“Do you love him?” Paige simply asked.

Derek turned to look at her. "That's a silly question," he simply replied, knowing that Paige was referring to Stiles.

“And yet it’s a question you won’t answer,” Paige replied.

Derek carefully observed Paige. “Why ask it?”

“Because he loves you.”

~*~

Or, the one where Stiles is the High Enchanter of King Hale's court, but at night is the lover that lines the sheets of Derek's bed. When Derek is forced to marry in pursuit of an heir, things begin to crumble.
EDIT: 5/15/18. Please note, I am not asking for advice on this fic. This fic is complete and not changing. I never want to disable comments on a fic, which is why I decided to address it here

In this AU, Stiles is supposed to be Philippa Eilhart from the Witcher series. And that's kind of where the fusion between fandoms end.

I decided to play with Paige's characterization and played her from the negative angle, as everyone always paints her as being a saint.

More tags will be added.

I hope you enjoy this!
Chapter 1

Stiles took his time drying himself off, using a soft towel to pat dry the droplets of water rolling down his skin. He knew he had hours before Derek finally arrived at the palace. He had been excited when Peter handed him the letter after the last council meeting.

The letter had been sealed with Derek’s private seal, the one he used for personal matters rather than reasons of State. It was the seal he had always used when writing Stiles.

Stiles ran his fingertips over the parchment, his nails catching on the wax engraved seal as he traced the howling wolf’s form. He smiled, knowing the truth—Derek was coming home early, and he was coming home to Stiles.

Stiles left the letter on one of his lab stations, turning his attentions towards readying himself for tonight. He knew he wasn’t welcomed at the reception, as he normally was shunned when Derek wasn’t present to order Stiles to attend. It didn’t bother him as it used to, when he would think about the times his mother had often been the shining guest of honor during Talia’s reign. He knew his magic was shunned, moreso now that rumors spread about him bewitching Derek.

Stiles leisurely dressed, pulling the silk fabric across his shoulders as he settled the dressing gown around his body. He left the material hanging open as he sat before his vanity, looking at himself in the mirror. He was tired—exhausted more than usual, having used his magic almost every day in order to keep an eye on Derek’s whereabouts and his wellbeing—it never made him stop worrying, knowing Derek was still on a battlefield the next day. He told himself to stop, that Derek would be fine as he always was.

Stiles ran a hand through his hair, adjusting the disarray in the wild locks. He opened a jar of foundation, rubbing some of the powder onto his fingertips. He dabbed the powder around his eyes, hoping to rid himself of the dark circles surrounding them. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the claw that hung from the nemeton branch that sat on his vanity.

Stiles turned his attention towards the raven’s claw that hung off the chain, dangling off the severed branch. He reached his hand out, twisting the token on the chain, his thoughts wandering as he tried to convince himself that Derek never saw him as a threatening force. He loved Derek, though he never said it aloud before, afraid it would make everything between them disappear. He had sacrificed so much for Derek, sometimes finding himself isolated, completely cut off from the rest of the world.

But in the end, Stiles was still a mage and Derek was still the King.

~*~

Derek relaxed into the bath, releasing a heavy sigh as his muscles lost their strain. He wished the roaring crowds, joyous of his defeat of another kingdom, hadn’t welcomed him home. He wished he could have lied and said that he was proud of his own feats. Too many nobles greeted him with untrue smiles as they offered him false praises and gifts meant to shower him with their charm.

Derek hated every moment of it.

“Your Majesty,” a familiar voice gently addressed Derek, announcing his presence.

Derek couldn’t help the smile pulling at his lips as he kept his eyes shut. “You weren’t at the festivities,” he stated, opening his eyes to look at Stiles when he heard the faint sound of bare feet
walking across tile.

Stiles offered a small shrug, gently walking around the curve of the bath’s wall. “I’m not welcome most nights,” he confessed. His bare feet made the slightest sound of dry skin touching a wet surface—a tease of intimacy.

“I don’t care what they feel,” Derek answered, shifting his body in the water as he sat upright. He moved to sit on the very edge of the bath’s seat, wanting to move closer to Stiles. “I always want you there.”

Stiles smiled to himself as he dipped his toes in the water, flicking a few droplets at Derek.

Derek slightly turned his head with a soft chuckle.

Stiles smiled at Derek. “I missed you.”

“And I missed you.”

Stiles released a soft hum. “I didn’t get to give you your gift for returning, yet.”

Derek arched his eyebrows, watching Stiles.

Stiles playfully pulled the laces of his dressing gown, making a show of loosening the garments. He let the material slide off his body, allowing the gown to fall into a pile by the bath.

Derek’s eyes traced the outline of Stiles’ naked body, a small smile growing across his lips. “That’s a damn good gift,” he commented as he watched Stiles descending into the bath with him.

“I like to think so,” Stiles smiled as he reached Derek. He pressed a kiss to Derek’s lips, lightly laughing when Derek drew his body in close.

~*~

Derek pressed a kiss to Stiles spine, smiling against Stiles’ skin when Stiles released a small moan. “I missed you so much,” he sighed.

Stiles turned his head to look at Derek. “I was afraid you’d never come back,” he confessed, a small sadness crossing his features. “This is the first time you’ve left me here,” he pressed.

Derek sighed, turning onto his back as he looked up at the ceiling. He knew Stiles was still upset with his decision. He propped his arm beneath his head, wishing he had a way to ease Stiles’ annoyance. “You know I couldn’t take you with me.”

“And here I thought you were the king,” Stiles sharply answered.

Derek released an aggravated sigh. “We’re going to start this again?” He asked as he turned to look at Stiles.

“We never started it once,” Stiles replied.

“You know I’ve been fighting with my advisors about this,” Derek replied, turning to look at Stiles.

“They shouldn’t even be allowed to fight with you about it,” Stiles countered.

“But you’re allowed to fight with me about this,” Derek countered in kind.
“I like to think I’m more than an advisor to you,” Stiles snapped, a harshness in his voice.

“You know you are,” Derek replied, turning onto his side to display that Stiles had his full attention. He propped his head up in his hand, reaching his other hand to touch Stiles. He settled for Stiles’ shoulder when Stiles turned his face away from him. “If I could make you my Consort, I would.”

Stiles was silent as he looked over at the balcony, trying to focus on keeping his tears back.

Derek’s hand slipped from Stiles. “Do you want me to tear Beacon apart?” He solemnly asked. “Would that make you happy?” His voice was wounded, weighed down by the fact that he had exhausted his resources in finding a loophole that would allow him to take Stiles as his own—to crown him the King Consort.

But Stiles’ title of sorcerer was the ironclad barrier that kept them apart.

“It’s a stupid, not to mention archaic, rule that a bunch of magic fearing old men came up with centuries ago,” Stiles huffed. “Your mother wasn’t the first ruler to welcome magic in her court.”

“But she was the first to allow an advisor to magic,” Derek replied.

Stiles turned his head to look down at the pillow, leaning his weight on one arm as he traced the woven thread of the pillow’s casing with his fingernail. “How long?”

Derek furrowed his eyebrows in question. “I don’t understand the question.”

Stiles forced himself to look at Derek. “How long would it take before your advisors start throwing marriage betrothals at you?”

Derek frowned, his eyes falling to where Stiles was still nervously picking at the pillow casing.

Stiles’ movements halted, suddenly understanding Derek’s silence. “Ah,” he softly uttered, turning to look back down at the pillow. “How many?”

“At least a dozen,” Derek honestly replied, looking at Stiles. “I told them I would look at them later.”

Stiles nodded. “It is later,” he answered as he shoved the blanket back from himself, practically crawling out of the bed as he moved away from Derek.

“Stiles, don’t,” Derek sighed in aggravation.

“I wouldn’t have come here if I knew,” Stiles sharply stated as he grabbed his dressing gown. He felt foolish, wishing he had worn his proper robes instead of the flimsy shred of modesty these robes stole from him.

The robes had been a joke between Stiles and Derek, a parody of the improper image the court believed Stiles to project. They were a gift from Derek, a type of gift that left both of them laughing but appreciating the enjoyment the robes ultimately gave them.

The material was a shimmer of golden dust, accented in the lightest tones of orange, a color Stiles always took a liking to. The laces of the robes were exquisitely crafted. The robes were not only made from fine materials, but designed by a great tailor as well.

And Stiles’ station was undeserving of such nice possessions.

“Stiles, don’t leave,” Derek stated as he rose from the bed.
“And why shouldn’t I?” Stiles asked.

“Because I’m asking you not to,” Derek answered.

“As my king, or as Derek?” Stiles countered as he turned to look at him.

Derek sighed, turning his gaze from Stiles as he thought of his next course. “We both knew this was going to happen,” he softly stated, looking to Stiles. “I have no heir, and the more battles my kingdom gets pulled into, the more likely I am to die on the battlefield. I need an heir, so that the people aren’t dragged into a civil war when I pass.”

Stiles looked away from Derek. “I hate when you’re pragmatic,” he weakly stated.

“We don’t have to …” Derek hated himself for thinking it. “I’m allowed a lover, Stiles.”

Stiles looked at Derek, his brow slowly furrowing as he allowed Derek’s words to digest. “You want me to be your whore?” He incredulously asked.

“That’s not what I said,” Derek countered.

“It’s what I already am to the Court and your advisors,” Stiles started. “I will not be labeled the Wolf’s Whore, constantly standing in the shadow of your Consort—to warm your bed while she’s round with your child.”

Derek knew Stiles was validated in his anger. He wished he could have as much disgust in his heart as Stiles seemed to feel. He was selfish and wanted to keep Stiles.

“If you accept a Consort, Derek, I will not come to your rooms again,” Stiles stated, looking at Derek. “And don’t you dare ask me to stay. Because for all the love and compassion I bare you, I would rather die than be forced to live a life of being secondary.” He fled, his words stinging his tongue with the knowledge that he would bend to Derek’s will—that he’d suffer the shame of being the Wolf’s Whore if it meant he could have Derek.

~*~

Stiles stared down at the fine marble decorating the cathedral. He pretended that his heart wasn’t breaking. He wanted to cry as the archdeacon finished up the ceremony. He forced himself to look up, seeing that the archdeacon had placed the crown on Derek’s head. He watched as Derek took the crown of the consort—a plain and beautiful circlet adorned with the smallest opals and emeralds—placing it onto the young woman’s head beside him.

Stiles forced himself to look away. His gaze caught Peter’s. He offered a curt nod of his head when Peter bowed his head to him—Peter’s silent apology for choosing a perfect Consort for Derek.

Paige shared a striking resemblance to Stiles, and Peter knew that before he vied for Derek to accept a union with her. She came from a distant kingdom, one that was small and humble in size, but vast in resources. Her hair was a shade darker than Stiles’ when the sunlight hit it, the length falling to reach her mid-back. Her face was curved similar to Stiles’, a small slender nose bringing a symmetry to her features.

Most importantly, she had beauty marks that graced her pale skin—beauty marks that shared a similarity to Stiles’ own. She had all the physical attributes to offer Derek a pale reminder of Stiles—the only difference was that Paige could give Derek an heir.

Stiles pretended that he wasn’t looking at Derek during the reception. He kept his gaze miniscule in
hopes he wouldn’t be caught. He was taken off guard when Paige approached him.

“Your Majesty,” Stiles respectfully bowed to Paige, wishing his drink was enough to make the words not taste like bile.

“I wanted to thank you,” Paige started, a softness in her voice as she elegantly stood next to Stiles. “I’ve done nothing to deserve your Majesty’s praise,” Stiles answered, taking a long sip of his drink.

“I’m told you willingly vacated the King’s bed,” Paige stated.

Stiles nearly choked on his drink. He looked at Paige. “I don’t know what your Majesty is referring to,” he played dumb to Paige’s accusation.

“I know the King enjoys you sharing his bed,” Paige carefully stated, a tightness in her voice as she addressed the concern. “But I’m told you won’t be doing that any longer.”

Stiles observed Paige. “Derek is a King,” he clearly stated. “It doesn’t matter who he shares his bed with—it’s his right.”

“But now he has me,” Paige countered. “I know he wants an heir—and if he wants a legitimate one, he won’t stray from my bed.”

Stiles stared at Paige.

“It never mattered when he was with you—you can’t give him an heir,” Paige answered, ignoring the hurt look she saw flash across Stiles’ features. “But if he’s focusing his pleasures elsewhere, I can’t give him a child.”

“Your Majesty doesn’t have to worry about me as competition.”

“You’re not,” Paige firmly stated, turning a critical eye on Stiles for the first time. “I’m Derek’s Queen—I have no competition.”

Stiles wondered if Peter had accidentally invited a snake into their den instead of the frail creature Paige pretended to be. He bowed his head, backing away from Paige. “As your Majesty has said—you have no competition.” He turned and left Paige behind when he saw a satisfied look cross her face.

~*~

Derek watched Stiles walk away from Paige, noticing how tense Stiles’ shoulders were as he hurried from the room. He didn’t stop himself from following after Stiles, wanting to know what Paige had said to him. He knew it was going to be obvious that he was absent from the room—that he left in the same direction as Stiles. But he didn’t care.

For all the people advocating for Paige’s character, Derek wasn’t sure what to make of her. He had spent little time with her, hating how obvious it was that Peter had tried to find a princess who physically resembled Stiles.

Derek halted when he caught sight of Stiles standing in the abandoned hallway outside the ballroom. He observed Stiles, noting how gorgeous and breathtaking he was.

Stiles had dressed appropriately, covering his normally exposed skin. He wore a collar that reached up underneath his jaw, the deep v falling to his sternum, exposing one of his rune tattoos—the one of
the wolf was still hidden, just over his heart, for only Derek to see. His hair was vaguely styled, a
slight disarray to it still, as if he ran his hands through it more than once. His eyes were highlighted
with charcoal, his fingernails still marked with smudge of the cosmetic, as if he tried and failed more
than once in getting the makeup how he wanted. There was more than one arcane jewel dangling
from his pierced ears, but the most prominent treasure was dangling from his neck—the claw of
Claudia’s raven, a reminder of the sacrifice he gave to ensure Derek’s first victory against the
Argents.

“Surely those aren’t tears,” Peter’s voice broke through the silence of the hallway.

Derek took a step back into the shadow of the tapestry lining the wall. He watched as his uncle
appeared from around the corner.

Stiles wiped at his eyes, partially not caring about smudging the charcoal his tears were smearing.
“Surely not,” he softly answered, turning his gaze from Peter.

“I know this isn’t easy,” Peter started.

Stiles scoffed at the words. “No, you know nothing about this.”

“I didn’t pick Paige because I thought she looked like you,” Peter offered.

“Yes you did,” Stiles sharply answered as he turned to look at Peter. “You saw all the portraits of the
proposals being thrown at Derek. You could have chosen any of them—blond, ginger, short, tall,
curvy. You had so many to choose from, but you chose the brunette girl with alabaster skin and
beauty marks.” He shook his head. “She offers nothing to this kingdom except for the fact that it will
be easier for Derek to picture me while fucking her.”

Peter carefully stared at Stiles. “If my nephew finds it easy to bed someone that isn’t you—well, I’d
say he didn’t deserve you to begin with.”

“He has to bed her,” Stiles softly argued.

“I didn’t say he didn’t have to,” Peter explained. “It doesn’t mean he has to find it easy—or
pleasurable.”

Stiles looked at Peter. “I’m not holding out for him,” he firmly stated. “I told him I wouldn’t be his
whore if he took a Queen. He knows I won’t visit him now. And I’m not going to pretend that he
will get rid of his Queen for me.”

“Who in their right mind would get rid of a Queen for a whore,” Peter pondered.

Stiles glared at Peter. He moved to go around him, wanting to be done with this conversation. He
barely startled when Peter grabbed his arm to stop him. He turned to face Peter, ready to order Peter
to release him, only to be surprised when Peter drew him into a kiss.

Derek wasn’t sure what he expected to happen. But of all scenarios, he didn’t expect Stiles to pull
Peter in close, opening up to the kiss, willingly allowing Peter to press him back into the wall. He
knew he didn’t have a right to feel jealous, but he had expected the pain, anger, and heartache that
coiled deep in his stomach. He forced himself to turn away, giving Stiles and Peter the privacy they
deserved. He had ruined his relationship with Stiles, and he believed he didn’t deserve to feel
betrayed by Stiles moving on.

Fate was cruel. If Derek had lingered a moment longer, he’d have seen the way Stiles pulled back
from Peter, gasping out for Peter to wait.
“Peter, wait—stop,” Stiles quickly uttered, his hands moving to cup Peter’s face. “I can’t—I can’t. I’m so sorry, I can’t,” he breathlessly rambled.

Peter removed his hands from Stiles’ body, placing them against the wall by Stiles’ head as he put room between them. “I’m sorry,” he hoarsely stated as he hung his head in Stiles’ cupped hands.

“I still care about him,” Stiles painfully uttered.

Peter looked up at Stiles. “That’s not surprising. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

Stiles closed his eyes, a sad expression pulling at his features as he shook his head. “I’ve given up so much for him already,” he softly confessed.

“He’s a King, Stiles,” Peter answered. “You couldn’t have expected him to keep you.”

Stiles allowed his shoulders to hunch as he practically curled in on himself. His lips turned up in a frown as he started to cry, unable to stop the hot tears from burning his eyes. “I love him,” he cried as he covered his face with his hands. “We never said it. I just assumed he loved me—that he cared enough to—to not do this.”

Peter pulled Stiles into his embrace, tucking Stiles’ head into the curve of his throat. He pressed a soft kiss to Stiles’ hair, wondering how his nephew deserved such a loving and caring devotion from one such as Stiles.

~*~

Stiles kept himself away from Derek, his gaze avoiding him at all cost. He listened to the generals and politicians prattling on about all attempts to counter any of the Argents formulated attacks. He knew they couldn’t meet the Argents on the open field, and he hoped Derek knew that as well.

“Why not utilize our arcane advantage for once?” One of the advisors asked, prompting all in the room to turn to Stiles.

Stiles looked up at the advisor who spoke, narrowing his eyes at the man. “And what do you propose I do, Lord Tarly?”

“Your job,” Lord Tarly answered. “You were appointed as the Hale Court Sorcerer, usurping the title of High Enchanter as well, and yet you can’t even advise your King when needed.”

Stiles dared to look at Derek. He wasn’t sure what he expected from it. He knew he wasn’t going to get a reaction from him. He wasn’t sure if he was more hurt or angry when Derek turned his gaze away from him. It seemed the times of Derek rising to Stiles’ defense were gone now that they no longer shared a bed.

“There are better approaches than annihilating an army of innocent men,” Stiles firmly stated, his gaze still watching Derek as the King leaned over the maps on the table before him.

“That’s your advice?” Another lord—Lord Blake—demanded.

“What would you have me do? Burn them?” Stiles snapped as he looked at the lords. “You’re all talk for men who have seen enough battles to last them a lifetime. But unlike you, I do not crave the senseless bloodshed.”

Lord Tarly scoffed at Stiles’ words. “You’re little more than a pretty face, mage. You’ve never added a single idea to this council—nor helped the King make any important decisions of State.”
“We all know that’s a lie,” Stiles countered, placing his hands on his hips as he stood his ground.

“No, we all know whose bed you’ve been hiding in,” Lord Blake countered.

“Enough!” Derek snapped as he stood up straight, glowering at the Lords as they began to bow their heads. He turned his attentions towards Stiles.

Stiles refused to bow as he knew should—as he used to playfully do to keep up pretenses.

“What is your suggestion, Stiles?” Derek asked, giving him the platform he needed to voice his concerns.

“Forget them,” Stiles bitterly stated. “They’re a figure from your past—they shouldn’t hold any meaning to you any longer, especially now that you have an alliance with the Queen’s houses. To fight would bring up old wounds and split your kingdom, creating a division.”

Derek stared at Stiles. “You want me to forget all that Gerard’s done?”

“That shouldn’t be too hard for you, your Majesty,” Stiles answered, holding Derek’s gaze. “As I said, he’s nothing but a ghost from your past now. Forgetting him and all you’ve experienced together shouldn’t be difficult.”

Derek’s features darkened, his brow furrowing when he understood Stiles’ implication. He clamped his teeth down tight, his jaw aching as he held back his desire to round on Stiles’ backhanding statement. But part of him knew he deserved it.

Stiles artfully bowed to Derek before turning and leaving.

~*~

“Do you love him?” Paige simply asked.

Derek turned to look at her, abandoning his hold on the map he was pretending to inspect. He had noticed Paige’s persistence in spending time with him now that they were married. He tried to accommodate her, allowing her to be present while he dealt with minor details of State. “That’s a silly question,” he simply replied, knowing that Paige was referring to Stiles. He had hoped to play it off as something unworthy of his attention instead of the terrifying reality it held for him.

“And yet it’s a question you won’t answer,” Paige replied.

Derek carefully observed Paige. “Why ask it?”

Paige calmly shrugged her shoulders. “Because he loves you.”

Derek cleared his throat, shaking his head as if that statement was ridiculous.

“You deny that?” Paige asked.

“I simply never gave it thought,” Derek lied, as if it hadn’t haunted his days and nights.

“The whole Court whispers about it,” Paige explained. “They act as if I’m someone to take pity on, trying to keep it from me.”

Derek looked at Paige. “Why do you care about this?”

Paige sighed, turning her attentions towards the window. “You’ve done the duty of consummating
our marriage … yet you refuse to visit my bed now.”

Derek looked down at his hands, knowing that he had no answer to give Paige. He had always been blindingly obvious in his attraction to Stiles, and it was no surprised that it made him ill to think of sharing another’s bed.

“Young uncle chose me, correct?” Paige continued to question.

“Yes,” Derek admitted.

“I’ve heard some say that I hold a great many physical similarities to Stiles,” Paige offered. “I supposed your uncle wanted to make it easier for you to look at your Consort.”

Derek closed his eyes, pushing off the table to move towards Paige. “I promise you, I do not try and pretend that you are him.”

“I don’t want you to,” Paige answered as she met Derek halfway, reaching a hand out to take his. “I had hoped that even if we can’t have a loving relationship, we could at least have companionship.”

Derek reached an unsure hand up, gently cupping her face in his hand. “I don’t want to pretend to have a relationship with you.”

Paige nodded, looking up at Derek as she covered his hand with her own.

~*~

Stiles stared at the guards. He had never before been rejected from seeing Derek. No room was restricted to Stiles, and for good reason—he always had the King’s ear, the only person who could help Derek mold the future of the kingdom for the better.

“Again, I am sorry, High Enchanter,” the guard formally stated, refusing to budge.

“This is ridiculous,” Stiles harshly uttered mostly to himself as he looked away from the guards.

“It’s an order from His Majesty,” the guard offered.

Stiles looked at the guard, his eyes widened in disbelief. “The King would not bar me from seeing him.”

“The King has informed the Royal Guard that his rooms are off limits to all but Her Majesty, the Queen Consort,” the guard recited, a reluctance in his voice.

Stiles looked away from the guard, trying to keep his emotions from reacting. “Did he specify me?” He dared to ask.

“High Enchanter—”

“Parrish,” Stiles sharply spoke his name, closing his eyes when he felt the burn of his magic pooling in his spine. “Please,” he softly pleaded as he looked at Parrish. “The truth.” He knew the tears in his eyes were obvious when Parrish’s stoic features flickered.

Parrish sighed. “I’m sorry, Stiles,” he answered. “His Majesty is spending time with Her Majesty. And he … he ordered for you to not come see him in his private quarters any longer. That he will meet and address you on common grounds.”

Stiles stared at Parrish, sharply nodding his head when he realized that a response was needed. “I …
Please, tell His Majesty that I understand,” he struggled with his words. His step backwards was stumbling as he tried to focus on containing the pain he felt in his chest.

~*~

The portal ripped through thin air, a dark swirling vortex that caused a gust of wind to spiral out from it. The papers around the war table were caught up in the gust, flying up into the sky. A man in torn and bloodied clothing fell through the portal, fear and pain covering his features as he scrambled to get away from whatever was on the other side of the portal.

The guards had acted quickly, several of them rallying around Derek as the others confronted the man.

Stiles stepped out of the portal, marching towards the man he had pushed through it. Fire ignited in his hand, the flames engulfing his hand completely as Stiles moved towards the man. The portal closed behind Stiles, catching all those in the room by surprise at the spectacle unfolding.

“No!” The man pleaded as he tried to get away from Stiles, as if Stiles was something conjured from his nightmares.

Stiles grabbed the man’s tunic, yanking him up off the ground to hold close. He brought the flame in his hand closer to the man. “I want you to tell them the same thing you told me,” he demanded. “Now!” He threatened when the man didn’t speak.

“The K-king in the West,” the man stuttered in fear. “They call Argent the King in the West. They’ve bent the knee, not through loyalty but fear,” he quickly added as he fearfully looked at Stiles. “He plans to attack King Derek from within his council,” he added.

“This is preposterous,” Lord Blake stated. “You’ve beaten a man into confessing your own version of events.”

“It gets better, Lord Blake,” Stiles snapped as he looked up at him. “I want the name of the councilman.”

“Beauregard Blake,” the man quickly uttered. “His daughter is meant to marry Argent’s son now that he’s widowed.”

Derek looked at Lord Blake.

“Your Majesty, this is the ramblings of a frightened man,” Lord Blake countered as he turned towards Derek.

Peter sidestepped in front of Derek, placing his arm out in a protective manner. “These are damning accusations, Blake.”

“By an injured man,” Lord Blake countered. “One who has suffered at the hands of an unhinged mage.”

“Perhaps a truth spell would make Your Majesty feel better about the accusation,” Stiles offered as he released his hold on the cowering man before him. He turned to look at Derek. “You wanted my help with the looming threat. I’ve gotten you proof. If you need more, just ask and I shall give it to you.”

“Do it,” Derek calmly answered, knowing Stiles wouldn’t have made such a spectacle if there was no reason for it.
“Your Majesty, I must protest this,” Lord Blake started.

“It wasn’t a request, Lord Blake,” Derek snapped as he looked at the man. “If you truly have no reason to fear me knowing the truth, you will bend your pride to my will.”

“This isn’t the first time he’s poisoned your mind,” Lord Blake snapped. “He’s nothing more than a charlatan,” he pointedly cursed at Stiles.

“Take a step closer, and I’ll show you how much of a charlatan I am,” Stiles partially growled.

“I won’t be subjected to his magic,” Lord Blake stated.

“Then how about your daughter’s?” Stiles countered. He allowed a small smile to pull at his lips when Lord Blake looked at him in horror. “It’s no secret she practices her magic behind sealed doors thanks to your hatred of it. You tried to keep it hidden—out of sight, out of mind, right? Or perhaps you wanted her to train in secret—hoping she could one day replace me.” He looked at Derek, wishing to know if Derek still trusted his judgment. He looked back at Blake. “But you’re the charlatan, Lord Blake. You speak flowered words but plot daggers in the darkness, all for selfish gain. You know you can’t deny it—not to our King.”

“Your father should have let us drown you in the lake after you killed your mother,” Lord Blake spat at Stiles. “He knew what you were but chose to allow a monster to live, out of sentiment.”

Stiles’ hand raised in anger, the fire igniting in his palm once more. He was ready to incinerate Lord Blake when a firm hand grabbed his wrist, holding his arm back from swinging into motion. He whipped his body around to face the person that dared to stop him—nearly prepared to ignite them in the flame as well. His features fell when he realized it was Derek.

Derek’s hand was gentle, his fingers merely wrapped Stiles’ wrist in a soft embrace. He slowly lowered Stiles’ hand as he looked into Stiles’ eyes. It was a silent reassurance that Stiles didn’t have to be strong for once—he didn’t have to carry out the execution.

Stiles curled his fingertips into his palm as he dropped his gaze to his hand, watching the flames slowly dancing around his hand before dying out and extinguishing. He tried to ignore the way Derek’s hand lingered in holding his wrist. He wanted to believe it meant something.

Derek looked at Lord Blake. “I don’t care for your cruel words, Lord Blake,” he lowly stated. “You’ve been nothing but hateful towards Stiles and all he’s done for this kingdom.”

“Your Majesty—”

“I don’t care if you willingly submit to a truth spell or not,” Derek snapped, stopping Lord Blake’s words from interrupting him. “You’ll submit to one because it pleases me, not Stiles.”

Stiles turned to look at those gathered, wondering who heard him being ridiculed in such a manner. He startled into action when he saw the guard moving towards Derek. “Derek!” He yelled as he grabbed ahold of Derek, yanking Derek in close to his body as he backpedalled from the would-be assassin.

It was a sudden array of chaos with Derek falling against Stiles as they both stumbled for footing, all in an attempt to get away from the blade meant to kill a king.

Peter moved to block the assassin, cursing loudly when the dagger dug down into his forearm, the blade slicing deep enough to hit bone. He brought his knee up into the guard’s stomach, hitting him hard enough to drive him backwards. He held his wound tightly as he watched the guards restrain
the attacker. He turned to look at Derek, catching sight of his nephew being guarded by Stiles’ arm, a protective ward of magic built up between the both of them and everyone else.

Stiles’ back was exposed to the threat, having been prepared to use his body as a secondary barrier to protect Derek from the assassin. He turned to look at Peter. He dropped the ward, quickly moving to tend to Peter’s wound.

“It’s fine,” Peter offered as Stiles assessed the damage.

“If it gets infected, you’ll either lose your arm or die,” Stiles countered.

“Lovely,” Peter dryly replied. “I’ll be a one-armed advisor,” he joked.

Stiles fondly shook his head, using his magic to heal Peter’s arm.

Peter looked up, seeing the way Derek’s gaze lingered on them. He wasn’t surprised by Derek’s quick turn from them.

“Throw him in the dungeon,” Derek ordered the guards. “Get what information you can out of him.” He looked to Parrish. “And find Lord Blake.”

“He’ll be half way to the Argents by now,” Peter commented.

“No thanks to you,” Derek sharply uttered.

Stiles turned to look at Derek. “Your uncle saved your life, Your Majesty.”

“He thinks he’s entitled to my arm,” Peter commented.

“I’m entitled to your life if I choose,” Derek snapped.

Peter narrowed his eyes at Derek, trying to discover his reason for such a reaction. He watched Derek leave with what was left of the guards, remaining in the room with Stiles as his wound was tended.

“He has no reason to act like that,” Stiles softly commented as he concentrated on healing Peter’s arm.

“Jealous men often act without reason,” Peter replied.

Stiles looked up at Peter. “And he has what to be jealous of?”

A small smile pulled at Peter’s lips. “He still cares for you, and he believes I’ve been taking advantage of your separation.”

Stiles looked away from Peter. “That’s ridiculous.”

“And Derek often is ridiculous,” Peter replied.

“He has no right,” Stiles firmly stated.

“No one can tell someone how they should feel,” Peter corrected Stiles. “Derek has no right to tell you how you should act or who you should be with. But he can feel that jealousy burning in his chest just as any man who lost your favor would.”

Stiles looked at Peter. “I won’t apologize to him for healing you.”
“I’m not saying you should,” Peter replied. “Just understand that his anger, though it seems malicious now, is coming from a place of hurt. He will feel foolish and ask for forgiveness sooner than you think.”

~*~

Derek never explicitly sought out Stiles’ forgiveness, though in the end Stiles made excuses for him. Stiles pretended that Derek wanted to apologize, that he was actually sorry for the way things were splitting apart for them. But Derek never made a move to show Stiles a shred of leniency when it came to expecting results.

That was how they ended up in a fight.

Derek had yelled at his generals to get out, for everyone to leave him alone to speak with his High Enchanter. He even ordered Peter to leave them, annoyed when his uncle hesitated before finally leaving.

“That’s mature,” Stiles pointedly stated.

“I’ve had enough of this,” Derek replied in a low tone. “You need to stop arguing with me left and right while in front of my advisors.”

Stiles had his arms crossed over his chest as he lulled his head to the side, pinning Derek with a tense glare. “I’m sorry, when should I address you in private? Should I ask the Queen when you’re next free?”

“Stiles,” Derek angrily stated his name in reprimand. “Enough.”

“You’re right, enough,” Stiles snapped. “I can’t advise you when you won’t let me have an opinion.” He let his arms fall in order to place his hands on his hips. “And no more being pissed at your uncle because you think we’re fucking.”

Derek’s features twisted—it was the first time anyone openly mentioned the idea that Stiles and Peter could have been intimate with one another. His own suspicions were still plaguing his mind, and it didn’t help when Paige would mention how close Peter seemed with Stiles whenever they were caught conversing during public festivities.

“I’m not fucking your uncle,” Stiles firmly stated once more to gain Derek’s attention. “I wouldn’t do that, Derek,” he softly added.

“It’s not my place to care,” Derek answered.

Stiles released a soft scoff, turning his face from Derek. He pretended to scratch an itch high on his cheekbone, desperate to brush the unshed tears away. “You don’t trust me anymore, Derek. I don’t see how I’m to advise you on anything when you can’t trust me.” He looked back at Derek. “You used to take my word as gospel, because you trusted I had your best interest at hand. I still have your best interest at hand, and yet you suddenly don’t trust me.”

Derek ran his hands over his face, trying to rub the weariness away. It had been so long since he had a night of uninterrupted sleep. He worried, more often than not, about how to keep his kingdom from another war. And then the peaceful nights he wished to pledge to sleep were stolen whenever he found Paige in his rooms, seeking him out for the warmth of his company.

It was impossible for Derek not to think of Stiles. Once, he tried to keep Stiles from his mind,
desperate to give his attention towards his wife, only to have the night end in the humiliating failure
of being unable to perform as a husband should.

