume of medications. Plus you build up tolerance so quickly that you’d be taking pills every five minutes within six months; if we could even get our hands on that much medication.”

“You say that like we’ve tried stuff.”

Derek barely keeps his tone civil as he demands, “Six years of watching you struggle to deal with everything, and you think we wouldn’t even try to—”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just—are there notes on that too?”

“Of course there are; Isaac keeps documentation on everything possible. You can look if you want, but if the meds had worked, you’d be on them. The counseling has helped, and the sedative used to be the best option for you. We’re kind of hoping that maybe your catatonic states give you a little bit of peace to make up for the lack of sedation.”
“I still kinda wanna look—if that’s cool? I just wanna know as much as I can. Maybe it kinda counts as a new perspective on things. Maybe it’ll even spark an answer or two eventually.”

“Maybe so.”

*But I’m not exactly gonna hold my breath.*

*****************************************************************

“Hey, you guys want lunch?” Collin wonders, poking his head in the study door. “Jackson’s making quesadillas.”

“I’ll be out in a minute,” Derek replies. “Thanks.”

“Stilinski?”

“Not really that hungry,” Stilinski answers distractedly, chewing the end of the pen as he continues to glance through pages and pages of Isaac’s notes on past treatments. “Thanks though, Collin.”

“No problem,” Collin replies but he doesn’t retreat just yet. “You—ah—find anything—ya know interesting or whatever?” he wonders.

“Collin,” Derek says in clear warning. “Stop being nosey and go eat. He’s not going to find anything new that you need to know. If you have questions, you ask me or Isaac, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Collin answers with a sigh, shutting the door behind him as he heads back out of the study; Stilinski barely holds back a laugh.

*How many times was that almost exactly what I did when dad had a case spread out on the table and I was determined I could help with it? Mom calling me away to try and keep me from getting the grisly details she didn’t want me to see or know about.*

*Maybe I should throw the kid a bone and tell him a little bit. Pretty sure Derek and Isaac would kinda hate that. But the kid has a bit of a right to know some things. It’s his Dad. I’d want to know.*

Then again, when he looks back down in the notes, he knows, *This is no shit for adults to handle, much less for kids to handle. There’s a delicate balance for sure. Isaac and Derek seem to have a lot of this shit figured out, so Stilinski should probably tread with caution before he starts overstepping parental boundaries and shit.*

“You should really eat something,” Derek says as he rises from his chair. “I can bring it in here if you want.”

“No, I’ll come,” Stilinski agrees reluctantly. “Five more minutes to get to a good stopping point,” he adds.

“Okay.”

Stilinski is almost through with the initial assessment of the “Treatments” file, so far it’s mostly been information sheets for pharmaceuticals with notes on how effectual—or more often ineffectual—they were when Stiles tried them. There’s only a few things left to go through before
he’s done with the file, and he’s not even remotely prepared for the five pages in the back that are crumpled and folded and shoved in out of Isaac’s typical, careful order:

Three pages discussing case studies for shock therapy.

Two discussing the theory behind old-school lobotomies.

*What the fuck?*

*So who crumpled them? Stiles? Or Isaac or Derek? And then who straightened them back out and kept them in the file?*

*Damn, talk about some drastic measures…*

*But then again, if the medications aren’t working and six years of trying to deal on our own hasn’t really worked….*

*huh…*

*Maybe that’s why it’s still in the file.*

**************************

Isaac tries not to worry over how distracted Stilinski seems at lunch. He keeps glancing back toward the study like he’d rather be there digging through files, and honestly, Isaac didn’t expect any less from this version of Stiles. It’s an insatiable thirst for answers, and he’s not jaded enough to start giving up on getting those answers; Isaac isn’t sure if that’s good or bad, but he hopes for the best like he always does. It surprises him more than a little when Stilinski rises from the table and retreats out the back door instead of back to the study; he doesn’t ask for company, but Isaac can’t help a peek out one of the back windows to check on him.

Stilinski’s got his phone out, and Isaac can hear him talking but can’t quite make out the words. He looks a little nervous, and more than once the familiar tick of running his fingers through his hair makes Isaac’s worry spike.

“Derek, maybe you should—” Isaac starts to suggest just as Stilinski pockets his phone and heads back toward the house.

“Should what? Is he okay?” Derek asks, abandoning his trek to take his plate to the kitchen in favor of joining Isaac at the window.

“Think so—just stressed maybe,’ Isaac says.

“He’s been through a lot of files the past couple hours. Probably just processing, right?”

“Right.”

“You realize I can in fact hear you,” Stilinski reminds from outside, and Derek chuckles.

“I’m fine.”

Derek walks out to meet him on the back porch, and Isaac follows more slowly. Stilinski’s exasperated expression starts to turn anxious again, and Isaac guesses he may have called Holly about some of the things he’s read; God only knows what he could have questions about. There’s so much agony in those files Isaac’s thought more than once about shredding the lot.

“So—um—I was thinking maybe—if, uh—you guys don’t have like plans or whatever for
the afternoon, that—uh—we could maybe—ya know—talk—and stuff?” Stilinski wonders hopefully. “I called my dad and he said he’d help Cora or whoever babysit—or do it by himself either, which is apparently an option because I didn’t give the kids enough credit for their control.”

“Oh—uh—yeah, of course; no set plans for the day so—uh—we can talk or whatever,” Isaac replies. “Everything okay?”

“Uh-huh, just—questions that maybe—I don’t wanna—the super-hearing make conversations a little difficult I feel like?”

What do you need to talk about that the kids shouldn’t hear? What did you read? Shit.

“Right.”

“And—ya know—if the kids are good with Dad and all we could kinda just—like—hang out or something too? Just—the three of us?”

Isaac’s worry wanes as he smiles and wonders, “Are you asking us on a dorky, married-life afternoon date?” he teases.

Stiles slight blush gives away the answer even before he says, “Well, yeah, kind of. I mean—for all I know I won’t even be here tonight, so—carpe diem and stuff, right?”

“Right,” Derek affirms. “Sounds like a plan.”

So where to?” Derek wonders as they pile into the Camero, and Stilinski clammers with anything but grace into the back seat to allow Isaac shotgun spot.

“I—uh—I dunno,” Stilinski replies. “I mean—it probably not like a great idea to talk werewolfy personality problems at like a restaurant—so is it like totally lame to just hand out at my Dad’s house and like order in Chinese if we get hungry or something later? Is that like way too lame?”

“No, not lame,” Isaac replies. “We tend to have a little too much excitement in our lives; chill afternoons hanging out are always good.”

“Okay, cool,” Stilinski says with a more confident grin, relaxing back into his seat and yet still humming with energy.

Stilinski still hasn’t quite figured out how to bring up all the stuff he wants to talk about; Derek got pretty defensive about the whole thing earlier, but, to be fair, Stilinski was pretty moronic not to think about the fact that they’ve been dealing with this a lot longer than he has. Six years is plenty of time to try the parade of options Isaac noted; it’s also apparently enough time to start looking at extreme options. He just wants to know who was looking at them.

He folded the crumpled papers and shoved them in his back pocket when he’d put all the files away; now they seem’ to be burning a hole in his pocket.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Isaac wonders as they pull out onto the road.

“Yeah, just—uh—ya know—curious and stuff,” Stilinski answers lamely, “but let’s talk
when we’re like at the house and can like actually look at each other and not be distracted and stuff.”

_Because I'm not sure that I know you two well enough to tell when or if you're lying to me, but it’ll help if I can get the best read on your body language. I want to know the truth here. I want to know the story behind the treatment plans. I have a right to know, don’t I?_

“For the love of God ask whatever you’re going to ask before you fucking explode,” Derek says before the front door of Dad’s even swings shut behind them. “Whatever it is, we don’t mind talking about it.”

“Sure about that?” Stilinski wonders.

“Yes,” Isaac confirms. “We can talk about whatever you want to, Stilinski.”

He reaches back and pulls out the crumpled papers. Judging by their reactions, they both recognize them immediately. Derek’s already fuming; Isaac just looks tired.

“I didn’t think those were in the file anymore,” Derek says, and the words are carefully controlled and eerily even in contrast to the deep frown on his face.

“Well, they are and—”

“Isaac?” Derek says, cutting across Stilinski’s words.

“Stiles put them back after you left. We haven’t touched it since,” Isaac supplies. “I didn’t see the harm in leaving them there.”

“Little easier to see the harm now?” Derek wonders tersely.

“Oh, yeah, sure he could _totally_ see a high-school Stiles alter-ego coming from a million miles away,” Stiles says sardonically. “I bet he knew this would happen all along.”

“This isn’t the time to joke,” Derek snaps back, “not if you really want to talk about that bullshit.”

“Bullshit? It’s not—”

“You want to electrocute or mutilate your brain, Stiles. It’s an awful plan; we’ve talked about it already.”

“Stilinski,” he corrects quietly. “And I haven’t talked about it yet, so if you could humor me for five fucking minutes, Sourwolf, that would be great,” he adds, failing to keep the annoyance from rising to the surface.

“Okay,” Isaac says. “Let’s sit, okay? And we’re going to have a _calm_ discussion about the options and why we didn’t go after them. Everybody good with that?”

“Yep.”

“Uh-huh.”

It takes what seems an eternity to get settled in the den; Stilinski knows Isaac can’t help moving slow these days, but he’s impatient as ever.

“What do you want to talk about?” Isaac wonders.
“I guess, most extreme first,” Stilinski replies, “because I totally get how lobotomy seems like a kind of crazy solution.”

“glad you agree it’s extreme,” Isaac says, clearly trying to extend some understanding as Derek continues to stew.

“I just--how bad is it for Stiles that he even puts it on the table? When did this go in the file?”

“About six months after the DID started presenting to the point that we recognized it for what it was. You’ve seen the notes; originally we just thought it was some sort of mental regression, but since then Holly and I agree that it was the early stages of his--your--dissociation. We were hopeful at first that the medications would help, and some did--you’ve read those notes too by now; nothing stuck though, and Stiles was getting very, very desperate for answers.”

“Would a lobotomy really do any good? I mean--I know there’s a lot of--”

“There’s no way to predict all the things that could happen; it’s an unreasonable solution for the results Stiles wants--that you want too, I hope; it’s a cheap, quick, dirty fix that I believe he thought might make our lives easier.”

“But we don’t give a shit about easy,” Derek interjects, “and he--you--no one is going to hack up brains trying for some stupid simplification that might not leave any of the real Stiles behind.”

“Okay, so no lobotomies anytime soon; I get it. Good call,” Stilinski allows. “But what about the shock therapy?”

“We decided it carried too many risks for something that can be so unpredictable. There’s also the chance that your werewolf healing would make the process less effective anyway. It might not be as permanent for you as for humans. There’s just--a lot to consider, and the cons outweigh the pros.”

“It worked on you,” Stilinski points out, vocalizing the main argument that’s been bugging him since he first saw the papers.

“That’s entirely different.”

“Well, yeah, kinda but still, the electricity thing is something that can totally be scaled to our resistance right? We could figure out how to modify techniques and maybe--”

“We aren’t frying your brain into submission,” Derek cuts in angrily. “Isaac’s legs were one thing, but--”

“I’m just saying that it’s an option,” Stilinski persists. “I can research some case studies. It’s been what--four or five years? Maybe there are more studies to support this plan now. It could work if we--”

“You don’t know that,” Isaac reminds. “There are too many variables, Stilinski. It’s not worth the risk.”

“Says who?”

“All of us,” Derek replies. “We talked this out before with Stiles, and we decided it wasn’t an option. It shouldn’t even be in the damn file anymore. It’s ridiculous.”
“You talked it out,” Stilinski repeats.

“Yes.”

“And you all decided?”

“Yes.”

“So did Stiles actually get a full say, or was he playing off what you wanted him to--”

“What the hell are you trying to say?” Derek demands, rising off the couch. “I never use my spot as Alpha against you--him.”

“Maybe not intentionally, but--”

“Stiles agreed that it’s not worth the risk!”

“I’m just saying that maybe he couldn’t really look at the options without bias because of--”

“Goddamit, I didn’t make him agree with us; we talked about it, and he saw why it was better to just stick to the counseling.”

“Then why do I think we should try it?” Stilinski demands, on his feet now too. “We’re the same, right? On some levels? I’m just not scared of my Alpha like he has to be. So if he said no, but I say yes, the logical difference is--”

Stilinski barely contains a flinch when Derek pushes past him to retreat from the den. He turns to follow, hot on Derek’s heels.

“Yeah, sure, walk away from the conversation when I start asking the difficult shit that you don’t want to hear,” he quips. “You can’t just--”

“You want to know what I can’t do?” Derek demands, rounding on Stilinski. “I can’t watch you--him--any of the personalities put yourself through that shit when there is absolutely no fucking guarantee that it won’t make shit worse or permanently remove things that shouldn’t go or--or--just all this shit that could hit the fan with that electroshock shit. I know we tried for Isaac, but that was different. Isaac was at the fucking end of his rope, and he was taking the risk for himself because it mattered to him. You will do this for us. And I fucking love you for that, but you do not have to fix yourself for us; its’ something--it’s a process that you’ve got to figure out. There aren’t shortcuts and easy routes to this shit. You might not have access to all the memories Stilinski, but you’re fucking smart as ever. You know that it isn’t really the kind of odds you should play with your sanity. You know rocking the boat like this won’t help. So light those goddamn pages on fire and forget they were ever in the fucking file.”

“Or what?” Stiles demands. “It’s my fucking brain Derek! It’s my choice at the end of the day, and you gotta respect that.”

“No.”

“No?”

“So help me God, I will kill the power grid to the entire West Coast before I stand by and watch you run so much as a kilowatt to your brain.”

Stilinski’s right hand is balled in a fist, he considers for a brief moment just letting his hand fly at
Derek, letting the wolf come out to fight for a little while and forgetting to use words to argue.

_He is so fucking stubborn and controlling and paranoid and infuriating and really, really fucking close right now; and it’s really not fair that eyes that gorgeous can practically glare intently enough to kill and--fuck. I’m so going to lose this argument_, Stilinski accepts as he surges forward to bring his lips to Derek’s.

“You are such an asshole,” Stilinski declares when he pulls back for a moment, but in the next instant he’s back on Derek, who’s kissing back like his very fucking life depends on it, ravishing Stilinski’s mouth with his tongue as they move as one back toward the wall. Derek turns at the last moment so that Stilinski pins him rather than the other way around, and he knows Derek’s trying to be careful with him.

But Stilinski’s not so sure he wants him to be…

********************

“This so…does not mean…that you win,” Stilinski insists between hungry, urgent kisses, and Derek tries to silence him by deepening the kiss, but Stilinski pulls back to pant, “Seriously—you are not allowed to use your unreasonable sexiness to—”

“Unreasonable sexiness?” Derek teases.

“Fuck you,” Stilinski replies, annoyed.

“Okay,” Derek replies, and he grins at the way Stilinski pulls away, mouth falling open in a perfect picture of surprise; he catches Isaac’s entrance from the corner of his eye but doesn’t turn his attention from Stiles just yet.

“Wait, what—are you—if you are just messing with me, Derek Hale, I will _end_ your Sourwolf ass because you cannot just _say_ shit like—”

“Not messing with you,” Derek assures. “Offer’s serious if you want it.”

“Holy. Fucking shit.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Still doesn’t mean that you win.”

“Doesn’t mean that I lose either,” Derek replies.

_Now fuck me until we all forget all this bullshit about frying your brain to try and fix it. I’ve come too close to losing you too many times to watch you risk something like this. Let it go, Stilinski; just be Stiles’ silver lining and enjoy the conditioning break._

He can’t get the words out, so he tries to put it into the way he kisses Stilinski deep like every one might be the last and mouths his way down his neck, pulling him in close, but not too tight. He smiles when Isaac interrupts them.

“It would be really awesome if this moved to a bed,” he says. “Ya know—as sexy as these braces are, they can be a bit cumbersome.”
“Bed...yeah...good,” Stilinski pants, and Derek preens inwardly at the effect he clearly has—that lust-dumb look in either of his husbands’ eyes still gets his blood racing like nothing else.

“Downstairs bedroom,” Isaac says, when Stiles starts for the stairs. “Come on.”

They lose a little momentum in the process of shedding clothes and getting into bed, but Isaac’s a little glad for it. Stilinski was headed a bit in the rough-sex direction; as much as he may think he wants and can handle it, Isaac’s not sure the triggers would be kept at bay. Still, even once they resume, he’s more demanding and confident than Isaac can remember Stiles being in a long while—back before any of Damon or Wretch started integrating back in. He bites as Isaac’s lower lip as he pulls back from a kiss, and the look in his eyes is pure, wanton, desire. Maybe Stilinski’s body isn’t a teenager anymore, but his mind’s no doubt already running away with the endless possibilities it can dream up for the three of them.

They take their time, melting into a tangle of limbs on the bed as they seek contact and friction. Derek’s running his hands over every inch of Stilinski and Isaac he can reach. Isaac’s playing connect the dots with the moles along Stilinski’s back, sucking spots on his pale skin and leaving a quickly fading trail upward toward Stilinski’s neck; a shudder runs through Stilinski that makes Isaac freeze for just a moment before the groan that follows relieves his worry.

“Fuck, Derek,” he moans, and Isaac sees the fading reddish tint of bite-marks along Stiles collarbone that seem to have drawn the remark. “Can we—I’m not sure I’ve exactly got the patience to—I am already so fucking hard it hurts and—”

“Lube, Isaac?” Derek says with a nod toward the nightstand in Isaac’s reach.

Derek flops with surprisingly grace to lay on his back beneath Stiles, who groans and plants his face in his palm, whining, “You can’t just say shit like that, dude! Do you realize—I—you are unfairly amused at my poor virgin inability to pace myself,” he finishes.

“All I did was ask for lube,” Derek reminds, innocently, bending one arm up underneath his head; Isaac barely holds in a laugh. “Breathe deep or something,” Derek suggests with his best shit-eating grin.

“Breathe deep he says,” Stiles mutters. “Like that does anything when I’ve got two chiseled Greek gods in bed with me and one’s going to let me—I mean holy shit, Derek; like, you’re good with me—I’m gonna get to—”

As Stiles babbles on, Derek slides his hand down, circles his fingers around the base of Stilinski’s cock, and gives a squeeze that gets a grunt from Stilinski.

“How ‘bout you relax for a little while, mmkay?” Isaac wonders, “and I’ll get Derek ready for you?”

“Oh. My. God.”

“Taking that as approval,” Isaac says with a grin, leaning in for a quick kiss before he turns his attention to Derek.

************************************************************************************************
Isaac doesn’t rush, working Derek open gently, driving Derek nuts if his impatient grunts are any indicator. He’s trying to quicken the pace, all but shoving himself back on Isaac’s fingers. Stilinski’s anything but relaxed, but strung with the best tension possible as he watches with wide, eager eyes from where he’s sitting back against the headboard, voyeuring what Isaac’s vainly going to assume is the hottest thing his teenage mind has ever been a part of. He’s honestly not sure which he’s enjoying more: the sight of Derek coming undone under his hands or the sound of Stilinski attempting—poorly—to muffle groans into his fist as he watches.

“Jesus H. Christ I never knew I had such a fucking voyeurism kink but *damn* this is just—it’s not my fault that—”

“More, Isaac,” Derek demands. “Stop fucking around. Give me some more. I’m good.”

“--I mean I have seen like a fuck ton of porn, okay,” Stilinski rambles on, “and if that family trust fund ever runs out we have got like such a solid future if we just set up and a camera and—”

Stilinski’s words choke off into something like a desperate whine as Isaac obliges Derek’s demand, sliding in the last finger, and Derek moans, deep and guttural.

“Stilinski, c’mon. You’re not the only one running out of patience.”

“Fuck yes,” Stilinski answers easily.

*******************************

“I--uh--so like I’ve *seen* this a couple times like *objectively* but--I--uh--”

“C’mere,” Isaac bids, moving to the side just slightly and letting Stiles take the spot Isaac previously occupied. “Not rocket science, you’ll be fine, just relax.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good with everything? Feel okay?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? If we stop right now I will murder you both; I am 150% on board with what’s going on here,” Stilinski answers exuberantly, and Derek chuckles softly at the reaction.

Isaac stays close, whispering instructions and encouragements in Stilinski’s ear, directing him to kneel between Derek’s legs so Derek can hook his legs up over Stilinski’s shoulders. He hesitates for just a second before pushing in, unsure until Derek lets out a moan so wanton it takes every shred of self-control he can muster to keep entering slowly.

There are absolutely *no* words for the exquisite friction of Derek’s tight, heat surrounding Stilinski’s cock as he settles in. Derek tenses at the intrusion, but relaxes again almost instantly, grunting, “Move.”

Isaac lies down beside Derek, sucking hickies into Derek’s neck and stroking Derek’s cock and *fuck* the sight of the two of them beneath him. Stilinski must be dreaming because there is no way that this is really actually happening. It’s a million times better than any fantasy he’s ever dreamed up, and *God* it’s almost *too* much.

“Faster,” Derek urges.
“I don’t wanna—like—hurt you or—”

“You won’t,” Derek assures, reaching back to grip the headboard. “C’mon, faster. Please.”

The last word is a needy plea that has Stilinski’s body obliging before he can bother to double check. He keeps his pace but tries to adjust angles until—

“Fuck, yes! Right! Fucking! There!” Derek moans before the words taper off into a groan; “Keep going, Stilinski; Don’t stop. Don’t stop,” Isaac adds before, muffling Derek’s moans with a kiss and Stilinski knows he’s coming to the brink himself.

In the next instant, Derek clenches around Stiles, orgasm bringing countless curses from Derek’s kiss-swollen lips as he pulls his mouth from Isaac’s, and Stilinski doesn’t stand a chance; he’s gone too, coming so hard he all but whites out.

Holy fucking shit.

********************************************************************************

Isaac grins as Stilinski pulls out a bit awkwardly and more or less collapses on the other side of Derek, blissfully rambling curse words and praises to how “fucking awesome” that was. He closes his eyes, envisioning the bliss of just moments before as he works himself toward release.

“Got you,” Derek murmurs, turning on his side to face Isaac and replace Isaac’s hand with his own. “C’mon.”

Derek’s post-coital languid but still more than adequate. He mouths along Isaac’s collarbone, as his deft fingers coax Isaac to the edge; Isaac drinks in the mental replay of watching the two people he loves most in the world enjoy sex in a way neither quite had before; and it’s not long at all before he spills in Derek’s hand as Derek swallows his cry of ecstasy with a kiss.

********************************************************************************

I should get up; I should totally get up and wash up; any minute now I’m gonna. Not going to fall asleep; it’s the middle of the fucking afternoon.

But the kids are hanging with Pop and Cora, and that was maybe the best sex we’ve had in—I don’t know, fucking forever.

And the world won’t end if we stay here a little longer.

Derek must not be alone in this thought process, because Isaac and Stilinski are dosing on either side of him. He’s not sure how much time passes between the moment his eyes flutter shut and when Isaac finally stirs beside him, but Derek opens his eyes again reluctantly, a bit sore but still more rested and relaxed than he’s felt in a while.

“Morning, Sunshine,” Isaac teases.

“Afternoon,” Derek replies. “Isn’t it? We should try to get home before supper.”

“John does in fact know how to feed children,” Isaac reminds. “I bet even Cora could scrounge up a can of tuna or something to keep them alive.”
“I dunno; she hasn’t had much luck with the goldfish,” Derek counters, rolling his eyes.

It’s the moment Stiles—Stilinski—should chime in, likely with some joke or jab to keep it going, but he doesn’t. Derek turns to look at him, assuming he must still be dead to the world, but he’s not. He’s lying perfectly still, moving only his eyes, which widen in apparent trepidation as they meet Derek’s for a moment before he drops his gaze downward. Derek’s mood plummets as his stomach churns.

_How long have you been awake like this? Not knowing what happened—what would happen next—naked in bed with your Alpha and Second waiting for God knows what to be done to you._

IRSTY

“Stiles, you’re safe,” the Alpha says gently. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

“Thank you, Derek,” he replies automatically.

_You’ve already gotten whatever you wanted? But I don’t ache anywhere. I must’ve healed quickly. That’s good. I can be at my best for him again._

_But what am I supposed to do? I lost time again. I don’t know what led to this. _The last thing I remember is—_

“I—I disobeyed. I misunderstood. I hurt Cora. I—I didn’t mean—I was going to do the laundry like you asked but then I was here and—and I don’t know what—I can’t find the memories, Derek,” he admits, but it’s not entirely true.

Even as he claims it, he catches glimpses—short clips of scenes running through his mind—the pack gathered around a table; soccer game; flipping through a file cabinet; and the last bit something that can’t possibly be real because—

_What kind of Alpha would lower himself to that position for the weakest beta in the pack!?_

_No, no it’s not a real memory._

_Then it’s something I dreamed up myself?_

_No! No! I wouldn’t ever try to dominate my Alpha like that! I know my place! I do!_

_“Stiles, it’s okay; just—just breathe, okay? I’m not going to hurt you at all. I’m not angry at all.”_

_Oh but if you could see the traitorous things in my head, Alpha. You would rip me to shreds again and again and you’d surely never keep such an insolent, lecherous beta._

_“I didn’t mean it, Derek; I don’t mean it. I don’t. I don’t. I don’t know where that came from!”_

The words blurt from his mouth before he can stop them, and he clamps his hand over his mouth before he gives himself away completely.

_“Hey, hey, it’s okay.”_

_“I can be good; I can be good, Derek; I know my place; I do, Alpha; I swear!”_
Bile rises in Isaac’s throat as Wretch babbles mostly incoherent and certainly unwarranted apologies before finally turning over on his hands and knees beside Derek, and muffing words and sobs down into the mattress.

“Stiles, don’t,” Derek pleads.

“Help me, Derek; I know my place I just—it won’t *stop*.”

“Help you?” Derek repeats, but Wretch’s only reply is a sob buried into the mattress as he nods his head.

“I want to help you, Stiles, but I don’t understand,” Derek laments. “Tell me how to help you.”

The reply is too garbled and muffled to make out, and Derek looks helplessly to Isaac.

“Stiles, you said ‘it won’t stop’. Can you tell us what you mean? What won’t stop? Is it voices? Pain?”

Wretch turns his head from the mattress, drawing two slow, deep breaths before whining, “I see things I don’t want to; I know better; I know how to be good; I don’t want to think or see it, but—they won’t *stop*.”

“You mean—are they memories?” Isaac wonders, remembering all to clearly Damon’s breakdown the first time Stiles’ desire for free will started to penetrate into his conditioned psyche. “You see memories?”

“No, no they *can’t* be; I’m a good beta,” he wails, burying his face in the mattress again.

“You remember what just happened?” Derek says, connecting dots. “Stiles, if you remember sex with me it’s not—you weren’t being bad, Stiles; it was something I *wanted*, and, we’ll explain it better when you can calm down, but it’s—it was your place; you were being a good beta; there’s nothing to be sorry for at all, okay? I swear, Stiles if that’s it, you don’t have to think that it’s something bad to have in your head.”

“You—you w-w-wanted me to—to—do that?”

“Yeah, Stiles, I did; I asked you to; you did *exactly* what I wanted you to,” Derek says, oversimplifying the situation. “It was great, and—and it’s *nothing* for you to worry about, okay? I know that it’s hard to understand without all the pieces, but we’ll fill in the gaps for you; I swear. Just don’t think that you did anything wrong.”

“Th—thank you, Alpha.”

“How about you shower and get some clothes on?” Isaac suggests.

“Yes, Isaac, I can do that.”

“Good, Stiles, thank you, and when you’re finished, we’ll all talk and help you understand.”

“Thank you.”

*******************************************

The moment the shower turns on in the bathroom, Derek allows himself a moment to let his claws shred into the pillow, rending it the way he wishes he could ruin those who reduced Stiles to
“Shhh, shhh, Derek, you’ll scare him,” Isaac urges quietly, resting his hand on Derek’s taut shoulders and rubbing gently.

“He thought I would want to—”

“Shhh, I know,” Isaac murmurs, “but he’s here with us now; we’ll teach him what pack should be. It’s okay.”

“And the fact that the memories are bleeding into Wretch?”

“Maybe it’ll help him understand better. Maybe it’s a good sign; he might be merging personalities again.”

*Or it could just bring on a whole new level of fucked up…*

They explain more than Beta’s sure he can fully absorb: that Beta is the same as this ‘Stiles’ who’s in so many pictures. When Stiles is here, Beta goes away; everything Beta knows was taught by Alphas who took him away from Derek during conflict. They go on and on with stories and metaphors to try and clarify before they finally tell Beta to take a moment or two before he starts dinner to collect his thoughts.

He studies the picture on the mantle, cataloging the names Derek’s taught, comparing them with stories Isaac’s told. Brazen humans allowed in a pack and yet never seeking the gift of the bite. Werewolves willing to breed with humans and risk worthless human offspring. Poorly-trained young betas running amuck, playing with gifts they can’t possibly have earned.

*No wonder your old pack fell to hunters. No wonder my old Alphas took me from you.*

*I can be a good beta—the best. They left me out of physical weakness, that’s all. My training was impeccable. They never would have let you have me otherwise. What kind of protection do you offer?*

A “family” with judgment clouded by human sentiment? Betas given no structure and allowed to draw little to no meaning in the embarrassingly simple tasks to complete. An Alpha who’s laughably indulgent and embarrassingly lenient. And Alpha who doesn’t teach or punish or dominate—who allows betas to dominate him and disobey without slightest punishment.

Who would want such a pack, living every day waiting for it to fall apart while the incompetent Alpha watches as hunters rip you apart or rival packs rend your flesh.

*How can they stand to serve such an ineffectual Alpha?*

*They don’t know any better, his old Alphas point out. But you could teach them; you know how to train good betas.*

*You could make them all better,* they point out as one echoing voice.

*I could make this pack good.*
The scream of pain from Wretch sends ice through Derek’s veins, and he bolts for the den at top speed. He arrives in time to see Wretch fall to his knees and vomit all over the rugs, clutching his head in obvious agony. He’s glad Wretch doesn’t shy from Derek’s touch as he helps him onto the couch. He curls in a tight little ball, still cradling his head.

“Call Deaton!” Derek commands, as Isaac stumbles into the den. “Something is--”


“Stiles? Real Stiles?”

“Yeah. Fuck. Shit. My head is gonna fucking split open is weartogod,” he whimpers, burying his face in the couch as Derek tries to leech pain he knows isn’t physical enough for his abilities to alleviate.

One of Stiles’ hands leaves his head and gropes blindly toward Derek. Derek laces his fingers through Stiles’ though he grips painfully tight.

“I’m here; can I help?”

“It’ll stop; it’ll stop; it’ll stop,” Stiles repeats. “Soon. It’ll stop soon.”

It’s not soon enough in Derek’s opinion, but within five minutes Stiles’ heart rate is back down, and he opens his eyes to squint against the light in the room.

“Blinds?” Derek offers. “Lights?”

“Yeah. Please?”

“Of course, Stiles. Everything else okay? Nothing else hurts?”


“We’ll clean it up; don’t worry about it.”

“Derek, what did I do?”

“Nothing; Wretch was here a while, but not long just--”

“Don’t lie; please.”

“I’m not, Stiles; I swear.”

“Isaac?” Stiles says, demanding corroboration.

“Nothing bad; Derek’s right. Why do you think that?”

“I just know; I don’t know how I do, but there’s something wrong. What happened with him?”

“He woke up in bed with us--confused,” Isaac says. “He panicked because he got a few memories that didn’t seem--”
“Wretch got memories of mine?!” Stiles demands, wincing at his own raised voice. “What the fuck?” he mutters more quietly. “That’s—he shouldn’t see those; he shouldn’t get that.”

“Maybe you’re merging. Maybe it’s good,” Derek says hopefully.

If only, if only...

“I don’t think so,” Stiles spits bitterly. “Because I’m pretty sure I’m missing some of the things with Stilinski. It’s fracturing, not stitching together.”

We’re not that lucky.

“We’ll help you fill in the gaps,” Derek promises. “It’s okay.”

“No it’s not,” Stiles insists. “Something is just off, and I--I don’t know; just something’s messed up.”

Fucking awesome...

**********************************************************************

“I think maybe I’m gonna go for a walk,” Stiles says as they finish up dinner. “Kinda need to clear my head.”

“Can I come with you?” Collin wonders. “Please?”

“Yeah, if you want to, that’s fine,” Stiles replies.

To be honest, he’d rather go on his own, but he’s invaded enough of Collin’s treks before that he’s got basically no justification for denying the company. Besides, it isn’t even remotely wise for Stiles to roam on his own when there’s seriously no telling who he could be five minutes from now.

“Stay close to the house?” Derek requests.

“Sure.”

“You okay, Stiles?” Dad wonders, and Stiles just shrugs.

“Things are just getting kind of—” there’s not really a word for what he’s trying to say, so he settles for, “chaotic.”

“We’ll figure it all out,” Isaac assures. “Don’t worry.”

“Not worried, exactly just—wanna clear my head, like I said.” He rises from his chair bidding, “Come on, kiddo.”

They’re a decent ways from the house before Collin breaks the silence.

“This is the part where you usually say something that gets me talking,” Collin teases with a small smile, “so guess it’s my turn.”

“I’m okay, Collin’ you don’t have to say anything.”

“D’you want to talk about it?”

Talk about which thing? About how Stilinski is trudging up old treatments and possibilities I haven’t
considered in a long time? about whether it’s solely my choice or our choice as a whole whether or not I take those drastic measures? Or the part where Derek and Isaac had great, carefree, fanfuckingtastic sex that I might not ever be able to have with them once I’m integrated back to one personality? Or maybe even that my brain felt the need to follow awesome sex by sending fucking Wretch out to play, and what the hell does it mean that he got some of my memories? and why can’t I shake this damn feeling in my gut that something is horribly wrong?

Yeah, sure, all those are totally appropriate things to talk about with my fucking son.

“I wouldn’t really even know what to say, to tell you the truth,” Stiles replies finally; it’s at least partly true. “I just kind of feel like something’s off and I don’t know what it is or why it bugs me so much. It’s like an itch I can’t scratch.”

“That sucks.”

 Yep.”

“And there’s no way I can like--help or anything?”

“Don’t think so,” Stiles replies, “but thanks.”

 “Yeah sure.”

“You know what though,” Stiles says as a crazy-but-maybe-brilliant thought comes to mind, “I think I know who could help if anyone could.”

“Who? Deaton?”

“Stilinski.”

“Huh?”

“I left him a message in a video once before,” Stiles says. “I could try that again, see how it goes.”

“So you can like try to figure it out twice as much?”

“In theory, yeah.”

“Cool,” Collin says with a grin. “I’ll tell him to watch it next time he’s here if you want.”

“Yeah, do that, for sure.”

“Can I--I mean do you want me to leave you alone to make the video, or can I stay?”

“You can stay if you want,” Stiles allows. “It’s nothing that I haven’t pretty much said at some point today.”

Even so, Stiles does turn away from Collin a bit as he pulls out his phone to start recording; he hopes his son won’t see the desperation that’s likely to show in Stiles’ face as he records himself.

“Hey, Stilinski,” he says once the phone beeps affirmation that it’s recording, “I need another favor, okay? I--uh--know you’re looking into all this crap going on with us and--there’s something wrong with all the splitting and the shifts. I think it centers on Wretch somehow. He’s getting our memories, and that’s—it freaks me out more than a little, and I’m guessing it freaks you out to, so if you can just help me--help us-- figure out what’s going on. Do you feel it too? It’s like just this dark thing lurking somewhere in our head? like something out of the corner of your eye that’s gone when
you turn your head to try and see? I *really* fucking hope you do because--I don’t think--it would just really suck to be the only personality picking up on it,” Stiles says. “So two’s better than one, right? Even though I’m not entirely sure we could as two--whatever. Conversation for a different time--God, this is so weird talking to me but *not* me, and just--do what you can for us, okay, dude? I’d totally owe you.”

He ends the recording and puts the phone back in his pocket.

“You are gonna figure all of it out, Stiles,” Collin tells him firmly. “Even if Stilinski can’t help, I know you’re gonna work everything out.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says forcing a smile.

“I mean it,” Collin persists. “You’re the strongest person I know. You can do it.”

Stiles fights at tears as he pulls his son into a half hug.

*God I hope you’re right, kiddo.*

“I’m sorry you have to remind me of stuff like that,” Stiles says, “but thank you, Collin.”

“It’s what family does; help each other stay strong, right?”

“You’re gonna be one hell of an Alpha, dude; you know that?”

“You have to say that; you’re my dad.”

“I mean it; I’m proud of you. Do I say that enough?”

“Sure, you do. It’s not that big of a deal, Stiles. All I did was come on a walk with you.”

“You know---”

“And swear jar, by the way,” Collin interjects of Stiles’ continued attempt to praise him. “I’m totally getting that glow in the dark rocket now.”

Chapter End Notes

So, so, so much thanks to my lovely betas!

Hope you kids are buckled in for the ride; we've got some rocky roads coming up :P

PS. you're welcome that I didn't end this chapter with "I could make this pack good." It was a close call :P
got some tissues at the ready? I've been informed by a couple betas that you should stock up on ice cream and cute animal videos prior to proceeding :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The switch comes after a grimace from Stiles turns into the whiny “Owww, my head hurts! Ow! Ow! Owww!” of a child in pain.

“Hey, kiddo, it’s okay,” John soothes, moving immediately to sit on the sofa beside his grown son and coddle him as though there’s no risk of Stiles lashing out. “I know it hurts, but it’ll stop in just a second I promise.”

“The TV’s too loud,” Stiles whimpers, all but crawling into John’s accommodating lap and burying his face in his father's chest.

Derek of course mutes the TV in the next instant. Addie goes to sit on the other side of Stiles, attempting to pull away pain even though they’ve explained time and time again that she can’t.

“It’ll get better, Stiles; it always stops,” she says in the closest thing to a whisper the average four-year-old can manage. “And then we’ll go play, okay?”

Derek’s not sure if he’s happy or devastated that she’s apparently already identified child Stiles through the mannerisms and is already planning how best to interact with him.

“I want it to stop now.”

“Soon, buddy, soon,” John promises again.

Thankfully he’s correct, and just a minute or so later Stiles is peeking his head back out to the world. He looks confused for a moment, the frowns as he looks around.

“Where’s Collin?”

“On the back porch with Isaac,” Addie answers, and Stiles is out of John’s arms and headed toward the back of the house immediately.

“Collin?!” he calls, clearly worried. “Collin!”

“Stiles, is everything okay?” Derek asks, jumping up with John and Addie to follow. “What is it?”

“I’m right here, Stiles; what’s wrong?” Collin wonders coming in the screen door. “You okay?”

“Yeah, but are you?” he asks.

“Course I am.”

“Oh.”
“Why wouldn’t I be?’’

“Cause—cause I saw you and you looked sad,” Stiles answers, “but maybe I was dreamin’.”

“You saw me?’’

“Uh-huh.’’

“You got memories?’’ Derek wonders.

“I dunno. I just saw Collin and we were walking in the yard and he looked sad.’’

“Did you see anything else?’’ Derek wonders worriedly.

_For the love of God, please tell me this nine year old psyche is not going to get flashes of sex or abuse or—fuck, fuck, fuck, this could be bad._

“I was doing a bunch of homework with you,’’ Stiles supplies.

_Homework? You mean when we were both in the study while Stilinski was going through files?_

“And dropping a pan washing dishes. And playin’ soccer. I wasn’t dreaming?’’

“I don’t think so, I think maybe you saw some of the stuff you’ve been doing the last little while,’’ John replies. “Did you see anything scary, Stiles?’’

“Scary?’’ Stiles repeats dumbly, and some of the tension in Derek’s chest releases; if he’d seen flashes of any of the horrors, he wouldn’t be confused at that question. “No, just Collin being sad.’’

“I wasn’t sad,’’ Collin counters. “We were just walking.’’

“Oh.’’

“But it was nice of you to worry,’’ Isaac says, as he comes into view at the door. “Your head feeling better now?’’

“Uh-huh.’’

“Good.’’

“Oh no! We’re gonna miss the best part!’’ Addie cries as she realizes the Frozen Blu-Ray has reached “Let It Go’’ but is still muted.

“What movie is that?’’ Stiles wonders, following her back in toward the den.

“The bestest one ever,’’ Addie replies. “Frozen!’’

“What’s it about?’’

“Well, there’s this princess with really neat magic to make snowmen and…”

****************************************************************************************************

Stiles really does want to know if Princess Anna gets all the way frozen or not—_probably not though, since it’s supposed to be a little kid movie, right?—_but he’s really tired, and his eyes keep
slipping shut, and next thing he’s waking up on the couch with Dad again. There’s someone moving around in the kitchen and daylight is coming in through the windows. He stretches and gets up, waking Dad too.

“Okay, kiddo?”

“Hungry,” he replies. “Is that pancakes?”


Stiles giggles as he hurries toward the kitchen, happy to see his nose was right. Derek’s plopping pancakes down on a plate for Collin, who’s clearly not thrilled to be awake this early.

“Morning, Stiles,” Derek greets. “You want some pancakes?”

“Yeah!”

“Give me a couple minutes; you can sit with Collin ‘til they’re done.”

“’Kay.”

“John? Pancakes?”

“Sure; thanks. I can drop Collin at school on my way to the office; there’s a few things I have to take care of today, but I’ll try to be back before long.”

“I guess I don’t haveta go to school any more if I’m all grown up, huh?” Stiles supposes.

“Nope; you’re all done.”

“I’m all done in two weeks,” Collin says.

“For summer?”

“Yeah, but for forever too. I don’t have to go back in August. I get to be home-schooled now,” Collin replies with a smile.

“It’s not set in stone, Collin,” Derek reminds. “We still have a lot to work out.”

“Yeah, but you’ll have three whole months; it’s plenty of time,” Collin says. “We’re even gonna do like a classroom thing in the new house,” Collin tells Stiles.

“But why’d you wanna be stuck at home all the time?”

“It’s not stuck at home,” Collin answers defensively. “Pack is way better than school.”

“School’s not so bad though; you make friends and get field trips and stuff.”

Collin shrugs. “I’ll make good enough friends at sports. I don’t wanna do regular school anymore.”

“But it’ll be boring by yourself won’t it? Lonely an’ you can’t ever get away with nothing if you’re the only kid in the class.”

Collin grins. “I bet I can still get away with plenty.”

“This one time, we had this evil lady substitute and me an’ Scott—”
“Stiles,” Dad cuts in. “Don’t start giving Collin ideas. He doesn’t get sent to the principal’s office every other day, and we’d like to keep it that way.”

“You get sent to the principal?” Collin asks with a burst of laughter. “Really?”

“Not that much,” Stiles answers. “It’s not my fault the teachers are boring.”

“Stiles!” Dad scolds more loudly.

“I know; I know; their job is to teach me, not entertain me. My job is to learn not cause trouble.”


“I want powdered sugar on mine like Collin.”

“You can’t have powdered sugar and syrup.”

“How come I still have all the little kid rules if I’m grown up now?”

“Because I’m still your dad and I say so.”


“Okay.”

“What about Addie?”

“huh?”

“Is Addie gonna go to school?”

“Maybe,” Derek replies. “She’s registered, but we’re not going to talk to her about options until we’re sure home-school is set,” Derek explains before adding, “Finish up soon, Collin; you need to get ready to head out soon.”

“I’m already done,” Collin says, abandoning the last few bites on his plate. “I just gotta get on clothes, Pop.”

“And brush your teeth!” Derek calls after him as he leaves the kitchen.

“Hey, Dad, can I come to work with you?” Stiles wonders.

“You don’t want to stay and hang out with Addie and Isaac and Derek?” he counters.

It’s not a ‘no’ but Stiles doesn’t miss that it isn’t a ‘yes’ either. He frowns.

“Why can’t I come to work?”

“I won’t be gone long; I promise, but it’s not really—it’s just a better idea for you to hang out here.”

“Why?”

“Because it is.”

“But why?”
“Stiles, please just trust me on this one,” Dad asks.

He looks so sad when he says it that Stiles drops his head and sighs at his pancakes, “Okay.”

It takes some arguing and compromise, but by ten o’clock Stiles and Addie have settled on a game of rescue the princess because it allows Stiles to be a dragon slayer while still letting Addie play princess. Isaac is sorely tempted to video the game for purposes of amusement, but he doesn’t want Stiles to think they’d tease him for this new personality. He does snap a few pictures for posterity though, especially when they spend the majority of time before lunch constructing a huge fort in the backyard using lawn chairs, blankets, the small PVC soccer goal, some cardboard boxes Stiles discovered in the garage, and a thoroughly unnecessary amount of string.

“Well, it’s definitely not the worst one,” Derek comments quietly with a nod toward Stiles and Addie as he joins Isaac on the swing, “but it’s still a little odd.”

Isaac just nods; this version of Stiles hasn’t been told about all the others, and he’d like to keep it that way—at least for now. He’s still hoping this one reconciles back into the rest of Stiles’ mind soon enough.

Easy come; easy go? Since it was the sedation situation that maybe caused it? Let him catch a fucking break on something here.

“Hey, who wants a juice box?” Derek calls.

