"Pick a card--any card."

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Card shark, magician, or descendant of Cassandra the Prophet:

No matter who or what Stiles Stilinski truly was, he was the only chance at the Hale Pack's survival.

Notes

Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered I have fought my way here to the end of the Reverse Bang... okay, but seriously: this past winter and spring have pretty much been the worst for me, health-wise, and there was definitely some concern that I wouldn't be able to get this done on time. But I managed to pull through and here it is! I hope

* 

I hope that you all enjoy the story and I give full credit for pretty much ALL of the inspiration
to my awesome artist, Rina. You can find her accompanying artwork [HERE](#) and I 100% recommend that you go and see it because, without it, this story would have never happened! Thank you for partnering with me, Rina! :) <3

*

For Tarot card readings/cheat sheet, please check [here](#). ;)

Tell Me Lies (Tell Me Sweet Little Lies)

*

_Hypocritical, egotistical_
_Don't wanna be the parenthetical, hypothetical_
_Working onto something that I'm proud of, out of the box_
_An epoxy to the world and the vision we've lost_
_I'm an apostrophe_
_I'm just a symbol to remind you that there's more to see_
_I'm just a product of the system, a catastrophe_
_And yet a masterpiece, and yet I'm half-diseased_
_And when I am deceased_
_At least I go down to the grave and die happily_
_Leave the body and my soul to be a part of thee_
_I do what it takes_
_“Whatever It Takes” — Imagine Dragons_

**

“Pick a card—any card.”

Scott’s enthusiasm was infectious and was easy enough to be felt by the group at large, even as he leaned forward into Stiles’ personal space to pull a card at random from the deck that the amber-eyed teen held in his long-fingered hand. It wasn’t often, after all, that Stiles was willing to entertain Scott with the card-reading ‘game’—both of the boys learning it at Claudia’s knee, though Stiles was the only one who had any genuine talent at the game—and so Scott had learned long ago to take advantage when Stiles was actually willing to reward Scott’s persistence.

The elder of the two teens reached out and, after a moment, carefully drew one particular card a short way from the bottom of the deck, almost immediately flipping it over to show the rest of the group—Lydia, Jackson, Allison, and Danny—the two of hearts. Only moments later, Stiles plucked it from Scott’s grip and waggled his eyebrows teasingly when he caught sight of which card his best friend had managed to pull.

“Two of hearts, huh? Should I be asking you about any potential love interests that you haven’t yet bothered to mention to me?”

“I—“ Scott began, eyes going sidelong to catch Allison’s gaze, both flushing brightly in embarrassed pleasure before glancing away.

The stare was obvious enough that the others caught it, and Lydia rolled her eyes as she settled closer
to snatch the card from Stiles’ fingers. “Oh, please. Like they couldn’t have been any more obvious, Stilinski.”

Lydia’s comment only made Stiles laugh, though, the sound bright and mocking as he bridged the deck of cards, making them practically jump from one hand to the other in a seamlessly done arch. “Should I tell your fortune next, Lyds?”

“Or how about mine?”

The interruption was unexpected, especially since the group had holed up in one of the unused classrooms towards the back of the high school—a private, hidden space typically used for storage by the teachers, one that Stiles had stumbled across early on in his freshman year and had immediately shared with Scott. The addition of Lydia, Jackson, and Danny—and Allison, too, just this year—had been a much slower process.

Stiles glanced up, gaze catching on blue, electrifying neon—

*Flames.*

*Blueblueblue:*

*Burning, heat completely encompassing, burning a body from the inside out.*

*Pain—*

*So much pain.*

(Incomprehensible.)

*Skin crackling and peeling as it cooked itself.*

A scream

*That never seemed to end—*

*Stretching out and away, pulling like taffy*

*Until it snapped*

*Taking bonds of family, of Pack*

(The too-sweet scent of wolfsbane clogged his throat, choking him and leaving him breathless and gasping for too-hot air.)

And so, too, went any comprehension of sanity.
Stiles blinked.

The man in the doorway offered a sharp smile, slyly predatory, and it was then that the unsettled feeling of *knowing*, of forewarning, dragged itself down to become a heavy weight in the pit of the
amber-eyed teen’s belly: he recognized this man, though it had been several years since Peter Hale had bothered to come visit Beacon Hills.

“Or is the card-reading something that you only do for friends?” the Los Angeles lawyer continued as he inclined a head towards Scott, who had managed to snag the two of hearts back from Lydia.

“…no,” Stiles answered slowly, feeling his way through his reply even as he struggled with dealing with the aftermath of that barest, briefest of glimpses of a possible future for the older man. “You can pull a card, too. If you’d like. I can do a reading for you.”

Why Peter would want to join in on the ‘game’ was a mystery and one that Stiles wasn’t willing to look at too closely; perhaps it was boredom as he waited for his nephew to finish up baseball practice, maybe it was hearing the group as he toured his old alma mater, maybe it was circumstance or Fate or any number of things: but overlooking the why or how, Peter Hale still stepped closer so that he could pull a card from the deck.

Before Stiles had the chance to resettle back into his chair, however, the man’s hand snapped out and long fingers wrapped snugly around the teen’s wrist, lifting a captured hand upwards to bring attention to the card whose corner Stiles was just about to bend.

“That’s cheating,” Peter chided gently, though his too-blue eyes remained amused. He turned Stiles’ hand just enough to see what card the teen had intended to stack the deck with to then have the older man pull—

And jerked back when the card was abruptly snapped towards his face, one sharp edge brushing over a cheekbone. “I’ve always been a firm believer in the motto cheat smarter, not harder,” Stiles shot back, gesturing still-captured fingers towards the card on the floor.

Peter glanced away from a honeyed glance to instead snort in amusement when he finally saw just what card it was that Stiles had intended on having him draw: the Joker. “With a saying like that, I can only assume that people have learned better than to play poker with you.”

“The deputies stopped playing with him when he was eight,” Scott chimed in, crouching down to pick up the fallen card to hand it back over to his best friend. “Pretty sure that a majority of Stiles’ college fund comes from the winnings he got before then, though.”

Peter hummed in amusement and only then slowly released the hold that he had on Stiles’ wrist, letting the teen take his hand back to curl fingers in towards his palm, hidden away out of sight just beneath the edge of the desk he was sitting at. Before any of the teens had the chance to resettle, moving forward to ask about his unexpected presence at the school—for the few that actually recognized him, though only Stiles, Scott, and Danny managed to do so—the attorney tapped a light finger over the top of the card deck.

“I admit that I’m a bit disappointed, however. I was hoping for an actual reading—not a trick.”

The comment was enough to make Stiles pause for a moment, torn and wavering, but…

_The metal of the bars over the basement window scorched the palms of his hands, burning skin and muscle both, deep enough to set up an unrelenting ache in his bones. It was agony, knowing that death was coming and that he could do nothing to stop it._

_Hungry, prowling closer with a wide-open maw, jaws spread enough to consume the entire world._

_One by one, his family died._
One by one, his Pack left him behind.

He howled.

“I actually have another deck—but I don’t use it all that often.”

Scott started at Stiles’ comment, brow furrowing in confusion that slid its way into shock as his best friend pulled a secondary deck of cards from the pocket of his red hoodie. ‘I don’t use it all that often’ was an understatement on the other teen’s end of things: in all of the years that Scott had known the other boy, Stiles had actually bothered to use the deck in front of him less than a handful of times.

The deck—an actual Tarot deck this time around—was something of a antique, a legacy passed down through Stiles’ mom’s side of the family through several generations. Even now, years later, Scott could remember walking into the Stilinski house after a long day of school to come across the sight of Claudia sitting cross-legged before the coffee table, expression thoughtful as she glanced over one of the many Tarot spreads that she had memorized long ago. It had become a familiar sight, and it was one that still caused a deeply-buried ache of loss in Scott’s chest when he thought about the memory.

The Tarot deck had been Claudia’s, something that was so often paired with her image, and the playing cards were so ingrained with Stiles that Scott sometimes forgot that his best friend still had them, that he carried them everywhere.

The fact that Stiles was even considering doing a reading with them…

“Stiles?” Scott asked, inquiry tentative as he finally caught sight of the expression on the other’s face. From the corner of Scott’s eyes, he saw the way that Lydia had suddenly stilled, gaze going intent and focused with head cocked to the side when she caught sight of the cards that the honey-eyed teen fanned, facedown, across the desk.

Sensing the way that the mood had changed within the room—but still casually, mockingly amused—Peter’s smile deepened as he quirked one eyebrow in challenge at the younger man’s offer.

It was plain, as well, that the blue-eyed wolf in sheep’s clothing was doing nothing more than humoring Stiles in his offer, already suspecting that nothing more—except perhaps another trick—would come of the reading.

The implied permission was all that Stiles needed, though:

In quick succession, the boy flipped one card after another over, bringing them to light.