Paige blamed Stiles, as she always had. Never noting the lack of attraction Derek had for her—the
passion he had with Stiles completely gone from anything he had with her. She fought with Derek,
going as far to call him a coward for letting Stiles bewitch him. She always played the victim the next
day, citing the pressures the kingdom put on her to provide Derek with an heir, only for there to be
nothing from their limited nights spent trying.

Derek knew he had a duty to perform, and hated himself for it. He vomited afterwards, while Paige
slept contently in his bed. He hated himself for pretending she was Stiles, just to get through the act
—to keep himself erect long enough to finish the task at hand. He prayed it would be the end of it.

“I’m trying, Stiles,” Derek softly stated, his voice small and unsure.

Stiles’ expression softened some, taking a step towards Derek. “You know I’d never wish you ill,
Derek,” he explained. “But Paige despises me. That is no secret. And I can’t help you if she warps
how you think of me.”

“She could never do that,” Derek answered, looking up at Stiles. “You know that.”

“I thought I did,” Stiles sadly replied.

Derek reached out for Stiles, his hand covering over Stiles’ own. “I do love you, Stiles,” he sounded
pained. “That’s what makes this so difficult.”

Stiles released a shaky breath. “You can’t do that, Derek,” he stated in a small voice.

“I’m not sorry for how I feel,” Derek replied. “But I can’t keep being this close to you—it makes me
think of how things used to be.”

Stiles was about to respond when a guard burst into the room unannounced. He pulled his hand
away from Derek’s, not wanting to give breath to any rumors already swirling.

“Don’t you know how to knock?” Derek demanded in a sharp tone.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” the guard quickly apologized. “But it’s the Queen. She’s fainted.”

Stiles looked at the guard.

“Fainted?” Derek asked.

“Yes,” the guard quickly confirmed. “She was with her handmaidens, and suddenly became ill. The
healers have been called. She’s fearful of poison, and asked for your presence.”

Derek looked at Stiles.

Stiles turned to the guard, quickly moving to exit the room again. “Tell the healers not to let her
ingest anything, incase it is poison. Have one of my apprentices go to the lab and retrieve what I
need for poisoning. They should all know what I need.” He paused, looking back at Derek. “Every
second counts, Your Majesty.”

Derek hesitated, wondering if this was a sign from the gods that he would be given a second chance
at happiness. He decided that he’d feel guilty later, should the true cause of Paige’s ailment be
poison. He followed after Stiles, knowing that he would be given an answer soon enough.
Paige was sitting comfortably in her bed, handmaidens dramatically surrounding her as they fretted over their Queen. She smiled at Derek, her expression barely changing when she saw Stiles enter the room as well. “I told them you’d come,” she softly stated.

Stiles kept from rolling his eyes at her words.

“Do the healers know what is wrong?” Derek asked, ignoring Paige’s comment.

“No,” Paige stated, a frown pulling at her lips. “I suddenly felt weak and passed out.”

“She threw up as well,” a handmaiden stated.

“If you will allow it, Your Majesty,” Stiles started, taking a step towards the bed. “I could use my magic to pinpoint what is ailing you.”

Paige looked at Derek, her eyes wide with uncertainty.

“Stiles is very good at diagnosing illnesses,” Derek replied, having full confidence in Stiles.

“Well, if you trust his abilities, then so do I,” Paige answered, nodding in consent for Stiles to proceed.

Stiles moved around Derek, sitting on the edge of the bed by Paige. He took her hand in his, hating the intimacy of the gesture. “Just close your eyes and relax, my lady,” he instructed her.

Stiles closed his eyes after Paige, concentrating on the magic pulsing through his palms and into her. He hated this part—the search for the sickness. He was puzzled when he didn’t find a poison, trying to decipher her symptoms with other ailments he knew of. His stomach twisted when he pinpointed the cause. He opened his eyes, looking at Paige, only to find that she was looking right back at him. He saw the hint of the smug smile pulling at the corner of her lips. He recognized the taunt in her eyes as the victory she saw it as.

Stiles tore his hands away from Paige, moving to stand up.

“Has she been poisoned?” A healer quickly asked Stiles, knowing that the mage found something.

Stiles couldn’t stop staring at her. He had still struggled with the idea that he couldn’t have Derek anymore, but this only cemented it. He hated Paige for thinking she was clever—that she had won some unspoken battle between them. It wasn’t a victory when one side was forced into submission by an ally.

“Stiles,” Derek addressed him, reaching a hand out to touch his arm.

Stiles jerked back, finally turning his attention to Derek. He couldn’t feel the tears on the brink of breaking loose, and he didn’t want to give Paige that victory as well. “I believe the Queen has happy news for you,” he weakly stated for Derek’s benefit. He hoped Derek wasn’t part to such a petty display. He turned to leave the room behind before his tears broke.

Paige was pregnant, with Derek’s baby. And nothing was going to change that reality for Stiles.

Derek tried to speak with Stiles, but he found the door to Stiles’ lab periodically locked whenever Stiles was there working. He had tried to sleep outside Stiles’ lab, only to find that Stiles somehow
made it around his sleeping form. He knew there was someone else visiting Stiles in his labs, hearing
the voices whenever Stiles’ wards flared.

Derek was furious with Paige, yelling at her for pulling such a stunt. He didn’t believe her claim of
innocence, but knew he had to forgive it when the kingdom reacted with cheers of happiness. He
didn’t like any of it, seeing how Paige seemed to know exactly what Stiles had been talking about
when he said it was ‘happy news.’

Derek pretended to be pleased with the merrymaking and revelry concerning the impending birth of
his heir. He wished Stiles had been in attendance, knowing that it was his one chance to see Stiles
and talk without being locked out of the room. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say he was shocked
when Stiles appeared before the throne, bearing a gift for the Queen.

Paige placed her hand on her stomach, rubbing a gentle circle into her swollen belly as she pretended
to be unaware of the image she made. She was bragging, placing her stomach on display to make a
point to Stiles—she did for Derek what Stiles could never do.

Stiles remained looking calm and collect, his gaze never turning to Derek as he remained focused on
the Queen. He bowed his head respectfully. “I hope my gift benefits you a great deal.” He gestured
for the servants to bring the box up to Paige in order to make it easier for her to open.

Stiles was dressed as he once traditionally did. His modest clothes were forgotten for the deep
plunging v-necks he often sported. His makeup highlighted his features, golden dust painted above
his eyelids as charcoal outlined his eyes beneath it. He wore a delicately elaborate lace collar that
haloed his neck, sleeves baring his shoulders and a significant part of his back. He looked as he once
did before his flirtations with Derek grew into something more, when he dressed to catch Derek’s
eye.

And like all the other times, it worked.

Yet, Stiles wasn’t wearing his raven’s claw—what was left of his mother’s familiar after he sacrificed
it for Derek.

Derek had never forgotten Stiles’ sacrifice, only learning about it when he woke from his brush with
death. He found Stiles hysterically hovering over him, pressing kisses to his face as Stiles sobbed
tears of sorrowful joy. He learned what Stiles gave up, and regretted that he cost Stiles such a
beloved thing—the only connection he had left to his mother.

The loud murmurs that broke through the crowd caused Derek to turn and look at Paige. It was then
that he noticed what Stiles had given Paige.

Stiles’ favored robes—the translucent ones that Derek had given him as a parting joke. They were
the robes that the whole Court knew adorned Stiles in the King’s favor.

Paige, however, was none the wiser to what the initial purpose of the robes was.

“I hope they bring you as much luck as they did me,” Stiles added, taking an artful bow. As he rose,
he made eye contact with Derek, an icy glare consuming his features. He walked away from the
thrones, enjoying that the nobles parted before him, avoiding him as if he was a plague.

~*~

Derek sought out Stiles, heading to his lab once more, knowing he spent more time there than
anywhere else in the palace. He descended the steps, taking his time as he came to the door. His
hand almost touched the door when he heard the heavy breathing, panting that interrupted moans of
pleasure. He didn’t want to believe what his rational side told him—that there was a lovers’ tryst happening behind the door, and logically it involved Stiles.

Derek pushed his pain aside, shoving open the door in a swift and simple motion. He took a step into the lab, knowing that Stiles would feel his wards reacting—if Stiles wasn’t beyond distracted.

Stiles was bent over one of his main stationary tables, his hands gripping down on the tabletop. The table’s edge bit into his hips with every thrust, trying desperately to meet his lover’s movements. Something twitched at the back of his mind, the faintest warning that someone passed through his ward. “Alex,” he started, his voice hitching in a breathy moan. “Wait,” he pressed, reaching a hand back to touch Alex, lifting his head to turn and look. That was when he caught sight of Derek standing at the lab’s entrance, a completely dumbfound look decorating his features. “Stop, stop!” He quickly uttered, demand in his voice as he nearly shoved Alex back.

The erratic movement seemed to alert Alex to check their surroundings, seeing Derek.

Derek turned his head away as the couple scrambled to cover themselves appropriately. He cleared his throat, trying to school he emotions.

“Your Majesty,” Stiles started as he made sure his clothes were secured tightly around his body before addressing Derek. “Forgive me, I didn’t hear you knock.”

Derek turned his attention towards Stiles. “Being King, I didn’t realize I had to knock,” he forcefully stated.

Stiles felt how stiff Alex was beside him, reaching a hand out to take hold of Alex’s. “This is one of my fellow sorcerers,” he started to introduce Alex. “Alexander—”

“I didn’t ask for his name,” Derek coldly snapped. “I didn’t come here to meet your bed partner. I came here to inform you that in the future, you will present the Queen with gifts befitting her station,” he stated, forgetting the real reason he came to see Stiles—knowing that it was his own loneliness and guilt that brought him here. Now all he felt was anger. “Not below it,” he added.

Stiles’ body stilled, his features twisting some. He had blinked, nearly recoiling as if Derek had hit him. He cleared his throat, offering a faint nod. “My mistake,” he barely stated. “Is that all?” He asked, grateful his voice didn’t crack under emotion.

“In future, lock your lab while you’re indisposed,” Derek stated as he turned and exited the lab without further discussion.

Alex tightened his hold on Stiles’ hand, reaching his free hand up to brush the tears from Stiles’ eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Stiles quickly stated. “I feel embarrassed.”

Alex pulled Stiles into a hug, pressing a kiss into his hair. “You shouldn’t be,” he offered, rubbing his open palm along Stiles’ back. He knew without a doubt that Stiles had lied to him earlier—there was no way Stiles was over Derek, and vice versa. Though he found the King’s reaction to be a near guarantee that Stiles would never fall prey to feelings for Derek again.

Stiles sniffed some, suppressing his tears as he pulled away from Alex.

“My offer still stands, Stiles,” Alex pressed, knowing that now was as good a time to mention it as any.

“I told you—”
“You shouldn’t stay in a place where your magic is looked down on,” Alex countered. “You’re a talent meant to be cherished, not sneered at. And it seems this King is happy to let his Queen do that.”

Stiles looked away from Alex.

“I know this is your home—your childhood home,” Alex elaborated. “But you deserve to feel welcomed in your home.” He sighed. “We could be happy, Stiles. We could … grow to love one another, if you’d let your heart try.”

Stiles knew he wouldn’t love another the way he did Derek. But he could try. “I’m not sure,” he softly answered.

“Think about it,” Alex replied. “That’s all I ask.”

Stiles nodded in response.

~*~

Stiles had been barred from court and other festive functions, the Queen’s already soured feelings towards Stiles began to putrefy when she discovered the origin of the robes.

Paige had the torn and charred scraps of material dropped off at Stiles’ lab as a warning. She wasn’t going to be crossed again with such an insult.

But Stiles didn’t care if he angered Paige as he hurried into the throne room, his last correspondence with Alex clutched in his hand. He halted when the guards told him too, only to be met with Peter just outside inner room that held the royal monarch’s throne.

“You seem troubled,” Peter started, wishing to deescalate the situation before anything reached Derek.

“I just had word from Novigrad, and my father is missing,” Stiles quickly stated, the urgency evident in his tone. “I need help finding him, a scouting party or something,” he stated as he pressed by Peter.

“Stiles,” Peter warned him, grabbing Stiles’ arm to stop him from getting to Derek. “It would be best to approach Derek when he is alone,” he instructed.

“My father doesn’t have that kind of time,” Stiles sharply snapped. “The Argents have him, and I need help now.” He yanked his arm out of Peter’s hold, marching into the room he knew Derek was entertaining diplomats in.

Derek balked at seeing Stiles, uncertain how to respond when the diplomats turned to look at him.

Stiles bowed to Derek and the other men before he approached them. “I have urgent news from Novigrad, and I must speak with you in haste, Your Majesty.”

Derek looked uncertain when the other men looked at him. “I’m sure this can wait until other matters are settled.”

“Your Lord of Strategy has been kidnapped,” Stiles snapped, uncaring if the diplomats overheard. Perhaps it would force Derek’s hand into acting. “Can that wait until other matters are settled?”

The herald announced Her Majesty, the loud noise of the staff banging against the marble floors
preceded Paige’s entrance.

Stiles only turned to look at Paige when he realized she wasn’t making her way across the room. He locked gazes with her, uncaring for the scowl she was sporting. He noticed that her stomach had grown larger in the weeks since he insulted her with his gift, though he knew she wouldn’t allow anyone to forget it.

“What is he doing here?” Paige demanded of Derek, her sight not leaving Stiles.

“He has news about a contact in Novigrad,” Derek answered, looking towards Paige. “It’s a matter of State.”

“I don’t like him here,” Paige plainly stated. “I said I didn’t want him in the palace any longer.” She turned her scowl towards Derek. “I don’t trust him—not after the stunt he pulled.”

“Paige,” Derek called her name in a low warning, wishing to tell her to cease her childish tantrum.

“I don’t trust him around the baby,” Paige pressed in a whiny voice, as if she was accustomed to getting her way whenever she used such an excuse.

“It is found that mages are bad luck for healthy birthings,” one of the diplomats stated.

Stiles rolled his eyes, sick of hearing that same superstitious belief thrown around.

“You said you would have him vacate the palace,” Paige pressed on when Derek didn’t reply.

Stiles looked at Derek, narrowing his eyes as he tried to catch a counter to Paige’s claim. His jaw trembled when he saw no reaction stirring within Derek.

“Perhaps this conversation should take place elsewhere,” Peter offered, gesturing for the guards to escort the diplomats away. He painstakingly gestured for Paige’s handmaidens to leave, annoyed when the women dramatically fanned themselves. He closed the door tightly behind them, leaving the room empty save for himself, Stiles, Derek, and Paige.

“You lied to me,” Paige uttered, her voice tight and breathy, as if she was shocked by such a revelation.

“Stiles is the High Enchanter,” Derek replied, looking at Paige. “I wasn’t about to kick one of my advisors from the palace. He was spoken to.”

Stiles scoffed. “Spoken to, is that what you call it?”

Paige moved quickly for a woman so heavily pregnant. She smacked Stiles across the face, digging her nails into his cheek.

On instinct, flames lined Stiles’ open palm as he turned back to look at Paige, a burning fire reflecting in his eyes.

Derek reached Stiles quickly enough, grabbing Stiles’ hand. The flames disappeared before Derek was able to hold Stiles’ palm against his, Stiles’ magic reacting to his touch on instinct. “We’ll talk privately,” he uttered, pulling Stiles with him into the side parlor. He had confidence that Peter would handle Paige.

Stiles pulled his hand from Derek’s once they were secured in the room alone. He paced, running a hand along his cheek where Paige’s fingernails drew blood.
“You said your father was in trouble,” Derek started, moving to stop Stiles’ pacing in an attempt to inspect his wound.

Stiles looked at Derek. “Do you care?”

Derek looked back at Stiles, his fingertips still holding Stiles’ chin. “You know I do.”

“No, I don’t.” Stiles answered, his heart still hurting.

Derek looked wounded. “You know I love you—”

Stiles wrenched himself out of Derek’s grasp, shoving him backwards. “You don’t get to say you love someone but then have a child with someone else!” He angrily yelled in exasperation. “What you’re doing isn’t fair. Or do you not see it that way? Are you really being the selfish brat Gerard Argent paints you as?”

“You handed my Queen a—” Derek stopped himself, biting back his angered words. “You know that the Court knows those robes belong to you—it’s no secret that I gave them to you.”

“That was the point,” Stiles childishly uttered. “She hurt me, Derek,” he stated as he turned to look at him. “I’m a vindictive creature. She rubbed it in my face that she was pregnant with your baby.”

Derek tiredly shook his head. “She didn’t know, then.”

“You believe her over me?” Stiles quickly questioned, gesturing towards the door. “After what she just did—”

“You raised magic against the Queen, Stiles,” Derek quickly uttered. “Other Kings would have burned you at the stake for that.”

“She has you so twisted, you couldn’t even see all she has done,” Stiles argued.

“There had just been an attack on my life—she fainted, she could have been poisoned, Stiles,” Derek replied.

“There was laughter in her eyes when she realized I knew,” Stiles snapped. “She knew—”

“You want to paint her as the villain,” Derek countered.

“Maybe she is!” Stiles yelled at him.

“She’s just jealous, Stiles,” Derek softly replied. “She knows how I feel about you.”

“Are you so desperate to have an heir that you’d give up your High Enchanter?”

“You’re trying to make me choose when you know that’s impossible for me to do,” Derek replied.

“She’s twisting things around, making you hate me more and more,” Stiles stated.

“No, Stiles,” Derek lowly answered. “You’re doing that yourself.”

Stiles turned and looked away from Derek. “Fine,” he weakly uttered, his words turning to ash on his tongue. “I’ll make it easier on you, then.” He spun on his heel, finally ready to part with Derek. “I’m leaving—like she wants.”

Derek looked at Stiles’ turned back.
“You’ll finally have marital bliss,” Stiles added, wanting to dig the knife deeper.

“Where will you go?” Derek asked, wanting to call out Stiles’ bluff.

Stiles hesitated, hearing the masked anger in Derek’s tone. “I have connections, Derek. The Lodge of Mages, even the Guild of Healers.” He tightened his hands into fists as he turned to look at Derek. “Even Alexander has asked me to move closer to him.”

“The Lodge and Guild aren’t even within the city’s limits,” Derek replied, ignoring Stiles’ obvious attempt to goad him.

Stiles released a bitter laugh. “You throw me out of my childhood home—the only place I’ve ever known—and expect me to still stay within your bounds?”

Derek refused to answer.

“Allow me to offer you one last lesson you have yet to be taught, Your Majesty,” Stiles nearly spat the title at Derek’s feet. “You want security—to be assured your legacy continues to thrive even long after you’re gone. You have your throne, thanks to the sacrifices I’ve made for you. And now, you will have an heir, thanks to you sacrificing us.” He barely flinched when the portal tore open behind him at his beckoning, an invitation for him to escape. “When you wound someone, you don’t get to decide what they do with the rest of their life, Derek. Maybe one day, looking back on it, you’ll recognize everything I did for you, and how you couldn’t even believe me when I needed you to.”

And just like that, Stiles walked out of Derek’s life—away from the life he knew and loved. He felt as if his heart was breaking, shattered into pieces that were impossible to fit back together. But he wasn’t going to live in a place he was detested. He could only hope that Derek would one day realize what he gave up, all in hopes of pleasing a social calling.

~*~

Derek re-entered the throne room alone.

“Should I sent the band of scouts?” Peter asked as he approached Derek.

Derek looked at Peter, a hollowness in his eyes. He felt as if a hole opened up in his stomach and tore through his chest. He lost Stiles, the only person he had been convinced he couldn’t lose. “Did he mention where his father was last seen?”


Derek nodded. “Send Erica and Isaac,” he instructed. “Have them make contact with any spies we have in Novigrad—I want to know who took John.”

Peter hesitated when he noticed Stiles was not rejoining them. “And Stiles?”

“He left. He’ll be living in the city, though,” Derek offered. “Inform Erica and Isaac to relay any information to him. He’ll be with … a mage name Alexander.”

“He threatened me,” Paige angrily snapped at Derek when he didn’t make a move to address her. “You let him go after he threatened your Queen—”

“Shut up!” Derek yelled at her.

Peter silently looked on, hoping he was about to see what should have been done months ago.
“You struck him,” Derek stated in a tight voice, as if he was explaining something to an insolent child. “You’re lucky he didn’t burn the skin from your hand.”

Paige looked shocked. “You’re still defending him—”

“Your confinement will start today,” Derek quickly stated, knowing that Paige still had more than a week before the traditional confinement should start. “You’ll stay in your quarters, shut away for the remainder of the pregnancy. When the baby is born, then you will be allowed to return to Court.”

“You’re shunning me?” Paige demanded. “You’re locking me away like some criminal because your whore—”

“It’s kinder than what you wanted to do to Stiles,” Derek answered as he looked at her finally. “I gave you the benefit of every doubt, and you lied to me. I should have listened to Stiles from the beginning.”

“Derek,” Paige started, a look of terror on her face. She was just realizing that she had destroyed what favor she had with him.

Derek didn’t reply to her as he left the throne room behind, his thoughts plagued with the image of Stiles’ back disappearing through the portal. He feared he’d never see him again.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Omg, I'm say happy that you are all responding to this fic so well. I'm glad that you've given it a chance, and hope that you enjoy this next installment. I'm not sure how many chapters this will be, but I'm thinking 3/4.

I hope you enjoy this installment!

Note: dimeritium is a type of metal that is used to neutralize magic. When dimeritium is touched by a mage, their magic is suppressed, and there are negative side effects from prolonged exposure. Witch Hunters use dimeritium shackles and restraints in order to keep mages from escaping once they've been captured.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As Stiles’ strength grew, Claudia’s weakened. Stiles’ magic had become great in the years since it emerged. Claudia taught him how to control his magic, how to harness the spark of energy growing deep within him.

Many people blamed Stiles for Claudia’s weakening, shifting their judgment to the young child whose power was sprouting before their eyes. When Claudia fell drastically ill, collapsing in one of Talia’s council meetings, the people’s grief and fear at losing such a beloved jewel turned to hatred for Stiles.

Stiles would stay with his mother, falling asleep on her bedside as he curled up against her. He was just a child seeking out the comfort of his mother. To those seeking to blame him, he was a leech stealing the strength of his host.

When Claudia died, Stiles ran away. He had been with his mother, seeing the spark of life die from her eyes as her grip on Stiles’ hand fell. He hid away in the faery tale book Claudia had made for him. He climbed into Rapunzel’s tower, hiding away from all eyes and ears.

Derek was the one that found Stiles, comforting him in his grief. He had been determined to get Stiles to return, knowing that others would break into their private realm and demand Stiles’ return.

Talia’s court needed a mage, and blame fell on Stiles for the vacancy.

Stiles was the one that went to Talia, asking permission to take his mother’s place in her court. He was only a teenager, but knew his abilities better than what the others had theorized.

Talia accepted Stiles’ request, hoping that the years under her reign would prepare him for serving out his time under Derek’s reign.

Derek however, had not been prepared for the infighting and trauma that followed his mother’s passing. Even with Stiles by his side, Derek found more against him than with him. He had many battles ahead of him, and he feared their outcome.

That was when his first major battle with the Argents occurred.
People were screaming, echoes of the battle raging on. Derek had been mortally wounded, and the Argents knew that, the murmur of the Hale King being on his deathbed moved throughout the camps like a plague. The Argents only had to wait for word that he had died, and they would be able to call themselves the victors.

Stiles was by Derek’s side, holding Derek’s hand in his own tightly clasped hands as he spoke every number of enchantments he could remember. He was draining himself of magic, but there was no improvement in Derek’s health.

Claudia’s familiar cawed loudly at the advisors whenever they made a move to address Stiles. The raven’s black wings beat loudly, as if it was about to fly directly at whoever dared get close. It was trying to help Stiles concentrate, and to keep him from harm as he focused his energies on Derek.

“We have to warn Beacon,” one of the advisors quickly stated.

“Have the princesses been informed?” Another advisor asked.

“Princess Laura with too heavy with child to make a trip,” Another spoke. “They fear telling her could cause her too much stress, and she may lose the child.”

“And Princess Cora?”

More than one advisor grimaced. “She is still hiding in the Novigrad tunnels, the last we heard,” someone offered. “Queen of Beggars, they call her.”

“Shut up,” Peter sharply snapped at the advisors as he finally looked away from Stiles and Derek to observe the pudgy men. “Leave,” he ordered when one of them prepared to address him. “If my nephew is to die, it won’t be from your incessant prattling.” He waited until the room was vacated before moving to place a hand on Stiles’ shoulder.

Stiles looked up at Peter, not bothering to hide the tears covering his face. “He’s dying,” he uttered, a sob cutting off his words. “Nothing is working—I can’t save him.”

Peter looked at Derek. “You’ve managed to keep him holding on longer than the healers thought possible. Long enough for a goodbye.”

Stiles only cried at those words. He placed his head against Derek’s arm, uttering the words again in hope that it would work this time. He lost his mother to an illness he couldn’t stop, and now he was going to lose Derek to a wound.

“Stiles,” John called his son’s name.

Stiles knew Peter must have gotten him. He wasn’t sure how long passed, but he felt Derek slipping away.

“Son,” John softly uttered, kneeling beside Stiles as he placed his hands on Stiles’ shoulders. “Derek’s life is on the edge, Stiles.”

“I have to keep trying,” Stiles argued.

“You’ll kill yourself if you exhaust your magic any more than you already have,” John pressed.

“I can’t let him die,” Stiles quickly uttered, sniffling his tears away. “First mom, now Derek—I
can’t.”

The raven released a sad sound, one of a bird weeping.

John looked up at the raven, seeing that it was staring back at him. “Do you remember what mom used to say?” He asked as he brushed his fingers through Stiles’ hair.

“Everything has a price, especially magic,” Stiles answered, looking up at Derek’s face.

Derek’s features were ashen, a result of the bloodied bandages the healers kept changing to no end. He was losing too much blood for his body to continue functioning. His heartbeat was low, almost nonexistent. And Stiles knew that within the hour, should Derek’s health not improve, it would stop beating.

“You can’t miraculously heal Derek,” John rationalized. “You’re expecting a result from nothing.”

Stiles pressed Derek’s cold hand to his face, closing his eyes as he tried to focus on a happier memory. His magic always worked better when he focused on joyful memories.

“I’m not telling you to give up,” John offered. “Just to see reason.”

“I won’t lose him,” Stiles stubbornly stated. “I’ll find a way.”

John sighed, taking a step back from Stiles. He knew he couldn’t convince him otherwise. He left his son behind, knowing that there was a tough choice ahead.

The raven flapped its wings, moving to gently set down on the empty space on the other side of Derek’s bed. It perched itself high and proud, looking down at Stiles. It reached its head out, stretching its neck out over Derek, resting its head over his chest.

Stiles watched the raven carefully, seeing how still and unmoving it was as it kept its head over Derek’s heart. He knew what the bird was doing—the sacrifice it was making for him.

Stiles wept until his head pounded, his eyes burning with the endless tears as he wiped them away with his shirtsleeve. He reached his hands up to thread his fingers through the raven’s feathers, knowing he’d never forgive himself.

Stiles waited by Derek’s bedside, the raven’s plucked feathers stashed beneath Derek’s pillow, its claw tucked away in a little pouch tied to Stiles’ trousers. He watched the candles burn low, until the light was dim enough to call forth servants. He heard the whispers of the advisors, the low curses cast towards him as they talked about how unnatural and evil he must be to afford such magic.

Derek awoke to Stiles sitting on his bedside. He reached a hand out, his arm heavy as he tried to control his movements. His fingertips brushed over Stiles’ bared shoulder. He offered a weak smile to Stiles when he turned to look at him.

Stiles released a joyful sob as he moved to embrace Derek. He pressed kisses to Derek’s face, his hands trembling as he held Derek’s cheeks in his palms.

“I’m sorry,” Derek weakly apologized for all the pain and tears he caused Stiles.

Stiles pressed a kiss to Derek’s lips, a soft puff of relief escaping his chest as he just held onto Derek.

Derek didn’t know of Stiles’ sacrifice until he saw the wrapped up bundle John helped Stiles to carry from the tent. He made his way after them, asking Boyd to help him with keeping silent about his
departure. He paused as he watched the Stilinski men halt by a small pyre as John placed the bundle on the wood. He made himself known before Stiles ignited the pyre in flames.

“I wasn’t going to lose you,” Stiles confessed when Derek confronted him. There were still tears in his eyes, his grief still great.

“I should have died,” Derek replied, having heard the whispers of his men.

“But I couldn’t let you,” Stiles answered. He leaned in to Derek’s touch as he brushed away his tears. He allowed Derek to pull him into a hug, resting his head against Derek’s chest as he watched the flames consume the raven’s corpse.

~*~

Stiles twirled the raven’s claw between his fingers, his thoughts running wild with how to proceed. He had already tried to find his father using common locating spells, but found it impossible to narrow it down. His father had been in Novigrad, that much his magic told him. But he didn’t have the power to break through whatever barrier the Argents were using.

“There you are,” Alexander uttered when he finally saw Stiles sitting on the edge of the well.

Stiles turned to look at him. “Careful,” he warned Alex, pointing out the small trap that was near him. “They’re littered throughout here,” he offered, as if it was natural.

“Why?” Alex asked, clearly curious why such dangerous things would be in this realm.

“The hunter is trying to catch the werewolf,” Stiles replied. “He still hasn’t caught him after he ate Red Riding Hood.” He looked down the well, seeing the werewolf pacing in agitation at being stuck in the dried up well. “I threw him down there for now,” he explained when Alex looked down the well with Stiles.

“I thought this was supposed to be a pleasant realm,” Alex softly stated. “One for children.”

“After my mother’s death, I wasn’t able to tend to it as often as I should,” Stiles replied. “She tried to keep order, but children’s tales are often the scariest ones out there.” He looked at Alex, a soft smile on his features. He was glad he got to keep this enchanted realm.

Claudia had created this enchanted getaway when Stiles was a child. It was a pastime she would let Derek and Stiles play in together whenever the parents were busy with reasons of State. Cora and Laura would sometimes join them, but before long, it was just Stiles and Derek who had time to hide away in the realm of fairy tales come to life.

The werewolf had once mistaken Stiles for Red Riding Hood, the crimson color of Stiles’ cape catching the interest of the wolf. After Derek defeated the werewolf, Stiles kissed him as they sat on the edge of this well. They were only teenagers, but it was the first of many kisses to come.

“You know, hiding in an enchanted book isn’t going to change anything,” Alex offered, trying to be kind about it.

“I know,” Stiles solemnly answered. “I was trying to figure out what to do.”

“You’re not waiting for someone to come rescue you?” Alex curiously asked.

Stiles looked at Alex. “He doesn’t come here—not anymore. I have no illusions that King Derek is my knight in shining armor. I just needed a calm place to think and ponder.” He continued to twist
the raven’s claw in his hands.

Alex looked at the claw. “We might be able to find something that can boost your powers,” he offered.

Stiles sadly smiled. “That’s not how it works for me.” He looked at Alex. “My mother always told me there was a price for everything—especially magic. You have to give up something if you want to gain something. And I’ve learned how true that is,” he softly answered, dropping his hold on the raven’s claw. “I need a Beggar Queen,” he suddenly stated, as if it was the answer he had been looking for.

Alex arched his eyebrow at Stiles. “The Queen of Beggars doesn’t do favors, Stiles.”

“She owes me,” Stiles replied, hopping down from the edge of the well.

~*~

Derek vaguely listened to his advisors, their words melding together. He had a dream about Stiles last night, plagued with the memories of the past. He wished he could have had time to think of things before parting ways with Stiles. He would have said so many things differently.

“Your Majesty,” one of the advisors addressed Derek.

Derek turned to look at the man. He noticed that the men were all looking at him. “Apologies,” he uttered. “Continue.”

It felt as if the meeting lasted longer than usual.

Peter remained seated as the other lords filed out of the room. He smiled at Derek when his nephew stood to pace. “Thoughts elsewhere?”

“Often times,” Derek halfheartedly answered.

“Would those thoughts be where a certain brunette is?” Peter asked as he turned his head to watch Derek.

Derek paused, looking into the flames in the fireplace. He leaned his hands against the fireplace’s mantle. “I dreamed about the night I died,” he admitted.

Peter sat up in his chair. “Almost died, you mean?”

Derek shook his head. “I did die that night,” he admitted. “If it hadn’t been for Stiles, I would have stayed that way.” He placed his hand over the scar that still ran across his sternum and dipped towards his navel. “I wouldn’t have made it to the healers if Stiles’ magic hadn’t pressed my body back together.” He remembered how cold he was, the pain practically disappearing as nothing but the cold took over. “I felt my heart stop, my body dead. And then I could feel something tethering me to this world.”

“Don’t tell me love,” Peter sighed, standing up from his chair. He made a move to pick up the wine pitcher.

“It was Stiles’ sheer force of will,” Derek answered. “He killed his raven.”

Peter stopped pouring wine into his glass, turning to look at Derek. “Claudia’s raven?”

Derek nodded.
“He never said what happened to the bird,” Peter replied, placing the wine pitcher back down on the table with a loud clink. “That boy gave up what he had left, all for you.”

Derek tightened his grip on the fireplace’s mantle. He pressed his head against the edge of the mantle, closing his eyes against the heat of the fire. “Have you heard any news about John?”

Peter looked at Derek, sighing deeply. “Nothing. Even Stiles has seemed to disappear off the map.” He looked to the map in the middle of the room, the war table that the advisors bickered over constantly. “We won’t find him through normal ways. Unless Stiles wants to be found, no one will find him.”

