

Rings Around

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Rings Around

by [Unloyal_Olio](#)

Summary

The letter read simply:

With the blessing of my father, I, Stiles of Beacon, offer myself in marriage to King Peter of Hale. The Calavera-Argent alliance forces both our hands. Respond promptly.

Notes

Um, so I'm hoping the tags scare away all the lightweights and that only those of you who are willing to hand me the already charred chunks of your aortas hang about. This is kind of *Games of Thrones*-like, what with the porny psychological craziness at max volume. If I'm missing triggers, tell me please.

Just a heads up. Both pairings in this story are important, but the Stiles/Peter dominates.

Chapter 1

The letter read simply: *With the blessing of my father, I, Stiles of Beacon, offer myself in marriage to King Peter of Hale. The Calavera-Argent alliance forces both our hands. Respond promptly.*

The offer was more than fair. The prince was an omega, and if the portrait Peter's spies had provided was anything to go by, he was an exceptionally comely one even by the standards of the fairest sex. His kingdom covered the resource-rich Roan Valley that stood between the Salern Ridge and the Calavera border.

Peter should agree, he realized—and yet his hand was shaking as he set the parchment down. His wedding ring, dull as it was, rattled on the wood. It had only been five years.

He thought of calling Derek, and Peter fleetingly considered: I could order him into it. But Derek's last marriage, negotiated as it was down to the letter, had been their collective ruin. That broken bit of history was the reason Peter sat on a scorched throne that was never supposed to be his. It was the reason he sleeplessly stalked the gardens beneath the moonlight. It was the reason the left side of his bed had cold, clean sheets.

If he had his own petty way, he would scrawl, "No," and send it back via his slowest courier. Alas, Peter had made a promise. Even as he'd wiped off the scarlet dribble off her lips, she'd managed to gasp out, "Don't give up. Find happiness. Say you will." He'd said yes, and it was the only promise he'd ever hated her for.

At the same time, what was horrible was the distant *want* that rose in his chest. The thoughts choked him: a chance for children. Children he could openly love. He had—they had—wanted so very much. It made his throat thicken and he bent his head toward the window where the lawns were flat and bright with the coltish bounce of spring. A flock of toddlers raced about battling with sticks and brooms as swords and spears. Peter had held her in this very spot. He'd looked out and pointed: ours will be out there someday. But no good news had befallen them, and his fearless, warring, alpha wife had been brought low by the empty promise of the passing months.

Peter could not love an omega. It would be too bitter, but maybe, he could love a child. Maybe. Besides, he was king; he had sworn to serve and protect and serve his people's interest, and now he was faced with the simplest duty: the kingdom needed an heir. The way that Derek went through widows, whores, and servant girls, there would be no legitimate children. Peter would have to do it. That is, if he could.

Walking to his chair, Peter sat down and began unlacing the front of his trousers. He pushed the fabric away and with a firm breath, took himself in his grip. Then he waited. He imagined the petal softness, the mating musk, the thrill of the large over the small... and yet even as Peter's hand pumped up and down, the muscle did not swell.

Then he thought of her. He remembered that thundering September morning when he watched her dance the sword, sailing through the enemy's finest with the fast grace of a cat

on a fence. At the battle's height, she'd reached the tent of the Argent general. Three alphas came at her—even the Argent's unconquerable Grand Duke Christopher—and she'd dodged them all to sever Gerard the Gaunt's head from his body. Victory was cried and the whole field rallied and surged. An hour later, she'd presented Gerard's gaping face to Peter, and with sanguine triumph, Peter had wrested the corpse's hoary head from her only to toss it in the nearest ditch. Then he'd pulled her through the flaps and yanked her hair and—

Peter could smell the sweat at back of her neck even now. He could taste the bitter adrenaline on her tongue and feel the blood crusted in her midnight curls. When he came, hoarse and furious, it was with snot and tears and in the end, broken sobbing.

After he'd composed himself, Peter wrote a neat reply. "Accepted. Come at once." He gave it to his manservant and slammed the door.

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It took Derek three days to hear the news. When he finally did, he interrupted a meeting with Peter's treasurer—he barged right in with a, "You've got to be kidding me."

Derek stunk of milled whiskey and the opiate cling of the river brothels. His beard, grown past stubble, had started to curl under his chin. Peter ignored him. "15,800 silver for rations, you said? Do we have that?"

"*You* are going to marry an omega?" Derek put his hand in the middle of the Treasurer's parchment.

"We do, my Lord," the treasurer answered stiffly; his chin was bunched at the sight of Derek's fingers smearing tobacco stains across his neat figures.

"If this is a plot to rope me into anything—"

"Harris, leave us." At Peter's command, the man scurried from the room and Peter was left with his nephew.

"What is this? Really?" Derek slumped back into a chair, looking up with thick brows. Irrational and cranky as he was, Derek didn't really believe this was some conspiracy against him. Peter had been on his side in the last disaster. They were more like distant brothers than anything. No, the lines in Derek's brow said he was worried for his uncle.

Peter looked away. "It's a political marriage. It's good for the kingdom."

When Peter turned back, Derek had his arms crossed and he was scrutinizing his uncle in a way that was damn near sober. When he leaned forward into the light, he winced, and yet he still said, "You still wear your wedding ring."

Peter twisted the metal band. Derek wasn't wrong—Peter should put it aside. If he was serious about this marriage, and he had to be, then it would be the proper thing to do. Pulling the ring off over the callous, Peter held it up to make a circlet through which he viewed the candle. The halo it made was dull and for the millionth time, Peter reminded himself that she

was gone, as if she'd flitted through some thin portal like this one. Pagan tokens did not change that. And then there was that final, awful request of hers, and so Peter started to nod. The up and down motion drove his whole body into a soft rocking, and it helped, the physicalness of it. He could do this. The decision was made. "It'll be gone by the time he arrives," he pronounced. What he'd do was get a chain from the jeweler, keep the old ring strung about his chest. He could order the new rings at the same time.

A high, choking noise popped from Derek's chest. "You're just giving her up—like that?"

Peter froze. He replayed *giving her up*, and then he really wasn't sure what happened next. There was the sound of parchment ripping; ink splattered the walls. He became aware that he was screaming. Derek had his hands up in surrender and was half-crouched behind his chair. There was a long splinter standing like a lightning bolt in the center of Peter's right palm. After plucking it out, Peter found himself clutching his heart and gagging on thick saliva as he seethed out through his teeth. He collapsed forward onto the table, smashing his face into the pathetic shadow ridges of the wood.

At some point, Derek's hand wiped at Peter's brow and his voice was careful, even soothing, as he said, "I'm sorry. I know you loved her. This is hard and..."

In the madness of the moment, Peter leaned into his nephew's touch. "I'm just trying. I told her I would. So I'm going to try."

"The road to hell," Derek muttered but he didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he helped Peter to his feet.

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The omega arrived within the fortnight. His guard was sufficiently large enough to ward off bandits but lacking the grand regalia of a peacetime betrothal. After all, his father the king was unable to accompany him. There wasn't time for such. Peter himself was barbered and bathed and coated in the full chest of symbols: Hale crown, lion robe, studded military sash, silver hilted sword, and so on. It itched.

The omega introduced himself plainly. "I'm Stiles," he said and then he'd given Peter a quavering smile. When he offered Peter his hand, Peter bent to kiss it—only to find his own hand being shaken, and the omega's eyes were huge and he was biting his lip as he hummed, "Errrm. Right." Then he tried to pull his hand away but Peter held it giving it a final firm squeeze.

"Welcome," Peter said, and he tried to say it warmly but wasn't sure that he all succeeded. The prince before him was barely out of childhood. His eyes were sunrise bright and his manners, if charmingly unaffected, were also unpolished, unhoned. God, what had Peter been thinking?

Dinner fared better. The feast was small and intimate and Peter didn't have to draw the young prince out—no, Stiles took out a journal covered in chicken scratch, and proceeded to point by point ask Peter questions. When would they be married? How soon? Would tomorrow be fine? Yes, well then where would he be sleeping for this night? He enjoyed riding, so who

should he bother at the stables? Where was the library? Could Peter show him? Good. Now what about troops along the southern border? The scouts' latest intelligence had put Calavera catapults passing through. Could a surprise attack be launched? Peter answered these last questions more comfortably. When discussing tactics, Stiles seemed less a boy and more a young officer, if still somewhat green on his first commission. Peter was watching bemusedly as Stiles set the field: his fork became the catapult train, the mead glass became the enemy fort, bread rolls formed mountains, and a chicken drumstick was suddenly the surprise cavalry brigade. The bone had just clattered with the tines when Derek peered over the table and asked, "Should Hale really be the bone? We've had enough skeletons around here."

Stiles fumbled with the fork—almost knocked his mead—and barely saved his plate from toppling into Peter's lap.

"May I introduce my nephew, Prince Derek."

"Prince?" Stiles's voice pitched, even as he squinted, still clutching his plate.

"Well technically a duke," Peter began, "but it's complicated..." which was to say that Derek had been next in line for the throne—only he'd been both too unpopular with the Lords after his "mishandled marriage" and too wrecked for the crown—not that he looked remotely royal now. Derek was fresh from the training yard. The cotton shirt he wore was dark spotted with sweat and the front laces were undone, showing a healthy amount of dark chest hair. His knees were caked with mud. The only good thing that could be said was that Derek's eyes were clear. His step was sure. Still, Peter rubbed his temple and muttered, "You were supposed to clean up."

Derek drew out a chair and dragged a whole turkey leg onto his plate. "I lost track of the time. Apologies. Stiles?" he asked, not unfriendly, before he bit right into the thickest part of the meat.

Stiles nodded, eyes skirting away from Derek—even as for a split second they dashed back to the bared slice of skin.

Derek didn't notice.

Peter felt old. At the same time, he didn't begrudge his nephew. Beauty had a price, after all. And Derek had paid it in buckets.

"How about dessert?" Peter offered. At Stiles's brightened expression, he said, "I fear it's pudding."

"It's good pudding," Derek added, between bites.

"I like pudding," Stiles allowed. He smiled at Peter, and it was... sweet.

Sweet wasn't the worst thing, was it?

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After dinner, Peter let some of his more eager courtiers take Stiles for a tour of castle's eastern gardens, and then he turned his attentions on Derek. "For his wedding present, I want those catapults, but what's more, I want—" Peter arranged two more bread rolls and a candlestick. "—a sneak attack on Fort Silver."

"And you want me to lead it." Derek was chewing thoughtfully, but then he glanced up. "You're getting me out of the castle."

"You're overdue for some blood and vengeance. Besides, Boyd says you're ready."

"You wouldn't let me go before."

"Before you would marched your heart headlong into a swordpoint."

Derek stood, pushing his chair back with a creak, and he came over to bend over the arrangement of utensils and food. "What's changed?" he asked with a bitter smile.

Peter returned the smile with equal bitterness. "Maybe since I'm marrying an omega I don't need you anymore. I'll have heirs aplenty." At Derek's disbelieving cough, Peter added, "And Calavera and Argent don't know about the new alliance. If we strike fast, we'll have the element of surprise. We can be smart about this."

With a nod at the candlestick, Derek said, "Besides Boyd, I'll gather Lahey and the more senior knights. I'll send the courier to alert Erica. When do we leave?"

Peter licked his finger and pinched out the candle's flame with a hiss. "The moment tomorrow's ceremony is over. Ready the troops."