The Lovers, upside down.
The Seven of Swords.
The Tower.

“And let me guess? I’m destined to somehow fall in love with a supermodel, win the Lotto, and then settle down with her and my millions of dollars sometime soon?” Peter asked, tone mocking even as he parroted back the ‘predictions’ that so many psychics promised their dedicated fanbase.

Stiles, however, grimaced and gestured towards the reversed Lovers. “There is a relationship mentioned, so you have that part right, but it’s not anything good. You—or maybe someone close to you—is in a relationship that’s doomed to fail and has been imbalanced from the start. One of the people in the relationship intends to betray the other. What happens as a result… there’s catastrophic loss. For everyone.”
Jackson scoffed at Stiles’ words and rolled his eyes in derision. “Whatever, Stilinski. The doom and gloom prediction is just as common as the winning the Lotto one. Is that seriously the best you could do?”

“Shut the fuck up, Jackson,” Stiles snapped, never once looking away from Peter Hale’s hellfire-blue gaze. Ignoring the affronted look that immediately settled over Jackson’s face—knowing that he’d be paying for the order later on in one way or another—Stiles continued, “So the question is, Mr. Hale: are you or is anyone close to you in a new relationship?”

Something shifted within Peter’s gaze at the question: a remaining sliver of doubt, perhaps the smallest expression of belief, there and gone again, but the emotions were quickly enough shuttered away from Stiles’ gaze, hidden and masked and tucked out of sight with an ease that would have served the older man well in the courtroom and before a jury.

“Uncle Peter? What are you doing in here? Practice has been over for ten minutes.”

Charming expression once more comfortably donned, Peter glanced over a shoulder and offered his nephew an easy smile. “Ah, sorry, Derek.” he murmured and stepped away from Stiles and the bared Tarot cards. “I suppose I was overcome by a sense of nostalgia and wanted to take a look around the school—see what the administration decided to change, what stayed the same. I suppose I got sidetracked longer than I had originally intended.”

Catching sight of who his uncle had been sidetracked by, Derek wrinkled his nose in dislike at Scott and Stiles and turned his attention back towards the older man. “Well, I’m ready to leave now. Let’s head out; you know how upset Mom gets when people are late to dinner.”

“Mmm,” Peter hummed in agreement and turned to follow after his nephew’s disappearing back.

The look he focused Derek’s way was contemplative, however.

Silence lingered for a long moment after the Hale duo finally left, and it was Danny who eventually broke it, tone bemused as he glanced Stiles’ way. “…what was that all about, anyway?”

“Don’t worry about it, Danny. It’s just a game,” the amber-eyed teen answered absently in turn, flipping over one last card.

The Two of Wands.

Stiles smiled.

**

“Hey there, kiddo. What’re you up to?”

The feeling of lips against the top of his head was a fleeting sensation, there and gone again, but its loss was easily made up by the familiar weight of Noah Stilinski’s hands curving over his son’s shoulders. The Sheriff leaned forward just enough to catch sight of whatever it was that had caught Stiles’ attention, and the older man snorted in easy amusement when he saw that the teen was browsing through stock purchase options.

“Gonna be recommending anything to my broker?” Noah asked in a fond tone even as he playfully ruffled his son’s hair before stepping away.

There were some things that had always been better left unsaid, and the knowing that Claudia and Stiles had about certain decisions had always been one such thing. Noah had long ago opted to
remain silent on the matter: instead, he had done as his wife—and, later on, his son—had ordered him to, bought and sold whatever stock and accounts they had said to, and the Sheriff’s retirement account had grown to the point that he would never have to worry about money in his old age.

Stiles’ own college fund was large enough to pay for whatever school he decided upon, Ivy League or no—and then some.

Between the brokerage accounts and the inheritance that Claudia herself had left behind, money was never really a concern in the Stilinski household; it was something that Noah knew he perhaps should have more closely questioned, but… there had been a too-knowing curve to Claudia’s smile whenever he considered bringing it up, and the Sheriff had learned early on in life that it was sometimes better to just look the other way.

(See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.)

“I wasn’t originally planning on it, but…” the teen began as the hoodie string he’d been absently chewing on fell from lips as he scooted forward, pulling the wireless keyboard towards his middle so that Stiles could shoot off an email to the family stockbroker.

“Well, whatever you tell her to buy, just make sure that you don’t get accused of insider trading. Again.”

Rolling his eyes at the comment—it had been one time and he was quickly proven innocent, anyway—Stiles waited until he heard his father leave the room before switching over to his laptop’s safe mode. A few keystrokes later and Stiles dove through the dark web, navigating the shadowed recess of the internet with an ease that came paired with long experience and knowledge of where he intended to go.

The forum site was a familiar friend—and it should be considering the fact that he was one of the Admins on it—and it wasn’t much long after he logged on that the teen was browsing through any and all new topics.

One new thread in particular was unexpected.

Paging: Requesting a Reading from The Cassandra

Not very many people knew of the existence of The Cassandra: even here, in the more obscure parts of the internet and amongst creatures that went bump in the night, The Cassandra was little more than a rumor and ghost. And those that knew otherwise were fully aware of just how much The Cassandra charged for their services.

Intrigued, Stiles clicked on the link and began to immediately scroll through the first post, curious to see what the original poster wanted from the infamous prophet.

I request services from The Cassandra for two readings. I will pay extra for guaranteed discretion. $100,000.

Stiles’ eyebrows shot upwards when he caught sight of the amount being offered: even with the request of two readings, it was still easily three times what he would normally charge. The teen knew that if something looked too good to be true, it tended to be true, but… Stiles’ curiosity just piqued higher still.

Granted, there was still a moment of indecision—debating the merits of what he knew he would do, regardless of any internal ‘should he?’ or ‘shouldn’t he?’ waffling—but the teen was soon enough switching over to his secondary account, the one that no one knew that he had.
Surprisingly—or perhaps not—the original poster was online and willing to accept instant messages from approved account users. Not so surprisingly (again), Stiles found himself on that list.

_The_Cassandra:_ You rang?

_ hróðrsvitnir_: A crude way of putting it, but yes.

_ hróðrsvitnir_: I would like to retain your services for several readings.

_The_Cassandra:_ Yeah… and the price is a bit higher than what I normally ask for.

_ hróðrsvitnir_: As I stated in the post, I expect discretion and am willing to pay for it.

_ hróðrsvitnir_: Perhaps you would feel more comfortable if I lowered the price…

_The_Cassandra:_ No, the price is fine. Well. Except that the amount screams more along the lines of ‘tell me where to bury the dead body’ sort of discretion. Compared to the normal levels of discretion.

_ hróðrsvitnir_: And for the amount that I’m offering to pay you, I would expect that the dumping ground to be everything I needed.

_ hróðrsvitnir_: The stories I’ve come across hint that it’s not something you’d be particularly squeamish about, regardless.

_The_Cassandra:_ …touché.

_The_Cassandra:_ So, anyway, I always require payment up front.

_The_Cassandra:_ Sending over my BitCoin info now.

_The_Cassandra:_ [link]

_ hróðrsvitnir_: Paid.

It only took a moment to switch over to a new screen to confirm that Mr. Famed-Wolf was, in fact, telling the true. He had paid—and Stiles was suddenly a hundred grand richer. It was exhilarating in a way… and concerning in another. What could this other person want to know so badly that they were willing to pay so much for a reading from Stiles…?

_The_Cassandra:_ Received.

_The_Cassandra:_ So. What can I do for you, _ hróðrsvitnir_?

_ hróðrsvitnir_: Someone did a reading for me the other day and I have concerns about what I was told. Is the Hale Pack currently under threat?

The message was unexpected enough that Stiles choked on his Mt. Dew, eyes going wide as the realization dawned as to who his mysterious new client actually was.

_The_Cassandra:_ And this will be your first reading?

_ hróðrsvitnir_: Correct.

Stiles chewed on the corner of his thumb, eyes going thoughtful as he stared at the computer screen and the latest message from Peter Hale. There was already a _knowing_ that had come when the older man had first stepped through the classroom door, a glimpse from a future-to-be—one that was already disrupted, potentiality lessened from a warning that had come just in time. There was no real reason why the ‘wolf should have—and apparently _did_—believe Stiles’ words, but perhaps suspicion had been lingering for a while over his nephew’s new and very carefully hidden romance.

(A relief, if Stiles was to be honest. Derek had just sneered at any and all carefully phrased warnings that the amber-eyed teen had attempted to give to him.)

But with the buffer of anonymity that an online identity provided, Stiles was able to afford being much freer with his words (though not as free as he would have otherwise preferred). Could afford to be _believed_, as well. It was The Cassandra speaking them, after all.