Derek pulled away from the fireplace’s mantle, moving to pace some. “You’re my spymaster,” he stated. “And you have heard no word of Stiles or John. That doesn’t exude confidence.”

Peter looked at Derek. “You wounded Stiles, deeply,” he plainly stated. “And now that you feel guilty enough for it, you are pressing to send him aid. We’re not even sure he’ll take it.”

“If it could help him find his father, he will,” Derek knowingly stated. “Stiles would do anything for his father.”

“He used to be willing to do anything for you,” Peter countered.

The muscle of Derek’s jaw twitched. “John didn’t abandon him like I did.”

Peter carefully observed Derek before finally caving to his nephew’s will. “I’ll see what I can do in Novigrad. Stiles may be difficult to find, but this Alexander may be easier to track.”

Derek nodded in appreciation. “Thank you, uncle.”

~*~

“Prat,” Cora muttered under her breath as she lounged in her chair. “I can’t believe him.”

“You were invited to the wedding,” Stiles offered.

“You’re just as bad as him,” Cora replied, giving Stiles a critical look. “You never told me, a year and you never mentioned that he was being an asshole.”

“He has a Queen now,” Stiles answered, smiling as he gladly accepted the goblet from one of Cora’s lieutenants. He sipped the wine, smiling to himself as he thought of Cora stealing such a fine vintage from some Toussaint merchant when she could clearly just purchase it instead.

“She sounds like a bitch,” Cora stated as she stood from her seat. “But I know you didn’t come here in person to just tell me how my brother is being an idiot.” She leaned against the front of her desk, crossing her arms over her chest. “You need help.”

Stiles nodded. “My … my father has been kidnapped,” he stated with a heavy sigh. He looked down at the goblet in his hands. “I don’t know where he is—even a locating spell doesn’t help. I have contacts that say Argents were looking for him, and I know they probably have him encircled in dimeritium, that’s why I can’t find him.”

Cora scratched at her neck as she thought of a solution. “The Argents operate in near secret. The only person who could get any information would be Lydia. She’s the closest with Allison, and Allison is by far the most reasonable of Argents.”
“You have no spies within the Argent stronghold?” Stiles asked in surprise.

“I don’t tell people how far my connections go,” Cora replied. “But for you, I’ll admit that I don’t. They killed my last two contacts, so I stopped putting people’s lives at risk.” She drummed her fingertips against the edge of her desk, moving to lean against the piece of furniture. She crossed her arms over her chest. “Let me reach out to her. I might be able to get a location.”

Stiles nodded, releasing a heavy sigh. “Thank you, Cora.”

Cora smiled in reply. She turned her gaze towards the window that looked out into the courtyard. She watched as Stiles’ companion spoke with a few of her men. “He seems fond of you,” she offered, looking to Stiles. “Is it true that my idiot brother lost your favor completely?”

Stiles frowned, looking down at the wine left in his goblet. “As I said, he has a Queen.”

“Derek was always doomed to marry,” Cora commented. “Doesn’t mean you have to turn to hating him.”

“He’s to be a father,” Stiles flatly stated. He looked up at Cora when she turned towards him. “As I said, things happened, and here I am without the grace and protection of the King.” He stood, placing his goblet on Cora’s desk. “Alex is all I have.”

Cora took a step forward, reaching out to hold Stiles’ hand. “You have me.”

Stiles offered her a weak smile in return.

~*~

Derek waited for news. His thoughts becoming plagued more and more with the longer it took Peter to find him an answer. He breathed a sigh of relief when Peter brought him news of Alexander’s whereabouts.

“He lives in a nice little hovel, actually,” Peter explained as he handed Derek the report. “It’s modest, to say the least. But it serves its purpose.”

Derek read through the spy’s looped handwriting, scouring the page for any note about Stiles. “A hooded figure,” he uttered. “An ebony cloak with emerald embroidery.” It was the Hale colors, the description matching that of the cloaks Talia had crafted for her children. He looked up at Peter. “He went to Cora?” He asked in disbelief, wondering why Peter hadn’t mentioned it before.

“The Queen of Beggars has many connections,” Peter offered. “There is a reason I have so few connections in Novigrad—Cora swiped them all up.”

Derek looked back at the report. “At least he’s getting help,” he softly stated.

“There are rumors of the Argents setting up a guild for the Witch Hunters,” Peter continued, hoping Derek was listening. “Some mages have disappeared, but there haven’t been any public burnings yet, thankfully.”

“Is Stiles aware?” Derek asked as he looked at Peter.

Peter gave Derek an expressionless look. “If I knew where Stiles was, I could ask,” he commented.

Derek released an annoyed huff. “There has to be something,” he stated. “Inform Alexander, then. He should at least know well enough how to keep his head with Argents roaming around Novigrad.”
Peter nodded, making note of it. “Should I send your love to Stiles as well?”

Derek glared at his uncle before turning his attentions towards the lengthy report once more.

“Tidings of good health, then,” Peter replied.

Derek didn’t answer. He sat up in his chair as he placed the report back on the table. “A crow,” he commented, his fingertips gliding over the spy’s writing.

“What?” Peter asked as he looked at Derek.

“How sure are you that your spies know the difference between a crow and a raven?” Derek asked as he looked at Peter.

Peter pursed his lips slightly. “It’s tough to say. They would be far enough away not to be noticed. But if it’s a raven—”

“It’s Stiles,” Derek stated. “They thought Alexander was sending letters to Stiles. Few know about Stiles’ polymorphy.”

“If the Argents don’t know, and he’s only going out in his raven form, then he’s the safest he can be,” Peter commented. “As long as he’s a raven, they won’t know it’s him.”

“Gerard knows what Claudia looked like in raven form,” Derek countered. “After she died, her familiar was larger than a typical raven.” He looked at Peter. “Stiles will likely look like her.”

“It’s a raven, Derek,” Peter replied. “There is no conceivable way anyone could pick out Stiles’ raven form—especially by just comparing it to Claudia’s.”

“There is still a chance—”

“He’s safe,” Peter firmly stated. “Leave him be, Derek.”

Derek knew Peter was right, even if he didn’t like to admit it.

“The best we can do is have Erica and Isaac touch base with Alexander,” Peter pressed. “In a secluded area. Then if Stiles wishes to reach out to us, we’ll make contact then.”

~*~

“Stiles,” Alex softly stated his name, trying to gage his mood.

Stiles was staring out the window, his eyes watching the passing crowds as they went about their errands. He wished his life could have been so mundane. “You went behind my back,” he finally stated, turning to look at Alex.

“Mages are disappearing, Stiles,” Alex countered. “Cora is the perfect person to help us escape the city.”

“The Argents don’t care about proximity,” Stiles answered. “They’ll find you, no matter where you run. But that’s not the point—you used my friendship with Cora.”

“She’s an acquaintance thanks to you,” Alex corrected Stiles. “I simply asked her about the Witch Hunters’ fortress being built here. Only recently had she come to me with a mutually beneficial plan.”
“My father has been missing for over a month now,” Stiles sharply replied. “You’ve been busying yourself with these affairs instead of helping me.”

“I’ve been trying to help you, but you never tell me anything,” Alex quickly answered. “You’re acting like I’m going to betray you at the drop of a gold sovereign. Like I’m—” He stopped himself, biting his tongue to keep from continuing.

“No, you’re not him,” Stiles finished the thought for Alex. “Derek at least was honest with me—”

“I am honest with you,” Alex answered. “But you’re so obsessed with what happened between you and Derek that you can’t believe anyone.”

Stiles stubbornly turned his back on Alex.

“Derek sent his spies here,” Alex continued, not at all surprised when Stiles turned to look at him. “A woman named Erica, and a man named Isaac,” he offered. “They asked about you—if I knew where you were. I told them you were well, that’s all. But it’s clear that he still hasn’t forgotten about you.”

Stiles was about to reply when there was a sharp knock on the door. He turned to look out the window, catching sight of the crest on one of their hats.

The crest was split down the middle, half an eagle on the left side, and sharp golden lines resembling carrotted mountains on the right. It was a crest many mages knew well, and dreaded to see on their doorstep. *Witch Hunters.*

Stiles took a step away from the side, looking at Alex, breathlessly whispering their name.

“Alexander Tevelyan,” one of the men outside called Alex’s legal name.

Stiles grabbed Alex’s hand, pulling him back from the door.

“We have a warrant for your arrest,” the witch hunter continued. “For the crimes of dabbling in petty magic, heresy, and buggery.”

Alex turned to Stiles. “Fly away,” he stated in a hushed tone.

Stiles shook his head.

“They want me, if they see you, they’ll grab you too,” Alex answered.

The guards started to knock on the door again. “Alexander Tevelyan—”

“I’m coming,” Alex sharply replied, his gaze never leaving Stiles.

“Alex,” Stiles quietly started.

Alex leaned forward, drawing Stiles into a kiss. He lingered longer than he should, trying to remember the feeling of Stiles’ lips—how it was likely the last time he would get a chance to kiss them. He quickly released Stiles, moving towards the door with the intent of opening it.

Stiles wordlessly morphed, his wings and feathers sprouting quickly. He ruffled his wings after his body completed its transformation, cawing loudly when Alex opened the door to the Witch Hunters. He angrily cawed at the Witch Hunters when they hurt Alex, flapping his wings in protest after they hit Alex hard enough to knock him off balance. He saw the dimeritium shackles they clamped down on Alex’s wrists. He startled when one of the men grabbed at him, trying to stop him from flying away.
“It’s just my raven,” Alex quickly stated when he saw that one of the men was trying to grab Stiles.

“These black birds have been used before in mage rituals,” a Witch Hunter accused Alex.

“They bring plague and death wherever they go,” another stated.

The man ceased trying to capture Stiles. “Then I’ll just kill it,” he uttered, drawing his sword from its sheath.

Stiles jumped up onto the top of the bureau, out of the Witch Hunter’s reach.

“You want to bring death down on our heads?” The Witch Hunter holding onto Alex’s shackles demanded. “You kill that bird, that’s what will happen.”

“Just leave it here to starve then,” the man waiting by the door stated. “It’s not our problem once we leave.”

“Please, he’s valuable to me,” Alex pressed, hoping his concern for the bird would make the men leave Stiles be.

“Where you’re going, you have no need of valuables,” the Witch Hunter stated, shoving Alex out of the house.

Stiles ruffled his feathers at the man that drew the blade on him. He cawed at the man when he lingered, laughing to himself when the man startled his way out the door before slamming it shut. He kept in his raven form for a while, hopping down from one shelf to another. He was too scared to change back, knowing that Witch Hunters lingered in hopes of catching more mages roaming around. He was terrified, knowing that Novigrad refused to protect its citizens as it should—that the Argents allowed Witch Hunters to run free. He waited until dark before he pecked open the window latch, flying off into the night and towards the tunnels Cora called home.

~*~

Derek was in a council meeting when urgent word reached him.

“Your Majesty,” a guard breathlessly interrupted the men in the room, causing all eyes to fall on him.

“This best be good,” Peter sighed, setting his reports back on the table.

“The Queen has gone into labor,” the guard replied.

Derek stiffened in his seat, his thoughts having gone away from his wife and unborn child. He was to be a father, and to finally fulfill what his rank demanded of him. Yet, the hollow feeling in Derek’s chest only widened, his joy having dried up a long time away, as if he had been robbed of such emotions.

~*~

“I need your help,” Stiles breathlessly stated once more. “They’ll kill him.”

The corners of Cora’s mouth turned down in a frown. “Stiles,” she started.

“Don’t,” Stiles shook his head. “Not you too,” he weakly added. “I’ve already been betrayed by a Hale.”

“I can’t have my people storm the Witch Hunter fortress for one man,” Cora replied.
“You were working with him to free the mages,” Stiles angrily argued.

“Alex knew this was coming, that’s why he reached out to me,” Cora replied. “There are warrants for him and you all over Novigrad.” She moved to sort through some of her paperwork, pulling out two large pieces of parchment. She offered them to Stiles for him to observe.

Stiles took the parchment in his hands, eyes scanning the details. Two warrants for two mages, both advertised as highly dangerous. He noticed how his warrant asked for information rather than apprehension.

“The Argents want you alive,” Cora explained. “They’ll want to use you against my brother, no doubt.”

“They’re going to kill Alex,” Stiles stated, ignoring Cora’s previous comment.

Cora looked at Stiles. “They may have already killed your father.”

Stiles’ blood ran cold, his stomach churning at such a statement. “I would have felt it,” he answered.

“They’ve had him for over a month, Stiles,” Cora softly stated. “Even if he is still alive, they’ve likely tortured him beyond the breaking point.”

“Shut up!” Stiles snapped, turning to look at Cora. “My father is alive—”

“But will he be able to make it home alive?” Cora answered with just as much passion. “You need to face reality—your father is likely on death’s door; Alex is likely being tortured as we speak.”

Stiles allowed the flames to grow from his hands, burning the warrants to ash. He let the burnt parchment fly from his hands, allowing the wind to take the ash away. “I’ll fix this myself,” he stated, turning to leave.

“Stiles—”

“I can’t wait.” Stiles answered as he kept walking. “I’m not running away.”

~*~

Derek remained in his chair, staring into the fireplace as he waited out news of Paige’s labor. His mind was blank, uncertain of the future should something happen to Paige. He would be without a Queen, without a mother to his child. He wondered if this was the gods’ answer to his guilt and pain.

“Your Majesty,” a servant called to him, breathless with worry.

Derek turned to look at the servant.

“The Queen’s labor pains are still great,” the servant explained.

Derek moved to stand. “Is she asking for me?” He wondered.

The servant paused, unsure if she should relay what the Queen had said. “No, Your Majesty,” she kindly lied. She had hoped the Queen’s behavior towards the child was spoken only because of the heights her pain grew to.

“What do the healers say?” Derek asked instead, moving to sit back down in his chair.

“They don’t know what will happen to her or the child,” the servant answered. “They asked about
Derek looked at the woman again. “Aid?”

“The High Enchanter, Your Majesty,” the servant specified.

Derek looked back at the fire. “Paige doesn’t believe in mages being present during births.”

“She is fearful, Your Majesty,” the servant pressed.

“I’ll request his presence immediately,” Derek finally answered, turning to look at the servant. “Have my uncle ride out to Novigrad to retrieve Stiles. Ask them to return by portal.”

The servant dutifully bowed before exiting the room.

Derek sat in silence, completely abandoned by any knowledge of the future.

~*~

Stiles perched himself high on the steeple of the neighboring roof by the Witch Hunters’ fortress. He watched the groups of men patrolling the streets, entering and exiting the fortified complex. He wanted to time everything correctly. He chose to enter the fortress under the guise of night, hiding in the shadows.

Stiles hid in the shadows of the guards passing, moving with little difficulty as he passed the lit torches. He gave pause when he saw the corpses displayed on pikes, bodies bloodied and barely resembling the humans they once were. He knew they were mages, or magic sympathizers—there had been an uptick in disappearances since the Witch Hunters started to gain ground in Novigrad. He planned on making their monstrous acts known once he escaped with Alex.

Stiles made his way into the commander’s quarters, ducking his way into the room with the determination to find the keys he would need. He ruffled his way through the desk, his eyes dashing for just a glimpse of the key.

“Looking for these?” A voice asked from the doorway.

Stiles startled, looking up at the man standing there.

“The gem of the Hale Court, rummaging around in my office drawers,” the man stated as he took a step into the office. “Is this what you’ve been degraded to?”

Stiles straightened up, abandoning his hold on the desk drawer. “Argent,” he softly stated, taking a step away from the man, making sure to keep the desk between them. He had made an egregious mistake.

~*~

Peter had been surprised to be met with an empty house, knowing that Alex worked from within his home—the safest place for a mage was unfortunately to invite clients into their houses. He was surprised, however, to have a blade pressed to his throat from an unseen assailant.

“Why are you here?” A female voice demanded in a low voice, words hushed as to not draw attention from those passing by.

“I’m looking for a mage,” Peter answered. He was taking note of his assailant, interested in the way the blade didn’t waver with the questions she asked. He had little to fear about having his throat slit
by accident.

"Then look elsewhere," the woman replied.

"With respect, Alexander Tevelyan knows the best mage in the kingdom," Peter calmly answered. "And I need the best."

"And who would that be?" The woman asked.

"Stiles Stilinski, the High Enchanter of the Hale Court," Peter replied. "And my nephew wouldn’t appreciate me being delayed in retrieving him."

The blade was quickly removed from Peter’s skin.

Peter turned to face the woman, a little surprised to discover that it was Cora.

“What are you doing here for Stiles?” Cora demanded, not giving Peter a second to grasp the situation.

"Niece Cora, Uncle Peter," Peter slightly huffed as he gestured between them. "Pleased to know that you still remember me."

"Now isn’t the time," Cora quickly stated. "I need to find Stiles before he does something rash."

"He isn’t here?” Peter asked as he looked around. His gaze fell on the faery tale book on the reading pedestal. He took a step towards it, reaching a hand out to touch the cover.

"I already looked," Cora answered. "The opening page tells you who is using the book," she explained when Peter arched an eyebrow at her.

"So Claudia could tell if Stiles was hiding," Peter continued, recalling how often Stiles had seemed to disappear into the book’s pages.

"He said that Alex had been taken by the Witch Hunters," Cora started as she paced some, twirling the dagger in her hands as she thought through a plan. "He said that he was going to save Alex. But Stiles isn’t stupid—he wouldn’t attack them head on."

"So there is no mage in this vicinity," Peter concluded, slightly cursing under his breath.

"Why have you come for Stiles?” Cora asked.

"Paige," Peter replied, turning to face Cora. "You’re to be an aunt—if the labor doesn’t kill both mother and child."

Cora’s eyebrows furrowed. "Derek is asking Stiles to come back because?"

"Paige is dying," Peter stated. "And the healers have no clue what they are doing. And since you wouldn’t be able to recall, I’ll recant the tale of how your birth nearly killed your mother. Had it not been for Claudia, both you and your mother would have died."

"There isn’t time for this," Cora quickly stated. "Have Derek sign a royal decree or something, petitioning mages to come to the palace and treat the Queen."

"Paige is the Queen that had the High Enchanter removed from the palace," Peter sternly answered. "You think any mage is going to willingly come to treat her? Their fear is well placed. And the only person who can be trusted beyond a doubt is Stiles."
“This is absurd,” Cora snapped at Peter. “She treated Stiles terribly, and now it is up to him to save her?”

“No other mage will come,” Peter tiredly stated. “I’ve tried to summon the mages I know, but none of them will come to her aid. I don’t know if they’ve switched their loyalties to the Argent, or that they fear what has happened to the High Enchanter will happen to them.”

“Well none of this matters,” Cora replied. “Because I have no idea where Stiles is. And if the Queen is as bad off as you say, she’ll likely be dead by the time we find him.”

“Then we better start looking,” Peter answered.

~*~

“I never believed that you’d come here willingly,” Argent continued, taking another step closer to Stiles. “Even when they said that you’d come for him, I didn’t believe it.”

Stiles raised his hand, concentrating his magic into a gust of wind … only nothing happened. He tried again, only to realize that he wasn’t able to summon up anything. His magic wouldn’t reach his fingertips, the energy refusing to dance through his veins as it normally did.

“Dimeritium dust—it’s coated throughout the fortress, to guarantee that even an escaping mage can’t hurt anyone,” Argent answered Stiles’ silent question. “Such a stupid boy,” he softly stated, as if he almost pitied Stiles.

Armed guards entered the office after Stiles, all with the intent of restraining him. Stiles put up a fight, struggling as best he could, breaking a nose of at least one guard. He yelled in pain when one of the guards twisted his arm harder than was necessary in order to restrain him. He could feel the effect of the dimeritium shackles before they even touched his skin.

“Put the collar on him too,” Argent instructed. “I don’t want him breaking loose.”

Stiles couldn’t struggle as two guards held him down, another clasping a heavy dimeritium collar around his neck. “This isn’t over,” he angrily stated as the guards yanked him up off the ground.

“You’re right, it’s not,” Argent stated. “Our time together has just started.” He took a step towards Stiles. “My father wants to know everything about Derek—and your father knows less than we thought he would.”

Stiles struggled at the mention of his father. “Where is he?”

“Some place you and Derek will never find,” Argent simply answered. “But if you’re good, and tell us what we want to know, we’ll send your father home.”

Stiles scoffed. “In pieces?”

“No,” Argent replied. “But I can’t say my father will do the same with you.”

Stiles struggled as best he could when the guards forced him to move towards the hallway. He wasn’t sure if he was surprised to find Lord Blake standing in the hallway.

“Hello, charlatan,” Blake greeted Stiles with amusement. “How I’ve waited for this.”

Stiles spit in Blake’s face, barely grimacing even when the man angrily backhanded him. He turned his head back to look at Blake. “I’ll never forget this, Blake,” he hissed at him with a glare. “When
I’m free, I’ll hunt you down, and tear your tongue out at the seam.”

“If you’re ever free,” Blake answered as he used his handkerchief to wipe Stiles’ spit from his face. “I hear Gerard Argent likes to slowly break his prisoners before casting them away—especially mages.” He took a step towards Stiles. “Perhaps your father won’t be lucky enough to survive such grueling conditions.”

Stiles brought his knee up into Blake’s crotch as hard as he could, knowing he caused damage when the old man released a sharp wheezing sound before falling to his knees. He faintly smiled as the guards hauled him down the stairs.

Stiles tried to school his expression when he saw Alex in one of the many cells. He was only just realizing that Alex wasn’t part of the trap the Argents had set. He wondered how either of them were going to fair in the Witch Hunters’ fortress.

Stiles was surprised when the guards brought him into the courtyard, heading towards a carriage. "Where are you taking me?" He demanded, digging his feet into the ground to slow the guards.

"To the King in the West," one guard answered. "Where mages are put in their place."

Chapter End Notes

As a general announcement, I'm sorry I haven't been responding to comments on my fics. It's very difficult to think of what to say, and most times I get emails while I'm away from my computer. Just seeing those comments though make me feel so wonderful, and spark my urge to keep writing for you guys. So thank you so much for commenting and letting me know if/how you enjoyed it.

It means the world <3 Thank you guys.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

As a general warning, this chapter is the most intense part of the fic. Torture takes place in this chapter, and parts of it may feel rather graphic. I tried to not go into immense detail with the gore.

I will put a note at the end of this chapter, should you like to know what happens before diving in.

Derek had not been surprised when Peter returned without Stiles. At first, he wondered if he was cruel for being unable to blame Stiles. It was a cruel request, asking Stiles back to the palace to treat the person that made his life miserable. Though he had hoped Stiles would have accepted, on behalf of the baby. He was surprised, however, when Peter explained to Derek that Stiles was missing from Novigrad.

“Missing?” Derek questioned, turning his attentions towards the person who entered the room after Peter.

The stranger removed his hood, revealing himself to be none other than Alexander. “Your uncle said you were in need of a mage, Your Majesty,” he offered a respectful bow of his head to Derek, wincing slightly at the pain in his abdomen.

“Where’s Stiles?” Derek demanded.

“The Witch Hunters took him,” Alex answered, straightening himself once more.

“And you know this how?” Derek asked, suspicious of why Peter would bring Alex back.

“Because Stiles was foolish enough to storm the Witch Hunters’ fortress in Novigrad,” Peter answered. “I’ve had the city guard put a stop to their objectives for now, though I’m sure the Argents will have them back up and running in no time.”

“And you brought Alexander here because?” Derek questioned.

Peter furrowed his eyebrows at Derek. “Has your child been born yet?” He asked, as if to remind Derek as to his reason for traveling to Novigrad.

“I don’t know,” Derek answered. “Paige hasn’t asked for me, and no one has brought me word.”

Peter looked at Alex. “I know you offered to help—”

“Stiles would have helped her if he could,” Alex quickly stated, looking to Derek. “Despite how much it would pain him, he’d have been here when needed.” He looked back at Peter. “It’s the least I can do for him, after they used me as bait.”

Derek turned to Boyd. “Take them to the Queen’s quarters,” Derek instructed him. “If Paige protests, tell her it’s not her decision to make. Her and the baby are beyond mundane healers now.”
Boyd nodded. “Follow me,” he gestured for Alex to come with him.

Alex obeyed Boyd’s command, taking calculated steps to avoid placing pressure on any wound in particular. He hesitated before speaking. “A man Stiles called Blake was there,” he offered, turning to look back at Derek. “He seemed to know Stiles. He called him a charlatan.”

Derek hesitated before nodding. “Thank you,” he answered, waiting for Alex to depart with Boyd before looking to Peter. “Lord Blake is without a doubt an Argent puppet.”

“I’ll inform the council of such,” Peter answered. He hesitated to move. “Christopher was there as well,” he stated. “He was in charge of the Witch Hunters.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “It seems Gerard somehow managed to get Chris back under his hold.”

“I thought Chris cut ties with Gerard after what happened with Allison?” Derek questioned, moving to sit once more. He placed his head in his hand, a headache growing from the building stress.

“After Gerard gave Allison to the witches, Chris had cut ties with Gerard,” Peter explained. “It’s unclear what’s happened since then.” He drummed his fingers against his bicep as he tried to think of the rumors he heard. “There is rumor that …” He hesitated.

“That what?” Derek sighed.

“That his wife, Victoria, was killed by a mage,” Peter answered. “Perhaps Gerard gave him the means of avenging his wife, only to use it to twist Chris into doing his bidding. That could be where Chris’ loyalty runs dry with Gerard.”

“He took Stiles,” Derek stated, looking at Peter. “Where did they go?”

“Alex said they mentioned the King in the West,” Peter replied. “They likely are bringing Stiles to Gerard directly, but there’s no telling where exactly.”

“First John, now Stiles,” Derek muttered under his breath. “The Stilinski men have disappeared off the map.”

Peter frowned at that. “I ran into Cora,” he stated, hoping it was at least somewhat good enough news to brighten the mood. “She calls Stiles a close friend, which means she’ll lend us her spies in Novigrad. We haven’t lost the Stilinski men—merely misplaced them.”

Stiles didn’t bother to fight against his dimeritium shackles. He could feel the numbness climbing up his arms, the metal suppressing his magic, trapping it in his body. He tried to swallow against the collar clasped tightly around his neck. He knew he wasn’t going to get a reprieve from the Argents, not when they could taunt him more. He remained still in his chair, refusing to give them a spectacle to laugh at.

Stiles barely blinked when Gerard Argent finally entered his room.

“The jewel of the Wolf King’s eye, in my house,” Gerard announced with grandeur. “I’m flattered you’ve accepted my invitation.”

“How could I refuse the King in the West,” Stiles stiffly answered.

Gerard moved to take the seat before Stiles, observing him closely. “By the gods,” he softly stated, as if he found something in Stiles’ features that he had lost long ago. “You do look like her,” he stated,
reaching his hand out to force Stiles to turn his head to the side some, placing his features on display. “She’s been dead for decades now, yet here you are, living proof that her beauty had existed.”

Stiles sharply jerked away from Gerard’s touch, turning his head as far as his collar allowed him. He had the unpleasant experience of meeting Gerard when Claudia was still alive. He had been weary, even as a child, with how Gerard acted towards Claudia. He noted the way Gerard touched Claudia more directly than anyone else dared to—except Stiles’ father. He saw the fire in his mother’s eyes when Claudia used her magic to jolt lightning into Gerard’s hand, forcing the man away from her.

“Take off the dimeritium, and I’ll greet you the same as my mother had,” Stiles offered in a low voice.

“I prefer my mages docile,” Gerard replied, turning his attention to one of the guards, signaling him to retrieve something. “Before we start with the fun, however, I want to offer you the chance of telling me everything I wish to know about Derek Hale.”

Stiles glared at Gerard.

“My son tells me you were in Novigrad with another mage,” Gerard offered. “Mages are terribly elusive creatures, as you know,” he started in explanation, hearing the guards entering the room once more. “They are dangerous, yet can avoid capture as quick and easy as it is for them to conjure a portal.” He relaxed in his chair as he waited for the guards to finish setting up the table beside him. “That’s why my son has come back to the family.”

“You mean you tricked him,” Stiles sharply stated, his eyes flickering to observe the leather kit the guard placed on the table. He saw the glint of metal peering through the flaps of leather loosely tied together.

“Depends on your point of view,” Gerard answered, knowing Stiles’ gaze was transfixed on the table and the utensils hidden beneath the leather. “I merely pointed my boy’s grief and anger in the correct direction.”

“Chris is a good man,” Stiles said. “It’s hard to imagine how he came from you.”

Gerard released a guttural laugh, turning his joyous mood to the table. He easily unveiled the sharp knives and other fine cutlery holstered in the leather binding. “I’m going to enjoy this, Stiles, truly. And by the end of it, you’ll beg to tell me what you know.”

Stiles snorted. “You think I’ll tell you … what?” He pushed the laughter into his voice, refusing to have it waver with his fear of uncertainty. “Derek has long been out of my control. There is nothing I know that could help you.”

“You warmed his bed for years,” Gerard simply stated. “And rumors of his incompetencies in his marriage bed are well known to us,” he added with a smile.

“Are you saying you have the Queen’s ear?” Stiles countered, daring Gerard to tell him differently.

“The Queen likes to talk to her handmaidens,” Gerard replied. “We have many who share our cause.” He leaned back in his chair, smiling sinisterly as if he recalled a cruel joke. “So tell us, is it true he wore the skirts for you then?”

Stiles clenched his teeth, his magic thrumming under his skin as the dimeritium kept him at bay.

“The Wolf King, baring his ass like a bitch in heat for his mage whore,” Gerard laughed at the idea. “It’s a shame that girl Queen of his got her way, though,” he mindlessly stated. “Gave him twins.”
Stiles tried to school his expression, knowing Gerard was waiting for something else to use against him.

“You think if you had a cunt he’d have kept you?” Gerard questioned.

“Mages are infertile,” Stiles finally fired back. “Wouldn’t matter.”

“I’m glad you know your place,” Gerard stated. “It’s a shame, really. You and your mother were such exceptional creatures.”

“You didn’t deserve to look at my mother,” Stiles hissed in a low voice. “And before this is done, I’ll burn your eyes out for thinking so.”

Gerard sighed, as if Stiles had disappointed him. “Shame,” he uttered to himself. “But I want you to know, this does give me some joy,” he confessed as he picked up a long, sharp stiletto knife, testing the weight of it in his hand. “Your father didn’t deserve Claudia. He should have let a better man have her—one that would have been happy to not have a brat like you running around.”

It wasn’t hard for Stiles to deduce that this had all been planned a long time ago, Gerard’s petty jealousy appearing to be the main driver. “If my father didn’t deserve her, you definitely didn’t.”


Stiles glowered at Gerard. “You’re not the first moron to tell me that.”

“Claudia exhausted her magic to cure her infertility,” Gerard stated. “You were the miracle child that everyone hailed as a gift from the gods for Claudia.” He shook his head. “As you grew, strong and beautiful, Claudia’s life started to drain away. She sacrificed her own life for a chance to have you. And you repay her by being a whore for a foolish boy playing at King.”

“My mother died from illness,” Stiles stubbornly stated, knowing the rumors that surrounded his birth, how miraculous they all said it was for him to have been conceived, let alone born alive and healthy.

“If you won’t believe me, perhaps your father can make you understand the truth,” Gerard offered, making a sharp gesture to the guards again.

Stiles tried not to react when the guards brought in a limp and beaten body. He watched as they tossed the man down by Gerard’s feet. He couldn’t stop himself from yanking against his restraints when his father looked up at him.

~*~

Paige was petty when Alexander offered to help her heal. Even after Alexander managed to save the child’s life and her own, Paige continued to turn her nose up at him and the magic he offered.

Derek wasn’t certain if Paige was raised to address magic in such a manner, or if she had soured into embracing the worst of prejudices because of her hatred for Stiles. He was saddened by such ideas, wishing she had not hated Stiles for what he himself couldn’t give her. He loved another, and it allowed Paige to target her anger at that love.

Alexander had examined the child as best he could, still suffering from his own wounds inflicted by the Witch Hunters. He cleaned the child before wrapping the baby up in soft blankets. He offered the child to Peter, nodding in affirmation when Peter asked if all was well.
“She won’t let me heal her,” Alex informed Derek of Paige’s condition. His eyes fell on Peter, watching the older man cradling the baby in his arms.

Peter was staring down at the child, a soft smile pulling at his lips as he watched his great nephew stir some.

“What did the healers say?” Derek asked, he remained seated by the fire as he watched Peter. His eyes focused particularly on his child in Peter’s arms.

“That she will heal similar to the way most women do,” Alex replied, finally looking at Derek. “But I’m afraid they may have done irreversible damage. She may not heal correctly, and never be able to have a child again. Or worse, infection could set in, and then it will be a completely lost cause.”

Derek looked at Alex. “I’ll try to speak with her. Perhaps one of her handmaidens could make her see reason.” His eyes turned to the small cradle by Peter. “And the other baby?”

Alex followed Derek’s line of vision. “She should be well, just smaller than her brother,” he offered. “She was born first, which makes me believe Paige’s body reacted in time to save the baby’s life.”

Derek nodded, sighing in relief. He stood, taking a step closer to Alex. “I want to thank you, for what you’ve done. I know I had no right to ask Stiles—”

“You didn’t.” Alex dared to state. “But I know Stiles to be a good man, one that would gladly help someone despite how it might pain him.” He sighed, rubbing a hand over his tired features. “I’m sorry,” he offered. “I’m just worried about Stiles, and I’m directing my anger in the wrong place.”