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It was then that Peter went down the back stairs to the tannery. Skirting about the hanging skins, Peter found her by the sound of her heavy breathing. Malia, never one to mind the stink of leathers, was doing push-ups in the corner. She didn't look up at his approach. Merely asked, "Orders?"

"First, you're going to kill the Calavera's fast courier. Then their second fastest courier. If you have time, take out the third. Then, I need you to get into Silver. Weaken Ennis. I don't care how. Just don't kill him. Leave him off his game."

Malia frowned. "Why not?"

"Derek needs an easy victory."

A snort. "He needs a dunk in the well."

"Are you saying you can't do it?"

Malia's frown grew incredulous. "In my sleep."

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They wedded in the throne room. It was all quite official and proper. When he had to kiss Stiles, it was a soft, polite press. Only, Stiles stared back at him with such wide eyes that Peter imagined he could hear the pounding of the boy's heart over the gay twanging of harpsichord.

The celebration was limited to a small feast. Peter made sure Stiles had a full glass of wine before he started knocking back his own queue. By evening-end, Peter was as drunk as Derek had ever been, and even if he was laughing and joking as if he was a perfectly normal bridegroom, the moment came when he couldn't take it anymore. He kept seeing her. Everywhere.

His last wedding had been the happiest day of his life. His mouth had hurt from the smiles. His feet had hurt from all the dancing. They'd sneaked into a closet for a desperate fuck and Peter had bloodied his elbow on a nail. She'd licked the wound clean for him.

Rubbing the thin scar on his arm, Peter retreated to the quiet of the northern parapet where he hung his head over the side and laughed a hoarse sob into the night's drizzle. The sound echoed out, distant and galloping as if to chant his pain to the whole kingdom, and yet his only answer was the flap of the west wind across the banners and turrets.

When he felt the hand against his back, Peter froze. He had a yell burbling in his chest when he turned to see Stiles.

The boy's hand didn't leave his back. If anything, it squeezed. His mouth opened, and Peter was expecting a meek, "Are you alright?" or "Too much wine?" Something innocuous. But instead Stiles said, "I know you loved her. I don't expect the same from you."

Peter, as far from sobriety as he was, lurched back, giving him space from Stiles's too warm palm. "You don't know anything," he said, even as part of him regretted the words. Stiles had done nothing to deserve his tone.

But Stiles only nodded. "I know you're doing this out of duty. Before he left, Derek told me ___"

"—it's to our mutual benefit. For Beacon and Hale."

"But if it weren't for this marriage, you wouldn't—"

"We didn't know your father well enough to trust him with an alliance before." Beacon had clung to its neutrality until the alliance had put an arrow in it. Not that Peter blamed Beacon. He would have played the same hand...

"But now you have me." Stiles's gaze was firm and his jaw was set. "And I need to know what you want."

"I don't know," Peter began, but then he backtracked. "Well—children. The kingdom needs an heir."

“I have heats. You’re my husband.” Stiles was nodding, like he was convincing himself, but then his eyes fell and his voice was barely audible when he said, “I don’t expect much, but I’d like us to try and be...” He glanced up. “friends.”

Peter felt something fall in his chest, and this time he met Stiles’s gaze. For, even with his fine features, his blatant beauty, the boy was not lowered by artifice or courtly double speak. He almost seemed brave.

Peter reached out to pick up Stiles’s hand. “Friends,” he promised.

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Later in the darkness of Peter’s chamber, Stiles was a shivering lump in the sheets.

“We can just sleep.” Peter’s voice was wooly with drink and fatigue. His head and ass felt like anvils when he arranged himself beneath the quilt.

“We’re supposed to—” Stiles’s hands clutched the pillow corner.

“No one knows what happens here except the two of us.” When Stiles only trembled more, Peter groaned and rolled over to him. Stiles held his breath—only to have it yanked out—as Peter dragged him flush.

This close Stiles’s hair was silk soft; his smell, the sweet tang of the orchard. The bare length of his thigh against Peter’s own was warm and taut, so much that Peter didn’t mind how Stiles’s toes were cold, clammy pebbles curled back on Peter’s shin. It was—Peter realized—nice. It was... not lonely. And Peter, for all that he wanted to sleep, wanted Stiles to sleep too. He wanted the boy to be well here—he liked him—he liked him *here*—so he wrapped his arms around the boy, hushing him with a long, “Shhhhhh,” and when Stiles’s breathing failed to calm, Peter pressed a quiet kiss into his neck.

The kiss finally made Stiles stop his wriggling. For a moment, he was still, and then he twisted his neck, straining as he turned to press a kiss back in return. It landed on the edge of Peter’s chin. More than anything, it tickled.

Peter caught Stiles’s chin and he asked, “Are you curious? Or are you simply feeling neglected? I meant it when I said we don’t have to do anything.”

“I’m—” Stiles tried to look away—but Peter held his jaw. With a glare, he asked, “Am I...?”

“Are you?” Peter waited, and as Stiles’s eyes went from bright to shaded, Peter finally let go.

Stiles with his face curled into the sheets asked, “Do I disappoint you?”

For a brief flash, Peter was angry. Hadn’t they just talked about this? Hadn’t Stiles said—? But then Peter checked himself. He had his own scars. His hair was capped with a silver frost. These days, vanity was a distant fog, but he remembered the innocent terror of being so exposed, even with night’s veil as a blanket, and true, maybe Stiles knew he was beautiful. Maybe, he knew he was *supposed* to be a prize, but he didn’t know if he was enough for Peter. (He probably sensed he wasn’t.) And today he had spent so much.

This is not love, Peter told himself as he drew Stiles's up into his arms. Peter began the kiss like it was a lesson. His tongue tutored the boy in the finer motions and his teeth chastened any errors. When Stiles's breaths were rapid and the lure of his slick drizzled like ether in the air, Peter pushed him down. He yanked up his dressing gown and beheld him. He couldn't help but compare Stiles to her. Alpha females and omega males weren't that different. Both had male and female organs; they had small breasts, rich thighs, silky jawlines. And yet, his wife had never smelled like this. She had been hard muscle, sunkissed with bridaled energy. Stiles, in contrast, was fey, sleek and luminous, as if of the night.

Somehow, noting the difference made it better. As if he wasn't betraying her. Peter pinned Stiles by the hips, and as Stiles's eyes grew impossibly rounder, Peter nosed into his nest of curls before sucking him into his mouth.

Unsurprisingly, it took less than a minute before Stiles was a bucking mess, and Peter was glad—amused, even—at the look of wonder that spilled over his face.

Crawling back up the bed, Peter once again brought Stiles to his chest. His lids were already growing heavy when Stiles's free hand slid up Peter's thicker thigh, and he asked, "What about you?"

Peter excused himself with a, "Too much drink."

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At the end of the week, the news came. A pigeon brought the note in Malia's scrawl, and Peter laughed at the post script. "Ennis likes horses. That way. All I had to do was a little spook and... kick."

Peter found Stiles in the library where he was bent over some thick tome. Peter, mouth full, was chewing on a drumstick. As Stiles looked up, Peter bit off the last chunk of meat and said, "Turns out we got your catapults." He wiggled the bare bone in the air.

Stiles stood, a smile stretched wide on his face. "All of them?"

Peter nodded. "And now we advance on Fort Silver—"

"—cutting off the pass to Beacon." Stiles strode over to him and Peter wasn't ready for it—he still had chicken in his mouth—when Stiles caught him in a kiss. The force of it caught Peter off guard—there were servants just around the corner, and yet Stiles didn't stop. He gasped out, "Thank you," and his hands were hard on Peter's shoulders.

He walked him back, smacking Peter's hand down so that bone went flying. Against a bookcase, Stiles bit down hard on his lip, and Peter found himself kissing the boy back with equal fervor. It didn't hurt that Stiles was positively rutting against him. Peter could feel the hard press of him thick in the crease of his trousers. Stiles's hands gathered up the sides of his shirt and squeezed up, like he could lift Peter instead of the other way around.

Peter found himself almost lost in a laugh when a gasp escaped Stiles—and the angle changed and then it wasn't just Stiles: they were hard together.

Peter's moment of panic was cut off by Stiles's biting hard on neck. His hips worked furiously and his voice went frenetic as he demanded, "Thank you. Let me thank you."

The thing was, Stiles didn't give Peter a chance to respond. There was no decision made as Stiles plastered them both into the wall of books. Peter's nose was pressed back against the musty spine of one jutting book and he—this was—Peter didn't know—except then Stiles's mouth was keening against his own, hot hissing pants. The rough, drag of the fabric was as as sore as it was good. Stiles's nails scratching lines up his back seemed to be ripping his dread away. There was a blackness to it. Peter took it in like poisoned honey, and when at last, Stiles was slumped against him—gasping—and there was the warm, seeping tickle of seed down his leg—Peter let himself come back.

"Thank you," Stiles whispered again—this time wearing a satisfied smile—and he pressed a kiss to Peter's lips.

Peter wanted to reply the same—but that seemed premature. He didn't know exactly what had just happened. He didn't know if it could happen again.

Some of his inner turmoil must have translated to Stiles because Peter found his hand being clutched and pulled. Stiles said, "Come. This way."

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That night, it did not work. It was premature. When Peter couldn't—it wouldn't—

He left the room with the usual excuses.

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For three more nights, Stiles let it go. It was on the fourth when the fast courier arrived from the west that the news came that Fort Silver had been successfully taken. The Prince-General, who was only recently derided in the public houses, was said to have led the charge.

Dinner was, dare Peter describe it so, *merry*. There was much joking over bread rolls and bones and forks.

That evening, in their bed, Stiles came at him again. This time it almost worked. This time Peter at least didn't feel the urge to flee.

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"Can I tie you up?" Stiles asked.

"Go to sleep." Peter rolled over.

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The next night Stiles didn't ask when he caught Peter from behind and locked his wrists in manacles.

“What are doing?” Peter protested.

“Whatever I want,” Stiles answered, and well, then he *played*.

Peter was half in-half out of it. When it got to be too much, he decided he was mostly amused. Stiles slapped him. Then kissed him. When Stiles unlocked him, Peter sucked him dry for his efforts. Told him he was beautiful.

Stiles smiled at him with purpose, like Peter was a puzzle to be cracked.

It was another moment where Peter thought that if he hadn’t met her, if he hadn’t tied his fate to hers so wholly, he might have been able to love this boy. For there was so much there to cherish. So much good.

He only wished he didn’t feel the sentiment so distantly.

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When Derek returned, it was with a new face. Oh, the anger was still there, bubbling beneath the surface. You could tell by the rigid way he held the troops’ collective gaze. It was present in the way that he caught the Ladies’ eyes, the way he seemed to alpha dare them. But still, when Derek approached his uncle, it was without the detached swagger. His uniform was straight, orderly. He was shaven. What stood out above all, Peter concluded, was the absence of shame. This was a Derek who could be king.

His belief was only given more weight when Derek not only accepted his honors, but with a dark smirk, reached into his pocket, and turning to Stiles at Peter’s side, unveiled a handful of forks.

Stiles’s bark of a laugh was loud, but he took the cutlery, and after counting them, craned a brow to say, “Only seven?”

“Catapults are a pain to haul, though worth it. They did their job on the Fort.”

Stiles nodded gravely. “The Calaveras intended those catapults for Beacon. You served my father as well as Hale.” There was a faint heat to Stiles’s cheeks even as he held Derek’s gaze.