And the teen had a generations’ long legacy to uphold.
The_Cassandra: It is.
The_Cassandra: Danger comes paired with wolfsbane-laced gunpowder and Silver.
The_Cassandra: Ignore the warning and the Hale Pack will burn.

There was silence for a long stretch of time on Peter’s end and Stiles was about to send a message to see if the ‘wolf was still there—the line of flashing dots eventually signaled that the other was writing, however, and the teen’s hands once more fell to rest in his lap.

hróðrsvitnir: Thank you for the warning, Cassandra.
hróðrsvitnir: I promise that we will take heed.

Talia wouldn’t, not from the stories that Stiles had heard. She was too focused on compromise, on being a civilized Alpha, chaining back the wolf that lived just beneath the thin barrier of her skin. But —

*Neon-blue, infrared bright in the sliding press of shadows.*

The warning didn’t have to go to her.

The_Cassandra: And the second reading?
hróðrsvitnir: The person who gave the original reading—the one that you confirmed. The person is a teenage boy.
The_Cassandra: What about the teen?
hróðrsvitnir: Could he be courted into becoming the Hale Pack Emissary?

For the second time that evening, Stiles choked on his soda and just barely kept it from spewing over his laptop’s screen. The fact that Peter Hale had actually bothered to ask that, when “regular” Stiles had just done the one reading for him... the teen’s hands shook slightly as he began to type out a response to the older man.

The_Cassandra: I thought that the Hale Pack already had an Emissary?
hróðrsvitnir: Correct.
The_Cassandra: ...you have me at a disadvantage then.
The_Cassandra: The rules say that you can only have one Emissary for one Alpha.
The_Cassandra: Alan Deaton still has a long career ahead of him.
The_Cassandra: And the Hale Pack only has the one Alpha.
hróðrsvitnir: I did pay you for your discretion.
hróðrsvitnir: If you do recall the terms of our agreement, Cassandra.

Stiles paused for a moment more, settling back in his computer chair; he brought a leg up so that he could rest his chin atop his knee, brow furrowed as he stared thoughtfully at the screen before him. Just what, exactly, was Peter Hale planning?

He certainly wasn’t aiming to take the Alpha Spark from Talia herself. With as closely knit as the Hale Pack was rumored to be, there was no way in hell that any of the others would stand aside and passively watch Peter’s cold-blooded murder of his sister. The Pack wouldn’t ever accept such an Alpha. It wasn’t in their temperament and there was a reason why it was rumored that Peter had become his mother’s—and then Talia’s—Left Hand at the age of twelve.

Rumors were rumors, though.

(But there wasn’t anything here that would dissuade Stiles from the actual claims.)

hróðrsvitnir: Cassandra?
hróðrvítir: I still expect my question to be answered.

Heaving a quiet sigh, Stiles dug his chin just a little bit more into the meat of his knee, bracing himself even as he reached out to pull a card from the Tarot deck that was set off to the side of his desk.

Wondering—

Expectant towards just what card he’d end up pulling—

The Emperor.
“Power, protection, accomplishment.”

“Of course. Typical,” Stiles muttered to himself before flicking the card off to the side.

_The_Cassandra_: The boy will never accept an Emissary position with Talia Hale.

_hróðrsvitrír_: And with any other Hale Alpha…?
_The_Cassandra_: You’re a smart man, Peter Hale.
_The_Cassandra_: I’ve already given you your answer.
_The_Cassandra_: Figure it out.

The_Cassandra has logged off.

**

Stiles burrowed closer to the steady security that his mother offered, turning his head just enough to press his face against the familiar arch of a hip. “Don’t go, Màna,” the eight year-old demanded, voice muffled as he scooted himself that much closer to his mother’s side.

The warm amber and spice scent of Claudia’s perfume filled Stiles’ nose, heavy enough that it become a solid weight within the boy’s lungs, spreading his chest wide to make room for itself—a space within him, always, that he could keep this piece of his mother.

“Don’t go. Don’t go. Don’t go, Màna.”

“Shhh…. Shhh… Be calm, my little Mieczysław Alexandros. Shhh…."

Claudia ran her fingers through Stiles’ thick hair, cupping her hand over the delicate curve of her son’s skull. Idly, already knowing what card she would be pulling, the dark-eyed woman reached out towards the Tarot deck that had belong to her mother and her mother’s mother and her mother’s mother’s mother, cards passed down from one Cassandra to the next through the various generations, and finally pulled the card that would tell her how this meeting would proceed—and how it would eventually end.

Ten of Swords.
“Màna, don’t go.”

Stiles slowly inhaled as he pulled himself up from the dream, blinking—dazed and still slightly confused—as he stared up at the ceiling above his bed. The hair at his temples was damp from the tears that had fallen while he’d been asleep—nothing he could have done would have stopped them from coming—and the seventeen year-old let himself linger in his bed for a moment longer as he tried his best to remember the scent of his mother’s perfume.

He couldn’t.

It’d been nearly ten years since he last smelled it.

**

Peter idly leaned a muscled shoulder against the doorframe of his balcony, sipping slowly at a glass of Merlot as he looked out over the expanse that made up the Preserve. He kept one ear open for any unusual sounds—the habit apparently that much more important now considering the warning he’d received that evening from the Cassandra—but most of his attention was focused on the teenage boy who’d done the original reading the day before.

He remembered Stiles Stilinski: the Sheriff’s son, the boy who had shadowed his father’s deputies for most of his childhood. Beacon Hills had eventually come to think of the boy as the Sheriff station’s mascot, never really very far from his father after his mother’s passing.

Despite the fact that Stiles had always been in Derek’s class, Peter had actually become more familiar with the child through Lionel’s work with the station. Talia’s husband had become the county’s D.A. long before he became the Pack’s Right Hand, and much of what Peter learned of law had been by watching Lionel and observing how he conducted himself around clients and opponents both.

Even though the exposure had only been the smallest amount, it was still enough that Peter had easily recognized the cadence of Stiles’ voice as he wandered the halls of Beacon Hills High School, waiting for Derek to finish with practice. There had been a… draw to the teen’s words, something about it that had caught and held Peter’s attention. Perhaps his approach shouldn’t have been as blatant as it had ended up being, but the blue-eyed man couldn’t find much within himself to care about that particular fact.

Stiles had changed a great deal since Peter had left home to forge his own career down in Los Angeles: had grown older, more striking. Powerful, too, in a way that the ‘wolf hadn’t been expecting; the moment he had reached out to wrap his fingers around the teen’s wrist, Peter could feel the—magic, for lack of a better word—thrumming just beneath the thin barrier of his skin.

Yes: a great deal had changed in the years that he’d been gone.

And it was enough that Peter found himself… appreciative… of that fact.

The ‘wolf brought his wine glass up once more and took another sip of the dark wine, letting the dry liquid linger on his tongue for a moment or two—savoring the subtle flavors—before swallowing.

With that, he finished the glass and set it down on the rough wooden planks of his balcony, keeping it away from the edge even as he flowed upright in one graceful motion and leapt towards thick shadows that the woods provided. It was time for his patrol—

And it was time to go searching for a courting gift tempting enough to convince Stiles to consider
becoming his Emissary.

(Not now. Not yet. But soon.)

**

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Hale. Sorry about that—my head was in the clouds.”

Stiles’ greeting was politely offered after he almost rammed his cart into her own, too focused on the grocery list of items that he had to pick up for the week. Granted, his attention had mostly been considering what type of meals he could prepare for his father to take with him to work, but it was no real excuse when the older woman had very obviously been parked in the middle of the aisle as she considered various spice options.

Talia Hale briefly glanced the teen over, easily dismissing him as a prospective threat, and inclined her head slightly before turning her attention back to her many choices. “It’s no problem, Stiles. It was an accident that was easily diverted and you didn’t actually hit me.”

“Still… sorry about that.”

The teen was nothing more than a sheepish child, awkward and apologetic, embarrassed about his near mishap towards the town’s mayor. Nothing suspicious about his mannerism—and nothing that Talia hadn’t seen before when people were confronted with small-time celebrities, though she had never considered herself as such.

“Oh!” he suddenly exclaimed before the Alpha had the chance to move on to the next portion of her grocery list. “I’m sure that you probably see her more often than I do, but could you please tell Kate thanks for the caramel cookies’n’créme bars recipe? I don’t normally like making sweets because my dad really shouldn’t have them with the diet that he’s on, but they seriously looked so delicious that I couldn’t help myself.”

Talia’s brow began to furrow as Stiles rambled on with his thanks, confusion blatant in her expression, obviously having no idea what the teen was talking about—or, more specifically, who.

“…Kate? I’m sorry, Stiles, but I don’t know a Kate.”

Stiles immediately looked at Talia like she was crazy. “Uh, Kate? You know Kate, Mrs. Hale. She’s Derek’s girlfriend.”