“Me!” Addie calls back, peeking out from under the fort.

“Me too!” Stiles adds.

“Come on then,” Derek bids as he tosses one to Isaac; this family is firmly of the opinion that you never outgrow some things.

“Race ya!” Addie cries to Stiles as she takes off toward the house in a full sprint.

Stiles is getting more comfortable in his fully grown body now, and he beats her by several feet.

“No fair! You’re bigger.”

“You’re the one that wanted to race.”

“Yeah, but you’re supposed to let me win,” she says with a frown.

“You’ll get there one day,” Isaac says. “It’s okay for Stiles to win sometimes; it’s just for fun.”

“It’s more funner when I win,” Addie asserts, and Isaac can’t entirely hold back a chuckle.

“Hey, Stiles?” Derek says.

“Yeah?”

“Where’s the ring you were wearing before?”

Isaac’s eyes go immediately to Stiles’ bare left hand, which Stiles is now studying.

“Can’t tell,” he replies with a mischievous grin.
“Can’t tell?” Derek repeats, unamused. “You mean you don’t know?”

“No, he means it’s buried treasure now,” Addie supplies. “There was a Dragon that wanted the treasure so the dragon slayer had to hide it away from him! So we’re gonna--”

“That ring isn’t a toy,” Derek interrupts. “We’ll find something else for you guys to play treasure with: go get the ring and bring it back.”

“Nope! Never gonna tell where the treasure’s buried!” Stiles asserts. “You could be the Dragon in disguise! Oh no! Run, Addie! Come on!” he goes on grabbing her hand and pulling her back out to the yard.

“Stiles, stop right there!” Derek barks in the Alpha tone, and Stiles freezes like his feet have been glued to the ground.

“Hey! Stop it!”

“Derek, that’s not fair!” Addie adds, tugging at Stiles’ arm, but he won’t—or can’t?--follow.

“Derek, don’t scare him,” Isaac urges. “He’s nine.”

*Don’t send him into a switch. He switches quickly enough even without triggers.*

“He buried Stiles’ wedding ring,” Derek reminds tersely, “and if he switches before he gets it back, God only knows how long it’ll take us to find it.”

“Stiles, can you please go find the ring?” Isaac requests.

“No,” Stiles replies. “I gotta stop right here,” he quotes with a glare at Derek.

“Stiles, please bring the ring back,” Derek requests in a voice much calmer than his face conveys.

“But it’s treasure!”

“Isaac, you’re going to have to--” Derek says, clearly out of patience and turns to head back inside.

“No! Derek, wait! I’ll get it! I’ll get it! Don’t be mad at me! Don’t leave!” Stiles begs.

Derek freezes with his hand on the door handle, and Isaac knows he can hear the hint of conditioning coming through in the words. He turns back toward the yard as Stiles scrambles back under the tent and emerges soon after with the ring in his dirty palm. He hurries up toward the porch, but he doesn’t come up the stairs; instead he places it on the bottom one and backs up again; Isaac’s pretty sure it’s the exact same “stop right there” spot that Derek gave him a few minutes before.

“See, it’s not messed up; I didn’t mess it up or nothing, so don’t--don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad at you, Stiles. I didn’t mean to scare you,” Derek says, going down the stairs to pick up the ring.

“You didn’t scare me,” Stiles asserts, but the tremble in his voice gives him away. “I just--I was tired of playing with it anyway,” he claims.

“Well, thank you for giving it back,” Isaac says. “Can you come up here for a second so me and Derek can talk to you?”
His eyes flit to Derek uncertainly, but Addie nudges Stiles forward.

“He’s not a bad Alpha,” she says. “C’mon.”

“I didn’t say he was bad,” Stiles points out. “I just didn’t like the thing with his voice.”

“I’ll try not to use it again, Stiles,” Derek tells him, “but you gotta listen to what we ask you to do, okay?”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

They come up the porch slowly. Derek takes a seat in one of the chairs. Addie hops up onto the swing with Isaac and Stiles follows suit taking a place besides her.

“What do I have to wear it again?” Stiles asks Isaac. “It feels weird on my finger.”

“I’ll bet it does.

“No, it’s okay if you don’t wanna wear it,” Isaac says.

_Honestly maybe we should have taken it off way before now._

“Besides, I’m not big enough to be married yet.”

“You know it’s a wedding ring?” Isaac asks; it’s not a hard leap, but he would’ve expected to hear more questions from Stiles once he realized it.

“Addie said I grow up and get two husbands and it’s you ‘n’ Derek and two kids ‘n’ that’s her ‘n’ Collin and a big brand new house soon.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Isaac confirms.

“I’m not in big trouble am I?” Addie wonders. “Aunt Cora said I couldn’t tell him stuff, but that was last time.”

“You’re not in trouble,” Isaac assures. “It’s nice of you to try and help Stiles understand things.”

_Honestly you might be the most equipped one to phrase things in a way he’ll understand._

“But I don’t wanna be married yet,” Stiles says. “That’s for when you’re old.”

Isaac laughs at the sentiment, especially since he and Stiles were only eighteen when they all got married.

“Yeah, guess it is,” Isaac says.

“But I mean--you guys are nice and stuff,” Stiles hedges, “so that’s cool that you wanna marry me an’ all, and that we have cool kids.”

“The best kids,” Addie replies with a giggle. “Specially me, right?”

“Uh-huh,” Stiles agrees, “better not tell Collin,” he adds, laughing with her.

“So do you understand why we got a little upset that you hid the ring?” Isaac wonders, bringing them back to the subject at hand. “We should have explained sooner that you should be careful with it, but--”
“Kinda.”

“Kinda?”

“Well Daddy spent all day trying to get Mom’s ring out of the sink this one time,” he confides quietly, “She was really sad about it, so I figured you wouldn’t want me to lose it, but I didn’t think I was gonna make anybody mad,” he finishes with a look to Derek.

“Well, sometimes when we get sad or worried, it comes out angry instead,” Isaac explains. “Derek isn’t mad at you; he just didn’t want the ring to get lost and you be sad when all your memories come back and you want to wear it again.”

Stiles studies Derek with skepticism, and Isaac’s grateful Derek nods agreement and says, “Exactly. I’m not mad, and I’m not going anywhere, okay? But when your memories are there and you feel grown up again, that ring means a lot to you.”

“Like how Dad never takes his off.”

“Yeah,” Isaac agrees.

“Hey, do I grow up to be as good a dad as him?” Stiles wonders.

“You’re a great dad, Stiles.”

“Yeah, you play all the fun games and you know all the words to the Little Mermaid songs and you go swimmin’ with us and let me have the cherry off your ice creams and do finger painting and play ring around the rosie and…”

Isaac’s heart absolutely melts as Addie trills off a seemingly unending list of all the reasons that Stiles “grows up” to be a “super cool” dad. He hopes fervently that this memory isn’t one that gets lost in transition. Stiles grins as she goes on and on, apparently approving of her definition of “a great dad.”

“Tell me more about cool stuff that happens when I grow up,” he requests. “Do I have a cool car?”

“You have a blue four-wheeler!” Addie answers. “It goes really fast!”

“Awesome! What else?”

It’s clearly enjoyable for Stiles to hear all the “awesome” stuff he’ll get to do or has done but can’t remember, but it’s honestly pretty great for Isaac too. It’s a less cheesy version of exercises Holly and other have suggested for getting through bad days, and it’s a solid reminder that while Stiles life was certainly harmed by traumatic experiences, it wasn’t ruined by them; there are still lots of good, everyday things that make this life pretty damn good.

And every day can be better.

*********************************************************

Derek’s phone rings, and his brow furrows in worry as he answers.

“Hello?”
“Mr. Hale, this is Joyce Young at Beacon Hills Elementary.”

“Is everything okay?” Derek demands, already rising to his feet and taking the conversation inside, away from the positive one Isaac has salvaged from the ring debacle.

“Nothing to be alarmed about,” she assures gently, “I just wanted to speak with you for a moment about Collin.”

“Um—yeah, sure. What about Collin?”

“Has anything happened at home recently that might have upset him?”

“Why are you asking?”

“He hasn’t quite been—himself today.”

“What does that mean? He’s okay, isn’t he? You said—”

“He’s not hurt or anything like that, Mr. Hale, but I’m not sure he’s exactly okay either. He’s snapped back at the teacher, and just got sent to the office for pushing another student down, so—”

“I’m coming in to get him,” Derek replies. “Can I talk to him for just a minute?”

“Sure, of course,” she agrees before calling, “Collin, can you come in for a moment?”

“Hey, Derek,” Collin mumbles from the other end. “I know you’re pissed at me but—”

“We’ll talk when I come to get you; don’t worry about that; how’s your control? Are you—”

“I’m okay—just—distracted kinda. All I did was push him Kirk Thompson; he was being a total jerk, Derek; I swear. I didn’t really hurt him though.”

“I’ll be there, soon, okay? Just keep your cool, and I’m on my way.”

“You don’t have to come get me; stay with Stiles and Isaac and Addie. I’m seriously good now. Cool as a cucumber or whatever.”

“I’m coming; it’s not a problem.”

“Is Stiles back yet?”

“No, not yet. He’s okay though.”

Collin doesn’t reply, and Derek would bet big money that they just hit the topic that’s causing the problems today.

But what about Stiles?

That there’s a new personality? That he’s younger than you? That he has some of Stiles’ other memories? Maybe a combo of that with the fact that the full moon is tomorrow? What’s wrong enough that this is the first time you’ve shown problems like this at school? I don’t know.

But we need to find out.

The sight of his son sitting glumly in the chair outside the counselor’s office isn’t exactly the best Derek’s ever experienced, but the fact that Collin really does seem in complete control of his shift
right now is definitely comforting.

“Hey, kiddo,” Derek greets with a forced smile.

“Who’s helping Isaac?” he wonders immediately.

“I called your Aunt Cora in case it takes us a while. They’re fine; don’t worry.”

“Mr. Hale?” Ms. Young says, stepping out of her office. “Thanks for coming so quickly.”

“No problem; I appreciate the call.”

“Maybe the three of us could talk for a minute or two?” she suggests.

“Sure,” Derek agrees though Collin looks like he’d rather face a firing squad of hunters than go in Ms. Young’s office.

“Do we have to?” Collin whispers.

“Yes,” Derek answers firmly.

“You don’t like talking either,” Collin reminds.

“Well, sometimes it’s just what you have to do, Collin. Come on.”

“Fine.”

“Please, have a seat,” she bids, gesturing to the two chairs opposite her own. “I just wanted to see if maybe we could get to the root of the problem here.”

“The problem is that Kirk Thompson is a total jerk,” Collin answers curtly. “Can we go now?”

“Collin,” Derek scolds.

“Ms. Maley says that Kirk wasn’t even talking to you.”

“Doesn’t mean he’s not a jerk.”

“Collin, she’s trying to help you out here,” Derek reminds. “Can you just--”

“Look, I won’t shove him or anything again, okay? I didn’t even hurt him that bad; he didn’t even cry; he just tattled like a dumb baby and--”

“And aggression is not the right response to any situation with your peers, Collin; if you feel like Kirk’s behavior isn’t okay, that’s something you should share with Ms. Maley or myself or any of the other teachers. It’s not anything you handle yourself.”

“I said I wouldn’t shove him anymore; I won’t shove anyone, okay? Two weeks and you don’t have to worry about me anymore anyway.”

“I think we all know that this is about a little more than the fact you shoved Kirk. I’m concerned about what’s causing your behavior today, Collin. Ms. Maley says you snapped at her and other students multiple times this morning before the incident with Kirk. It’s not like you, and that worries me--your dad too I bet,” she adds, and Derek nods.
“I’m just tired,” Collin says. “Didn’t sleep good. I’ll go home and probably get sent to my room, so I’ll be all rested and and full of fake smiles when I come back tomorrow. Can we go now?”

“Collin, that is not how you talk to adults who are trying to—”

“Don’t lecture me!” he commands, rising to his feet and rounding on Derek. “I don’t want to sit here and talk about shit that she doesn’t even understand!”

“I want to understand, Collin; that’s why I—”

“Well, you can’t!” Collin shouts, and Derek can see the tell-tale shaking in his son’s hands as he grips at the edge of Ms. Young’s desk. “No one in this school can! So can I just freakin’ go home now?!”

“I think this conversation might go better another time,” Derek says, rising from his own chair and laying a hand on Collin’s shoulder, praying his son keeps his control long enough to get to the car.

“If you insist,” Ms. Young says, “but I really think—”

“I appreciate your desire to help, Ms. Young, but I just don’t think now is the best time. It won’t go undiscussed; I can promise you that. We’ll work on this.”

“Let me know how I can help,” she replies in reluctant surrender.

Collin isn’t trembling anymore by the time they reach the car, but he’s clearly not planning to talk anytime soon. Derek’s debating whether or not to attempt a talk on the way home when he realizes that Collin is trying to flick away tears without being noticed. Derek pulls the car over into the near-empty lot of a sandwich shop so he can give Collin his full attention.

“Talk to me, Collin,” he requests turning toward his son as Collin turns away to hide his face.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re clearly not, and I want to know how to help; talk to me,” he repeats more insistently.

“You’re gonna tell me not to worry about it, and then I’m gonna worry about it anyway; plus it’s the full moon tomorrow so everything just seems worse anyway. I’m fine.”

“I swear that whatever it is I will not just tell you not to worry; we’ll talk it out.”

Collin doesn’t answer, so Derek ventures a guess.

“Something about Stiles? About this new personality?”

It’s a moment or two before Collin nods slowly, still not turning to face Derek.

“Is it like with Damon? That it’s weird to see your dad seem so—”

“It’s because it’s my fault!” Collin wails bringing his knees up in the seat so he can bury his face.

The confession opens the floodgates, and Derek struggles to figure out Collin’s logic. As Collin sobs, Derek gets out of the car to go around and open Collin’s door to comfort him properly. Collin shies away from the embrace though, pushing Derek’s hands away as he demands, “Didn’t you hear me?! It’s my fault! Mine and Addie’s! That’s why he split into another one because—because she missed Damon being her friend and then I didn’t want to go to school but little kid Stiles was trying to tell me how good school was this morning and it made me wonder if—if he did it because I wasn’t
listening to real Stiles and--I just--it’s my fault, isn’t it? Don’t lie because I’m a kid! I know we stress him out more than before you guys had kids! And he did all that stuff trying to save us when we got kidnapped and right after that is when it all started getting worse and worse and worse and--and--”

All further conversation is cut off as Collin gives in to heart-wrenching sobs, that have tears pouring from Derek’s eyes too as a different sort of guilt consumes him. Collin finally allows himself to be held, clinging to Derek like a lifeline as he continues to cry uncontrollably.

*You always seem so strong, kiddo. You take so much in stride with just the little struggles here and there. I should have known better than anybody that you not wanting to talk probably meant you were trying to internalize too much. I’m sorry we let you get to the breaking point. God, I’m so sorry.*

“I gotcha, kiddo; it’s okay; I gotcha,” Derek soothes, holding his son tightly, and it seems an eternity before Collin’s sobs fade to hiccuping sniffles.

Derek panics internally as he realizes that he needs to figure out what to say to really make this better. He doesn’t even know if that’s something just words can achieve.

“Hey, can you look a me a sec?” he wonders finally, and Collin nods against his chest, pulling back to meet his father’s gaze. “I wish that you would have let us know sooner that you were feeling this way about Stiles,” Derek says, “but I’m so glad you’re telling me now, Collin, because it is *not* your fault, not at all.”

“Yeah, it is; we--”

“You make him so incredibly happy, kiddo; Stiles loves you so, so much, and he would never, *ever* want you to blame yourself for what’s happening with him. The blame for that is *only* on the Alpha Pack and the hunters who kidnapped us. You and Addie make it *better* not worse; you love him and support him and give him something he never thought he was going to have the chance to get.”

“I know he loves us, Derek; that’s why he did all the stuff he did with the hunters that made his DID worse. That’s why he’d make a new Stiles to play with Addie and not be scared of me and tell me to go back to school. Don’t you *get* it?”

“I definitely see why you would think that maybe it’s because of you,” Derek allows. “And I understand where you’re coming from; you can’t do anything to the people who *really* hurt him, so it’s way easier to blame yourself because you can still beat yourself up about it. But that isn’t going to help Stiles, it isn’t going to change what happened, and it’s just not the truth at all. You haven’t got a thing to be sorry for, Collin. I *swear.*”

“I just want Stiles to be *Stiles*,” Collin says tearfully. “*All* the time--and not how he is now being scared, even though that’s okay, but like--like he--I want him to be my dad like you and Isaac, ya know? I want him like that all the time.”

“I know you do; that’s what we all want for Stiles. It just might take a while for him to get there, but you know he’s never going to stop trying.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And in the meantime, you know you can always talk to me or Isaac when stuff like this is bothering you. Or Cora. Or Pop. Or Jackson--*anybody* in the pack would be *more* than happy to. Or Miss Holly if that works better. And if you don’t want Stiles to hear, that’s okay, just ask me if we can go for a drive, or take a run with somebody. But you can’t just bottle it all up because that’s not going
to help anything; trust me. I’ve tried plenty of times and it never works.”

“I just--I dunno. I wanna be able to handle it.”

“Of course you do, but that’s why we have pack, kiddo, because we can’t handle it all on our own; we gotta help each other, okay? So you gotta let us help you any time you need it. That’s what we’re here for--well, ya know, that and pancakes,” Derek adds with a strained smile, praying his kid can bring himself to mirror it.

“And ice cream?” Collin wonders with the faintest of smiles on his lips.

“Is that a hint?” Derek asks.

“Can we? I mean--I kinda didn’t figure I’d get anything other than grounded today, but I swear Derek that kid is--”

“Probably an asshole,” Derek finishes for him. “I can imagine; I hear his mother at your soccer games.”

“So you’re not pissed at me?”

“It can slide this time,” Derek replies, “but violence is not an option for you to handle things, understand? Not ever against a human. It’s too easy for you to cross the line without meaning to and really do damage.”

Just ask Isaac…

“Yeah, okay.”

“So next time you are totally grounded until you’re thirty.”

“You can’t ground me that long.”

“Sure that’s a risk you want to take?”

“I said I wouldn’t shove him again,” Collin reminds. “I’ll be fine; today was just--I dunno. It just sucked extra bad or something.”

“Well, let’s see if you’re right and a little ice cream can’t help that.”

“Sweet!”

“Grab my phone and see what the others want us to bring.”

*****************************************************************

“Open up; I got ice cream,” Collin calls from outside the fort, and Stiles is only to happy to oblige, pulling a blanket aside for him to come in.

“Awesome!”

“How come you get in trouble and you get ice cream?” Addie wonders with a bit of a frown.
The thought crossed Stiles mind too, but hey, ice cream.

“You complaining?” Collin wonders.

“No, just—that’s not very fair.”

“It’s a long story,” Collin says. “I wasn’t in that much trouble after all.”

“Oh, well, that’s good,” Stiles says, taking the butterfinger blizzard Collin hands to him. “So you don’t have to go back to school today?”

“Nope. Maybe not tomorrow either.”

“Really? So you can stay and play with us then,” Addie informs him.

“We’re gonna tell Isaac ‘n’ Derek we want a tire swing like at my house,” Stiles adds.

“That sounds fun,” Collin says, but he doesn’t look like it sounds very fun.

“Hey, that’s the look,” Stiles tells him.

“What look?”

“That’s the way you looked in the memory thing. What’s matter?”

You didn’t get in trouble. You got ice cream. You get to stay out of school tomorrow and we can maybe make a swing. What’s wrong with that? Sounds pretty awesome to me.

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Nun-uh,” Stiles persists. “Did Derek yell at you?” he wonders. “‘Cause my Dad yells at me too sometimes but that’s just what happens when you get in trouble it doesn’t mean—”

“No, Derek didn’t yell. I’m really fine, Stiles.”

He frowns because he still doesn’t buy the lie.

“Isaac said you pushed somebody down.”

“Yeah, I lost my temper; I didn’t hurt him though.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“I’m fine, Stiles.”

“It’s hot under here,” Addie complains. “My icecream is melting too quick. I wanna go inside.”

“Good point,” Collin agrees, happy to stop Stiles’ questions by the look of it.

“You sure that other kid didn’t hurt you or something?” Stiles wonders as they leave the fort.

“Yeah, I’m sure—I just—” his eyes flicker up toward the house, and Stiles turns to look with him, but there’s no one to see but Addie’s retreating back. “I wanna tell you something, okay? And it’s not gonna make sense at all but I just wanna try something.”
“Try what?”

“Just listen,” Collin says. “And you don’t have to say anything back, and don’t tell ask Isaac or Derek about it when we get inside. It’s our secret, okay?”

“Okay, yeah; I’m good at keepin’ secrets,” he assures, eager to hear what Collin has to say.

Well, at least I’m good at trying to keep secrets. My mouth gets faster than my brain sometimes.

“Okay,” Collin says, taking a deep breath before whispering super quiet, “Look, Stiles, if--if we’re the reason, if I’m the reason you made this new one, you didn’t have to. I’m okay; me and Addie both are; you don’t have to do this for us. You can be you again, okay? Seriously. I mean it.”

What the heck?

“I didn’t make nothing new,” Stiles tells him. “For you or Addie or anybody--well, I made the fort I guess, but she helped some, and--”

“Nevermind,” Collin says. “Don’t worry about it--but remember don’t say anything to anybody about it either okay? Forget I said anything.”

That wasn’t a very fun secret, Stiles thinks as he answers aloud, “Yeah, sure, okay.”

“Okay. Come on, let’s go in before the ice cream totally melts.”

“Kay.”

Stiles’ head starts aching with a brain freeze just as they reach the porch.

But I only had a couple bites.

He shuts his eyes because everything’s starting to look way too bright, and he can hear drums in his ears. There’s a really loud thud when his blizzard hits the stairs, and he only has a second to mourn his ice cream before all he can think about it how bad his head hurts.

And even though he knows he’s not back yet, Stiles can’t help yelling, “Dad!??”

**************************

Derek comes back from locking the door behind Cora when Stiles’ cry from the back yard has both of them panicking. Derek takes off toward the back door, and Isaac is up on his feet and following Derek before he thinks about it. He falls hard five steps from the sofa, and it’s only in that moment that he realized he didn’t grab his crushes.

I just totally took like five steps without the crutches. Holy shit. Holy shit!

“Isaac??” Derek says, skidding to a halt and now torn between which husband to rush to.

“I’m good; I’m fine. Go,” Isaac replies.

I am so much more than good. Five fucking steps!
Isaac sits up and leans back against the coffee table, studying his legs as though there’s some highly visible indicator for the progress.

“It’s okay, Stiles; it’s okay,” Isaac hears Derek soothe outside.

“It’s getting better now,” Stiles answers, “just–uh–help me inside, would you? It’s kinda ridiculously bright out here.”

“Stiles?! Is that you?” Collin wonders excitedly.

“Uh–Stilinski, kiddo,” he corrects. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“No, that’s okay,” Collin answers, though from the sound of it still a bit dejected. “It’s good to see you too; I just thought maybe Stiles was back.”

“Who’s been here?”

“Little Stiles,” Addie supplies. “He’s nine ‘n’ a half.”

“Bet that’s interesting.”

“To say the least,” Derek agrees.

“Where’s Isaac?”

“In here,” he calls. “Hey, Stilinski.”

“Hey.” he greets as he walks in, squinting even against the light from the windows. “What’re you grinning so big for? That happy to see me?”

“I walked a little bit–I think.”

“What?! Dude, that’s awesome!”


“Yeah, I was headed for the back door before I could really think and I actually made it a few steps.”

“Try again!” Addie requests excitedly. “Can you?”

“Hope so,” Isaac says. “Little help up? I don’t think I can quite get up off the floor and start walking yet.”

“Yeah, of course,” Derek says, pulling him up by his arms and steadying him. “Where to?” he wonders.

“I wanna try and get back to the couch,” Isaac says.

“You sure?”

“That super awesome alpha speed will totally catch me if I don’t make it,” he supposes and Derek smiles.

“You got it.”

“Okay then.”
It’s something between exhilarating and terrifying to think about swinging his leg out in front of him and have it happen. He shakily puts his weight on his right as he goes forward, then half stumbles onto his left, then right again, but it doesn’t hold his weight this time. He barely drops three inches before Derek’s there.

He tosses Isaac’s arm over his shoulders and says, “C’mon. Let me take some of the weight off. Keep goin’.”

“Okay,” Isaac agree with a smile, as he make the last four steps toward the couch.

He plops down, more exhausted than he’d care to admit by the little--or not so little--feat. *Damn that was awesome.*

“Yay, Isaac!” Addie squeals, and he can’t help laughing as she claps gleefully. “You did really good!”

“Seriously impressive,” Stilinski agrees.

“You’re gonna be better than Derek at kickball in no time,” Collin adds, and Derek retorts, “*Hey!*” in an offended voice as though he isn’t grinning ear to ear like a kid at Christmas.

He takes a seat next to Isaac, threading their fingers together, and leaves a quick kiss on his temple.

“You can beat me at kickball anytime you want,” he says.

“Gonna hold you to that,” Isaac warns.

“Good.”

******************************************************************************

They sit around the den devouring ice cream in the wake of the excitement--he’s glad his tastes haven’t changed much since he was nine--and Stilinski finally can’t hold his question back anymore.

“So on a scale of one to ten,” Stilinski says, “how weird is it that I think I maybe remember something from another personality?”

“Like what?”

“Like walking with Collin, but I know it wasn’t me. Building a blanket fort and something about why my wedding ring is gone--treasure?”


“But are we wondering about the whole memories thing?”

“Well, you’re not the first to have that anomaly actually,” Isaac says, “which I guess means it’s not such an anomaly anymore.”

“Oh, really? That’s good, right? It could mean we’re blending together?”

“There’s still a lot to figure out,” Isaac hedges, “but we’re optimistic.”
“You’re a horrible liar,” Stilinski says. “Just tell me you’re kinda worried.”

“We’re a little worried,” Isaac admits after a moment or two of silence, “but just because we think the blending might be causing the more and more frequent switches, which could be straining your mind a bit.”

“But he’s gonna be okay, right?” Addie chimes in worriedly, and Stilinski immediately feels like an asshole for not holding his question in until the kids weren’t around.

“Of course, kiddo,” he replies. “I’m okay for now, and I’m just going to keep getting better.”

Well, technically I guess Stiles is the one who’ll get better.

So where the fuck does that leave me?

*********************************************************************************************************

Collin is tucked in bed, and Derek’s reading Addie a bedtime story. Stilinski’s had something on his mind since lunch, and Isaac takes the opportunity to prod into what’s bugging him.

“Everything okay with you?” Isaac asks from his spot sitting on the edge of the bed. “You seem distracted.”

“I’m always distracted,” he replies, deflecting the concern with a half-hearted jab at himself, but Isaac doesn’t laugh with him. “Seriously? You’re gonna pull the talk-it-out psychologist card on me.”

“You don’t have to talk to me,” Isaac replies, “but I wish you would.”

“Can I have my—his—our ring back?” Stilinski wonders, and Isaac can’t tell if that’s all that’s on his mind or if it’s a half-truth way of answering Isaac’s question.

“Yeah, of course; Derek put it in the top drawer of the dresser.”

“Thanks.”

Stilinski finishes donning pajamas before he searches for the ring. He doesn’t put in on though, instead he walks to the bed and holds it out to Isaac.

“Not gonna make me put on my own wedding ring for the first time, are you?” he asks.

It’s not yours—I mean, it is—but, this is so fucking surreal, Stilinski. I don’t know where the lines are anymore.

“No,” Isaac replies, helpless against the hopeful yet pleading look on Stilinski’s face.

He takes the ring from Stilinski, and returns it to its rightful place on his left hand. Before their hands break contact, Stilinski leans in for a kiss, slow and deep, and something more than Isaac understands. With a little nudging from Stilinski, Isaac lays back on the bed; Stilinski braces himself with one arm next to Isaac’s head, and leans in for another kiss. His other hand trails down Isaac’s bare torso until he’s hooking his fingers in the top of his pajama pants.

“So I’ve—uh—never exactly—I mean, except for ya know—with myself, but—like—same general concept, right?”
“Yeah,” Isaac confirms with a chuckle, “but you don’t have to—”

“You got left out the other day.”

“No, I didn’t; that’s just how it goes. Derek—”

“So now it’s my turn?” he asks, face the perfect combination of virgin innocence and delicious desire. “And if I totally suck at it, I’ll stop—or maybe I’ll try sucking at it instead? Okay?”

“If you’re sure, because I don’t want you to feel like you have to do anything just because—”

“Because you are gorgeous and brilliant and caring and I fucking ache to touch you—Derek too—like every second I’m here?”

“Because you owe us,” Isaac finishes, seriously, determined to think with his upstairs brian long enough to make sure Stilinski is really okay.

“I know I don’t owe you,” Stilinski assures. “All together; all equal.”

*How do you know that phrase?* Isaac wonders just before all coherent thought starts trickling away as Stilinski takes Isaac in hand.

“Gonna have to,” Isaac says between kisses. “Help me...keep...quiet.”

“Thought the goal was the opposite?” Stilinski teases, stroking Isaac slowly.

“Fuck,” Isaac groans, muffling the sound into his fist. “Not with kids.”

“Oh, yeah. Shit,” Stilinski replies. “So should we not—”

“Didn’t say that,” Isaac interjects, “just keep my tongue busy,” he adds, surging up just a bit to lock their lips back together.

*************************************

What the fuck is—Dreaming? Or something?

He freezes for a moment, completely confused about what the hell is going on.

Wait, this is Isaac. Isaac. Okay, yeah, I’m good.

“What was that? You okay?”

“Fucking fantastic,” he answers honestly, equally winded.

‘Cause it’s you, Isaac, so I’m good and safe and with you hard in my hand so nothing else really needs to make sense, not right this instant. For once it was actually a good switch that happened in bed.

“God, I’m so fucking close,” Isaac gasps. “Fuck, yes, that. Keep going.”

“Shh,” Stiles urges, swallowing Isaac’s groan with a kiss. “Kids,” he reminds when their lips next part.

“Mmm, right, yeah. Uh-huh.”

“Say my name when you come,” Stiles whispers in Isaac’s ear before muffling the
subsequent moan with his lips sealed back to Isaac’s.

He learned a long time ago how to get Isaac off quick and quiet as possible: tight grip, fast pace, and making sure to show Isaac’s balls a bit of love too.

“Yes, just like that—holy—fucking—hell—Stilinski!”

Isaac muffles the last word into Stiles’ shoulder as it morphs into a cry of absolute bliss.

But that’s not my name...

I switched; he doesn’t know; that’s all.

It’s okay.

No, no it’s not. He should, know! Shouldn’t he? There should be a difference. I should be different. It’s really me now, so--so it should be different--better?--recognizable? Something should show him it’s me. Otherwise...

“Stilinski, what’s wrong?” Isaac asks, unknowingly making the moment worse with the erroneous title.

Happy without you; Happy to have someone else in bed with him. Are you really so surprised? Rachel taunts.

No, but Isaac fell in love me me first; Isaac knew how broken I was and went for it anyway. Derek might wish for Stilinski, but Isaac--

Isaac fell in love with me...

He never had another option, Alec reminds. But now he sees what Derek fell in love with. Now they both have an unblemished, innocent, pure personality to love. How could you possibly think you’d remain first in their minds? You’re more obsolete and useless than you’ve ever been. They don’t need you anymore. They don’t love you.

“Yes, they do,” Stiles whispers aloud.

“Do what?” Isaac asks worriedly. “Are you hearing voices?”

“They love me,” he adds against the unyielding barrage of taunts now racing through his mind.

“Of course we do, Stilinski,” Isaac assures, so fucking earnestly that there is no possible way to doubt the words. “Of course we love you; don’t listen to them.”

Stiles bolts toward the bathroom, slamming the door behind him and barely making it to the toilet before he heaves. Isaac’s at the door in an instant knocking frantically.

“Talk to me; What’s wrong? How do I help? Don’t listen to the voices, okay? They’re lying! You are fucking loved and useful and kept and--”

No I’m not.

Stilinski is.

You love Stilinski.
One second Stilinski has got Isaac moaning beneath him, wondering if Isaac’ll return the favor since just the *sound* of Isaac is getting him unbearably hard, and the next he’s curled in a ball on the cold tile of the bathroom floor.

*What the fuck? Well, this sucks...*

The answer comes almost immediately as memories that don’t belong to Stilinski surface.

*So who was that? Stiles? He’s the only one who could pass for me, right?*

“Stilinski, *please*, open the door,” Isaac begs.

“Yeah, yeah, totally,” Stilinski answers. “I’m coming; I’m good. Don’t worry,” he goes on as he swings open the door to face Isaac.

“What happened? Are you okay? Did you hear--”

“No, I’m good. It was awesome,” Stilinski assures, leaning in for a kiss, but Isaac pulls back.

“What?”

“You don’t have to pretend to be okay for me; I want to know if something happens that--”

“I don’t know why I reacted like that,” Stilinski says. “It was just kinda intense, but I’m good.”

“It sounded like you heard voices.”

“I’m completely fine now, Isaac; *I promise*. It was just a quick glitch; nothing to worry about. Probably just a little base-level conditioning showing through or something. *Please* don’t let it ruin this.”

*I fucking refuse to let Stiles’ reappearance ruin it. It’ll wreck you that you didn’t see it was him, and you shouldn’t have to deal with that. You ought to be able to enjoy a goddamn hand job without having it fucked up by his issues.*

*You don’t deserve to ruin all the good moments with worrying about triggers and conditioning and all that shit.*

*You don’t deserve all the baggage that comes with Stiles.*

*You deserve me.*

---

**Chapter End Notes**

I BLAME SRL!!!!!!!!!!!! /points finger and runs for my life away from virtual angry mob

Okay, to be fair, the Collin angst was totally me, and she fretted over him the whole
time I was writing :P (but didn’t stop me, neither did Nicole, muahahahah!) 

BUT those last few sections are ALL HER FAULT for making sure we hit OPTIMUM level of angst (and by that I of course mean go and shower her with your unending praise and adoration because she does this every chapter, every step of the way, and you can largely thank her for the fact that these chapters have been coming more frequently than every two weeks :P )

/continues to run from all the people with pitchforks and torches shouting for me to leave out boys alone...
Derek opens his eyes into Stilinski’s and smiles.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Stilinski says.

“Why’re you awake?”

He shrugs. “Dunno; guess my head’s a little too chaotic for much resting these days. I actually kinda want to go for a run or something; I’m just--” he searches a moment for the right word, “restless, I guess, but I didn’t want to wake you guys.”

“Full moon,” Isaac murmurs from the other side of Stilinski. “First one for you.”

“Ah, dude! It is! That’s kinda cool,” Stilinski says, and Derek can’t help grin at the carefree reaction.

“We can go for a run if you want,” Derek says. “Collin’s usually pretty antsy today too, and we’re definitely not forcing him to school between all that happened yesterday and the full moon. We’d be asking for trouble.”

“Yeah, okay; now?” Stilinski wonders.

“Coffee first,” Derek replies.

He rolls out of bed, stretching as he stands up and grabs a shirt from the floor that smells clean enough. Stilinski follows suit, and Isaac reaches for his braces.

“I’ll make breakfast while you’re gone,” he offers.

“Um--sure that’s a good idea?” Stilinski teases.

“Dude, I can scramble some fucking eggs; it’s not rocket science.”

Stilinski casts a doubtful glance at Derek who dutifully assures, “Isaac’s pretty good with breakfast.”

“Little help to the kitchen?” Isaac asks, holding up his hands. “I want to see how far I can get.”

Stilinski takes one hand, and Derek takes the other. He can’t help feeling just a tad like a boyscout helping some old dude across the street, but he’d never say that out loud. Isaac gets to his feet well enough, and takes the first step forward. And the next. And the next. Until he’s at the bedroom door, and lets go of Stilinski’s hand to reach out for the knob. He loses his balance as he tries to open the door and stay upright, and Derek tightens his grip to keep him up.

“Maybe don’t push yourself too--”

“Down the hall,” Isaac interjects over Derek. “Lemme see if I can get down the hall.”

“Okay.”
Derek gets exhausted just watching Isaac determinedly putting one foot in front of the other. He slows as he moves forward, until the last few steps are little more than a shuffle, but he makes it. Derek’s getting ready to support most of his weight to get Isaac to a chair when Stilinski lifts Isaac off his feet in a huge bear hug.

“Dude, all the way down the hall! Holy shit!” he exclaims. “That is awesome! You are fucking batman or some shit,” he goes on as he sets Isaac gently back down and mostly carries him toward the recliner in the den.

“You know, that reminds me,” Isaac says. “Derek still owes me a battery powered bat mobile.”

“From the looks of it you won’t need it in a week or two,” Derek answers with a proud grin. “Have you told Deaton about the improvement?”

“Texted him last night. He replied with the usual: ‘excellent news, but remember your recovery rate is unpredictable’.”

“Deaton can be such a buzzkill,” Stilinski says. “All that mysterious mojo man stuff goes to his head sometimes.”

“He’s not so bad,” Isaac counters. “He’s got a point.”

“I guess, but dude you’re walking practically on your own again! That’s so fucking great!”

“Swear jar,” Collin says blearily as he appears on the other side of the den. “Isaac’s walkin’ more?”

“From the bed to the end of the hall,” Isaac confirms. “Not too shabby, huh, kiddo?”

“That’s a lot farther than the couch last night!” Collin praises. “Caroline’s for breakfast to celebrate?” he adds hopefully, and Derek chuckles. “Your Aunt Cora’s coming over to stay the night. Call and see if she’ll pick it up on her way here this morning.”

“Sweet!”

Stilinski has been debating when to go off on his own a bit to watch the video message Collin says in waiting on his phone. He stays in view of the back porch, per Derek’s request—fair enough really, volatile DID werewolf on the full moon; he’s lucky Derek doesn’t knock him unconscious and chain him in the basement—but he goes far enough away to pretend he has a little privacy left.

Okay, Stiles, what’s up? he thinks as he hits play and hears Stiles share his worries that something is “wrong” and “dark” and lurking around in their mind.

No, shit, Sherlock. God only knows all the demons locked up in there. Why are you just now worrying about darkness in your head? Isn’t it always dark up there?

Stiles’ vague description and request isn’t a lot to go on, but it’s something to file away in the back of his mind. Maybe he can be on the lookout for this “darkness” or whatever. He mostly hopes that maybe Stiles is just being paranoid or something. He plays the video once more, trying to
ignore the desperate sound in his own voice as Stiles talks.

\textit{I don’t understand what the hell I’m supposed to do. How do I help you–us? You’re supposed to be the one who knows the most.}

\textit{But is that still the case? If what Isaac said is right and you’re missing memories and other personalities are getting them, are you still the one with the most access to everything?}

\textit{What’s going on with us?}

\textit{What do we do about it?}

\textit{Can we do anything about it?}

***************************************************

Isaac’s amazed at how well Stilinski keeps an even temper as the morning goes on. Only his extra jitteriness gives away the nerves—or stress?—running through him. Stilinski’s occupying himself with more notes, but he’s not quite as intent on studying as he normally is; perhaps too distracted? He’s sprawled on the floor of the den where Addie and Isaac are watching cartoons while Collin, Cora, and Derek battle each other at various Kinnex games in the basement rec room.

“Could you \textit{stop}?!?!” Addie snaps, golden eyes flashing. “I can’t even hear the TV you’re drumming your fingers so loud! Ugh!”

It’s an innocent enough outburst given the day, but it gets a growl out of Stilinski, and Isaac’s scrambling desperately to get on his feet even as he hears the others pounding up the stairs. Stilinski’s starting to shift, but he’s backing away from Addie, not advancing.

“I didn’t mean to do that; I just–now I can’t stop,” he says, clearly panicking as his fangs and claws descend.

He takes off down the hallway, and the sharp sound of a door slamming shut startles Addie into motion. She rushes toward Isaac as Derek and the others top the stairs.

“I didn’t mean it!”


“Is he gonna change because of me?”

\textit{Probably.}

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You didn’t mean it, Addie,” Cora says gently. “Come on; come play games with me in the basement and get some energy out; it’ll help.”

She hesitates a moment before leaving Isaac to take Cora’s offered hand. Isaac makes his way slowly down the hall, bracing on the walls, to find Derek and Collin standing outside the bathroom door.
“Stilinski, it’s a totally normal reaction,” Derek assures. “Don’t freak out.”

“Yeah, sure, don’t freak out. Easy for you to say. You’re not sprouting fangs and claws and fucking sideburns and losing eyebrows. I mean seriously--the eyebrow thing--what the actual fuck is up with that. Why?”

“Yeah, pretty funny, huh?” Collin replies with a forced laugh. “We can shift too if it makes you feel better.”

“I’d rather feel a little more human.”

“Just focus on--”

“I know the damn theory!” Stilinski growls. “Who the fuck do you think taught Scott to keep control, but it’s not working!”

“Okay, okay, just breathe,” Isaac replies. “You’ve got to calm down that’s step number one.”

“Great, you three are just having a little support posse meeting outside since I’m freaking out. that’s not mortifying at all.”

“This is all completely normal,” Derek reminds. “It’s your first full moon; it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. I want to shift back.”

“Give yourself some time.”

“There’s got to be other ways to control it right? What about that thing you pulled with Isaac, the growly ‘I’m the Alpha’ thing?”

“Give yourself some time,” Isaac repeats. “Derek’ll help if he needs to, but I really think you can do this if you just--”

“Wait, pain is a thing right? You told Scott pain would keep him human so--”

“No!” the three outside the door shout at once.

“Wow, okay, definitely a story there I probably don’t want to hear.”

“Please do not hurt yourself, Stilinski,” Derek appeals. “If you really want me to use the Alpha thing, I can, but don’t hurt yourself.”

“Dude, I just want something to like, make this not be happening anymore.”

“Okay; open the door,” Derek replies.

“Derek, maybe--”

Derek cuts off Isaac’s protest with his best ‘trust me’ gaze, and Isaac waits to see what his move will be. Stilinski opens the door but retreats, like he doesn’t want to risk being too close to anyone. He’s got his eyes shut with a grimace on his face like he’s bracing for Derek’s advance, but Derek doesn’t growl, instead he reaches out to grab Stilinski’s hand, and brings it up to his mouth to leave a quick kiss. Stilinski’s eyes pop open and he raises an eyebrow in silent question. He’s opening his mouth to most likely verbalize that question but Derek silences him with a kiss.
“Gross,” Collin mutters, rolling his eyes in true Hale style as he pretends to gag. But it works, and by the time their lips part, Stilinski stands in human form looking baffled.

“She’s— How ‘bout that?” he says, examining his claw-free fingers.

“See; you can keep control,” Derek says with a smile, “just don’t work yourself up. You’re better at this werewolf thing than you think.”

“Addie okay?” Stiles wonders.

“Fine. Downstairs with Cora.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t be cooped up in the same place as the kids today.”

“We’re fine, Stilinski,” Collin replies. “No big deal. You totally ran instead of attacking when you lost it. Everything’s cool, right guys?”

“You handled it really well,” Isaac agrees. “We’re not worried.”

Yet.

*******************************

Stilinski falls into step with the others as they move back out to the den.

_My eyes were blue._

_My eyes were blue._

_My fucking eyes are goddamn ice blue._

_What. The. Fuck._

_Who was it? Do they know? Do I even know? _

_When? With the Alphas? Or something since then? _

_Both?_

_What if it’s not just one person? _

_Do I ask them this shit? _

_Do I really want to know? _

_Shit._

“Stilinski?” Isaac says, cutting across his thoughts. “You okay?”

“Uh-huh; just daydreaming,” he answers, deciding that this isn’t the day he wants to hear the answer to that question, _if he ever_ does.
He settles down on the couch beside Isaac and focuses on just breathing evenly.

It’s not me anyway; it’s Stiles. He’s the reason our eyes are blue. I wouldn’t kill an innocent person; I couldn’t even let them kill Jackson. I don’t want to hear what Stiles did because we’re different.

And I’m starting to think that’s a really good thing.

******************************************************************************

Derek still can’t entirely believe that the full moon is passing with so little turbulence. He’s honestly waiting for the other shoe to drop in spite of himself. It can’t possibly be this easy; surely something in the instincts will override Stilinski’s relative tranquility; the conditioning will come out or he’ll switch or something. Derek just can’t believe that they’re going to get off this easy after all the insanity they’ve been fielding lately.

But then lunch goes well–everyone jokes and tempers aren’t too short. And they spend the afternoon outside playing games, but nothing that involves contact; they stick to horseshoes and half-assed volleyball and--at Addie’s insistence--hopscotch and ring around the rosey. Not once does Stilinski lose it again; not when he’s losing miserably at horseshoes, not when Addie throws another tantrum over losing volleyball, not even when Cora inadvertently beams him in the face with the ball. Granted, Stiles has always had pretty good control, but Stilinski isn’t even showing signs of a struggle against the inherent moonborn aggression and instinct. Beyond his outburst this morning, it’s as though it’s any other day.

Can we really be this lucky?

Can he?

I wish I could believe it’s just this simple with Stilinski here.