This time Derek definitely didn’t miss it. He cast a smirk at Peter as he said, “I think it was your timely arrival that has been the source of our good fortune.” And yet his smile stayed warm as it moved between Stiles and Peter. “And Uncle, I see you’re looking well,” Derek said, almost jocular, as Peter found himself being clapped on the shoulder. Out of the corner of his mouth, Derek murmured, “Rested.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Come. Eat.”

In the corner of the room, he gave Malia a satisfied nod. She faded into the shadows.

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Derek seemed to have forsworn the lure of the river town. He didn't even menace the newest scullery maid with his calloused paws. Rather, he stayed in the castle's grounds, spending most of the day training with his knights, practicing swordplay. Besides the war council meetings, he accompanied Peter to a meeting with the treasurer to discuss adjustments to the supply trains.

Then there was the meeting with the castle apothecary. The first week, Stiles had asked to sit in on that meeting. After assessing that Stiles was more than competent, Peter had given the management over to him, simply relying on Stiles's briefings. This time, as he and Derek sat in, Lord Deaton and Stiles explained the new treatments under trial. Derek asked about applications to the battlefield, and Peter just sat back and watched as the conversation proved shockingly fruitful. Afterwards, Derek offered to take Stiles out riding.

Peter didn't ride for pleasure anymore. It used to be her favorite sport. In their time, he'd memorized the surrounding game trails for a full day's ride in all directions. It was enough that he could offer Stiles suggestions, he supposed. Peter knew the best spots to picnic. The best for hunting. For making love.

Whatever shyness Stiles had initially felt around Derek was gone within three days time. Peter came down to the stable to hear Stiles yelling, full-lunged hollering at Derek—something about a tree branch and a wild boar and near death, and how *at least Little Omegas know how to duck*—and Derek was bent against the hind of his stallion, convulsing with laughter as Stiles charged on through his tirade with storm cloud gesturing.

At Peter's approach, Stiles threw his hands up, muttering in curses, but the moment he reached Peter he threw his hands around his neck and buried his face with a long sigh of relief, and another mutter that sounded like, "Give me back my sanity."

Peter stroked his hair, breathing in his fresh, happy scent, and said, "Around here, we simply try to keep it in pasture."

Against his chest, Stiles made a low laugh, but in the stallion's stall, Derek looked away.

Dear Lord, Peter thought, it can't already be...

To test it he said softly and clearly, "Let's get you upstairs. Wash up."

Stiles was already nodding, but Derek's jaw was working ever so slightly. Sensing his anxiety, his stallion nickered and switched feet.

Oh, nephew.

For a second, Peter thought about telling Stiles, "Go on ahead," he thought about having a word with Derek. Some version of *Stiles is mine*.

But if Derek had a crush, Stiles was innocent to it. And for Derek to actually crystallize any affection into sound action, well, there were mountains in the way of that. Then there was that dark little part of Peter that whispered: you half-soul, you're not enough for him. You can't even raise your own flag.

It caused a desperate sadness to rise in his chest. One that made him clutch Stiles tighter and one that he definitely didn't feel like adding to. Not now. Better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Peter led Stiles up to their bedroom and left his nephew to suffer his own buried tenderness.

Chapter 2

Stiles started to ask questions about Derek. About Kate. About all of that of which they did not speak.

But he would wait until it was late at night, after they'd kissed and tried and maybe it worked for Peter—maybe Stiles surprised him into it—but more often it didn't, and answering the questions wasn't a payback. Stiles would never think of it that way. But Stiles was asking to be let in, and for that Peter ended up telling him shards of the tale. He told Stiles about *her*. He tried to explain.

Stiles mostly just listened. Other times he would get angry—so angry—on Peter's behalf. He'd rail for a good five minutes. It was strangely restful to listen to. Stiles, too, talked of his mother. Of how desperate he had been to save her. Of how he had packed the poultices each day. How he kept her brow cool. Only, when Stiles said, "I couldn't save her," there was the hard way he fixed his gaze on Peter as if to say, "So let me save you."

Peter wanted to say: you can't save what's already been buried; the rot never goes away. But instead, Peter kissed him. He wrapped his arms around Stiles like he could be a life raft, as if he was truly the king he claimed to be and not just a plank of driftwood melting to splinters on a quaking sea.

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It wasn't just Peter who was confessing his soul to Stiles. Derek wasn't accompanying Peter to meetings these days. Instead, the minute Peter stepped away, Derek would "happen upon" Stiles. There was always a new foal to see or a new book just come in.

The thing was, Derek needed the friendship. So did Peter's young husband.

Besides, a new campaign was due. Derek would lead it in due course. And Stiles's heat would arrive with the next moon. Some beginnings had natural ends.

- - -

"I slicked myself. I want you to try and put it in."

Whatever sensual tension had been building immediately began to ebb. Peter moved to apply his finger but Stiles batted his hand away and reached down to feel—

Yet again Peter was soft.

"Oh," the disappointment was thick in Stiles's voice, "another day then."

"When's your heat due?"

"Next week."

Peter nodded, even though a horrible feeling was settling in his chest.

- - -

Peter woke up in the middle of the night to shaking. Limbs were jerking. Sounds of pain.

It was only when his hand touched the cool pillow and his eyes adjusted to the moonlight that Peter was able to distinguish that it was Stiles thrashing. When he reached for him, Stiles's skin was hot—too hot. Whining, Stiles had his hand between his legs, frantically jerking. The room was saturated with his smell.

Peter tried to take over with his hand, but instead Stiles was on him. “Help me. God. I need—I need—I need—” His grip fitted over Peter's erection. It should have been good. But it wasn't. There was something about the sticky heat of the hand—the jerking in the dark—Peter found himself scrambling back.

Stiles let loose a sound that was undeniably a sob. “Peter,” he begged, and the way he called his name, it was wrong.

Peter was suddenly choking on smoke.

A chandelier fell. The throne room's carpet was in flames. He was running toward the sound of the screams.

There were flames and heat and she was there—she was calling for him—but Peter couldn't get there—

“Help me.” Stiles battered a kiss against Peter's mouth.

The smell. The taste. The fever and the cling of death.

Stiles's tongue was bleeding. He'd bitten it.

Peter saw the blood on her mouth. That had been from her lungs collapsing.

“I can't—I can't—” Peter was scrambling, tumbling away.

Distantly, he heard his name squeaked but he *couldn't*.

In the hallway, he collapsed down to his knees and made himself suck in the breeze from the window. And yet as his head cleared, it didn't get better. It got worse. Peter swore that distantly as if through the stones he could hear Stiles's whimpers. How he had failed him. How he failed her.

- - -

He grabbed a horse and rode to her grave where he collapsed into a circle on the sod and pretended that he had burned with her.

This way he could fail everyone.

- - -

Derek found him there. “Get up.”

Peter didn’t move. Instead, he bitterly returned, “I’m your king.”

“You’re a goddamn coward.”

Peter laughed, a high, insane series of pops from the back of his throat. “I’m dead.” He made angel wings in the cemetery grass. He imagined flying away like the fey through tiny golden portals. It made him pull down the collar of his shirt so he could find the chain. He yanked the ring out so he could hold it to the sun, and yes, how it glimmered as if it led to crystal isles in the sky.

Derek was watching him with ever thickening brows. “Stop pitying yourself and fuck your husband out of his heat.”

Peter sat up enough that he could meet Derek’s eyes. “I haven’t, you know.”

Derek didn’t know. “Haven’t what?”

“I thought the heat would fix it. Do you know what happened when I woke up this morning? Scintillating images of our family burning. I haven’t had that particular flash in a year but Stiles skin was hot, like steam, and he was crying and—”

“You still get hard?”

“By myself. Less often with him.”

“You’ll get over it.” At Peter’s glare, Derek added, “If you don’t face it, it only gets worse.”

The rot. Derek was not wrong, but that didn’t make him right either. “He deserves better than this.”

“Get back on your horse.”

- - -

Back in his chambers, Stiles was crying, not soft quiet tears, but snotting, angry ones. When Peter crouched down before him, Stiles punched him. The blow caught him off guard and his right ear was ringing. Peter was braced back on his elbow and Stiles was over him. He was staring down at Peter’s lap and spit bubbled out of his mouth as he sobbed, “Why don’t you want me?”

For a second, Peter almost tried to apologize. He almost tried to soothe. But Stiles had lost his golden eyes and haloed laugh; he looked as if he’d been buried too. By Peter. Because there was only one answer to Stiles’s question. The answer was: you’re not her.

It was that bit of honesty that allowed him to stand, to decide—even at Stiles’s desperate, “Don’t leave!”

Peter bent down to kiss his brow and said, "I'll only be a second."

He found Derek at the bottom of the stairs.

"I need your help," Peter said. "In fact I command it."

"What. You want me to hold it up for you?"

Peter didn't answer, just marched back up the stairs with Derek following.

In the inner chamber, Derek spun back around, grappling for the door knob. Peter wrenched his hand off. Derek's breathing was fast, his nostrils flared, as he seethed out, "How can you not respond to that? How can you not—" Derek's fingers strangled an invisible neck.

Through the doorway, there was the soft call of, "Peter?"

"I said I needed your help," Peter whispered.

Derek shook his head. "Get a beta servant. I can't—" His gaze snapped toward the bedroom before he smashed his back to the door. "I can't."

"Can't what?"

Derek only shook his head.

"You mean you're afraid you couldn't control yourself because you want him too much." At that, Derek's whole body froze, but Peter continued, "The kingdom needs a legitimate heir. Who will know if it comes from the king or the prince?"

Derek stared at him, expressionless. That was, until Stiles appeared in the doorway.

When he saw Peter, his face was a mix with yearning and outrage. "I was worried you—" And then Stiles took in Derek. Suddenly the flaps of his robe were being clutched tightly around him and Stiles hissed, "What's going on?"

Peter went to him, wrapping his arms about him and brushing his lips against his temple. Stiles leaned greedily into his touch. Stiles' smell was—God, his skin—he was really was beautiful.

On the other side of the room, Derek's face was ever-shifting masks: hungry, jealous, sad, pitying, awed...

"Stiles," Peter whispered low in his ear, "If I can't help you, can Derek?"

Though his breathing stilled, Stiles didn't answer. In its own way the lack of denial was an answer.

"Come along." Peter led him back into the bedroom. He sat on the bed with Stiles between his legs facing outward and he continued to kiss him gently. Pressing a fluttering line along

his nape. Thumbing lightly at his nipples. Running his teeth along the edge of Stiles's ear. Across the room, Derek was watching, his eyes growing ever harder.

When Peter started to pull down Stiles's robe, the boy clutched it, but Peter pushed his hands away. He whispered, "Show how lovely you are. How perfect." And it was with his eyes locked on Peter's that Stiles let the fabric fall.

Across the room, Derek seemed to take involuntary steps.

"Spread your legs," Peter whispered in Stiles's ear.

Stiles obeyed.

Then Derek was there—his expression belligerent, his hands and posture uncertain. Peter knew what he was seeing: the white vee of Stiles's thighs, the slicked pink hole, and Peter ruling over it.

For a moment, no one looked at anyone, and Peter feared he was going to have to give things another push, but then it seemed Derek couldn't take it anymore: he lowered himself. His hands were on either of Stiles's knees and he pressed a kiss just beneath Stiles's naval.

As if finally released, Stiles made a desperate whine, and when Derek bent to lick—Stiles was shaking his head, almost thrashing as he said, "No, I need your—I need your—"

"He needs a knot," Peter finished plaintively.