Annoyance flashed across the mayor’s face, and it was obvious that Talia had once more dismissed the teen. “You must be thinking of someone else, Stiles. Derek doesn’t have a girlfriend.”

“He does—that’s what he calls her, anyway. Didn’t you… know?”

The Hale Pack Alpha shook her head and began to walk away. “I do believe that you really are thinking of someone else, Stiles. Derek doesn’t have a girlfriend. He would have told me.”

Knowing that there was no point in continuing to try and push, Stiles watched as Talia Hale walked away to continue her grocery store run, scowl idly pulling his mouth downwards in an unhappy slant.

It looked like this route was potentially a dead end.

**

Claudia picked up the deck of playing cards that Scott and Stiles had been using earlier to play Speed, suits and numbers flickering quickly from one hand to another, darting between her fingers nearly too quick to see: it was an enchanting sort of magic, the control she had over her own body and the cards that slipped through her hands.

“What card do you see?” she asked, twisting the cardstock from one hand to another, shuffling and bridging the deck so that the deck flew through the air in a seamless arch, colors and face and options flying before the boys’ faces with an ease that would have made most magicians weep with envy.

“Again,” Claudia murmured, cards once more flying from hand to hand. “What card do you see?”

Stiles remained silent, eyes wide and solemn as he watched his mother, and it was Scott who tentatively spoke up: “Um… the Ace of Spades…?”

“Oh, sweetling. Are you sure?” the dark-eyed woman asked, voice teasing as the cards continued to dance before Scott—and, like most children everywhere, Scott leaned closer still, caught and captured by the bit of magic and parlor tricks that Claudia demonstrated for him.

“…yes,” he whispered, trying to make his voice as firm and as confident as possible, though his wide eyes never once glanced away from the dance that Claudia’s hands wove through.

Stiles’ mother laughed, the sound bell-like and crystal-bright, and reached out towards Scott’s ear. A twist of her fingers and a card appeared in thin air, transported there by something like magic, and Claudia twisted her fingers just enough so that Scott could see the card’s face for himself:

The Ace of Spades.

Later on that night, Claudia let her lips linger for the briefest of moments longer as she pressed a kiss to Stiles’ forehead. “Give them the magic that they expect,” she whispered softly to her son, voice low enough that not even Noah—stepping out of Stiles’ room and heading towards the master bedroom—was able to hear her. “Show them the dazzle and the trickery and they never look beyond the veil. They don’t want to see more than the obvious trick that’s right before their eyes.”

“Teach me, Màna?”

“Always, my little Cassandra.”

**

Stiles ran the cards through his hands, shuffling the deck from one hand to another. The cards were well-worn, the edges soft and malleable in his experienced touch. They were old enough and worn enough that the teen should have perhaps tossed them away a long time ago, but this was also the deck that his mother had taught him her tricks on. Memories and the emotional attachment that came paired with them had prompted him to keep it.

Mind occupied and hands busy with memorized rhythms and twists, it was easy enough to ignore the awkward conversation that Allison and Scott struck up between the both of them, cheeks blushing red with the first touch of interest—there was a sweetness there that Stiles didn’t want to disrupt, cared enough about his best friend to step back and allowed it to bloom into whatever potentialities that was just now slowly beginning to germinate—

And, besides, Stiles’ attention was on the semi-hidden pair across the courtyard.
Kate had swung by the school to drop off pizza for Allison and her group of friends—friends that had, conveniently, also covered the presence of Erica, Isaac, Boyd, and Derek Hale himself. Nearly everyone was either occupied with each other or the food, but Stiles didn’t bother touching the slice that Allison had set aside for him, eyes focused on the way that Kate sat much too close to Derek’s side and on the fact that her fingertips lingered a touch too long over the inside of the other teen’s wrist.

Innocent enough touches to overlook—unless you were paying attention—but the intimacy that was hinted at in the way that Kate leaned in close enough to nearly brush her lips against the shell of Derek’s ear or the way that the boy flushed clear to his hairline was telling. Stiles saw and, more than that, he understood the game that she was playing—could see the strings that she pulled with an expert touch to get Derek dancing to her exact tune, and it infuriated him.

How could none of the other Hales see? How could they not notice? It was right there.

And, like the Cassandra of legend, no one except for one was willing to listen to him.

(But that was fine. Stiles already had a plan.)

**

Stiles didn’t remember ordering anything from Amazon.

The package was an unexpected delivery and he stared down at it with a narrowed gaze, half expecting it to rear up and bite. Eventually, though, when the box did nothing to retaliate in the face of Stiles’ very obvious suspicion, the teen picked it up carefully and carried it into the kitchen to place atop the table.

One expertly applied use of the honed edge of a knife later and Stiles was unfolding the box’s flaps to see what had arrived (and, perhaps, from whom).

Moments later and Stiles was face to face with the very familiar front of the Rider Tarot Deck. It was a cheaply made deck—though many people swore by it and considered it a classic—and the fact that Peter Hale apparently considered this an appropriate Emissary courting gift especially when the teen knew that the ‘wolf had access to much rarer and much more valuable decks—let alone other divining tools?

Stiles wrinkled his nose in disgust and repackaged everything back into the box that Amazon had sent. It took only a moment more to scribble a ‘Return to Sender’ on the top before setting it out onto the front porch for the USPS worker to pick it up with tomorrow’s mail.

Apparently the ‘wolf was more than happy to spend a hundred grand on two readings from the shadowy presence of The Cassandra, but finding ways to coax Stiles towards his own slowly budding Pack? Stiles was finding himself less than impressed (and it became that much easier to push aside the reminder of the letter that was still awaiting a response).

Stiles still had time.

Perhaps.

(He tried to ignore how that particular belief came with the taste of a lie.)

**

“My little Cassandra, my Mieczysław Alexandros. Come here, sweetling. Do a spread for me.”
Surprised, Stiles glanced up from the puzzle he’d been working on, shifting his attention from his mother to the Tarot cards she held out to him, as patient and as unyielding as the steady movement of the tides. “You want me to do a reading for you, Màna?”

The smile that Claudia offered Stiles was knowing, full of a harmless sort of mischief even as she beckoned him closer. “Haven’t you been studying the cards and their meanings?” the dark-eyed woman asked, letting go of her favorite deck the moment that her son finally held it in his hands. “Practice makes perfect, Mieczysław Alexandros, and I am asking you to practice. Come. Do a reading for me.”

There was something cautious and tentative in Stiles’ gestures, awkward with a dawning sort of awe—the card deck! his mother wanted him to do an actual reading for her!—and it only required that last bit of encouragement before he was darting forward to settle on the opposite side of the coffee table from her.

“What type of spread did you want me to do, Màna?”

Claudia reached forward to tuck a strand of hair behind Stiles’ ear, attention shifting from her son down to the cards he held. “Just a simple three card draw will do this time around,” she murmured, expression serene and in direct contrast to the solemnity that had darkened her gaze until her eyes were nearly black.

She fell silent as Stiles shuffled the deck, the boy hemming and hawing over whether he had shuffled too much or not enough, letting her son decide when it was finally time for her to reach forward and draw the three cards that would comprise of Stiles’ first reading. Most readings done in such a way had a more simplistic meaning: past, present, future. With their line, however…

Things had always been a bit more complicated.

Three cards:

Five of Cups.
The Wheel of Fortune, reversed.
The Magician.

“Màna…?” Stiles asked, voice wavering as he looked down at the spread, fear in both his amber gaze and the abrupt, sharp crack of his voice. “Màna… what…. What does it…”

Claudia leaned forward to press a kiss to her son’s forehead, temporarily silencing and soothing away the fear that the reading had inspired. “Ah, my little Mieczysław Alexandros. How great you’ll be. How proud you’ll make me—one day, this day, and always.”

**

Uncle Peter! Please, Uncle Peter! Help me—

The fire was all-consuming, a relentless, malevolent presence that pressed down on him with an inevitability that whispered of Peter’s upcoming death. There was no escaping this, no way out: he and his Pack were trapped, poisoned and dying and already dead. The fire was just extra insurance to against the Pack’s end.

It was—so hot—

And Peter could feel himself cooking alive, agony extreme enough that death truly would come as a final relief, a blessing to embrace with both arms—there was no way anyone would be able to live
through this and remain sane.

Let him die—

Let them all die soon—

Let the pain finally come to an end, let it end, let it be enough—

The house echoed with the agony-filled howls of his Packmates, and Peter could hear Talia sob brokenly as yet another bond snapped abruptly, leaving behind a void that was its own sort of death sentence. Another cousin, a husband gone, a child—Laura this time?—dying while screaming for their Alpha. For justice. For the pain to finally reach its conclusion. For peace.