“No,” Derek replied. “You’re directing it in the right place. It was my fault that you and Stiles were residing in Novigrad to begin with.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ve been arrogant, and allowed my pride to jeopardize both of your safeties. But I am going to do all I can to find Stiles.”

Alex faintly nodded as he looked away, knowing that Derek would do what he could to get Stiles back.

“And to stop the Witch Hunters,” Derek added, hoping that would get Alex on his side.

Alex looked up at Derek. “I don’t know how you could. They’ve gotten a choke hold on Novigrad, slipping in beneath the guards’ watch.”

“The Queen of Beggars has a stronger hold on Novigrad,” Derek answered.

Alex furrowed his eyebrows. “And the King knows the fabled crime boss of Novigrad?”

“I believe Derek used to call her a brat at least once a week,” Peter commented. He smirked at Derek’s annoyed look. He looked at Alex. “I believe Cora liked to call him a prat.”

Alex’s eyes widened, looking at Derek. “You’re how Stiles knows Cora.”

“Stiles knew Cora while growing up,” Peter offered in explanation. “Stiles knew all the Hales. He was raised as part of our family.”

Derek clenched his teeth, a twinge of guilt running through his stomach.

“I never would believe that the Queen of Beggars is actual royalty,” Alex stated in partial amazement.

“That’s part of her cover,” Derek replied, moving over to the crib, his hands touching the railing in
order to look down at his daughter. He watched as she moved her limbs back and forth in the air, restless in nature.

“She’ll be well,” Alex answered, looking at Derek.

“Thank you,” Derek replied, reaching his arm down to place his hand on the infant’s chest, feeling her chest breathing up and down with ease.

~*~

Stiles tried to keep his breathing even, his breath harsh and labored as his limbs trembled with pain.

“Still no scream,” Gerard softly stated, tapping the blood covered knife against the arm of Stiles’ chair.

Stiles spit towards Gerard’s face, not at all surprised that his trajectory was off from the collar limiting his movement.

“Well,” Gerard commented, looking down at where Stiles’ spit landed on his knee. “I’m glad you still have your spirit.” He looked to John, watching as the man struggled against his own bindings, even with his weakened strength. “I suppose the Stilinski spirit is next to unbreakable. I’ll enjoy this.”

“Dad,” Stiles sharply uttered when Gerard grabbed his hand again. He only had one fingernail left on his hand for Gerard to take. He steeled his nerve when he felt the cool tip of the blade press beneath his nail. “Dad,” he called again when his father looked at him. He used what little magic he could to communicate his words without Gerard knowing.

It’s okay.

Stiles clenched his eyes shut when Gerard drove the blade beneath his nail.

~*~

Derek sat in isolation, holding his daughter in his arms. He trusted Peter to care for his son, knowing that he was safer with Peter than anywhere else. He gently rocked her, trying to keep the baby from stirring. He looked down at her, reaching his free hand to trace his fingertips along her cheek. He faintly smiled when her lips smacked together, gesturing to try and suckle at whatever touched her. He closed his eyes in a silent prayer, hoping she would survive the coming weeks. He had swallowed his pride and asked Alex to check on her a few times within the following days.

Derek had tried to convince Paige to accept help other than the mundane healers attempting to fix the problems they created. He wasn’t surprised when Paige turned her head from him, refusing to say anything. He left Paige in her silence, knowing he had lost any chance of making her see reason.

“I’m glad he rejected you,” Paige uttered when Derek was about to walk out the door.

Derek paused, looking back at her.

“Your precious Stiles refused to come,” Paige continued. “It wasn’t just my life he refused to save, but your son’s life as well.”

Derek’s gaze turned into a glare. “My children’s lives,” he lowly stated, watching the way Paige finally looked at him. “And Stiles would have been here if he could have. Instead, his partner saved your life out of the goodness of his heart, and you return his kindness with malice.”
“It’s not natural,” Paige replied, unwilling to admit her own fault.

Derek took a moment, trying to decode if she truly meant magic. “There are many things people think are not natural,” he finally answered. “It doesn’t give you a right to be cruel.”


Stiles kept his eyes closed, his head resting on the back of his chair. He opened his eyes when he heard the blade being set down. He looked at Gerard, watching as the man rose from his own seat.

“I wonder if your father will be as strong,” Gerard commented.

Stiles glowered through his pain. “Don’t you touch him,” he snarled at Gerard when he moved towards John.

“It appears you’re still confused about your place,” Gerard replied, turning to look at Stiles. “For now, your turn is over.”

“Get away from him!” Stiles yelled when Gerard grabbed John’s restraints.

The dimerium collar suddenly cracked, the metal breaking under the flare of Stiles’ magic. The metal couldn’t contain the spark, magic pulsing out from Stiles’ body, causing those present to stumble under impact. The outburst left Stiles nearly breathless, his skin burning with the itch of too much breaking loose too soon. He had broken the dimerium collar, but not his shackles—he wouldn’t be afforded such another outburst.

“Stiles,” John softly stated, rising to his knees as he ignored his own pains.

“You really are her child,” Gerard bitterly uttered as he moved to stand. He turned to the guards. “Get more dimerium shackles. Another collar; some restraints for his ankles. Perhaps a circlet”

“With respect, my lord,” a voice from outside the door started. “Your son is here for the prisoners.”

Gerard shoved passed the guards, leaving the room empty of Argent presence.

“Stiles,” John uttered again, moving closer to his son with haste. “Don’t strain yourself,” he stated. “I can’t let them hurt you,” Stiles weakly protested. “This is my fault—”

“No, no,” John answered, his shoulder touching Stiles’ knee. “Stiles, listen to me,” he started, knowing their time was short. “No matter what happens, this is not your fault.” He leaned in to catch Stiles’ gaze.

Stiles looked at John. “Is it true?” He weakly asked. “Is it true that mother died to have me?”

John’s expression fell, a sorrow flickering through his worn features. “Is that what Gerard told you?”

“It’s what everyone tells me,” Stiles replied, his eyes burning with tears. “I killed her once, and then I sacrificed her again—”

“Stiles,” John sharply uttered. “Claudia was ill before we could even think of having a child,” he explained. “She worked through the nights, telling me that she was working to arrange things in the years to come. I didn’t know what she had done until her belly swell with you.” He shook his head. “Mages are infertile, Stiles. What Claudia managed to do gave such hope to all of them. She found a
way to create a miracle out of what she was told could never be. Her magic did not wane because of you—you did not siphon her magic or her life. Her illness was impossible to change, even through magic, and she accepted that.”

“I killed her familiar,” Stiles weakly stated. “I … I killed her raven.”

“The raven was what was left of her magic,” John replied. “Claudia knew she was dying, so she stored her magic away, creating another life that would dedicate itself to watching over you. It was her way of making sure she could protect you.”

“I can’t even protect you,” Stiles confessed, hanging his head low.

“I’m the parent,” John countered. “I take care of you.”

“We take care of each other,” Stiles answered. “I can’t lose you too, dad.”

“Gerard is insane, but he’s not an idiot,” John replied. “He won’t kill us, not when he thinks he could use us against Derek. And I know Derek has been looking for me, there’s no doubt he’s looking for you too.”

Stiles released a soft sob, a watery laugh cutting from his chest. “I insulted his Queen—he knows I took a lover to spite him.”

“Derek is proud,” John offered. “But he loves you, that I have no doubt of.”

Stiles closed his eyes, shaking his head. His fingers were pulsing with pain, the blood dripping from his fingertips. He didn’t know how long he could last.

~*~

“I did all I could,” Alex told Derek with a frown. “She held out against being healed for too long—it was too much for my magic to cure. I’m sorry.”

“No, you’ve done more than the others,” Derek replied.

“It would be easier to blame the death of a Queen on a mage,” Alex answered.

Derek looked at Alex. “I’d have hoped you would have been able to trust my intentions towards mages by now.”

Alex turned his attentions back to Derek’s daughter. “She’s healthy,” he offered. “She’s strong.” He looked at Derek. “Have you named her yet?”

“Her official name day was scheduled to be next week,” Derek answered. “But given the circumstances now …”

“It’s often times easy for a parent to name their child without thinking,” Alex offered, leaving Derek’s daughter in the crib to continue her sleep.

Derek looked at his daughter, his thoughts racing with how he was going to do all this. He thought of his mother and father, how they struggled with the hardships of raising their children, knowing he would find his days ahead to be just as strained. His thoughts wandered to his grandmother, how she managed to rule the kingdom without a Consort once his grandfather passed, how her sister aided her in times of need. “Gwendolyn,” he softly stated, watching as his daughter wiggled some. “After my grandmother,” he explained aloud.
Alex nodded. “And your son?”

“Perhaps Geralt,” Derek answered. “After my great uncle.” He shook his head. “She never spoke of him often, but she seemed fond of her memories of him.”

“Was he a mage?” Alex asked, thinking that a hatred for magic may have betrayed Derek’s family early on.

“He became a witcher,” Derek answered. “He still visits my grandmother’s grave, from what I’m told.”

“A witcher has permission to visit the royal tomb?” Alex asked.

“A witcher doesn’t need permission,” Derek answered with a soft smile. “He’s quite elusive, only leaving flowers as a reminder of his visit.”

Derek always thought about how his great uncle had to watch his family grow old and die. The thought crossed his mind often whenever he noticed the difference in age he had with Stiles. He knew mages aged at a slower pace, and had felt the strain of his years on himself. He had found the first grey in his beard only a month before his marriage to Paige, while Stiles still looked as if he had just passed by the cusp of manhood. He knew that even if he had his happily ever after with Stiles, Stiles would have to watch him age and die.

It was something Derek had once heard Claudia utter to John.

“Your children will be much loved, Your Majesty,” Alex stated in observation.

“It’s the least I could give them,” Derek softly stated under his breath.

~*~

“Are you mad or just stupid,” Chris angrily snapped.

“You’re over reacting,” Kate replied.

“You kidnapped the King’s Master of Strategy,” Chris angrily stated.

Kate rolled her eyes. “Father has this under control.”

“You both said that once his questioning was over, you’d release him,” Chris countered. “But instead, you also took the King’s mage—his former lover.”

“You’re the one that had him delivered to us, brother dear,” Kate mockingly uttered.

“You told me there was reason to question him,” Chris countered.

“Stop this,” Gerard suddenly ordered as he entered the room. He looked between his children, trying to determine which one of them was causing the commotion. “Why are you here, Christopher?”

“He doesn’t think we should be questioning Derek’s whore,” Kate sharply answered.

“He’s the High Enchanter,” Chris warned. “Kidnapping Derek’s Master of Strategy—”

“His former Master of Strategy,” Gerard corrected his son.

Chris looked at his father. “Then you don’t deny kidnapping him.”
“John Stilinski would never willingly be put under questioning,” Gerard scoffed, laughter in his voice. “But you’re correct in saying that we have to correct this.”

Chris narrowed his gaze, unwilling to trust his father’s sudden appearance of compliance.

“John’s useless to us,” Gerard answered Chris’s silent demand for understanding. “Stiles is the one that knows the truth.”

“You can’t hold him,” Chris pressed.

“He’s a mage,” Gerard sternly stated. “Don’t tell me you suddenly softened towards them.”

“He’s a powerful mage,” Chris warned. “And as far as I know, he’s never hurt anyone.”

“He helps the King wage war,” Kate scoffed. “How is that not hurting anyone?”

“And what we’re doing?” Chris challenged.

“Will of the gods,” Gerard softly uttered, as if he knew the lie would be an affront to the gods and their will.

Chris sighed, shaking his head. “Stiles is as strong as his mother. You won’t be able to hold him for long if his magic builds beneath the dimeritium.”

“We have dimeritium dust littered throughout his room,” Kate answered. “We’ve had a dimeritium circlet crafted just for him,” she added with a twistedly amused smile.

“He is strong, like his mother,” Gerard commented. “It will be interesting to see how this plays out,” he thought aloud.

“And John?” Chris asked.

“We’ll release him,” Gerard answered. He looked down at his hands, still able to see the small amounts of Stiles’ blood that stained deep in the crevices of his fingernails. He picked at the cuticle, digging out the drying crimson flakes. “With a gift of parting to take to the King.”

~*~

Laura tightened her hold on Derek’s hand, keeping her gaze forward as the archdeacon continued with the funerary procession. She held Gwendolyn in her free arm, allowed her gaze to flicker over to Peter in order to see Geralt held in the crook of Peter’s own arm. She wished she could do more for Derek, knowing that the kingdom held Paige in a glorified state. She knew nothing of the woman beside the people’s praise and Derek’s weary letters. She kept silent until the procession ended, hidden behind the palace walls once more.

Laura rocked back and forth in a steady rhythm as she swayed Geralt to sleep. She enjoyed the atmosphere of the fire, hoping it was enough warmth to keep the children safe from the cold winter falling over the land. “You should eat something,” she softly stated as she watched Derek drinking another goblet.

“I ate this morning,” Derek hollowly answered.

“That was last night,” Laura countered.

Derek was silent, lost in thought. He released a sad laugh. “You’re right.”
“Derek, please,” Laura nearly pleaded. “You have to take care of yourself.”

“I’m fine,” Derek firmly uttered.

“You haven’t spoken about it,” Laura pressed.

Derek shook his head. “What is there to talk about? She killed herself, Laura.” He looked at his sister when she didn’t react. “Didn’t you know?” He partially laughed. “She refused Alexander’s help—because magic wasn’t good enough for her. She wanted to prove that she was better than magic.” He paused, his face nearly expressionless. He abruptly threw his goblet at the wall, listening to the metal clanging against the stone as the wine splashed against it.

Laura’s features were tight, controlled. She remained seated, calmly holding Geralt in her arms as she waited for Derek to say something else.

“She was selfish,” Derek angrily spat, turning away from the mess he made. “You know what the last thing she said to me was? That she did what I needed.” His breath was ragged with anger, pain twisted up in his chest. “She didn’t even care that they were twins—she cared that she had a son. My son.”

“Derek,” Laura softly spoke, moving to stand. She took a step towards the crib, placing Geralt down in hopes he’d remain asleep.

“And I hate her for it,” Derek nearly hissed. “I never should have married her— I should have told my advisors to go to hell,” he sharply uttered. “She knew I loved Stiles— she fucking knew, and made his life miserable.”

“You pushed him away,” Laura replied.

Derek finally turned to look at Laura. There were tears brimming his eyes, anger in his features.

“You know that’s what Stiles would say,” Laura continued as she took a step towards him. “He stood by you through it all, and you took a wife.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Derek argued shaking his head.

“How could you think he’d be able to stand by and watch the man he loves start a family with someone else?” Laura asked. “It was cruel to ask that. For him to remain as you willingly kept someone else in your bed—”

“I couldn’t!” Derek loudly snapped at her. He pressed his face into his hands. “I couldn’t lay with her as a husband should,” he confessed, a sob wrenching from his chest as he finally admitted the truth behind the rumors circling. “I had to think of Stiles— I had to— she pushed the importance of an heir. And even then, I couldn’t,” he hiccupped. “She called me sick. She goaded me, and I— I gave it all up. I gave Stiles up—”

Laura quickly moved forward, pulling Derek into a hug. She held his trembling body as he pressed his face against her shoulder, his arms encircling her body in a tight embrace.

“I’m sorry—”

“Sh, no, don’t apologize,” Laura gently hushed him, threading her fingers through Derek’s hair as she tried to calm him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” she softly uttered. “I didn’t know, Derek. And I’m so sorry.”
Weeks passed with nothing but rumors of where the High Enchanter was. Some claimed to see a raven of insane size, others saying they saw the jewel of the Hale Court themselves.

None of those claims held any weight.

Derek tried to remain composed in the wake of Paige’s death. He wore the traditional grieving garbs, his clothes a solemn black. He focused on matters of State, only breaking from his work to spend time with his children. He found no joy in the festive parties the Court reveled in, instead opting to remain alone in his quarters most nights.

Derek was reading to his children, one of the many books Stiles had favored when they were children. He wanted his children to know the sound of his voice, as he remembered his father’s. He recalled how Stiles would reminisce about the stories Claudia would tell him, how she used magic to illustrate her tales of adventure. In a small way, these moments made Derek feel closer to Stiles.

It was fitting, for in that moment everything changed.

“Your Majesty,” a guard interrupted the innocent moment, cause Derek to turn a tired eye on him. “Lord Peter sent word ahead—they found Lord Stilinski.”

Derek’s heart leapt, a lump growing in his throat as he folded the books pages together again. “Alive?” He barely asked, afraid to know the answer.

“Yes,” the guard answered. “Lord Peter said he would bring Lord Stilinski to the council room.”

Derek stood in a rush, placing the book on the nursery’s side table. “I don’t want the council there—Lord Stilinski isn’t to be harassed in any way.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” the guard dutifully nodded as he headed off to send word of Derek’s commands.

It felt as if a painfully long time had passed before Derek finally laid eyes on John again.

John entered the room with ease, allowing Peter to assist him in his walk. He ignored the pain in his steps, knowing that his leg would likely never heal properly—though that didn’t matter. He tightly held the ornate box Gerard had given him, refusing to let anyone take it from him. He knew what was inside it, though he couldn’t stomach actually looking at its contents. He gratefully took the seat offered him, sitting down for relief from his physical aches. He held the box in his lap.

Derek dared to move closer to John, slowly moving to take the seat next to the older man. He hadn’t spoken to John in months, having lost contact with him after the wedding. He never forgot the disappointment in John’s voice when Derek told him about the wedding, how John had frowned at Derek but refused to outright disavow Derek’s actions.

“Where was he?” Derek asked Peter, looking at his uncle for the first time.

“He was found walking the main road from No Man’s Land towards Novigrad,” Peter explained. “We tried to help him retrace his steps, but it’s no use—the Argents used tricks to jumble the little pieces of information he retained.”

Derek nodded in acceptance, merely hoping that this meant Stiles would be found soon.

“I can tell you it was Gerard Argent,” John uttered, breaking the small silence that lingered. He
looked at Derek. “Is that damning enough to have you act?”

Derek could hear the anger in John’s voice, even through his weakened state. “We’ve been unable to find him,” he replied, knowing it wasn’t an answer—it was an excuse. “What happened, John?”

“The bastard had me for months,” John stated, his fingers tightening on the box. “He didn’t do anything to break me, though. I couldn’t figure out what he was playing at—how he wanted to know what your plans were, your weaknesses in battle and in the Court. And then,” he closed his eyes, his mouth running dry as he remembered the glee in Gerard’s eyes when he came into his cell the last time. “He told me he had my son.”

Derek’s stomach dropped, knowing that something was wrong from John’s voice alone.

“And then I understood why he hadn’t broken me,” John uttered, his voice shaken. “He was waiting —”

“John, I— I’m sorry,” Derek’s voice broke off, unsure what he could say.

John looked at Derek, the anger evident in the absence of his own guilt. “You couldn’t possibly know what it’s like, having the last thing you love in this world put in front of you, only to be forced to watch it suffer.”

“Is Stiles alive?” Peter asked, knowing that neither man was willing to broach the subject unprompted.

John’s hands shook as he finally offered up the box to Derek. “Gerard plans on keeping him alive. It’s a sick game he wants to play with you,” he told Derek. “He said this was a parting gift to you—something he had hoped would … rekindle your affections for Stiles.”

Derek wearily looked at the box. He had seen the way John was clutching it to his chest earlier, knowing that its content was important. He reached his hands out, gently taking the box from John. He stared at the box’s cover, noticing the detail to be ornate, knowing that the box was originally meant to contain an expensive gem while it was transported.

Derek pulled the lid off the box, catching sight of a small folded parchment nestled inside. The parchment rested on top of a bundled up cloth, sticking out to grab Derek’s attention. He pulled the parchment out, setting the box on the table beside them as he quickly unfolded the paper.

A piece of your missing jewel—something to wet the wolf’s appetite. I’ll be sending you more soon.

An impression of the Argent seal—an archer shooting at the moon—was stamped on the bottom. An elegant ‘G’ was written beside the archer.

“He never screamed,” John thoughtlessly stated. He had his eyes shut, as if he was reliving the moment. “My little boy,” he shook his head, tears burning his eyes.

Derek’s eyes landed on the box, his stomach twisting as the parchment loosely hung from his fingertips. He let Peter take the paper from his hands, knowing his uncle had to know. He dared to stand, making it easier for him to see into the box. He pulled the cloth apart to look inside.

Inside the cloth rested ten bloodied and torn fingernails.

Derek slammed his closed fist against the table, his limbs trembling.

“This is a direct taunt,” Peter commented. He steeled his nerves when he caught sight of the bloodied
pieces in the box.

“It’s an act of war,” Derek countered, his eyes closed against the image of the fingernails.

“It can’t be if we can’t find the enemy,” Peter started.

“I don’t care!” Derek loudly yelled as he turned to look at Peter. “I don’t care what it takes, find me something. A family member, a business partner, a loyal acquaintance—there has to be someone in this realm that knows where Gerard Argent is housed.”

The room fell dreadfully silent.

“His son,” John uttered. “After Gerard finished …” he swallowed the lump in his throat before continuing. “After he took Stiles’ nails, the guard told Gerard that his son had come for us.” He looked at Peter. “Chris Argent was the one that took me out of that prison. I could only see them putting more restraints on Stiles as the forced me to leave.”

Peter looked at Derek before looking to John. “More restraints?”

“Dimeritium,” John explained. “Stiles broke the collar they had on him.”

Derek clenched his jaw tight. He looked at Peter. “Have royal warrants for Chris Argent issued,” he commanded. “I want him brought here for questioning.”

Peter nodded. “I’ll also request information on the construction of dimeritium restraints,” he offered. “With luck, those might both lead us down the right path.”

~*~

Stiles wasn’t sure how he found the strength to dare to sleep. He imagined it came from his pain. He couldn’t focus on anything as he remained strapped to the chair they shackled him into.

Gerard wasn’t lying about the additional dimeritium restraints. A heavy circlet was added, a new collar cut off Stiles’ ability to move his head far from the chair. Stiles’ ankles were restrained, making his magic scream against the pain of the dimeritium’s suppression.

There were sometimes healers that would periodically appear, examining Stiles’ health to determine how much more Gerard could push him for the day.

The longer Stiles went without magic, the longer he endured his body weakening. He felt brittle, as if his body was aging too quickly.

Gerard entered into Stiles cell in a fury, slamming the door open with little care.

Stiles’ eyes followed Gerard’s movement, watching as the old man angrily paced around the room. “You look … perplexed,” he commented.

“Your boy King has my son,” Gerard nearly roared as he turned towards Stiles.

Stiles hid his smile well. “I don’t know what you mean to accomplish by telling me this,” he replied. “There is very little I can do while strapped to a chair, and planning a kidnapping is one of them.”

“Through all these weeks of torture, you’ve yet to lose that annoying edge,” Gerard commented.

“Let me out of these shackles, and I’ll show you how annoying I can be,” Stiles uttered, knowing that he was walking the line with Gerard.
Gerard was silent for a while before he finally turned his attentions back to the guards perched by the doorway. “Bring the megascope,” he ordered.

Stiles narrowed his eyes at Gerard, watching the man as best he could. His gaze flickered over to the megascope the guards flawlessly constructed. “I didn’t know you understood megascopes.”

“Lord Blake has been kind enough to have his daughter explain such things,” Gerard replied as he too watched the megascope being set up.

“And who are you trying to contact in a hurry?” Stiles asked.

“Not contact,” Gerard corrected. “I have a recording I wish to send.”

Stiles tried shuffling his weight some in the seat, knowing that nothing good was to come from whatever Gerard had planned.

“I’m sending your King a reminder of what I still have,” Gerard answered Stiles’ silence, knowing that the mage was catching on. “Perhaps this will make him remember his affections for you. I hear that with the Queen dead, his bed remains untouched by others.”

Stiles’ eyes betrayed him, widening in surprise by Gerard’s admission.

“Oh, I forgot, you didn’t know,” Gerard uttered with an amused smile. “She died giving him twins. There was all sorts of fanfare and celebration for the little brats, followed by the tears for the Queen.” He loudly laughed. “He must have gotten tired of being the one doing the fucking.”

Stiles’ hands fist ed together as he bit his tongue, knowing that arguing with Gerard would only lead to more danger.

“It’s ready, sir,” one of the guards informed Gerard.

“Good, good,” Gerard mumbled to himself, his eyes focused on Stiles. “Get the poker red hot.”

~*~

“Here,” Chris simply pointed out on the map where Gerard was hiding.

“That was … easy,” Peter commented, arching his eyebrow in question when Chris looked up at him.

“He handed my daughter over to some witchers while I was away on business, and then manipulated me with the death of my wife,” Chris roughly stated. “But now that you’ve shown me this,” he gestured towards the box that still held Stiles’ fingernails, “I can without a doubt say that my father has lost it completely.”

“And even though Stiles is a mage—“

“I think mages are dangerous creatures,” Chris sharply started, cutting Peter off before he could continue. “And I’m not wrong. Gerard had to order more than enough dimeritium to guarantee that Stiles wouldn’t break free. It’s unheard of for a mage to be capable of such power.”

“You let John go, and then you came to us willingly,” Peter noted. “Why?”

Chris refused to look at Peter. “I may have a hatred for magic, and for those that would use it to hurt people,” he explained. “But to torture someone for your own amusement is different.”
Peter crossed his arms over his chest, observing Chris. “I thank you for this knowledge, Chris.”

“It’s nothing to thank me for,” Chris answered. “I don’t know what my father is planning, nor can I help change what he’s done.”

“But it’s a start,” Peter offered, folding the map up as he prepared to call for a carrier. “I’ll have to send word out, but it shouldn’t be too hard to orchestrate a coordinated attack.”

“He’ll expect that,” Chris replied.

“We’ll just have to hope that it will end in our favor,” Peter uttered.

~*~

Derek was present at the meeting convened to bring the generals together. He kept silent as he listened to the plan to surround the Argents. He was impatient, wishing his uncle would press the importance of their limited time. He turned his attention towards the doors when they opened. He caught sight of a guard entering the room, carrying an ornate box. His body grew rigid when he recognized the box being similar in design to the one John had.

Derek stared up at the guard when he came to stand before him.

“Your Majesty,” the guard started, bowing his head to Derek. “This was just delivered, with instructions to be given to you directly,” he explained.

Derek felt the eyes of the other men on him as he reached for the box. His hands were trembling, nearly dropping the box when its weight was deposited into his grasp. “Who brought it?”

“A rented messenger, Your Majesty,” the guard replied. “He’s being detained for now,” he added, as if to answer Derek’s command to hold the person responsible for any delivery to the palace.

Derek’s hands were sweating as he lifted the cover off the box, his thoughts racing with the numbing fear of what the box could possibly hold. He saw parchment in the told of the box, mimicking its predecessor. He quickly unfolded the paper, his eyes absorbing the words scratched in ink.

*His gaze never left you for a moment, so I thought I’d return to you what’s left. A token to remind you of what I have.*

The archer shooting at the moon followed the words, another elegant ‘G’ to credit the words to Gerard.

Derek looked down at the box, his stomach churning. He quickly ripped open the cloth, determined to get the suspense over with. He was perplexed when he saw it was a stone. He pulled the crystal from the box, recognizing it as a megascope crystal. He stood abruptly, clutching the parchment and crystal in his hand as he made his way hastily from the room, leaving the box behind. He was headed towards Stiles’ old lab, knowing that the megascope was still operating.

Derek was quick in setting up the contraption, placing the crystal into the megascope with care. He twisted the crystal into place, waiting for the recording to start.

“The entire Hale court once trembled in fear of Stiles Stilinski,” Gerard’s voice spoke out from the crystal, a grainy image of a secluded room being projected from the crystal. “Now you look quite tame.”

Stiles remained silent to Gerard’s taunt.
Derek drew in a sharp breath when he finally laid eyes on Stiles. He could see the gauntness of Stiles’ features, how his body looked smaller than usual. He wished he could walk through the megascope’s projection right then, to tear Gerard apart with his bare hands.

“A monarch never shows weakness,” Gerard began, moving to sit before Stiles. “That was something your mother taught Talia.”

“Talia was a wise ruler,” Stiles countered. “She didn’t need to be taught.”

“But you taught Derek how to deal with others,” Gerard countered in kind. “What did you teach him?”

“I was his companion,” Stiles calmly replied. “Is it a crime for a monarch to find companionship in his court’s mage?”

Gerard snorted in amusement. “He found himself a bed partner willing to play games.”

Stiles refused to answer, and Derek wished he could see his face.

“There it is,” Gerard breathed in amazement. “Claudia was a delight to watch in any manner, but she was still a force to be reckoned with. Your mother’s cold gaze could be felt from across a room—and there in your stared just now, I can see the ever defiant mage, prepared to glare someone into submission with the power behind it.”

“You’re a fool to fear someone’s eyes,” Stiles commented.

“The eyes are doors into the soul,” Gerard answered. He graciously accepted the fire poker from the guard, smiling as he noticed Stiles shifting his weight. “And it’s not hard to see why Derek loves your eyes so much.” He released a soft laugh at the wording. “It is a shame to ruin them because of that gaze.”

Stiles couldn’t stop himself from squirming back into the chair. “You’re making a big mistake,” he shakily stated.

“Now, now,” Gerard uttered, his own gaze looking at the glowing heat of the poker. “You managed to stand the pain so far.” He lifted the poker between them, moving the heated end of the poker towards Stiles’ face. “Let’s put out those vile eyes, shall we?”

Derek startled forward when Gerard moved, briefly forgetting for a moment that this recording had already happened.

Stiles screamed loudly when Gerard pressed the poker into his eye. His hands tightened on the armrests, trying to still the thrashing of his body. His screamed continued, the sound of crackling ringing through the recording.

“Scream all you want,” Gerard ordered through Stiles’ cries of pain, a joy in his tone. He dropped the poker, moving fast to grab the slender blade from the table. He grabbed Stiles’ forehead, forcing his head to stop thrashing. “Now let’s give Derek something to remember you by.”

“Go to hell!” Stiles viciously spat at Gerard, his voice rough and heavily pitched. His magic pulsed, a spark of fire igniting in his remaining eye.

“No!” Derek yelled when Gerard forced the blade into Stiles’ eye socket.

Stiles screamed, though he dared not to move for fear that Gerard would let his hand slip as he
carved his remaining eye out.

“Derek,” Peter called to him, his steps rushed as he entered the lab. He skidded to a halt as Stiles’ screams filled the lab. He saw the flickering end of the projected recording being played out from the crystal, Gerard pulling a knife from Stiles’ eye.

Derek turned to look at Peter. “We have to find him—now!”

Peter looked down at the box in his hand. He pulled it away from Derek’s gaze.

“What?” Derek asked, looking back at the box when he noticed Peter was hiding something.

“He sent—” Peter closed his eyes, shaking his head. “I didn’t realize Gerard recorded himself doing it,” he offered.

Derek looked down at the box. “Is it—” He cut his words off, not wanting to admit the obvious in front of him.

“It’s what’s left of his eye,” Peter finally spoke.

Derek closed his eyes, pressing his face into his hands. He had never felt so hopeless before, completely useless in saving Stiles from such a fate. “I want the men to move tonight,” he stated through his hands. He pulled back, wiping his tears away before looking at Peter. “Inform them that they’ll be following my direct order,” he stood from his impromptu seat, moving to walk passed Peter.

“It could be a trap,” Peter started, surprised when Derek took the box from his hands.

Derek looked at Peter. “That doesn’t matter to me,” he answered. He placed the cover on the box, his fingers clutching it tightly. “I’m going to tear that man apart, with my bare hands.” He shook his head, as if that fate was too good for a man like Gerard. “I’m going to press my fingers through his eye sockets, and listen to him scream for mercy. And then I’m going to let Stiles decide his fate.”

Chapter End Notes

Torture: Gerard has captured Stiles, and tortures him. He pulls out all of Stiles’ fingernails and sends them to Derek (while forcing John to watch him torturing his son). He then, later, burns out one of Stiles’ eye and cuts out the other to send to Derek. Gerard uses a megascope crystal (a magical version of video camera) to record the event, in order to also send it to Derek.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

You are all so amazing! Thank you for your kind words, and know that even though I don’t get a chance to respond as I would like, I read every single one of your words, and they mean the world to me. You are all so wonderful!!!

I hope you enjoy this chapter, I promise the next one will be happier ... I PROMISE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I thought you deserved to know," Claudia explained. She kept a calm look about her, reserved in her appearance. She counted Talia as a close friend, wishing to keep their relationship free of such lies and rumors.

“Yes, thank you,” Talia softly answered. Her eyes were scanning Claudia for a sign. “You’re already with child?”

“Yes,” Claudia nodded. “I wanted you to know before the situation worsens.”

“Worsens?” Talia asked, concern furrowing her brow.

“My magic is making this possible,” Claudia answered. “I may not be able to cure my illness, but I can battle the infertility my magic creates. My magic will be weakened during the pregnancy, and perhaps wane afterwards.”

“You’re giving up power to have a child,” Talia suddenly concluded in realization. “Most mages would never do that.”

“No, most mages wouldn’t,” Claudia concurred. She looked down at her stomach, her hand caressing the small protrusion that had begun to swell over the passing weeks. She looked up at Talia when the Queen touched her hand.

Talia held Claudia’s hand in her comforting grasp. “You are nothing like most mages.”

Claudia softly smiled at that. “I want John to have someone to love when I’m gone,” she concluded. “And if it means I have to give up my magic to help him and this child thrive, then it is a sacrifice I am willing to give.”