Stiles exhaled in a rush and then he was bent forward, yanking on Derek's breeches. "Please."

Peter kissed at the top bump of Stiles's spine only for Derek to snarl, "Back away."

For the first time—Peter felt like fighting. The alpha inside had its hackles raised.

What stopped him was Stiles. A soft, "Thank you," was sighed against Peter's neck, just below his ear and Peter couldn't ignore the feverish shivers of his husband's body. So he released Stiles over to Derek, rolling himself to the other side of the bed.

Derek gathered the boy up. He walked Stiles to the settee that sat dead center in the room, and there Derek kissed him. A hard *mine* with teeth and seductive ploy. A definite display of *not yours*. Stiles was blind to it, his hands moving desperately through Derek's laces as he drew him out—Peter avoided looking (it was his nephew's cock for god sakes)—and then Derek had Stiles flipped around, milky ass spread wide, and Stiles was shaking, head thrown back as Derek pushed into him.

The thing was, they were beautiful, youthful; Derek, dark and large and brute, while Stiles was pristine with his sculpted cheekbones and those insanely pretty, fluttering lashes. And there was something deeply private about the way that Derek hid his face flat against Stiles's back, keeping it down no matter the crashing and rocking of their bodies. As if there was some emotion there that he didn't dare want his uncle to see.

That was when Peter realized, it wasn't his business. He shouldn't see. Stiles was being cared for—Derek would never hurt him—and that was all that mattered. And the kingdom would have its heir.

When Peter found his bearings, he left the room. He paused in the sitting room, listening to the sound of their harsh panting. How the floorboards creaked and sang. Derek had begun to whisper, a soft set of litanies: "You don't know how I've wanted you—like that day in the forest when you tripped in the river." "Don't hate me for this." "Don't hate me for telling you this."

Peter stood silent for a long moment as he contemplated that his nephew was in love. There was no doubt. Nothing else would have driven Derek out to the family graves to force Peter back to Stiles. The thing was, Peter didn't know what to do about it. After all, he didn't know what Stiles wanted.

He went down the hall to his old chamber, the one meant for a duke and not the king, where he had slept side by side with her. He sat himself at the window sill and remembered the last time they'd both been here.

She had been worried about Derek. "Kate Argent is not his match."

"Probably not, no." Peter had agreed. "But it means everything to the kingdom."

"Should it though? Why can't he be happy? Why can't he choose—like us?" Her voice broke slightly at the end. Her smile was soft with hope.

"Few are as we. We are lucky." He picked up her hand.

"Talía should let him go."

"Hale needs peace."

"At what price?" Her hand clenched her scabbard.

In the empty room, Peter repeated her words aloud. "At what price?"

"Too much," he answered himself, and then he'd curled his knees to his chest and watched the sun set. The colors went from golden to pink to a flaming, bold red. Like fresh blood, Peter thought. And then asked himself again, "At what price?"

- - -

At the end of Stiles's heat, Peter made no mention of it. He crawled into their bed. He kissed Stiles on the brow before rolling into his pillow.

Stiles was not having this. "It's not your fault," he said.

"Nor is it yours," murmured Peter through the cloth and feathers.

"Do you still want to try?" His hand wrapped around Peter's waist.

“You’re still sore from your heat.”

Stiles didn’t deny this. “Are you and Derek…” His hand drew off of Peter. “...okay?”

They hadn’t yet said a word to each other. “We’re fine.”

“Are we going to try again? You and me?”

“We can.”

“I think it’s hard for Derek.”

Peter twisted back towards Stiles. He pressed another kiss. “If I’m not here—you have my permission to sleep in Derek’s bed. I’d ask you not to make a public display of it, for his sake as much as yours. His reputation in the kingdom, while improved of late, is not spotless.”

A pause then, “I don’t know if I should.”

Of course Stiles knew. “Because he’s in love you.”

“Do you?” Stiles’s voice was so small. “Love me?”

“In the ways that I can,” Peter said, and he meant it. It just wasn’t enough.

Stiles pulled them together. He wrapped his arms tight around Peter’s neck, and said, “I’d like to see my father soon.”

“We’ll arrange it.”

- - -

Within the month, Stiles’s scent shifted. At night, he lay next to Peter, but during the day, when he wasn’t wiggling himself into another council meeting, he accompanied Derek on long rides through the surrounding forests. The evidence was found in the bruises on Stiles’s hips, the pink mottling at the base of his neck, but most of all, there was the way that Derek—when he thought no one was looking—kept collapsing into private, involuntary smiles. His eyes kept flitting to Stiles’s stomach. And above all, there was the way he avoided Peter.

Peter let him have the leash for a time, but then another message arrived from Malia—the Argents were mobilizing again—and Peter had to reel him in.

“We’re going to cut them off here.” Peter drew his finger at the base of Mount Nem.

“So I’m taking the First and Second—” Derek began.

“I’ll have the First, actually. And the Third. You’ll be taking the evens.”

“We’re both going?” Derek was frowning.

“Stiles wants to visit his father.” As Derek’s eyes fled to the wall, Peter added, “And since the pass along Fort Silver is once again safe, I’ve given him my permission. Besides, if I’m right,

this battle will need every good man we've got. That means you, too."

"You're not just sending him away because—"

"I'm not jealous, Derek." Or at least he had no cause to be.

Derek leaned down onto the table. "Maybe I am."

"Do you see a solution?"

The corner of Derek's lips turned up. "Fight to the death?"

"I would win."

Derek shook his head. "Not this time."

Oh, the heart-spun fool. "Stiles would never forgive you."

"I know." Derek's chin fell.

"Actually..." Peter began to roll up his map. When Derek's head popped up, he said, "I haven't been in the training yard in an age."

- - -

Derek lunged and Peter easily parried—whipping Derek's blade in a near twist. Around the yard, a few eager *Ahhs!* sounded at the maneuver. They had a growing audience. After all it was the king and the prince. The knights were already placing bets.

"How are you this old and still this good?" Derek demanded, teeth gritted.

"Not that old—and *you* are all beat attacks and extensions. You still don't know how to wait for it." Sweat was dripping off Peter's chin. It stung in his eyes, and yet his feet felt light. Tomorrow was going to hurt but today his heart was ferocious, ready.

"You are too slippery." And then Derek charged: a flying lunge.

Peter merely dodged and tipped his shoulder from behind. "Try some hand eye coordination."

Derek smacked Peter's blade away. "I can take any knight here."

"*After* the king." It used to be after *her*. She had been their trainer, their Master Swordsman. Lord, she would have loved this fight. She would have been in the middle of knights, heckling them with jeers. Even now, it felt as if she were here whispering in his ear, instructing: *1, 2, lunge!* And Peter did lunge, feinting right and right again before Derek almost managed a riposte. Peter broke it with a stop-cut. Derek tried to knock his feet out from under him—the crowd loved that—but Peter danced away before smashing Derek's shoulder with his hilt. The crowd loved that even more.

"You sunnova—" Derek said, clutching his shoulder as he grimaced.

“Son of your esteemed grandmother, I know,” Peter drawled before leaning down to lend Derek a hand.

Instead, of taking it, Derek yanked it—and then Peter took a plough into the dirt. That garnered Derek a riotous combination of cheers and squawks, but Peter nailed him with a knee in the chest.

Derek responded by grabbing his arm and trying to lock him in a twist.

Peter stomped on his foot.

Derek cried, “Not fair,” and Peter yanked Derek’s shirt above his head, causing him topple back.

Laughter sounded, and it wasn’t just from the crowd. With his shirt covering his eyes and mouth, Derek was shaking, knees drawn to his chest, rolling and rocking his smacking his fists.

Peter couldn’t laugh, but he sprawled back contentedly. Above the sky was clear, the sun a white dot. The breeze was soft. In the distance there was the ring of the blacksmith’s hammer. It was when Peter’s eyes grazed the upper balconies that he saw Stiles. His husband was bent forward over a daisy and herb box. His mouth was hanging open, a loose smile playing at the edges. By the eager hunch of his posture, Peter read him perfectly:

You would have us both. You would save us both.

Peter looked away before anyone noticed. A squire helped him up, and then once again, he offered Derek his hand.

This time Derek took it with grace. Once Peter was upright, Derek then made an overly obsequious bow to the delight of the onlookers, and even as Peter rolled his eyes, Derek leaned into say, “Marie would have pummeled us both out here.”

Peter didn’t reply as he handed his things to a squire. On the bench, Erica was collecting a small fortune while the other knights grumbled. Overhead, Stiles was gone from the balcony, and nevertheless, Peter felt the lingering of his presence.

It was as he was about to head up the stairs that Derek grabbed his shoulder. “If it’s a girl, can we name her Marie?”

Peter bristled. He tried to shrug Derek’s hand off. But Derek’s grip only tightened. “She was my favorite aunt. I wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t—”

“I’ve told you before. She wouldn’t have been *herself* if she hadn’t.” It was why Peter had loved her. It was the warrior in her who had dragged Derek out, and then she’d marched back into the smoke. She’d done what Derek couldn’t: throat slit, Kate’s body had cracked down the stonework before splashing in the moat. Peter’s regret was that he had been out, meeting a contact in a neighboring town. He hadn’t gotten back in time to join her.

“I know and... that’s *why*.”

Peter's shoulders lowered, even though part of him wanted to punch the wall. He made himself say, "It would be a tribute to her. She would have liked it, a future queen bearing her name."

Derek nodded so kindly, so *charitably*. "Is that a yes?"

Peter's eyes grew hazy in their focus. "If Stiles agrees."

- - -

The rest of the day Peter's skin was prickling. A low beat thrummed in his veins. And that night as Stiles undressed, chattering away like everything was perfect—when it wasn't—Peter found himself sick with it. He found himself staring at Stiles's ivory neck and the high blooms of his cheeks and the wicked flitting of his eyes. The ease of his humor. When he couldn't take it anymore, Peter dragged him flush.

He bit his neck hard, right over the bruises that Derek had left, and then when Stiles gasped, Peter shoved him, making him take a step away, and then he grabbed the sides of his gown, pulling it up and off.

Stiles stood there, bare and bold faced, not saying a word, but his breathing was fast; his eyes were black no matter the lantern light. The two dots reminded Peter of crows sitting on a fence: talons down but wings at the ready. Like he wanted this. Like he was about to get his way. Peter resented the hell out of it.

"Turn around," he ordered.

When Peter pressed his finger in, Stiles made a soft huff, and the omega was pregnant, but he was wet already. Loose. From the afternoon.

It made Peter furious—that he should want this—that he should crave the comfort—that he should miss her and still bear the needs of a man—and that Stiles should call this from him—that he wasn't some stupid omega dullard easily put aside—that he should twist Peter's sympathies—that he should be worthy of love—even from his nephew—and therefore complicate everything. It left Peter unmoored. It left him too close. And right now, he was thick with it.

He slid in with a single thrust, sending Stiles sprawling forward to brace them. It should have hurt, but Stiles's groan was curled with relief. If anything, he pushed back at Peter—and it was so typical that Stiles would want it—Peter should have known. He retaliated by digging in his nails. His thumbs bit hard and he slammed Stiles down to the floor. Their knees banged and stung. Peter's muscles were still strained from his fight with Derek, and yet he pounded into the boy, blind and unhinged and destroying.

Except that it didn't end it that way.