Let it be enough—

Smoke filled Peter’s lungs, stealing the air from his chest, and the world was just… too heavy, too painful to continue facing, to live through, to survive past, the pain…

Let him—

Let him…

...let him…

Stiles stared up at his bedroom’s ceiling for a long moment, letting the remaining waves of agony—from being burned alive—wash over and through him. He still felt light-headed and shaky, limbs trembling with the reminder of pain that lurked just beyond the edge of unconsciousness.

He had begun to fear falling asleep.

Slowly, moving carefully, Stiles lifted a hand above his head, temporarily blocking out the stark white of his ceiling. It was fading slowly, just a little bit per minute, but the red of a truly bad sunburn—or burn—began to leech away from the back of the teen’s hand. Stiles stared at it, gaze almost clinical in just how distant it truly was from reality, and finally allowed his hand to come down to cover his eyes, hiding away from the world in the only way accessible to him at the moment.

“No more dreams,” Stiles whispered, ignoring how the corners of his eyes pricked with wetness. “Please.”

**

“Here; allow me.”

A warm weight of a hand settled at the small of Stiles’ back, possessively pressing down but still relatively conservative in its placement—no one looked twice at the way that Peter Hale leaned around Stiles, placing his own order with the barista before handing her his card to pay for both.

“I am capable of paying for my own coffee, you know,” the teen pointed out, tone almost academic in its observation as he watched Peter scribble his signature on the café’s receipt.

“Perhaps,” the ‘wolf agreed, voice obviously amused. “But I obviously make more than you can right now, so it’s a simple enough thing for me to pick up the tab.”

Taking a moment to consider all of the accounts that he’d be inheriting once he turned twenty-five,
as well as the various brokerage accounts currently in his name and under his control… Peter’s assumption was most likely far from being anywhere close to true, but if the older ‘wolf felt like paying for Stiles’ food… well, who was he to really complain? There was enough of a ‘regular’ teenager within Stiles that baulking at the offer of free food seemed to be a waste—especially when the food and drinks were as good as Stiles knew them to be.

“Your choice and your money. Who am I to argue against it?” Stiles eventually said in agreement, shrugging a shoulder and using the gesture to step out of Peter’s hold. The teen offered the older man a guileless smile—*I obviously have no idea what I just did to the claim that you tried to stack on me.*—and turned to head towards his favorite corner of the shop.

Stiles wished he could claim surprise at hearing Peter follow after him, footsteps predatory-quiet, but… it was a lie, and the teen wasn’t often in the habit of lying to himself.

(Lying to *other people*… well, that was a different story.)

It only took a moment or two to settle into the wingback chair that Stiles typically claimed at his own and barely even that more before his well-worn deck of playing cards once more absently ran from one hand to another, a familiar tic developed under his mother’s tutelage and always indulged in during the quite times when Stiles needed both hands and mind busy.

In this particular case, Peter’s gaze sharpened as he watched Stiles run through the cards, suits and numbers flying through the air with an ease that only accompanied years-long practice.

“You seem unusually talented with these cards—and the others,” the ‘wolf commented idly as he watched the teen from beneath a half-lidded gaze, intent as he watched for the moment to press closer still, striking at any potential underbelly Stiles may show.

It wouldn’t take long before Peter realized—was reminded of the fact—that the teen had teeth and claws of his own and always, always, kept well-honed.

“Yeah, my mom taught me and I’ve been practicing with them since I was little,” the amber-eyed boy answered and made the Joker disappear right before Peter’s eyes. “She was really good, but she wanted to make sure that I was better. So we practiced—with both sets of decks—and, well, here I am.”

Stiles spread his hands wide in a mocking sort of gesture and the cards yet again flew between his palms, resettling in the hand opposite that they had originally started in—and with a different card placed at the deck’s top.

“This deck is easy, though, and I’ve always preferred the other—but I’ve never really got the chance to pull it out all that often. What’s kinda funny—since we’re on the topic of decks, anyway—is that some asshole tried to send me a fifteen dollar deck from Amazon the other day.”

Peter’s eyes narrowed slightly and Stiles smirked at the older man.

*Did I strike a nerve?*

It was easy enough to continue from there:

“Obviously, I totally understand that there are people out there who have worked with that particular deck—or who also swear by it—but I’ve always been a collector at heart—you should one day see my comic book collection; Scott sometimes cries over it despite the years of exposure he’s had by now—and there’s always been something so much more *appealing* about using the older and more rare decks. Don’t you agree? Derek once mentioned that you’re something of a book hoarder, Mr.
Before Stiles could continue on with his prickly-worded ramble, the older man cut in: “Peter, please. ‘Mr. Hale’ was always my father and then, later on, Talia’s husband. And ‘Mr. Hale’ feels so formal in a casual conversation. Don’t you agree, Stiles?”

An immediate response became unnecessary when the barista made her way over, setting down Stiles’ overly-sugary iced coffee monstrosity and cinnamon scone, as well as the black coffee and sandwich that Peter had added to the order.

When they were alone once more, Stiles offered a shrug in answer to the other’s initial question. “I don’t know. Are we _casual_ enough with one another to call each other by our first names, _Peter_?”

The comment was offered from beneath the thick fringe of Stiles’ lashes, the teen watching the elder with a too-knowing look, and Peter _wanted_ with a dark sort of hunger that contained the taste of the hunt.

“I’d like to believe so,” the ‘wolf instead answered with a light enough smile that did nothing to soften the flare of his gaze. “It isn’t often that I come across someone who shares my intrinsic love of books and the collecting of them and other things. Tell me, if you were so unimpressed by the Rider Tarot Deck—“

“How interesting. I don’t think that I actually mentioned the deck’s name. However did you guess that particular bit of information, Peter?”

“—what _would_ you like to add to that collection you just mentioned, dear boy?”

The question was unexpected enough that Stiles actually took a moment to consider it, weighing a truthful response against an easy one. And yet… when he finally spoke, the boy’s tone was almost wistful with longing. “I’ve always wanted a set of knucklebones. My paternal great-grandmother taught me a little bit before she died, and I’ve always wanted to learn more. The card decks are easy enough and I _know_ them, but there’s a whole ‘nother side to my family tree that I haven’t had the chance to really explore and become acquainted with.”

And the hag that was _supposed_ to sell him a set of knucklebones had ended up reneging on their agreement—something that she had later on learned to regret—but it still didn’t change the fact that genuine divining sets were few and far between and Stiles hadn’t yet managed to find some for himself.

Maybe one day.

_Maybe._

**

“She’s dangerous, you know. You _have_ to know that.”

Derek glanced up, shooting Stiles an unimpressed glance before he returned his attention back to lacing up the cleats he used for baseball. “Sure, whatever,” the youngest Hale boy answered in turn, and Stiles could _hear_ the eyeroll in Derek’s words. “It’s not like I have any idea what you’re talking about, after all.”

It was obvious that the conversation was going to go downhill—and go downhill _fast_—but Stiles still had to _try_ because the thought of what would happen if he didn’t at least do that was… a horrifying one. Nightmare-inducing (and that, for a fact, he _knew_).
“Kate. She’s dangerous, Derek, you have to know that—”

The expression on Derek’s face shifted to something ugly: mulish and harsh, kaleidoscope eyes blazed with a fury that the younger teen had expected but had hoped wouldn’t actually happen. Hopes were pointless, though, and this was just the reminder that emphasized that particular fact to Stiles yet again.

“Don’t talk about her like that. You don’t know anything, Stilinski, and don’t you dare try to lecture me on what you know or don’t know about her when you really, really don’t know anything. Fuck off and mind your own business—because your comments aren’t welcome.”

Desperate to avoid one particular potentiality that was looming ever closer, Stiles stepped closer, fingers scrabbling for a hold in the other boy’s jersey. “No, no—think about it. I know that you don’t want to, that you think you care about her—that you maybe love her—but she’s so much older than us, Derek. Why is she pursuing you so strongly? Why? The age difference, the experience difference—”

The fact that she’s a hunter from one of the blood-soaked hunter clans in history and that you’re a beta werewolf in one of the most prolific Packs in America--

“—there has to be a reason for it all. She wants to take advantage of you, use you, for some reason and I’m worried about you, okay? Really, genuinely worried about you. Kate… she comes off as just plain wrong.”

Derek snarled at Stiles’ words, the most wolf-like the teen had ever heard the other being, and was just barely able to check his strength as he shoved Stiles against the row of lockers just behind the amber-eyed teen.

“Stop talking about things that you don’t understand—or I’ll rip your throat out. With my teeth.”

Well…

That particular encounter could have gone much better.

**

“Hello, Stiles.”

The teen offered the older man a sidelong glance, suspicious as to the how and why Peter Hale seemed to regularly turn up while Stiles was out and about running his errands. (Perhaps the how would have been less of a surprise considering the fact that Stiles was fully aware of the various advantages Peter had to draw from in order to track the teen down should he so choose. The how was a bit more of a mystery, though, especially considering the fact that the older man only thought that Stiles perhaps had a small gift of prophecy. Not enough to take notice of him and certainly not enough to want to court him as an Emissary over.)