“It’s a sacrifice any mother should be willing to give,” Talia replied. She pulled Claudia into a warm embrace. “I want you to know that whatever you need, it is yours. You are my friend first and foremost, and your health and happiness is what concerns me.”

“Thank you, Talia,” Claudia softly answered, lingering in their embrace a little longer.

~*~

Claudia ignored the rumors, the looks that many nobles gave her when the gossip began spreading about her time spent away from court. She kept Stiles from such events, knowing that many would like to sink their claws into the miracle child. She shielded Stiles from such interactions, after Gerard
had approached her with questions of Stiles’ tutelage.

In the end, Claudia knew Peter had been telling the truth when he admitted that he heard whispers of her health being the topic of conversation among many nobles with inquisitive questions.

The confirmation was more daunting than anything else, when outsiders saw her weakness as a moment to strike against the Hales.

Talia refused to meet them on open ground at first, knowing that her army would suffer heavy losses if she did. She had hoped she would be able to merge a broker with them, but she knew Peter was right when he said it would just feed into the rumors that Claudia was too weak to use her magic.

Claudia made a show of her magic on the eve of battle. She used the elements to her advantage—the fog rolling in from the marshes to blind the enemy archers; the water mucking the terrain to make siege weapons impossible; and lastly, the thunder and lightning used fear to spread chaos in the enemy camp.

No one doubted Claudia’s powers after that.

But with Claudia’s magic waning, she knew she had to teach Stiles control while she still could. It was the hardest thing she ever had to do, pulling Stiles away from his studies with the Hale children in order to start his own training. She hated how Stiles came to her the night she told him, how upset and inconsolable Stiles was when she told him there was no changing his future.

“I don’t want to,” Stiles protested, his voice muffled as he clung to Claudia. “I’m scared.”

“It’s okay, Stiles,” Claudia softly laughed.

“I’ll be different, then,” Stiles explained, sniffing as he tried to hold back his tears.

“We can’t all be the same,” Claudia replied, her fingers resting in Stiles’ short hair. She smiled to herself as she ruffled the soft locks. “You’re too unique to hide behind something you’re not.”

Stiles forced himself to look up at Claudia. “I don’t want to have magic, mama.”

Claudia frowned at that, her stomach winding tight. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. But magic is something that we’re born with—it’s a gift we can’t give back.”

“They’ll hate me,” Stiles argued, shaking his head. “I can’t be with him, then.” He released his hold on Claudia to rub at his eyes, trying to stop the tears. “He promised to be my forever—but I can’t be his forever if I have magic.”

Claudia’s brows turned down as a frown overtook her features. Her heart hurt, hearing Stiles’ pained words. She wanted to tell him that they were just children—that emotions changed as people grew apart. But she knew the truth—she had seen the way they refused to be separated.

“We all change, darling,” Claudia offered in explanation as she brushed Stiles’ hair from his face. “We’re different people, every step of the way in our life. Never forget that, Stiles. Derek will change, just as you do. It doesn’t matter how you change, but how you accept that change.” She cradled Stiles’ face in her hands, cupping his cheeks in her open palms as she forced him to look up at her. “You are a gift, Mieczyslaw. Never let someone make you feel different.”

~*~

Derek fell from his perch on the tower’s rock, his back colliding with the crumbling steps. He loudly
swore when he swiftly rolled back onto his feet. He looked up the tower, catching sight of the crimson cape dancing in the air, taunting him as its owner remained hidden in the tower. “Stiles!” He angrily yelled. “Get down here.”

“Go away!” Stiles yelled back at him from within the safety of the tower. “I said I was sorry!” Derek snapped, kicking one of the loose rocks at the base of the tower, ignoring the throbbing pain in his lower back from his fall. “Let me talk to you about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about!” Stiles answered.

“I’m not marrying her!” Derek finally yelled. He sat down, pressing his back against the stones as he ran his hands through his hair. He sucked in a deep breath, pained by the memory of the blonde lady of the court caging him in. He could still feel the dryness of her lips pressed against his own, too stunned to recoil immediately. He felt sick when he saw that Stiles had witnessed what happened. He followed after him when Stiles fled, finding himself in the pages of the fairytale book he had long neglected. They were teenagers now, and he tried to convince himself that he was too old for such childish things.

“You’re not marrying her?” A soft voice close to Derek questioned.

Derek looked up at Stiles, watching the younger boy floating down through the air. He was always amazed by Stiles’ ability to manipulate the space around him. “I came after you, didn’t I?” He breathlessly uttered.

Stiles silently moved to stand before Derek, leaning over as he reached his hand out to hold Derek’s. His fingertips smoothed over Derek’s knuckles. He squatted down before Derek, a frown pulling at his lips.

“I’m not normal, Stiles,” Derek weakly uttered. He forced himself to look at Stiles.

“Because you don’t want to marry a stranger?” Stiles questioned.

“I don’t …” Derek closed his eyes, letting his head fall back against the rock behind him. “I don’t find women attractive,” he painfully admitted.

Stiles’ brow furrowed in pitiful understanding. “I find both men and women attractive,” he offered. “Does that mean I’m not normal? Well, I know my magic makes me different, but—”

“You don’t get it,” Derek shook his head. “I have to marry a woman,” he forcefully stated. “I have to be their version of normal, or else the entire kingdom will fall into panic.”

Sorrow filled Stiles’ stomach with dread at such words. “Laura’s older, and she has yet to marry—”

“She has chosen the man she will marry,” Derek sharply corrected Stiles. “That’s why there are so many ladies of standing visiting now. They’re trying to find me a suitable Consort in time for my coronation.” He angrily stood up, withdrawing from Stiles’ touch.

Stiles followed Derek’s suit, straightening up from his crouch as he looked at Derek.

“I don’t have time to play games anymore,” Derek stated. “I have to start acting like the king I have to be when my mother passes the crown.”

Stiles grabbed Derek’s hand again. “That doesn’t mean you have to force yourself to—”
Derek yanked his hand out of Stiles’ hold. He turned to look at Stiles, a critical gaze overtaking his features. “I don’t have the luxury to be who I am.”

Stiles glared back at Derek. “And you think I do? We’re all different, Derek, but maybe you need to learn how to accept that.”

“Don’t be so childish, Stiles,” Derek angrily stated.

“Don’t call me a child,” Stiles lowly growled, feeling his magic flare in his palms.

“Or what? You’ll throw a tantrum?” Derek pushed.

“Fuck you!” Stiles yelled at Derek, shoving his hands against Derek’s chest. “You’re the one that is afraid to have a kingdom handed to him. Afraid to act on his own feelings.”

Derek turned his voice on Stiles, incredulously offended by Stiles’ backhanded words. “Because I can’t act on what I feel for you, you throw it in my face—”

“I don’t know what you feel for me because you’ll never say it!” Stiles tiredly argued. He turned his back on Derek, walking away from him as he left the tower behind. He turned on his heel, breath heavy with anger as he looked back at Derek who blankly stared back at him. “I wasn’t lying when I promised you my forever.” He angrily wiped at the tears stinging at his eyes. “And I trusted you when you said the same.”

Derek paced some, angered with more than the situation, but also with himself. He felt like he did away with what was the most important thing. He stopped his worried steps, turning his head to look after Stiles, realizing that he made his mind up a long time ago and couldn’t reclaim his heart even if he had wanted to. He took off after Stiles, rushing to catch up with him.

That was how a werewolf nearly killed them both.

The feral creature caught sight of Stiles’ cape and believed him to be Red Riding Hood. Infuriated with the knowledge that she had almost been its undoing, it attacked in a blind rage.

Stiles managed to evade the werewolf, his cape however was a tether that allowed the creature to yank him backwards. His cape was shredded with slashes from the claws, his brain logically telling him that he was likely doomed to be its prey.

“Get away from him!” Derek yelled at the creature, pulling the creature’s attention away from Stiles.

Stiles used his magic to push the werewolf off balance, knowing that there was little he could do without the risk of hitting Derek.

It was over quicker than Stiles thought it would be, seeing the creature fall to the ground with a loud thump, the blade of Derek’s sword driven straight through the beast’s chest—through its heart.

Stiles scrambled from his fallen perch by the well when he saw Derek stumble a bit before clutching at his side. He saw the blood staining the torn parts of Derek’s vest and shirt.

“How bad is it?” Stiles demanded when he reached Derek, slotting himself under Derek’s arm to support his weight.

“It’s not that bad,” Derek quickly countered, knowing Stiles was going to overreact—as most people did whenever Derek injured himself. Only with Stiles, the sentiment for Derek’s wellbeing was personal.
Stiles forced Derek to move towards the well, making him sit on the edge. His magic flared in his hands, the calming light warming Derek’s skin as it healed the wounds.

“You’re so stupid,” Stiles chastised through his welling tears, trying to focus on healing the claw marks along Derek’s side. He knew he couldn’t make the scars disappear. “You could have died, Derek.”

“I wouldn’t have to marry some princess, then,” Derek answered as he watching Stiles’ magic heal his wound.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Stiles countered.

“I’m serious,” Derek softly replied. He looked at Stiles when he silently looked up at him. “Without you, I’m … I’m not entirely sure I want to keep trying in this world.”

Stiles hesitated as he leaned in close, his lips so close to Derek’s. He was holding himself back, desperate to not cross the unspoken boundary between them.

Derek beat him to it, dipping his head low enough to capture Stiles’ lips in a kiss. It was a soft, quick kiss—one that asked if it was allowed as Derek pulled back.

Stiles cupped Derek’s face in the palms of his hands, kissing Derek once more.

~*~

“This was never about Derek,” Stiles softly uttered, finally breaking the silence of the room as he woke from his dreams—memories of happier times.

Gerard turned to look at Stiles, carefully watching the mage. He had grown confident that Stiles was nearly broken. He took pride in seeing the stillness and silence that overtook Stiles since he took his eyes.

“You’ve always hated him,” Stiles continued, lifting his head some as he ignored the pain. “But you didn’t need my father to get to him.” He paused with bated breath. “You needed my father to get to me.”

“You’re cleverer than you act,” Gerard replied, uncaring of the revelation.

Stiles released a weak laugh. “Not all would agree with you.”

“And who are they to not agree with me?” Gerard asked. He snorted out an amused laugh. “Blake? He was always a fool, underestimating you at every turn. He couldn’t stop hating the fact that his daughter couldn’t give Derek a child—it put her out of the running for Consort.”

Stiles remained silent, listening to Gerard’s revelations in hope Gerard might allow something to slip.

“But it never mattered to Derek that you couldn’t give him a child,” Gerard commented. “I think that made it easy to get Blake to help.”

Stiles wished the pain would subside, his head pounding. “Why grab my father?”

“How do you get a predator to lower his guard?” Gerard questioned. “You take something it loves.” He leaned back against the table, watching Stiles. “Derek was impossible to reach once you thwarted the assassin, so I needed you.”

“You wanted this the whole time,” Stiles firmly stated, wanting Gerard to admit it.
Gerard inhaled steadily before breathing out a clipped, “Yes.” He moved from his spot, almost pacing. “It was too easy to suggest to the advisors that Derek start courting. A man at Derek’s age should have been a seasoned father by now, yet he still hadn’t picked a Consort.” He released a cruel, amused laugh. “You never suspected so many in your midst of their treachery. But they were the ones that pushed Derek to wed—even after his protests.”

Stiles tensed at Gerard’s confession, realizing that the man still knew more than he let on.

“No,” Gerard breathed quickly, having caught Stiles’ reaction. “He didn’t tell you, did he? How pathetic of him, trying to spare a mage’s feelings.” He laughed at Stiles’ fortune. “It was easy enough to twist his arm into accepting when they stated how indebted his kingdom was to the far east—how his people would have nothing if it wasn’t for Paige’s family. How he fell in line after the rumors about you started to spread.” His voice drew closer to Stiles as he spoke, coming to linger before him.

“There are always rumors about me,” Stiles defiantly uttered, refusing to give Gerard more to taunt him with.

“You really are a blinded fool,” Gerard hoarsely muttered, a sick amusement in his tone.

“And you’re a pathetic, old man,” Stiles hissed.

“He was going to make you his Consort,” Gerard quickly stated, as if he couldn’t hold the taunt back anymore. “He had a law drawn up and everything—plans to help protect you from the backlash of accusations saying you bewitched him.” He looked at Stiles. “He was going to hand everything to a filthy mage, all because he liked the way you pleasured him.”

Stiles refused to answer Gerard, even as his thoughts raced with questions of what truth lurked in Gerard’s words.

“But then Blake told him the truth,” Gerard continued. “How people were already calling for your pyre to be built. How some asked for you to be impaled on a pike, afraid the fire would only make a demon stronger.” He finally moved to tie a scrap of fabric around Stiles’ wounds, covering the gaping holes where Stiles’ eyes had been from his sight.

Stiles jerked his head to try and get away from Gerard’s actions. He realized what Gerard was doing, begrudgingly allowing the man to continue.

“And then you insulted the Queen,” Gerard shook his head as he spoke. “That drove the nobles over the edge. A mage allowed to insult his better,” he scoffed out a laugh. “You would have been burned if it wasn’t for Derek insisting he’d talk to you—that he’d put you in your place. Of course, Blake wasn’t there to protest, so they let him—demanding that he make you act proper, now that things were corrected.”

“Corrected,” Stiles forced out a sharp laugh of contempt. “You’re all obsessed with your norms that you think magic is an abomination.”

Gerard released a guttural laugh. “Dear boy,” he stated as he regained control of his voice. “They didn’t care about your magic—they were glad you had it, presenting another reason Derek couldn’t make you Consort. They were pleased with Derek giving up his manfucking ways to finally produce an heir.”

Stiles wished he could tear Gerard’s tongue out when the man released another laugh.

“Derek never once protested for his own sake,” Gerard stated. “Even after the first few nights he
tried to consummate the marriage bed, and couldn’t. I heard the healers offered him some herbs to help with arousal—though he was like a zombie the whole time, the poor girl had to do all the work.” He shook his head. “It’s a shame that youth and fortune is wasted on men like that. Beautiful cunt laid bare before him, ripe for the fucking, and all he can think about is your cock in his ass.”

“He fucked me,” Stiles finally snapped at Gerard, unable to stand the way he kept speaking of Derek. It hurt to hear their intimate moments being spat on—how people looked down on Derek for enjoying the pleasure they had between them. He would never let Gerard know the truth of the matter—they found the pleasure in the moments shared, never exploring each other’s bodies the same way twice.

“Did he?” Gerard doubtfully questioned. “I suppose he had to have some practice before fucking his wife.”

“Why do you care?” Stiles pressed, angered that Gerard had such intimate knowledge of them. “Why take me when I was already gone?”

“Gone?” Gerard abruptly questioned. “You weren’t gone, Stiles. You left the palace, but the moment Derek asked for you, you’d go crawling back to him,” he started to explain as he stood up. “We saw what you did when he lay dying on that field back in No Man’s Land. You tore apart ranks of soldiers just to drag his dying body back behind safe lines. You conjured old magic to keep him alive,” he looked at Stiles, his features twisting as he watched such a terrifying force be broken apart in front of him. “What would the mighty High Enchanter do if his King was murdered? That is why you’re here, Stiles. I needed you to draw him out of his walls, because of his love for you. But I’m breaking you apart because your love for him has been the obstacle in my way since the beginning. I needed you removed because you’d never relent if you woke one day to find that your precious Derek had been gutted like a pig.”

Stiles clenched his jaw tight, wishing he could tear into Gerard with his bare hands.

“You were meant to die in that council room when you marked Blake as the spy,” Gerard admitted. “Everyone always assumes an assassin is for a King,” he mused.

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Derek spent days pushing his horse to the limits, determined to reach Gerard’s villa before it was too late. He knew the megascope crystal was old, the recording likely delayed more than a week as Gerard stewed in his anger and pride. He regretted ever having made the choice to push Stiles away. Even without the prospect of anything arising from this, he had hoped he wasn’t too late. How he hoped he could return Stiles to John, even though it wouldn’t change a damn thing.

The men were quick in their departure from the palace, all of them trying to follow after their King. Peter did what he could to calm the council from falling into complete anarchy upon discovering Derek’s departure.

The council wanted Derek safe, to fulfill the treaty signed with Toussaint. But even more important to them, they didn’t want Stiles found. Though it appeared that their hold on Derek had run its course, Stiles’ kidnapping and torture had pushed Derek passed the bounds of their manipulation.

Peter had found where Stiles was, thanks to Chris, and Derek was determined to get Stiles back sooner rather than later.

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Stiles stirred some when he heard the door to his room open. He could tell the bolt had been loosened, the yawning of the door’s hinges signaling the approach of someone. He didn’t bother pushing himself to the limits, knowing that he had little strength left. He wasn’t sure how long it had been since Gerard took his eyes—he thought he had counted the days correctly when he was first caught, knowing that he was gone for more than a month. He wasn’t sure how long had passed now, but his fingernails had grown back into his nailbeds, still too short.

The visitor was silent as they approached Stiles, their footsteps barely making a sound.

Stiles remained still as the visitor loosened his restraints. With the circlet gone from his head and the collar falling from his throat, Stiles felt his magic rushing back to him. He didn’t react, waiting for a sign of what was to follow.

The restraints around Stiles’ ankles fell to the ground with a clunk, the visitor taking the shackles from his wrists last. Stiles forced himself to move, pushing up out of his chair, grabbing the visitor in order to shove them back into the closest wall. He felt the hardened leather of armor, the cold touch of metal clasps and chainmail on the shoulder. He knew it wasn’t an Argent or a guard when the person didn’t react.

“I don’t know who you are—”

“You don’t need to see me to know who I am,” the visitor answered in a feminine voice.

Stiles tensed when the visitor grabbed his wrist.

“Calm down,” the woman stated. “I’m showing you who I am. So you’ll believe me when I tell you what I am,” she explained. She brought Stiles’ hand up to touch her medallion.

Stiles recognized the sharp points of the medallion. “Witcheress,” he uttered, his fingertips trying to make out the shape of the medallion. “You’re from the House of the Wolf,” he plainly uttered.

“I am,” the visitor replied.

“Have you come to torment me?” Stiles forcefully asked.

“I’ve think you’ve been tormented enough, haven’t you, Stiles?” The woman asked.

“Who are you?” Stiles demanded.

The woman moved swiftly, swapping their spots easily. She tightened her hold on Stiles’ arms, pinning his shoulder back into the wall with no difficulty. “A friend sent me.”

“You’re being unnecessarily cruel,” Stiles snapped at her. “I can’t see you—I can’t fight you. The least you can do is give me your name!”

“Allison,” the woman answered. “My name is Allison.”

Stiles took in an unsteady breath. “Allison Argent.”

It had been years since Stiles saw Allison. She had been one to avoid Court life, following the witcher path with ease. He had seen her last when he traveled to Toussaint to see Lydia. He knew that Lydia must have had something to do with Allison being here now—but he couldn’t fathom why.

“I’m sorry it’s been so long,” Allison offered.
“I’m guessing Cora sent you,” Stiles artfully lied, ignoring Allison’s apology. He didn’t need her pity. He wanted the truth.

“Cora mentioned you were missing,” Allison offered as she released her hold on Stiles as she took a step back. “But it was Derek that asked for you to be found.”

Stiles ran his hand over his wrists, wincing as he grazed the cuts that the dimeritium dug into his skin. “Derek put out a contract to get me?”

Allison busied herself with inspecting her inventory in order to determine how to proceed from their secluded room. “He reached out to his great uncle,” she answered. “Asked if the witches knew anything—that’s how word reached me.”

“He asked a witcher to help with a kidnapping,” Stiles plainly stated.

“He used his connections as best he could,” Allison corrected Stiles as she turned to look at him. “It wasn’t until Lydia agreed to his terms that she asked me to help.”

“The Lady Duchess of Toussaint cares about my fate?” Stiles incredulously asked. He had called Lydia a dear friend once, but had fallen away from contact as they grew older. He still sent her flowers on the anniversary of her husband’s death, and she reciprocated the favor when the anniversary of Claudia’s death rolled around. It was a silent understanding that they still cared for one another.

“She does,” Allison answered. “She employed me to return to my childhood home, knowing I’d be able to find you with ease.”

“What does Toussaint get from this?” Stiles asked. He released a soft, deprecating laugh when Allison chose to remain silent.

It had been years since Lydia’s husband died, and there was still no monarch by her side. And with Paige dead, Derek was now available for such a duty. “Don’t tell me. The royal houses will be united, won’t they?”

Allison was silent for a pregnant pause. “Yes,” she finally admitted.

Stiles wasn’t sure if her confirmation made him feel better or worse. In the end, Derek would always choose kingdom over happiness.

“Now if you don’t mind, I think we should be going.”

“I’m not going with you,” Stiles sharply stated, pushing himself away from the dank stones inlaid in the wall. His sorrow was turning to anger quickly.

“You don’t have a choice in the matter,” Allison forcefully countered Stiles’ claim.

“On the contrary,” Stiles nearly hissed at her. “I’m not going with you so I can be handed off to fulfill some contract.” He wouldn’t be laughed at—not by the courtiers. He knew he’d be the center of ridicule, despite Derek’s best intentions. He wasn’t going to trade one hell for another.

“You can’t see,” Allison stated in an annoyed tone. “We both know you can’t make it out of here without help.”

“You think I don’t know that they’ve been holding me in a cellar?” Stiles spat in anger. His muscles ached, his bones creaked, his soul hurt. But his magic was swelling as it returned to him, his skin
thrumming with the energy that begged to be released.

“You need my eyes,” Allison sternly stated, her voice hollow of caring for Stiles’ threats.

“I don’t trust you,” Stiles warned.

“You don’t have to trust me in order to use me to escape,” Allison calmly answered as she looked outside the cracked door. She finally turned to look at Stiles. She could see the trembling setting into his body, how overwhelmed he was to finally be released from his shackles. “It will take a while for the effects of the dimeritium to fully dissipate.”

“And until then, you’re my only chance of getting out of here,” Stiles answered.

“Precisely,” Allison replied, turning her attention back to the cellar’s exit. “We’ll have to be quick. Stay close behind me, and do as I say,” she instructed, reaching her hand back to grab Stiles’ arm, prepared to guide him.

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Allison froze, causing Stiles to bump into her back from the sudden halt of movement. She turned her head to evaluate the threat. She could hear the men moving in, knowing her grandfather better than the man thought. “They’re coming for you,” she softly stated under her breath. She turned her head towards Stiles, making it easier for him to hear her as she kept her eyes on the entrances. “You need to get out of here, Stiles.”

“I would love to do nothing more,” Stiles admitted, an edge to his voice. “But I can’t exactly see where I would be going,” he harshly reminded Allison of his current state.

“I know you can polymorph,” Allison easily countered. “Change into a bat,” she ordered.

The door in front of them was jammed. Stiles could hear the loud banging of someone hitting the obstruction—he knew that Allison must have blocked the door.

“That’s not how it works,” Stiles stated in annoyance.

Allison released her hold on Stiles, quickly drawing her steel blade with ease.

Stiles took a stumbling step back as Allison let go of him.

Allison pulled the crossbow from her belt, aiming it at the door. “This is your chance at freedom, Stiles. Now, fly.”

Stiles drew his hands in close to his core, concentrating on his magic within. He focused the force, building the power up as he struggled with the strength to change. He wished he had enough power to guarantee that the change would be painless. He released a soft cry when his arms started to change, his entire body morphing into the form of a bat. His flight was unsteady, but he could tell where he was going for the most part. He flew high enough to not hit the hallways’ ceiling as he flew through the doorway.

Allison shot the arrow into the first man that entered through the door, keeping him from trying to hit Stiles’ flying form.

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The men were on edge, having arrived to the aftermath of a great battle. There were wounded men
writhing on the ground, clutching at their missing limbs as they wailed in pain. There were corpses, too, strewed across the estate grounds. On the ground by the trap doors leading to the cellar, there sat a young woman kneeling, her eyes closed in meditation.

The woman was young, her features beautiful despite the deep scars cutting through her brow and jaw. Her breathing was calm as she concentrated on the moments passing, her twin swords sheathed against her back. There was blood staining her armor and the ground around her.

Derek made his way through the men, stopping at the front when he saw her. “Allison,” he uttered in recognition.

The woman opened her eyes, looking up at Derek with her golden, feline eyes. She stood with ease and grace, completely unhindered by the weight of her weapons. “Your Majesty,” she greeted him with a respectful bow. “I waited for your arrival.”

“Lydia sent you,” Derek pressed.

“Of course,” Allison answered. “Not all monarchs have a witcher at their disposal.”

Derek looked at the bodies, not seeing Stiles among the visible faces. “Where is he?”

Allison narrowed her eyes at Derek. “He flew away,” she simply offered.


“Magic,” Allison deadpanned.

Derek bit his tongue in anger. “In his condition—”

“Magic doesn’t wane under direst or wounds,” Allison explained in her reply. “In his condition, Stiles is still very capable of leveling a battlefield. Transforming into an animal is like second nature to him.”

Derek paused for a moment, allowing his anger to quell some. He took a deep breath. “How do I know you didn’t let Gerard escape?”

“Witcher’s are impartial to political affiliation,” Allison expertly recited. “We leave our families behind after we take the trials.” She allowed a small smile to take over her lips when she saw the exasperated look Derek gave her. “That being said, Stiles is a friend—and an even dearer friend to my lady.”

Derek nodded. “Lydia did send support,” he uttered in understanding, regretting how that act cemented their seemingly unavoidable marriage even more.

“She keeps her word,” Allison replied. She turned her head towards the sound of hooves galloping against the rural terrain. “Someone is coming,” she simply stated.

“Where is Gerard?” Derek quickly demanded, uncaring of Allison’s warning.

“Gone,” Allison truthfully answered. She looked at Derek. “Did you plan on ending his life?”

“He deserves worse than a quick death,” Derek stated through clenched teeth. He knew that diplomacy demanded he make Gerard face a trial of peers. But his heart wanted justice.

“Kate is inside,” Allison decided to let Derek know.
Derek carefully looked at the witcheress. His stomach twisted—he felt gutted at her mention. He remembered how the Argents frequented the palace while his mother was alive. He remembered Kate shadowing him; he still had moments where he dwelled on how she left court. He hated that he could still recall what it felt like to have her lips on his own. He hated her for how she started the rumors—how she lurked in Stiles’ shadow from that day.

“She’ll never hurt someone else,” Allison stated. Her eyes looked to the arrival of a rider. Her lips parted as she drew in a breath of surprise.

The rider dismounted, turning to address the situation before them. He halted when he saw the witcheress. “Allison?”

Chris sounded confused, as if he wasn’t sure that the woman standing before him was in fact his daughter. He had not seen the witcheress she became, only remembering the little girl he mourned losing. He stood in pure shock and marvel of the way her white hair and golden eyes altered her appearance so vastly from what he imagined his daughter would look like as a grown woman.

“Father,” Allison softly greeted him. She forced herself to look back to Derek. “Kate is inside—wounded.” She could see the flash of uncertainty in Derek’s features. “If you want words with her, I suggest you do so sooner rather than later.”

Derek took his leave, allowing Chris and Allison a moment of peace for their reunion. He knew Peter told Chris where Dere was headed, certain his uncle thought he was helping the situation. He didn’t trust Chris to put aside his hatred and anger for mages, despite the help Chris had offered. He pushed those thoughts away, entering the ruined estate’s villa. He took sure steps over the broken furniture and scattered pieces of destroyed decorations. He knew a battleground when he walked one, and Allison mustn’t have hesitated a moment to have exited the fight without a serious injury.

“He’s gone,” a voice sharply spat.

Derek turned to look at the owner of the voice, recognizing the wounded figure as Kate. He found it fitting that she met a fate other than the one she tried to steal at any cost. He paused his steps as he watched her hauling her body into a different potion.

Kate was sluggish, blood pooling around her as she collapsed once more. Her breath was heavy, panting as she struggled to dull the pain. “Your precious little mage escaped,” she uttered, wincing at the sharp pain in her chest.

“Why?” Derek demanded.

Kate laughed, ignoring the pain as she coughed against the blood filling her lungs. “Why the hell not?” She spit the blood at Derek’s feet. “You don’t deserve the crown.”

Derek took a step away from Kate, shaking his head. “Neither you nor your father will ever have the crown.” He paused, uttering before he left, “You were always a snake.”

~*~

Stiles stumbled across the uneven terrain. He had lost his way, his magic draining quickly once he took flight. The last thing he remembered in bat form was the feeling of his wings dragging through water. He thought he knew where he was, only to be lost on the grassy knolls surrounding the edge of the water he fell into.

It was no surprise that he happened upon the main trail by accident. He fell onto the dirt path, falling to his hands and knees as he tripped over the grassy edge. He clambered upright, keeping his arms
out as he reached for his surroundings. He was hoping fate would be merciful to him and allowed a post marker to be in his way. He wasn’t sure how long had passed, but there was no marker around him. There was no traveler to happen upon him as he stumbled around without sight.

Stiles gave up, falling to the ground. He wasn’t even sure if he was in middle of the path or not. Part of him had hoped he was so that a horse would run him over. “Put me out of my misery,” he huffed as he collapsed into the dirt. He could hear the distant hooting of an owl, knowing that night had yet to pass.

Stiles laid in the dirt, among what he assumed was the stars and moon. He hoped that it was a beautiful night out—it would be a blessing to pass under a beautiful night sky. He felt himself slipping, his magic waning. He wondered if this hopelessness was something his mother ever felt as she lay dying. He laughed at himself, knowing it wasn’t the same—his mother had the love of a family surrounding her when she passed. Stiles had nothing but the creatures roaming the countryside at night.

*Just let me die*, he softly thought as he drifted away from consciousness.

~*~

Stiles’ memories were playing out like a movie for him, images of their past falling together like in a movie. He wondered if he was dying, forced to relive his defining moments, one at a time until he regretted every mistake he made even more.

True to his word, Derek hadn’t wed. Even with pressure from Talia’s advisors. Talia brought up the subject of marriage only once, asking Derek if he had anyone in mind. She seemed understanding when he confessed to her that no lady caught his eye—a mother’s intuition being greater than a kingdom’s. She didn’t try to keep Derek and Stiles apart.

Now that Stiles was the Hale High Enchanter, at such a young age, he suffered the scrutiny of Talia’s advisors even worse. None of them protested against Talia’s words as she informed them that Stiles would be present during meetings. They kept their dislike for Stiles to privately endure without Queen knowing.

Even after Talia’s passing, the advisors never dared to vocally admit their dislike for Stiles in front of Derek, or any other Hale. Though they did not hide how forceful they were in their attempts to find Derek the perfect bride.

Derek refused them at every turn. He had grown up watching his parents, seeing how adoring they were and wondered how they could have been like that with someone they were forced to marry. But he couldn’t marry the women pushed his way—he couldn’t think of a life without love, especially after what he had with Stiles.

Stiles was the one that sat by Derek’s side during Talia’s funeral, his hand tightly holding Derek’s own in a sure grip as they sat next to one another in their isolated pew. He wasn’t sure of their future, but he knew he could never really let go of his life with Derek. He was tired of losing the people he loved—he wasn’t going to let it happen again.

And something told Stiles that Derek felt the same.

Derek’s rooms had been reassigned, as if Derek had a responsibility to embody everything the same way his predecessors had now that he was King. Derek begged Stiles to stay with him, his voice small and vulnerable, not one of a king. It was as if Derek wasn’t sure what Stiles’ answer would be—as if he feared that Stiles would say no. He didn’t understand that Stiles would never reject him, or
their bond.

They always snuck away, hidden away from the eyes and ears of the palace. But the rooms of the monarch were considered sacred to those in the castle—none would dare to try and eavesdrop there, fearful for pain of death.

That night was the first time they had sex in the castle.

Stiles was right when he assumed the wounds the claw marks left on Derek’s body would turn to scars. He would trail his fingertips along the scars whenever they were laying together, lost in thought as they stole a moment of reprieve, their naked bodies tangled together.

Derek ran his fingers through Stiles’ hair, his fingertips massaging Stiles’ scalp in a calming manner. He turned his head towards Stiles, pressing his nose into Stiles’ hair. He pressed a kiss against Stiles’ forehead, smiling when Stiles turned his face up to capture their lips in a kiss.

Stiles turned his body into Derek’s as he practically laid on top of him. He smiled at Derek, reaching his hand up to touch Derek’s beard. “You need a trim,” he softly uttered.

“I like it longer,” Derek countered, pulling his arm from pillowing behind his head. He subconsciously ran his fingers over the grey spot in his beard.

“I like the grey,” Stiles quickly commented, batting Derek’s hand away from the greying spot. “It makes you look regal,” he playfully added.

“I’m in my twenties,” Derek started to argue.

“And it happens,” Stiles firmly stated as he sat up. “Would you want me to get rid of my moles?”

“I like your moles,” Derek thoughtfully answered, his fingers tracing along Stiles’ skin as he following the moles across Stiles’ shoulder.

“And I like your grey,” Stiles replied, kissing the greying spot in Derek’s beard. “Don’t you dare try to get rid of it.”

“It shows my age,” Derek uttered, lifting his head back in order to open his throat up to Stiles’ kisses.

“You’re in your late twenties,” Stiles murmured against Derek’s skin.

“There’s already talk,” Derek sorrowfully stated.

“About how grey you’ll be?” Stiles questioned as he looked up at Derek, arching an eyebrow.

“That’s just silly.”

“About an heir,” Derek solemnly stated.

A stone sunk in Stiles’ stomach. “I know you said you wouldn’t marry—”

“And I meant it.”