As he collapsed onto Stiles, the two of them joined completely, his head was rolling and the dry air stung in his chest. He couldn't focus his vision. It was as if he'd rolled out of the

waves onto some sun bleached beach with the salt still stinging up his nostrils. In his arms, Stiles was shivering, lids squeezed tightly, and Peter didn't know what to do.

It was a moment longer before Peter realized that the shivering had turned soft chokes. When Peter turned Stiles's chin, it was to see the tracks of tears. "Did I hurt—?"

But Stiles was shaking his head furiously. He grabbed Peter's jaw and leaned up for a hard, commanding kiss. When Stiles at last pulled back, he was wiping his eyes. After a swallow, he gave Peter a sodden smile and whispered, "I love you too, you know."

For a second Peter couldn't breathe but then he clutched him close, as if he could suffocate them both together. His hands worked in a frenzy rubbing up and down Stiles's back, and it was only later, when he had Stiles tucked in bed, that he asked himself:

What have I done?

- - -

Malia found him down in the archives. "You look like horse shit," she said.

"So much for a bow. A curtsy?" At her dead stare, Peter shook his head and asked, "What news?"

"I caught the twin. I took out his fingernails and hung him out over a ledge. He wouldn't talk." She crossed her arms. "But I had better luck with his serving boy." Her tone said he wasn't going to like this.

"Don't be glib."

"Allison Argent has married—to Lord Scott of the McCalls."

"Stiles's cousin." His close cousin. Peter knew they still corresponded. "Not exactly strategic." Peter would have expected her to marry a Calavera.

"The serving boy said she's already fat with child. Can't hold her bow with the same alignment." Malia's smirk said she thought this was a great joke, but then she added, "What if it's more? What if through Scott, the Argents think they have an *in*? Do you trust him?" Peter didn't have to ask if she meant Stiles.

Peter paused, before smiling sharply. "As much as I trust you."

Malia blinked. "I would die for you."

"I know but that's not what I want to hear."

Malia's nose screwed up in disgust. "You need to get over her. She's dead." From anyone else, Peter wouldn't have taken it—the fury would have risen—but then Malia wasn't just anyone. As if to punctuate this, she added, "*father*."

As she took her leave, Peter murmured to the silence, "That you were legitimately so."

- - -

The next day Stiles stayed up in their chambers. It left it so that Peter was busy with not only the generals but the Lords' inane bequests. Over the past month, Stiles had taken to handling those. And he was good at it, too. Now all the Lords kept bemoaning his absence, as if the *king* were second-best. It made Peter wonder if Stiles held out just to draw notice to yet another of his talents.

Derek, perfectly easy about it, asked where Stiles was.

"Packing." Peter didn't meet his eyes as he unrolled the courier's latest delivery.

After Derek went to deal with some issue with the horses, Peter marched up the stairs to their room where he found Stiles nose deep in a book.

At seeing Peter, Stiles lowered the book, and when Peter didn't move, when he only stared hard and motionless, Stiles set the volume aside and walked over.

Peter was telling himself he should back off—that whatever he was feeling was the wrong path—when Stiles's fingers crawled the line of Peter's belt. The laze of his mouth was betrayed by the spark in his eyes as he undid the clasp, next the laces, and then he pulled a cushion beneath his knees before he drew Peter out and onto his tongue.

When the knot started to form, Stiles made noises over it. He worshipped it with a pond of spit, and when Peter said, "I want—" then Stiles was yanking down his own pants, sitting back on the table, and when Peter pushed into him—the knot catching—they both gasped, and when it popped through, Peter pulsed with the ache of the claim. He was already so close. Stiles was strained and strung out, nails dug into the wood border as Peter thrust, and when the flood came and Stiles thrashed, Peter yanked his jaw, biting hard. Leaving a mark. Making it obvious.

Peter could taste the smile on Stiles's face. There was a satisfied squirm to his body. Peter knew that right now—if he looked—Stiles's eyes would be alight with power. Only, this time Peter didn't begrudge him as he had yesterday.

The scrape of a footfall made Peter glance up.

It wasn't a servant.

Even as he spun toward the archway, Derek had his fingers fanned across his mouth, like he was choking back vomit. His broken gaze knotted into fury when it met Peter's own.

Stiles turned to look, but Peter caught him—pressing their hips, the connection, tighter—and cosseted Stiles's face tight into the crook of his neck.

At the sounds of retreating footfalls, Stiles pushed back and asked, "Who was that?"

Unlike yesterday, there wasn't the wave of shame. Instead, Peter felt iron forging up his spine—even a bitter sense of satisfaction—and maybe, he realized, maybe he hadn't really forgiven Derek. Maybe, he hadn't forgiven Derek at all. The hate, now unpacked, was so

spiteful, so petty as to be insulting: that Marie had cared enough for Derek to risk her life—that was one thing—but the other was new, that Derek could be so close to happiness when Peter was still so far. *She was my favorite aunt. You want me to hold it up for you?* And all those cocky simpers.

The admission came with a sort of release, and Peter's head swam with the stinking euphoria. God, he had been keeping it all patched together. He'd been getting through each day step by step. He'd even been minding Derek—keeping him off the edge. That was, until Stiles.

Stiles asked again, "Who?"

Peter thought about lying, saying, "A servant."

He thought about being brutal, snapping, "It seems my nephew hasn't yet learned to share."

Instead, he accused, "You get under my skin."

Stiles leaned back, not smiling, merely assessing, and said, "That's where the wounds are."

Peter was torn between a crazed laugh and smacking him. It would be easy if Stiles was blind to what was happening, if he was just a well intentioned ingénue, but Peter was beginning to see that such wasn't the case at all. He was finally seeing the truth: the boy was too intuitive, far too clever. And honestly, when the evidence of it was all laid out, Peter liked it. He craved it. It was so opposite from her. She had made him a better man.

Peter traced his finger over the puffy limn of Stiles's lips, and he said, "At times, you're like holding up a mirror."

Lashes thick, Stiles merely nipped Peter's finger.

- - -

The witching hour upon him, a shadow echoed Peter's steps through the west hallway. At first, he thought it might be Malia, sometimes she would do that, solely in her words, "to practice." But there was no lightness to the step; it was clomp and drag. Peter spun around, hand already rubbing his temple, as he said, "Derek, either grow a pair and face me, or go find a serving girl with a ready mouth. Hales do not skulk." At least, not without extreme finesse.

Derek stepped out from behind a column, a sword in either hand. Even ten paces away he stunk of drink; he was sweaty despite his pallor. "If you weren't my uncle, you would be dead by now."

So they were going to do this, were they? The dark irony tumbled out and Peter nearly laughed. "If we weren't family—better yet, if *you* weren't my family—everyone else would be alive right now."

Derek's eyes flashed with the cut, but Peter didn't care. They were already far beneath the belt. Nevertheless, Derek straightened, his hands tightening their grip on the sword. "Is that what this is? Vengeance? You're using Stiles that way?"

Peter flinched. Check one in the column for Derek. “I’m not using Stiles, at least, not anymore than you are.”

“I love him.”

“He’s my husband.”

“Carrying *my* child!”

“Lower your voice. Your stupidity risks them even now.”

“You abandoned him!”

“Not. By. Choice.”

“It wasn’t my choice either!” Derek roared, crossing the swords with a clang and closing the distance between the two of them. This close, Derek’s eyes were a wash of red; his neck was corded, and his breathing was harsh, hissing. He threw a sword down at Peter’s feet and snarled, “Pick it up.”

Peter held his ground. “No.”

“Coward.” Derek kicked it at Peter’s feet. “Maggot. Snake. Crawl out of your rotten shell and fight me.”

Peter was ready for it when Derek charged—not with the sword—but with his fists. The barrage was fast and ferocious, and Derek managed to clip Peter’s shoulder. His next throw met air. Peter’s knees panged as he ducked and swung—then pushed, sending Derek toppling. It gave Peter the opportunity to grab a sword. But not both.

He should have left the sword lie, because Derek went for the other one, and then he flew at Peter.

The crash and clang of metal drew out unsettled servants. Peter caught a dark flash in the corner of his eye.

No matter what words Peter spoke, Derek was beyond reason. Half of his swings were blind. Peter was faster—and in a real fight he could have taken Derek at least thrice—but as his right knee began to fail him, he realized he was either going to have wound Derek or—

“Stop!”

The sound was right behind him. Peter jumped back. He let his sword fall; his hands came up in surrender.

White flashed in front of him. Another, “Stop!”

Even as Peter yanked them both back, the tip of Derek’s swing nicked at Stiles’s neck.

For a moment, everything slowed. Peter was clutching Stiles in his arms. Derek's sword was flying and his fingers were curled and begging at the empty space left by the blade's cut. Behind him, a hooded figure kneeled and clasped a cloth over Derek's gaping mouth. Then his eyes were fluttering. The noxious smell of ether was in the air, and Derek wasn't fighting it as he slump back into Malia's lithe form.

Peter only breathed when Stiles asked, "Is he alright?" His voice was light, even composed.

"The ether will leave him with a headache. *Your* neck." Peter shifted to see.

Stiles grimaced as he kept pressure on the spot. "A small gouge but still, only a flesh wound." His eyes went between Derek and Peter. "It was worth it." And then unmistakably, he looked at Malia—who was watching the two of them with her usual double sight.

"Would you take the prince to Deaton?" Peter asked, while just as quickly mouthing, "thank you."

Malia snapped at two servants to help.

Peter frowned at Stiles. "You're going to Deaton, too."

Stiles shook his head, even as red dots covered his fingers. "I can tend it myself. It's not bad."

Peter was too exhausted to argue.

- - -

Once Stiles's neck was bandaged and they were in bed, Peter was expecting a talk. Only, he was expecting it to be about Derek. Instead, Stiles said, "She's yours, isn't she?"

"Who?"

"The alpha Lady Malia, House Tate. She practically knocked our chamber door off its hinges. For a minute I thought that she might be a mistress—but she has your mouth, your nose, and your shrewdness, too, though... she's only a year or so younger than me."

"I was but newly fifteen, and the Lady Tate's husband was apparently not enough." Peter was worn out, emptied of every last ounce of energy. He couldn't even think. His knee damn hurt, and he was supposed to be leading troops tomorrow morning.

Peter was on the point of slumber when Stiles whispered, "I'm sorry about what happened before. With Derek."

Peter groaned, before sighing and muttering, "Me too."

And there was no mistaking the reproach in Stiles's voice when he said, "You should have told me he saw us."

Peter was sick of talking. Right now he didn't have a solution. He didn't know whether to be guilty or furious. All he knew was that the morning would lay everything fresh.

And yet Stiles's hand came to squeeze the meat of his ass as he said, "I would have stopped him. Talked to him."

As Stiles's kneading grew more forceful, his thumb pressing right against Peter's asshole, it was too annoying to ignore, and Peter snapped, "Stop that."

"Can I fuck you?" His eyes were demure, his tongue tipping at the edge of his bottom lip. He had one finger lightly pressed against the wrapped wound on his neck.

If he was capable of feeling his body, Peter would murder him. "Do I have a cunt?"

Stiles's eyes narrowed. "Then roll over."

Peter turned onto his back. Then, when Stiles mounted him, riding his cock with abandon, Peter didn't even bother watching. He covered his head with his pillow, and when the release came, his fatigue hit him even harder than before. He was vaguely aware of Stiles curling into his side as he drifted off.

In his dreams, he heard Stiles whisper, "I'd choose you."