“Hello, Peter,” the amber-eyed teen offered in answer, hoping for a neutral response to see if he could figure out why Peter had tracked him down this time around.

Letting things rest there—the ‘wolf could make the next move, which perhaps wouldn’t take that long considering how clever Peter seemed to enjoy thinking himself—Stiles once more shifted his attention to the bookcase in front of him, stretching back up on his tiptoes in an attempt to reach a novel he’d spotted on the very top shelf…

…that Peter Hale was apparently more than happy to pull down for him.
Invasion of personal space: slightly concerning.

But at least there were potential benefits to it, and Stiles hummed an absent thanks as he flipped open the book, quickly paging through the various chapters to see if it held the information that he’d been looking for. Previous hits had been less than successful, so the only option left to the teen now was to cross his fingers and hope for the best.

“Interesting reading choice,” Peter commented lightly enough as he shifted to stand just behind Stiles’ shoulder, reading along with the boy as the honey-eyed teen continued to flip through page after page, disappointed at the fact that he hadn’t yet found the research he’d been aiming to track down.

“I think that it’d go hand in hand with divination, in all honesty,” Stiles replied distractedly, pausing over one particular page that looked relatively promising—more so than those previous, in any way. “Know the future, change the future: does that mean that you’ve changed the entire structure of reality to the point that the initial vision would then become null and void if things backtracked? Or does this mean that a new reality split off from the point of convergence?”

“Esoteric astrophysics. You are interesting, sweet boy.”

“Keep up commentary like that and you’ll eventually be getting me blushing.”

Perhaps the words wouldn’t have so easily slipped out from Stiles’ mouth if the teen had been paying just the smallest bit more attention. Regardless, however, the damage was done and Peter Hale was Machiavellian enough to happily take advantage of the teen’s moment of inattentiveness.

The ‘wolf leaned in closer, practically crowding Stiles back against the bookshelves, and his lips brushed against the thin shell of the teen’s ear as Peter murmured, “I look forward to it.”

**

The_Cassandra has logged on.

The_Cassandra: I don’t normally do readings for free, but consider this an extension of the two you already paid for.

The_Cassandra: The danger to the Hale Pack hasn’t abated.

The_Cassandra: The threat is still as prevalent as ever.

hróðrsvitnir: And how do you suggest we deal with it, Cassandra?

The_Cassandra: -Start paying closer attention.-

The_Cassandra has logged off.

**

“Tell me the story again, Màna. Please.”

Claudia smiled absently as she settled on the bed next to her son, curving her body protectively around him even as she began to whisper their oft-repeated bedtime story against the delicate shell of Stiles’ ear.

“Long, long ago, there was a princess who was born to the king and queen of Troy. She had hair as dark and as rich as chocolate and eyes that glowed like ambers in the sunlight—just like you, my little Mieczysław Alexandros—and they named her Cassandra. She grew tall and strong and beautiful, intelligent enough to dance rings around the court’s advisors, brilliant enough that she outshone the sun. Unfortunately, this brilliance caught the attention of the god Apollo, and he wished to have her for himself. To coax her close to him, he whispered secrets to her that he had learned at the feet of Clotho and Lachesis and Atropos, the Fates who controlled the strings of the world—and,
eventually, Cassandra began to hear the whispers and secrets for herself, brushing against the Veil of perhaps and possibility."

Stiles stilled as Claudia came to this part, curling in closer to rest his head over the steady beating of his mother’s heart. She felt fingers wrap in the loose fabric of her shirt, and Claudia lifted a hand to slowly begin combing her fingers through her son’s thick hair.

“Gaining power for herself, Cassandra turned away from Apollo and his attentions, and he cursed her for her lack of interest. Forever and always would she speak the truth, would speak prophecy, and no one would believe her words. Her mother and father locked Cassandra away, thinking her nothing but mad, and the locks and chains doubled and tripled when Helen was granted entrance into the city and Cassandra attacked her, demanding that Helen leave—that she would doom them all…”

Stiles cuddled even closer to Claudia’s warmth, her darkly rich scent, and listened to his mother tell the story of his ancestor, the woman whose name her descendants still carried in one way or another.

**

The scent of lilacs and gunpowder clung to the collar of Derek’s shirt, faint enough that Peter wasn’t surprised that Talia hadn’t been able to catch it. She had always been blind in the worst sort of ways, patterning the Pack after their mother’s own rule: leaving them soft and vulnerable, too willing to step aside, to remain the neutral third party—even when it was time to be anything but.

Their mother had always been civilized, collaring her wolf with a unrelenting grip that ended up neutering her more than anything else, playing at being tame and harmless:

Perhaps things would have been different if Melinda and Talia had taken different stances.

Perhaps not.

Hunters hunted—that was what they did. Perhaps this had always been destined to happen, even if their mother and Talia herself had been more aggressive in their defense of Pack and home. The possibilities were endless and there was no point in pondering upon futures that would never come to be:

This was the reality of the moment, the threat that Stiles and The Cassandra had both hinted towards.

Peter stilled, a predator poised on the edge of finally breaking free, and shifted just enough to make his eyes flare neon blue, technicolor-bright in the shadowed corners of the Pack’s laundry room. It was then, wolf prowling just beneath his skin, that Peter once more lifted Derek’s shirt upwards. A breath, another—eyes half-lidded and intent as Peter memorized the distinct scent of threat, of enemy—and finally dropped the shirt back in the basket he’d originally found it in.

It wasn’t much longer that he slipped from the house, loping out in his ever-broadening patrol circuit, focused on the purpose of a Pack’s Left Hand:

Eliminating the threat before it posed an even greater danger to his family and Pack both.

**

Stiles closed his eyes, taking a deep breath before reaching out to pick up the first card from the Tarot deck. The second came soon after, laid next to the first, and it was just a moment later that the third and final card was set down.

Three cards, several attempts to change the future from the possibility it was currently set on. Maybe
—just maybe—it had been enough to change things around from the original reading he had given to Peter Hale and maybe—just maybe—Stiles himself wouldn’t have to step in to pull the final strings.

Maybe. Just maybe.

Eyes still closed, the teen began to flip over the cards—one, two, three, all in a row—and held his breath as he gathered his courage to finally open his eyes to see what the Fates foretold for the upcoming events.

Please. Please, please, please—

*Let it be enough*, Stiles thought, echoing the sentiment that oftentimes blurred the rest of Peter Hale’s thoughts as he burned alive from the inside out.

*Please.*

The amber-eyed teen opened his eyes.

The Lovers, upside down.
The Seven of Swords.
The Tower.

**

“I won’t do it,” Claudia said, standing firm as she met Gerard’s flat gaze with her own defiant one.

“If you won’t… well, then, I guess there’s nothing more to say, isn’t there?”

*The gun lifted.*

*The shot went off.*

*Thud.*

**

Twilight was a whispered promise amongst the trees of the Preserve, hinted at in the soft, violet hues that slowly deepened the sky above, in the dropping temperature of the air within the wide clearing, in the faint gleam of stars that peeked out from the darkest purples that cast a smattering of bruises amongst the golds and corals and oranges of sunset.

The woods were peaceful—quiet—as the world shifted towards the night, and Stiles took a moment to breathe in the darkening atmosphere even as the Preserve suddenly went still and waiting, poised on a precipice even as the faint sounds of footsteps began to reach Stiles. It hadn’t taken as long as he had originally suspected for things to progress this far—had expected Kate to wait longer, for true dark to finally strike out—but at least her arrival would mean that things would soon enough be over.

(Hopefully.)

It was shockingly disgusting just how careless a hunter could become when they were under the impression that they were too far away from their prey to be heard or scented or seen. The Hale Pack’s house was still far enough away that Kate didn’t need to take any precautions for quite some time, but—regardless of the distance from her intended target, it was still so very… *sloppy.*

Stiles heard her coming minutes before she actually stepped clear of the trees’ protection, lounging easily on bared trunk of Beacon Hills’ Nemeton. Cross-legged and wearing the red hoodie that made
him so identifiable around town, the teen met Kate’s hazel gaze with his own dark one, watching her with chin propped in one hand.

“Hello, Kate,” the amber-eyed teen easily greeted as he offered up a laconic smile.

“…Stiles,” the huntress responded after a moment of silence. His appearance was obviously something that she hadn’t been expecting, hadn’t anticipated—and why would she have?; he was a mundane, after all—and there was caution in the lines around her eyes as she stepped further into the clearing. “What are you doing here? The town’s quite a distance away.”

“I could ask the same thing of you,” Stiles answered, smile sharpening as Kate’s expression shifted, turning predatory for the briefest of moments before a bemused-but-game smile quirked her lips upwards.