But I know better than to trust simple.

******************************************************************************

Stilinski tries not to mind that they watch him like a hawk all day and well into the night. He knows that they’re right to worry, but after the “incident” with Addie earlier passed with so little drama, he can’t help but feel like they’re not quite giving him enough credit.

Yeah, maybe I’m not used to this, but I’m not Stiles either. I don’t think you need to be this fucking vigilant.

He knows it’s the full moon working as his annoyance builds more and more until they head to bed in the early hours of the morning. He shouldn’t let the bitter words slip out, but his mouth runs away with him, as usual:

“So you guys going to take turns keeping watch all night or what?”

“You’re safe here, Stilinski,” Isaac replies, though he’s clearly confused to the origin of the
statement, “but if you’d feel better, maybe--”

“No, I mean watching me.”

“What?”

“If we’ve kept a close eye, it’s nothing personal, it’s just--”

“That you’re used to being on high alert waiting for a the next clusterfuck? I’m not a liability; I’m not a problem. I’m normal.”

I’m not Stiles.

“You remember you’re a werewolf, right?” Isaac says, attempting to deflect the aggression with humor. “Not sure ‘normal’ is really an adjective that applies here.”

“You know what I’m fucking saying.”

“I know that it’s the full moon; it’s been a long day; and we should talk about this another time,” Isaac says more somberly.

“Let’s just go to bed, okay?” Derek adds.

Of course you side with Isaac. I bet you two really did work out a plan to alternate who sleep and who fucking lies awake in case I go ape shit.

“Yes, Alpha, of course,” he mutters bitterly as he starts taking his shirt off to don pajamas.

Derek growls as he jerks Stilinski’s shirt back down. His eyes flash red and unbidden terror surges through Stilinski, though he manages–barely–to hold his ground and not shrink back.

“Don’t. do. that,” Derek orders, and Stilinski wonders if he means to use the Alpha tone or if it’s the moon.

“Then don’t boss me around,” Stilinski counters, voice shaking only slightly.

“Okay, okay, let’s just dial this back a couple notches,” Isaac says, taking a shaky step toward them, and grabbing their shoulders.

Stilinski doesn’t decide to bring out the claws and swipe Isaac’s arm away, but it happens all the same; in almost the same instant Derek pins Stilinski against the wall with another terrifying growl.

“Derek, no!” Isaac protests as he grabs at the nearby dresser for support.

Okay, so maybe more justified in the whole keeping a close eye thing than I thought.

“Stop talking and go the fuck to sleep before this night goes all to hell,” Derek demands tersely before releasing Stilinski.

Yeah, okay, full moon this officially sucks.

He wants to say something--maybe a comeback or an attempt to defuse the tension, but the words won’t seem to come. They change into their sleep shirts and boxers without another word, and lie tense in bed for a solid five minutes of excruciating silence before Derek of all people speaks.

“It’s not that we don’t trust you,” he says, staring up at the ceiling rather than turning to face Stilinski.
“It’s that we’ve learned the hard way--more than once--that it’s better to be overly cautious than caught off guard and unprepared.”

More than once?

With Stiles stuff?

Or with everything? Are you talking about the shit that went down with the house?

Fuck, you could honestly be talking about pretty much your whole life, couldn’t you?


“I love my family,” Derek corrects. “My pack. That includes you; I paid close attention to make sure you were okay too, not just the others.”

My pack. That includes you.

The assertion makes Stilinski’s stomach do an odd flip; maybe it’s the earnesty in Derek’s voice; maybe it’s just what he needed to hear in this moment. Whatever the reason, he finds Derek’s hand beneath the covers and squeezes it.

“Thanks.”

Stilinski wakes up to an empty bed, but before any worry sets in, the heartbeats of his family immediately reassure him.

How strange is it that I have a family?

Not bad or anything, just different I guess.

He rises from the bed, lured to movement by the smell of pancakes. Stilinski’s hand is on the doorknob to head out to the kitchen and join the others when he hears a thud. It doesn’t sound like major damage, but it definitely came from the bathroom, and Stilinski decides that pancakes can wait the extra minute so he can investigate.

“I’m fine, Derek,” Isaac says the moment the door opens.

“You sure as hell don’t sound fine.”

You assume Derek? Because I was still asleep or because Derek is always the one that comes to check on you? I guess Derek mostly checking on you would make sense, though. Stiles has plenty of issues on his own.

Another reason you deserve a husband like me.

Jackson’s master bathroom is kind of ridiculous in the best way, the tub and the shower are separate, muted chrome everywhere you look, and the whole thing is massive. Stilinski’s not here to appreciate the fixtures though, and he remembers his original mission the second he sees the back of
Isaac, one of his shoulders slumped precariously and kind of pathetically against the side of the shower, tilting the triskele tattoo to one side.

Stilinski only half makes the decision to strip with his upstairs brain--it’s morning, he needs a shower, Isaac’s his husband anyways--and if the fact that Stiles ruined his and Isaac’s good time a few nights ago has been nagging in the back of Stilinski’s mind, no one is going to know but him.

Stilinski opens the clouded glass door of the shower to step in behind Isaac. Isaac’s braced with one arm on either side of the shower, not nearly enough to take as much weight of his legs as he probably should. Tremors are shivering down Isaac’s back, his shoulders rising higher than they should despite his attempts to keep his breathing normal.

“This walking thing is taking more out of you than you want us to think.”

Stilinski doesn’t phrase it like a question because it’s not. For days he’s been watching Isaac’s failed attempt to try and hide how exhausted he is.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” he dares.

Isaac finally turns his head away from the blank tile in front of him, smiling over his shoulder.

“I’m okay,” he assures, turning to put his lean his back in the corner of the shower for a more stable stance. He reaches with one arm to pull Stilinski through the warm spray and closer to him. Stilinski can’t help but smile back, even though Isaac looks more tired than excited at the prospect of having Stilinski in the shower with him. It only serves to make Stilinski all the more determined to finish what he started in bed those few nights ago.

“You don’t have to look so worried Stilinsky—”

Isaac’s sentiment is cut off with a surprised grunt that makes Stilinski ache from his heart to his dick even as he moves to deepen the kiss, biting lightly at Isaac’s bottom lip. At some point Stilinski remembers that Isaac’s about to fall, so he lets his fingertips graze down from where they were grasping gently at Isaac’s godly jawline to wrap one arm around Isaac’s waist in support.

“You always look so tired,” Stilinski says as he breaks the kiss to appreciate the look of Isaac’s wet, flushed skin as Stilinski’s free hand traces over Isaac’s collarbone with his thumb, the rest of his fingers fitting over Isaac’s shoulders and gently pushing his husband back farther against the wall of the shower, encouraging him to lean on the wall for more support. He’s desperate to make this work, but shower sex seems like it could be a bit perilous at the best of times, and the last thing he wants to see is someone bleeding at the bottom of the shower.

“We were up late last night… and the full… full moon certainly didn’t help either. I’m just a little stressed. It’s not the walking stuff.”

Stilinski smiles to himself as Isaac tries to make excuses when they all know that Issac’s still healing, whether he acts like it or not.

“Lemme help you relax then, Isaac.”

“You know you don’t have to though—”

“Isaac.”

His fingers are already well placed and he digs them in to Isaac’s shoulders lightly, massaging muscles that are too tense from keeping up with all the craziness he’s been put through for too long.
“Please let me help. I want you so fucking bad right now.”

When Isaac kisses him back Stilinski lets his hands fall to Isaac’s, wrapping his fingers around slightly shaky ones and squeezing them before he breaks the kiss and turns to lay his back against such a warm and inviting body, pinning Isaac to the tile behind him.

“Got enough energy left to fuck me?” he wonders. “Well--my thighs at least? Don’t think I’ve got the patience for full on--”

“You know, somehow I think I’ll manage to muster up a little more adrenaline,” Isaac laughs.

“But next time…” Stilinski says, letting the promise hang in the air as he rearranges their hands so his are laced over Isaac’s, pulling his arms over his own torso. Isaac’s breathing heavily, but when Stilinski finally looks back to see that Isaac’s wrecked in all the right ways, his eyes hooded like they were last time they were at this.

I hope Stiles knows how fucking lucky he is.

“And maybe you could lend me a hand? Or ya know, two?” Stilinski wonders with a grin, as he directs one of Isaac’s hands to his chest, the other one towards his already half-hard dick.

Maybe now they can both get off without Stiles getting in the way.

I can give you everything he can and more, Isaac. I’m gonna show you--Derek too--as many times and as often as you’ll let me.

Isaac had been more than a little worried that this all seemed way more awesome in Stilinski’s head than it would be in practice, but it seems that worry was unfounded. Where Isaac had been just a bit disappointed with his first shower sex experience, it seems Stilinski’s hopes are being entirely fulfilled. With every thrust into the tightness of Stilinski’s clenched thighs, his grip over Isaac’s hands tightens, apparently giving Stilinski some exquisite friction that if the way he’s keening is any indicator.

“Faster, harder,” he urges, and Isaac doesn’t need telling twice.

The words have Isaac muffling curses into Stilinski’s shoulder where he nips just a little while he obeys Stilinski’s directive.

“Shh, kids,” Isaac grunts. “Quiet.”

“Need a--soundproof bedroom--at the new place,” Stilinski suggest, and damn the things they could do if that really happens; Isaac’s imagination runs away with him for a minute, thinking of all the ways they could get each other off as loudly as they fucking want to.

“Don’t stop; keep going; more, Isaac, more,” Stilinski demands. “I know that quick, hard pace you love. Give it to me. Show me.”

He picks up the pace even more, his legs aren’t going to stay steady much longer anyway--orgasm or not--and the idea of leaving this shower without is just not one he’s going to entertain.
“Stilinski, fuck--I’m close, are you--are you--”

“Yeah, baby I’m with you; Come on. Come for me,” Stilinski says, low and sultry.

Isaac closes his eyes and imagines he’s really inside of him, enjoying the rare ecstasy of the tight heat, filling him over and over again, until they’re both spent and sated and spilling everywhere.

Stilinski actually comes first, throwing his head back onto Isaac’s shoulder, throat bared and mouth open in a silent cry. The sight is more than enough to give Isaac the last shove over the edge, and he has to muffle the sound of his release into the flesh of Stilinski’s shoulder.

_Soundproof bedroom._

_We really do need to look into that..._

*********************************************************

Derek can’t help smirking when Isaac and Stilinski come to sit at the breakfast table. Isaac’s more than mastered the neutral post-coital expression, but Stilinski has a blush on his cheeks that Derek wants so badly to tease him for, but Addie’s still at the table. Instead he just plants a quick kiss to the flushed skin as he sets a plate of eggs and toast in front of Stilinski, and the bright red deepens to crimson. A burst of laughter escapes Isaac before he can muffle it into his hands.

“What’s funny?” Addie asks.

“Derek made a silly face,” Isaac lies smoothly.

“What face?” she wonders.

“Can’t do it twice,” Derek says solemnly. “Might get stuck that way.”

“Nuh-uh!”

All thoughts and jokes to whatever happened in the shower are quickly lost to a battle of funny faces, fielding a call from Allison to see if she can bring the kids over for a playdate, and getting Collin out the door to school.

*********************************************************

Isaac can’t quite believe it when they hit the 48-hour mark with Stilinski and there’s been no sign whatsoever of a coming switch--no headaches, no apparent flashbacks, nothing. While Isaac would of course prefer to have Stiles be the first personality that lasts a little while, he’s mostly glad that maybe his husband’s mind is becoming a little less erratic.

_Please let him be stabilizing. We could all use a little bit of a break._

“So--uh--do we have like dinner plans or anything?” Stilinski wonders.
“Not really.”

“Could we maybe like, go out?”

“Ooo ooh! Can we please?” Addie implores. “Pretty, pretty please?!”

“I mean, I did okay when we went to Caroline’s,” he reminds Isaac. “We could do that again maybe? With you and Derek there even if I switch you can stop me right? We can take the medicine sedative stuff just in case.”

I’m not giving you that sedative again. We’d just have to find another way—an order or fucking knocking you unconscious, but not the thing that may well be part of the reason you’ve got yet another personality to deal with.

“Cabin fever, huh?” Isaac guesses, and Stilinski nods.

“Plus we totally need to celebrate all your walking stuff. You gotta show off your mad skills,” he points out with a hopeful smile.

Isaac glances to Derek who shrugs. “Probably be good to get out of the house,” Derek says. “Right?”

“Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!” Addie agrees fervently. “Can Logan ‘n’ everybody come too?”

“We’ll call and invite them,” Isaac agrees.

“Pop too,” Collin chimes in.

“I’ll text everyone and tell them we’ll be there at six thirty,” Derek says. “We haven’t been out as a pack in a while anyway; hopefully most of us are free.”

“Gonna be totally awesome!” Stilinski says with an exuberant fist pump.

Sure hope you’re right...
I can barely believe it now.

“Back at you,” Scott counters.

“Yeah, guess so, huh?” Stilinski says with a smile. “Life is weird, dude.”

“Better than boring though,” Scott supposes.

Is it?

Seems like a lot of people in this pack could probably do with a little less weird and a little more boring.

“Where’s your head, kiddo?” Dad wonders from Stilinski’s left.

“Just--kind of wishing I had been here to see parts of how we went from barely surviving and chaotic as hell to a big pack family,” he confesses, but the words feel too somber so he teases, “and how the heck Jackson brain-washed us into letting him in.”

“Very funny,” Jackson says, rolling his eyes.

“Jackson’s a really good uncle,” Collin puts in, and there’s a definite perturbed undertone to go with his furrowed brow.

“I know; I’m just joking,” Stilinski assures with a smile. “We didn’t all get along so great in high school.”

“Well, we like who he is now so it doesn’t matter what he used to be,” Collin informs.

What are you really trying to say to me, kid?

“Check that tone a little,” Derek tells him quietly.

“Nah, Collin’s right. I’m being a jerk. My bad, Jackson,” Stilinski apologizes, eager to avoid any kind of scene that could ruin the outing.

“No big deal.”

“Cool.”

“So, who saw that insane A’s game last night?” Scott wonders, blatantly changing the subject, but Stilinski is grateful for the help.

“Forget the A’s,” he says. “I need somebody to catch me up on Mets standings like stat.”

Derek invites Collin for a run when they get home, and his son must see straight through to Derek’s true intentions because he stops abruptly the minute they’re out of earshot of the house.

“Gonna tell me what you really meant with that comment to Stilinski?” Derek wonders.

“Exactly what I said,” Collin replies. “Who people are now is what matters, not who they
used to be.”

“And Stilinski is who Stiles used to be,” Derek concludes.

“Yeah.”

“That’s not his fault,” Derek says, “and it’s not necessarily a bad thing either. It’s just—it is what it is.”

“Why does he get to be the first one who stays for a while after everything? It’s not fair.”

“Things aren’t always fair, kiddo. You know that.”

You know it all too well.

“It’s just really weird, Derek, ‘cause like Damon and Wretch were so different from Stiles, but Stilinski... He’s kinda close to how Stiles was when I first got here, but he’s still not Stiles, ya know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And he doesn’t get stuff.”

“Get stuff?” Derek repeats dumbly. “Like what?”

“Like--I dunno--just--like--like what you said, that life’s not fair, he doesn’t get that.”

“Even if he’s repressing more recent stuff, he’s had more than his fair share of hardships too. He knows.”

“But not like Stiles. Stiles--I dunno--just that--like--ugh!” he groans in exasperation, clearly frustrated that he can’t explain like he wants to; Derek knows the feeling well. “Nevermind, I don’t know how to say it. I just wish he was Stiles because Stiles is my real dad and he gets stuff and Stilinski isn’t Stiles.”

“You miss Stiles; I can definitely understand that. It doesn’t mean that you have to take it out on Stilinski.”

“No one asked him to come back,” Collin asserts resentfully. “I meant for Stiles to hear--” judging by the look on Collin’s face, the words spilled out before he intended them to.

“Hear what?” Derek prods.

“Don’t be mad, okay?” Collin requests. “I didn’t figure it would work anyway, but it’s not like it hurt anything.”

“Hear what,” Derek repeats, mildly concerned at Collin’s defensive reaction.

“You know when we got home the other day and I took the ice cream out to the fort?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I thought--I figured that maybe since Stiles is always in there somewhere even when another version of him is what we see, that he could maybe hear what I said.”

“And what did you say?”
“Nothing bad, I swear!”

“I believe you, but tell me what you said.”

“I just told him that if he was doing it for me and Addie that he didn’t have to keep being a kid. I was kind of hoping it would get him back, and he did switch right after then, but not to Stiles.”

Holy shit. Did you trigger a shift? Coincidence or control? And if it’s control what does it say that Stilinski came instead of Stiles? That the Stilinski personality is stronger than Stiles? Or that Stiles thinks Stilinski is the better choice? Maybe it’s just entirely random? Fuck, there are so many questions in this.

“Hey, say something,” Collin bids. “Are you mad?”

“No, not mad, just thinking.”

“Okay.”

“You still can’t take it out on Stilinski that he’s the one here,” Derek persists, “and he’s a part of Stiles even if he’s not the part you prefer.”

“Is he the part you prefer?” Collin wonders.

“What? No. Why would you ask that?” Derek immediately replies, more than a little worried about the unsolicited level of defensiveness that arises with the question.

“Just--he’s the way you remember him, right? Before all the other stuff happened?”

“He’s more familiar to me than to you,” Derek admits, “but that doesn’t make him my favorite or anything. I want Stiles back, too.”

Don’t I?

Of course I do!

But seeing him without that aged look in his eyes all the time is kind of nice--and that he’s not so attuned to the power dynamic that I have to be super careful. I mean we had an argument last night--on the full moon of all nights--and it was blessedly anticlimactic.

But appreciating the silver linings of Stilinski doesn’t mean I don’t want Stiles. I love Stiles, all the parts of him, I always have. Always will.

I just miss the crazy ass teenager I fell for sometimes.

But I love the man I married more.

That’s what counts, right? That’s the main thing.

**************************************************

“You’re sure excited for school,” Stilinski comments over breakfast as Collin shovels cereal into his mouth hurriedly.
“It’s Field Day today,” Collin says with a wide grin, “and I’ve got werewolf powers.”

“We talked about that,” Derek reminds.

“I know; I know,” Collin says. “I’m only allowed to win one solo event,” Collin tells Stilinski, “to be fair to the humans and all, but I can come in second or third in as many as I want and if I’m part of a team for an event then I can help win as many of those as we can.”

“Solid plan of action,” Stilinski says. “Should be fun, huh?”

“Dude, yeah! My class is totally gonna win and get the ice cream party. It’s gonna be awesome.”

“Sounds awesome. Can wait to see it.”

“Oh--uh--” Collin falters. “I think--Derek was gonna--but--um--Derek?”

“We’re not all going?” Stilinski wonders. “I thought Field Day was like a whole family day thing with--” His words trail off as the logic clicks together. “Oh. Me near a bunch of kids. Bad plan, huh?”

“Well, but the lawn in front of the school is like huge,” Collin says. “Maybe you could come but just keep a little buffer distance? That could be fine, right?”

“I’ll defer to Isaac and Derek on that one,” Stilinski says.

But I was fine at dinner. I’ve only flipped my shit on the full moon. I could totally do this. Your whole family should be there for Field Day shit. I bet this is the most excited you’ve been for school the whole time you’ve gone. I used to fucking live for Field Day when I was your age. I wanna watch you get all excited and impress all your classmates and actually act like a regular, happy kid. I wanna be that annoying dad like mine used to be taking pictures and cheering too loudly and grinning like an idiot at how proud I am. That’s not so much to ask, is it?

“I don’t see why not,” Isaac says. “We’ll see if we can get another packmate there too? That way Derek can stay close up to the events?”

“I wanna stay up close with Derek, too,” Addie puts in, still a bit groggy.

“Aunt Cora said she was probably coming,” Collin informs. “So that works, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll give her a call and let her know the plans. She can come pick you guys up?”

“Good, ‘cause I don’t wanna be late,” Collin says, shoving back from the table and dashing back down the hall. “Be ready in like three minutes, Derek!” he calls as he goes. “Don’t forget the camera!”

Derek chuckles softly as he rises from his half-eaten breakfast. “Think he’s a little excited?” he wonders before chugging the last of his coffee.

“How come my school doesn’t have Field Days?” Addie whines. “I wanna win ice cream parties.”

“You’ll have a Field Day when you start Kindergarten next year,” Isaac promises, and she sighs, “But that’s forever away.”

“Maybe we’ll do a pack field day when we get the new house started,” he suggests. “To kick things off with some fun.”
“Yeah!”

“Hey, Isaac, what did we do with the camera the other day?” Derek interrupts. “I thought I left it on the coffee table but—”

“I put it on charge last night. It’s in the study.”

“Awesome. Thanks. See you three in a little bit,” he says with a chaste kiss to Stilinski and then another to Isaac and a last one to the top of Addie’s head before he hurries toward the study. “You can help Isaac pack a picnic cooler, ‘kay?” he suggests, and Addie brightens up with a “Yeah! With ice pops!”

“With ice pops,” Isaac agrees with a smile.

The moment is straight out of a sitcom. It’s familiar and easy and perfect and Stilinski aches to keep everything like this.

This is what family is supposed to be. This is what they should always have. This is what they deserve.

Not Stiles and stressful conversations and missed events and horrible memories and kids having to play the parent.

They deserve me.

I just don’t know how to make that happen. Or how to convince them I’m right. Derek might be easy. Addie’s young enough to enjoy that I can do more things more easily and not be ‘scary.’ Collin’s comment last night kinda sucked, but if he sees how awesome the family is today maybe he’ll understand where I’m coming from. Isaac—well, Isaac could see the logic I bet. He knows enough about psychology to see the benefits of less stress on the family. And we’re making progress the two of us with the whole “falling in love again” thing.

I can totally do this. I can show them I belong, that I’m better. We can figure out how to hide all the fucked up shit away and let me be the part that shows.

I can find a way to stay.

*******************************************************************************

“Woo! Go Collin!” Stilinski shouts as Collin’s teammate hands off the flag they’re relay racing to the finish line.

“Yeah, Collin!” Isaac adds.

“That’s my brother!” he hears Addie shout from her spot in Derek’s lap nearer the action.

It’s an absolutely perfect day in so many ways: The sun is out, but not scorching; Collin is clearly enjoying himself; his teammates continually comment on how glad they are he’s on their team—“We’re gonna crush Ms. Henderson’s class for sure this year!”—but he’s not doing so well that he draws unreasonable suspicion; Stilinski hasn’t shown the slightest PTSD or DID symptom; Cora’s grinning proudly as she videos her nephew’s successes; and Isaac walked all the way from
the car to the spot they laid out the blanket and only stumbled twice.

*What I wouldn’t do to keep this day going for a whole month,* he thinks wistfully.

Stilinski is brushing his teeth before bed after a long day of cheering Collin on and celebrating his many Field Day event winner ribbons and promising Addie a “Pond Day Field Day” next week to mark the day construction starts on the new house. He hopes--maybe a little selfishly--that he’s the one here to see the event come to fruition. It sounds like it’s going to be a pretty awesome deal.

As he rinses the toothpaste from his mouth and look back into the mirror, a thought occurs; he debates a moment or two before speaking quietly, hoping the noise of the television still playing in the den will cover the words well enough.

“I really hope you get the memories of today, Stiles,” he says earnestly into the mirror. “It was awesome.” He pauses again, almost stopping there, but then goes on, “I know that something’s going on with us that has you worried, but whatever it is I can’t see it or feel it or whatever. I’m--I’m just--I’m totally good, ya know? Fine and dandy and all that. I’m not--I know that all the shit that went down the past few years totally matters, but maybe--maybe we deserve to be able to lock it away in the back of our head? Maybe that’s the dark thing. It’s just a Pandora’s Box of bad memories we’re trying to quarantine so that life can *always* be as easy and simple as it is when I’m here. If you see this you probably saw at least *some* of the other things that’ve been going so fucking well and I *know* you want the best possible thing for your family the same way I do, so maybe I should just--”

“What are you doing?” Collin’s voice interrupts sharply.

He turns toward the voice to see his son standing in the middle of the bedroom glaring into the master bath at Stilinski.

“Nothing, kiddo, just--uh--my own version of leaving Stiles a video, ya know?”

“You told him you’re the best personality for us,” Collin accuses.

“No, I didn’t. I was just going to talk to him about--about finding the balance between the two of us. I think that should be our next goal is all.”

It’s not *entirely* a lie, but Collin still regards him skeptically.

“Stiles, you don’t have to keep Stilinski for us either,” Collin tells him, eyes boring into Stilinski’s like he could see through to the other personality. “You can come back.”

“Collin--”

“Everything okay in here?” Derek asks, poking his head in the door.

“Little misunderstanding,” Stilinski replies.

“He doesn’t think Stiles is good for us,” Collin says, crossing his arms as he continues to glare in unwavering Hale fashion. “I heard him say it.”
“I didn’t say that. I said that I know Stiles wants what’s best for the family,” he corrects. “That’s what I want to help figure out; that’s what I’ve wanted to figure out the whole time. I want what’s best for the family too.”

“But you think that you and not Stiles,” Collin declares, a statement not a question. “Don’t you?” he pushes, forcing an answer.

“Well, that’s not exactly a fair question, kiddo. I’m a little biased on that one,” Stilinski admits with a forced laugh, hoping desperately to convey this whole thing as a harmless misunderstanding. “Can you blame me?” he adds with a smile.

“Yes,” Collin answers unforgivingly, turning on his heel and storming from the room.

Derek’s after him in a second, leaving Stilinski staring at a quiet, empty room.

_Well, shit._

_So much for a perfect day._

***************************

Stilinski offers to read Addie to sleep, so Isaac waits on the back porch swing for Derek and Collin to return. Collin marches right past and into the house without a word. Derek sighs and joins Isaac on the swing.

“Any luck talking?” he wonders.

“Nope.”

“Not surprising.”

“You talk to Stilinski?”

“Just reminded him that the kids have a lot to process with the DID, and that they have a hard time wrapping their head around the fact that they’re _all_ Stiles.”

“Complicated,” Derek summarizes, “the world that defines our whole fucking lives.”

“We don’t need what’s normal; we need what works,” Isaac puts in, quoting their go-to answer for all the chaotic days.

“And Stilinski works,” Derek points out softly.

“What?”

“I’m not saying that he’s better than Stiles; I’m not saying that he’s perfect; I’m just saying that he’s not like the other personalities. He works; he fits in; he functions.”

The words weigh heavy on Isaac; he can’t help feeling a bit betrayed by the assertion even if there’s some truth in it.

“He’s not Stiles,” Isaac reminds. “We married Stiles. Stiles is the father of our kids, Derek. He--”
“Hey, hey, I’m not debating that,” Derek assures, squeezing Isaac’s hand. “Stiles is the base of all this; he’s the core; I know that. I’m just saying that maybe Stilinski is right to assume the answer lies in figuring out how to get a little more of his personality back into Stiles.”

“Stilinski is a ticking time bomb of repression. Stiles could never maintain that level of compartmentalization long-term. His mind would start leaking repressed things back to him at unpredictable times; any memory blocks you could even try would start crumbling eventually, the same way things he shouldn’t remember anymore seep through now. The answer is not forgetting, the answer is facing.”

Derek’s quiet for longer than Isaac would like before he finally agrees, “You’re right. I just—I had forgotten how he used to be sometimes. How it was to argue without watching for triggers and go out in public on a whim without incident and make it through full moons without major breakdown. I want that again, for him and for the rest of us.”

“It doesn’t mean anything until Stiles can do it as himself,” Isaac persists. “Stilinski is a symptom, not a cure. Don’t forget that.”

Don’t get caught up in hoping for the easy thing; our lives never stay easy.

And at the end of the day, what’s kept us going this long are the people surrounding us.

That’s Stiles who’s been beside us the whole way. Not Stilinski.

Stilinski treads carefully in the days following the scene with Collin. It’s not going to do him any good to come off as the bad guy here. He doesn’t want to flaunt the ways that he functions better than Stiles seems to, but there’s really no hiding the fact that he moves through life much less burdened—and much less of a burden to the pack too, though he’s smart enough to keep those thoughts to himself. He knows Derek and Isaac are at a loss for why Stilinski has remained so long; he’s caught snippets of their conversations on the topic, and Isaac’s told him outright that they might get Morrell’s opinion too as to how to keep the switches less frequent.

Personally, Stilinski likes to think that the message in the mirror got through even though Stiles hasn’t resurfaced yet and maybe that is the reason there’s been no switch. Collin’s too young to understand the full scope of Stiles’ issues and their impact on the pack, but Stiles is plenty mature enough and damaged enough and selfless enough to know Stilinski has some seriously sound logic to his argument. He feels even more affirmed in that opinion when the “Pond Day Field Day” rolls around over a week after Stilinski arrived this time, and he’s still here for it with no signs at all of an imminent switch.

Because I belong here, and we all know it on one level or another.

Isaac has to admit he’s kind of ready for the quiet by the time they come home from the pack
field day at the pond. Scott and Allison volunteered to have the kids over tonight, and Isaac suspects it had something to do with him looking as exhausted as he feels. He knew better than to push so hard to participate in as much as he could, but in the moment, he didn’t care. Now his aching, throbbing legs are paying the price.

“So—um—might need a little help getting up to the house,” he admits as Derek puts the car in park.

“Maybe we should ask Deaton to drop by and take a look,” Derek says. “Just to be safe."

“I’m fine, just tired,” Isaac assures. “Don’t worry."

“You want me to get your chair or just carry you in?”

“I told you to burn that fucking chair,” Isaac reminds, and Derek seems a little relieved at the answer. “Besides, you know you never get tired of playing knight in shining armor.”

“You two are such an adorable old married couple it makes me want to vomit rainbows,” Stilinski informs. “And I mean that in the least offensive way possible, because I am in fact actually glad to be part of said old married couple--or triple--whatever we are.”

*What we are is old beyond our years, but that’s too much of a downer thing to say out loud,* Isaac thinks tiredly.

Derek opens the car door to scoop Isaac up. Isaac throws a dramatic hand up to his forehead and declares, “My hero!” just to watch Derek roll his eyes and try not to smile.

*****************************************************

“What is it?” Derek asks as he lays Isaac on the couch and Isaac immediately winces and grabs at his left calf.

“My muscles keep cramping up,” Isaac grunts. “I’m fine though, just overdid it a bit.”

“Understatement.”

*I should have stopped you, but you were enjoying yourself so much*...

“I’m fine, Derek,” he insists, but Derek replaces Isaac’s hands with his own, pulling pain as he massages at the muscles that have gone taut in protest of the day’s activities. “Thanks,” he says, slumping back on the couch pillows. “That helps.”

“I’ll go run you a bath, yeah?” Stilinski offers.

“Oh my *God* that would be the *best.*”

“On it.”

“Thank you!” he says as Stilinski disappears down the hall.

“Today was pretty good, huh?” Derek supposes with a slight smile.
“Today was fantastic,” Isaac agrees emphatically. “Good, fun start to the next chapter.”

“Sure hope so.”

I don’t know that I’ve got it in me to rebuild it all again.

Of course, the people who make up the pack are infinitely more important than any building or possession. Derek’s just hoping they can keep both the material and the immaterial safe and sound this time around.

He continues to knead Isaac’s calves until Stilinski returns to say the tub is mostly full. It’s been too long since he took a moment to take care of Isaac like this, and he doesn’t want to think about how much of this moment he owes to the fact that Stilinski is here instead of Stiles. He takes Isaac to the bedroom, laying him on the mattress before he starts pulling up the hem of his shirt.

“I’m okay; I can do it,” Isaac offers.

“Let me,” Derek requests, with a smile, leaning down to kiss reverently up Isaac’s torso as he pushes up the fabric.

“Well, if you insist…” Isaac answers and Derek looks up through his lashes to enjoy the sight of his smile.

“Mmmm, I do,” Derek replies.

“I think it might be a two-man job,” Stilinski adds in adorably hopeful as he moves to join on the bed.

“Pants?” Isaac suggests.

“My pleasure.”

Derek kisses Isaac slow and sweet while Stilinski relieves him of his jeans. When Isaac groans into his mouth, vibration of the sound transferring deliciously into Derek, he glances down to see Stilinski licking the length of Isaac. He gives Derek a smirk before locking their eyes together as he wraps his lips around the head of Isaac’s cock.

That is one sight that Derek will never tire of.

“Not that—that I don’t—I mean this is awesome and all, but—but—I am like not entirely sure I’m really up for—my entire body aches, and not in the fun way,” Isaac finishes finally.

“Right, yeah, of course,” Derek says, forcing a smile.

“But you guys should totally go for it. Don’t let me kill the fun. Can’t waste a kid-free night.”

“So what? We exile you to the tub until one of us comes out of post-coital fog long enough to fish you out?” Derek says.

“Unless you want a little company in the tub?” Stilinski wonders.

“Better idea,” Derek counters. “How about a show?”

“Oh, hell yeah!”
Stilinski is only too happy to steal a chair while Derek helps Isaac into the tub. He considers his options before deciding on the fancy Italian leather chair in the study. He knows he’s grinning like an idiot when he walks back in, but he can’t be bothered to care. Judging by the gleam in Derek’s eyes when he sees Stilinski’s pick, the eagerness is mutual.

“Nice,” Isaac praises. “This is going to be awesome.”

“Yeah,” Stilinski agrees readily. “So--but, uh--I mean, Derek, you bottomed last time, so should I--”

“No,” Derek answers, a bit too quickly and sharply for the moment. “I’m more than good with letting you blow my mind like last time,” he goes on, settling his tone back down as he closes the space between them to cup Stilinski’s face. “That okay with you?”

“Yeah, totally,” Stilinski consents, bringing his lips to Derek and feeling the thrill rush all the way down to his toes as Derek kisses him deeply, licking hungrily into Stilinski’s mouth.

“Good,” Derek says breathlessly. “Breathe deep,” he instructs. “I’m about to ask you to go get the lube,” he teases.

“Think I can handle it,” Stilinski tells him, rolling his eyes, as Isaac adds, “Play nice, Derek.”

“Always,” Derek assures, turning back to Isaac as Stilinski hurries out to the bedroom.

The adrenaline that accompanies the promise of watching his two gorgeous husbands fuck right in front of him is one of the few things that could keep Isaac awake at this point. The exquisitely warm bathwater is working magic on his aching body, and the sight of Derek undressing slowly with a sly little smile on his face is an excellent distraction. He can almost forget that he kind of feels like he got hit by a truck.

Almost.

“Got it,” Stilinski announces triumphantly as he returns holding the bottle of lube above his head like a championship trophy.

Isaac misses sex with Stiles. He misses the way Stiles knows every inch of his husbands’ bodies and just how to tease and caress and stimulate; he misses looking into the earnest, soulful depth of Stiles eyes when he pulls back from a kiss; he misses the man he’s shared a life with for years now.

But he still has to admit that there is something precious and wonderful in watching Stiles get a chance to be an awkward, slightly hesitant, still learning things, half-hard at just the mention of sex, virgin.

“So--um--have a seat? I guess?” Stilinski suggests.
“Hey, hey, hey,” Isaac protests, “Thought I was getting a show?”


Derek turns the chair so he can bend over, presenting his perky, chiseled ass to Isaac and looking back over his shoulder to wonder, “Better?”

“Yeah,” Isaac confirms, voice unexpectedly husky. “Okay, Stilinski, remember all those tips I gave you last time?”

“I--uh--yeah, yeah, dude, so got this,” he assures, “but--uh--lemme know if I’m like totally screwing up with the--”

“Stilinski, if you don’t lube up and get going, so help me I will just do it myself,” Derek interrupts.

“Right, yeah, let’s do this.”

He might technically be inexperienced, but Stilinski’s got his basics down. He pops the cap off the lube and trails his hands down Derek’s back, planting a few kisses too as he teases as Derek’s hole before sliding his first finger in. Isaac wraps his fingers around his dick and begins to stroke at the same pace Stilinski is setting.

“How’s it feel, Derek?” Isaac wonders, coaxing sound from the quietest husband. “Good?”


“Enjoying it? Knowing I’m watching? Letting me watch Stilinski open you up and get you ready to ride him fast and hard like you love?”

“Fuck, Isaac,” Stilinski hisses and Derek all but whines at the scene Isaac’s suggesting.

******************************************************************************

By the time Stilinski gets three fingers in, Derek is aching for the moment they rearrange and really get this show started. Isaac’s exactly right--of course--and Derek is painfully hard at the idea of being on display for Isaac like this.

“Are you--could we maybe--you good?” Stilinski asks, voice strangled. “‘Cause I’m like--”

“Yeah,” Derek gasps. “Fuck, yeah, c’mon.”

They don’t waste anytime rearranging, and Stilinski’s still erect, but Derek takes a moment to kneel between his knees anyway. He strokes Stilinski slowly, looking up at him through eyelashes in the way that always gets Stiles cursing Derek’s “unfairly gorgeous” face. It seems Stilinski is past the point of coherent speech because he just throws his head back and lets out a wanton moan.

“Derek, show,” Isaac urges, spurring Derek back to his feet to straddle Stilinski.

“Good?” Derek wonders.
“Yes,” Stilinski and Isaac pant at once, and he can’t help but chuckle a bit at the response.

He sinks down slowly onto Stilinski’s cock, feeling it fill him inch by glorious inch until he’s balls deep in Derek’s ass. He grins at the sight of Stilinski coming undone under him, head still back with mouth wide open, gripping at the arms of the chair so tightly Derek half expects claws to come out at any moment.

“Fuck, fuck, your ass is so fucking perfect and tight and move, Derek, please!” Stilinski begs.

Derek’s only too happy to oblige, rising up only to sink back down, setting the pace unforgivingly fast, fucking himself on Stilinski’s cock, finding the perfect rhythm and angle to have both of them keening and gasping.

“God, you two are beautiful,” Isaac praises. “Fucking perfect, and gorgeous, and damn just--Oh my God--so fucking gorgeous.”

Derek takes the moment to look back over his shoulder at Isaac, smiling at the sight of his lust-clouded eyes.

“Yeah? Enjoying the show?” he pants.

“Fuck yeah,” Isaac affirms heartily. “Oh yeah.”

Stilinski finds his power of speech long enough to cry, “Fuck, I’m--Derek, oh my God, yes, yes, I’m so fucking close, Derek, fuck.”

Derek clenches to drive him over the edge; Stilinski lets out positively sinful groan and spills in Derek, hips jerking up from the chair in the stuttering, uncontrolled desire to continue through the orgasm. Derek comes right behind him, painting Stilinski’s torso with it. By the time Derek sags forward, head resting on Stilinski’s shoulder, Isaac’s cursing through his own release.

Derek’s not sure if it’s ten seconds or ten minutes that the only sounds in the bathroom are three panting, spent, sated men slowing drifting down from euphoria.

The relative silence is broken by Isaac’s teasing voice, “Encore?”

Stilinski kisses Derek awake gently. He smiles when Derek’s opens bleary eyes and raises an eyebrow in silent question.

“Morning,” Stilinski says, pulling back out of Derek’s space. “Figured that was a much more polite way to wake you than just shoving you off the bed because you’re snoring like a foghorn.”

“I do not snore like a-”

“Yes, you do, and you know it,” Isaac grumbles from the other side of the bed. “I was about to smother you myself.”

“There are other ways to keep him quiet,” Stilinski reminds, sealing their lips together again.
“Not exactly quiet,” Isaac comments, “but definitely an improvement.”

“So I was thinking,” Stilinski says, abandoning the kisses and rolling back to his back, since it doesn’t seem like Derek’s quite awake enough for the next round to kick off.

**Maybe after breakfast?**

“Uh-oh,” Derek teases.

“That maybe next time you should fuck me?” Stilinski goes on, undeterred.

Despite the bit of space between them, he can still feel Derek’s entire body tense at the suggestion.

“No,” Derek answers, simple and firm, and maybe a better man could leave it at that, but not Stilinski.

“Why not? Don’t you want-”

“No, I *don’t* want to fuck you,” Derek interjects. “Just--let it go--things are awesome like they are, right? Aren’t they?”

It’s plain as day that the terseness in his voice is masking the underlying reluctance, and Stilinski can guess what the cause of Derek’s aversion is.

“You don’t want to fuck *me* or you don’t want to fuck Stiles?” he pushes. “Because-”

“Stop it,” Derek says curtly.

“No,” Stilinski retorts. “I want an answer to that question.”

“I don’t want to fuck either of you.”

“Do you fuck Isaac?”

“Stilinski,” Isaac replies before Derek can, “this isn’t the way to have this conversation. Just-”

“I asked if he fucks you,” he persists. “He does, right? Because if the answer was ‘no’ this wouldn’t be a problem, but Derek doesn’t want to let me bottom because you’re scared Stiles can’t handle it, and that’s not fucking fair.”

“For all your other differences, his trauma is still in your head somewhere,” Isaac reminds, voice infuriatingly calm. “We’re being cautious, and it hasn’t really seemed like you weren’t enjoying yourself so far.”

“I am not Stiles. I can handle myself. I know what I want, and I what I want to enjoy *everything* with--”

“Well, I *don’t*,” Derek snaps, throwing the covers off himself and rising from the bed, “and even if you can’t consider the risk it poses for you and Stiles, you should respect what I’m telling you.”

“You’ve tried before,” Stilinski guesses, and judging by the way Derek shuts his eyes and clenches his teeth, he’s right on the mark, “and it didn’t go well.”
“It’s much more likely for bad reactions to happen when Stiles gets penetrated so--”

“But I’m not Stiles! You’ve both said it before.”

“This is different.”

“It’s not my fault he can’t handle it. We don’t deserve to miss out on things because of him.”

“Watch what you’re saying,” Derek growls.

“You don’t know the Stiles side of things,” Isaac adds, voice noticeably strained. “You don’t understand what--”

“I understand that the ‘real’ Stiles so fucked he can barely function!” Stilinski reminds angrily. “Did you ever stop to think that maybe he isn’t the one who should stay when all this DID shit gets fixed? Maybe he’s not the best option.”

This is so entirely not the moment or the way Stilinski planned to share that thought—if he ever formed it out loud at all—but it’s out there now. The words seem to hang in the nearly palpable tension that follows. He knows shit is about the hit the fan, but he can’t back down from it now. He’s been amassing this argument internally for a while; time to see if he can’t make them understand his viewpoint.

******************************************

Isaac feels Stilinski’s assertion like a punch to the gut that leaves him breathless and sick.

“What are you saying exactly?” Isaac says. “That the base personality should be you?”

“Why not? I mean I get a free pass on the hell that ruined everything! I can help with the kids. You don’t have to walk on eggshells with me. I’m the best shot any of us have at ‘normal’ and you guys know that as well as I do.”

“We don’t need ‘normal’,” Derek reminds. “We need Stiles,” he adds, amending the usual assertion.

“I am Stiles! I’ve heard you say it.”

“It’s not—you know the difference,” Isaac counters. “You were talking about the difference three minutes ago! As horrible as the trauma was, it’s what made him the person he is. It’s—it hasn’t all been bad.”

“You mean like falling in love with you,” Stilinski supposes. “That happened because of the trauma but it wasn’t bad.”

“I’d hope not,” Isaac replies with a huff of laughter that doesn’t fool anyone about how deep the words cut. “But I just—”

“I fell in love again, didn’t I? I fit into this marriage; we’ll only get closer with time. Everything that happened those six years I can get back to one extent or another. It’s not like I don’t have the capacity for it.”
“It’s not the same thing, Stilinski.”

_You don’t understand. You can’t. You’re not the base; you’re the man he used to be. We can’t go backward in this life to rewrite, no matter how bad we want to. That’s not how the world works. It’s just asking for an explosion down the road. You’re not the answer to all this. It’s not that simple._

“You agree with that, Derek?” Stilinski demands. “Ready to give up the closest thing to the guy you fell in love with? Maybe you still loved me after everything that happened, but you _fell_ in love at _first_ with the doofy, carefree guy that you could _argue_ with and slam into walls who was cocky and strong and not some _fucked up_—”

“You shut your goddamn mouth! You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Derek rages.

“Tell me I’m wrong!” Stilinski demands, and his eyes flash gold.

_Gold? That’s not possible. That can’t be possible._

The eye color conundrum moves quickly from Isaac’s focus as Stilinski rages on, “Tell me you don’t _know_ that you and Isaac and the kids would be better off with a _normal, functioning_ husband and father than with some pathetic—”

Derek crowds into Stilinski’s space before he can think better of it, grabbing his collar and jerking him to the edge of the bed with a grow and hauling him up to his feet.

“You will never understand how fucking strong Stiles is; you _can’t_. And I’m not running on some old infatuation with him, I am in _love_ with him, you understand me? I don’t give a _damn_ if we never had sex again, because I can live without that; I didn’t _vow_ to spend the _rest of my life_ with him so that we could enjoy fooling around.”

“I’m not saying you--”

“I married him for his _soul_, understand? And his soul, battered or not, is _not_ the same, as you. You are _not_ the man I love, and you will _never_ be. You are a symptom, not a cure, so don’t you _dare_ sit there and think for one _second_ that anyone or _anything_ can take his place in this family. You hear me? Now shut the fuck up, and let it go!”