“I know you did,” Stiles replied. “I know you said that, and that you meant it. But if you have to, then … ” He moved to sit upright in the bed beside Derek. He placed his hand on Derek’s chest. “I’ll endure.”

“I can’t,” Derek stated as he sat up with Stiles. “I can’t marry someone else—”
“You’re not mine anymore, Derek,” Stiles sharply snapped. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. “You’re the kingdom’s now.”

“Stiles, I can’t be with a woman, not like us.”

“Derek,” Stiles sighed. “There is going to come a day when you can’t fight it. That day is going to break me— and I won’t be able to hold it all together if I think you still care for me.”

Derek laced their fingers together, pulling Stiles back into an embrace as they reclined back into the bed together. He was glad Stiles allowed them this. “I’d never try and string you along, Stiles.”

_You wouldn’t mean to_ , Stiles thought as he started to fall asleep, the repetitive gesture of Derek running his hand through his hair once more calming him.

Only this time, Stiles thought he could feel the intake of Derek’s breath causing the chest beneath him to inflate. He could hear Derek talking, the words soft and scared.

“I love you.”

Derek stilled when Stiles didn’t answer him, forcing himself to look down at Stiles’ face in order to gage a reaction. He only found Stiles asleep. He released a soft huff of laughter. He relaxed in the bed, turning his head towards Stiles. “The first time I mustered the courage to say it, and you’re asleep,” he mused. “Maybe I’ll just have to say it every time you’re asleep—maybe then I won’t feel so guarded.”

Stiles was always asleep before Derek, his magic constantly draining him throughout the day, and even part of the night. He would let his own guard down when with Derek, finally feeling safe enough to sleep. But it always meant he never heard those words—the words he thought Derek had always been so unwilling to say.

Perhaps a god took pity on Stiles, because his magic replayed the moment for him again and again. Until he found another one. And another one. Different nights, but always the same words.

_**I love you, Mieczysław Stilinski.**_ 

~*~

“I think he’s dead,” one of the men grumbled, kicking Stiles’ leg with his boot once more.

“Well, it didn’t say dead _**or**_ alive,” the other man answered. “Just said that he was wanted.”

“I don’t think they’d be happy if he was dead,” the first man replied, scratching his head as he tried to remember the details of the warrant.

“Why would they want a mage for?”

The first man hit the second man over the head. “He’s a mage, idiot—he does _**magic**_. Of course they’d want him—there’s a war coming, afterall.”

Stiles startled awake, moving in an attempt to scuffle away from the voices. He was terrified to discover that his hands were once again in shackles—dimeritium shackles. “Let me go!” He demanded when the men didn’t make a sound.

“No,” the second man uttered.

“I heard what you said,” Stiles quickly stated. “And I can do magic— _**great**_ magic.”
There was another pregnant pause.

“What kind of magic?” The first man asked.

“All sorts,” Stiles replied. “If you let me go, I can give you treasure.”

“Treasure isn’t magic,” the second man stated.

“I can use my magic to lead you to it,” Stiles quickly explained.

“I don’t think so,” the first man quickly stated. “Your bounty is greater than any unknown treasure you’re promising.”

“Imagine what we could get for a mage,” the second man stated. “A High Enchanter, too. Imagine what he’ll do to him once he’s got him back.”

Stiles cringed at the man’s words, knowing he was heading back to the Argents. Perhaps Allison wasn’t successful in her escape from the estate, and he’d be joining her once more.

“Please, just let me go,” Stiles begged, distressed as he tried pulling back when there was a yank on the chain attached to his shackles. He fell forward when another yank pulled him off balance, falling face first into the dirt.

“Get up!” The first man demanded. “We have plenty of ways to go if we are to get you—”

“Don’t tell him where we’re going,” the second man nearly yelled, fear lacing his voice.

“What? You think he’ll avoid it should we get separated?” The first man sarcastically asked.

“The warrant said he could change into animals,” the second man warily explained. “What if he tells one to send for help.”

“I curse you both!” Stiles spat at them as he struggled to sit up. “You’ll wish you never left home. You’ll—” A rough boot connected with Stiles’ jaw, the kick cutting off his words. His jaw was pounding, his cheek stinging as blood pooled in his mouth. He spit the blood out.

“Gag him,” the first man ordered.

There was some movement, the rustle of fabric. Stiles bit at the hand that touched his face, bearing down when he managed to bit the man’s finger.

“Fuck! He bit me!”

This time, one of the men kicked Stiles in the stomach until he let go. He didn’t fight the gag this time.

“Ugh, his eyes are disgusting—cover them up.”

Another piece of fabric covered the wounds where his eyes once were.

“Now start walking,” one of the men uttered, forcing Stiles to move forward with a rough shove.

Chapter End Notes
I wanted to address that, yes, Stiles is completely blind. However, like Philippa, Stiles is
going to work on trying to get his eyesight back. That isn't a promise that he is getting
his eyesight back, just an explanation of where this is going.

Thank being said--Please stop hating on Derek. He and Stiles are going to get into a
vocal fight in the next chapter, and much needed words will be said.
WARNING this story is on an “abandoned hiatus” as of 2/27/2018. I apologize to those who were enjoying this, but working on this fic, and the immediate reaction to it, is no longer something fun for me to experience.

Stiles stumbled, his knees weakening as he lost his balance. He fell to the ground, placing his hands out, only able to hope that he’d catch himself. He lifted his head, trying to hear what was happening in the room around him. He didn’t know where he was, but he was convinced it was back at the Argent’s stronghold.

“Please,” Stiles begged as he turned back to where the men had pushed him forward. He was thankful that they took his gag away. “I can give you a number of riches. I could—”

“Shut up,” one of the men snapped again, kneeing Stiles in the side to prod him into silence.

Stiles winced, tucking his elbows against his ribs. He hoped that perhaps the Argents would just let him die with what little dignity he had left.

“What are you doing?” A sharp voice incredulously asked, footsteps echoing in the vast hallway.

“Brought the witch you’re looking for,” Stiles’ captor stated with pride. “The one the fancy reward is laid out for.”

“His Majesty does not need half dead charlatans being presented to him,” the sharp voice instructed.

Stiles believed the voice belonged to a chamberlain, though the accent sounded different than anyone employed by the Argents—it sounded like someone who grew up in the Hale court. He could only imagine what reward the Argents offered for his recapture.

“You tell the King we have his mage,” the other captor snapped at the chamberlain. “This is Stiles Stilinski, the fucking jewel of the Hale court. Do you have any idea what it took recognizing him through all this filth?”

“Stiles?” The chamberlain uttered with familiarity, as if he almost didn’t believe the men.

“He doesn’t look it, but he’s him,” the captor stated with pride. “We covered his eyes up because you don’t want to see the mess the Argents left there.”

“Send for the King’s Advisor,” the chamberlain quickly ordered a servant. “And be quick about it. Tell him it’s about Stiles.”

Stiles didn’t know what to think, only knowing that it meant he wasn’t back at the Argents’ stronghold.

~*~

Peter was nearly out of breath as he ran down another hallway, rushing to the Council Room. “Open
the door!” He yelled at the guards, unsurprised that they snapped into action immediately upon his order.

“What is the meaning of this, Peter?” One of the Council members asked when Peter abruptly entered the room, interrupting their conversation.

Peter ignored the man, turning to Derek. “Two collectors were at the gates, saying they filled one of our bounties.”

“A bounty?” A councilman nearly sputtered in annoyance. “You interrupted this meeting for a bounty?”

Derek looked at his uncle, wishing to know what could pull his attention away from the fact that their kingdom was on the brink of war, once again.

“It’s Stiles.”

Derek stood, shoving his chair back abruptly. “Is he—”

“Alive,” Peter confirmed.

Derek didn’t hesitate, taking his leave of the Council.

Several of the Council began to protest against Derek’s departure. “Your Majesty—”

“This can wait!” Derek snapped as he kept his pace brisk, barely holding himself back from running. He looked at Peter when he realized his uncle was keeping pace with him. “When did they get here?”

“Minutes ago,” Peter stated. “The chamberlain didn’t believe them that it was Stiles.”

“Idiot,” Derek huffed. “How could he—”

Peter grabbed Derek’s arm, halting his nephew from heading into the receiving room.

Derek looked down at Peter’s grip on his arm before looking up at his uncle, a glare falling over him when he realized Peter wasn’t going to let him go.

“It’s bad,” Peter firmly stated. “I just heard a quick description—I imagine the visual is much worse.”

“If he’s hurt—”

“Don’t hurt him more,” Peter firmly pushed.

Derek’s features softened—barely. “I wouldn’t.”

“Don’t tell me that,” Peter harshly uttered. “You’ve already hurt him. Help him now.” He released his hold on Derek, taking a step back from him.

Derek was annoyed with Peter’s assumption that he would mistreat Stiles in any way. But he recalled the affection Peter had shown—particularly in the days after his marriage to Paige. He steeled his emotions, nodding in agreement with Peter as he pushed those thoughts aside. He entered into the foyer, not caring when the chamberlain panicked at seeing him.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” the chamberlain quickly started. “I asked them to retrieve Peter, not to disturb you with this. I’m not even sure—”
“Are you calling us liars?” One of the men questioned.

“You are not savory people,” the chamberlain stated in disgust.

Derek ignored the men, walking over to the man he saw in chains. His voice was gone, words meaning nothing anymore as he took in Stiles’ appearance.

Stiles’ clothes were beyond repair—dirtied and tattered. His skin was bruised and cut, wounds covering a majority of his body. The wounds where his eyes had been were barely covered by the dirty rag tied around his head.

“Get those off of him,” Derek ordered. He turned to the men that brought Stiles. “I said get those off of him!” He yelled at them.

“Derek?” Stiles weakly asked, recognizing his voice.

“I’m here,” Derek immediately answered, kneeling before Stiles once the men moved out of his way. “By the gods, I’m here, Mieczysław,” he tearfully uttered, itching to just hold Stiles but knowing he didn’t deserve to.

“Get out—everyone, get out,” Peter ordered the men as the room stared at the scene before them: the King kneeling before a wounded mage.

“My father … is my father here?” Stiles’ voice cracked.

“Yes,” Derek stated. “He’s here. I’ll get him—”

“No,” Stiles quickly breathed. “I don’t—I don’t want him to see me like this.”

Derek’s hands were trembling as he reached up to take the dirtied rag away from Stiles’ eyes.

“Don’t,” Stiles sharply ordered, his hands grasping hold of Derek’s wrists. He felt Derek’s fingers barely caress the blindfold before he reacted. “I don’t want them gawked at.”

“Stiles,” Derek calmly started. “You need to be tended to by a healer—”

“I want to go to my lab,” Stiles answered instead, dropping his hold on Derek’s hands. He pulled back some, sitting away from Derek.

The atmosphere of the room had shifted, a sudden chill of cold indifference falling between the two of them.

“You’re not the High Enchanter anymore,” Derek answered.

“Found someone else?” Stiles scoffed in question, knowing Derek had no satisfying answer to that. “If not, then I’ll find my lab how it was, won’t I?”

“With an additional friendly face,” Peter offered as he moved closer to both of them.

“You’re still alive?” Stiles half-heartedly questioned, turning his head towards Peter as he spoke.

Peter released a soft chuckle. “Miraculously so.”

“Are you the friendly face that I can’t see?” Stiles questioned, moving to stand on unsteady feet. He had no idea how he looked, but he hoped he was covered for the most part.
“Alexander, actually,” Derek answered, breaking the silence Stiles seemed to impose on him. He took a step away from Stiles, knowing when he was unwelcomed in another’s presence—Stiles made at least that easy for anyone to decipher. “Glad to have you back,” he curtly stated, stamping down any sentiment he had before being reminded of how they had parted in the first place.

“For now,” Stiles answered, unable to see the way Derek’s parting steps faltered slightly, nor the way the tight span of Derek’s shoulders folded in defeat.

Peter waited for the door to shut behind Derek before turning to Stiles. “Kicking a man when he is down was never a kind thing, even for you,” he reminded the mage.

“And reminding a King of his former blunders was not something I often did,” Stiles countered. His balance slightly wobbled some when he tried to step forward. He was grateful for the guiding assistance of Peter’s arm.

“He has the mind of a lion, but the heart of a fool,” Peter playfully stated.

“And I have the sight of a crone now,” Stiles mimicked Peter. His feet hurt from the blisters, his wrists still suffering the dimeritium. He longed for the safety of his lab, the protection of the runes carved deep into the stones. He would regret his attitude another day—when he had the ability to care.

“Alex will be glad you’re back,” Peter commented, as if to remind him of the person he was bound to converse with once entering the lab.

“Will he,” Stiles softly uttered, his legs wobbling now that they were doubtlessly closer to the lab. He knew he couldn’t keep walking, not when he felt so close to home.

“And your father is going to want to see you,” Peter added.

“I’d rather bathe first,” Stiles replied. “It would be cruel to subject him to me like this.”

Peter scoffed at those words. “Your father has been sick with worry for you,” he explained. “Your father doesn’t care if you smell like fresh lilies.”

“Jasmine,” Stiles countered. “I smell like fresh jasmine.” A small smile graced his lips when he felt the vibrations from Peter’s light chuckle.

“My mistake,” Peter answered.

~*~

Stiles was silent as he let Alex inspect his eyes.

Their reunion had been anticlimactic, to say the least. Alex had been surprised when Peter brought Stiles into the lab, but appeared to be expectant of Stiles’ return.

“You could say something,” Stiles stated to the empty air, listening to the slosh of the water as he moved. He had false hope that he could clean away all his traumas with the hot water.

“Say what?” Alex asked, his touch gentle as he cleaned the wounds of Stiles’ eyes. He had been expecting Stiles to recoil from him instead of placing his wounds on display.

“That you were expecting worse,” Stiles answered.

“Worse than losing your fingernails and eyes,” Alex sounded skeptical. “I would say that’s quite
bad, Stiles.”

“Then why are you so quiet,” Stiles asked.

Alex paused his movements, pulling the warm washcloth away from Stiles’ eyes. “You came here first, Peter told me,” he offered.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Stiles asked, remaining still as he waited for the inevitable.

“You should have seen the King first,” Alex stated.

“I can’t see anyone,” Stiles replied.

“You know what I meant,” Alex huffed, turning to submerge the cloth in the mixed remedy meant to clean Stiles’ wounds. “He has been beside himself with grief over you. A chance to talk to you alone would have been a great comfort.”

“Because his wife is dead, it is my job to comfort him?” Stiles asked.

“You could have spoken to him,” Alex countered. “Or even have gone to your father—instead you came to your lab to hide away.”

“I came to see you,” Stiles offered as an excuse.

“You were always a terrible liar,” Alex stated in a fond manner.

Stiles pulled his legs up to his chest, resting his chin on his knees as he breathed in the steam from the hot water. “I know what I must look like—some pathetic mage, wounded beyond repair.” He turned his head, resting his cheek against his knees. “How the court will love this outcome. That the King’s whore came back to him after enduring such hardships.”

A small silence grew between them.

“Derek’s done away with many in the court,” Alex finally informed Stiles. “And in turn, he’s welcomed many mages into the safety of his court. He allowed me to stay and practice my magic to no advantage of his own.”

“You do nothing for him?” Stiles asked, knowing there would be something Alex did in return for such charity.

“I check on his daughter,” Alex truthfully answered. “She has fallen ill a few times, but she is doing better than the mundane healers predicted.”

Stiles moved to recline in the bathtub, running his hands along the lip’s edge. “And the boy?”

Alex was silent for a moment. “He’s fine—was born healthy, actually. She was the one in danger of dying.”

“But you kept her alive,” Stiles concluded.

Alex stared at Stiles. “She’s not her mother,” he plainly uttered. “I never thought you would think something like that after everything you’ve been through.”

“I’m not saying you should have let her die,” Stiles argued.

“But you’re disappointed that Paige managed to give Derek children,” Alex quickly replied.
“What does this even matter?” Stiles angrily huffed as he kicked out one of his legs, his foot hitting the end of the tub. “I am nothing but a mage of importance to Derek now—and Derek is free to marry another princess.”

Alex remained silent at that outburst. He stared at Stiles, trying to decipher what he was thinking. “You think Derek is going to marry another woman?”

Stiles released a scoff. “I think Derek puts his kingdom before everything else every time he is faced with a dilemma.”

Alex discarded the dirtied washcloth in favor of a clean one. “Should a King or Queen not care about their kingdom’s wellbeing?”

“What Derek shouldn’t have been King,” Stiles softly stated, his voice quiet.

“No, he shouldn’t have,” Alex agreed. “He’s too soft at heart for it. Any other person would have placed his own selfish wants and desires before the fate of his people.”

“You could have been with him, then.”

Stiles leaned his head against the back of the tub. “In the end, he is still the King, and I am still a mage.”

Alex sighed. “I think we both know that it would have been easier for Derek to push through an amendment that would make you his Consort if you weren’t a man.”

Stiles pressed his lips together in a tight line. “No matter what, my magic would always keep children from between us.”

Alex looked down at the washcloth as he wrung the water out of it. “I guess it’s a good thing that he has children now, then.”

Stiles sat silently, sulking in the bath as he waited for Alex to continue.

Instead of continuing their fight, Alex reached a hand out, gently taking hold of Stiles’ wrist. He pressed the token into Stiles’ hand, allowing him to feel what the object was.

The claw of Stiles’ raven.

“I thought I lost this forever,” Stiles breathed out, his voice shaky as he clutched his fingers tightly around the claw. “Kate took it from me.”

“And Derek took it back from her,” Alex offered.

“Kate Argent is a prisoner of war, then,” Stiles bitterly uttered.

“Casualty of war, actually,” Alex answered. “Allison defeated her with ease, though rumor has it Derek let her bleed out.”

Stiles brought the claw closer to his chest. “She didn’t deserve such a kind fate.”

~*~
Stiles held onto his father’s hand, unwilling to let him go. He wanted to stay like this for a little while longer, being able to tell that his father was still with him.

“Are you in any pain?” John asked, his gaze looking over Stiles’ body.

Stiles shook his head. “No, not anymore.”

John frowned at those words. He wished he could have protected Stiles better.

Stiles reached his hand out, seeking to touch his father’s face. His fingertips grazed John’s chin before he was able to correct his reach. He offered a weak smile to John, hoping it was enough to calm his father’s guilt.

“I wish we found you sooner,” John replied.

“You did what you could,” Stiles countered, allowing his hand to fall away from his father.

“I’m thankful for Allison,” John admitted as he relaxed in the seat next to Stiles.

“Derek managed to make a great deal with Lydia,” Stiles half answered.

John turned to look at Stiles. He tapped his hand against the chair’s armrest. “You sound annoyed,” he commented.

“How can I not be?”

“Have you spoken with Derek?” John asked.

Stiles wished he could roll his eyes. “You’re not the first person to say that to me,” he replied. “And I don’t think it’s a necessary course of action for me to talk to him.”

“Why not?” John asked, wanting to understand Stiles’ intent.

“Because I don’t want to,” Stiles forcefully stated.

“You can’t hide away from this, Stiles,” John pushed. “What Derek did—”

“I don’t want to talk about Derek!” Stiles snapped, standing up in anger. His anger didn’t dissipate when he realized he couldn’t stalk off without his sight like he would normally do. He kicked his leg out, knocking over the side table that was near them. “I don’t want to be reminded about this!” He gestured towards the blindfold covering his eyes.

John grabbed Stiles’ arm, stopping him from walking away. “I can’t change what happened, and neither can Derek,” he quickly stated. “I am very sorry for what happened, Stiles, nothing will ever change that. But I want to know that you are not harboring this pain alone.”

“This pain is mine alone, and no one can help me with it,” Stiles confessed with a sharp intake of breath.

“Alright,” John answered. “But don’t make more pain for yourself. Talk to Derek—you’ll see that he’s not the enemy here. That’s all I want for you, Stiles—is to stop hurting.”

~*~

“Gerard is on the run, and our men are following after him,” an advisor informed Derek.
Derek was leaning into the corner of his seat, his eyes stuck looking out the window as he watched the birds fly high. He offered noncommittal answers to the advisors asking him questions. He found his thoughts elsewhere.

“What about Stiles?” Peter asked, daring to bring Stiles into question among the council.

Derek turned a glare on Peter, annoyed that Peter brought up Stiles with the advisors.

One of the advisors shifted uncomfortably in his chair as the others started to look at each other.

“I’m not sure we understand what you are asking,” an advisor dared to reply.

“Stiles is healing well, from what Alexander has told us,” Peter simply explained. “I was referring to reinstating Stiles as the High Enchanter.”

Derek’s glare softened some when he realized what Peter was asking.

“I’m not sure if Stiles would be a great choice for that,” an advisor reasoned. “He’s suffered many injuries. We can’t be certain he hasn’t suffered a change of heart.”

Derek turned his attention towards the advisor who just spoke. “Are you implying that Stiles would harm us?”

“Your Majesty, with respect,” an advisor started. “We can’t know what he suffered.”

“But we can conspire against him,” Peter countered.

“I trust Stiles, regardless of your theories that he might turn against us,” Derek simply uttered.

“Your Majesty, you may be biased—”

“He hasn’t been biased in years,” Stiles simply stated, announcing his presence to the council.

Derek turned to look at Stiles, moving to stand before he realized that John was helping Stiles walk forward. He fell back into his seat as he watched Stiles walk forward with John’s help.

Stiles was wearing a black set of robes, the material wrapped around his waist to hold it from billowing too much—it accented his waist perfectly. The sleeves were long, hanging in a deep bell shape, his hands were covered with silk gloves. A gorgeously intricate design covered the blindfold that was wrapped around Stiles’ eyes, a faint glow coming from beneath the golden fabric.

Stiles was breathtaking, but Derek saw it for what it was—armor. Stiles was hiding, drowning himself in material to avoid the calculating gazes of the others.

“How are you healing?” An advisor dared to ask Stiles.

“Well,” Stiles replied as he took an open seat. “Though I suppose you want me to say that I’m not well enough to be here.” He reclined in his chair, allowing his head to turn as if he was surveying the room. “But here I am, ready to serve my King.”

“I’m glad you’re well,” Derek finally stated, addressing Stiles.

“What type of High Enchanter would I be if I let a little kidnapping get the better of me,” Stiles replied.

“Your Majesty,” a lord addressed Derek. “Alexander Tevelyan has been serving as the High
Enchanter while Stiles has been missing."

Stiles scoffed at the lord’s words.

“Alex has been helping us,” Derek corrected the lord. “Stiles is still my High Enchanter.”

There was a small silence following Derek’s words.

“I’m guessing that’s not a popular decision,” Stiles stated as he allowed his hands to fold together in his lap.

“We don’t question your abilities, Stiles, only what you’re limited by now,” another advisor stated.

“Without his sight, he can hardly use his magic with practiced ease,” a different advisor stated. “He’s more likely to light us on fire than the enemy.”

Stiles turned his head towards the lord that spoke. He kept still, knowing he was facing the man when he heard the uncomfortable shuffle of bodies react to his action. He continued to hold his head turned in the lord’s direction, knowing it was making the man uncomfortable.

“Stop that!” The lord finally snapped at Stiles.

“I’m sorry, does my blindfold make you uneasy?” Stiles asked, a small smirk pulling at the corner of his lips.

“That’s enough for today, I think,” Derek interrupted the moment. He waited for the advisors to leave before he looked at Stiles.

“I suppose my arrival was pointless, then,” Stiles stated. “I wouldn’t have come just to have them leave.”

Derek looked at his uncle before looking back at Stiles. “I haven’t had a chance to speak with you,” he started.

“You’re speaking to me now,” Stiles curtly answered.

Derek sighed. “I wanted to know how you’re fairing,” he explained.

“I had my fingernails and eyes torn out,” Stiles flatly uttered, turning his head towards Derek. “How would you be fairing?”

“Stiles, that’s unkind,” John quickly stated.

Stiles turned his head away from Derek. “I said I’d keep up pretenses, and make sure that people know I’m still the Hale High Enchanter,” he explained. “That doesn’t mean I’m allowing pleasantries to enter our conversations.”

Derek released a heavy breath, the hollowness in his chest opening wide with Stiles’ words. He wasn’t sure what he expected, knowing that Stiles would likely never warm to the idea of him again—but he had hoped Stiles would have been amicable. “My mistake,” he finally stated as he stood up. “Next time …” He paused, trying to think if he should even bother thinking there would be a next time. “Please be here on time—it will make it easier for you to be part of the discussions then,” he softly stated, turning a tired gaze towards John. He didn’t try to stay and address Stiles’ resentment.

Derek assumed it was better to just let Stiles hate him.
Stiles was quiet as he listened to Derek’s footsteps retreating before disappearing into the hallway.

“I’d say that was cruel,” Peter commented as he piled the reports together.

“Clearly you haven’t been subjected to cruel,” Stiles replied. He opened his mouth to continue when he heard something slamming into the table near Peter.

“He didn’t take your eyes, Stiles,” Peter harshly snapped. He ignored the reports he nearly threw across the table in anger.

Stiles closed his mouth, turning his head away from Peter.

“I don’t know what you went through while with the Argents,” Peter started, the harshness gone from his tone. “But I know what you went through here and I regret that ever having happened. But he also went through a great deal that you pretend didn’t happened, all because of a marriage I arranged for him.” He grabbed the reports, shoving them into a precarious pile as he picked them up. “If you want to be mad at someone, be mad at the right people. Be angry with me. Paige. Gerard. But don’t focus your rage on him and think that it’s justified.”

“He thinks I should just forgive him because we’re both alive now,” Stiles sharply countered.

“No, he doesn’t,” Peter corrected Stiles. “He wants you to be happy, and if that meant breaking his neck, he might even do it.”

Stiles turned his head towards Peter, the words catching his attention. “Happiness isn’t something we get.”

“He never stopped loving you,” Peter stated, his gaze looking at John. He figured the man could tell how much his son was loved by Derek. “Though I think he accepted that being happy doesn’t mean that you have to be together.”

Stiles released a watery laugh, though he was grateful he had lost the ability to shed tears. “He’ll marry a queen, this time,” he uttered. “I don’t think Derek understands what happiness is.”

~*~

“Thank you for coming,” Derek greeted Lydia, bowing his head in respect as he took her hand, helping her to step down from the carriage.

“How could I refuse such a lavish request from a King,” Lydia answered with a smile. She leaned forward, pressing a welcoming kiss to Derek’s cheek. “Besides, I’ve missed it here.” She looked at the lords and ladies present. “Is Stiles hiding?”

Derek remained silent as he escorted Lydia into the palace.

“I take it by your silence that your reunion was not a happy one,” Lydia commented.

“It was as expected,” Derek answered. “I never thought Stiles would be happy to see me.”

“But you were happy to see him,” Lydia replied. “I wouldn’t have sent Allison to save him if I knew he’d be so cruel.”

“He’s not,” Derek quickly replied. “He’s been put through hell, and still suffers the pain of it.”

Lydia was silent as she held onto Derek’s arm, turning her head to observe the crowd around them. “And he hides away in the safety of his lab now,” she noted.
“He’s doing research,” Derek replied.

“For?” Lydia asked as she turned to look at Derek. She made a soft clicking noise with her tongue. “You don’t know.”

Derek refused to admit so.

Lydia emitted a slight noise of understanding as she looked back at the crowd. “I believe my stay here is going to be more interesting than I originally believed.”

~*~

Lydia sipped at her wine as she watched Stiles. She noted how often he turned his head to listen to those moving around them. She counted how many people moved around the room, seeing the way Stiles would grow weary of the slightest noise. She also saw how many avoided Stiles at all costs.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Peter asked Lydia, pulling her away from her thoughts.

“Greatly,” Lydia spoke against the rim of her glass. She turned to look at Peter. “Should I be enjoying something in particular?”

“I notice that Stiles has gained your attention,” Peter replied.

“And yours as well,” Lydia answered as she watched Peter.

Peter smiled to himself. “I had no idea you were such a delightful challenge,” he noted.

“How do you think I managed to keep a kingdom to myself?” Lydia replied.

“Through sheer intimidation, no doubt,” Peter answered.

“Partly,” Lydia corrected him. “If you’ll excuse me, Lord Hale,” she started as she stood from her chair. “I believe I have a long awaited conversation to have with our dear Stiles.”

“With respect, Lady Duchess,” Peter uttered as he moved in front of Lydia, his hand touching her arm in a gentle manner. “You should be spending this time getting acquainted with those meant to unite our kingdoms.”

Lydia offered Peter an amused smile. She reached her hand up, her fingertips delicately grazing Peter’s jaw in a caring manner. “We will have a lifetime together to learn about that, don’t you agree?”

Peter released his hold on Lydia’s arm, allowing her touch to leave him as she sidestepped around him.

Lydia smiled when Stiles turned his head towards her. “Even when robbed of one of your senses, you still can tell when I’m approaching.”


Lydia smiled to herself as she reached a hand out, taking Stiles’ hand in her own. “I’ve missed you.”

“And I you,” Stiles answered as he brought her hand to his lips, pressing a faint kiss against her knuckles. “Though I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that I wished it was under different circumstances.”

“You wish for too much,” Lydia playfully teased.
Stiles’ features twisted, souring some at her light tone. “You don’t have to marry him,” he begrudgingly countered.

“So this new attitude is about my intended marriage then,” Lydia commented. “I thought you’d never admit the reason for your sour face.”

Stiles pulled his hand away from Lydia. “You’re unkind.”

“I’ve heard that’s what you’ve been,” Lydia countered.

“Even you’ve been turned to ridiculing me,” Stiles replied.

“I’m sure you’re being a spoiled brat,” Lydia answered. “You’ve been hurt, I’ll give you that. But it doesn’t give you a right to be cruel to Derek.”

“I don’t have to sit here and listen to this, either,” Stiles stubbornly countered, moving to stand.

“Oh calm down,” Lydia quickly stated, putting a hand on Stiles’ shoulder as she forced him back into his chair.

“Roughing up a blind person—”

“We both know you could push me off if you wanted,” Lydia simply stated before Stiles could finish his complaint. “Just like you could have your happily ever after if you wanted.”

“You forget, Derek signed a treaty with you,” Stiles answered. “And besides, that’s assuming I even still want him.”

“By how you are acting, I’d say you still want him,” Lydia countered. She moved close to Stiles, leaning down to whisper in his ear. “Besides, I’m not marrying Derek.”

Stiles stilled, turning his head a fraction as if he was trying to look at Lydia in disbelief.

“You should know that two crowned monarchs can’t marry each other without causing chaos in their kingdoms,” Lydia answered Stiles’ silent argument.

“Derek thinks—”

“Derek would do anything to get you back,” Lydia stated with a wave of her hand. “I wanted to send Allison, but I needed a legal reason to have a witcher indebted to me out hunting for a kidnapped mage.”

Stiles shook his head. “You let him think you’d marry him,” he commented.

“I discovered how far Derek would be willing to go for you,” Lydia answered. “And besides, I would never marry a man who has no sexual interest in women.”

Stiles remained silent, wishing he could see who was around them. He wanted to know that nobody was going to start another wave of gossip about Derek. “How ... who told you that?”

Lydia looked at Stiles, simply offering, “Peter told me.”

“Peter doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” Stiles quickly stated.

“He didn’t know Derek had no interest in women,” Lydia replied, ignoring Stiles’ previous statement. “He thought Derek was like him—that the interest for women was there, but he preferred
you."

Stiles sat quietly, wondering if Peter would have vetoed the entire marriage if he had fully understood. “You spoke with Peter?”

“He’s the one that arranged the union of our kingdoms,” Lydia replied.

“If you’re not marrying Derek, then whom are you to wed?” Stiles asked.

Lydia turned to look back at Peter, observing the man from a distance. “He’s handsome, for an older man,” she answered Stiles’ look of shock.

“Peter isn’t—”

“In direct line for Derek’s throne,” Lydia explained to Stiles.

Stiles drew in a steady breath. “Peter agreed to this?”

“He arranged it,” Lydia answered. “He knew what the advisors were planning—a hurried and stressed marriage between myself and Derek would keep the rumors Gerard is trying to spread at bay for a little while longer. But Peter didn’t want that.”

Stiles reached a hand up to touch his lip, covering the perplexed frown there.

Lydia was watching as Peter conversed with one of the lords in attendance. “You knew I was married to an old man originally,” she stated, lost in her own thoughts as she spoke. “He wasn’t just a handful of years older than me like Peter is. No, he was a fat old man, well passed his prime—one leg in the ground. But because he had a throne, and still no surviving heir, he had a right to marry any girl he wanted.” She reached a hand down to her wrist, her fingertips tracing the scarred gouges of her failed attempt to end her life the night her mother told her of her fate. “I was fourteen when he chose me,” she weakly admitted. “He waited until I was fifteen to wed me.” Her nose scrunched at the memories. “He didn’t wait to bed me, though,” she bitterly added.

“He was a horrid ruler,” Stiles offered. “I guess I’m not shocked to discover that he was a sorry excuse for a human.”

“When he died,” Lydia released a soft sigh. “I had been so relieved.” She placed a hand against her stomach, recalling how terrified she had been when she hadn’t bled as expected. She was afraid to see her belly swell in the coming weeks. But her prayers were answered more than a month after the funeral. “I cried tears of joy when that spring came, and I was without child.”

Stiles pondered what Lydia just confessed to him. “So are you going to pray that your union with Peter produces nothing before he dies? Peter has at least a few more decades in him, you know.”

“Peter is charming,” Lydia admitted. “Something my first husband was not.”

“And charm can replace love?” Stiles scoffed in skeptic question.