“I’m actually meeting my boyfriend in an hour or so for a date. But I wanted to go on a quick hike beforehand. It feels like forever since I last had the chance to do so, and with the weather as nice as it’s been…” Kate’s explanation trailed off, wording manipulative enough to allow another person to fill in the blanks, coming up with explanations and reasons and convenient excuses that she had to expend no effort in drafting herself.

“This is private property, though,” came the teen’s easy reply, and both of Stiles’ eyebrows lifted expectantly.

“Land owned by my boyfriend, so I’m allowed to be here. You, though…” Kate’s expression turned chiding as she stepped into yet another role, elements of her expression turning both concerned and angry on her boyfriend’s family’s behalf: trespassing was against the law, after all, and as the Sheriff’s son, Stiles really should have known better.

“I doubt that you have permission to be here, Kate,” Stiles shot back and snorted his amusement at the scenario she was trying to draw him into. “First of all, I sincerely doubt that Talia would be at all approving of the fact that you’re currently dating Derek behind everyone else’s backs. She was never all that fond of Gerard—for good reason, granted—and I don’t really picture her being willing to give you a chance with her darling baby boy.”

Kate stilled at Stiles’ words, and something reptilian and cold slid like a greasy film over her previously warm gaze.

“Besides that, tonight’s the Wolf Moon. Derek’s gonna be busy with the rest of the Pack. There’s no way he’ll be able to sneak away to go out with you.” Gesture leisurely, oozing a sense of I know what you’re up to and it’s nothing good, Stiles gestured towards the bag that was settled across the huntress’ shoulders. “What’s in the backpack, Kate?”

“Walk away, Stiles. You still have the chance to do so,” the woman replied, voice hard even as her tone went Arctic with the amount of chilled venom laced into each word.

“I really, really don’t.”

Stiles’ words were ruefully said, accompanied with the lopsided twist of an unhappy smile, and the teen shifted to lean forward, hands bracing the majority of his weight over the Nemeton’s rough wood. “When the news of the Hale House Fire hits, that’ll make me a witness to the murder you’re currently planning on doing. And leaving behind a witness? Is sloppy. I don’t think that you’re sloppy, Kate. Are you?”

The question ended with the resounding click of a gun cocking, safety off.
“No, I’m not. But your death could have been easier if you had just kept playing along.”

If anything, Kate’s statement just made the curve of Stiles’ lips go that much more lopsided, a sharp edge slipping around the fringes even as his eyes lit with a bright, amber light. Satisfaction and fury burned within his gaze. The smile that he offered the older woman was toothy.

“I’ve been dreaming of you saying those words to me every night for almost ten years. I’m going to **enjoy** what comes next.”

“What—“

Kate’s started exclamation came too late, however: a dark shape blurred out from the shadows that surrounded the edge of the forest, barreling into the huntress and easily taking her down to the ground. As Stiles had thought: her overconfidence had made her sloppy, and Kate hadn’t considered the fact that with the entirety of the Hale Pack gathered, patrol rings would range even further out from their usual standard.

After all, why would they have? The Wolf Moon was a time of celebration and of family, of Pack. Concern for their safety would have been far from the werewolves’ minds.

…unless someone had offered a forewarning to keep their eyes wide and their ears sharp.

Perhaps Kate’s death should have struck up some sort of regret within Stiles, but he honestly couldn’t bring himself to care: he had stared down his death in his dreams night after night for years, had watched alternative futures play out—ones where he hadn’t been as lucky as he had been in this one—knew that this, too, had been one of the last sights Claudia Cassandra Stilinski had seen before her potentialities had finally come to a standstill.

Gerard hadn’t been one for grandstanding and villainous monologues. He just tended to shoot.

Ten years, too, of dealing with the vision of his mother’s death: the knowledge that she had refused to give in when Claudia had realized why the hunters had called her to their basecamp. They had thought that she’d be sympathetic to their mission, that she’d be willing to use the visions that came to her to lead them to their prey. But Claudia had refused and Gerard had killed her for it.

And Kate Argent, no more than sixteen at the time, had pulled the trigger on the final bullet as Claudia had attempted to crawl away from her makeshift firing squad.

Nearly ten years was a long, long time to watch his mother’s death, over and over again. Nearly ten years was a long, long time to plot, to plan. To wait: the spider patiently waiting in the middle of his web, tugging at strings oh-so carefully, snipping ones that were no longer of use to him—as coldly beautiful, practical in his assessment, as Atropos must have been as she eventually cut each mortal’s Life string at the end of their lives.

*(Cheat smarter, not harder*, Stiles had told Peter only a week before, and it was a motto that the teen had been living for his entire life.)*

Stiles stared down at Kate’s bloodied remains, gaze distant and almost clinical in its detachment. It was done—finally—and, with it came a surge of petty, vicious **gladness** and sheer, overwhelming **relief**.

“You orchestrated all of this,” Peter idly commented as he straightened, pulling a too-white handkerchief from his back pocket. The blue-eyed ‘wolf, gaze neon bright in the twilight that was slowly creeping across the Preserve, began to fastidiously clean his hands of the blood that coated them even as his eyes never glanced away from the still-lounging teen. “I should be angry with you
for treating me as your pawn.”

Even when Kate had pulled the gun on him, Stiles hadn’t bothered to move a muscle.

Stiles’ gaze flicked upwards to meet Peter’s own, and the amber-eyed teen quirked a sardonic eyebrow the elder’s way. “You should be grateful,” the prophet corrected lazily. “I saved your and your Pack’s lives. If you hadn’t been given my warning, you and the others would have burned alive, trapped by both mountain ash and wolfsbane.”

Peter’s gaze turned thoughtful at the claim, and he stepped closer to the body, toeing open the flap of Kate’s pack just enough to glance inside—confirming immediately, as well, that the boy’s statement was correct. There was enough mountain ash and wolfsbane that the Pack would have been drugged to their gills, fighting both the fire and their bodies’ own reactions to the poison—and losing to both, in the end.

“Besides, a pawn doesn’t always have to be a pawn. It can always be promoted to a higher rank. Isn’t that what you were intending, anyways?”

“You seem to be rather well-informed, dear boy,” Peter eventually commented, eyes assessing and shrewd as his fingers absently folded his handkerchief, motions long become instinctive and unconscious, to place back in his pocket.

“What can I say? I’m good at what I do.”

Clearly an understatement, evidenced by just how easily Peter had fallen into the rat’s maze that Stiles built around them all, tugged along by invisible strings to a tune that only the teen seemed to be able to hear. Despite the anger at the set-up and the obvious lack of autonomy that had been denied to the ‘wolf, there lingered, too, a sense of impressed appreciation at just how neatly everything had been done. All that was missing was the crowning, final bow placed upon Kate’s cooling body.

If Peter hadn’t already wanted Stiles as his future Emissary, the boy would have made the perfect Left Hand. Brutal and pragmatic both, the teen had somehow managed to find the cleanest, most effective way to eliminate a threat and enemy both by using the best tool in his apparent arsenal. 

Cheat smarter, not harder.

“You really are rather perfect, sweet boy,” Peter murmured quietly, his words accompanied with a stalking step closer until he was near enough to reach out to cup the curve of Stiles’ cheek in the palm of his hand. A claw-tipped thumb brushed over the arch of a cheekbone and Peter’s eyes flared blue, brighter than the heart of a star. “Accept her death as a courting gift. Become my Emissary.”

Stiles’ answering smile was sulky-sweet as a dark soft of mischief danced in the depths of his honeyed gaze. “But I did all of the work. You just wrapped things up. I think that you can do better. You’re smarter than that, Mr. Famed-Wolf.”

Peter’s touch stilled for a long moment, fingers eventually drifting down so that he could gently tilt Stiles’ chin upwards, highlighting the teen’s features in the faint starlight that was just starting to break through the trees. “The Cassandra.”

And—

Peter remembered, memories flickering through his mind like quicksilver, of Stiles’ mother—dead nearly ten years now—calling out, calling for her little Mieczysław Alexandros to come to her because it was time to come home. Remembered, almost distantly, facts faded to a sepia-toned knowledge, of a Classic Literature class in university, of reading epics about the fall of Troy—
remembered, too, how Cassandra, the prophet, was also called *Alexandra* in some of those stories.

“The Cassandra is nothing more than smoke and mirrors, a fairy-tale told amongst creatures that should know better themselves,” Stiles chided, though his eyes were too knowing. “After all, just picture what would happen if the knowledge really *was* true: a family descended from the famous prophet herself, talent touched by the gods themselves.”

Just picture what would happen if the hunters managed to track down one of those rumors.

Just picture what would happen if the prophet said *no*.

Just picture what would happen if the patriarch of the Argent family took offense to that refusal.

Just picture what would happen if the current Cassandra’s eight year-old son had to watch his mother be murdered in cold blood.