The last sentence reverberates in the alpha tone, and Derek realizes _much_ too late how entirely his temper has run away with him, and yet, he can’t fathom reacting any other way to the suggestion—even from a derivative of Stiles himself—_that there is any other person that could complete their lives better than Stiles._

“It can go for now, but I have a point, and you both know it,” Stilinski says, quiet but firm, glaring up at Derek. “We’re not done with this yet,” he adds, rising from the bed and stalking out of the room.
Stilinski is absolutely livid, and pretty hurt too. They didn’t give him two fucking seconds to talk before they completely shut down and flipped their shit, and what the hell was Derek’s problem? Jerking him off the bed like that. He was so fucking angry and--

So very angry.

Derek angry because of me. Because of what I said.

Disobeyed the Alpha’s order too. I kept going, kept talking, kept pushing.

Not my place to do that. It’s not. I know better. I can be good.

But I wasn’t. I was bad, very bad.

And bad betas must be punished.

Beta falls to his knees, taking in the hallway around him.

What happened? Why am I here? My head hurts. Where’s the Alpha?

With the last question comes a barrage of memories; some are confusing but benign, but panic consumes as others flood in, horrible, disloyal, insubordinate acts he would never attempt in his right mind. Things no beta should ever contemplate much less act on.

I lost time again; I lost memories; I’ve been bad, so very bad, but I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean to be!

He scrambles back to his feet, sprinting down the hall toward the sound of pulses, relief flooding through him to find the Alpha and Second there in the bedroom where maybe he can begin to show his repentance.

“Alpha, I didn’t mean any of it,” he laments, throwing himself at Derek’s feet. “I’m so sorry, Derek; please believe that I wouldn’t--”

“Stop,” Derek interrupts, and he bites his tongue against counted apologies. “What’s your name?”

“You--you call me Stiles, but--but it’s more--I don’t deserve--after--Derek, I don’t know how I could do such horrible--”

“It’s okay, Stiles; it’s okay. You aren’t in any trouble. You’re not going to be punished.”

“Thank you, Derek, teach me please! I don’t ever want to dishonor my pack like that; remind me where I belong.”

I’m losing my mind. I know better than this. I know what I need to be. I know that you’re lenient, but surely, surely, you won’t deny me the help of affirming my place. I need this, Derek. I need to feel good and useful and worthy of being kept. Remind me of my place here.

Please, Alpha, please.

I need you to help me.
Sorry for the wait time on this one! Life is kinda hectic right now, Strangeredlantern and I started co-authoring some Stisaac, and this chapter had to cover a lot of ground.

------

Adding this just as a point of clarification for character motivation:

So, yes, Derek comes across as a bit of an ass there at the end for those who see Stilinski as a generally benign personality and want to see more of the "You're always Stiles" that we've had in the past. BUT hang with me for a second here because this deal with Stilinski is a whole new ball game for the boys.

While Stilinski may have very sound logic as to why he believes he's the best for the pack, he essentially represents the part of Stiles that just wants to block out all the bad---and that kind of repression and refusal to face and deal with everything that happened is exactly what's lead to the DID and other complications in his psyche. Additionally, in the past, other personalities needed reassurance that they are "also Stiles" because they assume they're lower than him, or less worthy, or don't belong with the pack. Assuring them that they are good enough counteracts the portion of Stiles that is presenting in those personalities aka the portion that feels he is no longer good enough to be around the people he loves because of what the alpha pack did to him.

Stilinski is the opposite of the timid, self-doubting personalities. He doesn't think Stiles is good enough for the pack. And so while they at first assured him he was "stiles too" now that he's openly admitted he thinks he is better than Stiles, such an assertion would be an affirmation that Stiles isn't good enough; in the end, what's important is that no matter which personality is presenting, they stay firm in insisting to Stiles that the "whole" version of him, mental scars and all, is the version they love and want. So it might seem at first glance that they're going against what they've said all along, but you also have to remember that the mentality of Stilinski is very different from others we've encountered.

After all, as much as we all (yes, me TOTALLY included) may love (or hate) certain personalities, Isaac is correct in that they are symptoms, not cures. They are manifestations of issues that Stiles can't bring himself to share or work through in more healthy ways. The end goal is to get Stiles back to one personality that has faced and overcome the horrible things in his past, and that's hard enough to do without giving support to a personality claiming that he'd be better off to continue blocking it out. To affirm that Stilinski is better than Stiles would break Stiles on one of the deepest levels possible, and while they most definitely could have handled the moment better and the things Derek said shouldn't have been screamed and raged at Stilinski, the words nevertheless needed saying, and it's a sentiment the real "base" Stiles needed to hear.

I hope that maybe helps to explain the motivation behind the argument a little better? And where Isaac and Derek are coming from?

As always, thanks SO MUCH for reading and commenting and caring about these
characters! You guys ROCK!!
Chapter 15

Derek is going to puke any second now because no matter what he says, Stiles is still begging to be taught. Rather than seeing it as a mercy that Derek doesn’t want to hurt him, he seems convinced that it’s because Derek doesn’t think he’s worth the trouble. Judging by the bit of babbling Derek’s managed to make out, Wretch must have gotten some more memories from other personalities, and the assurance from Derek that those were all acceptable ways to behave isn’t doing anything to relieve the beta’s stress.

“Please let me do something, Derek. Anything.”

“Make breakfast,” Derek says finally. “Come on. Follow me. Don’t touch the other betas, understand?”

“Yes. Yes, I understand,” he says gratefully, scrambling to his feet to follow. “Thank you, Derek. Thank you. Thank you!”

“Derek?” Collin says uncertainly when they start crossing the den to the kitchen. “Ev—everything okay?”

His sister is peeking around from behind him, eyes wide in trepidation. Collin’s doing an admirable job of keeping a calm expression through his voice betrays his nerves a bit.

“Yes,” Derek replies. “Just a little confusion this morning. Take Addie down to the basement and play a while please. I’ll be down there in just a second.”

“Ohkay.”

Stiles is already heating up the skillet, moving as fast as possible to obey the directive given. Derek’s heart breaks as he watches.

What was I thinking to yell at you like that? I know better. I’m so sorry, Stiles. I just wanted Stilinski—or whatever part of you he is—to understand that we never expected you to go back to the way things used to be; we accept who you are now. We want you, flawed but whole, not just a shadow of your former self waiting to come apart again one day.

I was trying to say the right thing to help, but I should have waited. I should have made damn sure I had control of my temper. I’m sorry.

Derek texts an SOS to Jackson and Scott to see if either can come take Stiles to his father’s. Derek needs a chance to talk to Isaac before he heads off to isolation with Stiles. Cora is out of the question, and after everything that transpired with that last time, Derek doesn’t want this personality in the house with their children for a minute longer than he has to be.

“Am I—this is—this is what you wanted?” Stiles asks worriedly, eyes flitting from the half-empty egg carton to the frying pan and back to Derek’s feet as though trying to work out what he may have messed up.

“Yes, that’s exactly right,” Derek affirms. “I don’t mean to worry you. I’m not staring at you; I’m just thinking.”
“Sorry to disturb you, Derek. I just-”

“Thank you for checking.”

“Of course, Derek.”

 cabe
 Beta stares forlornly at the same miserable list he was handed last time he was here. Scott tells him the same thing Derek did before: that he need only complete three tasks today. He could do
all this and more so much more, if Derek would only let him.

“What’s wrong?” Scott wonders. “You don’t have to do these things if you don’t want to. They’re just suggestions.”

“No, I can do them; thank you.”

“Tell me what’s bothering you,” the higher beta requests. “Please?” he adds.

He could hold in the words if he wanted; it’s not quite an order and Scott’s not Alpha or Second, but it’s important to show he understands the hierarchy.

“Why won’t he let me do more?” Beta wonders. “Have I performed badly? Is that what I forget? He was so angry when I tried to teach the beta, Cora, last time. Then he wouldn’t teach me how I should have been instead. He won’t let me do anything to make up for all my confusion. Is that part of the punishment?”

To remind me how grateful I should be when he finally goes give me something meaningful to do?

“No, Stiles, it’s not like that. That’s not--we’re just not like your old pack. It’s not the same. They explained that, right?”

“Yes.”

But some things need to be the same. There’s no sense to the way this pack works. I don’t understand why the Alpha would want a pack run this way. It’s not practical; it’s not safe; it’s not even remotely as productive as it could be.

I just don’t understand the reasoning, or how everyone in this pack seems to agree that this sentimental, unstructured existence is preferable.

Don’t you want to feel useful? Like you have a purpose?

How do you stand the chaos?

They don’t know any better, the voice of a past Alpha reminds, coming from nowhere, just like before, and startling Stiles so badly he barely contains a flinch. But you could teach them.

The Alpha didn’t like my teaching; I don’t know how to-

This Alpha doesn’t teach; he doesn’t lead; he doesn’t even punishment. He barely deserves the title.

No! No! He’s my Alpha! I’m loyal! He deserves only my respect! I’m-

Why? For confusing family with pack? For leaving you all so woefully unprepared to protect yourselves and survive? For refusing to teach you even though you beg and beg? For never trusting you to participate fully in your place? He doesn’t know how to make proper use of you. You will never feel fulfilled under this Alpha. You will never feel safe.

It terrifies him that the logic against his Alpha is sound. He can’t believe that he dares agree, but they’re right. Alpha--or Derek--as he prefers, proving more his complete lack of respect for his species, is the shame to werewolves that his previous pack always claimed. He understand now why the Hales fell and need to rebuild.
But does he dare to take the measures that would be needed to save them from themselves?

No, no, no, not my place. The Second’s place if anyone. Not mine. Not mine. Bad, beta. How dare you think you deserve that spot?

But the Second is weak as well, the voices point out. The higher beta with you now stooped to wed a human. The one they call Jackson is pursuing a human as well. The Elect is too young too seize power and too loyal to his human grandfather to embrace his Wolf properly. They’re all poisoned by their Alpha’s sentimentiality. Every last one of them. You’re the only one who could step up, Beta. You must step up; for the good of the pack, to save it.

It has to be you.

You can make this pack good.

Derek stands at the window by the the door, watching as the sheriff’s truck pulls out of the drive.

“Everything you said was the right thing,” Isaac says, breaking the silence first. “It’s things Stiles needed to hear whether Stilinski did or not.”

“Don’t think I quite earned an A+ on delivery though,” Derek points out, turning to face Isaac.

Isaac shrugs. “You’d never send him into a switch on purpose. It’s not like you were trying to upset him.”

“He was worse than he’s been in a long time,” Derek comments. “Last time was worse too. What does it mean if Wretch is getting worse?”

“That Stiles is putting more of the trauma into him? Maybe? It’s hard to say.”

“And then Stilinski only gets better it seems like, so more of the good into him?”

“Possibly.”

“There’s not going to be much left for Stiles to have.”

“He’ll merge them all--with enough time.”

“And then what? The next shitstorm hits and shatters him apart again? I know you’re right that Stilinski can’t hold off the trauma for forever, but--I just--sometimes I’m not so sure how Stiles is going to work through all of it--or if it’s fair of us to ask him to.”

“Stiles wants to get better, Derek.”

“Then why is Stilinski pushing so hard to be able to just forget it all?”

“Because that would be infinitely easier than dealing with everything that’s happened. It doesn’t mean Stiles wants to give up on working through it; I’m sure he’s just tired--on several
different levels."

Yeah, well that makes two of us--three, if the look on Isaac’s face says anything.

“I wish there was more we could do to help him.”

“Honestly, I’d say that speech did some serious good.”

“Good? I brought out Wretch!”

“Yes, but the part about caring about Stiles’ soul—battered or not—that’s exactly the kind of thing he needs to hear, especially from you. That’s the attitude we gotta keep, and just keep trying to convince the ones who think they’re lacking that they’re really loved, and convincing Stilinski that lack of trauma doesn’t make him any healthier or more desirable or anything like that. We’ll help him keep the balance, and Stiles will keep moving forward, even if it’s slow. Tomorrow will be better.”

Derek sighs, resisting the urge to call bullshit on Isaac’s all-too-familiar mantra.

*I don’t even know what ‘better’ means anymore. I just know that I miss Stiles and I’m tired of being sidelined while he’s tortured to the brink of insanity by his own mind.*

***************

“There’s one thing that bugging the hell out of me though,” Isaac says. “Maybe you know more than I do but his—”

“Eyes were golden,” Derek finishes. “It’s not possible; not that I’ve ever seen or heard of. Once you spill innocent blood, that’s it. They’re blue unless they’re Alpha red. I don’t know how anything can possibly change that.”

“Unless it’s more subjective than we think?”

“What? Like since Stilinski as a personality hasn’t killed *his* eyes are a different color from Stiles’ eyes?”

“Maybe? I mean—who decides what killing an innocent means anyway? The werewolf recognizing the innocent wasn’t a direct threat? Or the werewolf consenting to kill? I mean—there’s a ton of ways to interpret that. I doubt Stilinski feels any of the remorse for everything that Stiles did—at least not on the same level? I don’t know. I’m just guessing.”

“And worrying,” Derek adds. “You’re not just curious, you’re seriously worked up about it.”

“I just don’t like what it says about how much control Stilinski could have. If he’s overriding Stiles to the point of changing eye-color, that could mean he’s pulling some real weight in Stiles’ mind.”

“You don’t mean that he could control Stiles? He couldn’t *make* himself stay to keep Stiles away. That’s not possible for Stiles, is it? That kind of control?”

“He’s presented minimal control of the changes before—nothing concrete or anything, but
you know, Damon trying to leave so Stiles could meet the kids. A few other days like that when we’ve suspected there’s that hint of control in some scenarios.”

“And Stilinski has stayed longer than any other personality since the attack,” Derek concludes, dread in his voice conveying the same fear Isaac’s been harboring since the moment the argument ended. “He’s got more than a hint of control.”

“What do you mean? The argument with Collin? About Stilinski maybe trying to convince Stiles to stay away?”

“Yeah, but something else too.”

“What?”

“When Stiles was back to being a little kid, Collin said something to him. I told you all that stuff about Collin feeling some of it was his fault.”

“Yeah.”

“And he told Stiles--kid Stiles--that he didn’t need to stay for the kids’ sake. He tried speaking through the presenting personality to Stiles, but Stiles didn’t resurface after that.”

“Stilinski did,” Isaac finishes, feeling the weight of this new information like lead in his gut.

“I didn’t say anything because I figured it was just random that Stilinski was the next one to come, but now that he talks like he’s vying for a permanent spot…”

“How long between when Collin said that and the switch?”

“The walk from the blanket fort to the house.”

“Damn. That’s--I mean, in theory it could be coincidence,” Isaac concedes, “but it could be a lot more than that. It could be trouble.”

“So what do we do about it? If Stilinski can control the switches somehow? I mean, if the argument hadn’t accidentally forced Stilinski back down, he could’ve stayed for as long as he wanted? That’s--I mean, there are worse things and all, but shit, what are we supposed to do to help Stiles get back to running the show?”

“That’s the terrifying part,” Isaac says. “There’s not really anything we can do, except stuff like what you said this morning. In the end if Stiles lets Stilinski stay on the surface, if he really has some kind of control and lets that be the personality that dominates, there’s not a whole hell of a lot we can do to stop him.”

“Well, fuck.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

******************************************

Beta’s first test for Derek is to look him in the eyes when he arrives to relieve Scott. Not only does Derek hold the gaze, he looked pleased at the assertion from his beta. He smiles.
“Feeling a little more settled?” he wonders hopefully.

“Yes,” Beta answers, neglecting the formal title.

“That’s great,” Derek tells him, smile growing even wider. “You’re safe here; I hope you keep feeling more comfortable with us.”

This pack isn’t safe, and that ‘comfortable’ feeling you want me to have is exactly why we’re not. We need to be vigilant, not comfortable.

The alpha invites him to watch television—pointless shows that have no possible value in terms of application. The alpha can do as he pleases of course, but he’s content to have his beta sit in leisure as well. No doubt the others are in their various homes uncontrolled and unproductive. It’s a pathetic excuse for pack structure and function, and it bothers Beta more and more with every passing minute.

In the end, he excuses himself to make lunch as poorly as possible without being entirely obvious. He mixes up the portions of proteins, vegetables, and carbs so that it doesn’t match the sheet. He adds too much salt to the green beans and allows the crust on the dessert pie to nearly burn, getting Derek to come into the kitchen.

“Everything okay?”

“I’m sorry, Derek; the pie—” he offers in way of pathetic apology. “I wasn’t paying attention. I lost track of time.”

“It’s nothing to worry about. I don’t mind.”

“Should I make another?” he wonders, offering the meagerest bit of atonement.

“No, don’t worry about it. Whatever you’ve got for lunch will be fine.”

Don’t you have any standards at all? Any expectations? You have to set some kind of bar for our behavior; you have to draw the line somewhere. What kind of incentives for obedience and loyalty do you have if your ‘no punishments’ claim is truly the case? What’s to stop us all from ignoring your wishes completely? How can you think that this is an acceptable way for a pack to work? This is absolutely ludicrous.

Derek offers to set the table while Beta finishes up lunch. Beta purposely serves it late, stalling and moving slowly so that it’s nearly another twenty minutes before he decides it’s time to serve. Derek’s gone back into the living room and is reading a newspaper. Beta doesn’t even bother to duck his head when he apologizes.

“Derek, I don’t mean to disturb you but—I—lunch is ready now—I didn’t mean for it to take so long, but I—”

“It’s okay,” Derek says with an encouraging smile, and Beta forces himself to hide the look of disgust at the gentility.

The more pathetic Stiles sounds when he speaks, the more eager the Alpha is to listen. The more timid and foolish he acts—smiling and gushing undeserved gratitude at an Alpha barely making effort to maintain the integrity of his betas—the more relaxed Derek becomes.

Blind, foolish, idiot, the voices taunt, and Stiles agrees. This is why betas are taken from you. This is why hunters come again and again to exploit your weaknesses. This is why other packs see
Derek’s not a moron; he knows damn well that Wretch is testing him. He’s pushing at limits, slowly becoming more and more bold in neglecting behaviors Derek knows have been conditioned into him. It’s the most progress Derek has ever seen in this personality, and he can’t help but be excited as to where this may lead if it continues. If they really can reach a point where there is no “Wretch” personality, then that would signal a huge milestone for Stiles. After the talk with Isaac this morning about Stilinski, Derek’s more than ready for a bit of good news.

They eat lunch together at the table in the usual silence. Derek complements the food even though it’s not exactly what was on the list and there’s far too much salt and Wretch gave him a glass of water instead of asking what he’d rather have (Coke). Wretch offers a small smile at the praise, keeping his eyes locked with Derek as he does.

“You’re doing really well today; I’m glad you’ve been able to relax a little.”

“Thank you.”

There’s a few moments more of quiet before Wretch asks, “What’s wrong with the Second’s legs?”

“We were attacked by hunters a few weeks ago and he was injured.”

“That was the body I disposed for you--one of those hunters?”

Derek chokes on the bite of potatoes he was in the process of swallowing. Coughing and sputtering as he chugs a few gulps of water. He expects much more of a reaction from Wretch, but the beta just sits quietly, doesn’t offer assistance, and waits for Derek’s reply. Derek’s almost a little put off by his level of apathy.

“You what?”

“If this pack doesn’t hunt humans, he must have been a hunter.”

“Yeah--he was, but--that was you?”

Wretch nods and smiles proudly. “Yes, Derek.”

Holy fucking shit.

“Oh--uh--just--oh.”

Wretch seems to be waiting for something from Derek, but he’s not sure what until he asks, face falling a bit, “The hunter wasn’t tied back to the pack was he? I was careful to--”

“No, no, he wasn’t--just--I’m sorry you had to do that. It’s not--”

“I don’t mind.”
The words send a chill up Derek’s spine, but he reminds himself that however Wretch’s behavior may be improving they probably still have a lot of work to do in terms of empathy. Derek struggles to figure out what the hell to say when Wretch most likely would rather have praise than an apology.

“I appreciate your loyalty,” Derek says finally, “but hopefully you won’t ever have to do anything like that for the pack again.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to serve the pack,” Wretch says earnestly. “Whatever it takes to keep us safe. I know that’s the most important role a beta has.”

“No,” Derek contradicts.

“No?” Wretch repeats, and Derek can’t quite read his expression—confusion? disappointment?

“No.”

“I don’t understand, Derek; what could be more important?”

“There’s still—there’s inherent right and wrong in the world that your Pack doesn’t get to define. Things like hunting humans for fun and turning people without consent and treating betas like they don’t deserve to think for themselves. You serve your pack, but that’s not who you are. It’s not something you have to follow blindly. You get to be your own person with your own motivations, and I know that your sense of right and wrong is a little—I guess muddled might be a good way to put it—but you’ll understand the more you’re with us that your first duty is to yourself and then to your pack.”

“That’s how human society functions.”

Derek nods. “And that’s why we think of ourselves as more of a family than a pack. We’re not mindless creatures lost in our instincts; we’re more than that.”

Beta’s quiet a while after Derek speaks, seemingly processing all Derek’s said. He’s more than a little surprised when Beta swallows hard, takes a deep breath, and wonders, “And if I disagree?”

“Well—if you don’t understand it—or agree with the logic, then—then we’ll keep talking it out. I want you to feel safe enough here to share those kind of doubts, Stiles. I want to help you understand how different we are from the hell you went through with your old pack.”

“Hell,” Wretch mutters, huffing out a bitter laugh.

“What they did to you was wrong in so many ways, Stiles. You’re never going to have to endure that here. You are safe now, with us. You’re loved.”

The peal of laughter that comes in response to Derek’s sincere statement sends yet another shill through him. There’s an undeniable darkness in Wretch’s eyes when his gaze settles back to meet Derek’s.

“No one in this pack is safe,” he informs coldly. “And what is love worth if it’s only the means to your destruction?”
The Alpha looks pathetically wounded by the Beta’s assertion, as though he’s sunk a knife into Derek’s belly rather than stated a simple truth.

_You see my logic? You see what I’m saying to you?_

_Maybe the others are content to stand by and watch their pack burn time and time again, but not me. I know how to be good. I know how to make a pack good._

_No one will dare to hurt a Hale ever again._

_Not with me leading._

_Your miserable excuse for leadership is no longer needed or wanted, Derek Hale. It’s time to give the power to a wolf worth following._

He shifts while the Alpha is still staring at him in something close to heartbreak. Derek doesn’t so much as extend his fangs before Beta’s claws sink in above his collarbone, slicing deftly downward and eliciting a roar of pain that _does_ finally bring on a shift. The Alpha shoves him back, no less than expected, but he doesn’t advance.

_If you have one chance to stop me, this is it. Prove there’s a hint of Alpha instinct left in there somewhere. Show me where I belong. Make me believe this isn’t the choice I should make._

_Convince me you’re worth something, Alpha Hale._

But he doesn’t, of _course_ he doesn’t. Instead he embarrasses himself further.

“Stiles, whatever you’re thinking, whatever you’re planning here, just stop. _Talk_ to me. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Beta’s only response is a growl as he rushes the Alpha, no longer worried about thinking anything through, seeking only to rend as much flesh as he possibly can. His efforts are made all the more easy by the fact that Derek presents no offense, moving only to redirect Wretch’s onslaught to less vital areas.

The iron smell of Derek’s blood saturates the air, and Wretch laughs at the whimpers escaping the _thing_ that dared masquerade as an Alpha werewolf for this long.

“You’re an _embarrassment,“_ he says as the Alpha falls beneath him, spitting in Derek’s face as he pins him to the blood-stained floor with claws through both shoulders.

*********************************

*Don’t hurt him. Don’t hurt him. Don’t hurt him.*

_**Stiles is in there somewhere. Stiles is in there. Don’t hurt Stiles. He’ll never get over it. You’ll bring out a new personality. You can’t hurt him; Stiles is trapped in there.**_
“He’ll stop it. Stiles will stop. Hold on a little bit longer. Don’t hurt him.”

“Stiles, please,” Derek implores, looking up at Beta from his place on the floor beneath him.

“What wolf would want a human name?” he demands with a growl. “What pathetic creature could possibly prefer to cling to human sentimentality instead of embracing the power that should sing through our veins? We are gods among insects. I am Beta.” The corners of his lips twist up in a cruel smile as he adds, “but not for long.”

“Please, Stiles,” Derek repeats, hearing the gurgle of the blood that’s dribbling from his lips. “Come on; this isn’t you.”

“Shut up, you idiotic sap,” he demands, adding more pressure to drive his claws further into Derek’s shoulders. The weight of him pinning Derek back to the unforgiving hardwoord floor makes each breath harder to draw.

Come on, Stiles; Come on. Don’t make me be the one to stop you; please.

“The most ridiculous thing about this, is that you were too blind and dumb to realize how easy it would be to fix this pack once the alphas left me stranded with you. You would barely have had to do anything, Derek. That’s the beauty of a well-trained beta. If you would just have allowed me to act as I was trained to, I would have done anything for this pack. I would have loved you for it, Derek. I would have felt more at peace and at home on my knees or in your bed than any time I’ve been made to sit and feel useless and incompetent with your goddamn unwanted freedoms and lists and all this sentimental human bullshit.”

And now Derek knows where this speech will go before Beta keeps talking, he knows the words are nothing but echoes of Peter’s logic from years ago.

“All your little plans to make this pack a family aren’t worth shit, and you know it. This pack needs an Alpha who will play to his instincts and not be blinded by the weakness of human sentimentality. You don’t deserve to lead another pack to it’s demise, Derek. I won’t stand by and let you.

I will make this pack better. I will make this pack strong. They will serve me and thank me for it because no one will ever bring us down the way you’ve allowed since before you were even Alpha.”

The words paralyze Derek because under the obvious assault is an even darker, more heart-wrenching message from some part of Stiles:

“Peter was right; you just fucked everything up when you tried to fix me; you can’t protect your pack; you’re not capable of it; you are the reason that this pack can never stay on its feet for long; they’d be better off without you.”

Derek’s so distracted by the words, by what it reveals about the horrible thoughts still trapped in Stiles head after all this time, that he almost misses his chance to react when Beta’s claws leave his right shoulder and swipe toward his throat. Panicking, Derek bucks, rolling toward his left to unseat Beta’s position on top of him, howling as Beta fights to keep him down and Derek’s left shoulder pops from its socket. He manages to send a solid kick that knocks Beta back.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he repeats as Stiles readies to advance.

“Doubt you will,” Beta taunts. “By the time I’ve had this pack a week your children will fight better than you. Maybe I’ll let them train on that pathetic cripple you keep as your Second,” he adds with a murderous grin.
And all Derek sees is red…

This is how an Alpha should fight.

But Beta is more than ready for Derek’s feral assault. He uses the fear that rises at the sight
of Derek’s scarlet eyes and snarling growl to fuel his own fight. Even with Derek finally shifting into
his wolf form, Beta knows how to fight to the fullest. After all, Beta knows just where to strike for
the most blood. He knows which bones to snap to have Derek Hale howling like the worthless bitch
he is.

heal! Ribs. Ribs. Ribs. If he can’t breathe, he can’t fight.

He keeps moving through the pain of the wounds from the alpha, trusting his instincts and training
to make him a true contender despite his lower rank. The damage to his own body is nothing when
traded for the power of an Alpha, and he continues to rip Derek apart despite the screaming protests
of his decimated flesh and the smell of his own blood mingling in with Derek’s. More than once,
Beta expects the next blow to end him. In the end, it seems there’s still some part of this Alpha
unwilling to kill whatever fragmented piece of his mate remains buried in Beta’s mind.

Beta carries no such reluctance.

And when the window finally opens, he slashes viciously at Derek’s throat with a preemptive
roar of triumph.

Derek comes slowly back to his senses, and he knows he’s losing; he thinks of retreat, but
there’s no chance, not at this point. All he can do is try to avoid any lethal blows coming from Beta.
From the looks of it, Beta’s fighting despite countless slashed muscles, at least one broken leg, and
he’s moving like one shoulder might be dislocated. He should have given up a long time ago, but
with all the conditioning crammed in this personality, Derek can see that nothing short of a death
blow is going to stop him, and Derek can’t do that--not to the body carrying Stiles.

He sees the opportunity in the same moment that Beta does, Derek’s left arm is all but
useless, and his right arm is in the unyielding grip of Beta’s left. He can’t block the claws coming at
his throat. This is going to be it.

“Stiles, no!”
Damon can’t quite stop his arm before he slashes Derek, but he pulls back as best he can, so that the scratches just graze the skin of his throat. He releases the hold his other hand keeps on his alpha, retreating away of the gruesome sight before him. Derek’s bleeding uncontrollably from what seems a million wounds that cover his body. He’s pale and shaking and he stares silently at Damon with clouded eyes before he drop to his knees, he pitches forward, and Damon hurries to catch him before he smacks face first into the bloody mess of the floor. It’s only when he tries to move that Damon takes in the pain consuming every inch of him. The arms that reach to stop Derek’s fall are slashed to ribbons; he can’t catch his alpha, but at least he slows the fall.

“Stiles?” Derek gasps, blood spewing from his lips at the world.

“Damon, Derek; I’m Damon,” he confesses. “I’m sorry, so sorry; I would have gotten to you sooner. I didn’t know--I didn’t think any of us could do anything like this! Not to you!”

Never to you, Derek. You should never have to question the loyalty of your betas. How could he do this? How could part of Stiles do this?

“‘Sokay,” Derek murmurs as Damon struggles to turn him onto his back. “‘I’makay.”

“No, no, you need help. You need the doctor, Derek!”

“Table.”

Damon turns to see what Derek means, and sees the phone lying there. He takes only a step toward it before the pain of his broken leg shoots through. He can crawl well enough though, smearing the blood in a trail behind him as he reaches for the lifeline.

“Derek, I don’t know the pass code.”

Derek doesn’t reply, and Damon looks back at him in terror to see that his eyes have fluttered shut. Only the rattling sound of Derek’s breathing staves of complete panic. He presses the screen of the phone frantically until the three emergency contacts display themselves. Deaton’s the first--of course, of course Derek would know to list it to be accessed. The phone rings only twice before the doctor answers.

“Derek?”

“It’s Damon; I’m Damon. I don’t know what happened but-- but we fought; I fought DErek,” he sobs into the phone. “Not me but the Wretch I think and--and I stopped at the last but it wasn’t quick enough and--and he’s not healing, Dr. Deaton. He’s going to bleed to death! You have to come please! You have to help him!”

“Okay, Damon, okay; I’ll be there absolutely as fast as I can. You’re at your father’s house?”

“Y--yeah, please you have to hurry.”

“I’m on my way, Damon. Both of you just hang on!”

He cuts off the line to make his way back to Derek, wincing every inch of the way, and trying to ignore the lightheadedness threatening to overwhelm him. Derek’s breaths are shallow and wet, more blood trickles out his gaping mouth with each one, and Damon doesn’t need a doctor to tell him just how bad it is.

There’s only one course of action to take. He has to make sure Derek lasts until the doctor has a chance to help him. Damon lays on the floor beside the Alpha he loves so dearly, and laces their
blood-slick fingers together gritting his teeth against the ache that consumes him as black tendrils spider up his ruined arms.

*Help is coming, Derek. Please just hold on. You can’t die. They all need you. Just hold on a little bit longer.*

*********************************************************

Derek resists consciousness at first, shying away from the excruciating wounds covering every inch of his existence. He keeps his eyes closed, trying to forget everything that’s happened, focusing on convincing his beaten body that it has to heal.

It takes longer than it should to realize he’s healing faster than he should be. The next instant the pressure of another hand in his sinks is, and his eyes snap open as he turns his protesting head toward Damon. Damon smiles at Derek, eyes unfocused and face pale as a ghost.


“Damon, stop pulling pain; you’re hurt too you--”

“Don’ mind.”

“Yeah, but you *can’t* do this. You’re too weak for that; don’t risk it for me. *You* gotta heal, okay? Heal, Damon. Do that for me instead.”

“Can’t, Derek; ‘M tired.”

“No, no, no, you stay awake, Damon. Stay awake and heal. Please, Damon; please!”

“‘Sokay. Don’ hurt ‘nymore.”

“Dammit, Damon! Heal!” he demands, with an exhausted, half-assed attempt at an alpha command.

*********************************************************

Derek is shouting so loudly. He’s giving instructions, and Damon should listen. He should obey. He *wants* to do whatever Derek wants, but he *can’t* keep his eyes open. He *can’t* heal. He can barely keep the weak grip he has on Derek’s hand. He feels the moment Derek starts to leech pain back, starting to undo the aid Damon was able to give.

“Please, please wake up,” Derek’s voice sobs into his ear.

He tries to open his eyes, but they’re *so* fucking heavy. He just can’t.

The last bit of energy he can muster, he uses for speech instead:

“Love you,” he breathes as he sinks down into the darkness.
what can I say? I love a cliffhanger.

I sure hope you'll all enjoy where that darkness Damon sank into leads us; update for you as soon as possible! buckle in tight, only a few chapters to go!

I cannot say enough how grateful I am to have my wonderful betas to help me when the self-confidence starts to waver or the imminent end gets overwhelming! You guys rock!
“Hey, Isaac, have you seen the disc for the Sonic Free Riders game?” Collin yells up from downstairs.

The kids ran immediately for the games downstairs once they’d scarfed down their lunch. John and Isaac finish up their meal at a bit more leisurely a pace.

“It is supposed to be put back in its case every time you play it! That way you don’t have to ask!” Isaac calls back.

“Nevermind, it was in Addie’s Sesame Street Game case.”

“Hey, then where’s my Elmo game?!” Addie whines. “Isaac! It’s missing! Oh, no! It’s my favorite one and--”

“Don’t be a baby, Addie; it’s here somewhere. Just look for it.”

“I’m not a baby! Don’t call me a baby! I’m almost five!”

“Sure sound like a baby.”

“Good grief,” Isaac mutters, pushing his chair back from the table, but John rises to his feet first.

“I got it. Finish up your lunch,” he tells Isaac as he heads for the stairs.

“Thanks.”

Just as Isaac picks his sandwich up for another bite, the doorbell rings.

Always something, huh?

He puts down his food and rises from the table. He’s still slow on his feet, and Isaac’s barely halfway there when it rings again followed by some pounding. Isaac picks up the pace, heart rate ratcheting in worry.

“Scott?”

“Hey, Isaac,” he greets with a smile so forced it looks like it’s screwed into place.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Deaton just sent me because he’s not going to be able to keep that electroshock appointment for tomorrow; he’s hoping you can come now? He’s only got a little bit of time today, so if we could maybe hurry back.”

It takes Isaac only a beat to process the situation. There aren’t any more EST sessions planned. Derek or Stiles--maybe both of them? Oh, God--are at Deaton’s office. And whatever has happened is bad enough that they want the kids kept away. This conversation is entirely for the benefit of the little werewolf ears potentially listening in.
“Yeah, sure, no problem,” Isaac says. “Hey, John?!” he yells back into the house. “Deaton had to reschedule, so I’m headed out with Scott. Hope I’ll be back before then, but if I’m not Cora’s bringing food for dinner.”

“Okay. Call if you need anything,” John answers.

Scott doesn’t actually let Isaac walk to the car, he hauls Isaac’s weight up by slinging his arm over Scott’s shoulders and basically carries him for the sake of time. Isaac has to practically bite his tongue to wait until they’re out of earshot of the house to say anything.

“What? Why?”

“Bad,” Scott replies, voice hitching on the word so that it squeaks off at the end.

“Is it Stiles? Or Derek?”

“Both of them,” he replies somberly. “They--uh--they--I mean Deaton is still piecing it all together but--it seems like--”

“For the love of God spit it out, Scott!”

“They tore each other apart!” Scott blurts.

The horrific words hang in the silence between them, and Isaac barely finds the voice to wonder, “What? Why?”

“Derek’s conscious--mostly--he said it wasn’t Wretch--he said it was a new one, and it--I mean it literally tore him apart, Isaac. He’d be dead if the personalities hadn’t switched.”

“Stiles took back control?”

“Not Stiles, Damon.”

“Damon? But Damon’s gone.”

“Apparently not; or this brought him back out or something. I don’t know, but he leached the pain to get Derek to heal, and--dude, they’re both fucked up. Deaton and Lydia and Jackson are all there. Cora was on her way when I left.”

“He called everyone except me?! What the fuck, Scott! My husbands might be dying and--”

“And if they are your kids don’t need to be there for it,” Scott interjects firmly. “Isaac, I’m not kidding. This isn’t--you were all messed up after the hunters, but they look like you did when the Alpha Pack got done with you. Derek’s doing okay I think; he’s an Alpha and Damon gave him a kick-start. Stiles, though--when I left he wasn’t healing; not at all.”

“Drive faster,” Isaac commands.
Derek growls at the pinching stab working its way up his arm.

“Fair warning, Sourwolf; if you snap at me, I will re-break your nose.”

“Jackson?” Derek says, forcing his eyes open but squinting against the harsh light shining down on him.

His voice is raspy, and his throat feels parched. The cold metal of the table underneath him makes him cringe. He tries to move, but he can’t; his limbs are leaden and unresponsive.

“Kanima venom,” Jackson informs. “You kept trying to fight. We had to do something so we could stitch you up since you’re healing so slowly.”

“Damon?”

“Same as he was when you asked ten minutes ago,” Jackson says. “Lydia and Deaton and Cora are all doing their best with him. I’m stuck with you,” he mutters, but there is worry and fear in Jackson’s eyes. “So just rest and heal up so I can save myself a few stitches, okay? Go back to sleep.”

“He’s not dying?”

“No,” Jackson says firmly. “Rest. Heal. We’ll know more when you wake up next time.”

Derek doesn’t want to, but he can’t move anyway. He can’t even really think straight. He closes his eyes again, counting heartbeats, finding the one that’s terrifyingly weak and honing in.

_Come on, Stiles. Damon. All of you. Whoever’s running the show you better fucking fight. Don’t you dare die on me._

_I’ll lose my goddamn mind._

Isaac can smell their blood in the air before Scott even opens the back door to the clinic. He thinks he might be sick, but he puts one foot in front of the other anyway, and Scott helps him forward. He’s grateful for the support, since he’s pretty sure it’s the only thing that keeps his knees from buckling completely at the sight of Jackson manually stitching Derek’s dozens of wounds.

_And Stiles is worse?_  

_Dear God._

“Derek?” Isaac says frantically, and Scott’s kind enough to help him rush for the table. “Derek, hey, can you hear me?”

“Doc paralyzed him so he wouldn’t hurt himself anymore,” Jackson says. “He might not be able to--”
“Look at me. Derek, open your fucking eyes!” he commands, letting go of Scott to frame Derek’s face with his hands, ignoring Jackson’s words.

Derek looks too pale, too still, too wounded. The steady pulse is reassuring, but Isaac just needs to see the life in Derek. He’s relieved beyond words when Derek’s eyes flutter open; it takes a moment or two for him to focus on Isaac, but a small smile graces his lips when he finally sees who’s hovering over him.

“Isaac,” he greets, and Isaac barely holds in a sob at the welcome word.

“Hey, yeah, it’s me. I’m here, okay? You’re going to be fine.”

“Don’t let Jackson fuck up m’stitches,” Derek says, slurring slightly, and God Isaac’s so happy to hear him joking already.

“You thirsty? You sound thirsty. Scott--”

“Trachea,” Scott interjects. “Little crushing with the bronchial tubes too. The skin’s healing, but the rasp is internal. Water’s just going to make him cough.”

“Asshole,” Derek mutters.

“Hey, in a little bit then; quicker you heal the sooner you can drink something, okay?” Isaac says.

“Mmmm.”

Isaac starts to leech a little pain, though he knows Derek’s likely been dosed with massive amounts of grade-A painkillers by now. Derek frowns as Isaac starts pulling pain; he stirs, turning his head to the side to survey the room.

“Damon?”

“Other room,” Jackson says, and Isaac gets the feeling he’s answered this question more than once. “They’re working on him. Don’t worry, Derek. You just heal.”

Derek’s eyes find Isaac’s again. “Don’t hate me,” he implores pitifully.

“No, Derek, of course not. Not ever,” Isaac swears, tears welling up in his eyes at how shattered Derek looks.

“I didn’t want to hurt him. I tried to--”

Derek’s words give way to a cough, no doubt in reaction to the tickle of the words in his still-healing trachea. Isaac can see some of the stitches straining with the movement, and he winces on Derek’s behalf.

“Shh, shh, shh,” Isaac urges, running fingers through Derek’s hair to soothe him. “It’s okay. I know you didn’t want to hurt him. Stiles’ll know too. Don’t worry about it right now. Just heal up, okay? Do that for me?”

“He was dying, Isaac.”

“They’re helping him; he’ll be okay,” Isaac assures, hoping with every fiber of his being that it’s not a lie.

No sooner have the words left his lips that the outburst of panicked cries from the next room
sent terror shooting through Isaac.

“There, Cora, the defibrillator!” Deaton commands. “Bring it to me!”

Oh, God.

No.

Please, no.

************************************************

Every atom of Damon’s being screams in pain. There’s no more of the quiet, peaceful black from before. It’s torture. It’s hell. It doesn’t stop. It just goes on and on and he screams but there’s no sound, just the pounding in his head that rattles the world.

One voice pierces through the agony:

“Damon, please, try to heal; even just a little,” Isaac urges. “You have to start healing.”

No, I can’t.

I don’t know who will wake up once I’ve healed.

I can’t risk it; it’s not worth it.

I want Derek to be safe--and you--and the children--and the pack.

I won’t risk letting the Beta hurt any of you again. I’ll keep you safe; keep the pack safe. I won’t let Beta wake up.

************************************************

Isaac only glances up for a moment when Holly walks into the back room of the vet’s office. He’s in a chair between the cot on which Derek’s resting and recuperating and the table where Stiles or Damon or whoever he is now lies pale and unmoving with his chilly, limp fingers in Isaac’s grip; he’s yet to heal any of the damage done to his body on his own, despite the fact that at least one of them is pulling pain at all times. His heart has stopped two times in as many hours, and Isaac’s starting to wonder if the stitches and remedies Deaton and Lydia tried are going to be enough.

It was enough to save me. Stiles can pull through. He will. He has to.

“Hello, Isaac.”

“Thanks for coming,” he replies, “but I’m not so sure the mental battle is what we’ve got to worry about right now.”

“Afraid I’ve got to respectfully disagree with you,” Holly counters. “I think it could be what
makes the difference for him.”

“And I agree,” Deaton puts in, re-entering the room. “Based on the physicality of the situation, he should be healing by now.”

“It took hours with me, didn’t it? He was even worse, so—”

“You were on a warehouse floor; we didn’t move you; we treated you at the site, and while it was slow it seemed the best option. I wasn’t sure I could save Stiles if we didn’t get him here and start plasma and transfusions and with Derek needing attention too—the point being, that his care is better than what you received.”

“Okay, so what? You want Derek to give him an Alpha order to heal?”

“As a first step,” Holly agrees.

“Which means you think we’re going to need a second step.”

“I do,” Holly answers simply. “I think we have reached the point of no return with Stiles’ DID. I think that so many new splits, such frequent switches, and losing control to the extent of attacking his Alpha, all bring the argument for supernatural treatment options to the forefront. I’m not sure it’s something he can come back from otherwise, and if he doesn’t regain control of his mental state, he might never start healing.”

“Healing is survival. No matter who’s most present in his mind right now, he’ll—”

“Damon presented to save Derek from this new personality that just calls himself Beta, correct?” Holly interrupts.

“That’s what Derek says.”

“So then, the portion of Stiles that’s in awe of his wonderful pack came out to protect Derek from the part of him that was vying to take control of the pack.”

“Yeah, what does that—”

“Stiles would do anything to protect his family, especially when the traits that present through Damon are at the forefront of his mind.”

He knows what she’s suggesting, and the mere idea of it makes Isaac’s heart ache.

“And if Damon—or any other part of Stiles—thinks that healing and surviving could pose some kind of threat to us, he would at least consider—”

“He wouldn’t hesitate for minute, Isaac,” Holly persists. “Especially not as Damon. If he thought there was the slightest chance that he could attack Derek—or any of you—like this again, you know that Damon isn’t the personality to worry in the least about his own survival over that of the people he loves.”

Isaac opens his mouth to refute it, but he can’t. Not if he’s completely honest.

He was ready to leave the pack house, even though the idea of it terrified him, just because he thought he was the reason we weren’t considering children. How much more would he sacrifice if he thought it would save our lives? She’s right. Stiles would consider not healing, but Damon wouldn’t hesitate to give up his own life for the sake of his family.
“So what are we supposed to do? What do you think is going to miraculously cure the DID and get Stiles back in control?” Isaac asks skeptically. “We’ve looked at about a billion options over the years but--”

“It’s an option I wouldn’t bring to you unless he literally lay dying,” Holly says solemnly. “It’s a risky option to choose; the odds aren’t necessarily in Stiles favor.”

“But you three have a tendency to overcome some truly terrible odds,” Deaton points out with a calm, hopeful smile.

“So tell me about this option,” Isaac bids.