“Charm can lead to infatuation,” Lydia stated. “Which in turn can change to fondness, and then love.” She looked at Stiles, wishing she could make him understand that the world they lived in may have been elegant and beautiful to look at, but was still just a cage all the same. “I didn’t get to choose my first husband, and it is a kindness that I was able to choose my second.”

Stiles was silent as he digested Lydia’s words.
“Does Peter truly like women?” Lydia thoughtfully asked, breaking the silence. She had her doubts, unsure if the lack of rumors surrounding Peter and women were in relation to his sexual preferences.

“He does,” Stiles honestly answered after a moment. “I was surprised to find that he had an attraction to me, for a time.”

“Everyone has an attraction to you,” Lydia noted with a smile. “There is something about you that pulls everyone in.”

Stiles laughed at that. “Gerard didn’t seem too keen on me,” he joked.

Lydia made a small noise of disapproval at Stiles’ jest.

“Hey, you’re going to marry Peter Hale,” Stiles started. “You better start getting used to dark humor.”

Lydia snorted at that, a small smile pulling at her lips.

~*~

“I can’t believe you kept this from me,” Derek uttered as he turned towards his uncle.

“Would you have agreed to it?” Peter asked in turn, crossing his arms over his chest.

“That’s not the point,” Derek countered. “You made me believe I was going to have to marry again.”

“I made you believe what you had to believe,” Peter retorted. “You are a self-sacrificing fool, something I’ve become used to over the years. When I met with Lydia’s ambassadors, this was the best outcome. I’m not directly in line for the throne, but still attached to it in an unhindered way, and she would be obligated to help her future in-laws in getting their High Enchanter back to keep ridicule at bay.”

“Have you not thought about her own wellbeing in all this?” Derek demanded, a soft growl in his voice. “What it would do to her to be married to a man that doesn’t love her?”

Peter was silent as he observed Derek. “You still blame yourself for Paige,” he commented. “But I can assure you, Lydia is not Paige.”

“You are attracted to Stiles,” Derek finally accused Peter. He looked at his uncle. “Don’t try and deny it, I saw you kiss him.”

“Years ago,” Peter added, a specification that helped change such a comment. “But yes, I was attracted to him, for some time. And in my arrogance, I kissed him.”

“You don’t stop loving someone,” Derek countered.

“I didn’t,” Peter answered, catching the look of surprise on Derek’s face. “I still hold a great deal of affection and fondness for Stiles—but not lust.” He smiled when Derek looked doubtful of his words.

“How can you make fun of this?” Derek asked.

“I make the best of a harsh situation,” Peter replied. “Lydia is a beautiful and kind woman,” he uttered. “I’m going to have fun with my new wife-to-be.”

“You’ll both be able to handle the court well,” Derek finally commented.
Peter looked at Derek. “I thank you for that vote of confidence,” he replied.

Derek released a heavy sigh, scratching an itch high on his neck. He looked at his uncle before shyly asking, “Will you be happy?”

Peter seemed confused by such a question. “Happier than you would be,” he answered.

Derek closed his eyes, shaking his head. “I don’t want you to be sacrificing yourself for—”

Peter barked out a bout of laughter loudly, his eyes crinkling around the corners. “You feel bad about me being married to a beautiful, powerful woman who is going to be the star highlight of the later years of my life?”

Derek released an annoyed huff of breath. “You can’t take this seriously.”

“Derek,” Peter uttered as he wiped a tear of laughter from his cheek. “I am not …” he started, clearing his voice some. “I’m not a young man,” he offered. “I’ve no illusions about finding a grand love, I know the reality of things—to be given a chance with someone that I could grow fond of … that I could possibly, one day hold affection for … as you do for Stiles. That’s enough for me in this life.” He looked at Derek. “You never had a chance with Paige—she resented your love for Stiles, and the inability for you to love her as she wanted you to. Lydia will not be that for me, so don’t you dare try and use this for your guilt pile.”

~*~

Derek remained silent as he listened to the generals debriefing of the council. His gaze was on Stiles, watching him as if he had the answer to their problems.

“Your Majesty, without the people’s support, not even her Lady Duchess’ forces will help us in this fight,” the general explained.

“There isn’t much I can do when they want another for their King,” Derek solemnly answered, pulling his sight from Stiles.

“Your Majesty, we can’t give up,” an advisor started.

“Perhaps you should try speaking to your people before giving up hope,” Stiles interrupted the grumbles of the council.

Derek looked at Stiles, noticing that he had his head turned towards him.

“Hiding behind her Lady Duchess won’t get you points with them, either,” Stiles added. “They adored your mother because of her strength as a leader. They adored you even more when you gave them little a prince and princess to dote upon.” He settled his hands in his lap, turning his head to survey the council. “Perhaps offering the people a rousing speech would give them hope.”

Peter snuck a glance at Derek. “Perhaps we should take time to think about this.”

Derek looked at his uncle before looking to the council of advisors. “I wish to speak with my uncle alone,” he announced, unsurprised when the advisors began to rise. “And you, Stiles,” he stated when he noticed the looks Stiles was getting when he didn’t move.

“I figured,” Stiles answered, a small smile on his lips as he turned his head towards the advisors. He snickered lightly when he heard one of the men bumping into the doorway. “Skittish men never make for good counsel,” he commented as he turned his head towards Derek. “But I would like to
“You’ll have to be there,” Derek simply stated.

Stiles’ features twitched some. “Not something I was thinking,” he answered.

“You’re a beacon of hope for the people,” Peter offered. “If you’ve disappeared from sight completely, they’ll think the worst has come to pass.”

“I’m blind,” Stiles darkly uttered. “Though it does nothing to affect my magic, it does everything to affect how people perceive me now.”

“There is no way we can disguise that, Stiles,” Peter answered.

“I’m working on spells of healing,” Stiles replied. “It’s taking me longer, now that Alex is back in Novigrad.”

Derek noted the annoyance in Stiles’ tone. He hadn’t asked about Alex’s departure, noting that it was a sensitive subject for Stiles when he heard Stiles snap at John for asking.

“Could you … rejuvenate your old eyes?” Peter asked. He knew Stiles had access to the remains of his eyes, Alex having preserved them after Derek released hold of the box.

“They’re too damaged,” Stiles replied in annoyance. It was as if he had tried and failed a hundred times already. “And if I go in front of a crowd of people, they’ll see that I’m blindfolded, and word will spread that the High Enchanter was broken by the King in the West.”

Derek looked from Peter to Stiles, biting down on his lip some as he almost dared to ask his question.

“So you’ll grow new eyes?” Peter simply asked, as if that wasn’t a crazy idea.

“That is the only plan I have now,” Stiles replied.

“Could … could you use someone else’s eyes?” Derek asked, almost feeling childish for asking.

Peter turned to look at Derek.

Stiles turned his head towards where he thought Derek’s voice was coming from. “What do you mean?”

Derek looked from his uncle to Stiles once more. “Because your eyes were damaged and … decayed, you said it was near impossible to heal them completely.”

“Correct,” Stiles pointedly uttered.

“What if you had a pair of eyes that were healthy?”

Stiles released a soft snort. “You’re suggesting I rob someone of their eyes.”

“A harsh sentence,” Peter commented.

“Whose eyes did you have in mind?” Stiles asked, a mocking tone evident in his words. “Some criminal in the dungeons? Or an Argent?”

“Mine, actually,” Derek softly answered, his voice small and almost childlike.
There was a small silence that fell over the room.

“Derek, that’s not funny,” Peter finally addressed him, a heavy seriousness in his voice.

“I’m not trying to be,” Derek answered his uncle.

“You’re worried about the people accepting Stiles back, but you think him taking your eyes is a good idea,” Peter countered.

“I’m a King, I don’t … I don’t need my sight as much as Stiles would,” Derek tried to reason. “And if it means that they’ll be on our side, it might be the only way to prevent Gerard from getting what he wants.”

“This is your guilt—”

“It’s not,” Derek forcefully argued.

“Okay,” Stiles firmly uttered, breaking the argument between the two men.

“What?” Peter incredulously snapped as he rounded on Stiles.

“They’re his eyes to give,” Stiles calmly stated. “If he wants to give me them, it is his choice.” Stiles stood with ease, growing accustomed to rising and sitting without eyesight. “I won’t lie, I desperately want my sight back, and if Derek is willing to give me his eyes, then I won’t argue.”

“This is ridiculous,” Peter snapped.

Derek looked at his uncle for a moment. He offered a faint smile, one he hoped said that he would be fine with such an exchange. He turned to Stiles. “I don’t know how to do this,” he softly uttered with a laughter in his voice—a strange giddiness at the unknown. “I imagine magic would be the best way to keep from damaging them.”

Peter took a step forward. “Stop this,” he sharply demanded as he grabbed Derek’s arm. “You don’t have to give up your eyes because someone took his,” he tried to reason.

“I want to,” Derek answered. He shook his head some. “I don’t think I can make sense of it, but … I’m okay doing this.” He took a step towards Stiles, reaching his hand out cautiously to touch Stiles. His fingertips grazed Stiles’ wrist, hesitant to allow his touch to linger for fear of Stiles not welcoming it.

Stiles turned his hand, lifting his palm up. He took a step towards Derek. “Place my hands over your eyes,” he softly instructed.

Derek lifted Stiles’ hands up to his face, placing Stiles’ palms over his eyes, trying to keep his eyelids open. He could feel the way his eyelashes touched against Stiles’ palms, a strange sensation that made him want to blink more.

Stiles allowed his magic to flow through his arms and into his hands and palms. His magic warmed his skin, pulsing through his hands and into Derek.

Derek could see the warm colors the magic produced, how bright and welcoming it was. He thought it was fitting—a beautiful last sight for a King. He felt light headed before his vision completely blackened. He felt his weight suddenly multiply, his knees buckling under a heavy sway of something unknown. He thought he felt his uncle grab him, but he wasn’t sure.
But the last thing Derek could hear were Stiles’ sobs.

~*~

Stiles was confused by the hazy aura around him. From the moment he touched Derek’s skin, he felt an electric current run through him. He couldn’t determine what was happening when a sudden vision blossomed across where his eyes once were. He could see. He had worried for a moment that he actually robbed Derek of his eyes. He had only intended to determine Derek’s motives for offering his eyes—he had doubted that Derek was sincere in his offer. Part of him wanted Derek to pull away and to recant his offer—it would have been easier for Stiles to accept than the truth that Derek was willing to go blind for him.

Stiles couldn’t tell what was happening, completely lost to where he was. He caught sight of the room suddenly becoming alight, the room’s stone piling up to create the walls, the furniture warping into sight. Voices suddenly grew louder, their words making more sense to him as the moments passed.

It was an unfamiliar scene Stiles found himself stuck in the center of. He didn’t like the way the gathered advisors were staring at him, as if he had just grown another head.

“Your Majesty,” an advisor uncomfortably addressed him. “You can’t be serious.”

“Why can’t I?” Derek’s voice asked, as if the words themselves were coming from Stiles’ lips.

“Even if Stiles wasn’t a mage,” a lord started. “He’s still a man.”

“And I’m a King,” Derek answered with authority.

“It’s not allowed,” Peter finally stated, taking pity on the foolish old men that squirmed at the subject. “They’re telling you that you can’t marry another man.”

Stiles felt uneasy, as if his body was brimming with adrenaline. He knew what was happening, but he didn’t know why. He hadn’t cast a spell, merely intended to give Derek a rush of magic that would create a small but annoying headache, a price for suggesting such a foolishly harmful thing as offering his eyes up. He never intended on witnessing Derek’s private memories. Yet here he was, living them out as if they were his own personal hell.

“A King is allowed to marry any of his subjects,” Derek elaborated.

“The people would riot,” Lord Blake offered. “If you appoint Stiles as your Consort, the people will call for his head on a pike.”

Stiles wanted to scream—Gerard was telling the truth. He never gave Gerard the benefit of the doubt, believing the man would say anything to rile him up. He was foolish for not realizing that his reality was crueler than what Gerard could fabricate.

“The people love Stiles,” Peter countered.

“They also love having someone to blame,” Lord Blake rationalized. “If our King marries someone within the realm, it doesn’t stop our enemies from igniting a war. Wars cost money, lives, and resources. Not to mention, they’ll be convinced the gods are against such a union once that happens.”

Stiles felt the frown covering Derek’s features.
“There’s no way to protect him from that, Your Majesty,” Blake pressed. “You’d be happy for a fortnight before the castle was seized by your own people.”

Derek turned to look at Peter.

Peter sighed, reluctantly nodding his head in agreement with Blake. “As much as I hate it, he has a valid point.”

“I suppose it was … foolish,” Derek’s voice weakly answered, his attention turning to the series of documents in front of him.

Stiles could see the words scrawled across the pages in ink. They were documents with the intent of making Stiles the King Consort, despite his magic and his sex. He hated the sinking feeling he got in his gut, knowing that Derek had the documents crafted with the hope of providing a future they’d never have.

~*~

Stiles never looked at Derek after he placed the circlet on Paige’s head. He never realized that Derek had hesitated when obligated to kiss Paige, under a forceful obliging gesture of the archdeacon. He never noticed that Derek’s eyes were open—that they never left Stiles.

~*~

Stiles felt sick, feeling the anger and pain in Derek’s chest. It felt like the heartbreak he had when standing in the cathedral to suffer through Derek wedding another. He hated seeing the way he had let Peter kiss him, the intimacy they shared. He never realized that Derek knew—that he had seen it all happen. He wished he didn’t know that it was the sight that welcomed Derek when he tried to check up on Stiles.

But that night—experiencing what Derek had when walking into that bedroom was nothing like Stiles ever felt before. He hated how he tried to turn Derek around—to force him away from the bedroom and away from Paige.

“I thought you wouldn’t come,” Paige’s voice greeted Derek.

Derek looked at her, unsure what to say in return.

“You were so distant earlier,” Paige explained.

Derek offered a soft apology. “I’m not feeling well,” he stated, a small hope curling in his stomach that perhaps he wouldn’t have to consummate the marriage.

“Surely you’re better now,” Paige pressed as she sat up in the bed, allowing her nightgown to slip down one shoulder.

Derek’s features twisted some. “No.”

Paige’s lips curled into an unsatisfied pout—Stiles wanted to smack the look off her face. “We’ll be ridiculed.”

Derek shook his head. “It’s common for royal spouses not to consummate their marriage on the first night,” he explained, remembering the conversation he had with Peter earlier—it was Peter’s gift to him, a way to delay the inevitable a little while longer.
“They’ll think you don’t like me,” Paige replied, relaxing back into her pillows. “I’ll ...” an unhappy look crossed her features as she picked at the blanket. “I’ll turn around, if that makes it easier for you.”

Derek grimaced at the words, knowing it would be a dead giveaway if he leapt at that chance. It didn’t matter, though, even if she did have her back turned to him—she wasn’t Stiles. He drank more of the wine that had been left there for them. He drank more than he probably should have, but Paige had been insistent that they try.

It wasn’t easier, from what Stiles could tell. The tears Stiles felt wetting Derek’s cheeks afterwards spoke volumes of how this marriage was doomed before it even started.

~*~

Stiles wanted to claw Paige’s eyes out when she gave such a pathetic, wounded look at Derek. It was one that blamed Derek for her pain.

“It’s not unreasonable to ask that of you,” Paige pressed.

“I’m not kicking Stiles out of the palace,” Derek firmly uttered. He had avoided Paige as best he could, but like always, she found him regardless of his attempts to get away.

“He could have his own house—his own accommodations,” Paige urged. “For his lovers to freely visit.”

Derek’s shoulders grew rigid. “Stiles doesn’t keep lovers,” he uttered.

Paige looked unhappy with Derek. “Is that what he tells you?”

“And who tells you these lies?” Derek asked, ignoring her question.

“Lord Blake,” Paige replied. “He’s run into a few of them.”

“Lord Blake is a god-fearing man that believes every mage is a walking embodiment of sin,” Derek tiredly answered.

Stiles snorted in amusement at those words.

“I don’t know why you are keeping him here,” Paige pressed. “If he truly means nothing to you, you’d let him go.”

Stiles wished he could see Derek’s face, that he could look at the man react to those words. But all he could do was feel the way Derek’s stomach clenched, and the twist in his features.

“Stiles will always mean something to me,” Derek admitted, his words small but sure. “We grew up together—he’s been my closest friend and confidant. You can’t ask me to do away with him.”

“You did away with him when you married me,” Paige argued.

Stiles hated that he felt that sentiment in his very core.

“I barred him from seeing me in private, is that not enough to satisfy you?” Derek angrily questioned. “I can’t keep cutting my ties with everyone you dislike.”

“You—you still hold an attraction for him,” Paige accused, sounding appalled by those words.
Derek opened his mouth to argue before he shook his head. He knew he couldn’t lie about it. He chose instead to ignore addressing it. “I have a meeting I must attend.”

“Derek,” Paige sharply called after him, following him out into the hallway.

Derek was thankful for Boyd halting Paige from entering the council room.

~*~

“You seem to be in good health, Your Majesty,” Deaton finally stated.

Derek faintly nodded, moving to pull his shirt back on. He had grown accustomed to Stiles inspecting his health. He figured that he’d have to get used to the change now. He looked up at Deaton when he realized the man wasn’t making a move to leave.

“The Queen has expressed concern about you,” Deaton offered in explanation for his lingering.

Derek released a heavy sigh, closing his eyes. He could feel a headache coming. “Her concern is misplaced,” he stated.

“She has said some … troubling things,” Deaton answered.

Derek looked up at the healer. “Troubling things,” he repeated. “And do tell me, what is troubling the Queen about me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Incompetence,” Deaton simply replied.

Derek narrowed his eyes at the man. “That’s not something to concern you with.”

“As your healer, it is,” Deaton countered. “If you are incompetent, it means that your bloodline ends with you.”

“My sisters are both still alive,” Derek partially snapped.

Stiles could feel Derek’s anger and annoyance coiling deep in his gut. He wished he could have been in the room—he wished he could have called Deaton the fool that he was.

“With respect, Your Majesty,” Deaton began, his words calculated. “Laura has her own legacy to build, and Cora is still gone from the throne.”

Derek remained silent.

“Every monarchy needs to have a clear heir,” Deaton pressed. “It prevents the likelihood of bloodshed surrounding the throne when you die.” He released a slight sigh. “If you truly wished to save your kingdom from falling apart, as you claimed when marrying Paige, then you should do your duty.”

“Duty,” Derek uttered the word with disdain. “Duty tears people apart in the end.”

“Then master it,” Deaton replied. “I can give you a concoction that will help you,” he finally stated. “It will make emotions … easier to have.”

Stiles could see the ingredients that Deaton prepared, and it turned his stomach when he realized what it was. He felt dizzy with uncertainty, the truth being bared before him was uglier than he could have imagined—Deaton knowingly drugged Derek, all in pursuit of a Hale heir.
Stiles cried when he realized where Derek was going with the herbs in hand. He recognized the hallway leading up to his lab.

“I’m busy,” Stiles’ curt voice answered Derek’s soft knock on the door.

Derek looked down at the leather bag containing the herbs. “I wanted to discuss something,” he uttered.

Stiles scoffed at Derek’s words. “I’m sure that’s what you have advisors for, Derek.”

Derek sighed, resting his head against the door. “I’m sorry,” he softly stated, in that moment regretting that he had lost his closest confidant.

~*~

Derek felt ill, his stomach churning with the herbal mixture settling heavily. He tried to keep himself from vomiting, moving to lean on his side. His mind was foggy, his sight blurred. A cold sweat fell over him as he struggled against the difficulty as sitting up. His body was overheated, a strange stirring lower in his body. He was on fire, horrified with how his body reacted to the slightest touch.

Stiles could only be grateful that Derek was mostly unaware of the coupling that happened. He felt dizzy, his own vision suddenly disappearing as he fell into an oblivion, far away from his connection with Derek as darkness swallowed him up. He knew the spell was fading, having done its job to show Stiles Derek’s deepest pains and secrets.

~*~

Nothing could hide how furious Stiles was once the sobbing subsided. He heard Peter yelling for a healer, knowing that the spell would have weakened Derek to the point of unconsciousness. He crawled away from Peter and Derek, his shoulder bumping into the table as he tried to find a way to get up. He needed to speak with Alex.
Chapter Notes

I had this sitting in my docs, and figured I'd give it to you. It doesn't feel complete, that's why I added another chapter tagged on the final number. If anything, the next chapter would be a leap forward, to show how things progress--the kingdom and the characters.

I'm still hesitant on this fic, just because of the negative feedback it has garnered. But all in all, there are some of you out there that seem to really enjoy it, and have had some helpful (and good) advice on how to keep going with it.

Thank you all. I hope you find this enjoyable.

“You had no right!” Stiles yelled through the megascope at Alex. “Do you have any idea what you could have done to him?”

“I took a page out of the Stiles Stilinski handbook,” Alex calmly answered Stiles’ angered words. “You didn’t want to face the truth, to have anyone tell you what Derek went through—”

“Those are his personal memories, Alex,” Stiles snapped. “You stole away Derek’s choice to tell me those things himself—”

“When do you think he’s tell you any of this? When would you listen to him?” Alex asked. “I made the spell react to the first time you touched him. I didn’t realize it would take this long.”

“You took away Derek’s consent,” Stiles angrily stated. “That’s just as bad as Paige.”

Alex was silent for a moment. “Hate me if you want,” he offered. “Because I hate myself for doing it, so I understand that sentiment.”

Stiles wrung his hands, twisting his fingers together. “What they all did to him— what I did to him —” He wished he had opened the lab door when Derek knocked. He wondered how many times Derek had sought him out for help, only to have the door remain locked.

“I didn’t want you to feel guilty, Stiles,” Alex quickly stated. “I wanted you to know that you’ve both suffered—to understand that Derek made difficult choices and sacrifices with the best intentions.” He released a heavy sigh. “No one is perfect, Stiles, including you.”

“He was going to let me take his eyes,” Stiles suddenly stated. “He was going to just stand there and let me blind him.” He shook his head. “That infuriating moron,” he growled out.

“Then tell him that,” Alex’s voice spoke up. “Don’t let him shy away from it. Confront him.”

~*~

Derek stirred some, his body aching as he shuffled his weight beneath the blankets. He released a faint moan of pain as his head pounded, his sight completely blackened. And then he recalled what lead him to this—his sight was gone, a soft cloth resting over his eyes.
“You’re awake,” Stiles’ voice stated in observance, the weight of a body pressing into the bed’s mattress.

Derek reached a hand out for where he thought Stiles was, his fingertips brushing against Stiles’ hand. He was happy that Stiles didn’t pull away from him.

“You’ve been out for more than a day,” Stiles explained, turning Derek’s hand in his own. He ran his fingertips over Derek’s pulse points, draining away the small pains that he could.

“Did it work?” Derek asked, his voice rough with sleep. “Can you … can you see?”

Stiles released a soft huff of laughter as he reached forward, pulling the cloth from Derek’s eyes.

Derek blinked at the sudden light that blinded him momentarily before he could take in the appearance of the room around him. He stared at Stiles, seeing the blindfold around Stiles’ eyes still.

“What?”

Stiles shook his head. “I wasn’t going to take your eyes, Derek.” He reached his hand forward, fingers tracing along Derek’s brow. “I just wanted to give you a headache.”

“Why? I offered them to you,” Derek argued.

“Doesn’t mean I was going to take them,” Stiles countered. “I wouldn’t do that,” he elaborated as he moved his hand away from Derek.

“Why did I pass out?” Derek asked.

Stiles shuffled his weight uncomfortably. “A spell I didn’t cast reacted to me touching you for the first time since …” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” Derek pressed as he moved to sit up, a sharp pain pounding in his head. “I heard you crying.”

Stiles looked away from Derek. “I saw things I didn’t want to see,” he offered. “Personal things … about you.” He rubbed his palms against his thighs, wishing he could forget the experiences. “It was a breach of trust, and I regret that it happened.”

“What did you see?” Derek asked, his mind racing with questions about what Stiles could have seen.

“Everything,” Stiles answered. “As if I was there, experiencing it with you,” he softly explained.

“Stiles—”

“You should rest,” Stiles pressed as he moved to stand. “I have errands to tend to, but I’ll be back to check on you afterwards.”

Derek’s brow furrowed wishing he had the right to ask Stiles to stay with him.

“I’ll be back, Derek,” Stiles restated, as if he could sense Derek’s uneasiness through their shared silence. “I just need … time to mull over some things. And you need rest.”

Derek reluctantly agreed, finding himself pleasantly relaxed in bed. He watched Stiles turn away from him, catching sight of how Stiles paused by the door. “I’m sorry,” he offered.

Stiles touched his hand to the door as he turned back to Derek. He imagined that he could see Derek, how incredibly soft and vulnerable he would look in his bed, tucked beneath the blankets. He hate
how he wanted to stay—but not how he was now. “As am I,” he answered.

“I wish you didn’t see that,” Derek explained.

Stiles swallowed the lump in his throat. “I wish it hadn’t happened,” he softly replied, his voice small and shy in admitting his own guilt. “We both … were wrong. In many ways.” He shook his head. “Such ugliness blossomed between us, and I regret that.” He knew his eyes would have burned with tears as he spoke the next part. “But I’m not sure I can go back—that we can go back.”

Derek stared up at the ceiling, trying to focus on anything but the ache in his chest. “I … I don’t want to go back, Stiles.” He pinched the bridge of his nose to stop the tears as his confession weighed heavy on his heart. “I want to move forward.”

Stiles was eerily silent as his nails picked at the wooden frame of the door. “Perhaps,” he offered. “But I can’t undo what she did to you, just as you can’t undo what Gerard did to me.”

“It wasn’t just Paige,” Derek corrected Stiles. He saw how tense Stiles’ shoulders were. “It was … all of them. They smile to my face, all while plotting daggers in the dark. I wonder how long it will be before they grow tired of me—if my children will be manipulated, twisted to be something different should they realize I’m too much of a lost cause.” He fist his hand against the blanket, wishing he had a clear way forward.

Stiles’ brow furrowed as he thought of Derek’s children. It had been easy to forget about the children without every laying eyes on them. He bit down on his lip, turning back to Derek. “You still don’t get it.”

Derek was quiet as he looked up at Stiles.

“You are a fool,” Stiles uttered, his voice calm as his words cut. “You were meant to be a ruler like your mother, one that didn’t shy away from what they wanted. Instead, you allowed a kingdom to tear you apart—you lied to yourself, convinced you could change yourself to suit others.”

“There is no other life for me!” Derek angrily bit out. “I know you understand what it is like to be told your whole life what you are, and what you are meant to be.” His jaw clenched. “My mother may not have meant this to be my life, but it is. I do not have the luxury of being something other than what a king is meant to be.”

“Luxury,” Stiles bitterly tested the weight of the word on his tongue.

“I am what I am, Stiles,” Derek answered.

“And I am not,” Stiles replied. “I never once blamed you for marrying Paige, though rationally I should have been furious to know you chose someone else. But I made excuses for you—ones that I’ve made for myself along the way. But I can’t, nor will I, ignore that you were willing to sacrifice yourself again when you claim to care.”

Derek looked away from Stiles. “I can’t give you what you want, Stiles.”

“No, you don’t know what I want, Derek,” Stiles sharply answered. “I only ever wanted you, not what you could give me.” He drew in a heavy breath, his hands clenched into fists. “You couldn’t even give me back the raven’s claw—you had Alex do it instead.”

“You didn’t want to see me,” Derek replied. “You made that abundantly clear.”

“I was mad at you!” Stiles snapped. “I think I’m allowed to be mad at you, Derek. I thought you
were going to marry another woman, despite how terrible the first time went.”

Derek closed his eyes, the pounding in his head only getting worse. “I wanted you back,” he finally answered. “I couldn’t send out soldiers to tear apart the Argents’ holdings, so I tried my luck with diplomatic connections.”

“You would have married Lydia,” Stiles accused.

“I would have married a woman that understood my inability to love her the way Paige wanted me to,” Derek forcefully replied. He wished Stiles could understand that. “I wasn’t sacrificing anything by marrying Lydia.” He looked at Stiles. “I never wanted this to happen between us,” he admitted. “I did what I did despite the advice of my former council members.”

“I’ve failed to advise you as I should have,” Stiles confessed. “I should have pushed to avoid conflicting interests. I was wounded … and I let that change my perspective on things.”

“I am sorry, Stiles,” Derek pressed. “Please don’t feel as if you have to avoid anyone or anything here.” He turned his gaze away from Stiles. “I’ve made that difficult for you.”

~*~

“They’re lively,” Lydia commented in fondness. She smiled as Gwen pawed at her diadem. “Would you mind?” She asked Peter, bobbing her head some in order to gesture towards the gem embedded in her hair.

“You wish me to mess up your hair?” Peter asked in kind.

Lydia rolled her eyes. “I would rather you gently pull the diadem from my hair, then to have the baby tear it out.”

Peter faintly smiled as he took a step forward, reaching a hand up to untangle the jewel from Lydia’s hair. He was careful, determined to not pull Lydia’s hair nor mess up the intricate braid along the crown. He noted how soft Lydia’s vibrant curls were, part of him wondering if she ever considered allowing her hair to flow free. He offered the diadem to Lydia, watching as she took the jeweled headpiece from him before offering it up to Gwen.

Lydia lightly laughed when Gwen pressed the diadem into her face, before waving it about excitedly.

“You’ve turned a priceless heirloom into a child’s toy,” Peter simply stated.

“I have others,” Lydia answered. “Besides, if it brings her joy, it’s doing more than the envy it creates when others look at it.” She looked up at Peter. “I’m fond of jewels, but find the snobbery that accompanies them quite tiresome.”

Peter released a soft snort of amusement. “Noted.”

The moment was nearly ruined when Gwen stuck half of the diadem into her mouth, bursting into tears when Peter took it from her.

“Did uncle Peter steal your crown,” Lydia asked in a playful tone as she pretended to nibble at Gwen’s fingertips.

Gwen giggled, her tears vanishing.
“Yes, I am the worst,” Peter uttered in a soft tone. He turned his attentions to Geralt, seeing that the boy was kicking his feet up into the air as he grabbed at them. He noticed how mindful Geralt was to examine his own feet, intrigued by the toes he felt beneath his socks. He smiled when Geralt made a small noise of victory after removing the sock in order to reveal his bare foot.

“I honestly never thought I’d live to stumble upon something like this,” Stiles announced his presence.

Lydia looked up to see Stiles standing in the doorway. “Stiles,” she pleasantly uttered his name. “It’s good to have you here.”

“Looking for someone?” Peter asked, unsure why Stiles would willingly come to the children’s nursery.

Stiles hesitated, shifting awkwardly as his lips twisted in an attempt to buy himself time. “I’ve come to check on the children’s health,” he finally admitted. “With Alex gone from the castle, I thought it would be good for me to keep an eye on their progress.”

Peter faintly nodded, unwilling to ruin such an offer.

“That’s very good of you, Stiles,” Lydia softly commented.

“It’s a duty of mine to assist the king in any way I can,” Stiles answered. “Keeping his children healthy is part of that.”

Neither Peter nor Lydia said anything to counter such a claim, though they could see how gentle Stiles was when handling the children. Both of them held onto the babies, allowing Stiles an ease in carefully inspecting them.

“Lady Duchess,” a guard interrupted the moment, gaining Lydia’s attention. “The rest of the council is ready for you to join them. His Majesty asked that you were present.”

“Of course,” Lydia replied, moving to place Gwen down.

Gwen burst into the tears the moment Lydia placed her down. She cried, “No, no down,” through her sobs as she grabbed for Lydia.

“Oh, I’m sorry, darling,” Lydia softly cooed. “Maybe Stiles will hold you.”

Stiles’ lips twisted into an bemused expression. “I don’t think a blind person holding a child is a good idea.”

“Plenty of blind people hold their children just fine, Stiles,” Lydia chastised as she placed her diadem back into her hair. She leaned over, placing a hand on Peter’s shoulder as she lightly kissed his cheek. “I’ll see you at dinner,” she uttered, turning her attention back towards the guard meant to escort her.

Stiles was silent as he stood, taking a step closer to where Gwen was still crying. He paused his movements when he heard Gwen’s tears subside some. He reached an unsteady hand down to determine where Gwen was. He almost snatched his hand back when a pair of tiny hands enthusiastically grabbed his fingers.

Peter looked at Stiles, watching the mage hesitate. “She’s fond of you,” he commented, noticing that Gwen’s tears had subsided.
“Apparently,” Stiles answered, he knelt down next to the small penned in area Lydia has placed Gwen in. He recalled having such a small contraption as a child, it being hidden away with the rest of his baby necessities—it was another reminder that his mother was gone, and he was the last child to grace the halls of the palace for a long time. He allowed Gwen to hold his hand, waiting for her to do more than just squeeze and splay his fingers apart.

“She reminds me of you as a child,” Peter offhandedly stated as he watched Stiles kneeling beside Gwen.

“If you’re trying to make me like her more, that’s not helping,” Stiles countered.

“I’m not,” Peter answered. “You were more lively than most children. You had a warmth in your laughter.”

“And I’m sure Derek was much the same,” Stiles replied.

“On the contrary,” Peter started. “Derek was a quiet baby. His mother often times worried that her labor with him had been too long—that something happened to him to cause such a somber attitude in a baby.” He looked at Geralt, watching the baby falling asleep as he clutched tightly to his sock that he removed earlier. “Your mother saved them both, actually.”

Peter recalled how nervous he had grown when his sister’s labor went longer than typical. He remembered Claudia asking him to help calm Talia, to ground her while Claudia worked to save the baby’s life. He held Talia’s hands tightly, trying to keep her thoughts away from the fear plaguing her mind.