Just picture—

Stiles shifted the smallest amount away, withdrawing from Peter’s surprisingly gentle hold. “If you want me as your Emissary, Peter Hale, you need to step up your game. Do or do not: there is not try.”

“…a Star Wars quote?” Peter asked with raised eyebrows, though he continued to track Stiles as the teen headed towards the clearing’s edge; hunger was blatant in the lines of his expression, edges pure predator—noting almost absently just how *apt* Stiles’ hoodie truly was.

“No point in messing with the classics when they already work so well,” Stiles shot back, grin as wolfish as Peter’s own.

And then he was gone, disappearing within the soft flicker of a shadow.
The house was empty when Stiles finally arrived home from his dinner with his father. The reason for his good mood was bloody enough, but the teen didn’t care—one lingering enemy finally gone—and he wanted to celebrate those high spirits with his father, even if Noah Stilinski would never understand the why of it all.

Stiles’ good mood was expansive enough that he had even allowed his father a burger during dinner, something that the Sheriff was more than happy to take advantage of—though he knew not to bother questioning his son too closely.

Life with Claudia had taught him rather quickly not to look too closely at certain things. Raising Stiles had emphasized that life lesson.

But growing up with his maternal grandmother in Poland had made him realize early on that there
was a veil stretched across the world that he was unable to cross, gauze-thin and muddying his sight: obvious enough to know that it was there, standing as a warning not to look too closely, and Noah had taken the warning to heart from the time that he was little. Strange visitors, unusual visitors, different visitors were glanced away from when they came calling at his grandmother’s house.

_Wilcza wiedźma_, they had called her. Wolf-witch.

Strangers—men and women both—who reminded Noah a great deal of the Hales of Beacon Hills.

(But don’t look too closely. Not if you want to actually, truly, see.)

So the Sheriff hadn’t questioned too closely the reason for Stiles’ unexpectedly good mood, didn’t let his gaze linger too long on the smudge of red that marred his son’s cheekbone. Didn’t look, didn’t question: knew, instead, with the instincts of a cop and father both that a weight that had spread itself across his son’s shoulders—for years—was finally lifted.

And that fact alone was enough to sit back and enjoy his first real burger in months.

But here and now, with dinner hours long past, Stiles was finally alone with his thoughts and feelings, space within him echoed by the emptiness of the house: given the time and distance to process the events that had happened earlier this evening.

Perhaps it made him a horrible person, but Stiles couldn’t bring himself to regret Kate’s death or his role within it. A threat to him, his family, and the supernatural community at large was finally ended this night, and the teen had finally managed to claim a vicious sort of justice for his mother’s death, as well. Stiles was truthful enough with himself to acknowledge the fact that Kate’s punishment was more retribution and revenge than justice, but—the deed was done and over with, and nothing would be able to bring back either her or his mother.

Dead was dead, and the ache of loss that came from his mother’s death still remained.

(The teen doubted that it would ever go away, would ever lessen into something not as present. It just was.)

Stiles climbed the stairs that led up to his room, leaving the lights of the house off; years of experience and familiarity allowed the teen to navigate through the rooms, avoiding obstacles that others would have tripped over. The dark was more... fitting—more comfortable, at the moment. Dawn would come soon enough, anyway.

He slipped soundlessly into his room, closing the door behind himself. The full moon’s light filled the space of Stiles’ bedroom, allowing him to continue leaving the lights off, and the teen made his way towards the desk that his laptop hibernated on.

One careful twist of a hidden panel later and Stiles carefully drew out the drawer to the compartment that lay flush against the underside of his desk’s top. Papers and letters—many years old, others more recent—from family members that had scattered across the globe, still reaching out to the main branch that Stiles was descended from, keeping in careful touch with the tree that had allowed their branches to spread out and grow. His mother’s journals were hidden here, as well, carefully kept from his father’s view despite the fact that Noah was fully aware that Stiles had them in his possession. Several decks of Tarot cards pressed against the back of the drawer, and Stiles hummed softly at hearing the familiar clink that came from his favorite rune stones’ pouch. He didn’t often use them, but remembering the afternoons that he had sat next to his mother, following her lead as he learned to carve the stones into the riverbed rocks... the memories were soft-edged and sweet enough that the teen didn’t want to disturb them too much.
On top of it all, however, rested an envelope that the teen had received just the month before, carefully opened despite already knowing what the letter contained—Noah wasn’t aware that the letter had arrived, though Stiles fully intended on showing it to his father soon in the upcoming days.

...we are pleased to announce your acceptance as an early admissions student...

With how high his GPA had always been, the academic performance he wielded with the precision of a fencer, and a list of extensive extracurricular activities that had even made Ms. Morrell break her carefully maintained, stoic exterior, it was no wonder that USC was more than happy to welcome Stiles with open arms.

And Los Angeles would certainly be a different setting, a perhaps alien environment, than Beacon Hills.

Stiles lightly tap-tap-tapped the edge of the envelope against the full curve of his mouth, allowing plans and plots and the briefest flashes of the future to dart through the recesses of his mind before eventually setting it aside to consider on another day that was not today. Placing the letter back amongst the pile, the teen began to strip out of his clothes, turning towards his bed—

And paused when he caught sight of the innocuous box that sat innocently atop his pillow.

Allowing his shirt to fall from his fingers, pooling at his feet, Stiles carefully stepped closer until he was near enough to pick up the white sheet of paper that lay folded atop the wooden box. It only took a moment to unfold it:

_I feel like I should warn you that I’ve always been stubbornly persistent when I see something that I want. But I’m sure that you already know that, dear boy._

_I’m sure that you also already know that the Los Angeles Alpha is old and unable to hold his territory the way that he needs to. The Hales will soon enough have a second Alpha amongst their ranks, though Talia will never welcome me the way she barely does now after my eyes turn red._

_You told me to ‘step up my game.’_

_I don’t intend to relent until you finally agree to become my Emissary, sweet Cassandra._

- P.H.

Curious now as to what Peter could have already gifted him with, Stiles set aside the note to instead pick up the box, holding it in the palm of one hand while he cracked own the lid with the other.

Ivory-pale against the black satin interior and still bloody in some hard-to-reach spots lay a full set of knucklebones. It was definitely a more _Slavic_ divining method, but perhaps Peter had finally caught on to the fact that there was a reason Stiles was named in both of his heritage’s traditions. Quirking a small smile, the teen reached within and picked up a portion of an index finger, inspecting it with an expert eye. The blood that still dotted several of the bones was tacky, semi-wet in most places: recently acquired, it was obvious enough to see, and Stiles didn’t have to make a guess to figure out who it was that had donated their finger bones to create this set for him.

(And it was fitting, in a dark-edged sort of way: just enough so that the teen looked forward to learning how to use them for more regular use, stealing away the energy that came with Kate Argent’s death to dip through the veil to whisper his requests to the Fates at large.)

Well…
Perhaps Stiles could share the letter from USC with his father sooner rather than the later that he’d originally intended.

**

Exhaustion was a heavy weight upon Stiles’ eyelids, lack of sleep—and food; when was the last time he had eaten?—an unrelenting force that tried to coax his eyes into closing, into resting and dropping off into slumber. But…

His last set of finals were starting the next day, and there were still several more things he wanted to tweak in his senior project, and that bastard of a professor had decided to assign one last ten page paper (somehow immune to the wave of loathing that had immediately surged up from the class’ students at that particular announcement), and he had also been recently contracted for five new readings—normally an easy enough task to accomplish, but with Stiles’ current workload and the fact that the clients were asking for a more extensive reading (and were willing to pay for it, too), well…

Stiles felt stretched too thin, pulled in every direction by a variety of responsibilities that had been easy enough to juggle for the longest time. But—with graduation weeks away—everything had managed to catch up or dump itself on him at the same time and…

All he wanted to do was sleep.

The twenty-one year-old sighed quietly and brought his hands up to scrub angrily at his face, ignoring how the stress and anxiety of everything that was expected of him—and soon—made him feel too brittle and prone to breaking.

Warmth settled against the curve of Stiles’ back, and the USC student took a moment to luxuriate against Peter’s familiar weight; a moment later and the equally familiar sting of too-sharp teeth grazed over Stiles’ pulse point.

“Enough for tonight, sweet boy. It’s time for bed.”

Exhausted and finally willing to accept defeat, Stiles pulled his hands away from his face, turning his head just enough to not only bare the vulnerable line of his throat to the other but to also shift to meet the predatory crimson hue of Peter’s gaze.

“Make me,” Stiles said in reply, desire and delight and challenge sparking to life within his chest—accompanied by the slow curl of an equally predatory smile—at the way that Peter’s eyes just flared brighter still.

Stiles slowly opened his eyes.

And smirked, Cheshire-like and sly.

::end::

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