- - -

The next morning when he awoke Stiles was already gone. It was no surprise then when a servant brought a message in Derek's plain scrawl that read: *My conduct last night was wrongful. If you won't accept an apology, then I will accept whatever punishment you deem fair.*

Peter convulsed, not laughing, but almost as he tossed the page into the fire. Accepting a punishment from his uncle? That wasn't Derek. Oh, but it had Stiles written all over it. Peter knew his nephew. He knew what his normal response would be: avid self-flagellation. Derek had butchered his precious omega. His precious, pregnant omega. He'd nearly executed his own lover and unborn child. Lord, Derek probably wanted to be banned from Stiles. Ordinarily, he'd be banning himself.

But now, if Peter did forbid it...

His stomach twisted and the tight wrap around his knee panged, and still, the blood in his cock flowed distractingly.

Picking up the glorified walking stick that Deaton had pushed on him, Peter gritted his teeth and hauled himself up, heading for the door. Seeing Boyd in the corridor, he said, "Make sure Derek is presentable, would you? We're already late on the march."

Peter told himself he'd feel better when he was on his horse.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Um, ElleCC yanked this from my hands and gave polish to it because she's amazeballs.

I'm adding an epi, too...

Peter spent the march with his generals. That night he slept alone in his own tent. In recent campaigns, he had lain sleepless, listing away to the sounds of the camp quieting as memories of her kept his eyes from shutting. On this night, too, he was sleepless, but it was because of *him*. Of his wretchedly delighted smile. Of his increasingly cutting quips and underhanded machinations.

Then, of course, there was Derek. God, Peter needed to make a decision. He needed to get *above* this, only his thighs stung from the full day in the saddle. Peter was gulping down a stinging nightcap when Malia slid through the tent flaps.

“This time is it the enemy or my husband?”

Malia sat down cross-legged and snatched the flask. “Both. Duke Scott is set to arrive in Beacon just before we do.” She tipped the tin back. A metallic glug sounded.

“Without his wife.”

“With a white flag.”

Peter felt the bile rising in the back of his throat. The back of his neck was at once hot. He supposed he should be glad he had some warning for this—even if hadn’t been from his husband’s oh-so-honest lips. “I need your tempered viewpoint.”

“I am as biased as you.”

“Fine, I need your cold logic.”

Malia’s knuckles grew white on the flask. “The Argents’ alliance with the Calaveras is too thin. The Calaveras were expecting Allison to marry one of theirs. Instead, she married a lesser duke from Beacon. Even if she’s pregnant, it’s an insult. There’s also the rumor of the Calaveras developing a new wave of catapults. Lighter, faster, they—”

“Stiles was showing me. If the rumor is true, they’re using the theories of a mathematician from the academy in Costa.” Stiles had been insisting they set up a second smithy, bring in the palace carpenter as well. Peter had been all for it, except the funds hadn’t been there. They could have hustled a Lord or two but...

Somehow the knowledge that Stiles was right made Peter want to simultaneously wring his neck and bend him over the nearest bed.

Malia nodded. “It would explain the reason they felt comfortable leaving such a large number of standard catapults so close to their least secure borders.”

“So Calavera threatens. That still doesn’t tell me what to do about Argent. Other than hate them.”

“King Christopher is not his wife. He’s not his father. He is certainly not his sister. At the very least, you could use the detente with the Argents to your advantage.”

Peter had made the mistake of believing in Christopher’s good intentions—his word—before. The man had said they could manage his sister. “Derek will never agree to it.”

“Derek isn’t king. For a reason.”

After she left, Peter drank what was left of the flask. It was enough to brace the pains of the day, but not enough to get drunk on. Malia had been well intentioned, but now Peter found himself shaking it out for the last drop, and when he was left unsated, he slumped back, wrenching his dick out, until he jerk-by-jerk recalled the unseen details of the night before: Stiles up and down upon him, galloping him away to slumber with Peter merely along for the ride.

- - -

It was late the next morning, when the troops were stopped for water and a brief respite, that Peter went and met his husband’s carriage. He found Stiles on the grass outside of it, seated on a blanket. He did not look himself. The circles under his eyes were prominent. His cheeks seemed gaunt. The sheen across his brow was not healthy. His eyes met Peter’s with a glare as he took a spoonful of broth. After dismissing his serving girl, Stiles said, “I sent you messages up the line. You ignored them.”

“About our imminent meeting with your cousin. Are you sick?”

“It’s called morning sickness. I’ve been rocking my ass in a carriage for the past two days while you pretended this was all my fault. I’ll be fine once I’m in Beacon.” Stiles ripped a hunk of bread off a loaf. “And Scott might be a representative of the Argents, but he’s also my cousin—my closest childhood friend. If you kill him, I’ll never forgive you.”

Peter shook his head. “Killing him serves little purpose. Though you might want to watch out for Derek. Then again, what am I saying? You seem to have Derek handled.” Peter plucked a plum out of the basket. He bit down, and when the juice burst, Peter had to lean out over the grass.

Looking back up, it was to find Stiles watching him intently over the bowl of broth. Despite Stiles’ wan complexion, Peter didn’t misinterpret the want in his eyes, and yet Stiles looked down as he said, “I arranged this for you because you wouldn’t arrange it yourself.”

Peter took another slow bite before sucking on his finger. “I doubt I could have.”

Stiles took a long breath, frowning at Peter’s finger. He swallowed. “Please just listen to him when you meet.”

“You mean listen to *you*.”

Stiles set down the bowl and bared his teeth as he said, “I want what you want.” At Peter’s look, he whispered low, “You know me. I’m trying to help.”

Peter took the bowl of soup from him. He refilled it from the pot, and then he called the servant for some tea. “Do I know you?” he wanted to ask. He didn’t ask.

Instead they sat in silence, eating and not looking at each other. Around them the camp milled about. They were on display, and their tempers were too obvious. At the same time, before him, Stiles seemed as exhausted as Peter himself felt. Then there was also the fact that Peter wanted to touch him. Maybe it was the damn pregnancy pheromones, or maybe it was simply that Stiles had him played, but Peter gave in. After a curse, he commanded, “Come here.”

No matter the unhappy slant of his mouth, Stiles leaned back against him, and Peter set about rubbing his shoulders, then his feet. At first Stiles was rigid, but as Peter began pressing itinerant small kisses along his skin, Stiles at last began to relax. When the sun came back out from the clouds, Stiles had some color restored to his cheeks. Like this, it was easy to imagine that the child was his, that they were two lucky parents out on a ride and picnic. Stiles must have sensed his mood, because Peter found himself meeting Stiles’s expression—the hungry one—just before a report arrived from the scouts.

As Peter read, Stiles leaned over his shoulder, asking, “What?”

“As expected, Calaveras are mobilizing. Fast.”

“And the Argents?”

“Quiet.”

Stiles nodded with obvious satisfaction.

Shaking his head, Peter poured Stiles out a final cup of tea. “Do you want me to send Derek to you?”

Stiles spilled the cup, and then he was gripping his scalded finger with a pained look. When Peter attempted to hand him the water jug, Stiles snapped, “I’m fine. Spend your focus on crushing Calavera.”

Clearly, Peter couldn’t win—so he stood and made for his horse. “I’ll see you upon arrival.” He bid Stiles farewell.

- - -

Derek arrived at the front at the king's command, but from a horse's length away, Peter could see the way he fingered at his sword hilt. No one could stew quite like Derek.

"Smile," Peter murmured, his own plastered on. "It's good for morale."

"You saw my note?" Derek's gaze stared straight ahead into the low rise of the mountains.

"I did."

"You never answered it."

"You weren't the one who wrote it." Derek jerked the reins, and his horse jolted, but Peter waved off whatever he was going to say. "And just so you know, I haven't settled on sending you away. One of us needs to go, though. That, I'm sure of."

Derek was holding his horse's reins too tight. The animal snapped at the bit. "My apology was insufficient," he said formally. "You're the only family I have left. I—"

"—in seven months that won't be true."

Derek grimaced. "I'm saying that I'll do whatever you command. You're my king. My kin. You've done more for me than anyone."

"If I die on the field, you'll marry him." Peter fixed him with his gaze.

Derek turned, choked. Then he looked back to stare at Peter as if he'd never seen him before. "Are you planning to die?"

Peter snorted. "No."

- - -

The King of Beacon was an alpha with a weathered face and a warm smile. Peter's intelligence reports had put him as a mild, even stoic, man—reportedly never recovered from his wife's death—but upon seeing Stiles, the king sped toward their party, throwing his arms about his son's neck and embracing him as if he'd never expected to see him again. Stiles rocked with the hug, laughing, and then introductions followed their usual course.

That was, until they got to Lord Scott. He was Stiles's age, a dark-haired and athletic alpha whose callouses said he was practiced beyond the sword. His smile was open and friendly, and when it fell upon Peter, curious and friendly, as if Stiles had said nothing but good things.

Peter had yet to make a decision either way, but then Derek spotted the Argent crest on Lord Scott.

Derek's hand went to his blade. "How dare you even set foot—?"

Stiles launched himself in front of Derek, hands held up. "That's Lord Scott of Beacon. He's my cousin. He's my friend. I've missed him."

Derek's hand came up—like he wanted to throw Stiles out of the way, but at the last second he froze, and then in a hiss, he said, “Your friend is my enemy.”

“Derek,” Stiles whispered, barely audible. He cast a worried glance at Peter. Derek was also looking at Peter, but this time it was with a look of betrayal.

Peter kept his face stiff as he took a step over to Scott, saying, “Duke Scott of the Argents, your wife's family and mine have some very, very bad blood.”

For a moment Scott teetered, but then he dropped to a knee, pressing a kiss to Peter's hand—a gasp went up around the court—and then he said, “It is my hope that old wounds can be healed.”

“Scars run deep,” Peter answered bitterly.

“I know, but...”—Scott glanced at Stiles—“sometimes new wounds are worse. Um, and you can't let insane people ruin it for everyone else.”

Stiles's fingers were knotted over his heart. His eyes begged at Peter. It was like Derek didn't exist right now. Peter reminded himself that at the very least a ceasefire with the Argents would help them crush the Calaveras, and so he said, “We'll talk more. Later.”

There was a loud clang, and then Derek's footsteps stormed like thunderclaps out of Beacon's Great Hall.

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Later, after dinner, when they were installed in their own chamber, Stiles grabbed Peter's hand and said, “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

Peter, bent over officer reports, didn't look up. “I've already been given my castle tour.” For he knew what this was about: Stiles's full argument for siding with the Argents. He didn't really want it. He didn't trust it. But then, there were other matters to decide. Like whether it would be he or Derek who would semi-permanently be on military duty, so at last he set the scrolls down and let Stiles lead the way.

They had just stepped beneath an old rose arbor when Peter decided he'd had enough. “Stiles, I need you to choose.” When Stiles froze, Peter added, “I could make the decision myself, but it will be better if it comes from you. So, Derek or me?”

Stiles sucked in his bottom lip as he settled himself down on a wooden swing. “That's why I brought you out here.”

“You brought me out here to talk about the Argents.”

Stiles let his head fall back as he picked up his feet, letting the swing glide forward. “Derek has been nothing but generous to me. I wasn't lying when I said I loved him.”

“And he's younger and prettier.”

“I could have chosen to marry any number of kings or duke, but I chose you specifically—do you know why?” His expression was distant as he swung forward and back—within reach, then gone again.