**************************************************

Derek wakes slowly; he feels like he got hit by a fucking train. Thankfully the cot they’ve got make up for him is next to the wall so he can slump against it because otherwise he doesn’t think sitting up would even remotely be an option right now. He’s sipping at the water Isaac offered and glaring past Isaac to where Deaton and Morrell stand with innocent looks like they haven’t convinced Isaac to go along with their insane plan Isaac woke Derek to share.

It’s an old ritual used for wolves who can’t get a handle on their control—most commonly suggested for Alphas at risk of pulling a Peter Hale and completely losing their shit in wolf form. The idea is to force a mental showdown between the human and wolf sides of a person; it’s a fight to the death, and only one emerges, at least in theory. Of course, Deaton doesn’t have any direct examples of it working. He’s not positive that it will make the other personalities go away, but it should at the least give one a clear dominance over the others.

The problem is, that dominant personality that emerges might not be Stiles.

“Seriously, Isaac, you want to trap him in there with all the others and make him duke it out?” Derek asks incredulously. “Isaac, he can’t even handle sedation anymore.”

“This should be different.”

“Should be?”

“It’s—we’re not just trying to render him unconscious with this. The whole point of the ritual is to have him face his other selves, not trapped with the Alpha voices or anything like that. It should help him work through things; he’ll make some serious progress in terms of reconciling.”

“What if he wakes up as that fucking Beta?” Derek demands. “Or Damon or Stilinski or--”

“What if he doesn’t wake up at all?” Isaac demands harshly. “Look at him, Derek.”

“He’ll make it.”

“Not if Damon doesn’t start letting him heal. Your Alpha order didn’t get so much as a finger twitch of a response. It’s not enough. We’ve got to do something else, or he’s going to be too far gone to do anything.”

Derek’s eyes remained transfixed on Stiles’ still form, trying so hard not to see him as he was hours ago with gaping wounds and blood pouring from him in gushes. He hadn’t been sure that they would make it this far. Maybe he’s stronger than they think; maybe this is too drastic a measure.
“You know I wouldn’t suggest something like this lightly,” Isaac goes on. “I know it’s a huge risk, but if the worst happens and it’s not Stiles who wins out for control, I’d rather try to fix whatever version of him wakes up than lose every part of him because we didn’t everything to help him.”

Derek’s silent a minute or two more, replaying Isaac’s words when he first began pitching this place: *Our best guess right now is that Damon is still in control, and Damon wouldn’t hesitate to give up his own life for the sake of his family. He’s going to lay here and let himself die in some misguided effort to save us. We have to do something to help him.*

“We’ve done all we can for his body,” Deaton says, chiming in for the first time. “The rest of the battle is mental; that’s something he’ll have to face alone. *But,*” he continues, “you can perhaps give him the arena he needs.”

“It’s taken *years* for him to get where he’s at, right? Is an ultimate crash course showdown what he really needs?” Derek can’t help but wonder.

“We’ve tried to treat this in the realm of what we know about PTSD and DID and everything else that can happen in the medical world; we’ve gone pretty traditional and clinical, but there’s a supernatural element to what’s happening with Stiles; there always has been, and maybe we’re overdue to try fighting fire with fire,” Isaac says.

And the idea makes sense; it absolutely terrifies Derek to think that a personality besides Stiles could wake up, but with Stilinski’s golden eyes and now this attempt to take over from Beta, it’s pretty obvious that Stiles is already losing control.

*Maybe Deaton’s right; maybe Stiles needs a different arena.*

> *Isaac’s definitely right that it’s better to have a personality to try and fix than to lose Stiles altogether.*

> *I can’t lose him; I’ve lost too many fucking people, and I’ve got too much blood on my hands already. We can’t just watch him die.*

> “So how do we get the damn ritual started?” Derek asks with a tired sigh.

*******************************************************************************

Deaton insists that Isaac help them amass the various things Deaton says the ritual will require. Isaac protests, but he knows he needs a distraction of some sort, and this is actively helping. He accompanies Scott and Jackson to the storage unit that Deaton gives them directions to; he says he keeps only a few of his supplies at the clinic, so they’ve got a list to gather for him: yarrow, betony, St. John’s wort, mistletoe leaves, wormwood. He makes a mental note to ask more about the intricacies of all the druid knowledge Deaton possesses when there’s more time to appreciate it. The most interesting item on the list by far is a chest Deaton wants to use for the ritual--made from sacred oak and elder wood.

“Looks pretty cool,” Scott says, reverently tracing the swirling symbols carved into the sides of the chest; Isaac recognizes only the triskelion immediately.

“It looks like a fucking *coffin*, McCall,” Jackson counters tersely. “This sacred trees and
herbs and mental entrapment sounds like a whole bunch of horse shit to me,” he mutters.

“It’s the best shot we’ve got,” Isaac reminds grimly. “You know as well as any of us that there a whole hell of a lot more than we understand at play in the supernatural world.”

All the same, Isaac can’t deny the uncomfortable resemblance. The chest is at least six feet long, two or three feet wide and deep. It’s monstrous to load into the back of the Tahoe, but it fits; they load in and head back toward the vet office. Isaac’s heart all but stops when his phone rings with Deaton’s number on the caller ID.

“What happened? Are they--”

“No change; that’s not why I’m calling. I just have something else to add to the list.”

“Sure. What?”

“Ice; lots and lots of ice.”

Derek feels utterly useless, lying on his cot while they prepare to send Stiles into his mental prison. He’s pale as a ghost, packed in ice to promote a hypothermic state and buy his body time to heal, and herbs to encourage the mental journey they’re hoping to set Stiles on. Deaton deems the casket-like chest necessary though personally it gives Derek the creeps. At least Deaton doesn’t intend to shut the damn thing; that would be entirely too much. All in all, Derek figures it isn’t any more odd than the various other rituals he’s witnessed or heard of. He’s confident in Deaton’s abilities.

Well, at least he’s confident until the druid pulls out a bag of mountain ash.

“Whoa, what’s that for?” Isaac says as Deaton begins to lay a trail of it around the edge of the chest in which Stiles lies.

“Part of ensnaring the mind is to also trap the body.”

“He’s unconscious and packed in ice,” Derek points out. “That’s overkill.”

“He’s safe here,” Deaton reminds in a patronizing tone that makes Derek want to punch his overly calm smile. “You don’t need to worry.”

“I don’t like the idea of--”

“Derek, this whole process is a delicate balance; this isn’t up for negotiation. Do you trust me or not?”

But don’t take it personally.

“We trust you,” Isaac says reluctantly. “Whatever it takes to help Stiles.”

“Okay then,” Deaton says, resuming the barrier. “Let’s get this started.”
One moment Damon is enduring complete, consuming agony.

The next he’s in the kitchen holding a mixing bowl full of chocolate cake mix. It’s as though the attack of the hunters never happened; Damon’s kitchen haven is filled with light and the general noise of his family bustling about.

Heaven? I get my own? I get all this?

He smiles at the thought because it’s the most logical explanation. Addie flounces into the room with a smile on her face. Her hair is curled in long, loose ringlets, and the bright green dress she’s wearing compliments her complexion wonderfully. She’s flushed with excitement and Damon loves the light it brings to his daughter’s eyes.

She’s turning eleven today.

He’s not sure how he knows, but she is. He’s making the cake—just a simple one—for her pack birthday dinner tonight. He’ll make her favorite dinner too: chicken carbonara with peas and extra mushrooms. Lydia’s helping to plan the perfect party for her and her classmates this weekend. It’s an all girls party that Lydia, Cora, and Allison are going to chaperone. They’ll be doing hair and nails and all the things that make them feel like grown up ladies even though they’re just leaving elementary school.

“Hey, Damon?” she says. “I can’t decide if I should wear this dress or the purple one; you know, that Aunt Ally got me?”

“How about one tonight and one this weekend.”

“Derek promised I could get a new one for this weekend, remember? It’s my birthday present, a whole new outfit.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

“So this one or the green one?”

“You look lovely in either of them, kiddo.”

“I’m not a kiddo anymore,” she informs him, “I’m eleven now.”

“And Collin’s seventeen, but I still call him kiddo.”

“Yeah, but he’s Collin; he’s never going to grow up.”

“Hey,” Collin protests as he walks in. “Keep that up and all you’re getting for your birthday is coal.”

“That only works as a Christmas threat, dumbass.”

“Swear jar,” Damon says sternly.

“Eleven,” she reminds.

“If the swear jar still applies to Pop, it still applies to you too; you’re not grown up quite yet.”
“Okay, okay; I’ll put a dollar in when I get my cards and stuff for my birthday. Which dress though? Everybody’s going to start getting here soon.”

“Pack dinner isn’t for another four hours,” Isaac reminds with a laugh as he joins in the scene. “I think you’ve got a little time.”

“This dress or the purple one?” she asks him.

“It’ll make your Aunt Allison’s day if you wear the one she got you,” he points out. “You look nice in either.”

“Ugh! You guys are no help!” she laments. “Just pick one.”

“Green,” Collin obliges, though Damon doubts he has any real preference.

“Okay, then I definitely need to go with the purple,” Addie says with a grin. She dips her finger quickly into the batter, and Damon rolls his eyes as he grins.

“Gotta make sure it tastes okay,” she tells him in mock innocence as she walks back out of the kitchen and toward her bedroom.

“Yeah, sure, because Damon’s definitely not the most reliable baker in Beacon Hills. His horrible tasting cakes are totally the reason his stuff sells out first at the PTA bake sale four years running.”

“What are we taste testing?” Derek asks, peeking in. “Because I volunteer!”

“Nothing,” Damon replies, “wait until it’s done. Only the birthday girl gets early privileges.”

“I’m headed to the store for the ice cream; anything else we needed?”

“For the love of God make sure you get sprinkles,” Collin replies. “Or we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Like you don’t use half the bottle yourself,” Damon teases.

He tastes the batter himself, and finds it more than satisfactory. He sets the bowl down to turn and retrieve a pan from the cabinet by the stove and freezes when he comes face-to-face with.

Me?

No, wait—what?

“Damon?” the doppelganger asks.

“Yeah,” he affirms. “Stiles?”

“Uh-huh, just—”

He can’t help that his first reaction is to simply envelop Stiles in the tightest hug he can manage. It’s a moment or two before Stiles returns the gesture, and it’s the most bizarre but perfect meeting Damon could have hoped for.

“What are you doing here? How is this possible?” Damon wonders when he finally pulls away.
“I was--uh--actually hoping you could tell me that.”

It’s been nearly two hours since they packed Stiles in ice, and Isaac is more than a little frustrated that there’s no visible sign that anything is happening other than Stiles withering away slowly. At least Derek’s visibly improving. He’s sitting up now, head on Isaac’s shoulder as they sit on the cot watching Stiles. Isaac feels more and more helpless by the moment.

He’s distracted momentarily from his melancholy by his phone alighting with John’s number.

*Please, please, tell me the kids are okay.*

“How are things at Deaton’s?”

“They’re--fine.”

“Improving?”

“We’re hopeful.”

“Well, we’ve got a bit of a problem.”

“Are the kids okay?”

“Well, Cora just found a Post-It on Collin’s empty bed that informed us he’s headed for the clinic. Seems your son has the same annoying level of perception and action without permission that mine does.”

“Shit, did she go after him?”

“Of course, but maybe--maybe she shouldn’t bring him home.”

“This isn’t anything Collin needs to see, John.”

“I tried to keep Stiles away from his mother; it didn’t do any of us any favors. I know it’s your and Derek’s decision to make, but I think maybe he has a right to be there if he wants to be; even if you keep him up front in Deaton’s office or something.”

“He’s got a point,” Derek murmurs.

“We’ll talk about it. Can I let you go? I want to call Cora and check if she’s found him.”

“Sure, and--uh--call if there’s any change, okay?”

“Of course. Use the emergency credit card to cover dinner; I think we’re going to be a while.”

Isaac’s there to intercept when Cora arrives at the vet clinic with Collin. Collin’s eyes are angry, but
his face is tear-stained. Isaac opens his arms, and Collin runs at him.

“They’re not dead are they?” Collin asks, young voice breaking and muffled against Isaac’s chest. “Cora says they’re not but--”

“They’re alive, Collin; I promise.”

“I wanna see ’em, Isaac. I wanna stay. Please don’t make me go back home; I can’t just sit there and Addie knows something’s wrong with me and--and--please let me see them!”

“Collin, I’m not sure that’s the best idea right now, but--”

“Isaac, please! I’m big enough. It’s okay if they’re hurt, as long as they’re alive it’s okay and I know they’ll get better, and I say how bad Stiles got hurt when the hunters had us and this isn’t worse than that, right? They’re okay, right? They’re not gonna--they can’t--the gotta be okay!”

“Collin--”

“Hey, kiddo,” Derek says weakly, emerging from the back.

Jackson’s got Derek’s arm thrown over his shoulders, clearly bearing most of the weight. The look of horror Collin’s face at the sight is exactly the reason Isaac felt like this might be a bad plan.

“Derek, no! What happened? Was it hunters again?” Collin demands, last words coming out in a growl as his fangs descend. “We’ll find whoever--”

“It wasn’t hunters,” Derek replies. “It’s--it’s a little complicated.”

“Where’s Stiles?”

“You can’t see him right now,” Derek says firmly. “I’m the compromise, okay? Stiles needs to heal up a bit first.”

“But he’s healing.”

“We’ve done everything we can for him; the rest is up to Stiles.”

“Stiles is the strongest person you know though, right? So he’ll be fine. He just needs enough time and stuff. Right?” Collin reasons. “Right?!” he insists when no one immediately confirms.

Derek opens and closes his mouth a couple times, clearly lost for words, and Isaac decides that honesty is most likely the best option right now.

“Stiles has always been a fighter,” Isaac says laying his hands on Collin’s shoulders, “but we can’t be sure right now exactly what’s going to happen.”

“Can’t be sure,” Collin repeats quietly. “You mean he could--he might--that Stiles is--Isaac, no, I can’t. I can’t lose another dad, okay? I can’t! Addie either, so--so whatever Deaton’s gotta do or--or maybe we could call Ruth or another Emissary or--or--”

Isaac can’t say he’s surprised at all when Collin dissolves into hysterics. He wonders more than once as he guides him to Deaton’s office to try and calm him down whether allowing him here was the right choice. In the end, Isaac accepts that there was no good way to handle the situation once Collin realized there was more going on than he knew.
After lots of shushing and soothing and a trip to the bathroom to wash his face, Collin eventually calms down again. Isaac’s about to ask if he’d just like his aunt to take him back home when Collin squares his shoulders to look Isaac in the eyes and say:

“Okay, I’m good. I got this now. How can I help?”

It’s Isaac’s turn to fight tears now, and he can’t help admire what a truly excellent Alpha Collin is bound to be one day.

“It’s mostly just waiting and hoping for the best.”

“I can pull some of Derek’s pain to help him heal a little faster. I don’t mind. Promise not to overdo it, but I don’t wanna leave and I gotta do something, ya know?”

“Yeah, kiddo, I know. Come on. We’ll go check on him, okay?”

Stiles stares on in confusion as Derek, Isaac, and the older incarnation of his son continue on with the scene as though Damon remains, completely unaware it seems that Damon has stepped away to talk to an alternate version of himself.

*So this is fucking trippy. What the hell is going on?*

“‘I’m not sure, Stiles,” Damon says apologetically. “I think—I think that maybe we’re—dead?”

“Dead?” Stiles wonders, and the events of the past day process in his mind. “Oh. Shit.”

“I wasn’t sure what else to do,” Damon says apologetically. “I know it’s not fair to you but I had to stop Beta; he was—”

“he was straight up off his rocker,” Stiles affirms. “You saved Derek’s life; you know that?”

Damon smiles shyly, ducking his head as he blushes. “We did,” he replies. “We’re all you, Stiles, so that means you helped me, right?”

“I guess, but--Damon if we’re really dead--this is your heaven, not mine.”

“Oh,” Damon says, frowning as he turns back to the scene still playing on without them. “You don’t like it? I thought maybe we’d just share?”

“No, it’s great it’s just—they don’t see me, Damon. This is your place.”

“You know I used to picture this all the time?” Damon admits bashfully. “What it might be like if I got to stay? Not that—that I didn’t want you to have a life with them too—I just—”

“They’re pretty awesome; I get it,” Stiles concedes. “Just kinda wondering where my version of this is.”

*Where’s the family that sees me? Are they this happy? Hey, if it’s heaven, maybe mom is there.*

“I can help you try to find it,” Damon offers helpfully, “if you want.”
“I don’t even know where I’d look,” Stiles admits honestly. “I guess—I mean if I walk out that door is it the woods? Or Beacon hills six years from now? Or just-darkness again?”

_I don’t think I can go into the darkness on my own. I don’t want to._

“I’m not sure; let’s see?”

He follows behind Damon toward the back door, still unnoticed by any in the room. He can’t help noticing the careful, quick, but even gait Damon has, so different from the way Stiles always feels like an overexcited kid in a too-big body. Dad used to say he’d grow out of his gawkiness; turns out he never quite did. Damon opens the door, leading the way onto the back porch and the picturesque view of the woods in full autumn colors. Stiles attempts to step out too, and promptly gets blasted back into the house, landing flat on his back as his head smacks against the hardwood.

“Oh, what the _fuck_?” he complains. “What the hell kind of heaven has _pain_. That’s total bullshit.”

“Are you okay?” Damon asks, offering a hand up and pulling a bit of the pain as Stiles accepts the hand to get back on his feet.

“Yeah, sure but, what was that? _You_ totally walked outside no problem.”

“I’m not sure.”

“We’re as close to fucking twins as it gets! We don’t even have our own bodies technically. This makes absolutely _no_ sense.”

He walks back toward the door, extending a hand toward the doorway. Before it can cross through the space outside, he feels a barrier as firm as if it were solid glass. He feels the repulsion of it, almost like a magnetic field.

“You try,” he instructs Damon, who lifts a hand and obliges.

Damon’s hand goes through without incident though Stiles remains trapped on this side. One other distinct difference catches Stiles’ attention.

“My wedding ring is gone,” he comments, frowning.

And oddly enough it’s the only evidence he needs to arrive at the confusion that whatever this place is, it’s not heaven. That wedding ring is _way_ too indicative of the absolute best part of Stiles’ life for there to be _any_ version of the afterlife that doesn’t include it. It’s not the most sound conclusion he’s ever drawn, but his gut says he’s right.

“Oh,” Damon says. “Is that the difference?”

“Maybe; I don’t know. Can I try?” Stiles wonders.

He’s more than a little surprised when Damon pauses at any chance to be helpful. Damon twists the ring nervously and looks anywhere but at Stiles.

“I--uh--it’s--it’s _mine_ though, right?” he says. “You probably have to have your own for it to work.”

“Damon, I didn’t _lose_ it. It’s just not here with me right now_,”
Damon’s eyes have gone to the happy scene of Isaac and Collin talking as Isaac starts a pot of coffee. Derek seems to have left for that trip to the store. Stiles can hear Addie’s footsteps upstairs.

“Damon, please?” he implores. “I just want to try. I’ll give it right back.”

Damon hesitates a moment or two more before working the ring off his finger and handing it over. Stiles slides it back to the familiar place on his left hand and moves toward the doorway again. This time there’s no resistance, his hand goes easily through and he’s standing on the porch looking back in. Damon attempts to swing his arm through now, but the same barrier holds him back.

“Huh, weird,” Stiles comments, looking down at the silver band. “Guess that’s the passport to the outside.”

“Stiles, can I--I’d like--like it back now,” Damon comments.

But Stiles doesn’t want to give it back. He doesn’t want to look down at his naked hand again, doesn’t want to be trapped in the house.

“Stiles, please? They went away when you took it out; give it back!”

He sees now that the kitchen is empty and the house is totally silent save for his own pulse and Damon’s. Damon’s watching him through tearful eyes, and Stiles hates himself for the step back he takes.

“No! No, don’t leave me, Stiles! Don’t! Please!” he begs, eyes widening in panic at the mere thought of being left alone.

This isn’t my heaven; it’s not my world at all. It’s Damon’s.

It’s Damon’s.

This is life with Damon--what it would be if he stays with them--and we’re not sharing it. They only saw him; they only talk about him; only he had the wedding ring.

This is the world where we merge back to Damon, isn’t it?

So how do I change it so we merge back to me?

“Stiles?”

“I think that I need the ring to keep going.”

“Going where?”

“I don’t know, but--they wouldn’t just let us die, Damon. Even if you think it’s the best and that means part of me does too, Derek and Isaac and the rest of the pack wouldn’t stand by and let us die. They’d try something.”

“Something like what?”

“I don’t know exactly, but--it’s something. I think this is it; they sent me here--us here.”

“And one ring because only one of us keeps going?” Damon wonders, face falling.

“I guess so.”
But how the hell am I supposed to knock you back down from all the progress you’ve made? Convince you that you don’t deserve to stay? Make you think that all the fucked up shit the Alphas taught you--us--was right?

“I guess--I guess that you should--get--going then,” he croaks, as the tears welling in his eyes spill over. “Right? They’ll be waiting for you to wake up.”

“Damon--”

“I’m good for them, but--but you’re better, Stiles; you know it’s the truth.”

“You don’t deserve to have to stay behind on your own; you’ve made so much progress, Damon. You--you saved Derek, you love the kids so much, the way you can open up to Isaac how I can’t, you shouldn’t have to stay here.”

And I shouldn’t have to deal with leaving you here.

“That’s all just the silver lining of everything the Alphas did to me--us--you. It’s not enough for them. They deserve more; they deserve you, Stiles.”

“Yeah, well, everybody needs a little silver lining, right? That’s not such a bad thing to keep with you.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe there’s a way to make us work.”

“How? There’s just one ring.”

“Yeah, but if this is some weirdo option to get me in control of the personalities, a way that we can keep Beta down without having to die, then it means I’ve got to deal with all of you. Sometimes dealing means moving on and leaving things behind, but sometimes--sometimes it’s accepting things, right? Learning to live with stuff? You live with all the shit that happened; it makes you ridiculously grateful for what you’ve got now. You manage the trauma better than any of us.”

You took all that conditioning they forced on us and let it enhance your interaction with our family instead of hinder it---you serve them because you love them, not because you were trained to. You understanding that however frustrating it is that you can't always separate if its training or genuine desire from yourself, it's not a bad thing that you want to love and do what is best for the pack--whether that's baking a cake or taking a bullet. You’re more focused on the awesome things we’ve got now that the fucked up shit that went down before, and that’s not something that’s detrimental at all really. You seriously are probably the most apt at healthy coping of any of us.”

“Maybe going on without you isn’t the answer, Damon,” Stiles suggests, stepping back toward Damon and extending a hand through the doorway. “Maybe you should come with me.”

Damon hesitates, but the hopeful look on his face at the prospect of continuing on is absolutely heartwrenching. He bites his lip as his eyes meet Stiles again.

“You’re sure you want me to come?”

“I think we both know I kind of need you to come,” Stiles says honestly, grabbing Damon’s hand since Damon has yet to move. “Please? I know you can help me, Damon.”

“I’d like that,” he tells Stiles earnestly, “to be your silver lining,” he says with a smile that
lights up his whole face.

“Awesome,” Stiles replies, tugging Damon’s arm effortlessly through the barrier, and Damon’s body follows just as easily. “Let’s get going.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! :) Y’all are s

Okay, so, for all of you trying to map out everyone Stiles will face, I'm going to direct you to Strangeredlantern's FABULOUS summation of the personalities we've met in the series:

"1st to appear was Damon, who is very conditioned, scared of not being useful, and always sees the rank in the pack. He's desperate to protect Derek, and earn Derek's approval too. Stiles tries to leave notes for Damon, but he rarely responds. Stiles receives all the memories of Damon's time, but Damon receives nothing from Stiles. Damon has been largely dormant since the end of Determined, merging more with Stiles than any other personality has so far managed

2nd to appear was Wretch, which Isaac and Morrell theorize is Stiles' brain's attempt to get some sort of rest. But the conditioning is so ingrained that this is the personality that happens instead of his mind getting a break. Wretch is quite dangerous when he thinks someone might be acting out of line, but is also INCREDIBLY terrified that Derek might hurt him or kick him out of the pack. He lives to serve the pack. We haven't seen Wretch since Determined, even though Derek and Isaac mistakenly think he might be a back in Divided.

3rd to appear is Beta, who is all the bad things about the conditioning that first appears when Stiles needs to interrogate the hunter prisoner that led him to where Derek, Isaac, and the kids were trapped at the beginning of Divided. He's dangerous, and he only remembers how efficient and well run the Alpha pack was compared to the pack he's in now. He's still worried that he's not doing anything right in this 'new' pack, but also feels like it needs some improvement. Stiles can sense these 'dark' intentions of this personality, but doesn't get the memories of what this personality does when it's in control. BETA AND WRETCH ARE NOT THE SAME PERSONALITY (even though Derek and Isaac and Stiles are still working that out)

4th to appear is what I call Catatonic Stiles, where he's just kind of... a blank slate and first appears in Divided. Isaac (correctly) theorizes that this is an improved version of Wretch, where Stiles' mind is at peace, where his brain just has time to rest. This personality is basically totally benign. He doesn't talk, but he does follow the suggestions of Derek and Isaac, kind of wanders around a bit. Whatever personality comes after Catatonic/Wretch is usually a little bit more at peace too. So while he's listed on his own as a personality, he's really the "healing" version of Wretch
5th to appear is Stilinski, which is basically one huge repressed reset personality that first comes about after Catatonic Stiles, in Divided. You could say that this personality is Stiles, but with major amnesia, going all the way back to Season 2 canon, when he's 17. This version of Stiles has no memory of any of his torture with the alpha pack, or any of the last six years with Isaac and Derek. He's pretty normal, so normal in fact that it almost seems easier to some of the characters to have Stilinski stay. Stilinski develops new characteristics too, like getting memories from other personalities. He also openly communicates with Stiles.

6th to appear is Little Kid Stiles. He first appears in Divided, after Stiles senses that his kids are stressed about the DID. Isaac and Derek also theorize that this personality may be brought on by the sedation that has now stopped working. This personality has even more amnesia than Stilinski does, basically Stiles at age 9 (and a half). He discovers that his mom is dead, but is also in awe of everything 'grown up' Stiles gets to do and have. Collin seems to think Stiles created this personality for him and Addie, and tells Stiles that they'll be ok if Kid! Stiles isn't there anymore. Kid! Stiles hasn't reappeared since then.

And number Seven, base personality, Stiles. Stiles who is supposed to get all of the memories from all of the personalities (that's not exactly working correctly right now). The Stiles who married Derek and Isaac, the Stiles who killed Alec and Rachel at the end of Desolate. The badass, super strong, quite damaged, werewolf that is fiercely in love with Isaac and Derek, and an excellent father to Collin and Addie."
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The woods are eerily silent as Stiles and Damon move forward. He’s got no sense of direction at all, they’re not really the woods of Hale territory, so Stiles just keeps moving, hoping he’ll find his way eventually. He’s not sure how long it takes him to notice, but after a while it’s clear that Damon’s not quite as corporeal as he was when they left the house. Stiles stops dead in his tracks, studying Damon’s translucent form.

“What’s happening to you? I can barely see you anymore,” Stiles says worriedly. “Are you okay?”

Damon glances down at his disappearing form but doesn’t seem alarmed in the slightest. He smiles at Stiles placidly.

“You don’t have to see me to know I’m here,” Damon replies.

“Mom said that to me,” Stiles tell him. “At the hospital, before she--”

“I know; I was there, too.”

“Yeah, but you’re--you’re not dying, are you? You were gonna come with me.”

“Not dying,” Damon answers, “going to live through you and with you again like we’re supposed to.”

“Yeah, but that’s not exactly fair.”

“Our lives are never fair; doesn’t mean you stop going.”

“So what? We just keep walking until you’re gone?”

Damon shrugs. “Maybe. Because I won’t be gone. I’ll just be--well, incorporated back into the whole, right? That’s what we want to happen.”

“Sure, eventually, but in the meantime I thought we could do this whole journey thing together.”

“I wish I wasn’t fading,” Damon admits, “because I’m sure the others are going to say awful, awful things, and you’re going to believe them.”

Stiles bites his lip, unsure how to reply because Damon’s entirely right.

“Just remember something?” Damon requests.

“Um--okay?”

“We shouldn’t be here,” he says solemnly, “but we are and that means we’re strong enough to do this.”

“Huh?” Stiles asks.
“Think about everything that’s happened,” Damon expounds. “It should have sent us howling to the nuthouse out of our minds; Beta should be the only thing left in here, or maybe the Wretch who just gave up and shut down. But we’re here. The Alphas handed you a fate worse than death, and you threw it back in their faces by making a life out of the broken pieces.”

He pauses and the words start to sink in, and Stiles can’t help smiling a little.

“Good point,” he admits.

“You’re still you, Stiles; they may have broken parts of you, but they never broke you completely. You’re stronger than you think.”

Out of nowhere, a manifestation of Collin appears besides Stiles, just as intangible as Damon.

“Derek says you’re the strongest person he’s ever met,” Collin says, voice reverberating oddly in its manifestation of Stiles’ memory.

As suddenly as he appeared, the remembered form of his son is gone again, leaving Stiles to look to Damon in bafflement. Damon smiles over at him.

“One of our best memories,” he says. “They believe in us—in you; we should fight to keep them. Don’t you want to fight for them?”


“Remember that no matter what happens? For me? For both of us?”

“I’ll remember. I promise,” Stiles says, hoping it’s one promise he can keep.

“We’d better keep going,” Damon suggests. “We don’t know how much time we have.”

“Right,” Stiles says, though he’s reluctant to keep moving and watch Damon fade; it’s part of the process though, he supposes, and surely not the most difficult thing he’s going to do before this is over.

He takes Damon’s hand, though he can barely feel its weight in his own. Damon smiles, and Stiles drinks in the light it brings to Damon’s eyes.

And they walk on…

Isaac doesn’t trust his own eyes at first. It’s three in the morning after all. He’s been nodding off a bit in the cushioned chair he pulled in from up front; it’s not the ideal sleeping arrangement, but Isaac doesn’t really want to sleep. They moved Derek’s cot to Deaton’s office and added another for Collin to keep him at least a bit removed from the situation; Deaton’s staying close, keeping an eye on Stiles, but Isaac’s helping so Deaton can get some sleep too.

“Alan,” he says, and the snoozing man is immediately alert and off the exam table he’d been laying on. “Am I losing it or—that gash above his left eye—it was bigger right? deeper or longer or—”
“Both,” Deaton confirms with a thrilled grin. “It’s healing, Isaac. He’s healing.”

“So that means—Damon’s not in control? Or—or he’s mentally healing or? Something?”


“Isaac?” Collin calls worriedly, and he can hear his sons stumbling steps as he rushes toward the back where Stiles lies behind screen Collin has been forbidden to peek behind.

“It’s good news, kiddo,” Isaac says, making his way around the screen on stiff legs. “He’s healing; nothing’s worse.”

“Healing?!”

“Yep.”

Collin’s face falls and he bites at his lip as he wonders, “But which one of him is healing?”

“There’s no way to know for sure,” Deaton admits. “We just have to hope that Stiles is the one making progress. Either way, physical healing was a critical step for him. It’s a good sign.”

Collin smiles at that, just a bit of the tension leaves his small shoulders.

“Can I see him yet?”

“Not just yet.”

“But maybe soon?”

“Maybe.”

“Awesome! I’m gonna go tell Derek he’s healing,” he says excitedly, dashing off again.

Stiles holds the grip long after Damon’s faded away.

*Don’t have to see him to know he’s here, Stiles thinks. So not faded away, faded back into me? I dunno.*

He’s about to wonder if he’s somehow managed to get lost in his own head—wouldn’t be the first time—when everything changes. One step the leaves on the forest floor are crunching beneath his feet; the next he’s stepping on cushioned pale gray flooring.

“What the hell?”

The room is painted the same pale blue—not drywall he realizes, but leather-covered padding.

*A padded room? Seriously? How is this anyone’s ideal—*

His eyes rest on the rocking form in the corner, and Stiles understands.

*Oh, the catatonic one. Well, I guess it’s not the craziest option for what to do with him long-term. It’s not like they could commit him, but they wouldn’t want him wandering around either; he’d be chill enough to be cool with this arrangement—maybe even happy to go along with it.*
There’s a single window on the wall opposite him, and when Stiles turns to look behind him there’s a heavy metal door. In the corner is a twin bed with a vibrantly colored comforter. The framed watercolor paintings decorating the walls are missing their glass, so are the two pictures on the windowsill. Stiles doesn’t want to think why.

He jumps at the sound of a loud, clanging knock on the door behind him.

“Stiles?” Isaac’s muffled voice calls. “It’s me, okay? Got you some dinner.”

The door opens slowly to reveal a fully healed Isaac bearing a tray of an all too familiar meal: sugar rush waffles.

“Derek ran by Caroline’s on the way home,” Isaac says brightly--too brightly.

You do this all the time. Too much.

“Addie got a part as a munchkin in the school play of Wizard of Oz,” he goes on. “She had to call Cora on the way home and tell her that she was gonna be a real munchkin not just Cora’s munchkin. It was the cutest thing.”

Isaac sets the tray on the bed and walks over to the corner where the catatonic wretch sits rocking. It doesn’t take much to get him to his feet, just the pressure of Isaac’s arm under his. He walks easily to the bed and sits, putting the tray on his lap and beginning to methodically consume the meal. The small smile on his face is the only indication of any emotion. Isaac sits next to him on the bed for a moment or two.

“Your Dad and Melissa are having great time on their road trip,” Isaac goes on. “They--uh-- they sent some postcards, so I’m just gonna put them over here, okay?”

Stiles crosses the room to watch as Isaac takes the two cards from his back pocket and leans them against the window. Stiles sees Dad’s familiar scrawl on the one from the San Diego zoo: “Hello from the newlyweds! Miss all you kiddos already! See you in a couple weeks!” There’s another from Las Vegas, and the Grand Canyon.

Dad’s always talked about a road trip around the country. God knows I’ve thought more than once what perfect company he and Melissa could be for each other. Not such a bad happily ever after for him.

Isaac leaves and Stiles is wise enough this time to test the doorway before trying to walk through. The same barrier that surrounded Damon’s world keeps Stiles inside with his doppelganger as Isaac walks back out into what must be the pack house by the sounds of familiar voices drifting in through the doorway before it closes and muffles the noise. Stiles turns to face Wretch, who has set the food aside now that Isaac’s gone.

“So how the hell am I supposed to talk this out if you don’t talk?” Stiles wonders.

Wretch’s eyes flit to him nervously for a moment before looking back down. He goes back to the corner and sinks to back to the huddled position he held before.

“Why don’t you stay on the bed?” Stiles wonders. “It’s got to be more comfortable than that.”

A flicker of eyes again, but nothing more.

“It’s the corner though; maybe it seems safer to you,” he supposes, surveying the room again. “Is that why this room is like this? You feel safe in here?” Stiles runs his fingers over the walls asking,
“But safe from what? It’s not to keep anyone out; it’s for you to stay in here.”

“Be good; be quiet; be still,” Wretch whispers, voice hoarse from lack of use.

“Is that what you do? Just sit in here all the time ignoring the rest of the world? Hiding away? Keeping them safe from how fucked up you clearly are?”

“Be good; be quiet; be still.”

“You’re not always good, though, are you?” Stiles supposes. “That why there’s no glass?” he asks, picking up a frame. “No night stand, no chairs, just enough decoration to keep it from seeming like a cell. You’re scared you’ll try to off yourself? You’re not just shut down; you’re suicidal, aren’t you? You want to give in to the easy way out.”

“We don’t deserve anything so sweet as death,” he mutters flatly, and the words send a chill up Stiles spine.

“You son of a bitch, after everything they’ve done to fight for us! Everything they’ve done to help us how can you even remotely consider this? We can’t just check out! We can’t just turn into some fucking ghost they have to keep locked away, haunting them before we’re ever dead.”

“Don’t deserve anything so sweet as death.”

“Haven’t quite gone through with killing yourself, scared you might, don’t think you should, so you just check out,” Stiles reiterates, turning a circle to take in the room again, imagining this as his entire world.

“Well, no fucking way, man,” Stiles asserts, crossing to kneel in front of Wretch and reaching for the band on his left hand.

“Can’t you see?” Wretch wonders, fixed Stiles with wide, panicked eyes, recoiling from Stiles’ touch and hiding his hands behind his back. “It’s easier for everybody.”

“Except us.”

“If you don’t let it in, it doesn’t hurt anymore. Just shut everything out. Nothing so sweet as death but we can be quiet,” Wretch offers. “Be good; be quiet; be still,” he repeats, emphasizing it like he’s just summed up all the logic the world will ever need. “So everybody’s okay,” he adds with a placid smile.

And God, it’s just so fucking terrifying to watch. Because Stiles as badly as he may want to deny it, he understands Wretch’s mindset. There’s been countless times that Stiles has considered this--looked for ways to just be done, to eliminate the pain and the heartache and the constant nagging feeling that at any moment they’re going to finally have their fill of dealing with Stiles’ insanity. Wretch is right: it’s easier for everybody; everybody’s okay.

_It’s not such a crazy plan really, not if I’m being honest with myself._

He plops to the floor beside Wretch, sighing heavily.

“So tired of trying to fix us,” Wretch murmurs. “So, so tired.”

“With you on that one,” Stiles admits glumly. “Dammit, I thought you were going to be the easy one,” he mutters. “Guess that’s the point, huh? None of this bullshit is easy.”
He pops his knuckles, a nervous habit, but it draws his eyes to his naked left hand. It reminds him that his wedding ring is gone again. The realization is more than enough to pull his attention back to the real issue here.

“You know, maybe we are half-crazy, and maybe we’re not the easiest person to live with, but life with us was never going to be boring, even before the alphas. We weren’t born for boring. We’ve been getting into scrapes since we got big enough to pull the chair over to the kitchen counter and start climbing shit,” he reminds Wretch. “And those fucking bastards took enough while they had me, and plenty after, and probably still be messing up my life when I wake up from this shit, but,” Stiles goes on, reaching behind Wretch’s back for the hand bearing his ring; Wretch doesn’t resist. “They don’t get our whole lives; they don’t get that much victory. We’re gonna take back every fucking moment and memory we possibly can. Yeah it’s scary and it’s hard and it gets really fucking exhausting, but fear isn’t a good enough reason to give up on my family and this life we’ve all fought so fucking hard to reclaim from all the people trying to take it from us.”

He slides the ring back to its rightful place on his left hand and rises back to his feet. Wretch whines, looking desolately up at Stiles, making him hesitate for just a moment more.

But I don’t want to be this, he thinks looking down at the piteous manifestation of all the alphas attempts to break him. This isn’t me any more than Beta is.

“I’m going to get us our life back,” he says to Wretch, who doesn’t react beyond closing his eyes and letting his head fall down to his drawn up knees.

Stiles turns away, grateful that Wretch doesn’t call after him. He tugs at the handle on the door, and it swings open easily enough, and the house he saw earlier when Isaac left earlier is now gone. Stiles steps through the barrier and back into the seemingly endless forest.

****************************************

Every inch of Derek’s body is aching, but he’s well on his way to healing from the ordeal. It’s more than he can say for Stiles, but it’s still a relief to watch the gashes and gouges on Stiles’ face and neck slowly stitch back together.

Something is better than nothing.

Keep going, Stiles. You can do this; you can come out on top; I know you can.

“Derek?” Collin calls from the other side of the screen. “We’re back; we got pizza. You gonna eat something?”

“Yeah, be there in a second.”


Derek can’t help but huff a little laugh out and the well-founded warning. He’s grateful for Collin’s eagerness to insert himself into the time of uncertainty for the pack, but his heart still aches at how fast his son is growing up. John says all the time that parents are never ready for their kids to grow up, but Derek still feels like they’re failing Collin in so many ways by all the hard lessons he’s learned in this pack.
The guilt dissolves just a bit when he makes his way out front to where they’ve laid the pizzas along the counter. Collin’s just beat Jackson in rock-paper-scissors for the last piece of cheesey bread by the looks of it. Jackson musses up Collin’s hair and mutters something about remembering this next time there’s a pond day.

“Can’t beat me at races,” Collin claims proudly. “Bring it.”

“Who said anything about races?” Jackson replies. “I’m just going to dump your cocky little butt in the pond—clothes and all. Better be ready.”

“Born ready!” Collin answers with an attempt at a serious glare he can’t hold for three seconds before grinning. “Hey, Derek, we got you a sausage and mushroom,” he says when he spots his dad, gesturing toward the unopened box.

“Thanks, kiddo. You guys didn’t have to get that just for me.”

“Near death experiences work up your appetite,” Jackson says with a shrug. “Stuff your face, Sourwolf.”

Cora gives Isaac a ride to Jackson’s. He wants to check up on Addie for an hour or two and Cora’s going to stay at the house with Addie and Lydia so John can bring Isaac back and see his son. It doesn’t take more than two seconds to see that Lydia is doing an absolutely fantastic job of distracting Addie from all the uncertainty still swirling around. Isaac knows that she must be picking up on the hint of foreboding that’s practically screaming through the pack, but she’s not quite old enough to understand what it means. She’s all dolled up in a Princess Elsa costume with her hair braided and nails painted, and it seems Lydia’s pulling out all the stops.

“Isaac!” Addie greets happily. “You’re home!”

“Yep, sorry we had to spend the night away, sweetheart. I missed you!”

“Missed you too,” she says, clambering up into his lap the moment he sits on the sofa. “But Pop played Prince Charming and he let me have ice cream before bed.”

“Did he?”

“Whoops, the ice cream was ‘upposed to be a secret,” she says with a giggle, looking over toward John’s dozing form in the recliner.

“He’s been out like a light for a couple hours now,” Lydia informs. “I told him to go up to the guest room, but I think he’s afraid he’ll miss something.”

“Pop says Stiles and Derek got hurt,” Addie says, frowning, “and that’s how come you had to stay at Dr. Deaton’s with ‘em.”

“That’s right.”

“Are they better now?”

“They’re getting better,” Isaac replies. “Derek will probably come see you tonight, okay?”
“What about Stiles?”

“He’s not healing up quite as quick. He’s got to stay at the doctor’s a little while longer.”

“I can make him a get well picture,” Addie offers. “Like I made you after the hunters got you.”

“I’m sure Stiles would love that,” Isaac tells her, surprised he manages to keep his voice even as her innocent kindness all but shatters his heart. “That’s really sweet of you.”


“Thank you,” Isaac says to Lydia. “I can’t tell you how much we appreciate-”

“Oh yes, because it’s just awful to spend my day pampering myself with the little princess,” she replies, flashing her own well-manicured nails at Isaac before admiring them herself. “I don’t mind at all Isaac.”

The silence hangs between them for a moment before she wonders quietly, “How is he? Really?”

Isaac purses his lips before answering honestly. “Touch and go.”

“But he’s still healing?”

“Slowly, but yeah.”

And isn’t that the fucking story of our lives for the past six years…

*********************************************

The woods are still silent, which puts Stiles on edge to say the least. It also makes it unmistakable when he hears the sound of talking and laughter in the distance. He picks up his pace, half running even though he feels exhausted. It’s not long before he can make out the sight of his childhood home through the trees. It’s the back of the house, and as he gets closer he can see his younger self swinging merrily on the tire swing in the backyard as Dad pushes.

“Higher, higher!” Stiles’ doppelganger urges, physically every bit the young man Stiles is, but his voice conveys his mental age.

“Good grief, kiddo; my arms are gonna fall off. Let’s take a break, huh?” he suggests.
“Okay, boys, time for dinner!” Melissa’s cheery voice calls as she comes out the back door. “Hot dogs and macaroni!”

“I want mine cut like an octopus,” the younger self requests as he follows dad toward the back porch.

“Hey, Stiles!” Stiles calls, the sound of his own name odd on his tongue.

Dad continues on toward the house, still chattering as if his son is with him. This personality--the Kid, Stiles mentally dubs him--looks between his Dad and Stiles in confusion.
“What’re you doin’ in my dream?” he wonders. “Who’re you? The grown-up me?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Well, go away,” he huffs. “I don’t wanna share my dreams.”

“They can’t see me,” Stiles offers. “I just wanna talk.”

“And about what?”

“That ring.”

The Kid looks down at his bare hands and smiles as he wiggles his fingers.

“What ring?” he asks with a teasing voice.

“I know you’ve got it; you have to,” Stiles declares, failing to keep the slight panic from his voice. “I need it.”

“So do I.”

“Well, not as much as me.”

“It’s my buried treasure; I’m usin’ it. Get your own,” he says petulantly.

“It is mine. There’s only one, and it’s mine, and I want it back,” Stiles says firmly. “Tell me where it is.”

“Nope.”

“Tell me!”

“No!” the Kid shouts, turning and sprinting into the house, letting the screen door slam behind him.

Ah, fuck.

Why did I have to be a stubborn, rebellious nine-year-old?

Well, here we go.

***************************************************************************************************************

Stiles thinks it’s pretty weird that Dad and Ms. Melissa didn’t notice he wasn’t there, but this is a dream, so it’s okay that it’s kinda weird—like how Ms. Melissa’s here instead of mom, but that’s not so bad. ‘Cause in real life Mom is gone, so maybe this is something that could happen soon. ‘Cause Dad shouldn’t be by himself, and Stiles still definitely needs a mom, and now him and Scott can be real brothers and stuff. Besides, it’s just a dream.