It took Claudia over an hour to keep both mother and child stabilized. She worked tirelessly to get Derek to take a breath, having slipped her fingers between the umbilical cord and the baby’s neck, releasing the cord’s tightened grip that tried to strangle Derek.

And even as a child, Derek was still quiet. He kept to himself, busy with curiosities of the simplest nature. He disliked spending time with his sisters, wishing to be left alone—he found an amusement in his solitary moments.

Until he met Stiles.

Derek attached himself to Stiles like a barnacle. He cried when Laura pointed it out, calling Derek a baby for latching on to Stiles. But Stiles didn’t mind in the slightest, loving that Derek chose to spend time with him.

“Derek rarely smiled, save for when he was with you,” Peter explained as he pushed the memories away. “You did magic shows for him.”

Stiles held his free hand up, allowing burst of colorful fire to dance into his palm. “And if I tried to use magic now?”

Peter looked at Stiles, seeing the way Gwen stared up at the fire in Stiles’ hand. He wanted to tell Stiles to not be childish—to put such dangerous stunts in the past. Though the other part of him saw it for what it was—a taunt to ridicule those pushing the idea that Stiles’ blindness made him a dangerous invalid. “If you thought you’d hurt the children, you wouldn’t have conjured that fireball,” he dared to reply, calling Stiles’ bluff.

Stiles turned his head towards Peter, clearly unamused at his words. He was about to retort when Gwen lunged forward, her hands clamping down on the fireball in Stiles’ hand.
Gwen squealed with joy when the fire burst into colorful bubbles, all floating around her and Stiles.

Peter released a faint snort of amusement when Gwen clapped her hand against Stiles’ palm, a clear demand for more bubbles to be brought forth.

Geralt made a noise of agreement with Gwen, both babies practically chanting gibberish for Stiles to do more.

“It appears you have two rather big fans, now,” Peter concluded.

~*~

“Why should we help him?” One of the sorceresses questioned. “He favored you above all else, and now look at you.”

Stiles drummed his fingers against the table, determined not to show pain at hearing such words uttered. “Gerard is an evil man,” he offered instead of a response. “He has a far reaching grasp on most of the cities. And if you all want your kings to remain kings instead of heads on pikes, you’ll see the benefit of stopping Gerard before he gets started.”

“How,” the sorceress mumbled something in a language Stiles knew little about, though he could hear the annoyance in her tone.

“You know I don’t care for any of you,” he admitted to the Lodge. “You plan too many daggers in the dark for my liking. I simply know that you can recognize a threat for what it is.” He waited for them to answer him.

“Stiles,” Alex’s voice was grainy through the megascope’s projection. “We can’t leave our places—we’re needed here.”

“If you do not stop Gerard, you won’t get to save any mages,” Stiles sharply countered. “You think what happened to me was because of Derek? Gerard did this to me because he hates mages. He sees us as filthy—monsters he needs to cleanse. He won’t stop once Derek is out of his way. Who do you think Gerard will come for next?”

The Lodge remained silent, the crackling of the megascope being the only thing that answered Stiles’ question.

“It doesn’t matter if you help us or not,” Stiles finally stated. “We’ll have to fight them regardless—if you join us, you’ll be saving your own skin by not facing him on your own.” He didn’t wait for an answer, using his magic to turn the megascope off. He sat in silence, propping his chin in his hand as he thought about how to proceed. He wished he could have convinced them, but he knew that they feared what happened to him.

So many still thought that Gerard only kept him alive because of Derek’s love for him. Stiles knew the truth—Gerard wanted to make Stiles suffer, long and slow, until he burned the will to live out of him. He knew Gerard still held a bizarre obsession with Claudia, and that the decrepit old man saw Stiles as the constant reminder of his failure to have her.

Stiles knew he couldn’t rely on the others, their fear making them as tamed as a prized hound. He made up his mind, summoning a servant to send a message to the King—he would join him at Drahim Castle, the ruined castle that served as the rallying point outside Novigrad.

~*~
Derek was at a loss. He couldn’t connect with his people, feeling the exhaustion from their appearance alone. He wanted to help them, but didn’t know how. This had always been his mother’s area of expertise—finding what wounded people needed to be whole again.

“Why should we?” A tired farmer pressed. He was older than a chunk of those present, but he spoke his mind for the good of the people. “We’ve already lost so much.”

“I don’t want you to lose any more,” Derek replied, knowing that the others saw him for appearance alone—he was a King in danger of losing his kingdom, and he needed more to sacrifice to keep it. “I’m here to protect you from Argent,” he pressed. “No one will be reprimanded for choosing a side. I only want what is best for you as my people, even…” He drew in an unsteady breath. “Even if that means forfeiting the crown.”

A shocked murmur washed over the crowd, many confused by Derek’s candidness.

An angry chatter erupted from the royal advisors.

Peter snapped at them to be quiet, allowing Derek to fill the sudden silence.

“If you truly believe me to be the cause of such misery throughout the land, then I have no right to be your King,” Derek answered. “I did what was expected of me, for decades. And now… now I’ve seen the results of those actions,” he confessed. He ran a hand over his features, knowing he looked broken down and tired. “Perhaps I’m selfish in this—I’m not sure. But if you won’t wish to call me your King any longer, then I do not deserve to stand up here and claim such a title.”

The crowd was silent.

Derek wished he heard the jeers and taunts he thought he would get now that he faced his people. Instead, he was disheartened to see the signs of hopelessness in their eyes. He startled when he heard another shocked whisper rushing through the crowd, catching the mutterings of those close enough to the scaffolding. He wasn’t sure he was completely lucid when he saw Stiles standing next to him.

“May I?” Stiles calmly asked Derek, waiting for him to give him permission. He knew this would only work if he showed his trust in Derek’s command.

“Of course,” Derek answered, taking a step back. He wished he could reach out and touch Stiles, just to keep knowing he was real.

Stiles turned towards the crowd, his head turning to survey the people he couldn’t see—he knew the effect was much the same as the reaction he received in the council room when he heard the awkward shuffling and intakes of breath. “Most Kings would not take that knee for you,” he began, easily threading his fingers together as his hands remained folded in front of him. “I know you’re angry, and tired. But hard days are ahead for all of us. This imposter King in the West threatens all of us—not just our rightful King. We are nothing but objects to Gerard Argent; toys he can bend and twist when he sees fit, until we’re broken, only to be tossed away when he sees no more use for us.”

Stiles drew in a steady breath, finally tugging on the fingertips of his long gloves. He drew the silk away, knowing that the wounds around his wrists healed a long time ago.

But his nails were another story.

“This is what Gerard Argent does to his victims,” Stiles loudly announced, placing his hand on display for the crowd. “He tore my nails from my fingers with no other goal than to hurt me. He wanted to watch what it was like to have someone squirm like a worm on a hook.” He clenched a tight hold on the gloves, twisting the material. “And when I didn’t scream how he wanted me to, he
told me to blame His Majesty for my situation. And part of me, like you, thought that Gerard was right—surely my King should have kept me safe; protected me from such a monster.”

Stiles dropped his gloves, reaching his hands back to undo the tight binding of the blindfold covering the scars where his eyes had been.

A loud gasp shook through the crowd.

“He cut out one eye, and burned out the other, because I refused to call him my King,” Stiles firmly stated. “I’m not asking that you rally around His Majesty, King Derek, because it is the honorable thing to do—I ask that by the grace of the gods, you see the truth about the type of man this King in the West is. He is a monster in human form, poisoning our minds against all that is good. Think about your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives—think about them, and ask yourself if you would subject them to this.” He gestured towards his wounds.

“Know that you will not be alone on that battlefield,” Stiles pressed. “For your King will be with you. I will be with you. And I only ask that you will be with us.”

A silence stretched out among them all.

But Stiles could hear the echo of the footsteps walking across the platform. He didn’t flinch at the gentle touch of another’s hand, knowing it was Derek. He almost grabbed Derek when he realized that he was kneeling before him.

Derek held Stiles’ hands in his own, pressing his forehead against Stiles’ slender fingers. He closed his eyes, wishing he could have done something different, knowing he should have been able to defeat a man like Gerard long before any of this came to pass.

Cheers and shouts broke from the crowd, bolstered morale growing through the ranks at such a humbled sight.

A King knelt before his subject, all in gratitude for pains suffered.

Derek pressed the faintest of kisses to Stiles’ hands, tears burning his eyes when Stiles’ palm moved to cup his face.

~*~

Stiles lingered by the entrance of Derek’s tent, keeping to the side as he listened to Derek giving out orders. He faintly smiled when Derek ordered the advisors to leave when they started to reprimand him for showing submission to a mage. He knew the truth—it bothered them more that it was Stiles than anyone else.

“They’re right,” Stiles admitted when he knew they were alone. He walked further into the tent, his steps calculated as his bare feet moved across the carpeted floor with ease. “What you did worked against quelling such rumors about us.”

“They’re not rumors if they’re true,” Derek answered, pressing his face into his hands. “You didn’t have to come here—you didn’t have to expose yourself the way you did, and yet I can’t—” He looked up at Stiles, watching the way Stiles held himself. He could convince himself that even now, Stiles was looking at him, despite knowing the reality. “I can’t stop hoping that you did what you did because of your feelings for me.”

Stiles remained silent, wishing that he knew the answer to Derek’s assumption.
“But I’ve convinced myself that I don’t deserve such hope,” Derek added.

“Because?”

“Because I loved you more than anything,” Derek simply uttered. “But I was afraid to admit it out loud.”

“Why?” Stiles’ voice almost croaked.

“Because then I’d have to admit that I couldn’t pretend to love who I had to marry,” Derek confessed. “Because I’d have to admit that for the first time, I hated my family—the name and title they gave me.”

“You didn’t want to bend to duty,” Stiles offered.

“Did you want me to?” Derek dared to ask.

Stiles turned his head down, slightly shaking it back and forth. “No. But it would have been nice to have heard it, at least once.”

Derek looked at Stiles.

“You never mentioned it—you never told me, even in the most intimate of moments, that you loved me. You waited until you lost me to admit it,” Stiles pressed.

“Couldn’t I say the same about you?” Derek asked.

Stiles opened his mouth to argue before swiftly biting his lip. He couldn’t argue, not when he knew Derek was right.

“I don’t want to go back to that, Stiles,” Derek pressed. “I don’t want to fight anymore, and I don’t want to go back to lying.”

“And if I told you that I’d never share a bed with you again?” Stiles asked.

“All I want is to have the knowledge that you’re happy,” Derek weakly admitted. “If you’ll grant me that knowledge, I don’t care what my future holds. I would never call you to my bed, nor try and sneak into yours, knowing that you feel this way.”

Stiles was quiet as he let Derek’s words settle over them.

“Your Majesty, reports are coming in from the fields,” a soldier addressed Derek from outside the tent, continuing to give them some privacy.

“I’ll join the healers,” Stiles softly offered Derek, giving him a small bow of his head. He left the tent before he could linger.

~*~

Derek filled out more reports, sending word back to Peter that things were progressing as well as could hope. He found himself pausing more often than not, thoughts lingering on Stiles and their parting conversation.

It was the reports, however, that drove Derek to see Stiles again.

“You’re not being bait,” Derek loudly snapped as he walked into the healer’s tent, interrupting
whatever lesson Stiles was offering his protegees.

“Thank you for not granting me the permission to do something that I didn’t ask you for,” Stiles simply uttered as he slumped against the table where countless ingredients rested. “His Majesty needs to speak with me, so you are all dismissed for the time being,” he instructed the others. He crossed his arms over his chest as he awaited Derek’s response.

“Gerard is a psycho, and you want us to use you in order to draw him out?” Derek demanded to know.

“He’s keeping himself hidden away, hoping his cruelty will turn your people against you,” Stiles countered. “I bought you time—I know you understand that. But in order to end this, Gerard needs to die.”

“You were at that man’s mercy before—”

“I don’t plan to be at his mercy again,” Stiles quickly corrected Derek. “I plan to be the one that lures him into a trap, that’s all.” He turned towards Derek. “You told me that you regretted making me feel as if I had to hide—that I should censor myself.”

Derek released a heavy sigh, his shoulders slumping.

“This is something I want,” Stiles stubbornly stated.

“Alright,” Derek finally accepted. “You’re right.”

“I know I am,” Stiles smiled. “You should start accepting that much quicker.”

Derek softly snorted. “Can you blame me for worrying?”

“Yes, at times,” Stiles replied. “You worry about things, and twist them into something much more troublesome.”

Derek couldn’t argue with Stiles about that.

“I need this, Derek,” Stiles pressed. “Give me this.”

Derek paused, mulling over his thoughts as he nodded. “I wouldn’t take this from you, Stiles.”

“Thank you,” Stiles softly answered, reaching his hand out to gently touch Derek’s arm, moving to hold Derek’s hand.

~*~

Derek was amazed at the masses, knowing that Stiles was the reason they gathered. He had no idea what could have been if it wasn’t for Stiles—but it wasn’t the bloodbath Gerard had been expecting to reign over. The numbers were fair, both sides knowing that the stakes were higher than normal.

“Did he take the bait?” Derek asked Allison when she joined him.

“My grandfather is many things,” Allison started. “But not a fool.” She crossed her arms over her chest, eyes looking out over the people gathered. “He’s going to take the entire bridge of Temple Isle in hopes that he’ll corner Stiles while you remain preoccupied with the gates. Afterall, he wants to strangle Stiles himself.”

“I would appreciate it if you were there,” Derek replied.
“Gerard would be suspicious of me if I was there,” Allison answered. “My father, on the other hand, he is less likely to turn against.” She turned to look at Derek. “Do you think Stiles can’t handle himself?”

Derek shook his head. “More like I’m afraid fate is cruel.”

“Fate can be kind when one least expects it,” Allison replied.

Derek faintly snorted in response.

“I must leave you now,” Allison finally stated. “I’ve dabbled in politics long enough.”

Derek nodded, accepting Allison’s parting.

“May fortune favor you, Your Majesty,” Allison replied with a small bow. “Know that you may call upon Kaer Morhen in times of great need.”

“That’s a truly heavy gift to give a king,” Derek softly commented, knowing that it was a great gift to offer.

“Yet a priceless offer of reassurance to a friend,” Allison replied with a kind smile.

~*~

Cheers that a tyrant was dead. Outcries that a savior was deterred.

There were to be many divisions among people now that Gerard was dead. Some would mourn what was lost, others would live easier lives—mages in particular.

But word spread about Stiles wielding the dagger that cut through Gerard’s throat. Tales were told about the fire Stiles lit in Gerard’s eyes, burning the man’s vision away the same way he stole Stiles’ own eyes. All the stories glorified it—though some still painted Stiles as a villain, claiming he killed Gerard for ulterior motives.

Nothing changed the fact that Stiles still felt terrified, as if Gerard was only the beginning of his fears. He had changed into a raven, flying away as quickly as his wings could carry him. He didn’t take a pride in ending another’s life, even though he knew the cruelty of the monster he saved the world from.

Stiles hid away in his tent, hoping that he would be left alone out of fear.

Stiles held his legs against his chest, arms encircled around his knees. He kept his head rested against his legs. He had flown away the second Gerard stopped making noise. He listened to the way the man’s cries for help only gurgled from the wound Stiles’ slit through Gerard’s throat.

He thought he’d feel better—more complete. But all he could feel was the heaviness of a life weighing on him. He had shifted the playing field once more, and it was in Derek’s favor.

It was another thing the advisors would blame him for. They would accuse him of trying to sway Derek with such a feat.

“Stiles,” Derek gently called his name, allowing the mage to know of his presence.

“I’m fine,” Stiles softly uttered, finally lifting his head. “I listened to him scream as I burned his eyes out,” he confessed. “It … it wasn’t as satisfying as I thought it’d be.”
Derek moved close to Stiles, daring to sit next to him. “It never is,” he stated in understanding.

Stiles reached down, an unsteady hand searching for Derek’s embrace.

Derek entwined his fingers with Stiles’, hoping it was the beginning of rekindling their trust.

“Long live the King,” Stiles uttered as he tightened his hold on Derek.

“Long live the Northern Kingdoms,” Derek replied.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This is it, the end!

Thank you for everyone that stuck with this, and was kind in their words.

Please enjoy this ending epilogue of sorts, and know that I'm happy with this ending, knowing that it would be very difficult to expand passed this ending.

“Still blind and foolish old men if you ask me,” Peter faintly huffed.

“They’re precautious,” Derek offered, looking at the report. “I can’t say I find fault in them for it—I wish to be home with my children before some on the council start formulating plots.”

“I told you that I could have come to you,” Peter countered.

Derek hadn’t left the Northern Kingdoms in a long time, decades even. The first time he dared to step foot out of his domain, it had been Peter’s marriage to Lydia. He felt overwhelmed, to say the least, when he set off to Toussaint to be present at such a lush spectacle. Now was only the second time he had been away, and it was once again Toussaint that extended its hand of hospitality to him and Stiles.

“Stiles wished to meet with Lydia again,” Derek answered, knowing that his uncle had offered more than once to come meet them. “And she doesn’t leave Toussaint for just anything.”

“Though she wishes she could,” Peter thoughtfully replied.

Derek looked up at Peter, about to speak when one of the guards interrupted them.

“This have better be interesting,” Peter sighed. His expression softened some when he saw the guard’s uneasiness. “What’s wrong?” He demanded when the man didn’t speak, his own fears evident in the sharpness of his tone.

“Her Lady Duchess has collapsed, Lord Duke,” the guard quickly uttered.

Derek looked to Peter, catching the hesitant step his uncle took forward.

“Collapsed?” Peter barely uttered. “Where?” He demanded when the guard didn’t offer anything else.

“In the gardens with the sorcerer,” the guard bumbled. “She’s awake, just—”

“Are they still there?” Derek asked, hoping he would get something helpful from the man.

“They brought her to the Royal rooms,” the guard answered, clearly aware of his faultiness in relaying such news.

Derek wordlessly followed after Peter, hurrying to catch up to his uncle’s near fleeing pace. “If Stiles is with her, she’s in the best care,” he tried to offer in comfort.
Peter didn’t answer him.

Derek knew Peter worried, especially after what happened with Lydia’s health last time there had been such a scare. Stiles had done what he could when he arrived after word reached them, but so many had turned a suspicious eye on Peter, wondering if their beloved Duchess was in danger because of her foreign husband.

Lydia’s soft laughter is what greeted both men when they made their way into the Royal rooms. She was sitting against the ornate headboard of hers and Peter’s bed, resting amongst cushions that rivaled her in size. She looked as if she could burrow beneath them and be forgotten in the plush material. Her hair was a little chaotic, her crown and jewels having been removed once they reached the private quarters. She looked tired, but not unwell.

Stiles in turn had a small smile on his lips as he shared in the amusement the small joke brought Lydia. He turned his head to the side, detecting the arrivals of guests.

“Husband,” Lydia uttered in surprise at seeing Peter, as if she hadn’t expected the man.

“The guard,” Peter muttered unhelpfully, the panic in his chest deflating when he saw that there was apparently no reason to fret. “He said you collapsed.”

Lydia made a small, disgruntled noise as she rolled her eyes. “That oaf,” she started before completing the insult in another tongue. “I was dizzy,” she offered in solace to Peter when he moved to sit on the unoccupied side of the bed. “I was trying to get to the bench to sit, and moved too quickly. Stiles helped me sit in the grass.” She offered her hand to Peter, unable to deny how touched she felt at the notion of his concern.

“She was moving slow enough for a blind man to help her,” Stiles added.

“Then she’s alright?” Peter asked Stiles.

“I’m alright,” Lydia firmly stated before Stiles could answer. “You worry too much.”

Peter looked unhappy with that observation. “After what happened last Spring—”

“I have been careful not to ingest poison,” Lydia countered.

Derek remembered receiving the troubling news that Lydia had fallen dangerously ill at the hands of a poisoning. Many had suspected Peter at first, before it was evident how distraught he was at Lydia’s brush with death.

“It couldn’t hurt to have a check up,” Derek offered.

“Ah, the ever wise King,” Stiles playfully teased Derek. “She already had me check her over for everything,” he offered, turning his body towards Derek. “There’s nothing that needs to be done.”

“As long as you’re alright,” Peter started, reaching a hand out to cup her cheek, his fingers moving to run through her loosened curls.

“I am more than alright,” Lydia answered Peter’s concern with a soft kiss against the inside curve of his palm. She took Peter’s hand in her own as she moved to settle them in her lap. “Stiles, if you would be kind enough,” she uttered, not taking her eyes from Peter.

Stiles turned with ease, his time without his eyesight proving to be nothing but a technicality in the end. He could move as if he still had his sight, most days surprising all but Derek. He took hold of
Lydia’s and Peter’s hands, drawing in a small breath as he allowed his magic to flow—a conduit to deliver the steady heartbeat drumming out from deep with Lydia.

“It’s faint,” Lydia commented. “But there.”

“That’s—” Peter started, his words cutting off as he stared at Lydia’s stomach.

“Our baby’s heartbeat.” Lydia answered, a light laughter in her voice as she took in the look of amazement on Peter’s face.

Stiles moved away from the couple, reaching his hand out to where he believed Derek was. He was glad when he found Derek closer than expected, taking hold of Derek’s arm. “We’ll leave you with the happy news,” he offered, not expecting a response from the two, knowing their attentions were invested elsewhere.

“Thank you, Stiles,” Peter quickly uttered, pulling his thoughts away long enough to express his gratitude.

“Always,” Stiles replied with a respectful bow of his head, feeling Derek falling into a similar pattern.

Derek had remained wordless, acting as a silent specter as he escorted Stiles into the hallway. He didn’t say anything until they had walked down a few turns in the corridors, a distance from the Royal rooms. “You seem quiet for such happy news.”

Stiles offered a small shrug, his arm still linked with Derek’s as he trusted his guidance. “Lydia already knew—a woman’s intuition, she called it,” he explained with a small laugh. “I put her mind to ease by confirming it.”

“All of Toussaint will rejoice,” Derek replied.

“Will they?” Stiles skeptically questioned. “They fear losing their beloved Duchess.”

“But will show happiness if she does,” Derek explained.

“If they truly love her, I suppose so,” Stiles answered. He remained silent for a few steps before turning towards Derek. “And what of you, my King. Are your people happy for you?”

Derek knew little of the supposed plots of those against him. He knew that he had some against him, not all threats being crushed with Gerard’s death. He wondered if he should follow after the emperor in the South—if quick executions were the swiftest and surest ways to deal with such threats. “I’m content,” Derek answered Stiles’ inquiry. “I can only hope my people would be better than content, though.”

“You’re still pragmatic,” Stiles tiredly sighed. “I thought you’d grow bolder in the wake of such success—yet more than a year has passed and you remain stoic as ever.”

“I’m a boring King,” Derek replied. “My court is much too tired of such laziness when it comes to my lack of scandal.”

Stiles made a slight noise of agreement. “Would a court mage in your bed help fan such necessary scandal?”

Derek slowed his steps, unable to read Stiles’ tone. It was frustrating for Derek to realize that he couldn’t read Stiles as well as he used to. He wondered if it came from his fear of reading too much
into things—if he was being foolishly hopeful that Stiles had once again found him worthy of such flirtations.

“I’ve rendered my Lord speechless,” Stiles added, a smirk quirking up one corner of his lips. “How I wished you would repay the favor,” he continued.

Derek hesitated before responding, “And what could a King do to render a mage speechless?”

Stiles slightly smiled. “A king’s lips work much the same as a lover’s would. “And if anyone knows how to silence a mage, it would be a lover.”

Derek furrowed his eyebrows. “And you wouldn’t mind a boring King for a lover?”

Stiles pursed his lips, turning his face upwards as if he was carefully considering Derek’s question. “A boring King? No, too dull for me.” He allowed his hand to run up Derek’s arm, pulling him in until they were intimately pressed close. “But a humble man who loves me despite everything that I am,” he drew in a shaky breath before softly uttering his next words. “I dare say that is someone worth having as a lover.”

Derek reached his hands up, gently cupping Stiles’ face in his hands. He brushed his thumb across Stiles’ cheek, his eyes tracking the movement before his gaze fell to Stiles’ lips.

“Is a mage worth such toiling?” Stiles asked, as if he was uncertain that he was interpreting Derek’s intentions correctly.

“Always has been,” Derek replied before Stiles managed to close the distance between their lips.

~*~

They were clumsy. It had been years since they touched one another.

Stiles pulled away when Derek touched his blindfold.

Derek pulled away when Stiles moved to straddle him.

They had both changed so much, but not enough to lose what they were.

Stiles held Derek close, their movements shallow and in unison. He wrapped his arm around Derek’s chest, their bodies pressed against each other at every point.

Derek almost couldn’t believe it was real, having thought he lost this so long ago. He felt the tears prickling the corners of his eyes. He released a sharp sob, glad when Stiles held onto him instead of pulling away. He felt broken down as he fell apart in Stiles’ embrace—his guilt hollowed out of him by Stiles’ touch.

Stiles draped his body of Derek’s, pressing kisses to his throat, pushing him down into the bed as they clung to each other.

“I love you,” Derek admitted, unafraid and unabashed in his statement, wanting Stiles to hear what he wanted to say so many times before.

Stiles released a soft, watery laugh. “I love you, too, you dumby,” he laughed as he pressed a kiss to Derek’s lips.

~*~
Derek turned in bed, reaching a hand out in search of the body he thought would be there. He wiped the sleep from his eyes as he looked towards the vacant side of his bed. He sat up, looking around the room until he saw Stiles’ outline by the fire. He stretched his limbs, climbing out of the bed.

Stiles was sitting in the armchair by the fireplace, his body nearly folded into the chair. He had on his dressing gown, a robe that managed to keep him warm where the fire did not. He didn’t startle when Derek’s hand touched his shoulder, the only indicator that he must have known Derek was approaching him.

“Can’t sleep?” Derek questioned as he looked to Stiles.

“Sort of,” Stiles offered, turning to rest his chin against his knees. He hugged his legs tightly. “It’s like a phantom reminder,” he explained, gesturing towards the blindfold covering his eyes still. “This feeling, that he’s still taking my eyes.”

“Is there anything that can be done?” Derek asked. “If you need resources—”

“It’s not that,” Stiles simply stated, a fond smile pulling at his lips—he knew Derek would give him whatever he needed for his cause.

“Maybe Alex would know of a remedy for the pain,” Derek offered.

Stiles released a heavy sigh. “It’s not that … Geralt asked me today why I don’t have eyes,” he finally confessed. “He sounded so sad—like it pained him to realize that I can’t see like he does.”

“He loves you,” Derek offered.

“It’s just something else Gerard managed to ruin for us,” Stiles answered, a soft sob being masked as a scoff.

Derek knelt before Stiles, his hand holding onto Stiles’ as he waited for him to calm. “Even without your eyes, you’re still you, Stiles. And that’s the person we love, whether you can see or not.”

Stiles nodded. “I know,” he weakly agreed. “I just wish I could see them grow up,” he confessed.

“I wish you could, too,” Derek solemnly answered. “You’re an ingrained part of their life.”

“I wouldn’t have even been allowed to be a part of their life if … if Paige had—” Stiles stopped himself. “Am I cruel?”

Derek knew what Stiles was going to say before. He had thought it himself many times. He reached a hand up to touch Stiles’ cheek, careful to avoid touching the blindfold. He had only ever tried to touch it once—when they were about to fall into bed together. His fingertips had barely grazed Stiles’ blindfold before Stiles was snatching at Derek’s hands to push them away.

“If you are cruel, then so am I,” Derek offered.

Stiles allowed his legs to fall, settling them into a sitting position. He pulled Derek close, allowing Derek to rest his head against his lap.

~*~

Stiles was agitated in the following weeks, all leading up to the twins’ birthday. He didn’t come to Derek’s bed some nights, claiming that he had too much work to do before the party.

“It’s a surprise,” Stiles had answered when Derek asked what could possibly be distracting him.
Derek didn’t press his luck when Stiles did come to bed, resisting the desire to ask questions. Instead, he allowed Stiles his space, taking what time he could get. He found himself happy with the fact that Stiles was still dedicating time to the children—teaching them their kingdom’s history through artful magical projections.

It was entertaining to watch the way the twins would light up with joy at Stiles’ theatrics.

Derek knew that Stiles had something special planned for the twins’ birthday, and part of him was jealous at the secrecy. He pretended not to know of its existence, though, whenever the twins asked him about it.

“Stiles will be there?” Gwen partially asked as she snuggled beneath the blankets.

“Of course,” Derek answered.

“And he’ll do magic?” Geralt questioned.

“If you ask him to, I’m sure he will,” Derek replied, settling in the chair between the twins’ beds.

“But papa, we want to know,” Gwen pressed, her lips twisting in a pout.

“I’m not sure Stiles will perform magic for others,” Derek playfully replied.

“He’ll make magic for us,” Geralt stubbornly stated as he looked to Gwen, giving her a reassuring smile.

“Yeah!” Gwen confirmed.

“Okay then,” Derek commented as he lifted the book in his hands. “Then should I leave the storytelling to him?”

“No!” Gwen and Geralt yelled in unison, both of them almost scrambling out of bed.

“You haven’t read to us in a while,” Gwen argued.

“You need to finish the story,” Geralt added.

Derek smiled, pleased to know that his children wanted him there.

~*~

The kingdom was in joyous upheaval when the twins’ birthday arrived. Celebration was widespread, a kingdom more than content in wishing the wellbeing of their future monarchs.

Derek was just happy that Gwen and Geralt were being accepted—that they had yet been pitted against one another. He hoped there would never be a day like that.

Many diplomats came from near and far to present gifts to the twins, offering their respect to the young prince and princess—and Derek.

Derek saw how Geralt would look at the gift before a small sadness pulled at his features, none of them living up to his expectations. Regardless, he was happy to see his son thank the people.

Geralt grabbed Gwen’s hand, pulling her close enough to say something in a hushed tone.

Derek wished they weren’t as clever as they were—for five year olds. He wasn’t surprised when
they both turned to look at him.

“Is Stiles coming?” Gwen innocently asked.

“He told us he had a gift for us,” Geralt replied.

Derek sighed—Stiles had spoiled them to know no limitation when it came to a gift from the mage. “He said he would be here, though late.”

The twins groaned.

“You should be happy that your aunt is here,” Cora’s voice interrupted the scene before it could escalate.

Gwen’s eyes lit up when she turned to look at Cora. “Auntie Cora!” She joyfully exclaimed as she ran down the steps, not caring about her dress as she jumped into her aunt’s open arms.

Derek was grateful for the distraction, until he realized that Cora had gifted his children swords. “They’re blunt,” Cora merely stated, as if it wasn’t a big deal to hand five year olds swords.

“If they hurt themselves,” Derek started.

“Stiles will heal them,” Cora countered. “You’re welcome for coming.”

“Funny,” Derek grumbled.

Hours had passed, Gwen and Geralt both restless once they woke from their naps. They ran around the dance floor, only distracted by a random relative for a few minutes before they started to go on their merry way.

Derek was standing off to the side of the ballroom, smiling as he watched his children run around restlessly. He couldn’t help it when his smile grew as hands covered his eyes.

“A king hiding in the corner of a ballroom,” Stiles mused, a smile evident in his voice.

“A king with no one to dance with,” Derek answered, reaching his hands up to touch Stiles’ own. Stiles allowed his hands to slip from Derek’s eyes, his movements slow and braced for a reaction.

Derek blinked the change in light from his sight, looking at Stiles. He jerked back in momentary shock, not sure if he was seeing things correctly. “Stiles, your … eyes.”

Stiles’ eyes were the same as the last day Derek saw them—a deep honeyed brown staring back at Derek. The scars around his eyes were still there, but they didn’t lead to vacant scar tissue, gaping wounds that had healed wrong and still caused tight pain to pierce through Stiles’ skin.

Stiles blinked, looking up at Derek. He reached a hand up, his fingertips brushing through Derek’s beard as he took in the sight. It had been years since he saw Derek for himself. He could see now that the volumes of grey in Derek’s hair had grown, spreading around his temples and throughout his beard. He gently touched the laughter lines around Derek’s eyes, smiling to himself.

“This was your surprise,” Derek stated in understanding.

Stiles nodded. “I’ve been working for years and … I finally figured it out.”
Derek pulled Stiles into a tight embrace, holding him closely. “Does it hurt anymore?” He found himself asking, wanting to know if this was truly the cure Stiles had been looking for.

“No,” Stiles lightly laughed against Derek’s shoulder. “No, it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Stiles!” Gwen yelled when she saw the mage.

Stiles pulled back from Derek, wiping at his tears. He released a watery laugh when Derek gave him his handkerchief.

“Stiles,” Geralt sounded amazed when he saw Stiles’ eyes.

Stiles turned to look at the children, hoping his face wasn’t blotchy from the crying. He smiled at them. “I told you I’d have a surprise.”

Geralt made it to Stiles first, followed closely by Gwen. They both clung to him.

Derek looked up at the audience they had. He could see the looks of confusion by those who didn’t know what was happening. He could also see the blatant paling of more than one courtier. He knew advisors would be swarming, spewing fear of Stiles’ ability to do the impossible. He didn’t care what they had to say—he found joy in witnessing the light laughter of his children, and the happiness in Stiles’ tears as he looked at the twins for the first time.

If it wasn’t obvious before, it was blindingly obvious now—there was no getting rid of Stiles, nor the magic Derek had welcomed into his kingdom. And if Derek was remembered as the King that allowed a mage to hold his heart, he was more than content with that.

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