Part of Peter wanted to tell him to get off and stand up like an adult, but that weariness from before—the darkness in his eyes—was back. Yet Peter didn’t keep the irritation from his voice as he said, “The Calaveras treat their omegas like dogs, and the only Argent available has been knocked up by your cousin. The other kingdoms offer no upgrade in size or power, and Beacon was too money-rich and military-poor for neutrality to persist.”

Stiles stared up into the branches of the tree overhead. “I know how the Calaveras treat omegas.”

“And the Calaveras have a hoard of heirs. Better to go after a childless king.”

“It’s more like...” Stiles met his eyes with a soft smile. “...the best spies were always from Hale. It took us forever to search them out, and having now met Malia, it appears we didn’t.”

“So you wanted a challenge?”

“You let me run all the council meetings I like. You attended to my needs, physical and otherwise, even when I couldn’t meet yours. And then there’s the rest of it.” Stiles stopped swinging. He reached out to brush Peter’s cheek. When Peter drew away, Stiles grabbed his neck and gripped hard. His eyes went to Peter’s lips as he said, “Maybe I don’t want young and pretty.” His nails dug in on the last word.

Stiles was looking at Peter like he wanted to rip into him. Peter was not unaffected. “And I’ll bet you tell Derek the perfect flipside.”

“Derek would never have let me stand in front of him to stop a swordfight like you did. He would have had the sword in his chest first. But you knew I could do it.”

“I knew no such thing.”

“You knew it was the best plan.”

“Stiles.” Peter wrenched away from his grip. “Just tell me what you want.”

Stiles’s lips twisted to the side before they became bitter. “What I want.”

“You can’t have us both. It’s too much.”

Stiles dropped back on the swing his eyes back to the treetop. “I told you that my mother died slowly, but it wasn’t from a disease of the body. She was a Calavera, and in that family, she’d never learned to be happy. In their clutches, she was too smart, too everything. My father was not cruel. He doted on her, drew her out all that he could, but she wasn’t—I remember—happiness did not find her. It was like she didn’t know how anymore. She hanged herself here.” Stiles pointed up to the bough overhead. “She stepped off this very swing with the rope about her neck. It was where she used to swing me.”

“Stiles.” Peter grabbed his sides, stopping the swing.

Stiles’s eyes were dry, still focused overhead. “Do you know what she told she told me before she did it?”

Peter could only stare. Stiles’s hands were shaking on the ropes at his sides. His eyes were shining with the moon.

“She came to me that morning. I was at my lessons, and she pulled me aside and whispered, ‘*Darling, I love you, but I have to go now.*’ And I knew. I didn’t know why or how. I was too young. But I knew. I begged her not to go. My tutor restrained me. No one listened, and they found her swinging with the breeze.

“And sometimes I fear I’m just like her. I feel like the world around me isn’t enough.” And Stiles’s expression broke as he collapsed forward, crumpling off and into Peter’s arms. Against Peter’s neck, Stiles said, “So you ask me who I’d choose, and it’s very simple. I don’t trust Derek. So what if he loves me?” A sour scoff. “He falls apart when he’s weak. I want to help him. I do love him, so I must, but I don’t trust him. But you, *King Peter*.” Stiles spit out the title. “The worst thing in the world can happen to you, and you will continue to fight to the last gasp. You will use any ploy and any strategy, and while you do it, you won’t treat me as if I’m a petty pawn. There is no one in the world who has ever made me feel safer, more whole. Sometimes you make me furious, but never—not once—*sad*.”

Peter was ready for it when Stiles went for his mouth. It was more of a gnash than a kiss, but then Peter bit back. Stiles gasped and collapsed backwards, and when Peter had him smashed in the dirt, when the swing overhead was threatening to knock his head, Peter licked the salt tracks from Stiles’s cheeks, and he said, his fingers pinching into Stiles’s ass, “You make me insane.”

Stiles looked back at him as if he understood perfectly. “You think I make you jealous. You have no idea. You haven’t been competing with the dead and perfect.”

Peter grabbed his jaw. “You have another man’s child in your belly.”

Eyes wide, Stiles shook his head in disbelief, and when his hands slid down to his stomach, his expression grew soft.

Peter grabbed his hands away, squeezing hard. “If you so dare as to say—” Peter imitated him: “*I wish it were yours*, I might just kill you right now.”

But Stiles yanked his hands free, putting them protectively back over his stomach. His voice was hard as he said, “It’s not about you. Or Derek. It’s about her. I’m going to love her completely. She shall never once ask if she is wanted, if she is loved enough. She shall know it every day of her life because I will make it so. She is *mine*.”

Stiles’s neck was corded, his chin bunched, jaw set. There was a grass stain on his sleeve, marks of mud everywhere. He was stretched out beneath Peter in the place where his mother had betrayed him, and he was still fighting. Peter bent down so that their noses were nearly pressing, and he said, “I love you.”

Stiles's face went from set to blank. When he tried to turn, Peter pulled his chin back, and then he kissed him, long, slowly.

Pulling back, it was to see Stiles with wet eyes, and Stiles said, "Now you've finally made me sad, you bastard."

Peter shushed him, and then he kissed his way down, working him out of his clothes, and then, when Stiles was wet on his finger and his scent was thick in the air, Peter pressed into him. Stiles was shaking, even as his mouth fell open with gasps, and he flattened his hands across Peter's back.

Peter felt the cool of his former ring rapping on his chest with each thrust, and he wondered when *her* became *him*. He wondered if this counted—if loving Stiles meant he could be happy, if Peter was meeting his promise to her. With Marie, Peter had been content to follow along, to attend to her on her adventures, working the details of the shadows the way he always did, but with Stiles, his other instincts came out. Stiles made him want to rule, to demand.

And so when the tensions sprang in his body—with Stiles gritting his teeth at the pulse of connection—Peter pressed a kiss into his hair and said, "I'll talk with your Lord Scott, and then we'll crush the Calaveras."

Stiles pressed his fingers to Peter's cheek. "I'll talk to Derek."

Peter shook his head. "Do what you need to do. Only I never want to witness it. And also—" Peter ran his hands down Stiles's waist. "The next one is mine."

Stiles rolled his eyes. "Easily promised."

They were on the edge of another kiss when the bushes stirred, and a throat loudly cleared.

Peter wheeled about to see Malia, whose eyes were straining toward the moon. "Ugh."

There was nothing for it. They were tied, and his daughter was but five paces away. "I assume you have a reason for inter—"

"Derek has challenged Scott to a duel."

"Now?" Stiles jerked upright. The knot pulled.

"It's Derek." Malia blinked. "When is it anything else?"

"Shit. Stiles, I have to go. If you—"

But Stiles was already nodding. "Just slowly okay?" His hands gripped hard on Peter's shoulders as they separated. At the end, Stiles loosed a soft groan, but there was no time to waste. Peter was lacing up his breeches as he chased after Malia.

He left Stiles flushed and sitting on his mother's swing.

- - -

Peter raced into the upstairs corridor to the sound of shouts and the clash of metal. Servants and guards of Beacon stood about, looking at a complete loss. The fight was a repeat of Derek's previous, only this time he was sober, and this time when Peter shouted, "Enough!" Derek actually drew back.

"He must leave," Derek hissed, and in his hand he held up a crumpled page. "He would trap us."

Scott was still warily gripping his sword. "I told you—that's not mine or Allison's. That's not King Christopher's!"

Before Derek could argue, Peter wrenched the paper from his grip. It was a map of the castle. It even had the escape passages neatly labeled. At the bottom was the stamp of the Argent crest. Or at least, an imitation of it. The Argents would never be so foolish to put their stamp on a document like this. They would never be so foolish to let it fall into enemy hands. Peter growled, saying, "This is the stupidest ploy I've ever—"

But then his eyes fell onto the passage that lead into the rose garden. It emptied right into the grotto where the large tree with the swing stood.

Peter took a breath, already telling himself Stiles would be back in their room by now. Guards would be close.

But then the bell tower sounded. Five sharp rings in a row. An attack.

His goddamn knee. Peter thrust the map at Malia, his finger on the garden tunnel, and he said, "Stiles. Go."

As he made to follow, Derek blocked him. "They've betrayed us again, haven't they?"

"It's Calavera." Peter wondered how—so fast—but then he thought of the new inventions applied to the catapults. "Organize the castle guard. Work with Beacon." Peter cast a look at Scott. "And its allies." And then signaling the nearest guards to fall in rank behind him, he ran for the stairs.

- - -

In the garden it was too quiet. Malia was missing.

"Spread out," Peter commanded the guards, his own sword at the ready.

A high grunt came from his left, and Peter turned in time to see an arrow dead center in his guard's chest. There was a whoosh just past his ear, and Peter dropped, rolled, and threw himself at the shadow in camouflage.

The Calavera—there was no mistaking the broad cheekbones, the square jaw—went down, but as Peter twisted, it was to feel a steel point press at the small of his back.

Two more guards went down. A familiar voice said, “Drop your sword and turn about very slowly.”

“Hello, Araya. You came in person. Charmed.” Peter graced the Queen of the Calaveras with his best smile.

“Peter, it’s been ages.” She kept her sword tip steady at his throat.

“Ah, yes. The last time we talked—was it eight years ago? I recall you being angry at a missing fleet. They seemed to have run abreast some rocks in the southern isles.”

“You paid those pirates a pretty penny.”

“No need,” Peter scoffed. “I merely showed them how taking control of the land offered its own reward. Why smuggle when you can be the new taxman? I heard they’re killing in pearls.”

Araya’s countenance did not shift. “We have your omega. Beacon’s prince, your consort. He’s a pretty little whippet and full of your heir.”

Peter’s heart froze in his chest. “And now you have me, so how about letting him go?”

Araya’s smile was as cold as it was satisfied. “Better to have both.” And then she brought her hilt across his temple.

- - -

Peter awoke to the sounds of trumpets, the shrill protests of the war horses. When he tried to wipe at his eyes, he found his hands bound. Still he blinked until they were cleared, and what he saw made him choke.

Across from him, a dead man in Calavera garb stared back.

“Shh!” was nearly shouted, and Peter glanced up in relief to see Malia crouched by yet another body.

“You perfect, perfect girl,” Peter murmured, his throat hoarse.

She didn’t smile, just nodded, as she bent down to cut his wrists free.

“How did you infiltrate?” Peter began to say when yet another hooded figure slid into the room.

Peter reared back, but Malia gave the figure a nod. “With him.”

“Stiles?” Peter asked incredulous.

The figure dropped the hood, and before Peter stood King Christopher of the Argents. At Peter’s gaping, the man said, “Stiles is being held in the opposite camp. We have little time.”

“Why are you—?” Peter made himself breathe. Thinking was harder, but as Peter stood he said, “The Calaveras still believe you’re allied.”

“The Calaveras planned to marry my daughter—a future queen—to an alpha whose last omega drank poison. You, they would ransom for territory. Likely, Beacon and beyond. After Hale fell, we would be next. Also...” Argent’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “Stiles, they would feed herbs until the child was flushed, and then they’d offer him as the prize to the Lord who took the most heads in battle.”

Peter pried the sword out of the dead guard’s grip and stood. Hate and fear were making him shake with energy. “Then we have no time.”

“I’ll lead you, and, Peter—”

“What?”

The man’s crystal-blue eyes were wide and sincere. “I can never make up for what my sister did, but if I can save Stiles, I hope you will at least know that my promise of long ago was not stated falsely. We were once friends, you and I.”