He gets in just one bite of macaroni before Old Stiles comes in the back door. He’s all frowny and grumpy, and Stiles wishes he’d go back wherever he came from or find his own dream or whatever, just so long as he goes.

“I need you to tell me where the ring is.”
“I don’t want to.”

“Stiles, please,” Old Stiles begs, and he really looks like he’s going to cry; the sight puts a tight feeling in Stiles’ throat, and he looks down at his plate.

“I was only playin’ with it.”

“I know, but it’s not just a toy, okay? It’s really, really important. I’ve got to have it.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t leave without it, and I’ve got to keep going; I’m trying to fix our brain, okay? But I need the ring.”

“Fix our brain how? Like remembering everything?”

“Yeah.”

“But why’d you wanna remember all that bad stuff? That’s why I don’t remember, right? Isaac told me it was because those alphas do all kinds of bad stuff when I get older. I don’t want to remember it.”

“It won’t be you remembering it; it’ll be me.”

“But we’re the same, right?”

“Kind of? Not really. I’m--I’m the one that supposed to be around. You’re like--like a piece of us frozen in time.”

“I’m not frozen.”

“It’s not a bad thing; I just mean--ya know--everybody’s got to grow up sometime. I’m the grown up one, so I’m going to get all the memories back and deal with everything and be in charge again like I’m supposed to be.”

“Why can’t I just be in charge?”

“What?”

“I had fun when I was in charge and doing stuff. I made friends with Addie and Collin. Scott’s got a kid now. I can be like a big brother to Logan the same way me and Scott are like brothers.”

Now that the idea of being in charge has struck him, Stiles can’t stop his imagination running away.

“We could start over almost,” he tells Stiles. “We could grow up to be an astronaut, or, hey, a race care driver! Maybe even be a race car driver to win lots of money but be a deputy too with Dad. We can--”

“We grew up already. We have a life, a family, one I want to get back to. Don’t you understand that?”

“Yeah, but--but Dad’s our family too. Don’t you want to stay with Dad? And then Isaac and Derek wouldn’t have to worry about you anymore, but they’d still have Addie and Collin to make a family. It wouldn’t be bad. Everybody could be really happy I bet. ‘Cause Addie says you’re sad sometimes and scary sometimes, and I’m not like that. Not the same way you are. I’m just--ya
know--me. I’m fun and stuff. It’d be awesome. Everybody gets to be happy,” he pauses a moment before emphasizing, “Dad would be happy.”

Dad would be happy.

The words stab at Stiles’ heart like a physical blow. His eyes find his father’s face in this version of reality; he can’t be sure if it’s exaggerated by the dream-state or not, but he looks younger, more relaxed, than Stiles can remember seeing him in a long, long time. Maybe the burden of having Stiles back to essentially raise all over again would be a huge undertaking, but Stiles can’t deny that Dad would take it in stride; it would probably be an easier task to face than how helpless he’s been made to feel as he watches his son suffer through the aftermath of various traumas.

Maybe Dad would actually be good with this arrangement. Isaac and Derek would have the kids. Dad would have someone. Melissa would probably step in to help out. I’d grow up and mature eventually, right? Just differently, without so much baggage maybe. There are way worse things.

Dad would be happy?

Or maybe at the least he would stop looking at me--us--whoever like I’m breaking his heart.

Old Stiles is crying, and Stiles knows it’s something he said--probably the thing about Dad. He didn’t mean to make him cry, but it’s the truth. Dad could be happy even if he has to help Stiles grow up twice. Stiles shovels food in his mouth to avoid having to say anything, but the food doesn’t taste right anymore; he’s not feeling so hungry.

“Sorry,” Stiles says finally.

“No, you’ve got a point,” Old Stiles agrees with a croaky voice, “and I want Dad to be happy, too.”

“Oh, good, so--”

“But I still need you to tell me where the ring is.”

“I thought you said--”

“It would be nice to start over, but that’s not how life works. You can’t go back; you have to keep going forward. That goes for Dad too. Maybe he’s sad that we’ve been hurt so much, but there’s a lot of good things in his life too. He’s got a whole pack, not just a son, and that’s a really good thing for him. It’s a good thing for us too.”

“So you still want the ring, because you want to be grown up and move forward and control everything.”
“Yes.”

“What happens to me when you keep going?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Am I gonna die?”

“I don’t think you can; we’re still the same, no matter what; I’ll just have you as part of the memories in my head, instead of you talking and acting for me. Does that kind of make sense?”

“This is all really weird; I don’t think any of it makes sense to anybody,” he replies honestly.

Old Stiles laughs at that, a deep laugh with his head thrown back, and Stiles isn’t quite sure it was that funny.

“Kiddo, you have sure got that right. It's all ridiculously confusing. All I know is that this whole dream thing isn’t really a dream. It’s something the others did to help us try and figure out some of the confusing stuff. I don’t want to waste the chance.”

Stiles doesn’t really care about the ring, not that much. It’s pretty cool looking, that’s for sure. He doesn’t want to wear it though; he doesn’t want to be married; he wants to stay a kid.

Old Stiles cares though, a lot, and he seems like he means it when he says he’s trying to help and fix stuff and wants Dad happy, too. So Stiles decides to make him a deal.

“If you can find the ring, you can have it,” he proposes. “I’m gonna stay with Dad and Ms. Melissa.”

*********************************************************************************

Stiles climbs the ladder to the attic slowly, sneezing three quick times at the dust that flurries in the air around him. He pulls the string to click on the bare bulb light, and it casts a dull yellow glow on the dusty boxes of Christmas decorations and childhood memorabilia. He hopes his hunch is right; there’s no sign in the dust that anything’s been moved recently, but he’s not so sure that his younger mentality actually hid the ring so much as wished it away.

He sees what he’s looking for in the familiar place behind the Christmas tree box. The chest hasn’t moved since he was a kid, when he first asked Mom what it was and she’d replied “It’s Mommy’s treasure chest.”

At the time, he’d been disappointed to have her open it and find just a few mementos of her childhood and her simple white wedding dress folded up. Now he’s old enough to understand what “treasured” items really are. He opens the lid of Mom’s hope chest slowly, staring down at Dad’s additions to the collection: Mom’s favorite bright blue head scarf, her journal, a framed picture of her and Dad outside the courthouse on their wedding day—they put it up by the casket at her funeral, and Dad hasn’t been able to look at it since—and the gold chain that Mom wore her wedding ring on when she’d lost too much weight for it to fit her finger anymore.

Stiles’ silver ring is with her gold ones on the necklace. He reaches his hand down slowly to pick them up, fingers brushing against the lace of the wedding dress folded beneath. It’s all the
confirmation he needed really that he should walk away from this version of himself. Mom fought so hard and still got taken away from her family, her son. If there’s any chance at all that Stiles can fight his way back to his kids and husbands, he can’t just give up on it.

*However simple the world seems when you’re a kid, it’s not the real view of things. The world’s a scary place, but there’s some awesome shit too. Can’t miss out on the future because I’m trying to hang on to the past.*

Stiles takes his ring off the chain and places Mom’s rings back in the chest, closing it and stepping back. He slips the ring on his left hand with a smile. The sound of conversation dies downstairs.

“Stiles!” his younger self calls. “They’re gone! What’d you do? Where are they?”

He hurries down the stairs apologizing as he comes, “Sorry; sorry; I should have warned you. When I take the ring, you start fading.”

“No; not dying, just kind of settling in the back of my mind I think.”

“Oh,” Stiles answers, frowning. “So Dad and Melissa are gone for good? And--and you’re gonna leave too?”

“No; they’re waiting for us to wake up--me to wake up,” Stiles answers. “And, you know, everything you were dreaming up here isn’t all that impossible. Dad and Melissa will be good friends even if they don’t get married. We’ll still have fun with Dad. And I gotta go for now, but just so we can wake up. You’re gonna stay part of me; I promise. It’s just time for me to step up and take the lead again. You can walk with me a while though if you want.”

“Well,” he considers, “Nah; I’m gonna maybe just swing some more. Get done healing quick, okay? Let’s wake up soon.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Okay.”

Stiles is relieved to see that the backyard is apparently enough a part of his younger mind’s domain that he can easily pass through to the porch and down the steps. Stiles turns away and doesn’t look back as he makes his way out the front door to find himself instantly in the middle of the forest again..

The quiet of the woods is as creepy as ever, but with every step Stiles feels more and more unease. The sense of foreboding is almost overwhelming by the time he sees the outline of a house through the trees. It’s seems to be the hybrid version of the home they’re planning based off the design sketches Derek’s shown everyone, but something’s off. The closer he gets the more Stiles understands what’s wrong.

*This isn’t a home. It’s a fucking compound.*

He can see the fence clearly now, electric by the look of it and topped with razor wire. There’s a heavy iron gate as the only visible way in or out of the yard, and Stiles makes his way slowly toward it, dreading the personality he’s sure to find in this possible version of reality. He takes a shuddering breath as he steps through the open gate. It swings shut behind him with a clang that seems to reverberate down to Stiles’ bones.
No escaping it now. Might as well get this party started.

“Okay, psycho beta, where the hell are you?” Stiles calls toward the house, voice projecting a bravado he certainly doesn’t feel.

In answer, the front door opens and Beta steps out, sinister smirk sending chills up Stiles spine as Beta’s icy gaze sweeps over him, sizing him up.

“Psycho beta?” he repeats with a huff of mirthless laughter. “Haven’t you guessed yet?”

“Guessed what?”

“A-al-alpha?” Addie’s timid voice carries from inside the house. “Lunch is ready if--if you’re hungry now.”

“We’re not a beta anymore,” he says, eyes flaring red to confirm the words. “Come and see what a pack should really look like, Stiles,” he bids, spitting Stiles’ human name like an insult as he turns on his heel to go back inside.

Chapter End Notes

This is just a reminder that every scene you see is NOT necessarily the accurate representation of how life would work if a certain personality took over, it's what that personality predicts and/or hopes will unfold if they have a chance to run the show.

ENDLESS appreciation for my lovely, lovely betas without whom I'd be lost!

and a HUGE thank you to all of you still reading as we come in on the home stretch! Hope things don't disappoint! :D :D :D
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Another reminder that this is the "ideal" for the personality presenting NOT Stiles and/or the character in real life.

Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alpha can’t stop the grin spreading across his face as he makes his way through the house toward the dining room. He can only imagine the panic Stiles feels at seeing his “home” this way. Alpha’s made the place functional, not personal. There’s adequate furnishings, weights and workout equipment take the main focus of the den, the only television is located in the alpha’s personal room, along with some other extravagances for himself. The house contains none of the sentimental clutter that plagued every house he’s been in during Derek’s time as Alpha.

_Fucking Derek Hale_, he thinks with a roll of his eyes. _Tell me again how family was the most important thing? How love matters more than training? That’s the mentality that got your shredded body on the six o’clock news while I was busy trying to clean up the mess of a pack you left behind._

He turns to look back and drink in the horrified look on Stiles’ face. He holds his laugh back, but only just.

_Terrified little weakling. Why should you get control over me? Look at the strength I’ve got. Look where I’ve gotten us. We’ll never be anyone’s beta every again. We’ll never be that quivering, frightened Wretch in any form. We’re powerful now; we’re safe._

“What the _hell_ is this?” Stiles demands, voice strained and fearful, but also furious.

“This? It’s our _destiny_, you short-sighted, sentimental disgrace,” Alpha replies. “_This_ is what we were _made_ for.”

“Our destiny?” he scoffs. “Our destiny? Are you fucking kidding me? You took our life with our _family_ and turned it into the fucking hell on earth that we endured with those _monsters_? What can you _possibly_ be thinking?”

“No, I took our pack, and I made it _safe_,” Alpha corrects. “I took all that pain we’ve endured--back when we were human, with the alphas, with the new Hale Pack--and I _used_ it for the _gift_ that it is. This pack is _invincible_. We are better and stronger and safer than _any_ place we’ve ever been. We are going to succeed where every person who was supposed to protect us failed.”

“No one _failed_ us. We~”

“Mom fucking _died._”

“Mom _fought_ to stay with us for as long as she possibly could. She-”

“And then Dad was so busy grieving his wife he practically forgot about raising his son!”
“No! Don’t you dare talk about Dad like that! He did the best he fucking could! So what if he drank too much sometimes; it could have been worse, so much worse. He could have turned into the same kind of abusive asshole Mr. Lahey did but--”

“That’s an excuse,” Alpha interjects. “It doesn’t change the fact that he let us down.”

“You’re so full of--”

“And Derek, Derek Hale is the biggest fucking joke of all. He can’t run a pack; he was never meant to be an Alpha. Wasting the gift of the bite on idiotic, outcast teenagers he barely took the time to train! The little promise Isaac had on his own, all the strength and ferocity that came from his rage, Derek diminished it. He took the best quality Isaac had to offer and tried to stamp it out. He even did the same with his own anger! Giving it up for the sake of a fluctuating anchor like family,” Alpha points out. “He was all but useless as pack leader; that’s why the Alpha Pack was able to take you! That’s why the only move it took to cripple his measly little pack was to take the pathetic human that an alpha had a little crush on! Derek Hale is the most ineffectual Alpha to ever disgrace our race!”

“Derek is a good Alpha! He’s--”

“How many memories do you have of the moments where they almost saved you? All the times they almost came through?”

“That’s not--”

“How many?!?” Alpha thunders.

“Derek loves his pack! He--”

“What good is love when you’re captured and tortured and dying and the pack that loves you still fails you? What is love worth? Nothing! It’s a childish fantasy that is disappointing, disadvantageous, and fucking deadly when you let it go too far!”

“Derek is--”

“Derek is nothing compared to the greatness of the pack that trained you! Thomas was a master at maintaining a pack! He and Alec and Rachel truly understood the key qualities of a strong, unyielding pack! But even they let us down. Thomas playing his revenge games with Talia Hale’s son since she wasn’t alive to answer for her transgressions; he got caught up in the vengeance; he drew his game out too long, and it cost him his life and nearly got is pack killed. And we both know the real reason Alec came back to Beacon Hills.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Stiles orders, and Alpha smiles at the panicked squeak in the words. “Right. Now. Don’t you even start with that bullshit of--”

“Of how he came to collect his pet? Of how that’s the only possible reason he would ever come back here? Thomas’ vendetta against the Hales meant nothing to Alec; he was just along for the spoils of the war. He just didn’t expect to find anything so good as us. He left us as a distraction, but he came back in the end. He saw the potential in us, all the excellent training and how well we took to it. He wanted us back,” Alpha reminds, “and part of us wanted to go back with him.”

“No! That’s--you’re lying! You’re just trying to fuck with my head so that--”

“But Alec let us down too. He lost everything, because he let sentimentality get in the way. He let emotion cloud his actions. We’ve learned so much from our disappointments, can’t you see that? Can’t you see how perfect it’s all been to mold us into the kind of Alpha that can truly lead a pack!”
We will be the stuff of legends. They will speak of our pack with reverence and fear and we will cut down anyone who dares to cross us!

“No! That’s not what we want! We want a family! We want-”

“We want to be safe,” Alpha interjects. “And this is the only way we make it happen. The more we feel the weaker we will become. This is better; this is easier; this is safer. You know I’m right even if you won’t admit it.”

“No.”

“They’ve all promised over and over and over that you’re safe, and you know as well as I do that it is complete bullshit! It’s never true! Something is always coming on the horizon to fuck up your life again and the only way you are ever going to break that cycle of fear and pain and misery is to take control of your life. Stop trusting other people to keep your pack safe! Do it yourself! It’s the only way you will ever get peace.”

“This isn’t keeping the pack safe! This is subjecting them to the--”

“It is the only way to keep them,” Alpha insists. “We have to preserve the pack any way we can! If we don’t step up and do what we’ve been trained to do, we’ll lose it all.”

“This isn’t enough left to matter. It’s not worth-”

“It’s better than being alone. You know it’s just a matter of time before the next threat comes. You know that with everything we’ve been through we’re the most likely to figure out how to survive whatever that oncoming storm may be. We’ll be all alone; we will bury our pack; Derek can’t keep them safe; Isaac can’t; no one can but us. This is the only choice that makes any sense.”

“This doesn’t make sense! You’re fucking psychotic! I will be damned if I am going to stand by and let you do this to our family!”

“They’re perfectly content, Stiles. You’ll see.”

In the next blink of an eye, they’re in the dining room. Alpha smiles, pleased at the quick progression of the reality and how easily he can manipulate it to demonstrate his point to Stiles.

“Serve my plate,” he tells the little beta waiting on her knees by the doorway.

“Yes, Alpha,” she answers quickly, and she scurries off through the heavy swinging door to the kitchen.

“No!” Stiles protests. “You can’t make her do all this; she’s five.”

“And a werewolf,” Alpha reminds. “Which makes her more than strong enough to lift anything she needs to in the kitchen, and she’s intelligent enough to follow directions—once she’s been taught,” he grins wickedly as Stiles’ clear outrage. “She’s a quick learner,” he adds to further his taunt.

“You sadistic bastard! I will kill you!” he roars, launching himself toward Alpha.

Alpha dodges the haphazard attack easily, sidestepping and grabbing Stiles’ arm to twist it sharply behind his back and slam him against the wall. He smiles at the sound of breaking bone as Stiles cries out in pain.

“Righteous anger gets you nowhere,” Alpha says calmly. “It makes you rush which makes you
sloppy,” he goes on. “It makes you weak.”

Stiles bucks back, sending his free elbow toward Alpha’s gut, but barely sinking in a good hit before Alpha twists the arm even farther, savoring the ‘pop’ as the shoulder dislocates and the pain sends Stiles to his knees.

Where he’s always belonged. He’s not strong enough to survive. I’m the one who’s kept us alive so long. Me. I’m the survivor.

And that’s why he can’t beat me.

*********************************************

Stiles whole body jerks where he lays packed in ice, and Derek’s on his feet in an instant, though there’s nothing he can really do. He can’t touch Stiles, and the battle is mental.

Or it’s supposed to be.

Stiles whines, eyes still closed, and the visible gouge in his cheek that’s nearly healed starts to bleed again. Slowly at first, and then oozing steadily like it’s a fresh wound.

“Deaton!” Derek yells. “Get in here!”

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Deaton calls back as Collin worries, “Derek? Is he okay?”

Deaton appears around the divide, studying Stiles and his eyes go wide in panic at the sight of the reopening wound. Needless to say it’s not the collected reaction Derek was hoping for.

“What the fuck is happening?” Derek demands. “He was healing.”

“I don’t know.”

“I thought this was all supposed to help his body heal!”

“Unless his mind is too busy trying to survive something worse,” Deaton says gravely. “If he’s completely engrossed in his mental struggle for survival, the physical may be falling to the wayside.”

“Derek?” Collin all but wails from the other side of the partition. “He’s not gonna die, right? What’s happening, Derek?”

“It’s fine, Collin; stay over there; we just--it’s just a--it’s just--”

“A complication,” Deaton finishes, regaining his composure as he takes a needle and thread from the silver tray on the table by the wall. “We’re going to do our best to help him,” he adds, leaning in to cross the mountain ash line since Derek can’t and begin re-stitching the torn flesh.

*********************************************
Stiles is absolutely no match for Beta’s fighting ability. He’s got enough rage to fuel an atomic bomb, but Beta’s right; the anger makes it hard to think or plan or do anything except swipe and jab at any inch of this sick fuck he can reach. He lands a blow or two to Beta’s abdomen and slices down his left arm. It’s less than three minutes before Beta manages to send Stiles face-first to the floor and slices deftly through Stiles right Achilles tendon. He howls in pain, curling in on himself though he knows he should keep fighting. He seethes at the sound of Beta’s unaffected chuckle as he takes a vice-like grip on Stiles’ left leg and slices the tendon there to match.

“How quickly you let the emotion erase your training,” Alpha comments, leering down at him. “You can’t let that happen. We are an impressive, invaluable, well-oiled machine. We are a work of art. You can’t just forget that! You have to embrace it!”

“You can’t kill me,” Stiles reminds, gasping through the pain. “Not here; it’s not even real. It’s some mojo they had to invoke because your psychotic ass almost murdered Derek! So what’s the point of--”

“Maybe I can’t kill you,” Beta concedes, leaning down and sinking his claws through Stiles right shoulder. “But if we learned anything from Alec, it’s that there are much worse things than death.”

“So what you’re--”

“I’m going to show you all the ways that I can make this pack greater than you could ever dream, and you will lay there and watch and learn quickly like a good little beta. And then you won’t be able to convince yourself that you can beat me--or that you should even try.”

Addie’s setting Beta’s place at the table like he’s not missing, her head is down and Stiles can see the way she trembles when she kneels next to the chair she seems to think Beta is occupying, waiting for her next instruction, or perhaps for a scrap or two to be dropped for her.

Stiles stomach turns at the sight and he actually heaves like this nightmarish sight is something he can expel.

“No, no, not her; not Addie; not this. I can’t let this happen. I can’t let him win.

“Go fetch the Elect and the Second to come and eat,” Beta instructs her from his place pinning Stiles to the floor, but she gives her reply to the empty chair when she says, “Yes, Alpha.”

The Second? Isaac? No. It can’t be Isaac. It can’t be.

But it is. Isaac walks in, no trace of the spinal damage left in his gait. He looks healthy and strong as ever; in fact, exhausted expression he carries so often these days is gone, and he actually looks a bit younger. Collin follows behind him; the tension that seems as though it’s constantly mounting in his son is gone. Though their heads are up, their eyes remain carefully down. Neither of them looks the least bit distraught or terrified or even rebellious. It’s much worse; they simply look content.

Addie stays back a good three or four feet, ducked down and waiting again for instructions whichBeta gives, “Serve your Second and Elect.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” Collin and Isaac reply as one before taking their seats at the table; the monotonous synchronization is beyond unsettling.

“This isn’t happening! It’s not fucking real!” Stiles wails before he can bite the words back.
“Not yet,” Beta agrees, “but soon enough. How long you think before I have the pack running like a well-oiled machine? There’s so much untapped potential in these betas. It’s a shame your dearly departed couldn’t see that.”

“You could never be half the Alpha that Derek was.”

“Derek was a--”

Beta’s sentence is cut off as the swinging door between kitchen and dining room hits Addie in the back and sends the two plates in her hands flying through the air before they shatter all over the floor. She shrieks as they fall, hitting the floor in an instant and desperately grabbing at the shards of china as though she could piece it all back together. The smell of her blood hits the air as the bits of porcelain slice into her skin. It’s all he can do not to vomit.

Stiles knows what happens next; he knows how this scene will play out with Beta calling the shots, and it renews his will to get to his daughter. He bites and claws and bucks frantically against Beta’s weight pinning him to the floor, but he’s all but crippled by the damage to his legs, and his shoulder is alight with pain, not to mention the countless other wounds he’s sustained.

But what really scares Stiles is that he should still be able to fight Beta off. He’s endured worse and kept going.

Why can’t I fight better? Why am I so, so fucking tired?

When the most probable answer comes to mind, it’s absolutely terrifying: because the part of me that fights like an animal and endures all that unimaginable pain is what presents as Beta.

He’s got the advantage.

*********************************

“Faster!” Derek urges Deaton, watching in horror as the ice around Stiles takes on a pinkish hue; more of his wounds are reopening. “Break the line! Let me help!”

“We can’t. Breaking the line could counteract it all. Stiles needs to be physically trapped as well as mentally. I told you that!”

“Yeah, well he needs to be physically alive too! He can’t do shit for his mental state if he bleeds to death!” Derek points out with a growl of frustration.

He catches movement out of the corner of his eye and turns to see that Collin’s finally given in to the temptation of laying eyes on Stiles. His eyes are wide in fear as he takes in the sight of his possibly-dying father. Derek’s gut gives an unpleasant lurch as Collin’s knees seem to give out on him, and he hurries to steady his son.

“I know it looks bad, Collin, but we’re--”

He pulls from Derek’s grip and runs to Stiles’ side, pounding against the barrier keeping him from making contact.

“No, Stiles! Don’t! Don’t die, Stiles! You can’t! You can’t! Deaton, help him!” Collin sobs,
struggling as Derek pulls him back from the edge of the chest. “Help him! Somebody do something! Stiles! Stiles!”

“Call the humans. Lydia, Allison, John, Melissa, Holly,” Deaton orders Derek, “any human that can get here and help me. Now.”

“Stupid, clumsy little bitch,” Alpha spits as the beta fumbles over the mess she’s made like there’s any way to repair the damage.

He leaves Stiles on the floor to approach her, drinking in the fervor with which she strives to atone--well trained; eager to be useful; the way a good beta should behave--not that it will do her any good.

“Leave her alone!” Stiles orders, trying to follow but of course held back by his mutilated legs.

“Please, Alpha, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to!” she whines, throwing herself at his feet. “I can-

“Shut up!” he thunders with a kick to her stomach that cuts off the pleas and sends her sprawling back on the floor; he can’t hold back a smile at the cry of outrage and curses that come from Stiles at the move. “You know I hate it when you beg,” he reminds.

“I’m sorry, Alpha,” she murmurs tearfully.

“Elect,” he bids, “show her what you think of the wasteful mistake she’s made.”

The beta pauses, hesitant to fulfill the order; it’s an annoying habit he’s retained from his unstructured former life. It makes no sense for such weakness to linger though the memories are gone, but he supposes it’s something to do with the genetics the Elect shares with the little beta. Alpha sighs in impatience, smacking the Elect on the back of the head to vent his frustration and eliciting a yelp from the boy.

“Second, maybe you should demonstrate,” Alpha suggests.

“Yes, Alpha,” he agrees with a grin, blue eyes flashing.

Blue? No, no, no. That would mean...

“No, please, I’ll be good; I’ll--”

Before he finishes the protest, Second smacks him hard across the face, splitting his lip and making his eyes water. Alpha nods approval at the well-landed blow, and the Second smiles shyly.

“No! Don’t you fucking touch him. Isaac you have to know it’s Collin. You can’t do this! You can’t!” Stiles insists, voice thick with desperation.

Despite his ruined legs, Stiles is inching toward the scene on his knees, unsteady but undefeated, and Alpha growls at the sight. Turning to slash across Stiles neck and chest, sending him back to the floor as he tries to dodge and fight back and loses his balance on his knees. He catches his weight on
his wounded shoulder and cries out as he lands. It’s not hard to land a few more jabs to his abdomen and pin him to the floor again. Alpha keeps a knee on his sternum to keep his down this time, wishing he could get back up to help teach the Elect his lesson, but knowing it’s best to keep Stiles at a disadvantage.

*It will hurt him more to watch them act out what I’ve taught them. He thinks so little of himself already, but to see how well those he idolizes and loves take to this life I’ve given him; it will help him see how suited we are for hierarchy and order and survival. It’s not in our nature to mimic humanity; we take to our instincts in the end; it’s best that way.*

Before the Elect fully recovers, the Second grabs his shoulders to yank him around and rake claws down his back, leaving scarlet trails between the tattered cloth of the ruined shirt. Stiles shrieks in protest, begging them to stop, demanding Alpha let him go, cursing and insulting the beautiful sight of a structured, enforced hierarchy Beta’s presenting. Alpha waits until Stiles’ protests are nothing but roars of helpless rage before he instructs the Second to pause.

“And now,” he says. “Are you still unsure of what you should do? If you don’t understand the Second can continue to demonstrate, and I’ll deal with the little beta myself.”

“I un--understand now, Alpha; thank you,” the Elect answers through gritted teeth.

“Good boy.”

**************************************************************************

Isaac just shredded Collin and now Collin’s about to do the same to Addie. Stiles is going to go insane if he just lays here and watches. He can’t see this. This can’t be happening. It can’t be. He screams Collin’s name as he screamed Isaac’s, begging him to stop as he moves toward his sister’s trembling, huddled form in the corner with his claws extended. Though he claws at Beta, Beta seems largely unaffected by the blows he doesn’t manage to dodge, smiling down at Stiles with eyes clouded with bloodlust.

“What the hell are you thinking? This isn’t a life that’s even worth living; it’s hell on earth can’t you--” his words choke off as Beta’s grip tightens around his throat and forces Stiles head to turn toward Collin and Addie.

“Shut up,” he orders. “Look at them. Enjoy. the. show.”

Stiles doesn’t. He closes his eyes against the sight of Addie’s flesh splitting under Collin’s claws. The act isn’t enough though; he can still smell the scent of her blood mingling in the air with her
brother’s; he can still hear the desperate wails being ripped from her lungs.

“Look!” Beta demands, picking Stiles head up just enough to slam it painfully back down on the floor and startling his eyes back open for a moment. “You see what I see? The sign of strength in a pack. Betas learning rules and structure and loyalty. Learning to withstand pain or dole it out according to what’s needed. Learning to survive,” he declares. “This is what pack is meant to be; this is the kind of pack that will keep you and your packmates alive.”

“There are worse things than death,” Stiles gasps, expending what little air he had, and fighting desperately to suck in the next breath.

Isaac can’t even fucking breathe. He can only look on helplessly as they do their best to stabilize Stiles and buy him more time for the mental battle he just might be losing. Lydia’s adding healing herbs to the ice water. Melissa has Stiles hooked to an IV of plasma to try and counteract some of the blood loss. Cora and Scott have the children so that John and Alison can be on hand to help Deaton patch wounds that seem to start bleeding and tearing again the moment they’re stitched back up. It’s as though some invisible force is attacking Stiles, slowly and persistently, determined to not only prevent any healing but to make matters worse. Even with all of them working on Stiles and monitoring everything and trying to curb the wounds, Isaac isn’t sure it’s enough. The general state of hypothermia is helping, but they’re removing ice to stitch at wounds and the new bandages aren’t staying well with all the ice but Deaton says the cold is essential. Stiles can’t be moved from the chest to treat properly without threatening the ritual potency.

As grateful as Isaac is for a pack that responds so quickly and in such force when called upon, the flurry of everything and the nearly palpable stress in the air just makes it all seem a million times worse.

And all Isaac can do is sit uselessly to the side, clutching at Derek and Collin as they stare on in terror and pray that Stiles keeps fighting.

The room changes entirely in the blink of an eye. No more dining room. No more Isaac or Collin or Addie. No more windows or lights either, just the flickering yellow glow of a bare bulb above him. Stiles feels the cold surface of a concrete floor below him now, but Beta’s still holding him down with a bony knee to his chest.

“How’d you do that?” What did you do?” he demands, baffled, and Beta laughs.

“It’s the advantage of home territory,” he says. “I know my way around.”

“It’s not your home; it’s mine and I’m not going to let you-”

“You’re in no position to be making threats, Stiles,” Beta growls, taking a single claw and tracing a line down the side of Stiles’ face with a grin. “You don’t make the rules here; I do. You
are as powerless to thwart me here as you are in real life, so just shut up, watch, and maybe you’ll finally start to understand what I’m trying to show you.”

“I’m never going to understand you.”

“You might not want to admit it, but you’ll see that I’m right. You know this is the only way we’ll ever stay safe. I wouldn’t be here if part of you didn’t believe there was merit to this method of pack. I’m just trying to help you stop resisting and embrace the truth that you have to let me take control, or we’ll never be safe. It’s better this way.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Family and love and sentimentality make you weak; they make you an easier target; they give no advantage. The pack is better off without clouded judgment. You’ll see,” he persists.

“No.”

“Stay down; you understand?” he orders with added pressure to Stiles’ chest. “Be good; learn something. We both know I’ll have you down in seconds if you bother trying to move.”

Stiles tries to get up anyway, but he’s got no strength left. His wounds aren’t healing which makes no sense given that this place isn’t even real. Only the consuming panic keeps Stiles alert. He turns his head to the side to track Beta’s movements as he takes a few steps away.

“Beta, come here!” he directs, and Stiles chest clenches at the cry, dreading to see which of his packmates steps forward.

He’s in no way prepared to see Logan’s small form shuffle forward from the shadows to kneel gracefully at Beta’s feet.

“Good boy,” Beta praises with a smile, reaching down to ruffle Logan’s hair. “You remember what I taught you? About slicing his arms to cause pain?”

“Yes, Alpha,” Logan answers. “Not too much blood or it ruins the fun too quick.”

“Smart, beta.”

“Thank you, Alpha.”

“Show me what you’ve learned; take your time,” he instructs with a nod toward the dark back corner. “The louder he gets the more you can eat tonight.’

“Thank you, Alpha,” Logan says, smiling at the promise as he rises to rush toward the back corner.

Bile rises in Stiles’ throat at the sight of a scene he lived through so many times with Alec.

No, no, no this can’t happen; I can’t let this happen; I have to get up.

But he can’t. It seems his wounds are struggling to heal, but he’s nowhere near any useful movement.

Beta is right. He’ll have me down again in a second.

Oh, God. How am I possibly going to beat him? What if I can’t?
He expects the face of a stranger when Logan jumps up to tug another string and light the
next bare bulb. Once again, he’s unprepared for the sight before him. Scott’s pale, gaunt face blinks
against the light. He’s weak but not helpless, restrained by a heavy iron ring around his neck that’s
chained and bolted to the wall behind him. His clothes are tattered rags, and there’s no doubting that
this is his purpose in the pack; he’s the practice dummy for Beta’s sick games.

“Not Scott,” Stiles whines pitifully, unable to stop himself. “Why would you--”

“Logan, don’t,” Scott pleads, voice hoarse and weak. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I wanna do it,” Logan replies simply. “I’m a good beta.”

“A very good beta,” Beta adds, and Logan looks back to smile, though he keeps his gaze
downward. “Who’s going to get dinner.”

“Thank you, Alpha.”

“No, you’re not just his good beta, okay? You’re a kid, not some monster or animal, Logan.
You’re my son, and I love you. I love you so much, Logan. Please try to remember that.”

And Stiles understands now.

“You took their memories,” he realizes, and Beta nods. “They’re not just brainwashed;
they’re reset completely. You did the same thing to all of them that the Alphas did to us.”

“Why wouldn’t I emulate such an excellent method?” Beta wonders. “But I have to say they
were pitifully easy to control even before I purged them of those useless years before I took over,” he
replies. “When they still had their memories they were all leverage against one another. It kept them
in line until I could erase enough of their worthless nostalgic musings to make them useful betas
again. All except this one; this one I left to teach all the others.”

“Because he’s going to rip his father apart on your whim,” Stiles supposes, “and Scott could
protect himself; he could stop it; but he won’t because Logan is his son.”

“He won’t because he’s weak and pathetic and practically human,” Beta spits. “He’s easily
manipulated, easily distracted, his judgment is clouded. He’s a liability like this, an embarrassment to
his species and any pack that might be stupid enough to keep a beta in his condition. Logan won’t
be the same failure. He’s young; he’s bright; he’s obedient.”

“He’s brainwashed.”

“He will make an excellent Second for the next generation of the pack. Look at his work;
he’ll be a master by the time he would start the pointless human educational system that Derek would
force him to waste time attending.”

“Masterful work, Beta.” How many times did I hear that from Alec? How many times did I
fucking crave those words? Jesus fucking Christ. This is so fucked up. Too fucked up. I can’t just
lay here and let it happen.

He summons what little strength he can, but the simple act of lifting his head from the floor
makes his battered body scream in protest and the room start to spin. Beta cackles, and reaches
down to force Stiles’ head to face toward to the grisly scene unfolding as Logan sinks his claws into
his father’s arms. Scott’s gritting his teeth, trying to keep his voice even and calm as he pleads with
Logan to remember him and stop. Stiles shouts at the both of them, desperate to be heard though he knows there’s no real use. Scott’s tolerance for the pain gives out soon enough, and his forced calm words give way to screams. Stiles closes his eyes, willing his wounds to stitch together and help him fight back or get to Scott or do something but lie here helpless. It’s not long before tears are leaking freely from his eyes, the salt of them stinging as the tears flood over the open injuries on his face.

*God, just make it stop. Please make it stop. Damon was right; if we need to die to stop Beta, it’s worth it. I can’t let this happen to all of them, not even if it would keep them alive. Feeling safe isn’t really worth losing our humanity. It’s not.*

*Please let it stop.*

*Stop him; stop the terrified monster lurking in my mind who’s willing to pay anything for the peace we’ve never been able to find.*

*It isn’t worth this.*

*Nothing is worth this.*

*****************************************************************************

Alpha is winning without a doubt, but Stiles has one lesson left to witness. The scene changes, and Alpha smiles to see where his control has led them. Isaac’s chiseled form is naked and kneeling at the foot of the plush king bed. He’s the *perfect* image of submission, and the Alpha is more than eager to have this scene to play out. He reins in the carnal urges for the sake of enjoying the sight before him—eager, gorgeous Second so willing to serve his pack. He’s *everything* Alpha could want in a Second, and in return Alpha provides the safe and structured life that such loyalty deserves.

*What is it the biologists call it? Mutualism?*

*The perfect symbiosis state of a perfect pack.*

Stiles is weak and nearly defeated. He didn’t rise to give a fight, however futile, for Scott or Logan. Either he’s starting to understand Alpha’s vision for the pack, or he’s still too weak to rise. Either way, his physical threat is minimal at the moment, and Alpha leaves him on the dull grey carpet and walks toward the bed, grinning as he runs his fingers through Isaac’s luxurious blonde curls, petting his loyal Second.

“Gorgeous and pliant,” he praises. “This is a good life for you, isn’t it Isaac? You enjoy your place with me?”

“Yes, Alpha, of course.”

“He’s fucking brainwashed,” Stiles counters quietly. “He doesn’t know any better.”

“Do you wonder about human relationships? Do you feel you’re missing anything?” Alpha wonders, eager to have his Second’s answers be the painful truths that negate Stiles’ ridiculous arguments.

“Their fickle ideas of love can’t be *anything* compared to what it’s like to be claimed by my
Alpha,” Isaac replies, voice low and needy, almost a whine, and Alpha’s blood pounds with the desire to give this beta the chance to show his gratitude.

“Up,” Alpha bids, and the obedient Second is his feet in an instant. “Good boy,” he praises.

“Thank you, Alpha,” the Second replies breathlessly as his alpha’s fingers grip tight in his hair to draw him in more closely.

He brings his lips to the Second’s in a bruising kiss, fucking into his mouth with his tongue, biting at his lip until he can taste blood, sweeping the expanse and taking in the taste of what belongs to him as Alpha. The Second returns the kiss hesitantly, displaying his readiness while maintaining his place and submitting to the Alpha’s control of the moment. Alpha smiles as he pulls back, satisfied enough for the moment, drinking in the attentive awe in his beta’s eyes, and looks to Stiles who seems to literally be biting back a furious commentary on the unfolding events.

“You took the Bite when it was offered to you; do you remember that?” Alpha asks.

“I’m loyal to you now, Alpha; the one who turned me was-”

“I’m not questioning your loyalty,” Alpha soothes. “I want to know if you remember why you agreed to be bitten.”

“The bite is a gift, Alpha. It’s an honor. It made me strong.”

“Strong,” he repeats. “To protect yourself.”

“I’ll never be weak and helpless again,” Isaac says, almost a growl, before he adds, “Only submissive to you, Alpha.”

“Is there anything about this life you regret? Anything you would change?”

“I have my own strength; the strength of my pack; an Alpha who leads without fear and teaches us to survive and thrive. What more could I want?” the Second wonders, eyes shining with the same gratitude his words convey.

Alpha smiles over at Stiles’ horrified face; the little weakling’s tear-streaked face is crimson with anger; he’s shaking with rage he can’t vent, and Alpha doesn’t bother holding in a triumphant laugh at his plight, throwing his head back as the sound reverberates through his stomach and chest and fills the room.

Stupid, useless, broken beta. Give up your nostalgic notions of family and humanity; let me make use of the power we’ve been given. I’ll use it to raise this pack to heights your fractured mind could never dream of.

Can’t you see how much better this would be? What a gift it is that we’ve been taught so well by such powerful Alphas--ones who only fell because they allowed their emotions to get in the way. We won’t be so foolish. We’ll be better than they could have imagined.

We’ll never be afraid, ever again.

We’ll have everything we could possibly want, and no one will take us away from it.
Anger burns through Stiles’ veins like fire as Beta grins over at him. He holds Stiles’ eye contact as he puts hands on Isaac’s shoulder to guide Isaac back down to his knees. Isaac folds easily, Stiles recognizes the placid smile and blank eyes all too well. His stomach churns as Beta reaches to unbutton his jeans, and Isaac’s hands come up tentatively.

“May I, Alpha?” he requests reverently, like it’s a fucking gift to be allowed to choke as his Alpha slams his cock down Isaac’s throat.

Stiles closes his eyes against the sight as deep, painful sobs burst from his lips, but closing his eyes doesn’t help. The memories are still there--his face where Isaac’s is now, his claws learning to rend flesh like Logan, his body learning to take and give punishment like Collin and Addie; all while Alec and the others erased memories and purred praises and spat insults and made him truly, truly believe that there could be no better existence.

But they were wrong.

They were so, so fucking wrong! I don’t care if this is safer. I don’t care if this makes the chances of surviving most likely. I don’t care if ignorance is bliss and betas who don’t know any better are easiest to predict and control and train. This isn’t a fucking life worth having anyway. This is a goddamn nightmare.

The sound of his own groans of pleasure have Stiles gagging. Surely he’s been in Isaac’s place too many times for any part of him to enjoy this. He hears the small, muffled yips of pain that escape Isaac, and Stiles’ knows the hard thrusts that cause them. He knows how Isaac feels in this moment--trapped and suffocating and yet happy to be on his knees taking the abuse because he lives to serve his Alpha and he’s good at it.

“No,” he wails, through the sobs. “Stop it; you can’t do that to him--to any of them--don’t you remember? How can you--”

His protests are drowned out by the growl of Beta’s orgasm. With eyes shut tight he can still see the way his doppelganger’s claws are digging into Isaac’s scalp, holding him in place as he spills down his throat, the smell of blood and come mingling together in the air, and Stiles turns his head to vomit until nothing is left to come up and dry heaves contort his aching body.

“Thank you, Alpha,” Isaac says, voice scratchy from the abuse and yet still worshipful.

“You did well,” Beta praises. “You may get water if you’d like,” he allows, “and when you come back climb onto the bed on your hands and knees and wait for more instructions.”

“Yes, Alpha,” he replies, hurrying to obey.

Stiles hates himself for continuing to cry and sob even as Beta walks over to gloat. There’s just no stopping it; this is his worst nightmare. He’d thought that being taken or abandoned, being alone was his worst fear, but he realizes now that there are much worse things that solitude; he would spend every day for the rest of eternity on his own with no pack rather than become the same kind of monster that broke him.

“Don’t be so human,” Beta chastises. “It’s not so bad.”

“You--fucking--raped the man we love and now you’re going back for round two. How the hell can you--there is no part of me that would want this!”
“No?”

“No!”

“No part of you that craves the simplicity of a pack run on instinct?” Beta wonders. “You were lost without it. We don’t have to be like Alec or Thomas or Rachel. You’re right; we don’t get release from the pain.”

“Then why the fuck would you--”

“We’ll be like Peter.”

“No! No fucking way! That sadistic--”

“He was gentle with you; you adored him for the balance of dominance and tenderness that allows you to feel wanted and useful but also cherished. You thought there could be no better--”

“But then I remembered everything! We have Isaac and Derek now! We have love; we have sex that means something! We--”

“What you have with them is a thin veil of empty promises trying to cover a world of darkness just waiting to get a hold on you,” Beta says, pulling a chain from beneath his shirt and holding it out so that their wedding band kept there dangles over Stiles. “It’s a mockery of the promise that should be made by an Alpha or higher beta to those he protects. Humans make and break vows like they’re nothing, and so they mean nothing. Wolves allow the act to enhance the pack dynamic and reward and reinforce the bonds that cannot be broken on some foolish whim of the capricious human soul. This is more meaningful and enduring that anything you’ve ever done with Derek or Isaac and you know it. Not once has anything done in their bed consumed you with purpose or security the way Alec or Peter did. You miss them—the simplicity they offered you. That is what we are giving Isaac, and if you would open your eyes you would recognize that consuming contentment on his face that you haven’t felt in years.”

“No,” Stiles protests, still choking on his own sobs, denying vehemently any truth in Beta’s words though he knows damn well the words are his own on some level. “No, no, no. We want Derek and Isaac and our family. It’s better! It’s not simpler, but it’s better! We didn’t understand when we were with the alphas and Peter. Loving them was just the closest we could get to the genuine connects we were craving because that is an instinct too! We’re not just animals! We have humanity in us too, and we need love not just contentment and safety! It’s got to be more than that. It can’t always be simple; it shouldn’t be. The chaos is part of any life worth living!”

Even if it’s scary, the chaos is still good. Simple isn’t better; simple isn’t what we need; simple is what we clung to so that we could survive, but we’re more than that Wretch that got dropped off at Deaton’s; we’re more than the shell that they turned us into. Simple isn’t enough to satisfy us anymore, not really.