Peter took the Calavera robe from Malia and drew up the hood so as to hide his face. He thought of *her*. If she were here right now, she’d have already been halfway across the camp with her sword. It made Peter miss her desperately. He also missed his husband. He met Argent’s penetrating stare and said, “If we save Stiles, I could never again name you my enemy.”

Argent clasped his hand and promised, “Allies.”

- - -

They skirted the fires and stayed close to the horse lines, walking in the camp’s darkness with trembling footfalls. When they reached the camp where Stiles was held, there was no tent. Stiles had his back to a post, and around him were laughing, drinking in infantry. The Calaveras had given him none of the respect of his birth. As Argent had said, they were bent on humiliation.

Argent motioned Malia. “My encampment, though small, is just to the northeast. If we can get Stiles there, my troops will take over, and we’ll fall back behind Beacon’s lines. For now, we need horses.”

“Cavalry charge?” Her brow was arched, incredulous.

“Too risky.” He shook his head. “We need to have Stiles free first—”

“—and *then* you’ll stampede the horses,” Peter finished for him.

Malia frowned but nodded. With a final “good luck” at Peter, she ducked into the darkness.

“You’re lucky to have her,” Argent said, and there was no doubt in his tone that he knew exactly what Malia was to him.

- - -

Argent marched through the camp like he was on a regular stroll. Several of the Calavera men made faces, but none stopped him. That was, until he got close to Stiles.

From where Peter stood, it seemed like Argent was interrogating Stiles's guard—complaining, based upon the gestures waved at Stiles.

When the guard shrugged—and the surrounding circle laughed—Peter could almost hear the jeers being easily tossed at Stiles. Staying low, he moved from a small bush to a stack of logs. From his spot, he watched as Argent grew more vociferous, loud enough that he could hear, “If you have not even basic respect for a prince, you deny the legitimacy of your own lords.”

It was obvious by the clenched fists and wide stances that Argent was getting to them—and yet they made no move to listen.

But then the first shriek of a horse came.

Peter broke into a sprint even as the first two horses charged through the camp. A tall black stallion bucked—a soldier went for its lead only to take a hoof in the chest. A roan and a pinto charged toward the circle where Stiles was bound. And then, three horses, still bound together, ran through the other side of the camp—effectively closelining all in their path.

The chaos was great, but even still, as Argent bent to cut Stiles loose, one of the soldiers standing guard moved to block him. As Peter closed in, he heard Argent yell, “He’s going to get kicked!”

Argent was half-proven right when the roan reared up with scream, and the soldier collapsed back.

Shouts of alarm sang through the camp. A trampled tent was dragged through a campfire, where it caught aflame. As Peter closed in, Argent’s knife was cutting through Stiles’s bindings. This close, Peter could see the haze in his eyes. He’d been drugged. His first thought was the child. Were they too late? But then Argent had his left, Peter his right. Yet another triplet of horses was coming right at them—but this time, Malia was astride the center stallion.

Argent and he had just thrown Stiles up on the saddle when Stiles croaked, “Watch—”

Peter wheeled with his sword—barely missing a blade in his side. It wasn’t just one soldier though, there were five—six—eight. And standing at their front was Araya Calavera.

“Ride!” Peter shouted, and he smacked at the back of Stiles’s horse.

Even with Stiles’s hoarse, “No!” the horse took off, and Malia, taking in Peter’s command, gave him the most fleeting of nods as she dipped her head and raced after Stiles.

Argent, back to his horse, stayed.

“Ah.” Araya pointed her sword at each of them. “Here we are. A meeting of kings. Though, Christophe, I fear you have made a terrible choice.”

“Have I?”

In the camp, another alarm went off. A new thumping of the drums. Araya rolled her eyes and advanced on them. “I think I’ll have your cocks hung from strings for all to see. A nice alpha joke, hm? What knot to do to the Calaveras.”

Around her, the soldiers laughed. Peter raised his sword. “Oh, please go ahead and try.”

A few of the soldiers had the wisdom to look uneasy, but the one nearest came at him with a low jab—and Peter sliced his knee before he cut Peter’s throat. The next soldier got much the same, and when Araya shouted, “Don’t let them pick you off. All of you!” they finally all charged at once.

When they tried to wing him, Peter found himself back to back with Argent. There was a joke on his lips about that—but he didn’t get to say it—because swords were flying at him from all sides. And Peter and Argent took them out. They had been trained in this art since birth—common foot soldiers weren’t real challenges—but they were in the center of the Calavera camp. For every man that fell, a new one appeared. Peter’s knee was back to hurting. His shoulder was sore, and the sweat on his brow was starting to blur his eyes.

The beat of drums grew louder. A trumpet sounded. Another beast of a soldier came at him. This time Peter deflected the hit, but the force of it cost him. His weight landed on his bad knee.

The soldier’s sword went high. Peter was braced to move—when the soldier stopped, mouth open, and choked. When he toppled forward it was to see an arrow in his back.

And then another set of arrows flew past, taking out more Calavera soldiers. Peter saw the figure, a girl with jet black hair and hawkish eyes. At the sight of her expanded armor, Peter realized he was seeing Princess Allison all grown up. And at her side was Malia, and behind them—behind them were Derek and the soldiers of Hale.

The trumpets heralded. The bass of a drum thundered. The roar of a charge filled the air, and suddenly the Calaveras soldiers were backing away, trying to fall into ranks. Araya was barking orders. Peter heard Derek cry of “To the king!” and Peter felt a spring of hope as he cracked the nearest Calavera trooper into the ground.

At once Derek was on his right. Malia was on his left. She was pulling him back. Arrows sailed around them. Derek, tall, elegant brave to the point of stupid, was too visible. Kings, princes—they weren’t supposed to lead battles. They were supposed to keep their necks safe while their generals did their jobs, but Derek, the fool, was going after Araya, and Peter saw it when the Calavera soldier only two paces away from him raised his bow.

There was a quiet certainty to the archer, and Peter just knew—he knew—the moment he released it would be to hit his target dead center.

Peter lunged, extending with the full thrust of his arm, and the soldier turned—and the arrow—Peter felt it before he saw it—it was sitting between his ribs.

Distantly, there was Malia's scream of "No!"

Hands were all over him.

Derek said, "Sunnovabitch."

And Peter wanted to make a joke about Derek's grandmother, but he couldn't find the words over the pain, so he just laughed, a high splitting sound that came out in chokes, and then he was on a horse. The bumping hurt. Malia's arms were wrapped around him, and she was saying things, like "hold on" and "don't you dare think about leaving me" and "Stiles will fix this."

He blacked out with the moon bumping over head.

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He came to with the press of lips against his. He didn't want to wake up—the pain was worse than ever—the right side of his chest seared—but Stiles was a blur above him.

"Can you see?" Stiles asked, and his eyes were red raw as he pointed Peter toward the window where the green fields of Beacon were bright and empty. It took Peter a moment longer to focus on the three flags hanging side by side: Argent, Beacon, Hale.

"We won," Peter gasped.

"We crushed them." Stiles said the words with a smile, but then the smile broke and he bent forward over Peter, sobbing at the mess of bandages there. At the white bath of pain.

It was then that Peter knew that while the arrow had missed his heart, it had poked a hole in everything else. He was going to die. The thought didn't scare him, but it meant he would be leaving Stiles alone. "I'm sorry," Peter said.

Stiles was scrubbing his face. "If I hadn't written to Scott—if Calavera hadn't felt threatened then—"

"It would have happened a year from now." Peter tried to say this as firmly as possible. Only, it came out weak.

Stiles wiped at his nose, and he said, "Derek says you did it for him. That you took his arrow."

The night was a blur, but Peter still shook his head. "Wanted to knock the archer off course. Switched his aim."

Stiles brushed at Peter's brow, and then he whispered, "You can't leave me."

Peter stared at him. “I won’t ask you to be happy. That’s not fair. But you must strong. You are so strong.”

Stiles looked ready to hit him.

“Do it for the baby.”

At that Stiles nodded.

“And don’t let Derek name her Marie. If it’s a girl.”

That caused Stiles to choke on laughter, but then he bent forward over Peter, again looking at him with wet eyes. “I love you.”

Peter wanted to say it back but a coughing fit seized his chest. The pain was spreading, but he was becoming numb, too. Each breath became harder. When he couldn't lift his neck anymore, when he couldn't see Stiles, he let his eyes melt into the distant blue blur of daylight. A hoop of light shone. One then another.

Peter went toward the rings, drifting up and away.

Chapter 4

Stiles heard the tiny creak, and so he set down his tea cup and turned. “So did Derek take the bait?”

Malia, with her back pressed against the wall, nodded. “He did.”

Wiping at his already sweating brow, Stiles took a breath, his stomach flipping as he leaned back into the table. Tightly, he said, “Your contact did as I said, right? She didn’t seduce him. She just offered.”

“I had her tart up a bit, smile at him. She told him where her room was and walked away. He followed.”

Stiles nodded, clutching his tea cup. It was doing nothing to settle his stomach.

Malia had her arms crossed. “I told you this was a bad idea.”

Stiles shook his head. “He’s the king. He’s beautiful and courageous and darkly tragic. I know Ladies have been throwing themselves at him. I’d just been hoping, he’d—” Stiles cut himself off. “Between being married again—and the betrothal—it’s too much for him. His infant daughter is promised to marry to the heir of the Argents. Outwardly he says it’s fine, but inwardly he’s furious. I shouldn’t be surprised.” He made himself smile even as he shivered. “And besides, better someone chosen for discretion than some whore with something nasty.”

Malia raised a brow. “How do you know I didn’t pick her because she had something nasty?”

Sometimes, especially when she joked, she was so much like *him*. “Did you?”

“No.” She had his eyes.

“And he’s delayed. He won’t be here until tomorrow?” Stiles set down the cup and strode towards Malia.

Her heels went flush against the wall, and her chin drew up. “He thinks he’ll be early for your heat.”

Stiles grabbed her hand. He lifted it to his cheek and he ran his nose along her fingers. “But it’s starting now.”

Malia’s breathing was faster. “This is about him, isn’t it?”

Stiles kissed her thumb. “Are you okay with that?”

“I miss him, too,” she said, and then she drew Stiles’s mouth to hers.

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Stiles's heat was short. He couldn't be sure, but it was likely that his time with Malia had taken. By the time Derek arrived, Stiles was near the end, and when it was over—he didn't linger—Derek kissed him gently and made noises about another round, but Stiles rose, saying, "I haven't held her in three days," and pushed out of bed.

Part of him wondered if Derek would find his second round on his own.

In the nursery, Claudia was awake in her crib, and when Stiles scooped her up, she was rich with giggles for him. She was not an alpha. She was an omega, and to make it more unfair, she had inherited all of Derek's beauty. Her form already showed signs of loveliness, and her coloring—rosebud cheeks and Derek's green eyes—made everyone comment.

Stiles brought her to the window, and looking out, he pointed. "Right now, that's us. That's Hale and Beacon. All the way to the mountains. We even collect tribute from the lands on the other side. And someday..." Stiles kissed her. "...you're going to marry Scott and Allison's little boy, and then all three kingdoms will be united. They'll tell you it isn't yours because you're an omega, but they'll be wrong. Because I am going to teach you. I'm going to show you how to be strong, smart, and then someday, when you're ready, you're going to rule them all."

At the baby's gurgle, Stiles smiled, and then he amended, "If you want to, I mean. I want what you want."

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