He can feel the strength returning as he speaks; like water from a damn washing over and mending what’s been broken. He thinks he might be able to get to his feet if he tried, but Beta would have him down again in no more than a second. Stiles still isn’t a match for him. He’s still not strong enough.

But I have to be strong enough. I have to stop this desperate fear living inside me from subjecting everyone I love to the kind of hell we would have to endure in the name of survival.

And fine, maybe our pack isn’t the most formidable, maybe I’m not as safe as we’d all like to
think; maybe they never saved me, but they tried and that’s the point; all you can do is the best; the same way we couldn’t save mom, but that doesn’t mean I’m sorry for the time I did get with her; some things are worth the pain you risk.

We’re not perfect; we make mistakes; but we learn and keep going and--and we have a reason to live besides ourselves. We’ve got the intangible shit you can’t buy or gain no matter how much power you get. The Stockholm kind of love you get through pain and fear and manipulation can’t hold a fucking candle to the unconditional love of a real family. There’s just no contest. There’s not. I want my pack and Isaac and Derek and my kids. Not mindless minions. I want real relationships!

And even if I’ve been through hell, I’m going to give my kids the best life I can, not make it so the only life they know is fear and training and shit. And if--God forbid--their lives are cut short because we didn’t condition them into well-trained, emotionless monsters, at least they’ll have known a little love and some true happiness before they go.

There really are worse things than death, and letting Beta have my family is without question one of them.

Over my fucking dead body.

Maybe it’s his righteous wrath surging up or maybe it’s something outside Stiles’ mind that spurs on the healing, but as Beta gets distracted by Isaac’s return, Stiles heals all the more, and suddenly he’s facing the same choice he had six years ago in the warehouse on his knees before Alec:

Give in to the life of simplicity; just relax and let it all happen.

Or embrace the chaos and fear for the sake of enjoying love and family?

And just as he did then, Stiles ignores the fractured, terrified bit of himself yearning for reprieve from the challenge of life with so many variables and vulnerabilities; he chooses to fight for the life of uncertainties; and like all those years ago, he will allow the carnal distraction of his adversary to provide the perfect moment to attack.

It’s not really Isaac; it’s a hallucination from my mind. It’s okay; I can wait. I have to wait for the right moment.

Beta positions Isaac on the bed so his ass is on display for Stiles. As promised, he mimics Peter, penetrating Isaac with two fingers, enough to draw a hiss of pain but not tear the flesh or draw blood. He works the fingers a time or two before adding a third and garnering a yelp of surprise from Isaac. Stiles closes his eyes against the sight and Beta chuckles.

“Do you enjoy this, Second?” Beta wonders, clearly enjoying the way Isaac’s answers cut much deeper than anything Beta could say. “Would you like me to stop?”

“No, Alpha, don’t stop,” Isaac implores, gasping before adding through gritted teeth. “Claim me, Alpha? Please?”

Stiles tenses, ready to spring. As Beta settles deep inside his Second, closing his eyes as a pleased groan escapes him, Stiles makes his move. He leaps to his feet and lunges at this disgusting, delusional version of himself. Beta doesn’t see Stiles coming until it’s too late. He doesn’t deflect quickly enough to prevent Stiles’ claws from sinking deep into the doppelganger’s shoulders, ripping him back from Isaac. He claws desperately at the gold chain around Beta’s neck that bears the
coveted ring Stiles will regain even if it fucking kills him. The chain breaks and Isaac’s form disappears. Beta roars in rage and flips Stiles through the air and he lands unbearably hard on the floor by the bed. Beta’s on top of him in the next instant, one hand raining down blows to every inch of Stiles he can reach, the other clawing at the hand holding the ring.

Stiles rolls onto his stomach, ignoring the excruciating damage being done to his back in favor of sliding the ring onto his blood-slicked finger. Beta’s attack noticeably loses ferocity with the move, and he’s not sure if it’s coincidence or a sign of coming victory. He takes the reprieve to scramble away from Beta; he kicks him back, newly healed tendons straining at the effort, but it’s effective enough for Stiles to stumble toward the bathroom. Though Beta gives chase and catches his arms at the last moment, his grip is no longer strong enough to hold Stiles back. Stiles jams his palm into Beta’s nose, admittedly savoring the sharp crack as his nose breaks. Before Beta can recover and attack again, Stiles slams the door, locks it, and immediately fumbles at the window. He slides it up so that he can haul himself up onto the ledge and out into the fresh air of the woods outside. He lands hard on the dirt under the window, adding to the throbbing pain that seems to plague his entire body, but he can’t dwell on that now. He’s not certain enough of the rules in this world to risk staying in Beta’s reach, so he hauls himself up on his aching legs, cradles his newly healed shoulder to his chest, and hurries as best he can to leave the compound behind him.

******************************************************

“Come on, kiddo; don’t give up on me now,” John pleads, cradling his son’s face in his hand as they all wait with baited breath for any sign of improvement. “Keep on fighting; use some of that stubbornness that drives me nuts to keep going, okay? You can’t give up, Stiles. Don’t you dare give up, son. You hear me?”

It’s all Derek can do to hold back a sob at the words.

Stiles has been what Deaton calls “relatively stable” for a solid hour now. The wounds they’ve stitched haven’t reopened again; his pulse and blood pressure are finally steady. If he’ll just start healing maybe it’ll be okay; maybe he’s not losing.

Maybe Stiles is going to be okay.

Maybe, maybe, maybe…

*****************************************************************

Stiles trudges forward even after the compound is out of sight and the wedding ring has once again faded from his finger. He’s so fucking tired; his feet feel like lead he’s dragging through the forest with him; he trips again and again until finally he just lets himself stay on the ground, surrounded by the dank, earthy smell of the blanket of leaves beneath him. He just needs to rest for a moment or two; that’s all.

He’s not sure how much time passes before arms scoop him up effortlessly although his body aches in protest. He feels the movement as the person carrying him begins to walk, and manages to wrench his eyes open to see his own face frowning down at him. For one horrifying moment, he
thinks he didn't escape Beta after all, but then the face above him smiles down and it's too concerned and genuine to possibly be Beta.

“Stilinski?”

“Yeah; it’s me. Looks like someone gave you a run for your money on the control, huh?”

“Yeah. Beta.”

“Should have figured,” Stilinski replies with a sigh. “Well, just relax, okay? I got this.”

Yeah, you really do, don’t you?

And for the first time it occurs to Stiles that Beta might not be the most difficult confrontation he’ll have.

Chapter End Notes

You just don't even know how much Strangeredlantern helped to make this chapter more than it originally was! You guys owe her and Nicole a lot for helping me through this.

Also, holy shit the end is nigh; every time I think about it, I kinda wanna puke; go ahead and brace yourselves for a really sappy end-note on the last chapter.

PS. Fun fact: we owe Lorde "Everybody Wants To Rule The World" and Dead Man's Bones "Lose Your Soul" and Bastille "Flaws" (shoutout to Billard82 for that one) for being my incessant soundtrack for this chapter.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

HEAR YE HEAR YE:

For the sake of my insanity and the readers’, dramatic effect, and posting time, **Divided will be extended to 20 chapters!**

(cue mixture of groans, cheers, and gross sobbing)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stilinski looks down at the weak and broken version of himself all but unconscious in his arms. It’s a weird feeling for sure, but at the same time, he’s never really felt like Stiles and he were the same, whatever the others claim. This shadow of himself is just the Humpty Dumpty version of his soul; maybe they’ve tried to piece him back together, but he’s never going to be the same as Stilinski. He’s just got to make Stiles understand that while he can’t get back to Stilinski’s level, Stilinski can get to Stiles’. He can catch up to his family, hear stories of moments he’s missed in the past six years, figure out how to fit in seamlessly with the pack.

*Hell, if he’d just sit back and let me handle things, we’d be back to normal in a month.*

With the thought, Stilinski steps out into a clearing he recognizes as the site for the new pack house. There’s a cement truck pouring the grey sludge into the form for the foundation. Derek, Isaac, Addie, and Collin stand by watching. Stilinski goes up to join them, still holding Stiles who silently watches through drooping eyes. He takes the empty spot they’re all talking toward, as though he’s been there the whole time, ignoring the oddity of it.

“Don’t you think, Stilinski?” Isaac wonders, but he didn’t hear the part of the conversation.

“Sorry, what?”

“That the kids should put handprints in the cement before it dries,” Isaac repeats.

“I wanna write my name in it,” Addie says. “Like Stilinski showed me.”

She’s starting kindergarten in a month or so; he’d wanted her to be ahead of the game, so he’d taught her to write her full name, not just “Addie.” Stilinski smiles at the idea. Enjoying the way his mind settles into this scene its created, filling in gaps and mapping out a world where he’s convinced Stiles to let them bury the past and build a brighter future.

“I don’t see why not; looks like we’ll have plenty of space,” Stilinski replies.

Stiles watches, unable to move, as Stilinski lays him gently on the ground and moves to add
his handprint to the other four in the setting cement. It’s his handprint, but it’s not and it makes him ache to see how it nevertheless looks like it belongs there. Addie extends a tiny claw to scratch Adelyn Marie Hale underneath; Collin puts on a big show of how put out he is to do the same with his “Collin Michael Hale,” but he’s got a small smile on his face; underneath their inscriptions Derek carves a triskele and the date.

No, no; that was ours; the three of ours; not Stilinski’s he wasn’t there. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t understand.

“Fresh start,” Stilinski says. “Feels good, yeah?”

“Yeah, it does,” Derek agrees, turning back to him and giving a quick but lingering kiss.

No!

“Ew!” Collin says as Addie adds, “Gross!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stilinski says, “we know.”

“Can we go to the pond now?” Collin asks.

“Yes.”

“Race ya!” Addie challenges, taking off with a giggle, and Collin’s after her in a second; keeping it much closer race than Stiles knows it would be if he were really trying to beat his sister.

It’s a sight for sore eyes; Stiles hasn’t been to the pond with them in what seems forever; maybe it’s just the lingering nostalgia of having it be one of his first pack adventures after he escaped the alphas, but everything always seems a little less horrible at the pond. Isaac and Derek start off to follow the kids, each reaching a hand to Stilinski and silently inviting him to walk between them. He takes their hands, threading fingers together, and starts off, leaving Stiles where he lays in the leaves.

“Hey!” Stiles calls angrily. “What the fuck?”

Stilinski turns, leaving Derek and Isaac to go on, walking away as though he’s still there. Stiles loathes the pitying look Stilinski gives as he walks back to him, crouching down beside him with a sigh.

“You really going to make me do this?” he wonders. “Why d’you want to torture yourself like that, Stiles? Just--let it be done. We both know which one of us they deserve; look at you--you’re in no condition to get this ring from me, and you shouldn’t. It’s a fresh start, the perfect time for us to hit the reset button.”

“No,” Stiles protests. “It’s--we--I’ve been facing the others; I’m dealing; I’m--”

“Broken,” Stilinski interjects, face darkening a bit. “You might be facing them, but you’re not getting rid of them, Stiles.”

“Exactly; I’ve got them all together, but they’re not controlling anymore. I’m going to--”

“Who do you think is really better suited to keep control of things?” Stilinski asks. “You or me?”

“You don’t understand it the same way I do. You can’t. I can--”

“Anything that you can do or offer, I can too,” he asserts, rising back to his full height and
staring down at Stiles. “I can give them everything that they deserve, and I’ll do it without the mountain of baggage that comes with having you as a husband, father, or friend.”

“That’s not—we’re different!”

“Yeah, we are; thank God. Look at you, Stiles; you’re not strong enough for this; you can’t handle it; there are too many chinks in the armor with you, and the darkness is always going to try and break through. You know exactly how fucked up you are; you’ve exhausted yourself completely trying to piece all these shattered bits back together.”

“I—”

“You honestly believe that they deserve to be doomed to drag you through life with them?”

No.

But I don’t want to just give them up either.

“I’ll be better now, now that I understand what’s behind the fractures I can—”

“Fix it? There’s no fixing us, Stiles; you should know that by now. I’m the closest we’re ever going to get. Don’t make me drag this out and have to show you all the ways it’ll be better once you give up; just trust me. Please?”

Stiles’ rejection of the offer sticks in his throat. Stilinski’s got a point--more than one good point really--and just the one moment of watching them be happy was excruciating to watch.

This isn’t the easy transitions with the first three; This isn’t like the hell I just left with Beta that could spur on a surge of strength to beat him; Stilinski's not going to give up without a fight and every scene here is going to be exactly the kind of life I’d wish for my family.

Without me in it.

The prospect makes Stiles sick with apprehension.

“I can’t just give up,” he says quietly. “Not yet; I want to be the one that wakes up with them. I want it to be me.”

Stilinski sighs and rolls his eyes, clearly annoyed at the response.

“Fuck you! What the hell else did you expect me to say?” Stiles snaps. “I’m not just going to step aside and let you have my family.”

“Our family,” Stilinski argues, “and I’ve got just as much right to them as you if not more! You’re being a selfish asshole! No kids deserve a dad they have to help take care of! Nobody deserves a marriage with this kind of imbalance of roles! What the hell is wrong with you? Why would you ever want that for them?”

“I am loved and useful and kept,” Stiles retorts before he can rephrase the coveted words to something less rehearsed.

“Yeah, well me, too,” Stilinski answers, unmoved, “and if you want this ring, you’re going to have to pry it off my fucking dead finger,” he asserts. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Stiles.”

“I’m not giving up yet,” he insists, managing to half sit up by propping on his elbows.
“Fine. Have it your way. Enjoy the show.”

Stiles shudders at the statement, hearing it echo in Beta’s voice from earlier in this nightmare. At least in this reality he should be the only one in pain; his family should all be perfectly content.

But I won’t just leave them to it; I’m still fighting to stay.

Is he right? Am I really just a selfish asshole?

****************************************************************

“Look at his forehead!” Isaac exclaims in excitement. “Look it’s healing! It’s starting to heal!”

Derek breathes for what feels like the first time in years as his eyes confirm the words. The gash there is healing excruciatingly slow beneath the stitches sewn in to help it close, but it’s clear, visible progress. It’s Stiles-is-not-going-to-die progress.

“Oh, thank God.”

“That’s it, kiddo,” John says, petting at his son’s hair. “You heal up, and come back to us. You can do this, Stiles.”

“He’s gonna be okay now?” Collin asks quietly.

“It’s a really, really good sign,” Isaac answers, dodging a direct answer to the question.

But he’s not out of the woods yet.

****************************************************************

They’re back at Jackson’s in an instant. Stiles is laying on the kitchen floor, elbows propped on tile instead of leaves. He inches back toward the cabinets, propping himself to sitting as he stares up at Derek’s back while he refills his coffee mug. Collin and Isaac sit at the bar across from Derek, eating Eggo’s drenched in syrup. It’s the familiar hubbub of a morning, and it’s clearly not the time-jump of Damon’s world.

“Derek, quick! I need you to braid my hair!” Addie cries, rushing into the room.

“And apparently I am not qualified for that,” Stilinski informs, following her in. “The honor of first day of kindergarten hairdo goes to you, Sourwolf.”

“Stilinski knows how to--”

“It’s gotta be perfect!” Addie insists, “and he only just learned the french one that works on my short hair.”

“Okay, okay, take a breath; I’ll braid it; it’ll be fine.”
“It’s just Kindergarten” Collin mutters.

“Like you didn’t try on five different outfits last night trying to decide,” Isaac reminds.

“Dude, it’s sixth grade; it’s different,” Collin replies. “I don’t wanna look dumb my first day. It’ll stick all year.”

“He’s not--he’s homeschooling,” Stiles protests. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“Of course he is,” Stilinski replies, walking past the scene that continues on behind him. “He’s a normal kid now. Except for missing out on a few social events on the full moon and some bigoted whispers about his parents. It’s not so different from the way we kept our secret with Scott. Your bullshit was what put him over the top--all that time worrying about a man who’s supposed to take care of him--are you really that surprised to know you’re the breaking point of how much fucked up shit our son could handle?”

“He’s not your son,” Stiles says because he has to protest; at the same time, he can’t deny the excruciating truth in the statement that all Collin’s secrets and stress from home would seem much more manageable without Stiles’ mountain of problems heaped in. “He’s my son, and he--”

“Doesn’t deserve to miss out on being a normal kid because he’s trying to help take care of you!” Stilinski interjects heatedly. “You know how hard it is to have a sick parent! You know the looks we got from everyone all the time while Mom was sick. That was a totally normal disease! It was something we could talk about; it was something fully understood; it still rained havoc on our life! Dad’s too. Can you even imagine what it does to Collin? To have a father who can never come to any of his events, one who’s whispered about constantly because the stories the pack uses to try and cover everything up are never enough to satisfy curiosity, a father who is so fucked up that sometimes Collin is the one who has to step up and act like an adult? It’s ridiculous, Stiles! You know it! Why would you wish that on him? On Addie too once she gets to school?

Look at her, look how excited she is! What happens if you get control and you have a bad day? You ruin her mood for the field trip days, or Derek and Isaac have to back out of chaperoning because someone needed to take care of you, maybe she even gets as tired as her brother of having to lie to every friend she tries to make and decides she’ll shut herself away because it’s easier than spending her entire school career covering for you.”

“No, no it’s--they’re not--I--I--it’s not; the DID is something that people--they understand that I was kidnapped and there’s things that I didn’t recover from it’s--they don’t know all the details, but it’s enough to--to get them by okay.”

“Sure,” Stilinski scoffs. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“Okay, ten minutes til blast off,” Derek says, drawing Stiles’ attention, “or one of us is bound to be late for class.”

“Late for class--they’ve all got--what?”

“One class shy of a degree,” Stilinski reminds. “He only ever finished the three hours before your DID presented and he put it on hold because all three of you knew that either or Derek or Isaac would potentially have to give up whatever career they chose to babysit you. Derek declined his last class to let Isaac keep going after his psych degree--also an effort from them to deal with your pathetic situation by the way--but with me calling the shots and stabilizing everything and Addie starting to school and Collin wanting to go back too, there’s nothing stopping him from getting that degree or Isaac from focusing on his either. I can hang out on my own, take care of the house. Hell,
I might even start back with online classes or enroll next semester. Who knows?”

It’s the perfect storm of progress, the kind of chaos that is supposed to come with a full, growing family. Not the storm of chaos that comes from dealing with the lingering symptoms of constant catastrophes. Stiles doesn’t have words to react to this; there’s nothing to criticize or protest against; he would love to see his family reach this place in the short span of a few months.

He just wants to be the one there to see it happen.

But if he’s there, it can’t happen.

And that’s the Catch 22 of this whole fucking nightmare.

He’s right; no matter how badly I want to argue with him, I’ve got nothing to stand on. He can give them everything that I can. Absolutely everything.

And more.

He’s right.

*************************************************

Stilinski can see some of the defiance leaving Stiles’ face as he absorbs all the possibilities that will open up if he would just get out of the way. Maybe this is cruel, but he tried to talk Stiles out of this route; he didn’t want to make the damaged wretch watch scene after scene of how wonderful life will be once Stilinski takes over, but if that’s what it takes, he’ll damn sure give a good show.

“Aren’t you tired of feeling like a burden?” Stilinski wonders. “Sick of watching how it wears them out to carry you through life with them?”

“It’s not always like that.”

“But it’s like that much more often than it should be; you’re going to drive them to an early grave, just like Mom,” Stilinski adds, knowing the punch the accusation will have.

Tears well in Stiles eyes as he looks up at Stilinski.

“Just let me take care of them. Let go, Stiles. Do what you know is best for your family. You know they’d rather have me be the one to wake up; they’re tired, Stiles. You don’t have to kill yourself; you don’t have to shut down; just take a step back and give them the version of you that they really deserve; the version that can help them move on with their lives.”

Stiles draws in a shaky breath, and Stilinski is sure he must be on the verge of admitting his defeat.

“I can’t,” he whispers instead.

The frustration in Stilinski escalates to infuriation.

“You selfish bastard,” he spits, because that’s the only explanation for refusing to see how much better Stilinski’s world is than Stiles’. “Still haven’t had enough? Fine. Fine. I will drag you through a thousand scenes if that’s what it takes. We’ll watch Derek get his diploma and land his
first job. We’ll see Isaac get published in countless journals because of his excellent work on his doctorate thesis. Collin will graduate magna cum laude. Addie will be Homecoming Queen and President of more student organizations than you can count! Dad will live to a ripe old age because he didn’t have a goddamn stroke trying to look after you; hell maybe he’ll even get a chance to make a life for himself again, with Melissa. You know all the great things they can all accomplish if you will just get out of the fucking way!”

“I don’t--I can’t lose them; I’m not giving them up. I just--I won’t.”

“You will,” Stilinski growls. “Because we both know which of us is stronger, Stiles; all I’ve got to do is bide my time and enjoy my future world.”

It’s the truth; there’s a million things that Stilinski could conjure up here that would fuck with Stiles’ idiotic resolve to continue burdening his family. However weak Stiles may seem though, he’s made it this far; plus, he’s sitting up on his own now, so he’s not in nearly the same sad state he was when Stilinski rescued in the woods; he’s improving--maybe even becoming a threat? Stilinski doesn’t know how it will go if they fight. Stiles has been trained into a lethal weapon. It’s a battle he just might lose, and he doesn’t want to risk it.

So if I only had one more scene to show him, what would it be? What’s going to hit the hardest while he’s still down? What’s going to make him see that there’s no way he will ever heal to be anything as close to normal as me?

Oh, I know, Stilinski thinks with a grin.

****************************************

Stiles nearly falls over as the room shifts again and he’s suddenly in the master bedroom at Jackson’s. He pulls himself back to the wall, next to the tall cherry dresser and takes in the scene before him with bitterness churning in his stomach. Stilinski, Derek and Isaac are a tangle of limbs on the bed, naked and panting and thoroughly enjoying themselves. Stiles seethes where he sits.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he rants. “You think this is the thing that makes me change my mind?! There are much bigger things at play than sex, here! Just because your teenage mind--”

“It’s not about the sex,” Stilinski gasps, looking at Stiles over the rippling muscles of Derek’s back and shoulders while Derek nips and sucks at his collarbone.

“Oh really? Because it sure as fuck looks like--”

“It’s about you seeing just--ah,” he moans as Derek moves down to mouth at his nipples, “ah--God that feels good--it’s about understanding just--just how well I can--can block out all that conditioning that drives you insane,” he finishes, last word tapering off into another groan of pleasure.

“Just stop it,” Stiles orders. “I’m not changing my mind! I can’t give them up.”

“Why should I cut my fun short just because you’re being stubborn?” Stilinski wonders. “If you really think you belong with them, it shouldn’t bother you to see me fool around a while. You must be better at this than me if you don’t think you’re messing up their love life.”

“I didn’t--there is more to love than sex.”
“Oh, definitely,” Stilinski agrees before his words are cut off by a long, deep kiss from Isaac, “but crazy, hot sex is a damn good perk,” he reminds breathlessly when he breaks away.

“Flip for the bottom?” Derek supposes. “I’ll get--”

“No,” Stilinski protests, “I wanna,” he all but begs.

“Sure? You bottomed last time,” Isaac reminds.

“Pretty sure my ass was like made to have one of you inside me as often as possible,” he replies. “Work those magic fingers, baby,” he bids Isaac, leaning up for a kiss. “’C’mon.”

Isaac reaches for the lube on the nightstand, applying a liberal amount to his fingers as Stilinski spreads his legs wide, meeting Stiles’ eyes and grinning at him, brash and triumphant.

“I can bottom, too,” Stiles asserts. “I--”

“How long has it been since either of them put anything besides a few hesitant fingers in you, Stiles?”

“Not like this,” Stilinski counters, “not without worrying about losing it; not without worrying them. How long has it been since either of them put anything besides a few hesitant fingers in you, Stiles?”

“That’s not--”

“How long?”

Stiles doesn’t answer, and Stilinski has the audacity to laugh as Isaac moves to kneel between his legs and Derek starts to suck hickies at Stilinski’s bared throat.

“God, how the hell can you think you could even be half the husband I can be?” he jeers, gasping as Isaac slides the first finger into him.

“They married me!” Stiles retorts furiously.

“But they deserve me,” Stilinski declares, “and you fucking know it.”

Stilinski lets his head fall back to the mattress now, reaching up to run his hands over every inch of Derek he can reach. Derek swallows his grunts and moans as Isaac continues to work him open. Stiles’ blood is practically boiling at the sight Stilinski’s chosen to torment him with.

What gives you the fucking right to try and convince me I don’t deserve the people I’ve fought so fucking hard to stay with? You don’t get to do this to me. I won’t let you.

But Stiles’ resolve is crumbling and he knows it. There’s so much truth in Stilinski’s logic that he’s having trouble discounting it all, even if there wasn’t ample visual aid to highlight Stiles’ shortcomings. He tries to focus instead on assessing his strength, hoping he can somehow regain enough to give Stilinski some kind of fight for the ring. It’s not easy though, he can lift his arms, but Stiles knows he couldn’t stand yet unless he uses the wall behind him for support. Not to mention that it’s more than a little distracting to have a real-life porn scene happening on the bed eight feet away.

“More,” Stilinski demands; “faster, Isaac, please. I--I need--I want--Oh, God I want--”

“Yeah?” Derek wonders, murmuring against Stilinski’s neck. “What d’you want, baby?

“I wanna---wanna come with you inside me, but then--then let Isaac fuck me again or I can deep throat you, Isaac, or whatever, you want after you voyeur, but I’ve just--kinda been daydreaming
Stilinski’s blushing like crazy, and Derek chuckles as he caresses his face tenderly.

“Tell us,” he bids.

Stilinski looks Derek dead in the face, biting at his lip as he confesses, “I want you to fuck me against the wall, Derek. Please?” he implores, voice strained with desire. “God, I want it so fucking bad.”

His hips stutter, bucking and fucking back on Isaac’s fingers like his body can’t handle the anticipation of pleasure that accompanies just the thought of having the scene really play out.

“You son of a bitch!

I’ve fantasized about that since the first time Derek ever shoved me against the bedroom door! I’ve dreamed about it, masturbated too it, imagined a million different ways to make it happen!

But it’s not possible anymore, not after…

We can’t handle that; there’s no way.

“You sure?” Derek wonders.

“God yeah. Positive!”

“I’m good with it,” Isaac puts in. “Gimme a good show,” he adds, leaning over to kiss Derek and then down over Stilinski to repeat the move before making his way up toward the head of the bed and propping a pillow behind his back to get comfortable.

No. No way this is happening. Even if I said I wanted it, Derek would be too worried to--

But Derek stands from the bed with an almost predatory grin--not the carefully tender expression Stiles is so used to--and lets his eyes flash red as he reaches to draw Stilinski to the edge of the bed and guide his legs to wrap tightly around Derek’s torso.

“There,” Isaac says, pointing to the wall opposite the bed, where Isaac's sure to have a good view and Stiles will also see every moment of the scene he’s longed for play out with someone else.

No, it’s not possible; this is conditioning we can’t override; it’s too deeply ingrained.

This isn’t possible. I can’t do this.

But I guess Stilinski can.

And if he can do this, then he’s right; he’s got a peace of mind I’m never going to reach again.

Oh, God, what if he’s right?

Tears of jealousy and rage and bitterness brim in Stiles’ eyes as Derek brings Stilinski’s back flush to the wall, bracing himself with one arm and continuing to hold Stilinski around the waist with the other. Stilinski’s clinging around Derek’s neck, and he lifts himself up helping Derek to find the angle to line up and slide slowly into Stilinski. The wanton moan that escapes him when Derek settles in deep is reflected in his expression, the way his jaw goes slack and his head goes back to give Derek his throat. A rumbling growl escapes Derek, and he nips at Stilinski’s exposed neck, leaving little red marks that linger a moment or two before they begin to fade.
“Fuck, Derek, fuck me,” Stilinski begs, “Oh, God, move; please!”

And Derek does, pinning Stilinski to the wall as he begins to thrust in earnest; it’s a possessive, borderline aggressive fervor he never displays in the bedroom with Stiles, not anymore, not after all the flashbacks it triggers over time. He pants with the exertion as Stilinski’s moans get ever-louder until he’s demanding, “Harder, Derek! Gimme more! I wanna really feel you! Harder, Derek, please!”

“Fuck,” Derek bites out, “you don’t even know how long I’ve thought about--you’re so good, so tight and hot and--”

“Yours; and I’m yours,” he asserts.

“Mine,” Derek agrees, growling the words as his eyes flash red. “My Stiles.”

“No!” Stiles protests, choking on the sob as it’s ripped from his chest. “No, no, he’s not--he’s not me, Derek; he’s not! Don’t call him that, please.”

“So fucking close,” Derek grunts, “so close.”

“Say my name when you fill me up,” Stilinski pleads, and that’s all it takes to have Derek coming with a cry, screaming Stiles’ name in ecstasy to a man who isn’t Stiles.

No, no, no, no, no.

This can’t be happening; please, this can’t be happening, Stiles laments as he dissolves completely into sobbs. I don’t want him to have all the things I can’t.

But I want my family to have all the things I can’t give them, and Stilinski really can give them everything

Oh, God, I’m not going to beat him, am I?

******************************************************************************

“Collin, you’ve got to eat something,” Isaac insists, trying for the millionth time to convince his son to leave Stiles’ side.

“I told you I’m not hungry.”

“If you don’t eat something, even if it’s just two bites of pizza, then you’re going to have to go home. If you’re too stressed to eat, then--”

It’s perhaps a bit of a low blow, but the kid has barely moved in twelve hours; he won’t move away even though Stiles has started healing, and the attempt to keep him from seeing Stiles condition was of course shot as soon as the earlier turn for the worse brought on total chaos. Still, Isaac would like to remove him from this constant strain if he had his way.

“I’ll eat a whole piece if I can eat it in here,” Collin negotiates. “How about that?”

“That’s fine,” Isaac replies; it’s better than nothing after all.
“I’ll get it,” Derek offers, rising before Isaac can. “You want some Isaac?”

“Yeah, just one piece.”

*Truth be told I don’t have much appetite either.*

Collin yawns slouching down in his uncomfortable straight-backed chair. Isaac reaches to card his fingers through Collin’s hair, a move he only ever tolerates when he’s tired or thoroughly frazzled.

“After you eat, you should try to rest a little too, kiddo, okay? We don’t know how long it might take him to wake up.”

“But he’s still healing; he’s healing even faster than he was at first faster than he was before even,” Collin points out. “It could be any minute; we don’t know. I want to be here when Stiles wakes up.”

“Collin, we’ve talked about this; he might not be— he may not—there’s no way to know what to expect when he wakes,” Isaac reminds gently, searching for a less blunt way to say “It might not be Stiles who wakes up.”

“He’s gonna be Stiles,” Collin says firmly. “He’s gonna be Stiles, and he’s going to be better than he’s been since the hunters.”

“I hope so too but—”

“He’s strong enough; it’s going to be Stiles,” he repeats firmly. “Stiles wouldn't just let one of the others take us away from him.”

*I wish I had that same kind of faith. I honestly don’t know who the hell I expect to wake up. I want it to be Stiles, but I’m not so sure I could blame him if he’s tired of the battle.*

“You’re right; he’s strong,” Isaac agrees, “and we’ll hope for the best.”

*Tomorrow will be better; tomorrow will be better; Stiles will be okay, and tomorrow will be better.*

Stilinski is unbearably hard by the time his conjured Derek carries him back to the bed. He tunes out Stiles’ pathetic protests and whimpers, intent to prove just how much more they can enjoy all this with Stilinski in control. Stilinski flops onto his back, aching slightly but uncomfortably empty at the loss of Derek inside him. Isaac greets Stilinski with a kiss, deep and urgent, and his hands slide down Stilinski’s stomach to stroke his cock teasingly slow.

“Fuck, that feels so fucking awesome, but not—not yet,” Stilinski says breathlessly, pulling his lips from Isaac’s. “Wanna come while you fuck me,” he suggests. “Unless you’ve got something against sloppy seconds?”

“You’re not sloppy seconds,” Isaac counters. “I don’t want to push—”

“The only thing you’re pushing is your cock into my ass,” Stilinski orders. “Now, Isaac,
"please?" he goes on, stretching his legs wider and grinning up at the lust that clouds Isaac’s eyes at the move.

"Fuck, yeah, if you’re good then."

“So, good, dude,” Stilinski assures, “and you, Alpha Hale,” he goes on, tugging Derek down as Isaac leaves his space to settle between his legs. “get your gorgeous post-coital, slackjaw face over here and kiss me.”

Derek obliges, still smiling and high from his orgasm. He lays on the bed beside Stilinski, sucking first along his neck before working his way to locking their lips together, lazily sweeping his tongue into Stilinski’s eager mouth as he moans. He’s still sore from Derek, but it doesn’t take Isaac long to find the right angle to have Stilinski babbling his elation, ruining his kiss with Derek because he can’t hold his words in even if he cared enough to really try. Derek sucks at his neck again instead, reaching down to cover Stilinski’s hand with his own and join him in pumping in time with Isaac’s thrusts.

“God, I’m so fucking close,” Isaac cries, “Come with me, baby.”

“Say my name,” Stilinski pleas.

“You feel, so fucking good. Come on. Come for me, Stiles,” Isaac answers, and it’s all that he needs to go over the edge, body clenching tight around Isaac; Isaac comes right after him, cursing through it with his head thrown back.

“We should do date night more often,” Stilinski gasps as he sucks in air to catch his breath. “Holy shit.”

Derek chuckles against his skin, sending a shiver through him as Isaac pulls out slowly and collapses on his other side. It’s such a comfortable closeness, the kind of thing he could barely have imagined before he woke up in the middle of this shitstorm. It’s a few moments more before he lifts his head to look at Stiles.

It’s a miserable sight. He’s curled in on himself, knees drawn up and laying on his side as he covers his face and sobs. The cries wrack his body as he wails, and Stilinski almost wants to go and comfort him somehow, almost feels that subjecting him to this particular vision was too much.

I tried to reason with him; he didn’t listen.

The truth hurts, but sooner or later he’s got to accept that I’m simply the best option for everyone.

That’s all there is to it.

But Stiles still hasn’t completely given up, not if this dream state is still happening. If he were really through fighting, then Stilinski would be waking up, beginning the process of healing his family from the mess Stiles made even now.

But he won’t get out of my fucking way.

He sighs heavily, reluctantly leaving the warmth of the bed with Derek and Isaac. He’s magically dressed again the minute his feet hit the floor, and the room shifts to the next scene he hopes will finally put Stiles feeble resistance to rest. He walks over to stand before Stiles, taking him by the arm and pulling him up to his feet. He’s steadier than Stilinski expected, which makes him all the more eager to crush Stiles’ resolve once and for all.
“Fucking pull yourself together, man,” Stilinski chastises. “You’re the one who won’t let this go; as soon as you do, we’re done here. No more torturing yourself watching a life you can’t have, and I get to go take care of the people we love. You’re the one who can make it happen.”

He’s not expecting the words when they come, but Stiles wonders quietly, “If I--if I decide you’re right, then how do I--how do we--I took rings from the others but--”

“I’m guessing that,” Stilinski replies, gesturing to Stiles’ left hand where a ring appeared when their setting switched.

“But you still have one, I didn’t take--”

“You can’t take it,” Stilinski corrects. “I’m never gonna let you; no fucking way, but I bet if you give me yours, we can be done with all this ridiculousness,” he supposes. “You can be done; you can let go; I’ll take care of them for you.”

As though waiting for Stilinski’s cue, Collin’s whimper comes from across the room. Stiles realizes on second thought this representation of Collin probably is that in sync with Stilinski. He takes in their location through still-watery eyes, and realizes they’re standing in Collin’s room at Jackson’s. It’s dark now, the only sources of light are the gibbous moon shining in the window and the thin strip of light under the door from the hallway. Collin whimpers again, thrashing in his bed from a bad dream it seems. Both Stiles and Stilinski move toward him.

“I can do this at least!” Stiles insists, reaching for Stilinski’s arm to pull him back, but his hands go straight through, like he’s little more than a ghost.

Like Damon’s as he faded away.

_stilinski is winning._

It’s not exactly a surprise, not after everything, but Stiles had hoped giving in would be a choice, not an inevitability. Stiles tries again and again to manage any kind of hold on Stilinski, but he’s completely ineffectual. Stilinski purses his lips and shrugs.

“Looks like you can’t do this, Stiles; can’t do much of anything, here or there; you’re going to have to accept that.”

“Fuck you! No! I--I--this can’t happen!”

I can’t lose.

But I am; I’m losing.

And maybe I should be.

Stilinski turns his back to Stiles and shakes Collin’s shoulders as Stiles watches on forlornly.

“Collin, wake up,” he urges. “It’s just a bad dream, kiddo. Wake up.”

Collin sits bolt upright, growling and shifting. He swings at Stilinski, who absorbs the blow with a
grimace as Collin’s claws sink deep into his shoulder. He grabs his son’s wrists firmly, but doesn’t growl or shift in turn. Collin’s eyes go wide as he realizes what happened, and tears begin to spill down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Stiles; I didn’t mean it! I just--I dreamt that hunters were after us and--”

“Shhh, shhh, it’s okay; Just a scratch, Collin; nothing to worry about,” he soothes, pulling him in and wrapping his arms around him.

“It felt real, and everybody was screaming so loud and--”

“Just a bad dream,” Stiles reminds. “Probably just the full moon coming putting you on edge. It’s okay. You’re safe, Collin.”

They keep talking, but Stiles can’t focus on the words; everything sees to give in to the rushing noise that surrounds him. He can’t breathe, can’t take in yet another way that Stilinski could care for and enjoy his family more than him. Derek and Isaac happy and satisfied by their finally equal partner; the kids taking comfort in having normal parents. It’s all the way he would have wished his life would turn out; it’s as though the Alpha Pack never came into his life.

It’s the impossibility they never expected to happen: getting to hit the reset button for Stiles.

And maybe I shouldn’t keep second guessing what could well be the closest thing to a miracle we’ll ever get...

*******************************

Derek’s dozing on the cot, feeling just a bit too guilty that Collin refuses to even lie down to really enjoy his rest. Besides, closing his eyes doesn’t erase the fact that Stiles is fighting for his sanity four feet away. Still, he needs at least a little rest; he can’t help anyone if he passes the fuck out from exhaustion, and though his wounds have mostly healed in the past forty-eight hours, he still aches all over with the residual mending going on beneath the surface. He’s just drifting to sleep again when Collin’s quiet voice wakes him.

“Hey, Stiles,” he starts, and Derek can practically feel Collin’s gaze as he checks to see if he’s woken him; he feigns sleep, curious what their son has to say that he hopes Stiles can hear. Derek opens his eyes just a bit, staring at the brick wall he’s facing but doesn’t move otherwise, letting Collin have his moment of privacy if he needs it.

“I don’t know if you can hear me, but I kind of hope you can,” Collin goes on. “Pop said he likes to think you can, so--uh--I’m just gonna talk, okay? Just in case? Because they said you’re supposed to be fighting to get control back from all those other personalities who want control, and I--uh--thought maybe--I just wanna tell you that we want you to be the one who wakes up, Stiles. The real you. Not any of the others, okay?”

“Cause like, I know that you get worried that you’re a burden and all that, Stiles, but you’re not. I swear. I never thought me and Addie would get past losing everybody like we did or that we could really fit in with this pack, but now we do. We really do; and--and a lot of that is thanks to you,” he goes on.

Derek can feel the tears welling up in his eyes at the touching monologue, and he blinks frantically to hold them back.
“Ya know, you get what it’s like when things just feel too much, and all. I know how scared or angry or hurt you feel sometimes, but no matter how bad things get for you, you keep going; so when I’m feeling bad like that, I know I can keep going too, and I know you’re gonna help with it however you can, because even though you’ve got all this stuff, you still try to do everything you can for us.”

Derek’s losing the battle to hold back tears, so he resolves to at least keep them quiet.

“And from the very first day we were here, you wanted to help me and Addie feel like we had a home and a family and weren’t alone. You got a lot to deal with on your own, but you still worry about us and look after us and--and you love us so much, Stiles; you love the whole pack so much, and we love you just as much, okay? More than any of the other ones that try to take your place so--so I know you’ll do whatever it takes to keep us as safe as you can--like how you saved all of us when those hunters came, and now you gotta use that same thing to make sure you come back to us. ‘Cause you’re the one we need, okay?”

Collin’s voice is breaking and tears flow freely down Derek’s face as his son swears, “You’re not weak or useless or any of that stuff they tried to make you believe; you are strong, really, really strong, and you’re brave and--and--you’re not a burden, Stiles; you’re my dad!” Collin all but sobs. “So you gotta fight now more than ever okay? because losing one Dad was enough, I don’t wanna lose you too. Not even for Stilinski. I want you to be the one who wakes up. Please, Stiles? Please don’t leave us!”

With the last words Collin dissolves into sobs, and Derek rolls over, rising from the cot to go and comfort him. For once Collin doesn’t try to act like he’s too grown up to be coddled; he lets Derek scoop him up and wraps his arms tightly around Derek’s neck, hiding his face in his father’s shoulder as he cries his young heart out. Derek shushes him quietly as he carries him to sit in one of the chairs, carding his fingers through Collin’s hair to soothe him. Isaac comes in, no doubt to check on the noise, and looks as though he might cry too at the sight of Collin’s misery. He approaches slowly, taking the chair next to Derek and reaching out to rub Collin’s back.

“Whatever happens, it’ll be okay,” Isaac promises.

“I like to think Stiles could hear you too,” Derek adds. “I bet he’s fighting as hard as he can; but no matter which version wakes up, we’re all still a family; we’ll figure it out together. I swear.”

“It has to be Stiles that wakes up; we can’t lose him!”

“I hope so too, kiddo; I don’t wanna lose him either,” Derek agrees.

It takes a while longer for Collin to cry himself out completely. The poor boy is exhausted, physically and emotionally, and Derek’s grateful he finally finds some reprieve by letting Derek soothe him to sleep, held close in his arms with a head on his shoulder. Isaac’s eyes meet Derek’s, and he sees his own fears reflected there.

What are we going to do if Stiles isn’t the one who wakes up?

Come on, Stiles; fight for us; fight to come back to us.

Please don’t give up the fight.

*****************************************************************************
“You’re not weak or useless or any of that stuff they tried to make you believe; you are strong, really, really strong, and you’re brave and--and--you’re not a burden, Stiles; you’re my dad! So you gotta fight now more than ever, okay? Because losing one Dad was enough, I don’t wanna lose you too. Not even for Stilinski. I want you to be the one who wakes up. Please, Stiles? Please don’t leave us!”

The anguished voice is undeniably Collin’s, but Stiles is beyond confused because the supplication definitely didn’t come from the version of his son that Stilinski has created; it’s not the message Stilinski would have anyone in his world give. And judging by the furious look on his face, he’s not pleased with this turn of events.

An ethereal version of his voice? But where’s it coming from? Me? Is it a new voice in my head? But this whole scene is in my head, so then what the fuck is happening?

“You heard that?” Stiles wonders though the answer seems obvious enough.

“He doesn’t know what he’s asking,” Stilinski replies. “He’s too young to understand.”

It clicks together in Stiles’ mind then; it’s not Stilinski’s control, or a memory; he’s hearing the present? Whatever is going on in the world outside his head? And that means that Collin is begging him to fight.

Stiles breathes in deeply, like some vice he hadn’t realized has been removed from his chest, the first satisfying breath since the moment they switched to the bedroom. He’s not sure if that’s what clears his head a little or if it’s coincidence. He’s not sure why he feels like he’s fading just a bit less now. He can’t even be sure what he heard was real and not just some desperate ploy of his pathetic mind to convince him to overpower the most functional personality.

Except Stilinski looks awfully shaken.

And for just one moment, Stiles can see that, for all his bravado, there’s at least a part of Stilinski that isn’t so certain he’s the best choice.

“Oh, for the love of God get that pathetic hopeful look off your face,” Stilinski chastises, regaining his composure. “Even if it’s real, the only thing that his voice proves is just how much you’ve fucked up your kids’ lives. Your son is out there watching you heal from the attempted assassination attempt on Derek. God only knows what’s going through his mind, or what this is going to do. It’s just another one of your unforgivable characteristics to make him ashamed to have a father like you!”

“He’s not--”

“Trying to kill Derek, hurting Addie, and the things you did to that hunter’s body--something is broken in you, Stiles; something that’s never going to get fixed,” he declares coldly. “I saw your eyes on the full moon. How many innocent people have you killed? Do you even know? And maybe you’ll add even more to the list if you don’t let me take control! You’re a monster, and I’m trying to save us and the people we love; help me to help us!”

“I’m not--not broken beyond fixing,” Stiles argues, but the words sound feeble in the light of Stilinski’s reminder of the darkness lurking in Stiles’ mind.

“Maybe not, but how many people are you going to break trying to fix yourself?” Stilinski demands. “How many innocents like the poor blonde girl Alec had you--”
“Shut up.”

“Or the harmless young girl you helped kidnap and turn and the twist into a heinous, merciless hunter who came to murder your pack?”

“I said shut up! Those were--it was--I’m not like that anymore!”

“No? Then explain what you did to Derek! How he nearly died at your hands because--”

“It wasn’t me! It was--”

“It was the symptoms of the hell that is running rampant in your head, Stiles! You can’t fucking function! You’re pathetic and weak and even worse you’re dangerous!”

“No,” he protests quietly, losing resolve as the tightness in his chest begins to come back and he starts to fade away again. “No, you’re wrong.”

“I’m not; I’m exactly right, and you know it,” Stilinski says simply. “Look at you. You’re nearly gone anyway, Stiles; and aren’t you tired of all this yet? Do the right thing for everyone. Just let go.”

He stares down at the ring on his finger, twisting it with his right hand as tears swim in his eyes again. He grips the ring, sliding it slowly off, and the scene around them disappears, leaving only whiteness around the two of them. He starts to extend the ring out to Stilinski in surrender, but Collin’s echoing voice makes him freeze.

“So you gotta fight now more than ever okay? Because losing one Dad was enough, I don't wanna lose you too. Not even for Stilinski. I want you to be the one who wakes up. Please, Stiles? Please don’t leave us!” his words repeat from earlier.

Stiles bites his lip, bringing the hand holding the ring back closer to his body.

“It’s just wishful thinking,” Stilinski claims. “Your desperate mind is coming up with things you wish they felt, but you need to accept that if you really love them, you’ll do what’s best for them,” Stilinski persists. “The people you love don’t deserve to be burdened with--”

Collin appears in the space between them, shocking Stilinski to silence. He looks up with earnest eyes and declares, “You’re not a burden, Stiles; You’re my dad. So don’t believe their shit, okay?” he tells Stiles before vanishing in the blink of an eye.

Stiles gapes into the empty silence once Collin is gone.

What’s happening? That was an actual memory, but where did it come from? How do I get more?

“Stiles, listen to me,” Stilinski commands. “You have to let it all go so that--”

“I can’t tell you what to do,” Dad says somberly, his appearance cutting across Stilinski’s words. “I can’t even begin to imagine all the struggles you face that I can’t understand. I can tell you that those two promised to love you for the rest of their lives and they meant that. And I hope that you know that I love you, and that your pack loves you and that we love you, and we have hope that you’ll keep fighting.”

“That was before they realized you were facing DID,” Stilinski protests. “That was when Dad didn’t think you were so broken that--”
“You have to believe that you aren’t some problem we’re trying to solve,” Derek’s voice asserts, and he’s suddenly standing to Stiles left, looking at him with the impossible kindness Stiles recalls after Beta hurt Cora. “You’re a part of this family no matter what state you’re in, and we love you.”

“He let Beta shred your little sister!” Stilinski cuts in angrily. “He--”

“You want to play this game?” Derek demands, but he’s still talking only to Stiles, a replay of the memory regardless of what Stilinski does? “You want to start listing the ways we’ve fucked up? I turned teenagers because I was too scared to be by myself even though I knew damn well I wasn’t prepared to lead a pack; I left a tortured amnesiac with my psychotic uncle because I—”

“It’s not the same thing,” Stilinski puts in, approaching the manifestation and reaching out to turn Derek, but his hands go through. “It’s--”

It seems this Derek has eyes only for Stiles as he repeats for him the words Stiles clung to in the aftermath of Beta’s transgressions, “You will never, ever do anything so awful that I will stop loving you, Stiles,” Derek reminds earnestly, “and you know that Isaac feels exactly the same way.”

“Derek said that before you tried to slice him to ribbons and enslave his pack,” Stilinski points out. “Now, they’ve seen what a monster you really are, there is no way they would want to deal with your weak control attempting to--”

“You’re the strongest, most stubborn son of a bitch I’ve ever known,” Isaac says, appearing to cut off the latest insults from Stilinski, “and you’re way too tenacious to let them beat you. And Derek and I—and your Dad and Scott and the whole fucking pack—love you way too much to ever stop supporting you while you try to figure things out; no matter what.”

Isaac’s form lingers a moment more before fading, and Stiles smiles despite his absence.

Doesn’t matter what’s bringing them here; all that matters is that they’re real memories. Not just hopeful hallucinations; these are just a couple of the hundreds of reminders they’ve given me over the years that they don’t expect perfection; they love me, scars and all. They help me keep going.

“Those are all memories,” he tells Stilinski as if he doesn’t know. “Definitely not just ‘wishful thinking’.”

Stilinski huffs, crossing his arms as he glares across the white expanse at Stiles.

“Fine then, keep bringing them in to argue for you,” Stilinski snarls, though Stiles isn’t summoning these memories—not consciously anyway.

Before he can think of any reply, Collin appears and all but tackles him with a hug that Stiles feels no matter how incorporeal this all may be. He clings back tightly, grounding himself in the embrace.

“Just always come back, okay? Come back and treat me like a kid?” Collin beseeches

“Always,” Stiles promises, repeating the oath he made to his son and can’t forget now. “Even when you’re fifty,” he adds with a grin.

“You’re just embarrassing yourself, Stiles,” Stilinski insists as Collin disappears. “No matter how many of them you bring, it doesn’t change the fact that--”

“If we do anything with him, it’s because he’s you on some level,” Derek says, on Stiles’ right side this time, “You’re the guy we married; we love you.”
Isaac materializes on his right to add, “Stiles, even if the three of us have to be careful, it
doesn’t mean that takes away from the intimacy; if anything we all know each other better because
we take our time and pay attention.”

“That was before they really understood everything I could give that you---”

This time Derek appears with his back to Stiles, advancing on Stilinski as he rages, “You will never understand how fucking strong Stiles is; you can’t. And I’m not running on some old infatuation with him, I am in love with him, you understand me? I don’t give a damn if we never had sex again, because I can live without that; I didn’t vow to spend the rest of my life with him so that we could enjoy fooling around. I married him for his soul, understand? And his soul, battered or not, is not the same, as you. You are not the man I love, and you will never be. You are a symptom, not a cure, so don’t you dare sit there and think for one second that anyone or anything can take his place in this family. You hear me? Now shut the fuck up, and let it go!”

Stiles can’t hold in his burst of laughter at the indignation on Stilinski’s face at being affronted by the memory; he half expects cartoonish steam to start pouring from Stilinski’s ears.

“What the fuck is so goddamn funny right now?” he roars, only making Stiles laugh more.

“You are a symptom,” he answers, “not a cure. He was exactly right. Isaac said the same thing a million different ways when I used to think that just letting the personalities take the trauma was the best answer for us. It doesn’t fix anything. You can’t fix anything.”

“The hell I can’t! I am--”

“All those things I did--they were the other personalities--or when memories were gone, but not me. I’ve faced them all; I’ve moved past them. I--”

“You didn’t move past them; you brought them with you! All that rage and fear and psychosis is in you, Stiles; don’t you understand?”

“Yeah, I do, actually; I think I finally see it,” Stiles replies, moment of clarity coming not a moment too soon.

How has it taken me so fucking long to finally see this? To accept it?

“About damn time,” Stilinski says with a relieved sigh and a grin, like he can’t believe he just pulled control back from the brink. “So gimme the ring,” he orders, moving in on Stiles, “and let’s be done with this pointless--”

“No,” Stiles interjects. “No, because, see you’re the one who doesn’t understand, Stilinski.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? I--”

“If you move on, then you take me with you, just like I’ve got all of them. All the aspects of us are going to combine into whoever wakes up.”

“But I can block them out! You can’t! I’ll--”

“No, but that’s not the answer!” Stiles insists. “I thought it was; I’ve been trying so fucking hard to forget all of it since the very first moment I let Derek start blocking memories. At first it seemed okay, but there’s just--there’s too much to try and lock away. If you go back, if you try to block it out and pretend the past six years never happened---it’s only a matter of time before our mind breaks again. As bad as it hurts and as much as I wish that you are actually the “reset” button I’ve
been praying for, the truth is that I went through hell, but I survived it, and I made a life for myself, and I’ve just got to accept that those months left horrible, horrible scars that I’ll carry the rest of my life, but those scars don’t change the soul underneath! It’s not about getting rid of the past; it’s about living life as best I can in spite of the past.”

“You want to face all of that? All that pain and torment and hopelessness? You can’t, Stiles! We can’t handle that. We’re not strong enough! It’ll drive us insane to stare that hell in the face and let it all back in!”

“Maybe,” he concedes, “but what if it gives us the power we need to really put it behind us?”

“It’s too risky; it’s--”

“I’d risk a lot more for a lot less,” Stiles replies, “and I gotta say the old Stilinski gut is feeling pretty good about this decision, and you know what Dad always says about that intuition.”

“Dammit, this is not something you try on a hunch! You could ruin our mind forever! Give! Me! That! Ring!”

“No.”

Dad and Scott appear in front of him at the assertion, and though Stilinski tries to put past them, they seem every bit as powerful as some mountain ash barrier, forcing him back each time he advances. Collin and Addie appear beside them, adding to the wall, then Lydia and Jackson, Allison and Melissa, even Logan and Melanie. He guesses the last two face even before he turns to see them completing the circle behind him.

Isaac and Derek are smiling at Stiles with nothing but adoration and love, tears threatening to fall from their eyes. Stiles realizes which memory they’ll quote to him just as Isaac opens his mouth to speak.

“Stiles Stilinski,” he says. “D’you hereby call dibs on the rest of our lives? No matter what awesomeness or hellish shit may come?”

Though his throat is tight with emotion and he can barely breath in anticipation of the many, many things that may go wrong with this decision, Stiles knows what to say.

More importantly, he means it when he answers, “Hell yeah!” and slides his ring deftly back into place on his finger.

And everything goes black.

*************************************************************************

The sound of Stiles’ agonized shrieks echo through the clinic and pierce through Isaac like a knife. Every animal in the place starts to bark and yowl and only add to the din as Isaac hurries as best he can toward the back and the sound of Derek’s demands that Deaton do something.

“What the fuck do you mean ‘nothing to treat’?!?” he roars as Isaac enters.

“Look at him, Derek; it’s not what happened before. The wounds aren’t opening; his body
is still healing. This is--different.”

“Different how? What the fuck do we do? We can’t just sit here while--”

“I’m afraid it may be all we can do; it’s not the first time Stiles has endured the psychosomatic pain; we just have to hope it’s a good sign and wait for it to run its course.”

*Or kill him or drive him insane,* Isaac adds mentally, remembering too well the old options Deaton gave the first time Stiles was subjected to this kind of long term torment.

*Come on, Stiles,* he urges. *You can do this. You’re so much stronger than you think. Don’t give up!*

***************************

Stiles screams for nearly a solid hour, screams until his voice goes hoarse and the screams are nearly silent, chokes as they try to give him water to relieve the dryness that must be torturing his throat; all his open wounds are nearly healed though, and Deaton swears they should take this as some kind of sign that Stiles may be nearing the end of his mental odyssey. Mostly Derek just *loathes* the helpless feeling that consumes him in the face of Stiles’ renewed pain. He *longs* to get the hell out of here and run until all he can hear is his own pulse and all the can think about is putting one foot in front of the other, but he’s too worried he won’t be here when Stiles finally wakes.

Collin is distraught, to say the least, and still allowing himself to be held, hands on his ears to block out some of the noise through he *refuses* to leave the room. Isaac’s face is tears streaked as he keeps vigil with Derek, intertwining their fingers and giving Derek a reminder that he’s not alone in his misery.

*Come on, Stiles; you’ve made it through the psychosomatic stuff before. Just hang in there with us a little longer. Please, Stiles, please.*

Stiles is awake and rising to his feet so quickly Derek doesn’t fully register what’s happening until Stiles is pounding frantically against the mountain ash barrier that’s preventing him from stepping out of the chest. Everyone is on their feet in an instant, the sheriff rushes forward to break the ash line, and Stiles tumbles out of the chest onto the floor, wincing.

“Stiles!” Collin shouts, trying to rush to him, but Derek holds him back, because something isn’t quite right. “Stiles!”

Stiles doesn’t react to the words as his father and Isaac help him to his feet. He doesn’t really react to anything, and Isaac shoots Derek a panicked glance.

“Stiles, can you hear me?” Isaac demands. “Say something. Please?”

“Perhaps it’s just overload,” Deaton says, hitting the lights. “He’s been through a lot. He may need a moment.”

“A moment, yeah, but--Deaton, he’s--” the sheriff stammers.

“Catatonic,” Collin finishes for him, sobbing the word. “That’s what it’s called, right? The personality that’s zoned out?” he demands.
“Yes, but--”

“That is the one that won? That’s the one that woke up!”

“It could be—could be any number of things,” Deaton assures in attempt to soothe. “It’s too early to be certain that—”

“Let go of me, Derek!” Collin orders. “Let go! Stiles! Come on, Stiles! You gotta hear me! You gotta! You swore you’d always come back and always treat me like a kid! You promised me, Stiles! Please say something! You can’t be gone, Stiles! Please!”

Derek keeps his hold on Collin’s arm even as tears flow freely at his son’s outburst of grief. Guilt burns in his chest at the realization that this may well be the Stiles they’re now stuck with; maybe they finally pushed him too far, beyond the limits of his mind, and driven him over the edge.

Oh, God, Stiles, I’m so sorry. So fucking sorry. We didn’t know what else to do for you.

What were we thinking?

Oh, God.

He can’t say he’s all that surprised with Collin’s grief contorts into fury as he rounds on Derek, pummeling every place he can reach with punches.

“You said it would help him!” he rages. “You said he could fight it! You said it’d give him a chance to face them and win!” he screams, hitting hard enough to leave bruises now as Derek forces calm and absorbs the abuse, understanding completely the emotional agony his son is trying desperately to vent. “You said—you said—he—that he—you were supposed to save him! He trusted you and Isaac to save him!” Collin spits, swiping with claws this time and drawing blood from Derek’s arm.

He freezes as soon as the scent of blood hits the air, looking from the bloody marks to Derek face and back again in horror before collapsing in his father’s arms, thoroughly inconsolable.

And Stiles doesn’t so much as bat an eye.

Oh, God, is he really gone?

Chapter End Notes

One more to go folks; I'll get it to you fast as I can :) 

Thank you for reading and your patience :D
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Allow me to gush for a minute or two? Or skip this if you would rather avoid the explosion of author emotions.

I want to take a second to dedicate this chapter to every last one of the readers, whether you’ve been here since the prologue or you marathon read it yesterday; to those of you whose comments kept me writing when I wondered if it was worth it, to those who’ve sent messages or emails to make me feel my writing means something, and to those of you who simply hit the kudos button. An extra thank you to the beta readers, past and current, who helped me through, your input and encouragement have been invaluable; Nicole, thank you for cheerleading me through for what seems like the past couple eons :P Strangergedantern, you’ve not only made this particular series better, but you’ve helped me grow as an author; you two are the absolute best wingwomen ever.

I can’t thank all of you enough, but this chapter is my toast to ALL of you.

Y’all ROCK! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Rise and shine, kiddo,” Derek bids, rapping his knuckles on Addie’s door as he enters.

“Un-uh, five more minutes,” she protests.

“Aunt Cora brought breakfast from Caroline’s,” Derek tells her. “Don’t you wanna eat it while it’s still hot?”

Addie peeks over at him, opening just one eye. “Maybe,” she concedes.

“Come on, Addie; come eat. I need to talk to you about a couple things, too, okay?”

With that she sits bolt upright, eyes wide in fear. “Is Stiles dead?”

It will forever break his heart how easily his daughter assumes the worst, having faced far too much mortality in her short life.

“No, baby, no,” Derek swears, sitting on the edge of the bed and holding her close when she scrambles in his lap. “Stiles isn’t dead; he--”

“Then why do you look like that, Derek?” she demands, forehead wrinkling as she studies him. “Your mouth is all happy but your eyes look sad. I thought Stiles was awake now? Dr. Deaton was gonna make him all better like he did for you.”

She still only knows the barest details of the horrible past few days; she knows that Stiles was confused and attacked Derek; after what she witnessed when Wretch struck her and Derek attacked, it wasn’t hard for her to understand why he would need Deaton to help him heal. They’d kept the idea of the ritual simple for her, saying they were trying something that might help Stiles’ head heal and not just his body. She’d taken in all in stride, accepting it with the resilience they’ve come to
expect from her--though he hates to rely on it.

“That’s right,” Derek assures, confirming the update she was given when he came home last
night. “He’s awake just like we talked about, but he’s not quite better yet.”

And we don’t know if he’ll ever get better.

“Dr. Deaton couldn’t help?”

“He did everything he could, but--but Stiles’ mind is still having a hard time. He’s not really
acting like himself right now.”

“So it’s a bad day?”

“Yeah, it’s like when he has a bad day, but it might last for a while. He’s not going to talk or
do much, but we’ve just got to be patient, okay?”

“He’s gonna get all better sometime though, right?”

“We hope so.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“We’re not going to give up on it; we’ll just keep loving him and hoping for the best, kiddo. That’s
all we can really do for him right now. He’s going to come home today, so that maybe being around
everybody in a familiar place will help him.”

“Can I talk to him?”

“Yeah, you can; just understand that he might not answer you back. Try not to be upset with him.”

“Okay.”

“How about we go eat that breakfast, huh? Aunt Cora got you extra sprinkles.”

“Yeah, okay,” she agrees, clearly still trying to work through everything that’s been said.

“You can ask us questions anytime,” Derek reminds. “It’s okay if it’s a little scary or confusing.”

“I’m not scared of Stiles,” she replies, clearly offended by what she thinks Derek’s suggesting. “I
love Stiles, and Stiles loves me! He just gets confused sometimes, but that’s okay.”

“That’s exactly right, sweetheart; I know you’re not scared of him. I just meant that it might make
you worried to see him sick like this.”

“I can make him lots more get well pictures. Enough to go on the whole wall of his upstairs room.”

“That would be really sweet of you, but let’s eat some breakfast first, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, and then you and Aunt Cora can help me color ‘em!”

“That sounds like a great plan.”
Derek should be home now, bracing Addie for Stiles’ arrival home. There’s no need to stay at Deaton’s since Stiles is as physically healed as he can be at this point. Morrell and Isaac both agree that more familiar surroundings will be good for him. Best-case scenario is that Stiles may just need some time to adjust; worst case scenario: this is the first day of what his life has been diminished to.

Scott drives the miserable group to Jackson’s: Collin in the back every bit as silent as his father, head down, still simmering in his anger and grief. He hasn’t spoken a single word since his outburst against Derek. He won’t look any of them in the eye. It’s absolutely killing Isaac that for all his studies into the field of psychology, he can’t do a damn thing to remedy this clusterfuck of a situation. All he can do is force a smile, be supportive, and hope to God that they hit the upswing of this disaster sometime soon.

Because right now, tomorrow is going to suck just as fucking much as today.

“Look, Stiles, we’re home,” Isaac announces to the painfully silent car, the forced cheer in his voice isn’t fooling anyone, but he’s got to try.

Stiles gives no more response than he has in the past twenty-four hours. It’s a possibility that Isaac never really considered. He’d braced himself for Stilinski to wake up, to restart the healing process with a personality determined to block all the trauma away. He’d even tried to figure out what in the world they would do if he woke in the same violent rage and tried to attack Derek. Stiles has been through so much at this point, he shouldn’t be surprised that his mind may have hit the breaking point.

He just always seems to push through, one foot in front of the other all these years. I never stopped to wonder if we’d be throwing too much at him with this ritual. I don’t know that we would have done it differently; I don’t know that we really had any other choice.

But I don’t think I’m ever going to forgive myself for not even considering that we could overload his mind.

Isaac leads the miserable procession as they make their way up to the house. Scott follows with a hand on Stiles’ shoulder to guide him in.

“Welcome home!” Addie calls as she greets them in the foyer. “Me and Aunt Cora and Derek made chocolate pudding cups,” she informs, the evidence of which is smeared all over her face. “There’s enough for everybody.”

She’s been informed that Stiles is sick, and she’s studying him with squinted eyes; Isaac can only guess what’s running through her young mind as she works through her own assessment of his state. Collin walks right past his sister and on into the house, she frowns and runs after him.

“Collin? What’s wrong? What’s a matter? Collin, wait!”

He turns when she catches up and tugs on his arm, glaring at her before he jerks his hand free again.

“You’re not sick like Stiles are you?” she despairs, “You’re not--”

Collin’s anger instantly melts away as he pulls her into a hug.

“No, Addie, I’m okay,” he promises quietly. “I can talk and stuff--I just don’t really feel like it right now, okay?”
“You want pudding?”

“No.”

“You want Max?”

“I’m okay, Addie,” he repeats, pulling back out of the hug. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You wanna go run? I’m not real fast, but--”

“Maybe,” Collin answers, glancing from Derek to Isaacs. “Could we?”

“I’m sure you could use some fresh air,” Derek says. “Stay close, and go slow enough for her to keep up.”

“You’re it!” Addie cries, smacking her brother’s shoulder and taking off toward the back door; she still can’t understand why in the world anyone would want to just run, so her runs generally consist of playing tag or red-light-green-light. “Can’t catch me!” she challenges.

“Can too!” he answers, rolling his eyes before running after her.

There’s a beat or two of awkward silence in their absence, and Isaac sighs, “Well, that was drastic improvement already.”

“Classic Hale-style coping,” Cora agrees. “He’ll be fine. Plus, she’s all sugared up and good to keep him running til he drops.”

“Might be sooner than we’d like,” Isaac comments. “Barely eating, hardly sleeps.”

“He’ll be fine,” Cora repeats. “It’s been a rough few days for everybody. He’s got to process.”

“We all do,” Derek adds with a sigh.

“Hey, the construction on the house starts soon, right?” Scott chimes in. “That’s a good distraction; it’ll get everybody’s mind off things, and well--we’ll figure it out; we always do. Don’t we, Stiles?” he adds at the end, clapping his hand on his friends shoulder a few times. “Everybody just needs some time.”

*Where the fuck do you get all this optimism, McCall?* Isaac wonders bitterly.

“I should probably get home if you guys don’t need me,” he says, “but if the kids want to come over to play and get a break, or if you want me to come pick Stiles up for a couple hours, or if there’s anything else, gimme a call, ‘kay?”

“Yeah, Scott, thanks,” Derek answers.

“See you Sunday for pack breakfast, right? If I don’t see you before?”

Derek replies with a hesitant, “Maybe we should take a week to--”

“Sunday for pack breakfast,” Cora interjects firmly. “Even if I have to cheat and get take-out. We could use a little family fun.”

“What? Cora Hale wants bonding time?” Scott teases. “I think hell’s freezing over…”

“Swear jar.”
“Like you’ve got any room to talk.”

She rolls her eyes in exaggerated annoyance and crosses her arms. “Would you go home already, McCall?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going; keep these three in line, okay? Wipe that mopey look off Derek’s face and tell Isaac jokes before that frown sticks permanently.”

“We’re fine, Scott,” Derek mutters.

“No, you’re not,” he replies, “but it’s cool, ‘cause you’re gonna be. So chin up and all that jazz. Call if you need anything, dudes—and dudette,” he adds to Cora.

He leaves, taking any hope at an upbeat vibe for the room with him. Cora’s still got a small smile on her face, but Isaac can see she’s worrying again already. She shoves at Derek’s shoulder though, renewing her attempt at lightheartedness as they hear Scott’s corolla retreat down the drive.

“Come on, Sourwolf. Let’s show Stiles his get well wall.”

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Motion and voices and colors and smells and he understand things are happening but he can’t focus on anything and doesn’t think he wants to because there’s already too much in his head.

Too much, too much, too much.

And so much fear and pain and hatred and confusion and desolation.

It’s going to smother him; there’s too much.

Too much.

How is anything happening outside of this? How does anything exist except these horrible things locked away in memory? How can he focus on anything other than the heinous scenes floating through his head, swirling around until he chokes on them, like the dull ashes of some horrible fire that burned out his entire existence?

He has to see, needs to see, has to run through it all to get to the other side, the place where good things are waiting, but he can’t see the good things, just more and more nightmares, and he whimpers because he’s scared that maybe he’s not ever going to find his way out of the wasteland.

He’s tired, so tired, and there’s just too much. So he closes his eyes, and curls up tight and tucks his face in his arms to keep the ashes out so maybe he can breathe and stop for a while and sleep.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------

There’s absolutely no warning at all before Stiles sinks slowly to the living room floor, curling in on himself with a small whine before he closes his eyes and lies completely still. Only the
quiet sound of his breathing and steady pulse keep Derek from losing it. He kneels with Cora to lay hands on Stiles, asking if he’s okay, trying to coax out a response, and eventually deciding that maybe he’s just exhausted; he hasn’t slept since he first woke, so maybe this will be good for him.

Derek picks him up and takes him up to lie on the bed in the guest room; once there, he curls into an even tighter ball, burrowing under the blankets as Isaac tucks Stiles in, rubbing his back in soothing circles.

The sadness in Isaac’s eyes when he looks up at Derek chills him to the bone. He knows that look all too well, but he can never seem to figure out how to help Isaac before he breaks. The panic the look ignites in Derek nearly has him darting out to call Morrell right this moment. Instead he laces his fingers through Isaac’s and squeezes.

“We’ll make it work, Isaac; whatever it takes, however unfair it is, we’re going to make it work.”

Isaac responds by turning his attention away from Stiles and relaxing like strings holding him up have been cut. He leans into Derek where he stands by the bed, forehead resting just above Derek’s navel, but Derek takes a seat on the bed, guiding Isaac’s head to his shoulder instead, wrapping one arm tightly around his shoulder and continuing to cling to his hand with the other. Cora purses her lips like she’d like to hug them both, but she retreats from the room instead murmuring, “I’ll keep an eye out for the kids. Take your time if you need it.”

“Thanks, Cora.”

Isaac doesn’t have words for just how much it means to have Derek next to him, sitting quietly, just existing at Isaac’s side for a moment or two. Isaac lets his tears fall freely, feeling the damp patch he’s making on the rough fabric of Derek’s shirt; Derek’s tightens his grip on Isaac’s shoulders, like he’ll never let go if that’s what Isaac wants. It grounds him, reminds Isaac that he’s not alone in his anger or guilt or fear; it reminds him he’s not alone in his determination either.

Derek’s right; they’re going to do what they always do: make it work no matter how unfair it all is.

“Thank you,” Isaac murmurs after a while.

“For what?” Derek wonders.

“Understanding,” Isaac replies, “and just--this,” he adds, gesturing vaguely to the two of them with his free hand.

“Nowhere else I’d rather be.”

“Are you okay?” Isaac wonders. “‘Cause I feel like I’m falling apart at the seams, Derek; I just--how many times are we going to have to pick up the pieces? I’m tired.”

“I know; me too,” Derek says. “Maybe this is the last time.”

“We hope that every time.”

“Maybe this time we’re right.”
“God, I hope so.”

“What’re all the supplies for?” Derek wonders when Addie comes upstairs from the basement with her arms stacks with dress up clothes and a tiara on her head.

“I got an idea,” she replies without breaking her determined stride. “To make Stiles feel better.”

“Baby, Stiles can’t--I’m not sure if--”

“I said I got an idea,” she repeats. “It’ll be perfect; it’s okay if he doesn’ feel like talkin’, she goes on, starting up the stairs to the room Stiles hasn’t left in the past four hours.

Derek rises to follow her. She walks in the open door of Stiles’ room like she owns the place, depositing her load with a plop on the floor. Stiles is still curled in a ball on the bed; Isaac’s been sitting with him, reading a book in the armchair by the window. They watch silently as Addie takes a plastic crown and a big crimson velvet cape and heads toward the bed.

“Is it gonna scare him if I touch him?” she wonders, hesitating.

“Be very gentle,” Isaac instructs. “Slow movements are probably better.”

“Okie doke.”

She places the crown on the pillow so it props against Stiles’ head. Then she stands on her tiptoes so she can reach over him, draping the cape over like another blanket. She turns back to Derek and Isaac smiling proudly.

“See?”

“I--uh--”

“He’s Sleeping Handsome,” Addie informs, saying the words slowly like it’s the only way to be sure they understand. “Ya know, like Sleeping Beauty, but for a prince.”

Derek breathes deep and slow as he tries to rein in the tears burning in his eyes at her innocent hopefulness.

“This way it don’t matter if he doesn’ wanna talk.”

“Addie, that’s--that’s perfect,” Isaac praises. “That’s so sweet of you to--”

“So now you an’ Derek can dress up and kiss him an--”

“Baby, that’s not going to make him wake up.”

“I know; it’s make believe,” she says with a small frown. “But we can try, right? And in case Stiles can hear he won’t feel left out. He’ll know we want him back.” She grabs another crown out of the pile and extends it toward Derek. “Please?”
He walks forward to pick her up so she can place the crown on his head. They distribute the supplies so Derek and Isaac can be Stiles’ heroes. Addie plays the beautiful fairy that helps them on their “quest” around the upstairs to get to Stiles’ place in the “tower”. It’s the most bittersweet memory Derek thinks he’s maybe ever made; judging by the barely masked melancholy on Isaac’s face, he’s feeling much the same as Derek. He can’t stop his heart breaking as Addie watches expectantly when both Derek and Isaac kiss Stiles gently but he still doesn’t respond; she sighs in clear disappointment.

“Well,” she says, “maybe next time?”

“Maybe so,” Derek agrees, running fingers through her hair. “You wanna go on a quest to the backyard, beautiful fairy? I bet we could find a unicorn if we look hard enough.”

The unicorn is of course the tire swing they set up last week, but Addie’s thrilled at the prospect.

“Bye, Sleeping Handsome! We’ll rescue you soon!” she promises, leaving a kiss her own before she hurries out to the hall and down the stairs crying, “C’mon, Prince Derek! The unicorn might be getting away!”

There’s a weight on him now, a shield and a helmet, dispersing the darkness and ash, lending protection. Sounds of joy break through the screams echoing everywhere. He thinks he might smile but he supposes he must have forgotten how because his muscles don’t move like he wants them too. She smiles at him anyway, the beautiful fairy, and for a moment he can’t see any of the nightmares anymore.

Isaac dozes on and off as the evening wears on, lulled into a general sense of security by the sounds of Derek, Cora, Addie, and later even John down in the backyard and downstairs; Derek’s offered to relieve him more than once, but Isaac just can’t quite muster the energy it’ll take to put on a happy face. The game of “Sleeping Handsome” earlier sapped out just about all his fake-it-til-you-make it willpower for the day. He’s mentally exhausted, but entirely unable to shut his brain down enough to reach any deep sleep.

Isaac wakes from the latest to the sound of sniffling, and opens his eyes to find Collin on the floor by the bed, sitting with his back to the frame and mattress, just under the place where Stiles’ face stares blankly out at the room. Collin has his knees drawn up with arms folded on top and face buried down in his arms: the perfect personification of the way Isaac feels right now. Isaac rises to join him, cursing his still-stiff legs as he plops the last foot or so to the floor.

“Sorry I woke you up,” Collin murmurs without lifting his head. “I was tryin’ to be quiet, but--but--” his words break off into a muffled sob.

Isaac wraps an arms around Collin’s shoulders to pull him in close soothing, “It’s okay, Collin; I don’t mind one bit. You could’ve woken me up to start with.” He doesn’t reply, just leans into
Isaac’s side, bringing his head up to rest on Isaac’s shoulder. “It’s gonna be okay, kiddo,” Isaac swears. “I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, but we’ll get through it.”

“I just--I was so sure that he could do it,” Collin wails. “I just knew he’d win it and wake up as Stiles and maybe things would be okay again--like they were kind of before those hunters attacked, maybe even better since--since maybe he could beat all those other personalities, ya know? I didn’t think--I thought maybe Stilinski might--but not this.”

“I know, Collin; I know. I don’t think any of us were ready for this,” Isaac admits. “Just--just try not to give up on him yet? We know better than anybody how quick things can change; we’re overdue for a good kind of change.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t give up on him ever,” Addie says angrily from the doorway; Isaac hadn’t heard her ascending the stairs, but he takes in the flowers clutched in her hand and assumes she’s here to deliver them to Stiles.

“Addie, I’m not giving up completely--I just--I’m scared ‘cause what if--maybe he’s not gonna get better,” Collin answers.

“We’re all a little scared,” Isaac assures. “It’s okay to be worried. Good thing we’ve got Addie to keep our hopes up.”

“Yeah, she’s good at that,” Collin says. “You bringing those to him, Addie?”

“I picked ‘em myself,” she reveals with a nod.

“They’re pretty,” Collin says, forcing a smile for his sister’s sake as he wipes at his tears. “I bet he’ll like ‘em.”

-----------------------------------------------

Through the suffocating stench of sweat and blood and ash there’s just a whiff of something sweeter, something that shines through the horrible haze and brings in the light. He draws a breath of fresh air for what seems the first time in eons, like a vice is releasing around him and his lungs feel sated instead of seared. He wants to hold onto the smell, find the source and keep it close, protect it from all the awful things trying to swoop in and smother it.

-----------------------------------------------

Derek dashes for the stairs at the first sound of the chaos coming from Stiles’ bedroom. He’s halfway up and on the verge of a heart attack before it registers that the raised voices are celebrating.

“What is it? What happened?” he demands as he walks in to find Collin, Isaac, and Addie all on their feet and practically dancing in happiness.

“He likes my flowers!” Addie shrieks joyously, launching herself into Derek’s arms. “I tried to grab ‘em, Derek! He looked, and he wanted to grab ‘em!”
“Yeah, she put them in the little cup she brought,” Collin chimes in to help explain, “and right after she sat them down he turns his head a little bit to see and then reached his arm out. Look!”

“Here you go, Stiles,” Isaac says as he places a few flowers under Stiles’ extended hand, “they’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

Derek’s mouth stretches into a painfully wide grin when Stiles’ fingers tighten slowly to grip the stems under his fingers.

*That’s it, Stiles; you can do it; come on back to us. You can do it.*

The realization that Stiles has at least some ability to react to the world around him changes the mood instantly. At first they think of moving him downstairs, but the moment Derek starts to lift him up, Stiles resumes his tightly curled fetal position and loosens his grip on the flowers he’s been holding. They opt instead to let him stay in the bed but bring up dinner to eat an “indoor picnic” as Addie dubs it. John places a few food items in Stiles’ hand, wrapping his son’s fingers around crackers and a bit of sandwich and even tries a celery stick, but Stiles’ grip never tightens. He gives up eventually, offering a few of the daisies from Addie’s gift bouquet again, which he *does* hold tightly to.

“Well, it’s definitely something,” John says. “Take your time, kiddo,” he adds, petting his son’s still head. “Come back when you can, okay?”

It seems that this hint of recovery is the nudge they all needed to drive them back toward something like “normal”. Derek’s thrilled to see a few smiles on Collin’s face over the course of the meal; he’s even more thankful to hear Isaac teasing with Cora and see a slight glimmer of optimism return to his eyes. Stiles isn’t the only one recovering, not by a long shot, and he’s hoping they continue to see signs of progress across the board, not only with Stiles.

Addie has Collin read a bedtime story to both her and Stiles; *The Little Engine That Could* and Derek’s fairly certain his daughter didn’t get that one off the shelf by chance. Isaac and John go downstairs once the story is done to tuck the kids into bed. Derek moves toward the chair by the window, but Cora stops him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Let me stay with him a while,” she says. “You and Isaac need some rest, real rest. I swear I’ll get you if there’s even the slightest change, good or bad. Okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. You look like shit, bro; go get some sleep and annoy everyone with your lumberjack snores.”

“I do not snore,” he replies, rolling his eyes. “Not that loud,” he amends, and she huffs a laugh as she pushes him gently toward the door.

“Bedtime,” she insists. “Right now Derek Lee Hale, or no dessert for a week,” she adds, using Mom’s best threat.

“Night, Cora.”

“See you in the morning.”

He trods down to bed and waits for Isaac to join him. Stiles’ space in the middle feels as wide and empty as ever, but Isaac’s hand reaches across the expanse, clasping Derek’s tightly.
“And tomorrow’s gonna be better,” he says quietly. “Love you, Derek.’

“Love you, too.”

Something smells wonderful, like heaven, like home, and he breathes in deeply. His mouth waters at the smell, and he wants to find the source.

The ashes are settling now; the darkness is fading; and the screams that have been echoing through his mind are turning to laughter. There’s something waiting for him on the horizon, something wonderful. He just can’t quite make out what it is, but he starts to move toward it anyway, willing leaden limbs to help him seek out whatever awaits.

Isaac doesn’t trust his senses at first when he hears the sound of Stiles feet hitting the floor with a thud. He looks up from his book, amazed to see Stiles sitting, eyes clouded but not blank. He seems almost confused as he rises slowly.

“Stiles? Can you hear me? Is anything wrong?” Isaac wonders, rising to walk to him.

Stiles turns toward the open door and starts walking as if Isaac never spoke. He’s a bit slow, and his feet shuffle as he walks, almost as if he’s sleepwalking. Isaac’s right behind him, worried for his ability to navigate the stairs, but Stiles’ body seems to remember the house well enough. He moves with relative ease toward the kitchen where Derek is making breakfast with the kids, the radio provides a cheery “Good Day Sunshine” soundtrack for the moment, and Isaac chooses to take it as a good omen.

Only Derek’s werewolf instincts keep the bowl of batter from crashing to the kitchen floor when it slips from his fingers at the sight of Stiles walking into the kitchen.

“Stiles?” he breathes in disbelief, as the kids greet him much more exuberantly.

Stiles doesn’t react to any specific word or movement, but he smiles, wide and genuine and Stiles. The smile that Derek could stare at forever, that dazzles and lights up Stiles’ face. He moves to his usual chair, like at least part of him feels at home, and Collin quickly slides his barely-touched plate of pancakes over in front of Stiles.

“You hungry, Stiles? You haven’t eaten in a long time. You should have some pancakes; or you want something else? We’ll get you whatever you wanna eat,” he offers.
"No," Stiles murmurs in response, frowning in what seems to be concentration.

*Hard to get the word out? Hard to think? God only know what’s going on in his mind....*

"Pancakes," he adds, smiling again as he reaches to lift one from the plate, foregoing the fork in favor of folding it in half and all but shoving it into his mouth. The “mmmm” of satisfaction that escapes him as he chews his first bite only adds to the hilarity of the scene.

"That’s awesome, Stiles,” Isaac says. “Eat up, okay? You can have as much as you want.”

Stiles feels like it’s been a lifetime since he reclaimed his rightful place as ruler of his own mind. The world has transitioned from a swirling kaleidoscope of pain and nightmares into a hazy, warm, safe space that buffered him from whatever surrounded, and now it seems that he’s finally coming to a place of focus and clarity.

Stilinski had been right to worry that embracing all the shattered remnants of the past six years might drive Stiles insane; honestly, six years ago, it probably would have

He recalls Isaac telling him that working through his issues instead of letting them run rampant was taking the “scenic route” instead of the “shortcut.” Stiles has filed away some truly gruesome, horrific memories in the course of coming back to the surface, but, in the end, those months of hell are well on their way to being buried by years of happy memories and decades of joy yet to come with his family.

“Okay, Stiles,” Isaac says, voice cutting across Stiles’ thoughts and revealing Stiles’ overdue lucidity. “I’m just going to help you wash the syrup off your hands; nothing to worry about; I promise,” Isaac goes on evenly, guiding Stiles’ hands gently under the lukewarm water.

Stiles turns his head to survey the room. Derek’s sitting over at the table, sipping coffee and watching out the bay window where Stiles can hear the kids playing now that he’s paying attention.

“Stiles?” Isaac says.

He just wants to know why Stiles has turned his head; he’s checking on the sleepwalker Stiles has been the last little while, not truly expecting that Stiles has finally made it out of his mental prison on so many levels.

The sound of the kids stomping up the back stairs and back in the house distracts for a moment, and Stiles decides not to reveal himself just yet.

When Addie wonders, “Hey, can we all go on a quest in the back yard? Collin says he’ll play too if he can be a knight. We can rescue Stiles again so he won’t feel left out. He can be in a trance from an evil spell since he’s not Sleeping Handsome anymore.”

“Sure,” Derek agrees, “It’ll be good for Stiles to get some fresh air I bet; if he seems okay with going outside.”

There’s no decision to be made now; Stiles is going to wait for the opportune moment to let them in on the secret of his triumph. After all, it’s not such a stretch to argue that the insanity of the past six
years isn’t the living manifestation of a Grimm Brothers’ tale; it’s past time to rewrite this story with a Disney-worthy fairytale ending.

So Stiles keeps his expression blank, which is no small feat with Derek helping don him with his princely cape, tickling at his neck as he ties it and Isaac lifting Addie up so she can bestow him his crown. They take his arm to gently lead him outside to await his rescue on the garden bench. Prince Derek and Prince Isaac battle invisible trolls with the brave Knight Collin at the lead; the beautiful Fairy Queen Addie lends them her magical unicorn to ride across the river—which involves Prince Derek’s not-so-royal face-planting dismount and only their hysterical laughing save Stiles’ grin from giving him away too soon. It seems like this “quest” might take all afternoon, and Stiles is beginning to wonder if he really has the patience.

“Addie, c’mon,” Collin says after a while; “We gotta be near the end, right? It’s really hot out here in these costumes.”

“And Prince Derek votes that we have some ice cream at the end of the journey to celebrate,” he adds in, further bribing Addie into willing abbreviation of the imaginary adventure.

“Just one more test of bravery before you can find Prince Stiles,” she agrees, “Uh-oh look! He’s stuck in the middle of a big scary jungle! I’ll be your guide an’ that way no one gets lost!”

“Thank you, fairy,” Derek says earnestly.

“Beautiful fairy Queen,” she reminds.

“Yes, of course!” Derek agrees, and Stiles concentrates everything on holding in his amusement.

“Be on the lookout for tigers an’ lions, Knight Collin!” she says as she starts them down the path of stepping-stones before veering off to wind their trail around the hedges.

“And bears?” Isaac wonders. “Oh my!”

Stiles bites the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing and maintain his neutral expression. It’s almost time; if he can just keep it together for a few more minutes.

When they finally arrive at Prince Stiles’ “Prison,” Addie laments dramatically with a hand raised in distress to her forehead, “Oh no!” He’s in an evil trance! Only a double power true loves kisses will break it!

“Double power, Queen Addie?” Isaac asks.

“Uh-huh! Both his Princes can kiss at the same time and it’ll be double magic!” she declares, and Stiles sees Collin roll his eyes through the opening in his plastic silver knight’s helmet. He seems to be tiring of carrying his giant yellow foam sword and big green shield emblazoned with some crest that includes a wolf. from where he’s standing behind his sister.

For Stiles’ plan, Addie’s declaration couldn’t be more perfect. Derek and Isaac move to sit on either side of him, and Addie counts, “One, two, three!” for them. Their lips brush Stiles’ cheeks for just a moment, and the minute they leave his space, Stiles shakes his head as though clearing it, rubbing at his eyes as he yawns exaggeratedly. All four of them stare open-mouthed, and he grins, thrilled at the reaction to his performance.

“It worked!” Addie squeals delightedly, first to break the stunned silence. “He’s awake! Prince Stiles is awake an’ all better!”
“Are you--it’s--he’s--” Isaac stammers, looking to Derek. “It’s really you, Stiles? Not--

And then it clicks; they can’t be sure yet which personality won the battle; this could easily be a Stilinski plan as much as one thought up by Stiles. For one awful moment, Stiles wonders if that’s who they were hoping would win, but the hopeful look on Isaac face when he asks again, “Stiles?” banishes his worry.

“It’s me; I swear,” Stiles says with a smile. “No way was Prince Stiles letting Stilinski or any of those other imposters steal my fairytale ending, dude; this is my life and it’s about time I step up and take it all back, right? Six years in the making, but I’m finally home to stay.”

Finally, finally home.

“I knew you could do it, Stiles!” Collin cries joyously, Stiles hugs both kids tightly as the rush at him and clamber into their fathers’ laps on the bench. “You came back.”

“You helped,” Stiles answers. “I heard you, when I was trying to get past Stilinski, and I loved Addie’s flowers,” he adds, “and Derek and Isaac too; you’re what helped me get back. All the good memories with you guys to get past the bad, plus all the awesome memories we’re going to get to make together.”

“Cause we’re gonna live happily ever after!” Addie announces.

“Yeah, kiddo, we are,” Stiles agrees.

We’re going to get our happily ever after...

Chapter End Notes

This work started over 15 months and some 470,000 words ago at a time in my life where I truly had little to ground me but this fic. I can’t even express how much it meant that this series was received with such a positive reaction.

It’s been one hell of a ride, kiddos; thanks so much for reading! I really hope you enjoyed it!

An abbreviated soundtrack for the first four parts of the series can be found here if you’re interested.

Also, a note regarding Delivered: the "upgraded" first chapter is posted and I’ve marked the series as complete, BUT I reserve the right to add chapters to Delivered as time allows; there will however, be no more cliffhangers (and the people rejoice!) as each chapter will be a self-contained snippet of their happily ever after.

Much Love,
VS
End Notes

shoutout to my wonderful, invaluable betas! <3 I love y'all!

As always, I love to hear from y'all! Feel free to hit me up with questions, comments, or just to chat if you want :P If you're in the neighborhood, I'm packdontendwithblood on tumblr (or vague-shadows for writing post only) or arebutvagueshadows@gmail.com

Works inspired by this one: [Desolate (fan poetry)](http://example.com) by Naminia

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!